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System Transformation in Response to a City's Homeless Emergency: Who Are You?

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The iBelong Project began with the purpose of transforming what it means to be a good neighbor in the midst of Sonoma County's homeless crisis and the nationwide loneliness epidemic. This is a short story of how our focus and inquiry changed as the systems transformed over the last year.

Our project began over a cup of coffee laying out the complex systems of stakeholders working to resolve the "problem" of homelessness. We saw businesses suffering, people feeling unsafe, police

following orders to drive homeless people out of their camps, and advocates chanting "Where will they go?". We saw the multiple voices and agendas as one of many dynamics creating an experience of being stuck. The priority quest was to help the various organizations collaborate to create alternatives to the destruction of communities formed by people who are living trapped outside.

Our question became, "How might we unstick the systems by increasing shared understanding between everyone affected by the homeless emergency?" We brought the stakeholders together to simulate the system dynamics and hear the multiple voices. At the gathering, people were able to see the positions and hear the voices of each other. During the simulation, multiple systems seemed to be acting in isolation; Local government and economic systems occupied the center with access to power and resources, while social systems made up of community stakeholders stood at the edges and felt unsafe stepping into the well-resourced centered systems. This led to a turning point as we asked, "How might the power and resources of the healthcare system anchor a distinct system of care in which the social system naturally finds a safe home?" We wanted everyone to be collaborators and pulled out all the plugs creating action based collaborative forums to help people bring their solutions and work together.

However, there was a turning point in the inquiry during our "playshop" at the Taos Institute's Silver Jubilee in November 2018. It was winter. Winter is a brutal time to be trapped outside and there is a spike in avoidable deaths. During the "playshop", the system simulation seemed to be frozen with horror and unable to respond to this



reality. The images and feeling of frozen horror took months to unstick, but eventually the feeling revealed a connection to the heart of the matter.

Nationwide, and in the county, heart disease is the number one cause of death. The challenges of homelessness, isolation, and many other social ills harm our hearts. We pivoted and resolved to practice relating with acceptance and empathy. We moved our action framework to a supporting role. This shift sounds simple, yet it was and is very difficult. The siren's song of providing answers is omnipresent.

The move to a relational approach has invited unexpected shifts in how the governing, economic and social systems interact. Collaborators softened the tone of interactions which elicited unexpected friendly response from other parts of the system. New patterns of interactions emerged as stakeholders became aware of what they were making together in every interaction.

As we thought about the stance of the iBelong Project, we realized that we too had shifted. During the *1st Annual Day of Belonging* we stood in solidarity with homeless people who were being evicted with nowhere to go. Now, almost a year later, during the *2nd Annual Day of Belonging* we stand joined in relationship with the multiple systems in celebration. In April 2019 a new governmental body of decision-makers funded two emergency villages where unhoused residents will have a safe place to go and begin rebuilding their lives with the support of community partners. We could not have expected this progress a year ago, and are humbled again by the power of relational work.

The iBelong Project found that our most transformational work was not the result of what we did in the system, but who we were as we were doing it. We now see our primary purpose as relating to everyone from a stance of kindness and care. We are all doing our best. We are caring neighbors.

