

Flourishing Fashion: Working Together to Complete the Circle

Professor Rebecca Earley

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On the day of the Rana Plaza disaster, 3 years ago, I was giving a talk to staff at H&M in Stockholm as part of the Mistra Future Fashion programme. I was providing H&M with Sustainable Design Inspiration, to become more able to change from within, through decision-making by existing staff - in particular the design teams.

On 24 April for the last two years I have been wearing my clothes inside out whilst actively campaigning for change, in support of the Fashion Revolution organisation. On the first anniversary I worked with the local primary school, asking pupils to consider who made their uniform. For the second anniversary I addressed an industry audience at the Textile Institute in London, where I talked about enabling greater collaborative ventures.

This year, in the run up to the anniversary, I'm disappointed by the overwhelming negativity and criticism of the efforts of the industry. In fact, those that have done the most in the last three years seem to be at the receiving end of countless accusations of inaction.

From Lines to Loops

The two campaigns last week - Fashion Revolution and H&M's Recycling week - were concerned with issues at both ends of the linear lifecycle of fashion. They are about the beginning - the people that make our clothes, and the end - what we should do with the clothes when we no longer want them. If we look at the fashion industry's potential to be circular, ironically these two activities are remarkably close together; the end joining up with the beginning, creating the closed loop.

The thing is, if you read the press this week, you would think these two camps live on separate planets. They exist in the old paradigm - at opposite ends of the line. I find it frustrating as I am involved with both, and ultimately they want many of the same things. Yet they are simply not looking at the complete circle. They are also at different stages of maturity, and are concerned with different scales of industry production. I believe that - like yoga, the body and mind coming together - if we view the industry as a whole being then we have more potential to transform it.

The Fashion Whole

What is needed, given the track record of the first twenty years of this beings' life, is a total makeover. It has been a fast living, unhealthy, inconsiderate child-turned-adolescent. Personal transformation may come about through support, strong friendships and relationships, a clean diet and a new regime. The

unhealthy person cannot be disregarded; cannot or should not be killed off. With time it can use its shady past to drive and inform its future self.

However, if we meet this unpleasant young companion with anger, with vitriol, with criticism, then like any strong-willed teenager, it may well turn away to return to what it knows best.

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Active, Constructive Responding

Martin Seligman in his book *Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being, and How to Achieve Them* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011) presents the ideas of Shelley Gable, professor of psychology at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Her research has demonstrated that how you celebrate is more predictive of strong relations than how you fight. How we respond either builds or undermines relationships. There are four basic ways of responding, only one of which builds relationships: in active, constructive responding, all positive changes are noted and celebrated verbally, supporting further positive changes to take place.

Those watching this animosity from the sidelines include the next generation of employees in the fashion industry. Of the 5,000 textile designers that leave university in the UK each year, the majority will work in large companies. Some will become entrepreneurs; few will survive the first three years of business. There is a clear need to inspire and guide them to be active and involved in the industry of the future, enabling change for the better.

This year on 24 April I took part in a [brunch with Filippa K](#), a partner in the Mistra Future Fashion project, supporting a company that is bringing its consumers in to meet the makers. We will celebrate progress and build relationships. I will remember those that lost their lives three years ago, yet I will continue to work as an academic towards long-term change from within the industry. Read more on my blog: <http://www.beckyearley.com/weekly>