

Engaging with Heart in Global Health Partnerships

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The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched—they must be felt with the heart.

— Helen Keller

Abstract

What does it mean to build a more peaceful, equitable and loving world, to solve problems together? Global health partnerships are a perfect place to explore ways to do this because they rely on relationships. However, we are coming out of a dominant paradigm of Western science and colonialism that is often an invisible driver of our thoughts and actions. This frequently invisible yet insidious history still frames much of our understanding and our actions in every facet of life, including in science and global health. Continuing business-as-usual, without deep introspection and intention, leads us to replicate inequities and instabilities within our relationships with each other and between people and nature. These are experienced as traumas by all of us, some more easily seen than others. Many appear as individual and widespread human health concerns, as well as social and environmental disruption and degradation. This chapter explores ways in which we can create opportunities for healing these traumas while working together

on solutions to immediate and long-term global health issues.

Keywords

Integrating knowledge systems · Intuition · Mind-body · Other ways of knowing · Global health

Author Perspective

I am a woman scientist and policy practitioner working with a variety of social-ecological systems, ecological economics, and the science-policy interface locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. My background is in forest science, adult communication and education, and ecological economics and policy. I have worked with NGOs throughout my career, serving in organizational and leadership positions at local, state, national, and international levels. I have served at all levels of academic leadership from Department Chair to Interim Provost and Executive Vice President. My research, academic, and organizational work is informed by systems thinking to enhance effectiveness and efficiency of institutions through inclusive, compassionate, and matrixed systems of shared effort, power, and respect for all. I founded [Heart Forward Science](#) to support the development of holistic knowledge through a balance of intellect, imagination, and intuition to advance equitable, sustainable scientific outcomes.

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Key Tenets

1. Engaging with heart means bringing our whole selves to all that we do.
2. Recognizing the extent to which one is embedded within the dominant paradigm that stems from a colonizer/settler framing is crucial to building a more peaceful, equitable, loving world.
3. Engaging diverse knowledge systems respectfully requires self-confidence with humility and humanity.
4. Intellect, imagination, and intuition all provide paths to envision and bring a more equitable, sustainable world to life.
5. This chapter addresses the following SDGs: #3 Good health and wellbeing, #10 Reducing inequities, and #16 Peace, justice, and strong institutions.

1 Introduction

Recognition of the power and impact of partnerships within global health initiatives brings forward the possibility of healing much more than the diseases or health concerns at their base. By expanding the scope of understanding of the “problem” to include systemic violence and inequity resulting from a colonizing-settler mentality, we can achieve much greater positive outcomes through global health partnerships.

In this chapter, I suggest that we have an opportunity to have a much greater and sustained impact by recognizing the power and influence that partnerships can have to demonstrate the respectful engagement of diverse knowledge systems within ourselves and with others. To do this, I briefly explore how we replicate the dominant paradigm of a science mentality in our current approaches to partnership and collaboration, acknowledging the trauma that this can and does cause. I then offer a few ideas to consider for bringing our whole selves to all we do as we

move toward respectful engagement of multiple knowledge systems.

2 Engaging with Heart

Recent worldwide attention to the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements which emerged from northern contexts have stimulated many to begin or further our efforts on a path toward an equitable world. These movements and other influential incidents created opportunities and support for people everywhere to do their own individual work, to see and to unlearn the longstanding oppressive structures and systems of our colonizing history.

Unlearning is crucial to this process. How do we do this? It begins with acknowledgment of the traumas caused by dualistic, elitist, hierarchical power structures, including within Western science, medicine, and the public health activities stemming from them. (See Chapter(s) [“Colonialism, Decolonization, and Global Health”](#) and [“Transforming the Planetary Health Crisis Through an Indigenous Land-Based Meta-Narrative”](#) for a deeper treatment of these concepts.) Once we open to seeing this, we can go beyond acknowledgment to intending and discovering pathways that no longer replicate the harms of power-over mentalities.

The power dynamics that we see institutionally also tend to be replicated at the individual level among the “haves” and “have nots”, and with gender, race, and orientation identities. This means that each of us can address this by finding ways to move in the world with love, blameless discernment, and acceptance while resisting violence and inequities. Following a path of individual awareness, empathetic listening, acknowledgment, healing, unlearning, learning, and co-creating a transformed future helps not only at the individual level but creates a ripple effect that carries much further. Just as we experience the joy of someone who enters the room with exciting and happy news such that it uplifts us, too, our work of self-healing and self-care with community awareness transforms and encourages those around us (see Chapter

“Courageous Authenticity: Bringing Our Inner Wisdom to Our Work, Partnerships, and Communities”). Recognizing this impact and adjusting one’s own self-care and behavior to reflect this requires introspection, self-compassion, and emotional healing. Supporting each other in these efforts is one way in which we help to extend positive impacts.

Engaging diverse knowledge systems respectfully requires self-confidence with humility and humanity as we consider who is involved, who owns the outcomes, and how we can collaborate in truly equitable ways. It also requires self-knowledge. It is no longer enough to bring only our analytical, intellectual selves to this work. We must bring our whole selves to all that we do. I call this engaging with heart: learning and embracing the many ways we know, extending beyond the analytical and intellectual. Learning to intertwine it all to inform our actions can be described in a deliciously paradoxical way: “thinking with the heart and feeling with the mind.” The results are impactful, compassionate, humble, and respectful.

3 Practice Seeing Embedded Oppression

Recognizing that we are steeped in oppressive structures and systems is an initial step. Practice seeing embedded oppression, supporting each other in doing so, and seeking out and listening to under-represented people helps to build within each of us the ability to better see and hear the traumas that need to be aired, acknowledged, healed, and not repeated. Being willing to let go of these structures and find new ways is vastly different from simply recognizing them. It’s a natural question to ask how to let something go when (1) we can barely see it given its ubiquitous nature—like a fish seeing water; and (2) without clear ideas of what will replace it.

One way to begin to do this is to engage the use of imagination. Imagine a world where...fill in the blank here with your wildest, most loving ideas. *A world without disease? Everyone is fed and healthy? Living in harmony with nature? No*

violence or war; living with love? No greed? Using imagination to envision what we want is a powerful tool. The process of imagining and envisioning helps move us toward developing intentionality—deliberate articulation of desired outcomes for our world, each program, each relationship, each day. Combining intentionality with these visions will move us collectively toward a more sustainable, equitable world. While this may seem impossible when considering it with only the analytical mind, opening to intuition and engaging with heart brings the knowledge that making these changes within each of us, one at a time, actually leads to much greater change in the world. By healing ourselves, we heal the world as it flows through us into the families, companions, and communities around us.

In addition to using imagination to individually envision the futures we want, it is also useful collectively. Science is already making use of imagination. For example, future scenario development involves going beyond data trends to imagine futures much further than data allow. I engaged this process with a national professional association to identify possible futures, the role of the organization within each, and the adjustments we needed to be relevant and useful no matter which future emerged. The outcomes were the foundation of the organization’s strategic plan that was widely supported while reflecting important future possibilities. This process can be used in many different settings and in transdisciplinary approaches involving science and public health experts along with interested citizens. Interestingly, in one experience working on Great Lakes futures, I observed that science-related participants had the most difficult time letting go of data trends enough to actually engage imagination regarding possible futures. These efforts followed specific guidelines and did engage the imagination. However, they would be greatly improved by explicitly drawing together participants’ individual visions and intentions for the futures they want along with the focus of the exercise, be it the management of lakes and ecosystems, planning public health programs and interventions, or the strategic plans for an organization.

4 Challenges of Seeing—A Personal Story

For many of us, it is difficult to reconcile the analytical power of the mind and Western knowledge with intuition, spirituality, and other ways of knowing, such as traditional Indigenous knowledge. My path to this reconciliation was a long and winding one, reminiscent of the Buddhist symbol unalome. Soon after becoming an Assistant Professor, I had two experiences so profound that they changed my entire perspective on knowledge. They shook me to the core, challenging everything I thought I understood about the world around me, including, and possibly especially, what I understood about science.



Buddhist symbol unalome

The first of these experiences involved having someone close to me, who I knew well and trusted fully, ask me a simple question: “Did you and Lorraine ever get out of that boat?” It sounds like a simple question, doesn’t it? The question might seem silly since I was standing in her living room... except the night before, Lorraine and I were in a boat *in my dream*. I stood there, about to answer her question, when the realization came: *she was asking me about something I had dreamed*. How on earth would she know what I dreamed? She wasn’t even in the dream! And that was it. Everything I thought I knew about the world, what we know, what we can know—science—was shattered.

The second experience took place later that year in the canopy of an old-growth forest in the Pacific Northwest. As a forestry academic colleague, I was invited to go up more than 200 feet in a gondola to the canopy where groundbreaking research was taking place. At the time, I was extremely afraid of heights, but given my interests and this extraordinary opportunity, I had to accept. I situated myself in a corner of the gondola and asked not to be disturbed because it was going to take all I had in me and much self-talk to be able to do this. Up we went, me terrified, deep breathing and self-talking, all the way to the top. The crane stopped, and we silently observed the forest from within its uppermost branches. It was astonishingly beautiful, and I found myself at complete peace. I no longer noticed the gondola nor even perceived the ground so far below us. I was enthralled by the trees and the atmosphere they created. I felt that I was a part of it. There was no separation between us. Before I knew it, the crane began to lower the gondola back to ground level.



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On the way down, I marveled at all that I learned while in the canopy. I now fully understood how vital energy flowed among and between trees, through intermediaries and directly, even understanding how losing trees within the forest shifted that energy and impacted the others, with clear implications for forest management. As we reached the forest floor, it hit me...there was no lecture in this gondola up in the old-growth forest canopy. How did I now know this? Where did it come from? My expertise was in forest policy and ecological economics, not biogeochemistry, the focus of this new knowledge. My Western science trained intellectual mind kicked into gear, and I asked my biophysical science colleagues about it, assuming

that I must be remembering something from a forest ecology class. When the answer came back that no one had studied this energy flow, I realized that somehow this information had come to me from the trees and the forest itself. I had no idea how that could have happened, but there it was—a full understanding of something yet to be studied by Western science, and not something in my own field of expertise. The recognition of this unusual (to me) way of learning combined with the fact that I was not yet tenured resulted in me setting aside the whole experience for nearly 20 years for fear of losing credibility or even my job if I told this story. That's when I heard a radio show about scientific findings of the energetic connectedness of trees in a forest. The scientific

study of what I learned nearly two decades before from the forest itself had now been done.

That radio show delivered a jolt that brought me face-to-face with the reality of something beyond science and I was no longer a professionally vulnerable Assistant Professor. It was time to explore the acquisition of this knowledge that did not fit within the definitions of science – this knowledge encountered before Western science had addressed it, what I referred to as pre-science. Read that last word without the dash. I knew it was time to share these stories. As I have done so, it validated others who, often sheepishly, offered examples of serendipity, fortunate coincidences, and unexpected sudden realizations that helped their work and everyday lives in beneficial ways. I also learned that Indigenous Peoples have known such things for millennia.

Sharing stories and validating others is an important step. We must also build the scaffolding that allows for respectful intertwining of multiple ways of knowing both within ourselves and with others. Bringing together knowledge systems allows for more complete and complementary paths toward a non-violent, equitable, sustainable world that we can pursue with confidence.

5 Linking Ways of Knowing Within

Engaging with heart means bringing our whole selves to all that we do. Compassion, gratitude, appropriate detachment, understanding sovereignty—individual and collective, and humility are all a part of this path. Essential to this effort is linking intellect with the other ways we know. Imagination provides a path to do this. Meditation provides a path to do this. Being still and communing with nature can do this. Recognizing and articulating what comes to us in these ways, often in deep stillness, helps to bring it into the analytical, intellectual mind. We tend to keep these parts of ourselves separate and hidden from others. By intentionally and actively connecting the non-analytical and the analytical parts of ourselves we build internal bridges that allow us to begin to intertwine these knowledges, thereby bringing more of ourselves to all that we do. By sharing

this through talking about it with others, we not only support each other in these endeavors, we build bridges between and among us, strengthening collective abilities to engage with heart. At the same time, we actively connect the specific goals of collaborations and partnerships with the broader goals of systemic change reflected by the visions of the futures we want, which for me is a peaceful, equitable, sustainable world.

Developing intuition skills is also part of engaging with heart. Unless it is the subject of a scientific study, though, many in science are uncomfortable with the notion of intuition. We have not been free as scientists to articulate our experiences with intuition without fear of damaging our credibility as scientists. It is as if having more to our life experiences, other dimensions than those expressed through the analytical mind and scientific experiences, is somehow odd and not rigorous. The usual and familiar argument goes like this: “intuition is not externally verifiable; therefore, it is not acceptable in relation to science.” This stems from our understanding of intuition and intuitive knowledge being direct knowledge, not derived analytically. Therefore scientific external validation does not work to verify it. Logically, it makes no sense to use scientific external validation methods applied to a different knowledge system, yet this appears to be overlooked. It also implies that we do or would not know the difference between analytically based knowledge and intuitive knowledge. If that’s so, then the answer is clear – we need skills-based training to learn how to do so.

This is an example of how science maintains and contributes to existing inequities. Rejecting knowledge from sources other than the analytical smacks of elitism and denies the experience of many cultural traditions and indeed, all individuals who have been nurtured to be and to bring more than just their analytical minds to all that they do. For example, in rural Bolivia Aymara Indigenous communities do rituals and rely on physical and biophysical indicators to predict climatic events, crop productivity, and more. This practice in Bolivia remains alive and part of the annual agricultural cycle (thanks in part to their social revolution to empower and elevate Indigenous Peoples). However, in many parts of the world, Indigenous

peoples, their languages, and their practices continue to be brutally exterminated.¹

I am keenly aware that the knowledge shared with me by the trees and forest must surely have been shared with many, many others. And yet, no one I found within the forest science community knew of these relationships—or they didn’t speak of them. How could this be? We have clearly turned away, forgotten, shamed, or rejected this kind of knowledge. At what cost, I wonder, and who is paying the price? Looking at the status of environmental and social conditions, my assessment is that this forgetting or rejection has come at tremendous cost which is not borne equally within and among us. We have opportunity with every partnership to remember and to accept.

Many, if not most of us educated in the sciences were trained to limit ourselves to our analytical minds, leaving aside other parts of us. Science celebrates the analytical over all else. Understanding “mind” as more than only the analytical will help. Historically and across cultures, mind has been more widely interpreted to include conscience. In fact, definitions of mind include consciousness, yet in the practice of science in the twenty-first century, we tend toward limiting our practical engagement of mind to the analytical. Looking at the word “conscience” itself reveals broader understandings that stood at one time. Con science, from Latin, essentially meaning “with science” or “with knowledge”. That’s perfect! Science and conscience together reflect a breadth that would serve us well as we co-create a more equitable, sustainable world though mindful (science and conscience) global health partnerships.

6 Challenges to and with Western Science

Following the dominant paradigms of science, though, our tendency in practice is to take the stance that we, as experts, know something that other people need to know without giving much, if any, consideration of what they already know

or know in ways that we may not have considered. While the number of research partnerships has increased in recent years, many, maybe even most of them are based on developing relationships only deep enough for people to accept what we already know we have to offer as disciplinary experts, instead of being truly collaborative, participatory, and flexible from the start. We have learned to “be experts”: to tell, to profess, to compare, to direct, and to persuade, all amounting to primarily unidirectional communication aimed at our “partners”. We listen enough to make our own points better, instead of empathetic listening to deeply understand and co-create the best ways forward. Engaging communities as subjects of study is not true partnership.

Most science and public health education programs do not address the roles of imagination, consciousness, and intuition in science or ways of knowing beyond the analytical and intellectual. Nor do they teach the skills necessary to engage intuition as well as the intellect and to effectively interweave them. This combination not only results in solutions that reflect diversity in all ways, but it also welcomes all people to contribute, no matter their level of scientific education. Imagine a partnership that is designed to allow for the emergence of new ideas from anyone within the group. We may believe we are offering this simply by calling an association a partnership, but it is not so without explicitly designing and operating in ways that support every participant to bring their full selves and ways of knowing to the endeavor. To be not only allowed, but encouraged and supported by purposeful design to fully contribute. Inviting others into our world on the condition that they accept and abide by our rules does not adequately address the issues. In recent years, Western science has done just that, making an arguably weak effort to recognize Indigenous and local knowledges. In my humble opinion, this is no way to learn about and engage other knowledge systems.

Reframing partnerships with respect for all that each participant brings, balancing this with what we in Western science/medicine know—engaging differing knowledge systems with respect—will bring more people into global

¹Example provided by Susana del Granado.

health partnerships, expanding and impacting them in new ways. Understandably, this raises the question of how to do so at a time when we are grappling more than ever with widespread misinformation. Discerning distinctions between knowledge systems versus misinformation is challenging, especially with social media artificial intelligence algorithms designed to misinform or to direct behavior repetition within groups with common beliefs. The primary business model of many of the largest social media companies results in increased profits by maintaining or even exacerbating separations among groups of people, limiting true dialogue and cross-pollination of ideas through these potentially powerful communication channels.

The challenges of misinformation are exacerbated by a mistrust of science. This is an important time for discernment. Continuing to reject out-of-hand anything other than the main line, dominant paradigm of Western science is likely to result in greater difficulties in managing public health issues, as trust continues to erode. We are at a difficult time in terms of managing misinformation, and we are only just beginning to develop an awareness of and respect for knowledge systems other than Western science and to tear down the colonizer/settler mentality embedded within it. This makes it more important than ever to engage with heart. Resistance to and mistrust in science may stem from values important to those resisting. Exploring these values can be a fruitful way to address this mistrust. Vaccine resistance during the COVID-19 pandemic provides many examples of public health professionals doing just this. Opportunities to do so, to engage with heart, abound. For instance, in Bolivia, chlorine dioxide, a chemical banned by the FDA, became a popular treatment against COVID-19, even approved by the National Government.²

In valuing ways of knowing beyond an analytical Western science approach, we can also acknowledge the value of Western science. It has brought a great deal of knowledge forward for the benefit of humanity and it continues to do so. By

linking with multiple knowledge systems, we have the opportunity to incorporate many knowledges to sustain all life—human and more-than-human—and enhance its quality. Many non-dominant cultural traditions model intertwining multiple knowledges to sustain all life. We must learn how to learn without appropriating cultural and spiritual traditions of others (see Chapter “[Transforming the Planetary Health Crisis Through an Indigenous Land-Based Meta-Narrative](#)”). This is not a simple task when we are just now beginning to recognize the depth of the colonizer/settler mentality in our social structures and systems, despite many in Indigenous communities and in the global South having long called this out.

7 Concluding Thoughts

Engaging with communities in true participatory fashion, not simply as subjects or data providers, is an important initial step (see the case studies in this volume). Creating opportunities for solutions to emerge in more ways than only analytically with the partners—aligning with ancestral knowledge, intuitive knowledge, and imaginative and anticipatory possibilities—will transform the outcomes and our world. Stemming from our study of systems, evolution, and complexity science we have learned the limitations of prediction and the reality and value of the emergence of novelty. Discourse in policy has grown to include adaptive management, or learning from doing and making the necessary adjustments along the way as we learn. More recently, the need for an anticipatory approach to policy has been recognized if we are to adequately protect people and planet. It is not enough to adapt as we go, we need to be open to other ways of knowing. With rapidly changing conditions, anticipating the possibilities will provide a stronger means of engaging—if we do so with right relationships and intellectual humility—the recognition that what we believe in this moment might be wrong. These approaches to global health partnerships are evident in the case studies found in this volume.

²Example provided by Susana del Granado.

Systems thinking helps us to better understand both possibilities and limits (see Chapter “[A Holistic Systems Approach to Global Health Research, Practice, and Partnerships](#)”) by bringing together the many threads that intertwine to create the complex situations we face in global health. One critical example is how funding sources often limit the possibilities by focusing on limited timeframes, immediate outcomes, set frameworks, and the requirement to state these outcomes *prior to* the start of the endeavor (see Chapter “[Funding for Equitable Infectious Disease Research and Development](#)”). This restricts or even precludes the possibility of new ideas, approaches, and knowledge to emerge from partnerships. As we move toward more heart-centered approaches, working with funders to adjust will also be necessary. We quickly see the systemic nature of making change and the challenges of stepping forward with change in one area without supporting adjustments in the rest of the system. None-the-less, we must carry

on. As a wise friend shared with me, “it is difficult to live a post-revolutionary life in a pre-revolutionary world...and still we must.”

Participating in global health partnerships provides us with the clear opportunity to have much greater and sustained impact by respectfully engaging diverse knowledge systems within ourselves and with others. Recognizing the power and influence that these partnerships have to shift us individually and collectively provides even more reason to consider exploring how we replicate trauma through the dominant paradigm of science. Finding a path to wholeness in all that we do—engaging with heart with openness and intellectual humility—is a courageous way to heal ourselves and our world.

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