

Bennet, C. (2006).

Why Don't Facts Change Our Minds?

It has been more than 50 years since scientists pointed out that the Earth is a finite environment incapable of supporting unlimited levels of development and resource consumption. Published in 1972, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (Meadows et al.) is a scientific report produced by a well-respected research team at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and written in an accessible style for public consumption. Clearly documenting that sustainability could not be

achieved within a model of unfettered growth, the book provoked sharp critical review at home and abroad (Kolankiewicz, 2001).

Despite this factual information about the condition of our world, entrenched dedication to capitalism has led to the degradation of planetary health and human wellbeing (Lawrence et al., 2022). For more than five decades, despite research efforts, protest movements, and ecological awareness programs, the severity of imbalance in global natural systems has only increased. As systems scientist Jay W. Forrester (Meadows, 1999) noted, we have identified growth as the leverage point for change and are pushing it in exactly the wrong direction.

So why is it that being presented with facts doesn't change our mind or our behaviors? Scientists have researched this question as well ([Chan & Albarracin, 2023](#); [Ecker et al., 2022](#)). Interviewed late in his life, Edgar Mitchell, the sixth man to walk on the moon and the founder of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (Homans, 2013; Reuters, 2016) was asked a provocative question - *why, if we have all this information, is it so difficult to move from awareness to implementation?* Mitchell replied:

What makes it difficult is that the ego prefers to satisfy itself, rather than satisfy the greater good. That's just the way we tend to be built, until we have a transformative experience... a change of mind, a change of heart

that switches you from one way of looking at things to another. ([Global Academy Media](#), 2015, 25:30)

The accelerating crises have catalysed a growing awareness that our current way of thinking and doing is unable to formulate appropriate solutions (Archer, 2021, Bockler & Hector, 2022; O'Brien, 2016; Wamsler et al., 2023). And [conservation scientists](#) have identified that research into a comprehensive understanding of values, emotions, and mindset is necessary to impact beliefs and behaviors (O'Brien & Sygna, 2013; Toomey, 2023; Wamsler et al., 2021).

Could it really be, as Mitchell suggested, that transformative experiences catalyze a shift in beliefs and behaviors toward sustainability? My MSc [research project](#) explored that question by examining the relationship between life-changing experiences and engagement with social change toward sustainability.

Designed as an Integral Inquiry (Braud, 2011), the study employed a mix of methods and began by gathering a purposive sample of individuals with life-changing experiences. Quantitative screening, validating authentic transformation and sufficient integration of profound change, produced a sample of 145 qualified participants primarily from English-speaking western cultures.

The qualitative phase of the study invited participants to offer brief written reflections on the process of integrating their experience, and their current

involvement with social change toward sustainability. Of the 78 participants who contributed reflections, 10 were invited to semi-structured interviews to share and document their experiences with personal transformation.

A Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) approach was utilized with the qualitative data to support a foundational level of theory development. Participant data converged around two primary themes, the felt-experience of *intraconnection*, and the concept of *personal equilibrium*.

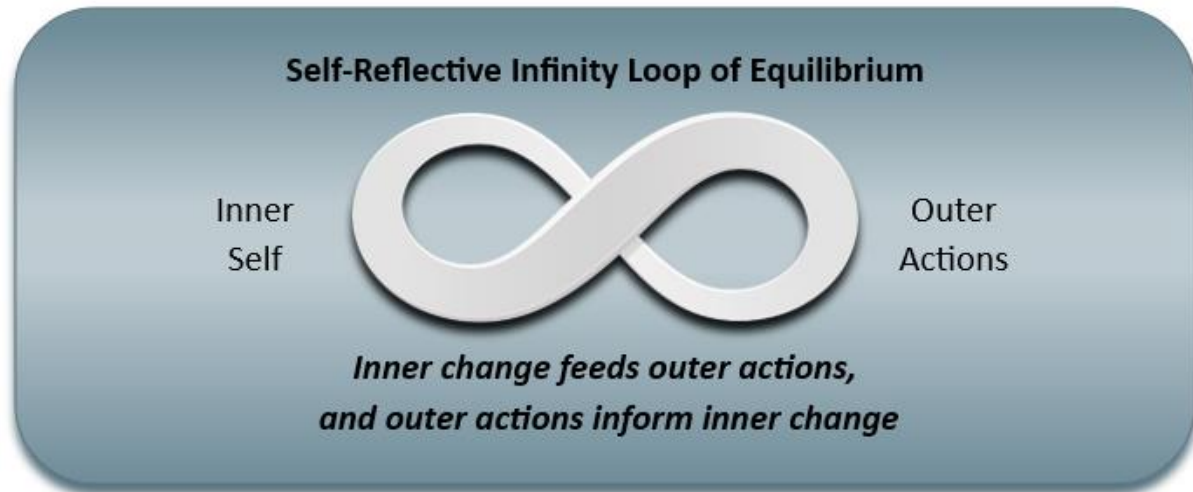
For each participant, the transformative experience included an embodied knowing of [intraconnection](#) – described by one study participant as “the awareness that everything is one, everything is connected” (David, lines 174-175). While the details of the transformative experience differed for each individual, the experience of intraconnection caused a shift in worldview – from a sense of being separate and vulnerable, to a paradoxical awareness of wholeness as a part of something larger than themselves.

It has been well-documented that a transformative life-experience can produce a change in worldview, accompanied by the discovery of a set of values and beliefs which may be new to the experiencer (C’de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; Grof & Grof, 1989; Stout et al., 2006; White, 1998; Woollacott & Shumway-Cook, 2023). The core values identified by participants in this study included

commitment to something greater than oneself, self-respect, respect and care for others, and care for other living things and the environment. Common to all wisdom traditions, these *universal values* (Kinnier et al., 2000) are understood to form and inform the structural threads which inextricably entangle individuals, collectives and systems (O'Brien et al., 2023).

This awareness of unity and wholeness was identified as the vital element in an orientation toward sustainability, as it naturally supported a clarification of values and led to changes in behavior. Additionally, the felt-sense of intraconnection was accompanied by an innate desire to be of service to others; each study participant found themselves organically oriented toward engagement with activities which support flourishing for all living creatures and our biosphere.

The term *personal equilibrium* emerged as a descriptor for the process of maintaining personal balance in the presence of dissonance between opposing worldviews (i.e., intraconnection vs. materialist reality). The importance of tending to this alignment of personal values and behaviors was frequently illustrated with examples of the ripple effect – the impact of personal behavior upon others and the world. The drive to harmonize inner and outer aspects of the self may be visualized as shown below - a dynamic process of learning to function as an integral part of the whole.



Opportunities for future research include exploring the evolution of outer actions toward deepening engagement with social fractals (i.e. self-similar patterns) focused upon sustainability (O'Brien et al., 2016). The findings from this study have illustrated the truth of Edgar Mitchell's words; although facts do not change minds, transformative life-experiences do hold the potential to catalyze a fundamental shift in our perspective of self and the world.

The full dissertation may be read [here](#).

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