

BOOK REVIEW

Transformative Sustainability Education: Reimagining Our Future, By Lange, Elizabeth, A. 2023, Routledge, 437 pp., ISBN: 978-0367-74706-0

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The world, as we know it, is not sustainable. To change these realities, we need to dig deep to the very roots of Western thinking – this is a big story of alternative worldmaking.

Ethical adult educators cannot continue to provide the same old curricula as if the very existence of the planet was not in peril: we have a “response-ability” (Sterling and Martin, 2019) to contribute to the struggle for ecological justice. Some of the many pressing questions we face are: how do we unpick the false assumptions about the separation of humans from the more-than-human world; and how do we re-learn relationality – and why do these questions matter? These are profound personal, political, and pedagogical questions.

Elizabeth Lange’s new book speaks to educators. We are being called to reclaim education and reimagine our future towards relationality. We are encouraged to foster active hope. We are the transitional generation that stands in the liminal zone between two epochs, from what has been to what is to come.

We are now undergoing a reality revolution from mechanistic ways of knowing and being towards a relational way of knowing and being. There is more of a shift back to wisdom that is already known by humanity but was eclipsed – now discovered through New Science. A relational ontology is a relational understanding of reality and existence. A relationing way of seeing perceives reality as an organic web of relations where the cosmos is connected as a vast sea of energy and all things are connected within a living system. This relational shift, Lange argues, has much potential to address the crisis in education and constitutes a transformative approach to sustainability education.

The book is comprehensive in its scope. As stated on the back cover, overall, the book “enacts a relational approach to transformative sustainability education that draws on post-humanist theory, process thought, relational ontology, decolonization theory, Indigenous philosophy, and a spirituality that builds a sense of sacred toward the living world”. She argues that this time of epochal shift is the time for a profound rethinking of all elements of Western civilization, for these have backed us into a tight corner. She describes us as the transitional generations who will experience the long climate emergency but also have the opportunity, especially as educators, to find pathways into the emerging story of Relationality.

Stories, old and new, are used to frame much of the book. She argues that stories matter – big stories have powerful transformative capacity to shift consciousness and elevate humanity. It is the Western big story, shaped by science, that is now being transformed by science itself. As Lange (p. 336) describes,

“The machine story of the last 300 years is founded on a worldview of four disconnects: estranging us from the natural world, erasing place-based traditions and spiritualities, detaching individuals from community and extended family, and uprooting Land-oriented ways of living. The machine story has been a process of alienation for humans -their bodies from their minds, their self from the social world, their being and knowing from the physical natural world and spiritual worlds, and their labour from their work and the products of their work.”

There is movement towards the big new story of Relationality which has been intuited by mystics over human history. It is also supported by New Science which demonstrates how humans and nonhuman beings are not discrete entities but entangled. Lange (p.258) quotes cultural historian Charlene Spretnak who states:

We are profoundly relational beings who have been living -with some difficulty- in anti-relational systems of thought and ways of doing things. Finally, all that has begun to change.

Lange’s purpose is for us to loosen the grip on the old story, which is primarily one of separation and machine logic, while stretching into various veins of new thinking, reimagining, reembodying. In this way we can play a role as transformative leaders for deep sustainability which can enable a flow into a new civilization.

Lange argues that transformative educators need to be critical students of history, with knowledge of root causes of issues and ongoing insights into social change movements and processes. She provides substantial material for educators and others working for social change through a recounting of the journey of education, its constitution and reconstitution within larger systems. It is offered to prod educators' historical and sociological imagination. Out of this, a pluriverse of possibilities is proposed that can help in this momentous epochal shift to break through to another way of thinking and being. There is urgency for humans to unlearn and re-learn on a grand scale.

Lange (p.400) advocates for lifelong learning, which values interconnectedness. She quotes Stuchul, Prakash and Esteva, who state that:

Lifelong learning, we propose is simple, yet profoundly sophisticated - to learn again together, to recover and to extend traditions of hospitality. Such learning cannot but occur over our lifetimes, cannot but be worthy of our living.

Elizabeth Lange has produced a book of great depth, intellectual breadth, filled with compassion and creativity. She invites critical engagement with her ideas. It addresses the most pressing issues for educators - how to midwife the big new story of Relationality. It is an important text which can usefully be used in study circles of educators and social change actors to think deeply on processes of unlearning separation and relearning the vision and purpose of Relationality.

References

Sterling, S., and Martin, S. 2019. Climate crisis and the response-ability of universities. *Times Higher Education*. Available online at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/climate-crisis-and-response-ability-universities>