



LET'S GO BEYOND FIXING to GROWING DEMOCRACY - TRANSCRIPT

I

Hi,

I'm Michael Johnson and I have a question for you. If you are concerned about how our democracy is doing, do you think about how it needs fixing or how we can grow it, even grow it exponentially?

If I had to bet, I would say you seldom think about growing it. Here in the time we have together, I want to invite you to consider making both important, especially growing it.

I am going to argue as well as I can that democracy is in our DNA, but right now our democracy is a disturbed, preteen adolescent. Fixing our current governing process is urgent, but that will not address growing our democracy. We need a new starting point, and I am going to make the case that the Growing Democracy Project can be that starting point.

First, a bit about me and my story.

The project and I actually evolved together. At sixteen I had a jolting experience I could not understand. At that point I was completely enthralled with John F Kennedy as the paradigm of dynamic politics. In spite of this, a message came thundering into my mind as I was mundanely watering the family lawn:

THE WORLD DOES NOT WORK.

I had no idea what to do with this, but its impact was so forceful in that moment that I knew I couldn't lose it. So I filed it away somewhere within me. And that folder opened up some 8 - years later. Here's what happened:

I grew up thoroughly enculturated with Catholicism. I embodied it to the point of becoming a Benedictine Monk in my early 20s. In the midst of a spiritual crisis involving guilt I began to unpack my Catholicism. This came to a head during a meditation when the core of my crisis lit up like a neon sign: *I'm feeling guilty because I'm not feeling guilty.*

And I went: "Wow! I've been had."¹

Working through this crisis led me to a profound moment where I realized *I could be in charge of re-shaping my life.* I not only left the monastery, but the Church as well. I wasn't just

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grasping an idea. My whole being was recognizing something about myself as a human being that I had never realized before, and I had come to it by working through my spiritual crisis.

Overlapping this big change was a series of experiences that began in my senior year of college and later in dropping out of my first semesters in both law school and graduate school. These experiences led me to abandon traditional education as a pathway.

Casting about rather desperately for a ground for my life, I grabbed onto the revolutionary fervor of the sixties. Then came an epiphany of sorts, during the student insurrection at Columbia University in 1968. It threw my whole conception of politics into doubt: “Whoa! We’re trying to dominate them because they’re trying to dominate us. This can’t work! What is this all about?”

Now I had a real direction. Eventually I was able to identify what has become my lifelong research question: “When a world works well, what is making it work?” This took me into four years of community outreach work as well as hundreds of hours in experiential training in psychotherapy, human relations, and group dynamics.

Still, answers to my questions were hard to come by. Pursuing them led me eventually to co-found a transformative intentional community in 1980. I still thrive here with 60 others. That’s 42 years and counting. Ever since, my everyday living in community has been shaping my research as much as my research has been shaping how I live and relate.

The first 20 years involved intense experiential research into the problems of giving and receiving critical feedback. By living the culture that we evolved from this work, I’ve learned three big things:

how to self-determine my life in ways I never imagined,
that this process is never ending, and
to persist on this path you must be part of a transformative group and culture.

Over the past 15 years I have added a lot of field experience in the cooperative/solidarity economic movements, where I learned that for a group to best sustain itself as an effective group, it has to be part of a network of like-minded groups. In addition to all of this, I’ve done much reading and thinking all along the way.

In early 2017, all of this experience and reflection began to culminate in what I am calling the Growing Democracy Project. This shows in its three pillars:

culture-building,
transformative learning, and
redefining democracy **primarily** as a way of living and relating, rather than **just** a way of governing.

II

So, that’s me and some background.

Now let's get into the project by talking about radically re-thinking democracy. Here's a way for us to get started. Imagine a very established and confident nineteenth-century physicist talking about Newtonian physics — how awesome it is, and how it explains everything about the physical world. Oh, for sure, there are some very challenging problems, but in time we'll figure all of that out.

From hindsight we know our imagined physicist is stuck in Newtonian seeing. For sure, it's a powerful way of seeing the physical world, but just one way.

But there was a real late 19th century physicist named Max Planck who wasn't so stuck. He'd been working on one of these challenging problems, bringing all of his Newtonian diligence and expertise to bear on it. However, the problem kept saying:

UN-HUH!

If Planck were here in the 21st century—*I'm jumping metaphors here*— we could imagine him feeling like he is in a car driving down an unknown road at night. He's having a super hard time navigating because he doesn't realize he is driving by looking in the rearview mirror. At one point he gets so frustrated he vigorously shakes himself.

And suddenly Planck is looking through the front window. Shocked, he sees the solution to his problem, but he also realizes it's in a whole different landscape, one that is MORE THAN the Newtonian paradigm.

$$E=mc^2$$

Planck had begun to suspend his way of thinking about physics...

And that's what I am getting at: We need to see and challenge our way of seeing and thinking about democracy. To see and think beyond how you usually do. Our democracy needs your heart and mind to see and sense it in radically fresh ways.

That's what the Growing Democracy Project is all about.

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Okay, let's turn now to some of the animating elements of this project.

The first thing such a project needs is a worthwhile purpose, and this project's purpose is idiotically ambitious:

to enable everyday people to make democracy the dominant way of governing throughout the United States in all of its various institutions.

Yes, everyday people.

Second, there's an underlying conviction – the one that hit me back in May of 1968: We and our democracy are dead-ended in an outdated framework, and we don't know HOW to get out of it.

(Max Planck, where are you!)

Third, the Growing Democracy Project has a specific focus – and this is very much about letting go of old ways of seeing. Google can take us through streams and streams of sites and papers about WHAT needs to be done to fix our broken proto-democracy. And this is urgently needed. However, it's very difficult to find democracy stuff outside of this fixing box. There are only a few places that focus on figuring out HOW we can grow democracy.

Because this HOW problem is so important to growing democracy, let's look at two examples that speak to it.

A democracy has to hold our politicians and CEOs accountable. That's a WHAT. Monitoring systems are hugely important, but they have always been vulnerable to being undermined and outwitted. Competent and democratically motivated citizens who are well organized for power and spread across our country, are essential for doing this work.

BUT HOW do we develop legions of people who will **want** to become democratically competent to do this work well? That is, do it compassionately and intelligently.

OK, a second example:

Democratizing our institutions more fully is one of the things we need to do. People right, left, and center are saying this. It's another WHAT. But everyday people are everywhere, and they have huge influence in shaping our quasi-democratic institutions and how they shape us. If they became conscious of having this power, then they could become a key, if not the key, factor in growing democracy.

BUT HOW can they learn to “democratize” themselves into people full of loving, proactive power.

Okay— so we have a purpose, a conviction, and a focus on this vastly overlooked matter of HOW.

But that focus on HOW takes us right up to a great, big wall: **lack of know-how**. We really don't know how to grow democracy so that everyday people can make governing “of, by, and

for the people” a reality at all levels of society. In fact, when we think about democracy, we hardly ever think in terms of HOW to GROW it. Our passions rightfully roar around the right to vote, but not about how to develop personal responsibility for democratic empowerment throughout our populace.

So, with the Growing Democracy Project we have four catalyzing elements: a purpose, a conviction, a focus, and... **ignorance**—our lack of know-how. Knowing what we don’t know, is a critical resource. Together, these four elements can form a starting point.

IV

Here’s how I think we can learn how to do this work. First, the three pillars I mentioned earlier:

culture-building,
transformative learning, and
redefining democracy **primarily** as a way of living and relating, rather than a way of governing.

Second, through a structural plan to build a national project on these pillars. We will get to that plan in a moment.

Right now, let’s go deeper into what’s involved in redefining democracy. This will overlap with why culture-building is so important. And that will also take us into Transformative Learning (TL), which will take us directly into the structure part.

Redefining Democracy

Our predominant everyday notion of democracy is that it is a way of governing. For the Growing Democracy Project this is **beginning the story in the middle**. It makes no sense. Democracy starts and ends with our living and relating to each other grounded in hearing and understanding so we can think and act together.

Our rainforests, like the one in the Amazon, are the lungs of our Earth. Hearing and understanding each other are the lungs of every functional group. This is what we do when we make a family. When musicians make music. When a work team gets a job done. When a Ukraine defends itself.

This is why democracy **can be** an effective way of governing at all levels of society. It’s in our DNA.

LISTEN!

A cognitive understanding of democracy is essential, but it won't do the job of making a democracy work well. Democracy must be lived, and we are its lungs. Cooperation and democracy are in every cell of our bodies ... *but so is selfishness and domination.*

There's a big mistake going down and so many of us aren't seeing it:

We are trying to figure out how to liberate our democracy from some 10,000 years of patriarchy, and, at the same time, adapt it to the huge, complex scale of life today without focusing on how we can enable everyday people to be a vitally active part of this process.

I'm arguing that when we have a significant number of citizens practicing and developing democracy as a way of living and relating, we will be able to see our way to a solidly democratic way of governing. But not before.

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Now, if we step back a bit, we will see that our breathing metaphor falls short. And seeing how it falls short will show us how essential self-transformation is to growing our democracy. Our bodies and our rainforests breathe automatically. Breathing relationally, however, has to be developed and sustained through struggle and with others.

The basic requirement for its success is two-fold: inhaling and exhaling information:

INHALING:

wanting to hear and understand each other so we can think and act together,

EXHALING:

willing to move into our vulnerabilities by speaking our relevant responses to what we are taking in—whatever they may be. Speaking truth to one another, face-to-face as well as we can and learning how to do it better. Then wanting to hear back the responses to what we put out. Back to inhaling.

Please note: I did not say "we should hear and understand each other," nor "let's be transparent." It's about *WANTING* to hear and understand each other as well as *WILLING* to move into our vulnerabilities by speaking our hard truths to each other.

Motivation is at the core of this kind of breathing. It sustains and develops this practice, and the practice sustains and develops trust. And trust is absolutely essential. These are the roots of democracy. And we are all in deep conflict about this stuff in every part of our lives: in our bedrooms, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our school boards ... **everywhere** we live and relate. It's a persistent struggle. It is the **overarching conflict** of human life: selfishness and

domination pitted against cooperation and democracy. Each of us embodies and transmits this conflict.

Here's the good news: The transformative capacity to shift the balance of this struggle, personally and collectively, is in our DNA. However, our motivation and competence for doing it must be learned, developed, and persistently nurtured. That's the role of culture. It is not the role of ideology. Our fears, biases, ignorance, certitude, selfishness, and domination are our primary challengers—and they will not go away. Developing and nurturing this root democracy is our starting point. We have to go beyond just doing democracy.

And that brings us to another pillar of the project: Transformative Learning.

Transformative Learning

...which is—briefly—is an emerging **experiential learning tradition** based on the insight that it's the learner's interpretation of her experience that creates meaning for her, and that thinking through these interpretations with others can lead to deep changes in her and their behavior, mindset, and experience.

Its potential is huge, and that potential is hugely untapped. And this presents a major HOW challenge: HOW can we take this kind of learning **to scale**? Doing that would require an ongoing learning system, serious R&D, and the institutional wherewithal to support, promote, and organize for these kinds of changes. That's a lot of work and it will take a lot of time. That's why the Growing Democracy Project sees itself as a starting point and not a solution.

These kinds of changes will not come about by political reforms to our governing processes. We need to engage legions of everyday people in self-transformation and rethinking democracy from the ground-up. Achieving this would produce a major cultural transition.

And to do this we need a vehicle, and that brings us to the structural elements of the project.

Structure

What follows is more of a sketch of the essential structural elements than a blueprint. Implementing this project will involve working with a lot that is already up and running, and that will shape what gets put into place. But there are three essential pieces.

For starters, there needs to be a basic unit that is peer-driven—the **Transformative Community of Democratic Practice**—or, TC, for short. The name captures its purpose. They would be small learning-and-action groups of 10-20 people who are grounded locally: in a specific community, neighborhood, workplace, organization, housing unit, etc.

But stand-alone TCs would have very little chance to sustain themselves over time, or develop small dynamic cultures. Evolutionary thinking tells us that the power of selfishness is too

great in the isolated small group context. This calls for a polycentric **Growing Democracy Network** to connect and integrate all of the TCs. This network would have three roles to play:

Provide ongoing mutual support, training, and multi-group bonding for the TCs,
Serve as a Participatory Action Research project for continuous development of
Transformative Learning and culture-building practices and theory.
House a Participatory Management coordinating system.

Culture-Building

And last but not least, culture-building...

the dynamo for the Growing Democracy Project because culture is the driving force of the human species. Our whole spectrum of diverse ideologies is a product of our cultural diversity. No one ideology can see or hear well enough to be in charge. We need all of them at the table listening, arguing, and understanding each other.

Some several hundred thousand years ago some primates crossed an evolutionary Rubicon: they began sharing intentions with each other, and that led to thinking together so they could act together better, as in hunting. It's referred to as the fourth great evolutionary transition, and it is the latest one. This breakthrough led to a still evolving capacity to cooperate that has driven human development ever since. This extraordinary capacity has been the vehicle for human culture. Through it we have become able to work together better and more powerfully than any other species.

The outcome of all this development, however, is **not utopian**. On the one hand, it was the beginning of democracy. Equals could now join together to offset the domination of alpha males and females. Further, the scope of our imagining, innovating, and wealth building has gone beyond anything we would have considered possible a few centuries ago.

But on the other hand, this also holds true for our collective capacity for violence and domination. That continues to capture much of our cooperative power for selfish ends, taking us now to the precipice of massive self-destruction. As I noted earlier, this is the overarching conflict of our species: selfishness and domination pitted against cooperation and democracy.

If culture is such a powerhouse, we need to understand how it works and how we can consciously use it to make cooperation and democracy the dominant force in our lives.

So that's pretty much the Project as a starting point for growing democracy.

To summarize:

So, there is my argument-and-proposal for this project to be a starting point to grow our democracy.

we can say that the Growing Democracy Project plans to use transformative processes in the basic unit of culture—the small group—and join them together in a transformative group of groups for continuous learning of how to grow democracy through personal development, meaningful relationship, and organizing for power.

The thrust of the project is about people taking responsibility for their lives, connecting with others, developing trust and love, and becoming competent in democratic practices.

In a word, everyday people coming together to share their energy and passion and struggles as a gift to themselves and to each other in order to make their worlds work better.