

# 4 Moves for Turbulent Times from the Work of Donella Meadows

Marta Ceroni

**Academy for Systems Change**

[marta@academyforchange.org](mailto:marta@academyforchange.org)



Academy for Systems Change

# Academy for Systems Change: Who We Are

**The Academy for Systems Change** supports communities of systems learning and practice in North America and internationally.

We build on the work of **Donella Meadows** (who was one of our founders) and other voices of **systems thinking, being, and doing**.

We cultivate the qualities of mind, body, heart, and spirit that allow individuals and groups to develop **collective awareness for deeper, longer lasting social transformations**.



# A moment to arrive in the space



Cobb Hill Co-Housing, Hartland, Vermont, USA



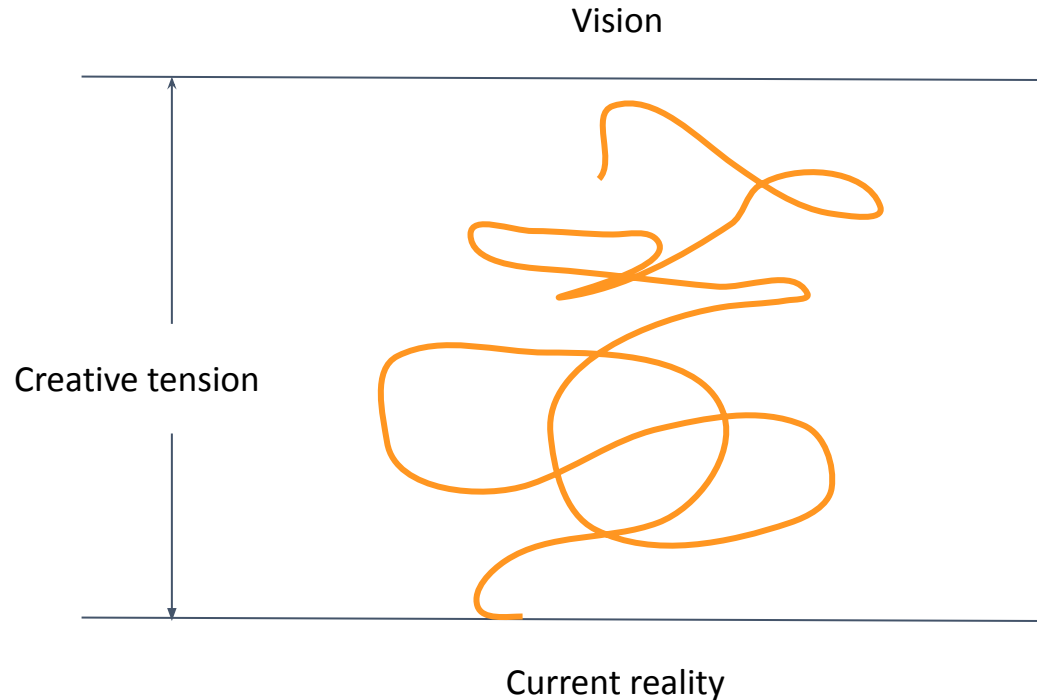


*In her words: "An ex-biophysicist, opinionated columnist, perpetual fund-raiser, fanatic gardner, opera-lover, baker, farmer, teacher, and global gadfly [...] who lives on a sheep farm and writes on a Macintosh computer with a Buddha sitting on top of it, a cat on her lap, and a dog at her feet."*



Academy for Systems Change

# A frame to navigate Donella Meadows' work



*"Start with the vision, be open to any path by which the vision will be realized, be patient and persistent, be true to the vision, and things will work out."*

*"I keep my feet firmly on the ground of present reality but my eyes on a vision for a better world"*

## From Donella...

*“We could strengthen ourselves to endure the pain of the enormous gap between the world we know and the world we profoundly long for. I believe that it’s only by admitting, permitting, and carrying that pain that we can gradually move our world away from its present suffering and unsustainability and toward our deepest values and dearest visions.”*

[Dear Folks Letter, March 19, 1989](#)



# Places of Power in a System



## From Donella...

*“A change in purpose changes a system profoundly, even if every element and interconnection remains the same.”*

[Thinking in Systems: A Primer](#)





## Insight 1: Name and Act on the Goal

There's a difference between the stated goal and the actual goal of a system; between the intended purpose of a system and impact

What does it look/feel like to intentionally design a system so that it does deliver the stated goal?

*What are you designing for?*

*What/who are you centering through your work?*

*Who is the current system being in service of?*



## From Donella...

*“There is yet one leverage point that is even higher than changing a paradigm. That is to keep oneself unattached in the arena of paradigms, to stay flexible, to realize that NO paradigm is “true,” that every one, including the one that sweetly shapes your own worldview, is a tremendously limited understanding of an immense and amazing universe that is far beyond human comprehension.”*

[Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System](#)



## Insight 2: Transcend Paradigms

Paradigms are the mindsets out of which the system arises

*“There is an emotional investment in a paradigm, because it defines one’s world and oneself.”*

Becoming aware of one’s own paradigms can bring “radical empowerment”



***Visioning, networking, truth-telling, and loving***



## From Donella...

*“Vision without action is useless. But action without vision is directionless and feeble. Vision is absolutely necessary to guide and motivate. More than that, vision, when widely shared and firmly kept in sight, does bring into being new systems.”*

[Tools for the Transition to Sustainability](#)



## Insight 3: Visioning

**A vision is an image of a desired future.**

**Desirability over Feasibility:** “What I really want, not what I settle for.”

**A vision is different than a goal, and different than a plan**





## From Donella...

*“You can drive a system crazy by muddying its information streams. You can make a system work better with surprising ease if you can give it more timely, more accurate, more complete information”*



## Insight 4: Truth-telling

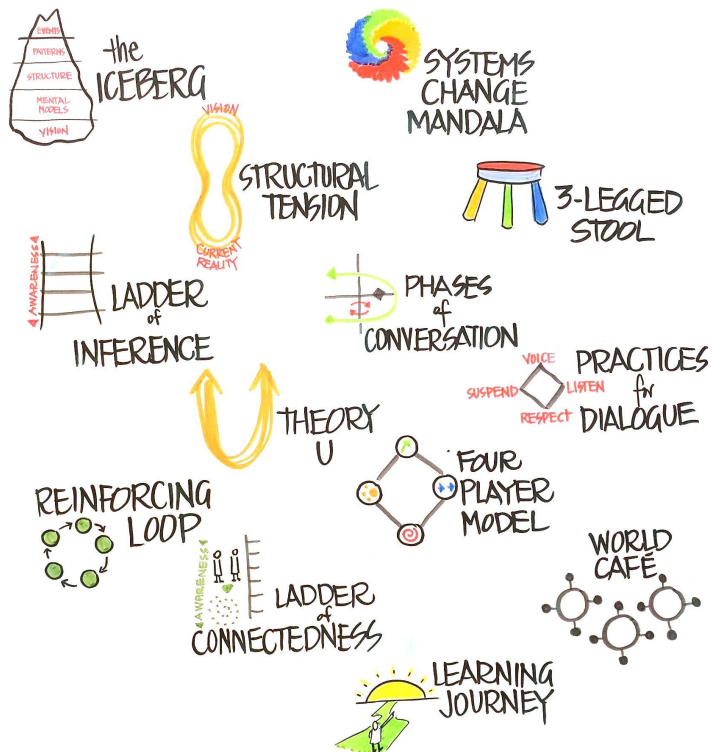
**Commitment to truth is a commitment to honoring complexity**

**Truth & Reconciliation as paths of systems change**

**Truth and Love:** holding each other in kindness and rigor



## More learning, tools, and resources - Academy for Systems Change



Sign up for our Newsletter

[www.academyforchange.org](http://www.academyforchange.org)

More from Dana Meadows

[www.donellameadows.org](http://www.donellameadows.org)

[www.facebook.com/DonellaMeadowsProject](https://www.facebook.com/DonellaMeadowsProject)

[Videos of Dana Speaking](#)

More Systems Tools

[www.systemsfieldbook.org](http://www.systemsfieldbook.org)

[marta@academyforchange.org](mailto:marta@academyforchange.org)



Academy for Systems Change



Thank you!

*Image by Marek Studzinski*

# ***EXTRAS***



## A dancing orientation

*“We can’t impose our will upon a system. We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone. We can’t control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them!”*

[Dancing with systems](#)





## From Donella...

*“There is no single, legitimate boundary to draw around a system. We have to invent boundaries for clarity and sanity; and boundaries can produce problems when we forget that we’ve artificially created them.”*

[Thinking in Systems: A Primer](#)



## Insight 5: There are no separate systems, including us!

Each problem that we are addressing might require drawing a different boundary of the system, a boundary that clarifies who/what is part of the scope of change

Some guiding questions on drawing boundaries:

- Who needs to be at the table? (more diversity is better!)
- Are people most affected by the outcomes of the current system at the table?
- Who are we accountable to?



## From Donella...

*“I have to work hard not to pay attention to you. When I succeed, when I have closed my mind to you with walls of indifference, then the presence of those walls, which constrain my own aliveness, are reminders of you.*

*And when I do pay attention, very close attention, when I open myself fully to your humanity, your complexity, your reality, then I find, always, under every other feeling and judgement and emotion, that I love you.*

*Even between you and me, even there, the lines are only of our own making.”*

[Lines in the mind not in the world](#)

