

Kaleidoscope Thinking

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Anyone who has visited CREA House has seen the “toys” and other objects which can be found on the surfaces of my desk and surrounding shelves in my office and also in my workspace in the research center. Each of these is a reminder of an experience, a memory of persons. In a sense, they “keep me company” during the long work days (and nights too sometimes.)

Two of my favorites are the kaleidoscopes and the “bug eyes,” toys for children, yet continual reminders of lessons we need to learn and re-learn as adults.

The “bug-eye”, sometimes mistaken for a kaleidoscope, is usually a short funnel shaped tube with a multi-faceted lens at the broader end. When we look in the smaller end and focus the lens on an object or scene, we see the object repeated over and over again on each facet of the lens.

The true kaleidoscope is very different.

In a kaleidoscope, specific parts are rotated, moved in position in relationship to one another, inviting the viewer to look at the object in a new and different way. These objects, when viewed separately, may seem innocuous, ordinary. Once you see the object, you’ve seen it. However, the art and science of the kaleidoscope put the components together in ever changing formations, allowing us to see art and beauty in new and different ways each time we look. Kaleidoscopes allow us to experience beauty in the ordinary.

In reality, there are two components to a kaleidoscope: the objects being viewed or examined, and the person(s) doing the viewing. By changing the position of the objects, we are invited to see differently. Our willingness to look in the kaleidoscope, to spend time looking, and to realize that the combinations are almost endless keeps us returning to kaleidoscopes in fascination and anticipation.

The Kaleidoscope as Model

The image of a kaleidoscope is a powerful one. We can expand it to include the idea of kaleidoscope thinking. Kaleidoscope thinking requires that those who are looking at a situation or series of situations be willing to examine what they are looking at in new and different ways. It is not merely a question of looking at something or someone from a new perspective. That is changing our position in relationship to what we are looking at. While helpful, it is still not kaleidoscope thinking.

Kaleidoscope thinking requires that we begin to re-arrange what we see, to imagine new arrangements, new patterns, new groupings. It encourages us to begin to think about what might be necessary to bring about these new arrangements, patterns and groupings. It enables us to see what is missing...and then to think about how to bring these missing components or members into what we are examining.

Kaleidoscope thinking brings us to ask: “what if?” and to be willing to continue to question before we rush to fill in the answers.

Kaleidoscope thinking can be directly linked to how we view time. Time is usually seen as either cyclical or linear. Seeing time as cyclical encourages us to see change as the anomaly since it presents situations, relationships, etc. in terms of the ways things have been, are now and as they are supposed to be. In contrast, linear time, with its sense of past, present and future, allows the space not only to imagine the future as different but also to work for the future to be different. Linear time makes change normative rather than exceptional.

In reality, kaleidoscope thinking can be scary, even frightening. What happens if what we envision as a new possibility fails? What happens if it is not possible? What happens if we are wrong? There are several important considerations here.

First, change in a situation is necessary. The situation may be unjust, harmful, or painful...to individuals, to whole communities of people, to our planet. If we do nothing, that change will never take place. So even if we are not sure exactly how to bring about the best change, it is better to try, to modify and adjust, the situation, than to do nothing. If we do nothing, then what is wrong about the situation remains, and may worsen.

Second, even when we do not achieve what we had hoped to do, we learn from what was done and how it was done. These learnings become the foundation for new possibility. The trick is to be willing to learn from our mistakes and not try to hide them.

Third, making mistakes does not make us terrible people. One of the most damaging weaknesses that beset projects and ideas is the personalization of constructive criticism or of failure, rather than concentration on the idea, or the action and the process that brought it about.

Personalization destroys the environment that allows kaleidoscope thinking to happen within a group. It is a form of manipulation designed to damage the receiver of the personalization. Unless it is prevented or stopped, it grants power to the one doing the personalizing. Personalization results in the silencing of others who fear that they, too, will become its objects. This silencing is doubly damaging: first because it silences the recipient and second, because it deprives the project of the expertise, knowledge, insight and passion of each and all of the participants. In a project that is collaborative, power rightfully belongs to all who are working on it.

Some people are kaleidoscope thinkers naturally, for whatever reason that may be. Others can learn to be kaleidoscope thinkers if the necessary environment and companionship can be provided. Kaleidoscope thinkers need the companionship of others who are willing to listen to the new ideas, and then to help the ideas to grow and to develop. Together they can work to bring their kaleidoscope ideas into reality.

While some might imagine that kaleidoscope thinking is a burden, the truth is that it is exciting and hope filled, because it enables us to imagine a world that is different, better, and more peace-filled. It fills us with the energy to work to create that world.