

The Garrison Institute Presents: The Common Good/Inner Works Podcast Transcript

Gretchen Steidle: The Inner Works of Social Change

[Please note: Although the transcript is largely accurate, in some cases it may be incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription software errors.]

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[00:00:11] **Gretchen Steidle:** the primary focus was to start to build this connective tissue, like the mycelial network that connects these organizations. But the question beneath it was really to understand the mechanisms of inner work. How spirituality, contemplative practice, personal transformation work, actually functions when it is employed and integrated into the way we are offering social change programs.

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[00:01:02] **Steve Varley:** I am Steve Varley, managing director of the Garrison Institute, and today I'm delighted to connect with you in this special podcast episode that is a unique format and conversation style that I think will be a rich resource for you at the Garrison Institute. We've spent more than two decades working with a question we hold, and we know there's not a simple answer to it.

[00:01:25] What does it look like when contemplative practice becomes not just a personal refuge, but the actual engine of social change? We believe strongly at the Garrison Institute that the inner and outer dimensions of transformation are inseparable. That lasting change in the world has to begin somewhere in stillness, in deeper knowing the quality of presence that comes from a genuine inner life.

[00:01:52] And we're constantly probing the edges of this in. Lots of ways. Are there others doing this work? [00:02:00] And if we can find them, what might we learn from each other?

[00:02:25] Around 18 months ago, we set out to do exactly that at the Garrison Institute, to map the field, to find and connect the organizations around the world that are building their social change work on a foundation of contemplative practice or spiritual values or some sort of deep inner work. The result of that is the conscious change collective, a living crowdsourced map of hundreds of organizations across the globe, all working at this intersection, and what we have found has surpassed anything really we'd imagined.

[00:02:59] The breadth [00:03:00] is extraordinary organizations and criminal justice education, health, ecological restoration. Peacemaking and beyond, and the insights emerging from the field are profound about what inner work actually does in the world, about what may be missing when it's absent. It's really about how transformation at every scale seems to move from the inside out.

[00:03:25] These stories on the Conscious Change collective deserve to be told. So we're setting out to do just that over the next few podcasts as a little miniseries. And the only other thing we needed was the right person to tell those stories. We were fortunate and genuinely fortunate to have Gretchen Key's title with us as the architect of this work.

[00:03:47] Fortunate to have her as the host of these conversations, and I'm fortunate to have her as my friend. Gretchen's, the author of *Leading From Within* Conscious Social Change and *Mindfulness for Social Innovation*, published by MIT [00:04:00] Press. She's the founder of Global Grassroots, a social venture incubator and mindful leadership program for women and girls in East Africa.

[00:04:08] And the founder of Circles for Conscious Change, an education firm helping social entrepreneurs and organizational leaders use mindfulness as a design tool for innovation. She's been delivering breath based healing as a breath work practitioner and resilience practices globally for the last two decades, holds an MBA from the Tuck School at Dartmouth.

[00:04:31] Has been honored as a CNN hero named one of Inc's top 100 leadership speakers, and is recognized all over as being generally and specifically remarkable. And what I know about Gretchen though, and really what makes her the right person to steward this work, is something that's a little harder to put into a bio.

[00:04:49] It's her combination of analytical rigor and genuine compassion. She has this wonderful and absolute conviction that the world can be changed from the inside out. [00:05:00] A conviction. She doesn't just hold but lives. Gretchen, welcome.

[00:05:07] **Gretchen Steidle:** Thank you, Steve. Thank you very much.

[00:05:11] **Steve Varley:** I wanna start where you start with your guests in this podcast series and where we start on the Garrison Institute podcast with a story and learn a little bit about where your own inner journey began.

[00:05:24] Where did this calling come from for you?

[00:05:27] **Gretchen Steidle:** Hmm. There's always a question of where to start your story.

[00:05:34] **Steve Varley:** I know.

[00:05:35] **Gretchen Steidle:** I would say my journey truly began in my. Early twenties, I was, I was sort of following the path that I thought was expected of me. I'd been an investment banker. I went and got my MBA. I was very much focused on achievement and also felt pretty empty.

[00:05:59] It wasn't [00:06:00] fulfilling what felt like a sense of meaning or purpose, and. Someone told me once, who's now one of my teachers and a great mentor of mine that I, I might want to try this breathwork class that might invite me into. You know, some deeper introspection and it sounded way far out and completely outside of my comfort zone.

[00:06:31] And it took me about six years before I decided that maybe it was worthwhile. And I did take this incredible breath work class with, um, my teacher, Jessica Dibb, of the inspiration community in Baltimore. And it completely changed my life. It was a deeply transformative. Modality that really invited me into a relationship with myself and my own deeper wisdom in a process of healing and [00:07:00] inquiry that has continued to be of service ever since.

[00:07:05] And that was when I was about, I think, 2026 maybe, that I started my journey of, of breath work as my core practice.

[00:07:20] **Steve Varley:** You are, um, at the Garrison Institute, our Director for Spirituality and Social Change, and also the founder of this organization, circles for Conscious Change. And how do those two strands of work or two worlds of work connect?

[00:07:40] **Gretchen Steidle:** Well, for me, I have been fascinated by, and a practitioner of. This space where the inner domain intersects with social innovation and systems change.

[00:07:55] I started my work for about 18 years working as a [00:08:00] practitioner serving. Women survivors of war in East Africa and running a mindfulness based social venture incubator that helped them design their own organizations and mindfulness was a very key part of the way in which we did our work, which we called Conscious Social Change.

[00:08:21] It felt really important that not only do we build the. Capacity for self-reflection and understand change from our own experience of going through personal transformation work. Build a deeper human understanding and compassion for what other people have to go through when they're trying to create change, or cope with change in their lives.

[00:08:43] But we should also go about our work in the world more mindfully with deeper compassion, with a greater level of relationality and. So mindfulness was core to how our work at Global Grassroots was [00:09:00] unfolding, but it was very hard to articulate that to funders as to why that mattered. Even though it was, we thought the core to the way that this work was unfolding and its sustainability and its impact.

[00:09:14] And so we started going out. Looking at the, the research, looking for other organizations that were doing similar things and discovered that there was actually a really wide reaching community of organizations that. Also held to be true that this inner dimension and our inner growth mattered for the way in which we were operating in the world, but we were all kind of working in isolation without recognizing that maybe we were part of something bigger than ourselves, and it suddenly felt.

[00:09:50] Really important to be part of building that connective tissue to help us see [00:10:00] ourselves as part of a field to learn from each other, maybe even collaborate in some way to help. Um, to help shift systems to be a bit more compassionate. And so it was a great excitement and, uh, an honor to be able to step into this role at the Garrison Institute to be able to be part of doing the field building at this intersection of inner and outer.

[00:10:30] **Steve Varley:** Gretchen, the thing that strikes me about this work and this project, we've been in this deep inquiry of how inner work illuminates or, uh, informs or sharpens, makes more effective outer work, but. I'm really curious about your decades of inquiry in this space and your own practice and how it might have worked in the other direction.

[00:10:56] So how being immersed in the field of [00:11:00] work has changed your own contemplative practice, your inner work.

[00:11:06] **Gretchen Steidle:** Well, I, I think there's a integral and reciprocal relationship between. Your inner work practice and your outer engagement in the world. For me, my breath work practice, and my mindfulness and meditation work has supported me in doing my own healing, becoming more capable of being present with whatever's arising.

[00:11:39] And from there, sourcing sort the, the wisdom of, of how best to respond. So I, I think that so much of my learning about change comes from that ability to step into presence with [00:12:00] other human beings, to open to what's emerging. Even when there might be a desire to kind of manage the narrative or be in control, to invite that deeper curiosity that's fostered through practice and let what is unfolding in the, the space of, of human suffering and human resilience to teach you, you know, what's, what's the next lesson that you need to be holding.

[00:12:36] **Steve Varley:** So some 18 months ago we launched together. What has become the conscious change collective, this field map of organizations working at the intersection of spirituality and contemplative practice or social change? What was the core question you set out to answer with the conscious change collective?[00:13:00]

[00:13:01] **Gretchen Steidle:** Well, I think. The primary focus was to start to build this connective tissue, like the mycelial network that connects these organizations. But the question beneath it was really to understand the mechanisms of inner work and. How spirituality, contemplative practice, personal transformation work, actually functions when it is employed and integrated into the way we are offering social change programs.

[00:13:35] There's something about. How that shifts people and cultures and communities and systems. That is often really hard to measure, to articulate, to get at. And yet there are hundreds of organizations that are demonstrating that it matters. And I, I [00:14:00] wanted to get to the bottom of why and, and the how.

[00:14:04] **Steve Varley:** And, um, this map, this visualization of the work when you put these organizations together are so impressive to see.

[00:14:13] And I wonder if you could just characterize what that map looks like today. You know, like how many organizations are we talking about? What sectors are represented? Just sort of in broad strokes.

[00:14:25] **Gretchen Steidle:** It's really fun to play with, so everyone should actually go take a look. You can find it at Conscious Change Collective Community.

[00:14:34] From the very beginning, it was really important that this map be of service to the field, And so we had a really diverse set of. Advisors that helped to think about what exactly did we wanna know from each other, and we designed a very extensive survey that each organization completed in stepping into the map.

[00:14:58] And those [00:15:00] questions allow us now to to search and to explore different. Subsets of, of the map according to organization modality. What are all the different modalities that, that folks are using in service of social change? What are all of the social issues that they're working on? Um, why do they use inner work?

[00:15:24] What size organization are they? What faith or secular basis do they have? You have a chance to look. Across these different fields of work, the populations they're serving, the issues that they care about, to explore more deeply each of those organizations, their core values, their theories of change, how they articulate the importance of inner work for social change, and what their impact is and what they're learning from it.

[00:15:57] So there's an immense amount of [00:16:00] information. Contained in this map that is available open source for people to explore to really understand more deeply what this sector is doing.

[00:16:29] **Steve Varley:** One of the questions that I know the collective has really spent a lot of time and heart on is really what inner work is and what an organization looks like that is spiritually grounded or contemplatively oriented in its social change work. So. Could you paint a more concrete picture of what that means?

[00:16:56] Like who are these organizations? And I know that inner [00:17:00] work being integral to the Theory of change thing is, is part of it, but this is different than just a group of organizations doing good work.

[00:17:09] **Gretchen Steidle:** Exactly. So what was really important to us was to find the organizations that were engaging with some sort of inner work modality.

[00:17:17] Let's say it's meditation or it's yoga, or they're using an inner work process that. Is integral to their programs. So this isn't just a, a faith-based organization that's doing service in the world. These are organizations that actually have a theory of change about how if they are doing this particular modality with this particular population, it's going to change something within society.

[00:17:47] So, for example. There's an organization called Mindful Badge, and they use a mindfulness based stress reduction program that they have adapted for [00:18:00] law enforcement officers. And by sharing this program around. How to develop compassion, how to invoke mindfulness, to pause and stay curious in a moment where they might have otherwise been more reactive, and that could have led to an act of lethal violence.

[00:18:22] They're beginning to shift. Policing culture and in shifting policing culture and being able to encourage police officers through the use of mindfulness to engage in communities

differently, resulting in less violence, more deescalated situations, circumstances where. They have the ability to, to build deeper trust within communities, greater resilience among police officers.

[00:18:53] And so there's an employing of these inner work skills that are then changing and [00:19:00] shifting the current system that these organizations are working on.

[00:19:06] **Steve Varley:** What has surprised you about what has emerged in this map? Something you expected to see, maybe that wasn't there, or something that kept popping up that you had not anticipated?

[00:19:20] **Gretchen Steidle:** Well, the field is so diverse. I mean, we have folks working all over the world. Working with an incredibly wide range of modalities and populations and all different issues, And so I wasn't sure whether we would find coherence across these communities. But what has surfaced from looking in depth at their profiles and how they've articulated their values and why they do what they do is that there actually is.

[00:19:54] Across the board, some very similar core [00:20:00] values that guide these organizations, and it has begun to really feel like it is defining an alternative paradigm, a contemplative paradigm, to how we think about and go about systems change.

[00:20:17] **Steve Varley:** A few months ago, uh, you hosted the inaugural Conscious Change Forum here at the Garrison Institute and, um.

[00:20:28] Something like a hundred people from all over the world and from this diverse field, this, this very, uh, different approaches to the work and what happened, uh, when you put all of these people in a room together, when you put this diverse and um, um, passionate field all in the room.

[00:20:52] **Gretchen Steidle:** Well, the, the energy was.

[00:20:55] Extraordinary. There's a real sense [00:21:00] of finding your people this experience of, of home, that this work that we all do is actually legitimate and it doesn't have to be defended. That we are able to find a sense of, of. Community that is strong, that is, it is emergent, but that level of recognition that there is a community of people that also are working, sometimes it feels like an isolation, but that they aren't alone.

[00:21:43] It's really powerful and there was a lot of energy for what next? A sense of wanting to build communities of practice, wanting to build spaces where we could collaborate and design solutions together and grow the evidence base for why [00:22:00] this matters and help other people recognize its importance. So there's a lot of energy for being able to, to grow this emerging field.

[00:22:13] **Steve Varley:** As we, um, look ahead to some podcast episodes, Gretchen, where you will host some conversations. I, I know you have described a theme that has been emerging

across your conversations, and there is a distinction that you make between employing contemplative values and embodying those values. What do you mean by that?

[00:22:41] **Gretchen Steidle:** We are finding that many of these organizations share similar values, and those are, for example, that the inner and the outer are really inseparable and need to be embodied. That we [00:23:00] need to embrace our interdependence and work in relational ways in community. So many of these organizations recognize the inherent goodness and wisdom in each of us, And so they are not just.

[00:23:22] Teaching mindfulness, let's say. They are embodying those values in the ways that they're showing up. So if they're working with youth or they're working with people who are incarcerated, they are there present, engaging with that relational way of being and treating people with dignity from that inherent belief in their deep.

[00:23:50] Personal wisdom and and goodness of each person and as they are both providing inner work [00:24:00] experiences or contemplative practice, and exemplifying those values in what it would be like if we existed in a system, an education system, a prison system, for example, that actually honored the goodness of each person by.

[00:24:19] Using those modalities and embodying those values. They are creating very significant shifts in people in the culture of those systems and then in the ways that those systems function. And that's what's been really fascinating seeing across these different organizations.[00:25:00]

[00:25:00] **Steve Varley:** Gretchen, you've identified and. Spoken with folks from the collective to tell some of these stories, and you've selected four different organizations and projects that have seemed essential in characterizing parts of this narrative. Uh, do you want to preview some of these conversations and what we might hear from you over the coming weeks?

[00:25:23] **Gretchen Steidle:** Sure, I would love to. So we're gonna start with an episode with Susan Oleic and Alex Senegal from the Enneagram Prison Project. So. Susan is its founder, and Alex is a man who was previously incarcerated, who experienced the program and now teaches it. What the Enneagram Prison Project is doing is bringing the Enneagram a form of inner work that helps us understand the ways in which people.

[00:25:56] Have certain human patterns of [00:26:00] compensation that have helped them to survive, especially adverse childhood experiences and recognize that there's nothing wrong with them, but to, uh. Work to unlock them from what they call the prison of our own making and how incredibly transformative that is, not only for those incarcerated, from those with life sentences for acts of violence, but also for the folks that are involved in these prison systems, from parole boards, case officers, forensic psychologists, and by bringing this.

[00:26:37] The same inner work to all of these different parties within the prison system. They are helping to show how inner work can truly shift an entire culture by embodying those values of, of recognizing the universal nature of our human challenge, of, of [00:27:00] healing within

community and. Really honoring each person for their innate wisdom and, and treating them with dignity.

[00:27:08] And Alex's story is so deeply moving and Susan's model is, is profoundly transformative.

[00:27:21] **Alex Senegal:** I'm a type nine on the Enneagram, the peacemaker. So my question to that is, how does the peacemaker get on the FBI most violent list? Yeah. And so I have over 26 years of incarceration And so when I was introduced to the Enneagram, I was full of shame. I was broken. That was, that was, um, I was 14 years ago and I still feel it right now as I talk.

[00:27:51] I was shattered as the individual and um, I wanted to know why.

[00:27:58] **Susan Olesek:** The Enneagram does not [00:28:00] discriminate. It does not care. Gender, race, language, age, all human beings, all all human behavior is just an attempt to get one need met, and that's the, the need that was so hard for you to answer yourself. Alex, like to need to know that.

[00:28:17] We are loved, we're lovable, and when we don't think we are, we will do so many dysfunctional distortions of who we really are to try to get that need met. Of all the people who get in so much trouble with themselves, the people who are living behind bars are so deserving of understanding why we do the things that we do.

[00:28:49] **Gretchen Steidle:** After our episode on the Enneagram Prison Project, we have the deep honor of hearing from Zen Master and Social [00:29:00] Entrepreneur and contemplative activist Roshi. Norma Wong, founder of Collective Acceleration. Norma brings us some of her very deep wisdom as an indigenous Hawaiian practitioner talking about something that she calls Kuleana, which is our mutual responsibility or mutual stewardship for each other and the earth and what that requires of us.

[00:29:29] And she shares the practical wisdom of how do we. Start by interrupting our habitual patterns that keep us disconnected, like putting down the phone, having a meal with someone walking in the forest without listening to this podcast and asking ourselves what is the future that we envision. But to go from there to [00:30:00] actually.

[00:30:01] Inviting yourself to think about what would be my part in stewarding that future and then embodying that now. And she talks about a town in Maine where 10 people ask themselves such a question. If our work paid off, what would that world look like? And what part of that vision could we be doing right now?

[00:30:19] And what transformative shifts were possible because of that?

[00:30:31] **Norma Wong:** There's a town in Maine where 10 people ask themselves that question and you're going to a tight spot. 'cause you know there was that month long government shutdown, you remember that?

[00:30:44] **Gretchen Steidle:** Mm-hmm.

[00:30:45] **Norma Wong:** And there was also like a way in which people were losing their benefits for SNAP and in terms of getting the support for food.

[00:30:55] And so they said, well, you know, in our horizon story. [00:31:00] People didn't sit in their own homes having their food just by themselves. They met in community and had food together. Why don't we just do that? And it started with 10 people, and as it proceeded, day after day, week after week, over the course of about a month, 5,300 meals were served.

[00:31:27] And they would have over a hundred people show up as volunteers to cook together, and you could not tell who needed the food and who needed the company. Okay? So simple things.

[00:31:53] **Gretchen Steidle:** After Norma Wong, we have a chance to hear from another incredible practitioner, Radha [00:32:00] Ruparell. She's the head of the Global Leadership Accelerator and the Global Institute for Shaping a Better Future At Teach For All. Teach For All is an organization working in more than 60 countries with educators around the world to try to shift whole education systems.

[00:32:18] And they've been asking themselves the question, why do we educate? And in answering that question differently than perhaps most education systems, not just ensuring young people learn certain information, but to really think about helping to develop young people as aware, compassionate, connected leaders of the future.

[00:32:43] They are exploring then what are the capacities those youth need in order to become that and how do we bring these inner capacities into education systems, not just for youth, but also all of the people that surround them within education systems. [00:33:00] And she talks a lot about success stories of developing what she calls relational intelligence and all of the many practical ways that.

[00:33:10] That can be employed, um, not only within education systems, but just in our own ways of relating with other people, how that informs highly productive teams and what it looks like when we really build relational intelligence amongst ourselves and the youth that we hope will, will lead us into the future.

[00:33:39] **Radha Ruparell:** All of the studies around transformational classrooms around the world has shown that when there are strong relationships, everything changes. And by the way, that's our whole theory of system change too. Systems change because of people, and people are in relationships. And so a second body of work we've been doing is not just the [00:34:00] individual regulation, but a lot of what I call sort of relational intelligence.

[00:34:05] Just as an example, in the Himalayas of Nepal, there is a school called Jump Gato. They have a beautiful new documentary that came out, an Emmy award-winning documentary, loving Karma, which I just had a chance to see. And the school is run by a former monk who was trained under the Dalai Lama, who himself went through great difficulties as a child.

[00:34:27] You know, his parents had given up on him. He got sent off, and because he had faced those difficulties, he wanted something different. And so he has created a school, it's a residential school that's brought in orphans who's. Parents, for many different reasons had had to give them up. And this school is an embodiment of what I wish so many schools would be, which is it's really around compassion.

[00:34:53] So in the morning when kids get up. They set an intention for the day and some of the intentions [00:35:00] around how do my thoughts and my speech and my heart, how do they align? And at the end of the day, they spend a few minutes thinking about how was I, how did I do? And a lot of the practice there is, it's, it's not just about me, it's around we.

[00:35:21] So that's one example.

[00:35:28] **Gretchen Steidle:** And then finally we have the deep, again, honor of speaking with an extraordinary wisdom teacher Roshi Joan Halifax of the Upas Center, comes to speak with us about her lifelong work on death and dying and how. Our ability to engage our own fear of death with deep curiosity and compassion, [00:36:00] and embodying that compassion and presence and openness to our impermanence when we are in the presence of others who are dealing with illness and death, that that has truly shifted the ways in which.

[00:36:19] Institutions have come to care for people who are moving through experience of, of death and dying.

[00:36:35] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** And our values, you know, needless to say, are conditioned by our, our culture and society. And so sometimes we have to swim against the stream. Of our society to retrieve or activate values that are deeply pro-social and that are related to love, including love of this very planet. [00:37:00] And you know, one of the things that I keep emphasizing is this experience of mutuality, of interconnectedness of what Han calls inter being, not just only with human beings, but.

[00:37:16] With the trees, the butterflies, the very atmosphere that we breathe And so forth. You know, I just wanna go back to what McKibbin said. Stop thinking like an individual. If we begin to see things from the perspective of sym ais, which means creating together, one has this opportunity to understand, as one wonderful writer wrote, the oak tree isn't as a result of the acorn, the oak tree, and the acorn come about because of, you know, air.

[00:37:56] Water, fire, space, earth, [00:38:00] the whole environment. We're here because of, you know, multiple causes and conditions. And that realization begins to shift how we are in the world and we, we see ourselves not just as an individual, but really as a community of many beings and things. As I keep saying, it's an ontological shift that has to be directly experienced without which we will keep on our own individualistic, selfish ways, extractive corporate, And so forth.

[00:38:49] **Gretchen Steidle:** I think you'll be in for quite a treat of experiencing the wisdom that has come from decades of work of these practitioners [00:39:00] who have been deeply entrenched on the front lines of this work. But also who have their own stories of how they have

invested so deeply in their own inner work and personal transformation that has brought them into these insights that have led them to incredible innovation and social impact.

[00:39:24] **Steve Varley:** You've talked about if these four episodes land the way you hope they will about what we will feel and be inspired by, but. We know that a lot of people who I hope are listening or doing social change work now, and that people who are doing that work in this moment are often exhausted and frustrated.

[00:39:48] You know, systems feel large and entrenched and broken. What do you want to say to them directly as you've observed and worked with? These [00:40:00] four amazing leaders and the stories that you're gonna tell and the field overall.

[00:40:07] **Gretchen Steidle:** I think what I find remarkable each time I have a chance to speak with these wisdom holders and practitioners is the, the patience, the recognition that this is a long game that may take generations.

[00:40:28] And we're at one moment within this long trajectory that or spectrum that goes back. To the wisdom of our ancestors and looks forward to future generations, and we are one piece of a much larger puzzle. As Norma Wong says, we can't change the system by being a single person with a fishing pole on the shore catching one fish at a time.

[00:40:56] We have to all be holding a piece of this [00:41:00] much larger net, and if we can recognize. Our role in shepherding in that future, and we can pivot to begin to operate from that orientation now. And the more of us that are doing that, the more that we are all holding that net and the more that it will be able.

[00:41:22] To catch us to become a new paradigm, to become the dominant ways of being as we move into the future that we are inheriting.

[00:41:37] **Steve Varley:** Well, Gretchen here at the Garrison Institute, we. Love your work and we love you and I can't think of a better person to steward us in these next few episodes. I'll be listening along with everyone else, so take it away.

[00:41:53] **Gretchen Steidle:** Thank you so much, [00:42:00] Steve.