

An aerial photograph of a dense evergreen forest in winter. The ground and branches are covered in snow. Several trees are illuminated from below, giving them a warm, golden-orange glow, while the rest of the forest is in deep shadow.

THE BANFF SYSTEMS FELLOWSHIP

POSITIVE  
**DEVIANTS**

SYSTEMS ARTISTRY for SOCIAL IMPACT

OVERVIEW

FELLOWSHIP DETAILS

LEARNING OUTCOMES

ARE YOU A POSITIVE DEVIANT?

ARC OF THE PROGRAM

INTERESTED IN APPLYING?

"In any community there are people whose uncommon but successful behaviors or strategies enable them to find better solutions to a problem than their peers, despite facing similar challenges and having no extra resources or knowledge than their peers.

These individuals are referred to as **positive deviants**."

Wikipedia



# Overview

These are turbulent times.

We find ourselves at a threshold of unparalleled complexity and opportunity. A moment of great peril and potential. Established institutions and systems of all kinds are unravelling before our eyes. New patterns are urgently required if we are to collectively flourish – to live sustainably with ourselves, with each other and with the natural world on which we depend.

In this moment, **we are convening a community of dangerous dreamers.**

*Dangerous* because their path of service involves daring acts of creation intended to impact whole systems in practical and meaningful ways. *Dreamers* because they are attuned to the more mysterious voices of soul, of land and of possibility yet unseen. Perhaps **you** are such a dangerous dreamer.

*Positive Deviants* is an uncommon fellowship dedicated to *systems artistry*. It is designed to support fellows to cultivate both the inner capacities and outer skills required to work effectively in complex challenge domains. It is a **learning community** intent on exploring evolutionary change – within ourselves and across the systems that we inhabit. It is a **leadership development journey** to develop the skills and sensibilities needed to thrive in complexity. It is a **community of practitioners** who know that multiple ways of knowing, doing and being are necessary to guide systems

transition, and that social and self-awareness are required in equal measure. It is a **cadre of dedicated changemakers** who know that how we participate in this moment *matters*.

There are many ways to intervene skillfully in social ecosystems - to influence the course of events as they unfold. The pattern of tomorrow depends on what we do today. It holds the power to change the story.

*Positive Deviants* is a fellowship for people who **really** want to change the story.

## WHAT IS A POSITIVE DEVIANT?

**A positive deviant is an outlier – a person or group that succeeds despite the odds.** Positive Deviance reminds us to:

- \* Look for outliers – people and processes whose outcome deviates in a positive way from the norm
- \* Seek patterns of emergence and possibility already alive within any system
- \* Focus on what's working rather than what's missing or broken
- \* Recognize that change comes from within
- \* Remain perpetually curious, respectful and humble
- \* Embrace difference and diversity as a vital community resource



“I often feel I am trapped inside  
someone’ else’s imagination,  
and I must engage my own  
imagination in order to  
break free.”

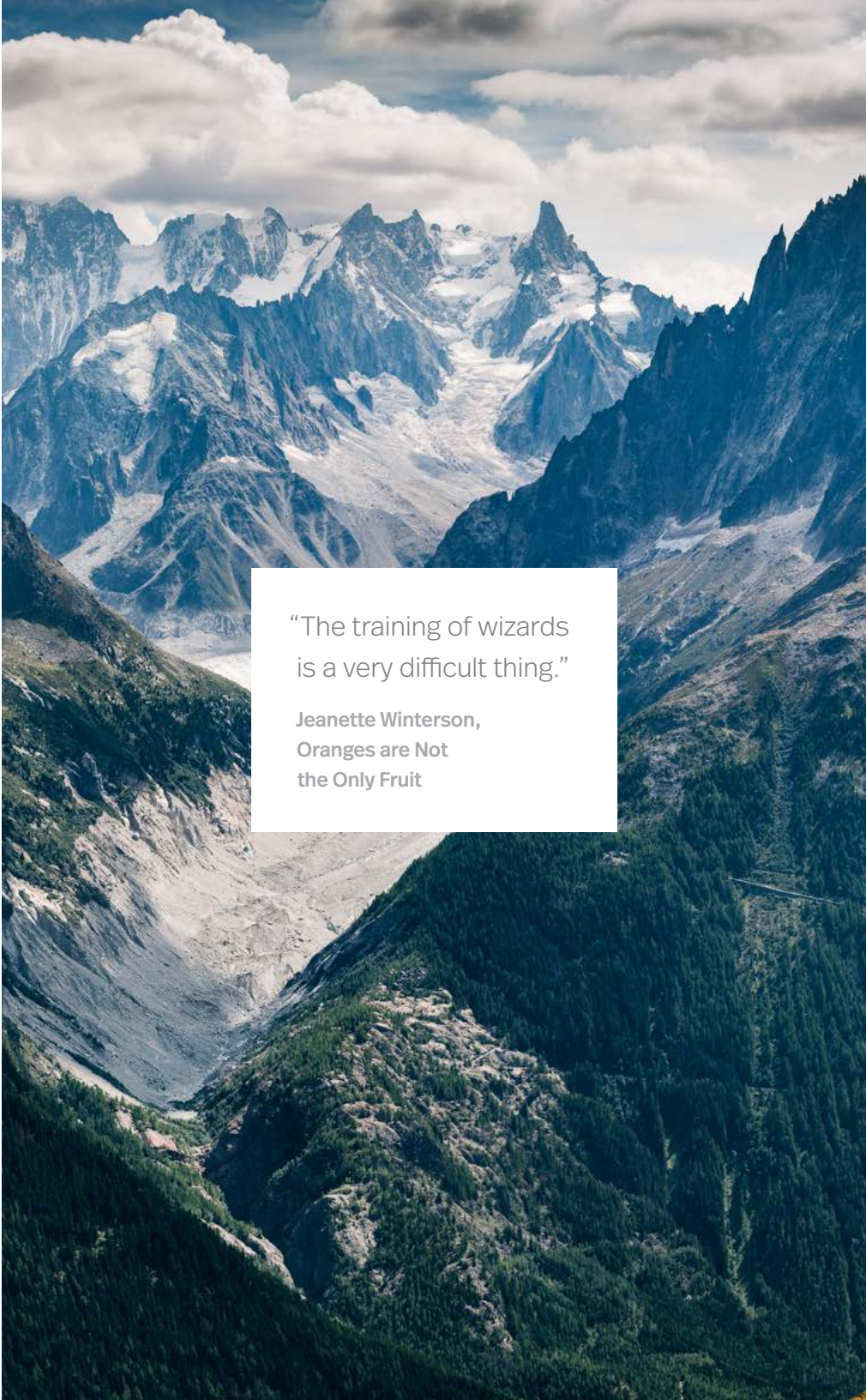
**Adrienne Maree Brown,**  
**Emergent Strategy:**  
**Shaping Change,**  
**Changing Worlds**

# Fellowship Details

*Positive Deviants* is an extended developmental journey with a small cohort of fellow travellers. Over 18 months, fellows will participate in six learning retreats totalling approximately 40 days. Between each retreat, there is a steady rhythm of personal coaching, systems mentoring, online content and ongoing practice. The program framework is rooted in the Banff Centre's approach to transformative learning for systems leaders.

Over the course of the fellowship, participants are invited to bring a heightened level of intentionality, experimentation and reflexivity to their lives and work, for it is here that the most significant learning and action will take place. It is a demanding commitment that requires nothing less than full participation.

The Fellowship offers no degrees or certificates. It is not meant to be prestigious. It will be hard to get into and harder still to complete. It is intended to be a fierce and beautiful crucible that develops capacity for field catalysts across domains.



“The training of wizards  
is a very difficult thing.”

**Jeanette Winterson,  
*Oranges are Not  
the Only Fruit***

# Learning Outcomes

## NEW LEADERSHIP FOR SYSTEMS TRANSITION

*Positive Deviants* is intended to cultivate the skillful leadership required for guiding systems transition and fostering enduring change. We think of this as *systems artistry*...a dynamic blend of competencies and capacities embodied by transformative social innovators, systems entrepreneurs and what renowned Canadian community organizer Al Etmanski calls *wise travelers*. These are people who are not only deeply committed to evolutionary change but equally committed to finding the most skillful and effective way to bring about such change – even if it requires significant personal change within themselves.

The Fellowship learning outcomes and program design have been influenced by recent research<sup>1</sup> that identified 8 common factors shared by profoundly transformative social innovators across a broad range of impactful systems change initiatives. These are:

1. The capacity to **articulate** a powerful and appealing “counter-**truth**” that presents a compelling alternative vision to the current reality
2. A powerful and often courageous **tenacity** in moving the desired change forward –even if that requires compromise
3. The skill, **agility** and risk tolerance to sense and seize opportunity when it opens up
4. A long-term **commitment** and perspective that results in deep ‘selflessness’ (“*it’s not about me*”)
5. The self-awareness and maturity necessary to tolerate **paradox** and ambiguity
6. The capacity to engage **conflict** and shadow generatively
7. Alignment with deep **purpose**
8. A systems orientation and **cross-scale** approach to change

These factors have been built into the Fellowship *Learning Outcomes* which are grouped into four clusters.

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<sup>1</sup> Westley, F., & McGowan, K. (Eds.). (2017). *The Evolution of Social Innovation: Building Resilience Through Transitions*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

## 1. SEEING SYSTEMS: BECOMING A SYSTEMS SEER

As a *systems seer*, participants will cultivate their capacity to:

### **Track Patterns & Possibilities**

Become increasingly sensitive to patterns, dynamics and possibilities alive within a system.

### **Expand Perspective**

Bring a consistent 'systems mindset' and relational perspective to all their work.

### **Develop Systems Awareness**

Develop practical and applied fluency with the language and core concepts of complexity, resilience, social innovation and systems change

### **Make System Dynamics Visible**

Become more skillful in mapping complex social systems in ways that build shared understanding and identifies opportunities for intervention, influence, leverage and cross-scale action.

### **Ask Powerful Questions**

Ignite their curiosity and learn to ask increasingly potent questions that can destabilize and enrich habitual ways of seeing and acting

## 2. GUIDING TRANSITION: THE ART OF SKILLFUL SYSTEMS SHAPING

As a *systems transition guide*, participants will cultivate their capacity to:

### **Design for Impact**

Interact skillfully with systems in order to design cross-scale strategies using tools, and tactics drawn from a wide range of systems traditions.

### **Engage with Agility**

Bring an adaptive mindset, creative imagination and an action-learning orientation to their work

### **Draw Upon Multiple Traditions**

Understand the power of artistic, aesthetic, poetic, symbolic and ritual processes in shaping culture and creating the conditions for systems change

### **Thrive in Uncertainty**

Become more comfortable with uncertainty, liminality, paradox, confusion and risk as inevitable fellow-travelers and potential allies.

### **Harness the Power of Language**

Arouse a 'mythic' sensibility and communicate powerfully using empowering stories to build shared vision and invite others into greater possibility.



### 3. MOVING WITH AWARENESS: AWAKENING THE CONSCIOUS PRACTITIONER

As a conscious practitioner, participants will cultivate their capacity to:

#### **Deepen Inner Clarity**

Perceive their own tacit assumptions, socio-cultural worldviews, biases and conceptual scaffolding and the ways these impact their capacity to act skillfully.

#### **Respond, Not React**

Understand and shift their own habitual patterns of reactive thinking and feeling, conditioned tendencies, limiting stories, maladaptive mindsets, and protective strategies.

#### **Adapt a Growth Mindset**

Engage in sustained practices that enable them to 'be still' and move with centered presence in the midst of hyper-complex, confusing and high stress situations. Be able to transmute difficulty into potential for growth.

#### **Know Your Unique Potential**

Maintain a conscious conversation with their own deep sense of purpose and calling, particular gifts, and the emergent edge of their calling.

#### **Practice with Intention**

Sustain ongoing practices that cultivate complexity 'metaskills', engage the whole person and promote a felt sense of well-being.

### 4. CONNECTING CONSCIOUSLY: TENDING THE WEB OF RELATEDNESS

As a conscious connector, practitioners will cultivate their capacity to:

#### **Engage Power**

Maintain empathy, open-heartedness, listen deeply and relate with greater intimacy and dignity across barriers of difference, power, privilege, position and perspective

#### **Engage Conflict Generatively**

Work creatively and courageously with conflict and resistance

#### **Experience Wholism**

Embody an eco-centric experience of relatedness, connection, interdependence and reciprocity with both the human and other-than-human worlds.

#### **Think and Act Like a Movement**

Work with a collaborative mindset that seeks to build partnership, alliance, inclusion, ethical shared space, engagement, commonality and collective purpose across diverse networks of stakeholders

#### **Convene Wisely**

Use a range of process skills and tools to facilitate deep listening, collaborative inquiry, generative dialogue, shared reflection, analysis and meaning-making.



# Are You a Positive Deviant?

“You walking,  
your footprints  
are the road,  
and nothing else.”

Antonio Machado,  
Proverbs and Tiny Songs

## WHO THIS IS FOR:

Are you serious about changing the story related to an issue of critical concern in Canada? *Positive Deviants* is designed for dedicated changemakers from any sector who want to deepen their capacity for influencing whole systems and whose work holds the potential for significant impact.

Applicants will have a long-term commitment to cultivating the skills and personal qualities needed in complex change processes. The program offers a limited number of places, each with a full scholarship, for changemakers who are likely to have learned some of their most important lessons outside formal education - whether it be on the streets or on the land, in combat, caring for another, through lived experience of marginalization, as an entrepreneur making waves, or as an intrapreneur working quietly behind the scenes in their organization. It's not important whether you identify as a social innovator, a complexity leader, an activist, or any other label but that one way or another you've been working for change most of your life. If you look through the qualities described here and recognize important parts of yourself, then we'd love to hear from you.

We particularly welcome applications from those trusted by and innovating within/across diverse contexts, especially within BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) communities and others working towards an inclusive future.

## PERSONAL QUALITIES:

**Calling.** You have a strong inner calling - a clear sense of your part to play in these times. Following that calling is very important to you - even if it has left you feeling like a misfit at times.

**Commitment.** It doesn't have to be a single issue. But your commitment to creative change is bone-deep, long-term and very real. We're looking for people who are disciplined and tenacious in pursuit of that commitment. Relentless. Driven. Maybe even a bit obsessive.

**Accountability.** You are genuinely accountable to the community or cause that you serve. It's a long-standing - even life-time - commitment. When asked, those community members will attest to your commitment and integrity. And you embody the kind of leadership accountability that comes up with possibilities and next steps rather than looking for excuses.

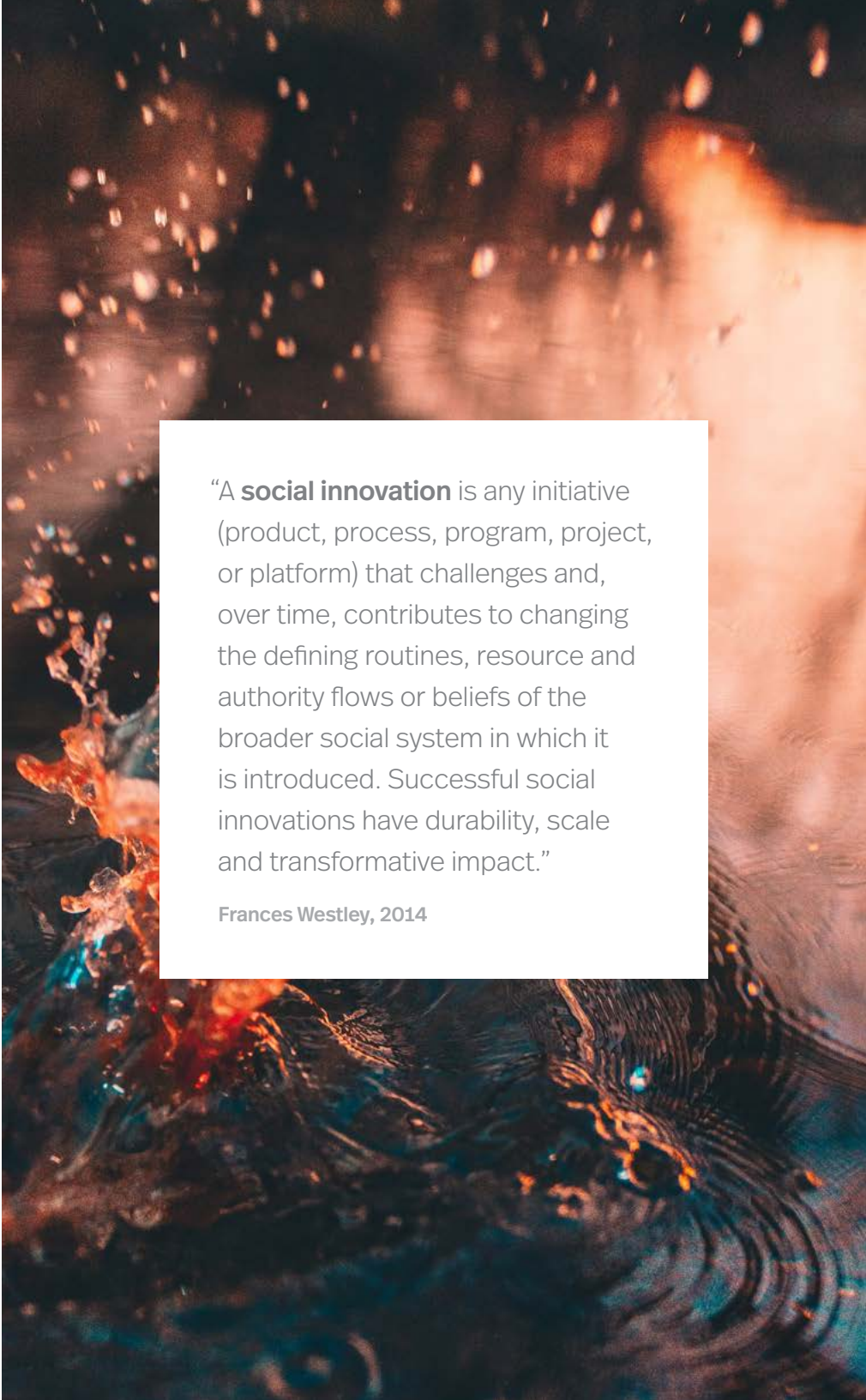
**Curiosity.** You have an insatiable drive to learn, to question, to probe and to expand your understanding and awareness. And you're just as willing to ask questions that challenge your own assumptions and certainties as those of others. By itself, formal education is not enough. We are looking for people who are smart, reflective, who can think critically and who understand the value of a good theoretical model.

**Visionary action.** At your core, you are a practitioner - a creative 'doer'. Your past is likely littered with projects, organizations, programs, platforms, movements, campaigns, processes or artworks that you have founded, built, initiated, tried. These initiatives may be very visible to others, but they could also be executed quietly in the margins. There will undoubtedly be juicy failures in there too.

**Audacity.** You are willing to risk impact. You might have been terrified in the moment, but you've taken big risks or made meaningful sacrifices to speak up, step in or take action in service of your truth or cause. When the right door opens just a crack, you go for it.

**Honouring the invisible.** You know there are many ways of knowing and you are wide open to exploring them. The body's wisdom. The visionary imagination. The open heart. The deep mind. The vitality of spirit and soul. The teachings of wild landscapes. You have a longing to bring the full spectrum of your intelligence online.

**Self-aware.** We are looking for mature, grounded people who move with mindfulness. You have begun to understand how your own vulnerabilities, reactivity, unresolved wounds, personal biases and overall state of consciousness impact relationships and systems and you're already committed to evolutionary inner work.



“A **social innovation** is any initiative (product, process, program, project, or platform) that challenges and, over time, contributes to changing the defining routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs of the broader social system in which it is introduced. Successful social innovations have durability, scale and transformative impact.”

**Frances Westley, 2014**

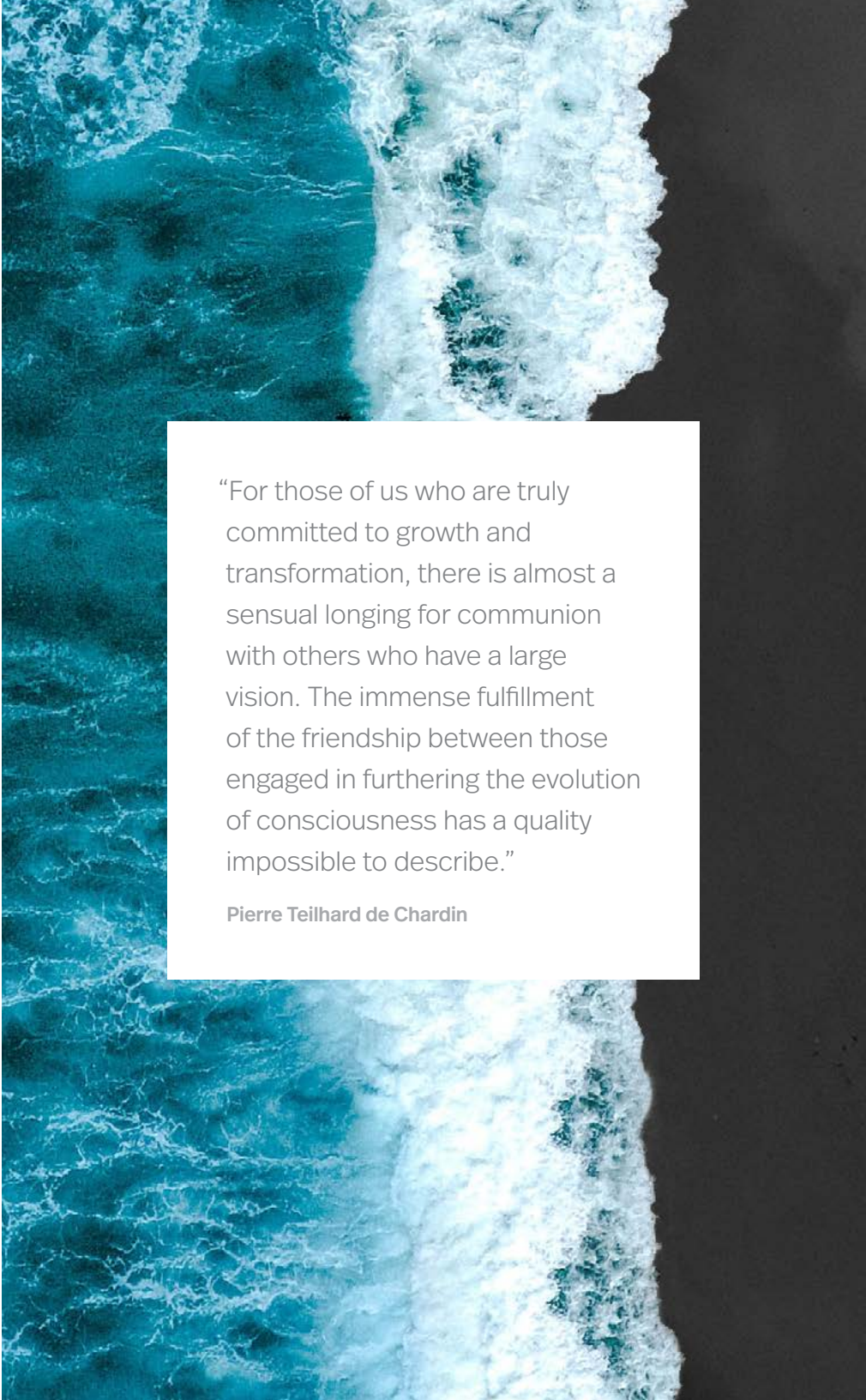
## CAPACITY FOR IMPACT:

**Transformative.** Your work has the potential to make a meaningful impact. Following Frances Westley's definition above, we are looking for people who are intent on *'changing the defining routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs of the broader social system'*. You may be working at a local level. But your work holds the very real possibility of transformative impact at the scale of whole socio-cultural and eco-systems.

**Systemic.** You already have a lived systems orientation. The language of complexity and the tools of systems intervention are familiar and you are actively looking to put those insights into practice at a new level.

**Connected.** You're already in the system. You have existing relationships and viable entry points into the parts of the system you want to shift. Working in – or on – that system is part of your daily reality. You already have some degree of skills, tools, relationships, placement and experience. It's possible you have recently hit the wall or experienced some form of shattering realization that what you are doing is not working and something fundamental in your way of working needs to shift.

**Creativity.** We're particularly interested in ideas and approaches that are genuinely fresh and innovative. It might be something utterly new that has never been seen before. It might be an act of bricolage - the creative recombination of familiar forms. Or it might involve the rediscovery of original teachings to address contemporary challenges.



“For those of us who are truly committed to growth and transformation, there is almost a sensual longing for communion with others who have a large vision. The immense fulfillment of the friendship between those engaged in furthering the evolution of consciousness has a quality impossible to describe.”

**Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**

# Arc of the Program

## MODULE I: SELF & SYSTEM

### **Banff**

*Self & System* builds a foundation for the Fellowship. We get to know one another and learn about each other's stories, work, dreams, challenges and systems. We review the shared language, common practices and core frameworks that will be used. Participants get clear about the kinds of change – personal, relational and systemic – that they are working towards over the coming months and what it will really take to foster. We'll begin to look at the systems we are working in through new lenses and experiment with a range of practices that can build our capacity for engaging complexity. Together, we'll co-craft a rhythm of on-line engagement, coaching, self-study, practice and reflection that can be sustained across the coming 18 months.

## MODULE II: THE REFLEXIVE PRACTITIONER: SITTING IN THE FIRE

### **BC Coast**

*Sitting in the Fire* will offer participants the opportunity to explore and transform conditioned tendencies and limiting stories. We will cultivate greater self-awareness around our tacit assumptions, worldviews, biases and conceptual scaffolding and the multiple ways that these impact our efforts to create the conditions for meaningful change in social systems. We will practice engaging in the kinds of difficult and courageous conversations that are invariably required to meet difference, conflict and resistance well. And we'll enter the powerful and generative currents of diversity and learn to connect more consciously across barriers of power, privilege, position and perspective. The intent here is to become more comfortable with uncertainty, liminality, paradox, confusion and risk as inevitable fellow-travellers and potential allies in the work of systems shaping.

## MODULE III: THE SYSTEMS STUDIO: TOOLS FOR TRANSITION

### **Greater Toronto Area**

This module begins with the assumption that the ‘answer’ to most systemic challenges is already present in some form somewhere within the system. During the *Systems Studio*, participants will hone their capacity to map complexity, to track the way the future is already ‘alive’ in the system and to design for systems intervention while working from a place of curiosity and humility, paying attention to ‘weak signals’ and above all trusting the wisdom and resilience of communities themselves. The module is based in an urban environment and will include various opportunities to connect with and learn from other changemakers and innovators. Participants will develop greater proficiency in using a range of process skills and tools to facilitate collaborative inquiry, shared reflection, and collective meaning-making. And they will explore the practical skills needed to foster the conditions for learning and innovation across organizational and community systems.

## MODULE IV: THE ECOLOGY OF PURPOSE

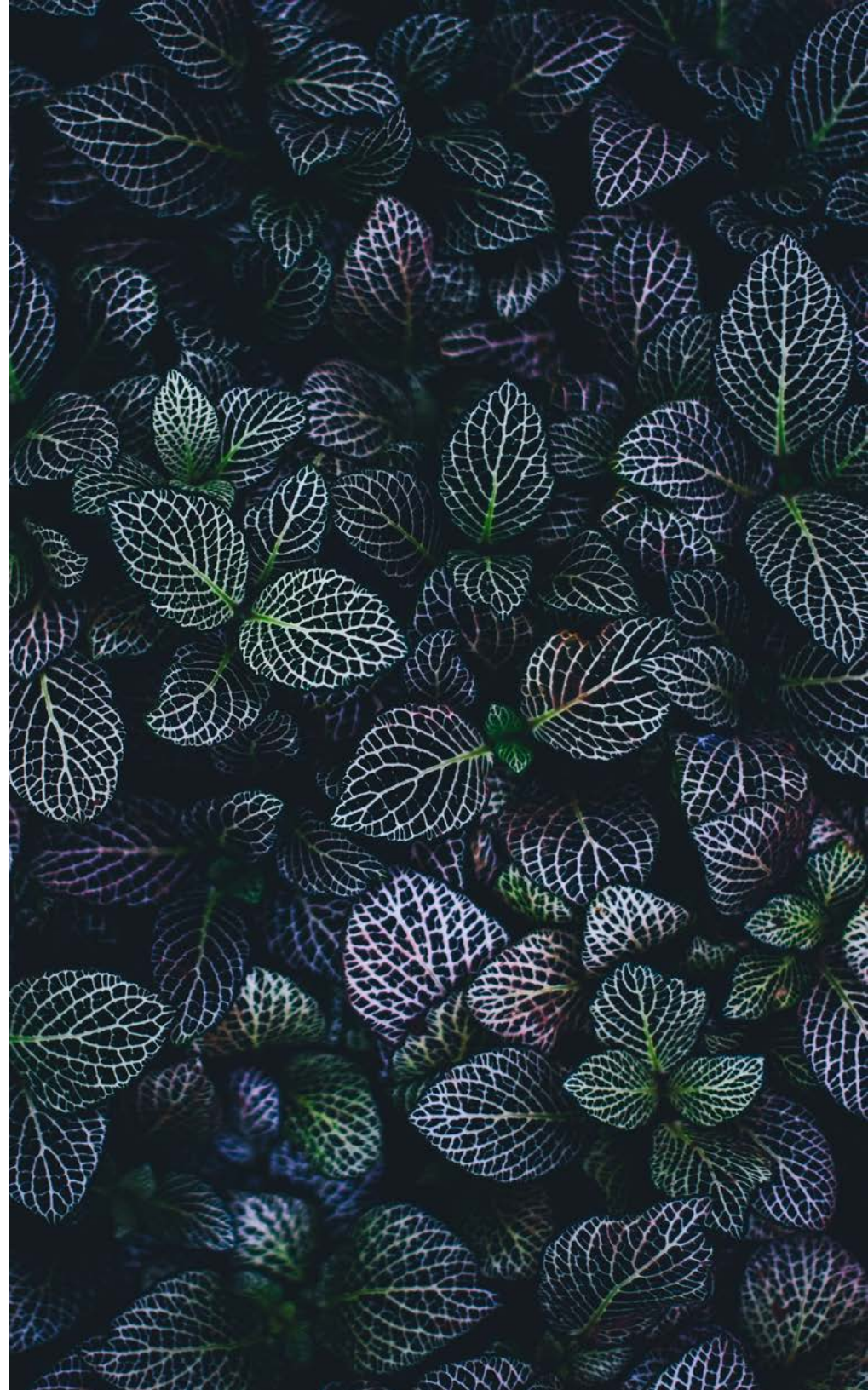
### **Southwestern Colorado**

The *Ecology of Purpose* is a profound exploration of our unique sense of purpose and calling. The module is primarily land-based and will include the opportunity for an extended period of stillness and reflective solitude in a wild landscape. When approached in a spirit of openness, humility and deep curiosity, natural eco-systems can offer both a living model for complex socio-cultural systems and a potent mirror for our own complex life stories and potentiality. We’ll track and listen for the threads of our own emergent ‘becoming’ and the very next steps on our own unique path of service in these times - the particular systems ‘niche’ that we’re each called to inhabit in this time - and from which we can make our distinctive contribution.

# MODULE V: DECOLONIZING SYSTEMS THINKING: COMMUNITY AS TEACHER

## **Northern Ontario**

*Decolonizing Systems Thinking* is an opportunity for participants to explore the worlds of systems change and social innovation through the perspective of traditional Anishinaabe knowledge keepers and Elders. As guests on the traditional territories of Treaty 3 Nations in Northern Ontario, participants will have the opportunity to be deeply immersed in the living teachings, traditions and landscapes inherent within Anishinaabe *Gikendaasowin* (ancestral ways of knowing). Participants will be invited to think of systems thinking not so much as a theory or a set of tools but as a fundamental *way of being* rooted in community, language, land, reciprocity and respect for all life that can allow for the emergence of harmonious and sustainable patterns of consciousness and culture.





## MODULE VI: STORYCRAFT

### **Banff**

According to noted systems theorist Dave Snowden, “myths have higher agency in human systems than individuals”. Systems shapers understand that information is the lifeblood of systems and *Storycraft* builds the ‘myth-making muscles’ needed to use purpose-generating stories to inspire collaborative action towards shared goals across time and space.

Participants will cultivate a ‘mythic’ sensibility and learn to communicate more powerfully using empowering narratives to build shared possibility. At both a personal and collective level, they will explore the way that the stories we tell ourselves can both limit and expand possibility. We will explore the way that narrative weaves through our personal, organization, community and wider system identities and cultivate a much deeper appreciation for - and fluency with - the power of artistic, aesthetic, poetic, and symbolic processes in shaping culture and systems. This is also our final module and as such, it will be a time to review and celebrate the story of our journey together.



## DISTANCE LEARNING & INTEGRATION

The Fellowship is designed to ensure that practitioner's personal and professional lived experiences are the primary domains for learning and experimentation. Integration, application and ongoing learning between residential modules are central features of the Fellowship program. In service of this view, we include the following distance learning elements:

### **Coaching & Mentoring (approx. 3-4 hrs/month)**

There will be several opportunities available:

- \* Personal coaching and group coaching: each participant will have regular one-on-one calls with a personal coach focused around their 'inner work' and personal journey.
- \* Systems coaching: participants will have regular opportunities – both individually and collectively - to access coaching around their systems intervention work.
- \* Mentoring: where appropriate, we will draw on our collective networks to help participants build relationships with potential mentors, allies and supporters.

### **Online Engagement (approx. 1-2 hrs/month)**

Participants will receive access to our dedicated social niche networking platform where they will remain connected with each other and with faculty, be able to engage, ask questions, post insights, and access online courses and office hours for continued learning. There will be regular online presentations and discussion sessions to the cohort from a range of leading practitioners. Participants can also expect to take part in some form of regular online group check-in.

### **Personal Practice (approx. 20 min/day)**

Practice is central. We become what we consistently practice. Participants will be supported to develop and undertake a personalized practice routine. This is likely to include general practices (things that all participants do such as self-awareness, meditation and mindfulness training) as well as specific practices (activities that are intended to help individual participants address particular issues and cultivate particular capacities). Where appropriate, baseline metrics will be established and tracked over the course of the program.

**Total required time investment/week:  
approx. 2.5 hours.**

INTERESTED IN APPLYING?

[banffcentre.ca/programs/positive-deviants](https://banffcentre.ca/programs/positive-deviants)

Application Deadline: April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020

Or for more information please contact:  
[leadershipadmissions@banffcentre.ca](mailto:leadershipadmissions@banffcentre.ca)

888.255.6327

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