

# Change Happens & A River Runs Through It

Advanced Case Studies: Stories, Theories & Ethics (PAX 681a)

December 6, 2000

Jarem Sawatsky and Libby Schrag

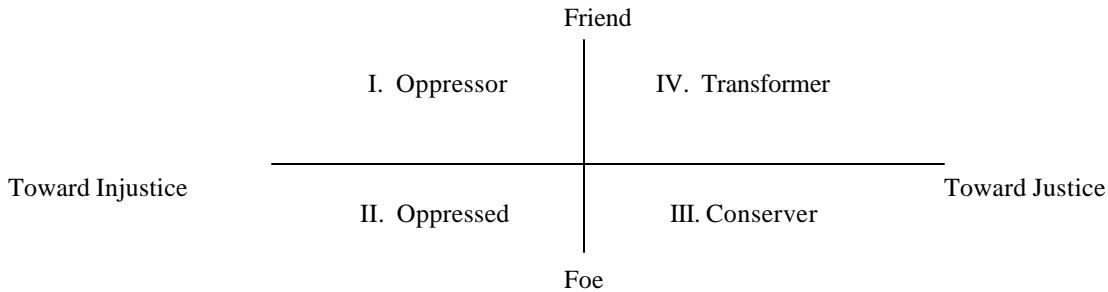
“What is your theory of change? How does change work?” These questions seem harmless and open-ended. However, behind these questions are several problematic assumptions. First, the questions assume that there is a single universal theory of change, unbounded by culture and time. Establishing such a theory rests on the hope that its answer would enable one to manipulate and control change. These are the questions and assumptions of the conflict management paradigm, not conflict transformation.

The quest for a theory of change is an old and futile one. As all of these theories have been disproved over time, the only thing that has remained is change itself. Change happens. Asking *how* is frustrating because it is a quest to which there is no single answer. We must focus on more fruitful questions: Can change be used or refocused to achieve an end? Where does one situate oneself in change? How does one respond *transformatively* to change?

Conflict Management sees the character of change as predictable, formulaic and theorizable. The transformative approach, on the other hand, sees change as unpredictable, spirit-filled and wild. It is a creative energy force infused with great potential—potential for good, potential for harm. In his comparison of the South African conflict with those of Northern Ireland and the Middle East, the Rev. Dr. Peter Storey named this energy force “the X-factor.” The X-factor concerns those elusive characteristics that ultimately helped move that conflict toward peace. The X-factor does not explain how change happens but rather what makes transformative change possible.

One helpful metaphor for this perspective on change is that of a river. The river metaphor pushes us beyond a control-centered approach to change, instead looking at the constant and untamable flow of the river. The river is wild – sometimes calm, sometimes erratic. It’s flow is unending. It has the power to sustain life and take life. Like the status quo, a river flows gently until an obstacle is put in its way. The obstacle creates a disturbance. Conflict arises. As the current changes, waves compete for space. Our job is to learn to ride the flow and navigate the river of change. Later we will return to this metaphor from the perspective of a canoeist learning to listen and respond to the flow of the river.

We have argued that the issue is not so much how change happens but how one responds to change. The four principle responses we propose are depicted graphically in Figure 1.



*Fig. 1 Responses to Change*

Horizontally, the graph shows a continuum of change moving toward or away from justice. This terminology more obviously applies to social change than to personal change. However, we believe it is possible to broaden one's scope to include personal change, if necessary using the language of positive or negative change.

The danger of this axis is the temptation to believe that change dynamics can easily be separated into just and unjust, or even to quantify justice. Though this axis may suggest such a notion, the purpose of the continuum is to illustrate a different and more significant point. We believe there is a moral quality to change responses. Change responses can be transformative or detrimental. It is important to have this awareness – is the change response life-giving or death-dealing? This is the horizontal axis.

The vertical axis depicts our attitude toward the change that is taking place. Do we welcome the change that is occurring? Or do we reject it? The relationship between these two axes is illustrated by the different quadrants.

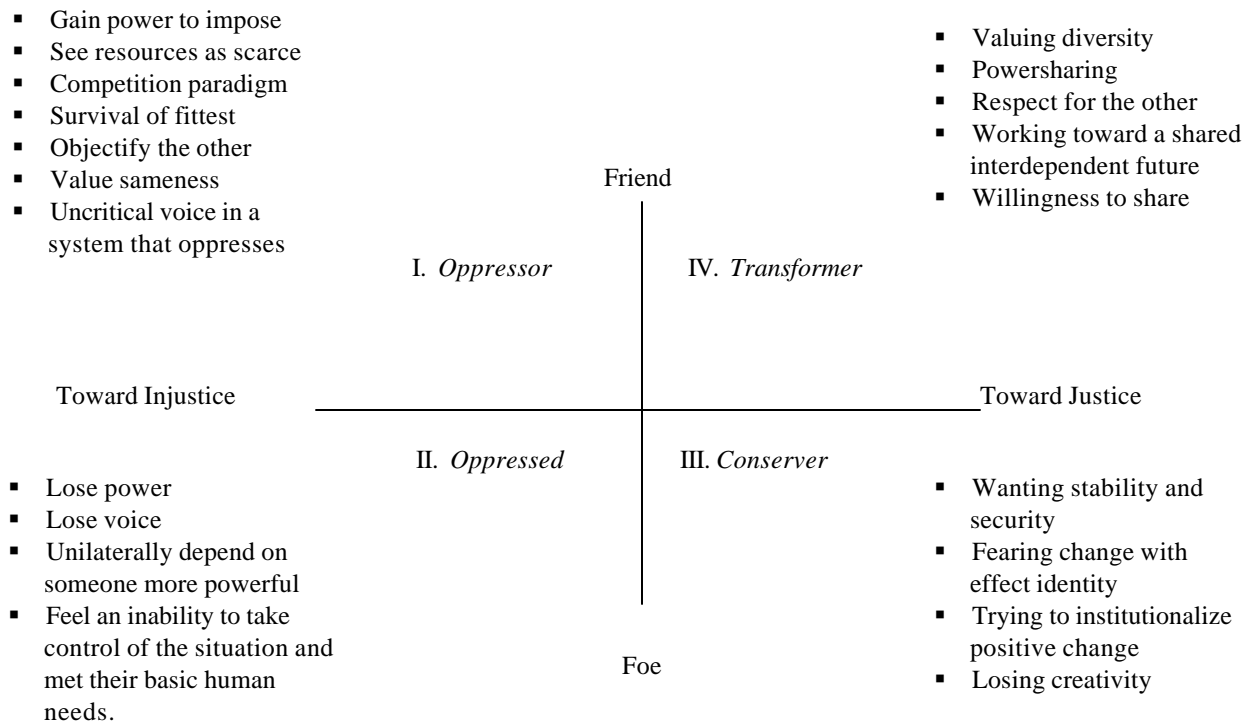
**Quadrant I: The Oppressor** – The oppressor benefits from an unjust change. The way they respond to change is by encouraging unjust change. People from other quadrants move in this direction through certain change responses. These include gaining power to impose, seeing resources as scarce, espousing the competition paradigm, following the survival of the fittest ethic, objectifying the other, valuing sameness over diversity, or simply being an uncritical voice in a system that oppresses.

**Quadrant II: The Oppressed** – The oppressed are aware of and against the unjust changes taking place, though they perceive that the power to change their plight rests in the hands of the Oppressor. Suffer silently or violently revolt are the only two apparent options in this perspective. Not all people suffering oppression—structural or systemic violence—fit this quadrant; some may fit other quadrants. People(s) may move toward this quadrant when they lose power, lose voice, unilaterally depend on someone more powerful, or feel an inability to take control of the situation and meet their basic human needs.

**Quadrant III: The Conserver** - The conserver resists positive change and seeks to maintain the status quo. The conserver perspective results from wanting stability and security, fearing that changes will affect identity, trying to institutionalize positive change, or losing creativity.

**Quadrant IV – The Transformer** – This is the realm of transformative change, of embracing movement toward a vision of justice for everyone. Those moving toward this quadrant do so through valuing diversity, powersharing, respecting all people, or working toward a shared interdependent future. Elements of Storey’s X-factor are present in this quadrant: hope for a just future, faith in the basic goodness of people, and a spirit-filled creativity.

These quadrants characterize more extreme positions. When listed together with mechanisms of change, as Figure 2 depicts, a number of observations can be made.



*Figure 2 – Responses and Mechanisms of Change*

First, for many the existing paradigm is one of oppressor/oppressed or offender/victim. The above chart demonstrates more options, principally the movement toward transformation. Too often the oppressed become the oppressor and true justice is not achieved. Second, people in the oppressor or conserver quadrants generally do not perceive themselves in this way. For example,

those in the South would see America as an oppressor, while Americans often see themselves as transformers. Without understanding where we are beginning, it is difficult to get to where we are trying to go.

So far we have argued that responses to change are more significant than causes of change. Further we have argued for responses to change that move us toward transformative change. We are now ready to return to our metaphor of navigating the river.

## **Location**

One of the most critical elements of canoeing a river is location. All strategies of responding to the flow of the river are dependent on location. Paddling a lazy Kansas river is a different experience than paddling that same river in the Yukon. As obvious as this sounds, location is one of the most overlooked elements of responding to change. When rivers are classified according to difficulty, before you look at the rate of flow (rapids, waterfalls, etc.) you must consider geographical location. The same river that would be Class I (easy) in Kansas is bumped up to a Class III (difficult) river in the Yukon because of the remoteness and temperature of the river.

Location is equally important in strategizing how to respond to change. One could argue that the “location” relevant to change is the context in which the change is happening. Context includes such things as culture, politics, history, economics, and so forth. Justice and injustice are always experienced within a specific context. If change responses ignore this context, justice will likely not be experienced. Context, or location, is the starting and ending point of all change. The Elicitive Approach advocated by CTP is rooted in this central understanding of location.

We move now from looking at the location *of* the river to location *on* the river. More critical than what strokes you use in the middle of a rapid is where you start. Where you place your canoe when you are in the calm water at the top of a rapid is often the determining factor for successful navigation. An experienced paddler will locate himself or herself in such a way as to use the current rather than fight it. This takes careful listening and interpreting what is happening with the flow of the river. If you only have the end of the rapid in mind, you will never get there.

When things are calm, with whom do you align yourself? When change starts picking up its pace, from where are you starting? These are questions of location. Like the flow of a river, change keeps happening and has its own momentum. When change is happening slowly and without much conflict, we have a lot of room to move around, to choose where we place ourselves. When change picks up its pace, we have less room to navigate. We get swept down current by the momentum of change. The obstacles we get swept into are greatly determined by where we start. In this way then where we align ourselves in times of calm, affects our capacity for transformative change (when the momentum picks up). Where we align ourselves has to do with relationships we have, structures we participate in, and the character of our vision. Each of the archetypes presented in Fig. 1 would conceive of these differently. Movement toward the transformer quadrant requires that we develop

relationships that value diversity and respect others, structures that share power and resources, and a vision of a shared interdependent future.

Finally, location is also about knowing what is down the river. Is it fast flowing water? Is it a runnable rapid? Is it a waterfall? Some people think that navigation on a river is a simple thing – stay on the river and you won't get lost. However, when you are on a flowing and winding river, the scenery and direction of travel change quickly. Here, it is hard to know where you are in relation to the map. Does it matter? If there is a waterfall around the bend, it sure does. Canoeists die every year because they thought there were on a small rapid only to discover it was a large rapid, or they were misled by the calm water on top of a waterfall and got swept over. Knowing where you are and what type of obstacles are ahead has everything to do with the coping strategies you use. What is appropriate in one situation (fast flowing water) is deadly in another (fast flowing water on top of a waterfall).

Again we see parallels with navigating through change. One parallel is in maintaining the appropriate level of intervention for the change experienced. Underestimating the significance of certain pressures can conceivably contribute to a harmful experience of change. An example of this would be the female employee approaching a male supervisor with concerns of feeling undervalued, only to be dismissed as a personal problem. The male supervisor has ignored a much larger experience of the female worker, thus further exacerbating the sensitive situation. Another parallel relates to the difficulty in placing oneself within the flow of change. It is extremely difficult to predict what lies ahead in the process of change. It is precisely because of this uncertainty that the role of perspective becomes immanently essential.

## **Perspective**

White-water paddling teaches that often the worst perspective is being in the middle of the action. From the top of a rapid—at water level (canoe level)—is the most limited perspective to see what is ahead. To discern the appropriate navigation strategy it is often necessary to get a different perspective. The easiest way to do this is to change one's location by standing up or getting off the rapid. For the most difficult rapids, it is necessary to get off the river, climb up the shore and take a broader look at what is happening. Looking up a rapid from the bottom reveals rocks, ledges, holes and other obstacles not observable from the top. Because rapids look so different from the top than from the bottom, it is necessary to find some stable landmarks. “When you pass the overhanging branch you know it is time to start steering toward the right.” Perspective helps discern what is happening and how one might respond. Landmarks help to indicate when we need to switch strategies for responding to the flow.

People in the midst of change, like a canoeist in the midst of rapids, often are only able to see the immediate effects of that change without realizing what has come before the change or where it may be headed. They lack perspective. To respond to change in a transformative manner, one needs to gain multiple perspectives. While it is important to understand the immediate circumstances of the situation, one must also look both forward and backward with short- and long-term lenses.

There are a couple obvious ways of gaining such perspective: the first involves physically removing oneself from the context of the change; the second involves consulting with someone outside of the change. Without some strategy to gain a broader perspective, decisions will ultimately be short-sited and crisis oriented.

The broader perspective enables one to find landmarks. In turn, the landmarks help keep perspective in the midst of change. Landmarks help us to know when and how to change strategies. In the context of change, these landmarks might take the form of questions. Laue and Cormick suggest that the central question revolves around power and empowerment. By itself, their question is too narrow. By itself, their question limits the dialogue to an oppressor/oppressed dichotomy. The limitations of the powerful/powerless framework as a landmark became clear in our recent class discussion about the Oka Crisis. In hindsight Lederach now questions the justification of his involvement on the basis of power imbalances. Though power is always an important issue, by itself it will not lead us to a transformative paradigm.

We argue the more significant question is how to move towards the transformative quadrant (see Figure 1). The question isn't so much *who* you are partnering with [the powerful or the powerless], but in *what direction* you are moving. A number of ethical questions can serve as landmarks indicating when and how to change strategies. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to flesh out such questions, they might include topics of justice, respect, responsibility, shared interdependence, and contextual appropriateness. As landmarks, these questions help guide the response to change.

### **Going with the Flow**

As seems to be the case with much of life, the path of least resistance sometimes becomes deadly. When paddling a flowing river, one of the most dangerous places to be is flowing with the current. When a canoe travels at the same speed as the current, it is impossible to steer. To steer the canoe you must either go faster or slower than the current. Being carried by the flow is a distinct advantage on calm water, but in the midst of a rapid, that same strategy strips the canoeist of any ability to respond to the flow.

Often people in society and in their own lives feel disempowered when they realize they have just been "going with the flow." Going with the flow can be translated as allowing change to happen without thinking critically about that change. By not engaging in the change, one develops no tools with which to affect that change downstream. The canoeing metaphor teaches that we need some level of distinction between us (the canoe) and the change that is happening (the flow). Responding transformatively to change requires us to move at a different pace than the change that is taking place.

### **Navigating the Flow**

The more aggressive style of paddling is to paddle faster than the current. This enables the canoe to build on the momentum of the flow to actually move over top of the current. This aggressive style allows the paddler to almost ignore the flow and move in his/her own direction. Many rapids are impossible to run without some use of these strategies. There are times the canoe needs extra forward momentum to get through particularly difficult sections.

Slower than current navigation involves paddling backwards. Rather than ignoring the current or trying to beat it, this style tries to use the current to redirect the canoe toward the desired direction.

Where change is concerned, those who move faster and/or in a different direction than that change might be considered activists. On the other hand, those who move slower than the current are like facilitators. Activists call us to a place we have not yet discovered. Facilitators slow down the momentum to create a space where people can come together and reflect on where they need to go. Each of these strategies is appropriate in different conditions. Responding to change transformatively requires an understanding and appreciation for both approaches. Coordination and collaboration become critical.

### **Who's in your canoe?**

For a canoeist on a river the question more basic than navigation strategies, is who is in your canoe. It is not possible to talk about strategies of navigation and change without talking about who and how many are in your canoe? This factor changes everything. Are you in a solo canoe? A tandem canoe? Or a voyageur canoe?

Extending this metaphor to our responses to change raises important and often overlooked questions. So far, we have suggested the canoe represents us. But who are “we”? Does “we” mean a single canoeist, an individual? Does “we” mean two of us, a small family? Or does “we” mean a whole community? Our most basic unit of understanding—whom we belong to and are accountable to—deeply influences our capacity for transformative change. Are we working from individualistic assumptions or collective assumptions? The answer to this fundamental question effects our path toward transformative change. An individual moves quickly, within a short timeframe. A collective orientation moves slower but with a much broader view of time. In our metaphor, the solo canoe spins behind rocks that are so small they are irrelevant to the voyageur canoe. The voyageur canoe, which is unable to spin quickly, out of necessity is much more concerned with the distant future. The point is that the number of people in the canoe has a huge influence on what aspects of change come up on our radar screen. How one responds to change has every thing to do with who's in your canoe.

Assuming there is more than one person in our canoe, collaboration and cooperation become central. The most common reason canoes dump in white-water is less about the turbulent water and more about the lack of communication between paddling partners.

We have argued there are multiple strategies for responding to change – strategies needed at different times, needed to be executed by different people. Activist and facilitators are two strategic orientations mentioned earlier. Often these two orientations are in tension. We have argued that both are needed. We need both activist and facilitators in our canoe. Coordination of these multiple approaches can maximize our ability to respond transformatively to change.

In conclusion, we have argued that there is no single theory of change. Change happens. The more important focus is how we respond to change. We have suggested four archetypes of change response: oppressor, oppressed, conserver, and transformer. The central question is not where you start, but what direction you are heading. Moving beyond the empowerment paradigm, we have suggested the change-agent's task is to partner with any of those in other quadrants to respond to change in transformative ways.

Through the “navigating the river” metaphor, we have examined the role of location, perspective, and navigation strategies. Throughout we have argued for change responses that move people toward the transformative quadrant. Transformers act with a spirit-filled creativity. They create transformative spaces and capacities that previously did not exist or were not being mobilized. We have argued that these qualities are less formulaic and more elusive. Peter Storey called this the X-factor. We have called it the transformative quadrant. Conflict, therefore, is not looked at as something to be managed but rather looked at as a wild river, with the energy to give life and to take life. The transformer listens and discerns how to respond to the change that is happening in such a way that life for everyone abounds.