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Transforming Power: Impact, Partnership and the Tao of Wholesome Power

by Tom Atlee

Power is not just about influencing and controlling people any more than art is just about painting or love is just about romance. When we see the bigger picture of power, we find wholesome, creative, exciting possibilities. We see both influence and partnership—and more.

At its most fundamental level, power is the ability to create effects. This deceptively simple definition can trick us into assuming that we know where effects come from and that we can just create them. The reality is more complex, interesting and, ultimately, more empowering than that.

The Mechanistic Worldview and Power-Over

Modern minds tend to assume that identifiable single causes generate identifiable specific effects. This assumption underlies the remarkable power of the mechanistic paradigm—also known as the linear, Cartesian or Newtonian worldview.

Applying this mechanistic view to human affairs, we see ourselves as separate from each other and from the world. We are responsible for the effects we create—unless we are innocent victims or beneficiaries of what happens to us. We tend to view people in a given situation as either powerful or powerless. For example, an archetypal conservative might suggest that “poor people can pick themselves up by their bootstraps!” An archetypal liberal might claim that “poor people are victims of systems and more powerful people!” Blame, shame, regret, sympathy and outrage are all natural companions of mechanistic power in the human realm. So are pride and arrogance.

The mechanistic view specializes in what most people think of when they hear the word ‘power’—a version of power often called *power-over*—the ability to control, influence, manage, dominate, destroy or otherwise directly shape what happens to someone or something.

I recently found this perspective well articulated in Moisés Naím’s book *The End of Power*. Naím describes how—despite the obvious concentration of power in economic, political and other realms—centralized power is becoming harder to use and harder to hold on to. There are too many challengers empowered by modern technology, globalization and mobility. Politicians compete with activists, journalists with bloggers, security agencies with hackers and whistleblowers, established companies with innovative start-ups and pirates, universities with online sources of knowledge, militaries with

grassroots militias, dictators with social uprisings... the list goes on and on.

Naím sees this upwelling of bottom-up power as a real problem for social order because he believes that when you lose control, everything turns to chaos and people get hurt. In contrast to that view, I want to explore bottom-up power as a resource for social order—and for orderly transformation into a more just and sustainable society.

Power-Over Meets Power-With

Actually, even calling this kind of power ‘bottom-up’ is not fully accurate. Yes, there is lots of bottom-up energy going on. But that phrase ‘bottom-up’ serves more to contrast it with ‘top-down’ than to describe its essence. Its essence is more about cooperation, networking, co-creativity, inspiration, doing-it-ourselves, process, synergy, conversation, and other forms of what I (and others) call *power-with*.

Power-with is the kind of power that arises through connection—connection to ourselves, to each other, to what’s going on, and to everything else. We could describe power-with as holistic partnership power. In its most mature and comprehensive form, power-with involves our ability to see allies, resources and possibilities anywhere and everywhere, and to engage with them for mutual and collective benefit.

Power-with is not the opposite of power-over because they can and do co-exist. We see power-with enhancing power-over when work teams collaborate to generate market dominance for their company or when activist alliances overwhelm their opponents in the political battlefield. We can also see it in how PR works with people’s instinctive urges and reactions to manipulate them into certain beliefs and behaviors. On the other hand, we see power-over enhancing power-with in competitions that promote collective benefits and win-win solutions, such as the Olympics (at their best) and households and schools competing for the lowest carbon footprint.

Despite these synergies between the two modes of power, it is useful to notice their differences. What distinguishes power-with from power-over is its vector—the flow and directionality of its energy or impact. Power-over functions through linear A-to-B causation, the ability to have direct impact, to create specific effects desired by those exerting the power. In contrast, power-with functions through multi-directional interactivity and participation,

usually for mutual benefit (although short-sighted applications can produce mutual harm).

This brings us back to the assumptions we examined earlier: To what extent are we *independent agents* who create and cause things? To what extent are we *participants* in larger events whose causes and effects are complex, interdependent dynamics that emerge and evolve continually from whatever is going on?

In its extreme form, this second, less linear perspective sees seemingly independent entities as emergent phenomena arising from and manifesting the whole fabric of life. It sees apparent direct causes as interdependent and probabilistic. In the spiritual realm, this non-dual or 'co-incarnational' view is familiar to Buddhists, Taoists and meditators. In science, it is home to ecologists, quantum physicists and complexity scientists.

Strengths and Limitations of Power-Over

These modern sciences have discovered that we can't ultimately reduce the wholeness of life to its individual parts and laboratory-simulated single causes. The complexity of the real world resists our reductionism. So we play mental tricks to maintain our narrow view, calling unexpected or unwanted outcomes 'side effects.' This mental sleight-of-hand is a major factor in our degradation of nature and human lives. Current crises are almost all composed of 'side effects' from our linear progress and productivity.

The linear power-over perspective, however, is not wrong in any absolute sense. It is usually good for relatively mechanical undertakings at human scale, such as building a house or scheduling your day. In other circumstances, it can be safely exercised to the extent that we understand the larger contexts in which we're functioning, pay due respect to aliveness and wholeness, and are prepared to readily modify our ideas and actions in response to feedback.

But power-over comes with real risk of complex and messy side effects. That's why using it calls for enhanced humility and caution at the beginning, oversight during its application, and/or protest at any time from those aware of its limitations and dangers. This vigilance is especially important when we exercise power-over in circumstances involving any of the following:

- vast scales, such as whole populations, regional or global environments and global economics
- tiny scales, such as those in nanotechnology, biotechnology and nuclear science
- dynamic complex systems, such as human beings, natural systems, social systems and climate
- inadequate balancing feedback dynamics, such as in manipulated elections, media and legal systems—or in the time lags, over-

shoot and hidden magnifying feedback dynamics of climate change, as when evaporating arctic methane makes greenhouse warming worse

- other situations involving a real possibility for broad or long-term damage, as with the intrinsic risks of nuclear energy and GMO crops.

In other words, you can use power-over safely to hammer a nail, but be very careful when using it with children, radioactivity and our world. Vigorously protest efforts to apply it to large living systems without rigorous systems of review, answerability and countervailing forces over extended periods of time. This is the logic of the Precautionary Principle, which states that a new technology should only be applied out in the world when it has been proven safe, rather than applied until it is proven harmful.

A vivid example of the arrogant application of power-over is the idea that because polar ice is melting, oil companies will soon be able to exploit oil that has been inaccessible under the ice caps. This profit-driven power-over impulse will generate more climate change, more climate-related geopolitical conflicts, and more calls for the misguided power-over strategy of global geoengineering to control increasing climate chaos.

Examine for a moment the power-over dynamics exemplified in that narrative. Most obviously, it features efforts to control and dominate nature, to exploit its 'resources' for profit while trying to put its demons back in the bottle. Less obvious is the fact that the profit motive driving all of this is part of a larger system of magnifying feedback: oil company profits get used to manipulating political and legal systems to enable more profiteering while externalizing costs (such as war and climate change) onto the government, the public, the environment and future generations. In systems lingo, this is a parasitic relationship. It is supported by the manipulations of PR and media control but it is actually built into the economic and political systems. It would be possible to redesign those systems if enough popular power-with is applied to them with adequate understanding of the power-over dynamics currently involved.

Exploring Power-With

Power-with is the power we get from partnering with the entities and conditions around us. We use and support the qualities, needs and aspirations of people and groups—including ourselves. We work with the aliveness and natural tendencies of animals, plants and all kinds of living systems—from communities to forests. We align ourselves with the innate properties of the tools and resources we work with and with the flow and underlying dynamics of the situations we find ourselves in.

The energetics of power-with are like those of a dance or a jazz improvisation. Its exercise requires attending to, responding to, learning from, and shifting with the reality—especially the



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— Tom Atlee

This sculpture is part of a series of 'Olympic Gestures' inspired by the Ancient Greeks. These gestures, it has been said, touch upon the secret of our human nature and are the foundational qualities for the 'Art of Living & Being.' Discus-throwing symbolizes man's offering and countenance with the Gods as the discus is sent off into flight and then with arms stretched open awaits the return of the spirit.

— Ginger Gilmour

vitality—of what's around us, what's within us, what's in front of us. Power-with becomes more useful and effective to the extent we seek and recognize allies and resources even in problems, enemies and shadow dynamics. Someone for whom power-with is a life practice finds an abundance of people and things to work with everywhere.

Power-with is not about suppressing our own needs and aspirations to serve something or someone else. That is an effort to control ourselves, which is a power-over approach. The essence of positive power-with is mutual or collective benefit: I get my needs met and exercise my best self by helping someone or something else meet its needs and exercise its best self.

The most common power-with dynamic is teamwork—collective intention and action. Our shared energy is focused on a shared goal. Together, we build the school or get the law passed. In teamwork at its best we experience a co-responsive, organic *moving-with* dynamic called *flow*. We often see flow in sports teams who are 'in the zone' or in jazz improvisation groups who are 'in the groove.'

Another common power-with dynamic involves mutuality, the kind of reciprocal give-and-take we find in the symbiosis of flowers and bees or of partners in barter exchange or love-making. No shared goal needs to be present except the expectation of shared well-being.

These two dynamics, teamwork and mutuality, can combine such that our collective and mutual activities support something larger than ourselves, which, in turn, supports both or all of us. In a mediation, we create an agreement that works for both of us. In a gift economy, generosity creates a culture of abundance and a healthy commons that supports the well-being of all participants. Plants breathing carbon dioxide in and oxygen out and animals breathing in that oxygen and breathing out that carbon dioxide create an atmospheric cycle that provides abundant supplies of both oxygen and carbon dioxide to support all life. This generates phenomena I call whole-system power and wholesome power, big-picture forms of power-with.

Whole-System Power

Whole-system power is, of course, the power of a whole system—a whole person, a whole community, a whole situation, a whole forest. It derives both from the wholeness of the system and the wholesomeness of its engagements with its environment—that is, the larger whole systems within which it functions.

It is easy to see whole-system power in nature, where it has been called the Tao—the Intelligence of the Way of Nature—an emergent, self-organizing property that characterizes the mutual and collective behaviors in complex, adaptive systems rich with feedback dynamics that sustain them and drive their evolution. Within healthy whole systems, we also find power-over dynamics such as predator-prey relationships, but they are subsumed into

a power-with regime that supports the long-term well-being of all participating species.

Whole-system power is more than—or other than—the sum of all the subsidiary dynamics operating among its participants, including the conscious and unconscious activities of people. It self-organizes both the system's internal state and its external responsiveness. It is something we can be mindful of—or not.

Wholesome Power

Although largely unpredictable and uncontrollable, a whole system's power is something we can creatively participate in, using our power-with capacities to surf its energy and contribute to its healthy dynamics that support us and all other participants. We can also evoke new forms of whole-system power by linking and engaging previously isolated people, ideas, communities, cultures, innovations, adversaries and possibilities. And we can embrace ever more comprehensive forms of whole-system power, including the powers imminent within and beyond physical systems, the sacred power of Wholeness itself that includes, transcends and continually emerges from the creative unity and diversity of the whole Kosmos.

Consciously evoking, catalyzing, tapping into and working with whole-system power to benefit whole systems is called *wholesome power*. Wholesome power is a human capacity characterized by and utilizing the best of our evolving understandings of wholeness. It is the essence of sustainability, helping us co-exist fruitfully over the long term with the living systems in and around us.

To the extent that we engage collaboratively with nature and our fellow humans, we tap and generate whole-system power that supports all entities involved and that minimizes or transforms the harmful dynamics of depletion, conflict and toxification that endanger the ongoing health of the whole systems we depend on and are.

As we reach the global limits of what we can usefully dominate, our future survival and thrival depend on how brilliantly we learn to use wholesome power.

Thankfully, hundreds of approaches and models provide guidance and tools for that undertaking. In addition to ancient wisdom traditions and practices such as the yin-yang, shamanism, meditation and circle process, we now have 21st century tools like Spiral Dynamics Integral (Don Beck), integral theory (Ken Wilber), Polarity Management (Barry Johnson), systems thinking (Donella Meadows), permaculture (David Holmgren), Engaging Emergence (Peggy Holman); emergent processes like Open Space Technology, The World Café and Dynamic Facilitation; crowdsourcing; and my own writings on evolutionary activism and wise democracy.

All these and more have arisen naturally and in parallel from a widely shared sense that narrow-minded, short-term, linear, controlling or dominating forms of power are seriously

dysfunctional for complex dynamic systems—both human and natural. We increasingly need a different, more organic and vital form of power as our social and natural systems complexify and display increasing signs of disequilibrium and collapse.

Wholesome Power and Disruption/Collapse

Wholesome power arises from conscious engagement with wholeness. Wholeness includes not only ‘positive’ dynamics like inclusion and integration but also ‘negative’ dynamics like exclusion and disintegration. Harmonious, balanced interaction between these two generates the health and evolution of living systems. Understanding and working with *both* these vectors enables conscious evolution which, undertaken effectively in the context of wholeness, constitutes wholesome power.

Wholesome power is most readily recognized in efforts to increase wholeness, as in being inclusive, supporting good relationships, facilitating constructive interactions, creating nurturing environments, and stimulating integration, healing and growth towards greater integrity and communion. It is less readily understood and practiced in its positive engagement with the dynamics of breakdown—with problems, disease, death, waste, conflict, disturbance, crisis and collapse. But power is wholesome to the extent it engages both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ phenomena with a spirit of co-creative responsiveness.

To explore the wholesome power perspective on the dissonant, harder-to-accept vector of wholeness, let’s label that vector *disturbance*. Ranging from risks and problems to disruption and collapse, disturbance always signals a nascent new or renewed state trying to emerge. We may resist disturbance, being attached to the old order, but from a wholesome power perspective, we recognize that disturbance is vital to the ongoing maintenance and evolution of all natural and human systems. Old or dysfunctional things naturally tend to get unsettled and break down—a process that, especially when handled well, contributes energies, material and guidance for what comes next.

Here are some examples:

- Old ideas are shaken up by new evidence and perspectives. The resulting cognitive disturbance fuels the birth of new worldviews, driven by our hunger for a coherent story.
- Societies are shaken up by revolutions or technologies: old privileges, products and professions fade as new ones emerge and millions of people struggle to adapt as their lives, expectations and support systems are disrupted.
- An ancient multi-million year reptilian regime gets blasted into global winter by a giant meteor, freeing rodents to emerge from their hiding holes as the precursors of a new world order of mammals that, over eons, produces the mammalian mega-organism of human civilization.

- An organizational crisis motivates a freewheeling conversation designed to be no longer constrained by the old ways and perspectives, generating innovations in the organization’s purpose, structure and culture.

- During composting, dead plants and animals get broken down by microorganisms and bugs into organic matter usable by other plants and animals to build themselves, a process of digestion vital to all natural life.

So the disturbing phenomena we see and treat as death and waste actually constitute processes generating new resources, conditions and energies for the next arrangement of things. Breakdown often produces or makes way for greater diversity. Diverse entities and factors interact in shared contexts—natural and/or designed—thereby co-evolving their relationships and collective forms. How well they do their co-evolutionary dance determines the wholesomeness of their emerging whole and the level of suffering and/or vitality involved in the transition. Wholesome power can bring consciousness and choice to this process.

Consciousness, intelligence and wisdom help create the conditions that then shape the re-creative processes that occur as disturbance moves through its cycle to new or renewed wholeness. We have an opportunity to be aware of the creative potential and dynamics involved at such times and to work with those dynamics to serve life and the positive evolution of all involved. This kind of *working-creatively-with-what-is* is a big part of what I mean by wholesome power.

The world we live in is a whole and so, of course, are we—individually and collectively. So are every environment and situation we face. When we act as if we and they are separate from each other, wholeness creates ‘side effects’ that can be undesirable and ultimately catastrophic. On the other hand, when our exercise of power is in harmony with the reality of wholeness, wholeness evolves in harmony with us, including and supporting us. This conscious participation in co-created power of, by, and for the whole—this *wholesome power*—is key to creating the kind of lives and societies that are an ongoing delight to belong in.

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