

The Crisis In Greece — and Unexpected Gratitude



The Art of Participatory Leadership in Athens, Greece this April. Through the Systemic Innovation Zone (SIZ-Hellas), people are birthing new systems, ones that return to the meaning of democracy, where citizens self-organize around what is needed and dream is possible.

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'If there had been no crisis, we could not have known this quality of being together was possible'

Monday, June 29, 2015 -- Vanessa Reid

This spring, for the first time in the four years that we have been working on the ground with citizens in Greece, I heard Greeks saying that they are grateful for the

collapse of their systems.

No, not in a lighthearted way. Not an easy “This is all good,” but through the pain and despair of feeling the life they knew fall away and something opening on the other side of the despair.

In the Art of Participatory Leadership training we offered this April in Athens, we heard participants speak with anger and shame of encountering bureaucrats not taking pride in being civil servants — but relying on old responses that have nothing to do with the collective reality or with supporting those who are wanting to change things.

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We heard the potency of loss — loss of identity, material life, money, hope — and the necessity of re-inventing oneself.

We heard gratitude for seeing new perspectives and world views, that offer connection with each other and with a future that has a different blueprint than consumerism.

We heard this: “If there had been no crisis, we would not have met this way, could not have known this kind of quality of being together was possible.”

Since 2011, through the Systemic Innovation Zone (SIZ-Hellas), we have been witnessing and living the incredible stories and movements of people on the ground in Greece, in their communities, across the country and beyond. People who are birthing new systems, ones that return us to the meaning of democracy, where citizens self-organize around what is needed, and what we dream is possible in service to the Commons.

These stories, this courage, these actions of ordinary citizens who are creating the future now, are the threads of a new narrative that is emerging from places where current systems are collapsing or deteriorating. The thickening threads of the narrative that make the new stories possible are around how we create the conditions to meet in our collective chaos, how to be in our personal chaos, and let the new patterns within that chaos unfold to show us a way, rather than trying to avoid the angst and fear of this state of being.

We speak a lot about the chaordic in this work of Participatory Leadership: the chaordic that is born from creating the minimal optimal structure that allows just enough chaos to meet just enough order to find its route towards emergence. But the reality in places of collapse and crisis is that chaos reigns, and chamos, the degenerative extreme of chaos, is lurking. So, sitting with and in our internal and external chaos is an essential human capacity that needs attention.

I have been learning this by working and living in Greece (and in Israel and Palestine). There are many places in our trans-local network filled with the precariousness of life, the unpredictability of responses, and the shaking of the old and new. It is not comfortable but filled with human emotion: historical tensions, unspoken intergenerational traumas, and the dance of paradoxes that are hard to reconcile.

What I have learned is that:

- **Coming together to be in conversation about what matters most to us is a seriously political act** — one that can often be a great risk to one’s personal safety or can open the risk of being excommunicated from one’s “tribe.”

- **Listening in to what we don't yet know or see is an act of faith and also a skill**, and this quality of listening is the most important skill to cultivate in oneself and collectively.
- **Witnessing each other in the honesty of our expression — whatever that expression may be — is healing** beyond all measure, and
- **Navigating chaos together by doing these simple, yet very difficult, things is itself the work.**

I say it is the work because once we have done this — once we have been in the hardest places together and learned from them and allowed them to touch us — there is a clarity and depth that is a new landscape. A new landscape of relationship and trust and shared wisdom. This becomes the ground, the new soil, for what we can plant.

The knowing of what comes next reveals itself once we have met and lived the coming-through-chaos — and not before. We may have had seeds and hints, and already begun new initiatives, but we have not been initiated by the unpredictable and the unknown.

To meet chaos, to be transformed by what we did not know or see before, to let these discoveries become part of us and to let go of the old identities is a form of initiation. We are learning how to be in the chaos of our dying systems and create chaordic spaces for the emergence of the new. And importantly, we are learning how to be in this together.

This is one of the many ways that courage is bred, and when we find our courage, live from our depths, trust our relationships, feel our gratitude for the hard things that have happened — then our actions ... well, they are really something.

For more on the work on the ground in Greece, click [here](#).

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