



THE IMAGE

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"DIALOGUE AND LISTENING"

THE INSTITUTE OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS: CENTREPOINTES

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The Action Research Journal is written to communicate designs, formats and ideas of transformational processes which promote the human factor in private and public sectors as well as individual growth. It is published by CentrePointeS, a research division of The Institute of Cultural Affairs. It is distributed through the network of ICA offices and affiliated organisations. These include ICA offices in Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, India, the United States and Canada.

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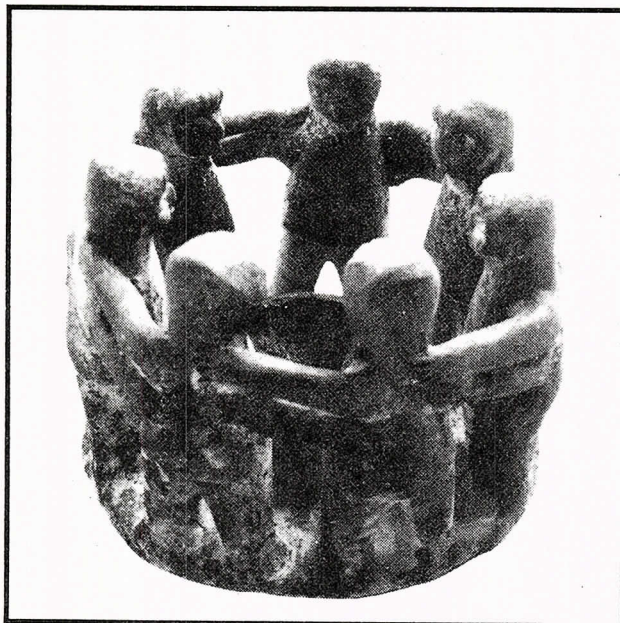
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"DIALOGUE AND LISTENING"

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THE IMAGE JOURNAL OVERVIEW



Recently, we facilitated a programme with a major company in India. During the three days, I was struck by the fact that nobody asked any questions of substance to one another. There were questions of clarification, validity and intent, but none in which the questioner might pose one that would elicit reflective observation. No "I wonder if.....?" or "What would it mean if we were to....?" When I commented on this observation to the group, one participant said, "Jack, you have to realize that you are up against a total education system that trained us to only respond when we know the answer."

I realized that if these kinds of questions would ever be part of a creative, open culture of inquiry, people would have to be reprogrammed in the dialogue process. This would entail more than teaching and getting them to use the Basic Discussion Method of the ICA. This method tends to have the one leading the discussion asking all of the questions and, although it can lead to great insight and bring a group to consensus on action, it does not easily foster a great open conversation where many people are offering creative questions or exposing themselves as not necessarily having an answer, but risking a creative thought anyway.

I first became aware of the power of dialogue as a process through Joe Jaworski's book, *Synchronicity, The Inner Path of Leadership*, where he describes his conversation with David Bohm, the renowned quantum physicist. Bohm had deduced a theory of an 'implicate order' underlying the observable world that connected all things to one another. This 'field' became noticeable when one engaged in a deep form of inquiry conversation that he called dialogue.

Examples of dialogue processes are evident throughout history. It can be found in Zen teachings, ancient Greek writing and the practices of aboriginal peoples such as the native American Indian's council decision making and Australian aboriginals. It has recently been brought to modern management's attention through the work of Peter Senge when he included it as

part of the five disciplines for a learning organization. (Team Learning)

A helpful summary of the present need for dialogue in organizations today as well as the background theory and practical processes of dialogue can be found in the book, *Dialogue, Rediscovering the Transforming Power of Conversation* by Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard, Wiley, New York, 1998. We included one chapter on Listening from this book in this issue. The word dialogue is from the Greek *dia* (through) and *logos* (meaning). But meaning here is about deep or profound meaning. It can best be understood when contrasted with discussion.

Dialogue	Discussion
Seeing the whole among the parts	Breaking issues/problems into parts
Seeing connections	Seeing distinctions
Inquiring into assumptions	Justifying/defending assumptions
Learning through inquiry	Persuading, selling, telling
Creating shared meaning	Gaining agreement

As stated by the authors, "The main question to ask yourself when you are wondering if the conversation is more dialogue or more discussion-based is whether the main intention of those taking part in it is to push towards closure and choose one perspective; or, if it is to primarily learn from each other and build shared meaning that includes all perspectives. When there is a strong push for a conclusion or to find one solution, people tend toward discussion. When there is no push for a conclusion or a solution, people find it safer to offer differing views without any need to justify 'rightness,' and it will have more of a dialogue flavor."

But is there more to dialogue than just effective communication? I believe there is and most of those who have written on the topic point to a more profound dimension. When a conversation is really open and assumptions are truly suspended, then occasionally, a level of communication can happen that is qualitatively different. It is as if a "field" is generated that facilitates deep wisdom to emerge. A common reference point is participated in through which all the participants feel a sense of empowerment and a free flow of creativity is experienced. As I said, this does not happen often, but the resulting sense of "oneness" allows each to transcend their differences. It is not so much that a deeper sense of trust and honor towards one another occurs, although it usually does, it is if each is being "trusted" and "honored" by reality itself.

At this level of dialogue profound changes can occur. I think this is what has happened at some of the eventful peace talks in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. Mortal enemies find common ground, honor the center they are both standing in and move on to new ground. This results in a new "state of being" or a new reality to exist and I believe is at the heart of the creative process. When we get the opportunity to participate in this true

dimension of humanness we begin to glimpse the wonder that is available to all, but so deeply hidden through our own definitions and insistence on our own points of view being the "right" ones.

This Issue

This is the first of a two part series of issues on the subject of Dialogue. In this issue we cover the topic from the point of view of person to person or intra-group dialogue. In the second issue, No. 35, we will look at dialogue as an internal process, the art and practice of opening the interior to depth communication. Both are part of the transformation process, one being external and the other internal transformation.

Our first article is by Prasad Kaipa who is a consultant with Mithya Institute for Learning in California. He discusses the foundational dimensions of dialogue in a conversation with Russ Voickmann, an internal consultant, as they prepare a joint consulting assignment that uses dialogue as part of an ongoing organizational intervention with an intact management team. The entire article can be seen on Prasad's web site at: www.Mithya.com. We have called this section of the original article **Bohemian Dialogue**.

One of the foremost experts on the dialogue process is Parker Palmer, an internationally known consultant. He has studied the Quaker method of solving problems through what they called a "Clearness Committee." He has also done extensive work with teachers in a "formation" process, a dialogue used to strengthen and deepen a vocational commitment. This second article, **Teaching and Learning in Dialogue**, is from a paper he did for the Fetzer Institute called The Art and Craft of Formation. Parker uses a poem as a reference point of dialogue with groups to get at the profound dimension of being an educator. By having the poem as a reference point, it allows depth conversation that otherwise might not come out due to fear of revealing things about ourselves.

The next two articles are from a wonderful collection of essays in the book Learning Organizations, Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace, edited by Sarita Chawla and John Renesch, Productivity Press, Portland OR, 1995. In the first article, Judy Brown, an educator, writer, and facilitator, shares with us her insights on the dialogue process. She sees it as a capacity we all possess, and that we need to rediscover that capacity in our organizations. The article is titled **Dialogue: Capacities and Stories**.

The second article is called **Mindshift: Strategic Dialogue**, by Sherrin Bennett and Juanita Brown. Sherrin is president of Interactive Learning Systems and has consulted widely in the USA and internationally. Juanita is president of Whole Systems Associates, an international consulting consortium dedicated to strategic change in management. They take us through a series of scenarios of a group engaged in strategic planning and how that process evolves over time as the dialogue

process reveals the groups struggle and eventual breakthrough.

At a recent gathering at Mohonk, New York, I had a chance to meet Adam Kahane, a Canadian working with The Center for Generative Leadership. Adam shared with us his journey in facilitation and consulting with diverse groups including South Africa and Colombia. He recounted a remarkable experience in Colombia where the participants were drawn from the whole spectrum of those trying to create a viable society including representatives of the revolutionary rebels. The sense of shared purpose that emerged was miraculous! His story is called **Dialogue as Social Change**.

One of the keys to effective dialogue is the ability to listen. To allow what the other person is saying to alter our own perspective means we need to be able to both suspend judgment and hear what is really being said by the other party. This is not easy and requires a conscious effort of deep listening. This article, **Listening**, is taken from the best book on dialogue I have read to date. It is called **Dialogue, Rediscovering the Transforming Power of Conversation**, that I have mentioned earlier. Linda and Glenna are cofounders of The Dialogue Group, a consulting and training firm specializing in interpersonal communication, collaborative work processes, community building and leadership.

Finally, a brief article concludes this issue by Alex Knight and Hugh Pidgeon called **Strategic Sonatas**. They report about a dialogue process using classical music as a means to learn about strategy. It is about the process a world renowned violinist, Miha Pogacnik, uses with music to illustrate the strategic progression that unfolds through classical pieces. This unusual dialogue process is remarkable in that it allows the participants to learn principles of change not normally understood in business strategy development. I had the chance to meet and hear Miha at the same gathering in Mohonk where Adam Kahane spoke. Miha enthralled all of us with his skill, wit and wisdom of music as a revolutionary art form for understanding depth dialogue.

I hope this issue will enable you to become more effective in creating an environment of effective communication for your organization.

Jack Gilles
Editor

BOHMIAN DIALOGUE - Prasad Kaipa

Background: Russ worked as an internal organization development consultant for a premiere managed health care business. Prasad was invited to facilitate the dialogue process with the management team of an information technology division and Russ had agreed to work with the team before and after the dialogue session.

Russ and Prasad first engage in the dialogue process to discuss and plan their joint consulting assignment of using dialogue as part of an ongoing organizational intervention with an intact management team. They explore how to bring dialogue as part of an ongoing organizational intervention in a division facing major, turbulent organizational changes within an hierarchical system.

Russ's consultation thus far had included data collection interviews, data feedback via a report to the management team. Key themes for this client group were:

- Poor integration of members following two previous reorganizations of the larger system of which they were a part.
- Conflict and distrust among some members of the group
- Mutual professional respect; and
- Widely varying sets of assumptions about how to reorganize including resistance to a technical consultant's reorganization recommendations.

The client had agreed to bring in Prasad at this point to support the use of dialogue in a two-day, two-night offsite.

Russ: I am interested in the alignment and attunement that is going to be important between us when we are working with the clients. It is important to develop meaning and understanding together about this work. I've read about dialogue, gained some basic principles, and participated in a number of dialogue groups. You'd think that being at least a reasonably intelligent human being I'd be able to work into a dialogue really knowing what I'm doing. I question that because I've watched my own behavior and my own way of managing myself in those contexts. There are elements of dialogue that I still want to understand particularly in terms of suspending what I already know and moving more into inquiry rather than trying to assert what I already believe I know into the process.

I've seen dialogue participants engaging each other from an old paradigm or an old method of discourse. There was very little time spent on the notion of dialogue itself. We jumped in with both feet and just started talking to each other. There was very little time taken to reflect on how our discourse related or didn't relate to dialogue. That surprised me.

What kind of preparation, what kind of understanding is important for people to have before they can use the dialogue process? My assumption is that people need to have some basic understanding of what dialogue is before they engage in it.

Prasad: When we are engaging in dialogue it is effortless. It does not mean easy - total attention is required, it takes a lot of effort to reach that effortless state. The purpose of engaging in this dialogue is not to resolve some issues, or to get at something. Giving a "description" of what dialogue is or what the expected processes are may be problematic.

At some level, human beings are naturally inclined to dialogue both within themselves and with other people. Dialogue between people deepens the relationship and may increase our ability to question each other without suspecting one's motives, even when we are both in conflict.

We can start with the assumption that we are going to have a dialogue but there are very few times when we really connect with one another at a deeper level of meaning. It doesn't hurt to provide some preparation, but dialogue is about "unthinking" or "unlearning" our assumptions.

Russ: One assumption is that people need to be primed in some way, that they need to have some kind of introduction, some kind of framework with which to enter into "effortless" dialogue. A way to do that is to frame a set of ground rules and guidelines.

Prasad: I think it is very valuable to have some ground rules as long as they don't obstruct the flow of meaning and they are at a foundational level - they support the dialogue process. If somebody doesn't have the distinction of "water," vs. "ground," they may quickly get into trouble. Boundary conditions have to be very clear, like where the water ends and where the ground begins.

Russ: You are saying there is a sharp boundary, that you are either in the water or the land?

Prasad: Yes, boundaries can be sharp, but not necessarily rigid. As long as you are going to stay either in the water or the land, you do not need to concern yourself with boundaries. Only when you come to the edge you need to know the implications of going across the boundary so you can make a choice about it.

In the dialogue, if I say, "Russ, you are accusing me of this and you are wrong," then I'm making a statement that you are wrong. There are no two ways about it. In the above assertion, there is no possibility for you to be right. On the other hand, I could say, "Am I hearing this right, Russ? Are you trying to say X, and if X is what you are saying, then I believe X does not work, at least from my perspective," and that gives us a lot more freedom to explore further.

Russ: It also allows us to explore two different points of view and look at the assumptions that underlie them.

Prasad: Right. Suddenly what happens is conflict between us can move to the meaning at the root of the word "conflict." Conflict comes from the Latin root *conflictus* which is past participle of *confligere*, to strike together. *Con -*, together + *fligere* to strike. So we strike together instead of striking each other.

Russ: So it is us.

Prasad: It is us. Instead of I vs. you, it becomes us vs. whatever is in the way. We can look at it, dig deeply, and understand what is not yet understood, what is unconscious and to be unfolded.

Russ: One of the things that gets in the way is the issue of trust. In this situation with our clients, there is an existing system with a history and people have had varying degrees of time to establish relationships. There

are some strongly held feelings of distrust about personal agendas. There is mutual professional respect. There is anger and frustration and a sense of a lack of efficacy in their working together. There is little sense of strong mutual support among some of them; there are conflicting views about how they can best approach the radical changes that are taking place in their environment. So given all that, what are the implications for dialogue?

Prasad: I look at mutual respect as a foundation. First of all, "respect," is like "re-looking." It is from the Latin root *respectus* which is the past participle of *respicere*. *re-*, back + *specere*, to look at. In other words, the idea of respect is that you are willing to stand up and look in each other's eyes, look at one another and reexamine your relationship. That indicates openness.

Russ: So respect is our foundation.

Prasad: Yes. And once we have mutual respect, it allows for people to begin a conversation. Suspending judgment could come as a natural process of respecting one another.

Russ: Is suspending judgment one of the ground rules?

Prasad: Yes. I don't put it that way because each one's interpretation of those words can be very different. How can we make it much simpler? Suspending one's judgment could get them into examining their own mental models much more deeply than engaging with one another's mental models. Through the process of dialogue we can look at one another and, ultimately, each will look at himself. The process of dialogue is to help them to look. Not look at something, but just look, because most of the time people don't look. They go with pre-judged or pre-processed "prejudice," opinions. Is there a way in which we can suspend that prejudice?

Russ: Or at least raise it to awareness?

Prasad: Yes, at least an awareness. The second thing you brought up regarding our clients was there may be a deep mistrust because of previous encounters. My sense is that it is not about "I trust you" or "you trust me". Either we are in the presence of a larger trust or we are not. It is not like I and You and trust are not different entities.

Russ: You are assuming that trust is a social phenomenon, it is not an individual phenomenon.

Prasad: Yes. Trust is nothing personal. It is like choosing some food from the refrigerator. You choose a certain amount of trust when you feel hungry, just like you choose food. At times when you experience a certain level of respect, love, compassion, care, willingness to explore, or willingness to stay with not knowing, you might experience trust and say, "I'm going to stay with this long enough, even though I don't know where we are going, even though I am becoming afraid at this moment." We should remember that trust comes from the word true; the Greek root true means tree connoting firmness. I trust the process or I trust that this is good for me indicates that we are holding firm and that we are making choices.

When you trust or when you hold firm, you do not

experience related feelings of fear or anxiety or resistance. In our work with the clients we engage with them on past experiences and analyze those, and if we discuss past feelings, what will come up are the past reactions. But there is a way to set a context in which people operate out of mutual respect, and to engage with the dialogue knowing only that we know where to begin. And the idea of this beginning is to examine our own relationship with one another and with ourselves in such a way, that together we can be much more productive together. At least it will be less stressful to talk to you if I feel that you listen to me, and that could be a starting point.

Russ: I'm still thinking about the context here, because we need to make things explicit. For example, this management group is faced with a significant organizational change that is already taking place in their environment. They are needing to do something that brings them more into alignment with where that change is going. They are walking into the dialogue with strong commitments and biases toward different models for that effort, some of them with more or less fear about what decisions will be made around these models. The fear gets right down to the gut of where they live because it could mean the elimination of some of their positions or the relative demotion of some of these positions inside new structures.

Given that trust related dynamic and a hierarchical system where a boss and direct reports are the participants of this dialogue, how do we get people to think and get conscious about the face that they are bringing all of those issues into the dialogue?

Prasad: We are never an empty sheet of paper. We bring everything we have got into everything that we participate in. It is important to include all of it. One thing which I have found to be powerful is for us to consciously wear our assumptions, our personal agenda, and exploring those out consciously.

Russ: I get a picture of moving from a win/lose way of thinking to a win/win way of thinking and that is one of the things we are trying to achieve through dialogue. Right?

Prasad: That is one way of looking at it. A discussion is constituted around win/lose and in a dialogue, we are in it together looking, examining and exploring and hence win/win is a more powerful way to think about it.

Of course you know that win/win, win/lose are all concepts which mean different things to different people. So everybody goes away with their own understanding and distinctions and interpretations of them. When we use concepts as ground rules without bringing the content with them, their interpretations become barriers.

Russ: What becomes barriers?

Prasad: The misunderstandings and different interpretations about the ground rules. When participants don't know where the ground is solid and where it is not they are giving up their ability to make their own choices, and their responsibility to facilitators. Ambiguous ground rules create conflict and participants may never acknowledge that conflict.

What we are suggesting is that a first step is to make sure your personal agenda is clear to you. It is perfectly all right whatever you bring. You may share your agenda with others if you feel it is appropriate. We are not asking you to do it, and we are not asking you not to do that. We are just asking you to become responsible and accountable for your actions while you dialogue.

Russ: You raised the question of the facilitator in your comments. When I think about the facilitator role in a context like this I think of basically two ways of approaching that. One way is the kind of pure process observer. As a facilitator you are giving feedback about what you see happening, either in an individual or in a group dynamic. The other way is to give the group a structure and try to work them through the structure to achieve a task. What is the facilitator role in a dialogue context?

Prasad: The facilitator in a dialogue is a person who has some practice at looking, someone who is able to look at both what is going on at a conscious level and at a background level. There is no separation of her being the ultimate observer trying to feed in, but she is an ultimate participator. This person is taking part in the whole. That means she is not depriving them of her role as a participator, and at the same time because she is looking at the process itself, looking at the dialogue itself, there might be something she looks at which other people who don't have the experience might skip through. At some time she might help people to slow down a little bit, to examine something which might become a barrier later.

Russ: So all of us are in a partnership together. We are discovering and moving meaning through the group regardless of what the roles are that we bring to that context.

Prasad: Yes. You asked another question about the present moment. I don't know who said it, but somebody did, "If you don't take care of the past, you don't have the present. If you don't take care of the present, there is no future." So at one level, we need to be responsible, cognizant, and aware of our own agendas with which we came into the dialogue, and our so called "win/win" situations which we have designed. But when we are conversing from those frames of reference consciously we begin to examine the filter themselves. So at that level, when the dialogue does take place, when the sparks are flying, when there is meaning which is passing through, the roles become completely dissolved. Even the facilitator role. The facilitator is only required until that dialogue begins. It is like stoking the fire. But when that fire starts, it will consume everything.

Russ: And that takes me back to another question. As long as dialogue isn't taking place then, in the facilitator role, do I say, "We are not dialoguing," and call attention to what we are doing, or say "We are getting caught up in who is right and who is wrong," or something like that, and/or do I light a path to dialogue?

Prasad: What I've found to be valuable is not making people wrong and to notice that we are caught up by our past expectations or experience. By trying to create a path

based on the past memories, we may stop the flow of meaning in the present moment.

Russ: So by sharing what we experience now, we may begin to spark. Which reminds me of Carl Rogers. He wrote that one of his principles of life was that those things that we think are most unique about ourselves are the things we share most widely with others. That is the assumption or principle underlying this notion of using our own experience to spark.

Prasad: This might sound corny or very philosophical - but whatever is inside is actually coming from outside and whatever is outside is what you put from inside. Boundaries are very porous.

Russ: At least we are connected and part of a field.

Prasad: We are part of a larger field. As long as we are conscious of it and act out of it, our individual boundaries expand. When we are unconscious of this larger field, we may think we have total freedom to do what we like, but we are limited, confined by our own boundaries. Paradoxically, just by looking at our connectedness, by noticing our boundaries and the larger field, we gain freedom from them. When we don't see our own boundaries, we may, by working hard, at times, go beyond them or even expand our boundaries, but they snap right back. It is not going beyond boundaries, but observing them dispassionately, that frees us up.

Russ: Once again, I still have two streams going. One is the hierarchy question in the context of boundaries, because that is a boundary condition. The second piece has to do with dialogue in which we are discovering our sameness. In most of my work, whether it is using tools like Myers Briggs or recognizing the value of confrontation in working across boundaries, the assumption is that the important differences and diversity among us will make us richer by coming together, rather than making everybody the same. So you take either one of those.

Prasad: You yourself said that hierarchy is a boundary condition. So I say let us include it as such and examine it rather than negate it and fight it.

Let us look at the discovery of sameness. The interesting thing about the diversity vs. sameness is that, until we recognize the sameness, the diversity cannot be distinguished. Until we recognize the diversity, the sameness cannot be acknowledged. So in a paradoxical way, which one we are valuing and which one we are entering the conversation from, allows us to expand the boundaries in another dimension.

The question of confronting means to meet face to face like being in front of something. So that means, when we are confronting somebody, there is a way in which we can look at what you see on the face freshly. See whether that has something to do with the other person or not, or your own assumptions, or about what happened with respect to what you think should have happened, or what did not happen. When the boundaries are transgressed unconsciously, peoples' feathers get ruffled. So the idea of looking at identifying the differences, starting from the sameness, or acknowledging the differences in such a way that we can recognize the common base are not mutually exclusive.

Russ: In the case of dialogue the assumption is that from that common basis we are able to generate meaning together - for both of us.

Prasad: As a starting point, yes. That means we need to get to the realization of how futile it would be to assume that each of us is creating bodies of knowledge which are entirely different and exclusive, despite the fact that we are all beginning at the same place from the same source, in the same condition.

Dialogue is to help us to discover this unacknowledged body of knowledge from which we start. From that point, we can begin to discover the processes of thinking and feeling themselves. And to look at the boundaries of what that is. From that common body of knowledge, that common set of assumptions, we can jump beyond thoughts and feelings. To confront what has not been confronted before, to look at what has not been looked at before, to include what has not been included before, is the purpose of dialogue. And that is where the meaning gets discovered, and we generate new knowledge. It is discovering the new that has always been old...and the key word is discovering.

Russ: This is not a group of peers or a group of strangers coming together. This is an intact, executive and middle level management team. We have one boss and his direct reports. That is a boundary that we have created in our culture in terms of hierarchy. What kind of preparation does a boss need around this kind of work prior to going into it?

Prasad: The preparation for the boss or for the employees is to examine, not negate, the relatedness. I don't believe that all hierarchy is bad and that networked organizational structure is the only way to go. I believe there is a natural hierarchy in nature. We get into trouble when we take a rigid stance on what that hierarchy means when we have a certain assumption about authority. We get stuck into control and authority and power, instead of freedom, service, making things work, doing the best that people can do, with creativity, growth and development.

Russ: What this implies is that in a dialogue where there is a hierarchy, the existence and the implications of hierarchy become part of the dialogue.

Prasad: That is right. It is about responsibility at one level. In the best situation, the boss is only an interface to some other level of hierarchy or some other people he is responsible to. What is she responsible for? One thing she is responsible for is growth and development of the people and for getting the jobs done for the function for which she is responsible. She is supposed to be accountable for the actions that the group collectively takes. Beyond that, the question of a hierarchy doesn't necessarily need to create a conflict in the traditional sense, a confrontation of roles and responsibilities in how the job gets done, or of what the individual is good at and what the boss is good at. Those could become part of a dialogue in which the boss begins to start noticing what gives her power. All these people doing the best that they can for the times they have together will make the boss look good.

The problem comes not because there is a boundary. There has not been a negotiation of boundary. In a dialogue, we are asking each of them to keep their personal agenda explicit, conscious and on the front burner. We are creating a conversation in which people can recognize and remove boundaries for themselves in relationship with other people. Collectively we are arriving at something which would be mutually inclusive. Together we invent, discover and create boundaries which are useful for us.

Russ: Among some of the members of this group there is a sense of competition. The competition is on the level of assumptions and ideas about the present and the future. There may also be a kind of political dynamic going on that may establish a narrower boundary that constrains trust and relationship.

Prasad: Any boundary that people have not taken responsibility for will become a barrier to dialogue. Any boundary can become a springboard for dialogue when we are willing to acknowledge it.

Russ: Boundaries can be structural or emotional. How do emotions like vulnerability get dealt with from a facilitator's point of view?

Prasad: In any group we are confronting each other with past behaviors, we are confronting each other with what did work, what did not work, what they said they will do and they did not, or what they were good at. It is through the past, dealing with the present, hoping that the future can be consistent if we work enough with the past and kind of clean it up.

Russ: Or it is feedback, like when you do this, this is how it impacts me, this is how I feel about that sort of thing. You are getting feedback about your behavior.

Prasad: Right, but in dialogue it is about feed forward. The idea of a dialogue is to acknowledge, to appreciate, to take ownership, honor, be with the body of knowledge that we have. But that body of knowledge is not what dialogue is about. It is a springboard to dive into something that has not been experienced before.

It is not about fixing somebody, it is not about changing behavior, it is bringing to consciousness an awareness, with respect, with compassion. But with care. It is about not making somebody wrong, but acknowledging the human frailty. It is not about being vulnerable as an individual in a group, but being authentic about our own inability, and noticing that, and allowing one to take responsibility for that and embracing it in whatever way one can.

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN DIALOGUE -

While I am not shy about lecturing when it seems necessary, I am committed to doing as much dialogical teaching and learning as possible at these formation retreats. My reasons are simple: this is the mode in which the participants learn the deepest things about themselves, their world, and their work - and this is the mode in which I, as facilitator, learn most and stay most alive. When I am lecturing (no matter how brilliantly), there is a palpably lower energy level in the group, and in me, than when I am engaging people in a conversational and communal quest for insight and truth. I may have taught a story or poem a hundred times, but when a new group opens it up in dialogue I invariably learn something new.

The key to dialogical teaching and learning is to put a subject in the center of the circle that is both capable of giving shape to the dialogue and is worth being in dialogue about. Some subjects have one of these qualities but not the other. They may be worthy of dialogue - e.g., the meaning of life - but have no discernible shape, thus inviting aimless meandering. Or they may have a clear shape - e.g., the sum of two plus two - but are not worthy of prolonged discussion. Finding a subject that possesses both qualities can be difficult but it is crucial: without a clear and compelling "third thing" between teacher and student, the dialogue can falter and collapse.

The presence of a "third thing" has at least two effects on the dialogical group. First, it establishes a plumb line for the dialogue that is owned neither by the facilitator nor by the participants but exists in the thing itself. If, for example, the subject is a poem or a story, it exists as a free-standing, independent entity in our dialogue. Its meanings can be imputed or interpreted by anyone in the circle, but never controlled - the thing itself is always there to call us back to its own truth.

Second, the presence of this "third thing" allows us to speak indirectly about things that we might have great difficulty saying head-on. We can make statements about the story or poem that are really statements about ourselves - statements that we may be afraid to make about ourselves directly, or statements that we do not yet know are about ourselves.

The "third thing" rightly employed, brings both discipline and freedom to the dialogue - the discipline of a reference point outside ourselves, and the freedom that comes from being able to "tell the truth, but tell it slant," as Emily Dickinson advised.

But what does "rightly employed" mean? The best way to answer that question is to show how I explore a particular "third thing" in dialogue with a group. The example I have chosen is a story called **The Woodcarver** from the Fourth Century B.C. Taoist master, Chuang Tzu. It is one of my favorite teaching stories, and since its central themes concern the dynamics of the inner life and its relation to the outer life, **The Woodcarver** may deepen our understanding of formation itself as well as illumine the practice of facilitating a formation retreat.

THE WOODCARVER

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand

*Of precious wood. When it was finished,
All who saw it were astounded. They said it must be
The work of spirits.
The Prince of Lu said to the master carver:
"What is your secret?"*

*Khing replied: "I am only a workman;
I have no secret. There is only this:
When I began to think about the work you commanded
I guarded my spirit, did not expend it
On trifles, that were not to the point.
I fasted in order to set
my heart at rest.
After three days fasting,
I had forgotten gain and success.
After five days
I had forgotten praise or criticism.
After seven days
I had forgotten my body
With all its limbs.*

*"By this time all thought of your Highness
And of the court had faded away.
All that might distract me from the work
Had vanished.
I was collected in the single thought
Of the bell stand.*

*"Then I went to the forest
To see the trees in their own natural state.
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt.
All I had to do was to put forth my hand
And begin.*

*"If I had not met this particular tree
There would have been
No bell stand at all.*

*"What happened?
My own collected thought
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;
From this live encounter came the work
Which you ascribe to the spirits."*

- From The Way of Chuang Tzu

First I give everyone in the group a copy of the story, then I read it aloud. Sometimes I will ask for a volunteer to read it again before we start the discussion, for at least three reasons: people often need to hear a story or poem twice before they begin to get it; different voices reveal different nuances in the story; and inviting a volunteer reader begins to transfer responsibility from me to the group.

I often begin the dialogue simply by asking people to name any words or images that speak especially to them. After a few minutes of this, we begin to develop a general image of what the story is about (which helps assure that no one will feel totally lost) - and since the question is an open one with no "right" answer, even the shyer people start to feel empowered to speak.

But this opening exploration cannot go on too long lest people begin to feel that the conversation is aimless. So my next probe is a more pointed inquiry: "Why did the woodcarver make the bell stand?" As people respond to that question I thank them - and then I ask the question again. I want to demonstrate from the outset that any significant question we might ask about the story has a variety of legitimate answers. For example, the woodcarver made the bell stand because he was commanded to do so by the prince, a person with potentially fatal power; or he made it because he accepted the command he had been given; or because he had prepared himself to do the job; or because he happened to meet the right tree; or because it was his nature to do so - he was a woodcarver.

As we explore the multiple answers to this basic question of motivation, not only are we loosening ourselves up to receive a variety of voices and viewpoints, but I have a chance to lay down a fundamental rule for working with stories and poems. The question is not, "What is the objective meaning of this text?", an ultimately unanswerable question, but "What does this text evoke in me that is worth attending to?" I often compare stories and poems to Rorschach tests where the meaning is not in the ink blot but in what the person projects upon it.

I suggest to the group that stories and poems - indeed, retreats themselves - have special power to awaken the inner teacher, and that as we explore these texts people should pay close attention to what their own inner teacher is saying. I urge people to take a few notes on what I say, a few more on what others in the group say, but to take the most notes on what they themselves say. Just because we have said something does not mean that we understand the implications of what we have said - and a formation event is a rare opportunity to listen to and learn from ourselves.

Occasionally, someone in the group will insist on "objectifying" the text. Such a person might say, for example, "I've studied fourth century Chinese culture, and I think we are glossing over some important differences between that culture and our own - we're making assumptions about this story that are not true to its own time." It is very important that this voice not be allowed to take over the dialogue, because if it does, we are locked into an externalized debate about cultural history and locked out of any further exploration of our inner selves.

If I use the Rorschach analogy early enough, and forcefully enough, this voice usually does not arise. But if it arises, and if it persists, I need gently but firmly to explain that, as valuable as historical analysis may be in certain settings, this is not the place for it - we simply have a different, more inward, agenda. In extreme cases I may need to point to the possibility that the effort to keep the conversation focused on external, historical issues is simply a way to avoid one's inner voice.

After we have opened up a general inquiry into why the woodcarver made the bell stand, which usually takes us to points in every stanza of the poem, I suggest to the group that texts of this sort always reward close reading, and invite them to "take it from the top." I ask people to

look carefully at the first stanza of the story, and at the first line of the second stanza, and wrestle with the question, "What is going on here between the woodcarver and the people, between the woodcarver and the prince? How do you understand the dynamic of this exchange between the person who created the bell stand and the people who are astounded by it? Have you ever experienced anything like this in your own life?"

Again, there are no right answers - only the projections that people bring to interpreting this exchange. But while I give people the freedom to offer their own interpretations, and while I try to weave each of those interpretations into a larger fabric, I have my own projection on this part of the story. I try to make my projection part of the group's discourse - which happens most successfully when I can build on other people's comments.

For me, the basic issue in this encounter between woodcarver, people and prince, is fundamental to the idea of formation itself: the woodcarver refuses to allow his own identity and integrity, or the integrity of his work, to be defined by the projections of others. He insists on the right to define himself and his work in his own terms. In particular, he resists the false spiritualization of his work ("It must be the work of spirits...") and claims his own deeply human engagement with the process. In doing so, he not only reclaims his own identity ("I am only a workman...") from the projections of his "admirers," refusing to fall prey to their mystifications; he also keeps his admirers from distancing themselves from their own creative potentials by imagining that excellent work involves some esoteric secret.

I mention this dimension of the woodcarver story not only to name the substantive issues involved, but also to name another paradox in the process of facilitating a formation event. As facilitator, I want to give the group freedom to explore its own insights, freely and deeply - and at the same time I have insights of my own that I want the group to deal with. If other voices in the group articulate my insights, or if I can build on other voices to introduce my insights, so much the better. But I am also free to put my own thoughts into the mix, so long as I own them as my own projections, playing by the same ground rules that I ask others to abide by.

For me, the capacity to keep the group dialogue open without dominating it (even when it seems misguided to me), and at the same time to keep raising insights that I do not want the group to miss - this capacity depends on a transformed vision of the nature of truth. In my academic training, I was taught to think of truth as propositions that contain "points." I was taught to "make points" in conversations and to do everything in my power to see that I won by "scoring more points" than others before the propositions stopped flying.

But for the purposes of formation, it is vital to understand that truth is not a point, or even a line made of many points. Instead, truth is a fabric of many intersecting and interwoven lines of experience and perspective and feeling and thought. It is a fabric, or quilt, or collage, a rich pattern of meaning that is generated by the whole

group, a pattern in which every member of the group can find him or her self. Once I embraced this transformed image of truth - and embraced the fact that people will take from the pattern of meaning whatever they are ready and able to take - I began to experience a deeply relaxed and yet deeply attentive way of guiding the group as it weaves the unique yet universal patterns that emerge from this group's peculiar intersection with this text and with these others.

Deep attentiveness to what people in the group say is probably the single most important virtue a facilitator can bring to this process - and it is certainly the most spiritually demanding! Nothing helps a group inquiry along as much as a facilitator who remembers what someone said forty minutes after he or she said it, and is able to connect that comment to something being said at the moment. But this attentiveness is not a result of technique. It comes only from trusting that what is going on in the group is real and valuable and will take us somewhere worthwhile - even if it seems to contravene the facilitator's own "game plan."

To return to **The Woodcarver** - after we have explored the exchange between the master carver and the prince and the people, I ask people to turn their attention to the second stanza. "What's going on here?" is the basic question I ask. "What words and images from the poem help you name the spiritual discipline the woodcarver is practicing? What words and images of your own, rooted in your own experience, help you make sense of the inner journey the woodcarver is taking here?"

Once again, I have my own projections on the meaning of this passage and I attempt to interweave them with the interpretations of others. In this passage, I see the woodcarver doing what I call "the work before the work," the work of moving into and beyond his fears, of emptying himself of ego and detaching himself from outcomes, indeed of "dying to self." That is, I see him doing all the things that would make me a good facilitator of a formation event if only I knew how to do them! People in formation groups often share my reaction. They see the woodcarver as master of a contemplative discipline that they would like to be able to practice but often feel is beyond them.

At this juncture in the story, we usually move even more deeply than we already have from the story and the general issues it raises into the details of our own lives. A formation facilitator needs to understand what is going on as we make this movement - and how to handle it. In particular, he or she needs to know how to keep possibilities of spiritual growth open and alive for people rather than letting them become discouraged or defeated by apparent counsels of perfection.

Several sensibilities are helpful in this regard. First, it is important to note, from the story itself, that the woodcarver undertook his discipline "in order to set his heart at rest," a clear indication that even this master carver had not settled the issue of anxiety and imbalance in his life. Second, it is important for the facilitator to be honest and vulnerable about his or her struggles with spiritual dis-

cipline, rather than coming across as someone who has achieved perfection and is urging it on others. I often tell groups that the woodcarver is a "contemplative by intention," but that I tend to be a "contemplative by catastrophe," someone who stops to reclaim and renew his spirit only when things have fallen apart - and I may share a few of the experiences in which that has happened for me, especially my experience with clinical depression. More than a few people seem to identify with me when I say these things.

Third, the facilitator needs to be able to "reframe" such issues for a group by offering alternative ways of conceptualizing them. For example, I tell people that we need a concept of contemplation that goes beyond technique so people will understand that if you can't fast or take seven days to meditate, as the woodcarver did, you can still be a contemplative. Then I offer this definition of contemplation: "Contemplation is any way one has of penetrating illusion and touching reality."

With this reframing, people are able to name and claim their own modes of contemplation - some of us penetrate illusion and touch reality by raising children, some by failing, some by getting exhausted or depressed and understanding why, some by spending time in nature. With these insights comes the ability to see that the woodcarver does not offer us a formula to be followed slavishly but a metaphorical challenge to find our own ways of "setting our hearts at rest."

We generally have a good laugh at the first lines of the third stanza. It is as if your boss - an authoritarian boss, at that - has asked you how you managed to do such a good job, and you reply, "Well, frankly, I had to forget that you even exist." Laughter, as much as any other quality of discourse I have explored here, is a vital element in the formation process. Without it, the issues we are dealing with can become heavy, overbearing, depressing, or pretentious. But with laughter we can be like the angels, of whom it has been said, "They can fly because they take themselves lightly."

The fourth and fifth stanzas of the poem give us a chance to look at what happens when the woodcarver emerges from the inner world into the outer world. "What happens when the woodcarver goes into the forest?" I ask the group. "How does he view the trees - and what allows him to view them that way?" "What would have happened if he had not met the right tree?" "What does this suggest about the way he views his assignment, his job, his vocation?"

One of my tasks as facilitator is to keep opening up the image of the tree as a metaphor for "the other" that is always present in any kind of work: for a teacher, "the other" is a student, for a parent it is a child, for a plumber it is pipes, for a writer it is words, for a manager it is a staff and a system. If people are to keep making connections between the story and their own stories, it is important that they have as wide an array of parallels as possible so that they will feel challenged to reflect on how they view "the other" in the roles they play in their own lives.

I believe that the key to the woodcarver's ability to

perceive the true nature of the tree is that he worked at perceiving his own true nature, stripping away all that was false and misleading in himself so that he could see the essence of "the other" beyond any projection he might be tempted to make upon it. This, of course, is key also to good facilitation of a formation event. The facilitator is constantly challenged to move beyond praise or criticism, gain or success, in order to receive each participant just as he or she is, to see each participant's true nature even when he or she does not - and to trust that each participant has a true nature even when the facilitator cannot see it. The more a facilitator is able to work with that sort of clarity, the more likely the outcome of the work will be as beautiful as the woodcarver's bell stand.

Perhaps the most radical line in *The Woodcarver* is in the fifth stanza: "If I had not met this particular tree there would have been no bell stand at all." Here the master carver suggests something that seems deeply true to me, but that flies in the face of most professional training in our society. Contrary to the common notion that a professional with the right techniques ought to be able to get results no matter what, the woodcarver suggests that no matter how skillful one is, one cannot achieve good results without the collaboration of "the other."

There are some "others" one can dance with - and some one cannot. Knowing the difference, and having the courage to act on that knowledge, is one key to professional performance and integrity. Of course, a formation event fits this pattern perfectly: if it reaches deep and reveals the "bell stand" in every person, it is because facilitator and participants learned how to join in a life-giving dance. If that dance does not develop, if a formation event - or any other sort of professional activity - becomes a grim struggle for persuasion or domination, it is critical to change the music, or to find another dance partner, or just to leave the dance hall and go home to do another round of "the work before the work" that keeps the woodcarver, and us, open and centered and whole.

Framing And Reframing The Subject

One of the dangers of teaching and learning by dialogue is that important meanings may get lost in the complex collage of insight that the dialogue generates. This danger is especially real for those people whose dominant learning style is logical and linear. For these reasons, once the group is through exploring a story or poem, I try to "reframe" the subject with a brief lecturette.

I. The Motives for Working

The woodcarver is commanded to do the work by a prince who has the power of life and death over him. Many of us feel "commanded" as well, not by a prince, but by the circumstances of our lives - we work because we must make a living, support a family, do not know what else to do, etc. Working under command can easily breed cynicism, but there is an alternative: one can freely choose that which one is commanded to do, as the woodcarver does. Not all commands should be chosen - indeed, some should be resisted unto death! But some commands have the potential to evoke more from us than we knew we

had, and when we freely choose a command of that sort, we find ourselves moving from resentment to rejoicing. The woodcarver transformed his relation to the prince's command by freely embracing it as an evocation of his own integrity.

II. The Gifts And Skills That Make The Work Possible.

For some people, the woodcarver's story is difficult to identify with because the central figure is a "master carver" - and they cannot imagine themselves as master (or mistress) of anything. In the face of this struggle, I suggest my own belief in the idea of "birthright gifts," the idea that each of us is born with certain qualities and capacities that we spend the first third of our lives being disabused of or trained away from or forgetting. Our task in the second third of life is to reclaim the gifts that constitute our primary calling. I do not mean skills like the woodcarver's agility with sharp instruments - those are learned abilities. I mean qualities and capacities like the woodcarver's patience, his eye for beauty, his sense of connectedness, his sense of self. Every person has gifts on this level, and our most frequent task in mid-life is to cast off the masks and roles that we have accumulated over the years and reclaim the gifts that constitute who we truly are.

III. The "Other" With Which One Works.

Every work involves an "other," and the third transformation in the woodcarver's tale has to do with how he comes to view the tree that is "the other" in his work. The woodcarver approaches the tree knowing that it has a particular nature, a nature that will allow it to evolve in some directions but not in others. This approach is contrary to the assumption, so popular in our culture, that the other is always plastic and malleable "raw material" that can be made into anything we want it to be - if we use superior technique on it. We would not wait for the right tree to appear; we would cut down the entire forest and mass-produce bell stands! But the excellence of the woodcarver's work depends heavily on his respect for the identity and integrity of the other - and so it is with teaching, with facilitating formation groups, and with any worthy work one can imagine. We cannot "make" anything of value happen - we can only hope to co-create new realities with "the other," and this requires approaching the other with perceptiveness and respect.

IV. The Results And Effectiveness Of The Work.

When the woodcarver says, "If I had not met this particular tree, there would have been no bell stand at all," he once again flies in the face of our culture, a culture that insists on results at all costs. With this insistence come at least two pathologies: we take on smaller and smaller tasks with which one can get results, and we become adept at creating the illusion of results rather than waiting for the real thing to emerge. If we are committed to the big jobs-like helping to bring beauty and goodness and truth into the world-we will not see definitive results in our lifetimes. So we need another standard by which to judge our efforts, and the story of the woodcarver suggests one: the standard of faithfulness-not as an abstract theological virtue, but faithfulness to one's own identity and integrity and the identity and integrity of the other.

DIALOGUE: CAPACITIES AND STORIES -

I have come to view dialogue as a process central to the development of learning organizations. I have also come to view dialogue as a capacity we each possess. We may have forgotten our capacity for dialogue as individuals and as organizations. Thus learning about dialogue is really a matter of rediscovery, of recalling what we have forgotten to remember.

I know no way to convey this understanding of dialogue but to tell a story.

Not long ago, I was working with a group of Fortune 500 executives in a retreat. Two days into a session on teamwork, this group was struggling with the perverse effects on teamwork of an element of its financial incentives package. As only one of the firm's operating units, the group had no power to unilaterally change corporate policy. They saw no leverage for getting the corporation to change. It was clear that the incentive structure made real team effectiveness nearly impossible. This had been frustrating them for a long time. It had become an insurmountable impediment to much that they wanted to accomplish.

I suggested that a struggle like this could be seen as a kind of hologram, containing all the patterns and problems that were interesting and important to the corporation and to their work. I asked if they would be willing to take a couple of hours and work on this issue in a slightly different way. They were delighted to try something that might "loosen the knot." A change of pace seemed welcome so they quickly agreed.

I asked if they would follow some simple guidelines for a different kind of conversation: Only one person could speak at a time and, as they spoke, they were to hold a small rock (I carry a small polished heart-shaped rock and I fished it out for the occasion). They were to relinquish the rock only when they had completed their thought. They should then pass the rock to someone else who had signaled they wished to speak, or place it in the center for someone else to pick up. They were to begin by talking about where they were with this issue in the moment. They were to speak from the "I" and from the moment, and "listen from the perspective of the group."

One man took the rock. He spoke with deep passion about how rotten the current policy made him feel and how painful it was for him to explain it to his subordinates. He deeply wanted to change it. The rock passed from person to person. Sometimes the energy of an idea would cause someone to "piggyback" quickly on the idea or to finish someone's sentence, and people would laugh and say "remember the rock" or "you have to have the rock." The conversation sped up. It slowed down. There were periods of silence.

One person took the rock and said "I am not where I was when we started this conversation. Something really has changed my way of thinking." Bit by bit there emerged an entirely new way of conceiving the problem and shaping possible solutions, until finally, after a long silence, one person said "I see how we might work to change this..." He proposed a very participative and involving process for incubating a new approach, with a

clear goal of greater fairness and equity. He volunteered to contribute his own financial gain to the pot to make it work. People began to weave together an approach that would have seemed impossible when they began the conversation. They ended in silence.

I asked if they felt finished and settled with this issue that they had been gnawing at for months and years. They said "yes," perhaps sensing that each of them had a clear idea of the collective goal, and would immediately do whatever could be done to move forward on this work, realizing that after this conversation there was no way not to do what they had given voice to.

What is Dialogue Then, as it Emerges in This Experience?

In a sense, dialogue is not complicated. It is good conversation, over the "back fences" of our lives. It is continued, thoughtful exchange about the things that most matter. It is time to sit under the apple tree together and talk, as the ideas and thoughts come to us, without agenda, without time pressures. It is the kind of conversation that we have forgotten in the pace of western, modern life. Or, in the language of both Maya Angelou and Paula Underwood, who speak to us from the African-American and Native American traditions respectively, from cultures that practiced dialogue, it is reminding us of "that which we have forgotten to remember."

The concept of dialogue comes to us from many historical and contemporary sources. One form of it comes out of the Greek tradition of Socratic dialogue in which the student is led by the master to a greater level of wisdom. Some form of dialogue is found in most traditional pre-industrial and pre-agricultural societies. It is particularly visible in the Native American culture, where the process acknowledges that it is necessary to "talk and talk until the talk starts."

In contemporary management literature, dialogue figures most prominently in the work of Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*, where it serves as one of the processes central to systems thinking. It finds its intellectual roots in the work of British physicist David Bohm. Various forms of dialogue are reflected in the work of Bill Isaacs and his colleagues with the MIT Dialogue Project, in the work on "organization as community" and the concept of work as "nourishment for life" of the Naerings Liv project of Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, in the exploration of corporate strategy employed by Diana Smith, and in the work about the nature of learning and inquiry of Parker Palmer. All of us are part of a contemporary, virtual community exploring the power of dialogue, in a variety of different ways.

The pattern of dialogue requires new ways of thinking about and evaluating communication. If the goal of communication is to decide something or do something, we are unable to discern the way in which dialogue enables individuals to focus their personal energies so that they can go forth and act in a remarkable level of concert. We may believe that, without action plans or coordination or checking, focused action seems impossible. However,

such patterns have been noted in the modes of communication of Asian and Native American cultures.

Dialogue taps ways of communicating not often represented in the dominant Western culture - ways that may be more reflective of minority cultures, or marginal cultures, or the cultures less visible in our organizational world. These ways are not going to feel comfortable or familiar for leadership elites which have achieved great success by communicating in modes decidedly un-dialogue-like.

Dialogue is a different and often unfamiliar way of being together in communication. We should acknowledge that and be prepared for it. If we overlook the unfamiliarity of this mode of communicating, we will also make it unlikely that others can accurately evaluate its benefit in our organizational lives. Instead, we will mistakenly evaluate it in traditional modes (of decisions taken by meeting's end and measures of closure) and judge it within the time bounds of the meeting, rather than in the longer and more important time frames of future action and alignment.

In negotiating with Asians, many North Americans consider the process of talking and silence without any seeming progress to be pointless and unproductive. The same North Americans have found the level of accord and speed of implementation quite astonishing. Seldom do they realize the relationship between the slowness of speaking and ease of implementation.

In very powerful dialogues, I have found participants unwilling to evaluate the experience during the session. In one case, after I had asked the group to evaluate a pilot experience with dialogue, one usually driven and outcome-oriented executive said to me after a long period of collective silence, "I cannot do this. I can't evaluate this. For three days we have engaged in a level of communication and exploration, the likes of which I have not experienced before. I, for one, am not willing to stop the dialogue in order to evaluate it. For three days we have suspended judging and instead we have listened to each other. I'm not going to stop now."

Yet the practice of dialogue is not without its dark side, its seeming dangers for people. We know from heatedly negative reports of "dialogue sessions" that for some people the process is powerful, for others it is "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." For still others it may open their understanding in ways that are emotionally overwhelming and that the process is not prepared to help them handle. There may be instances in which dialogue leaders are using the intensity of the mode for their own purposes, subtly and invisibly manipulating the process to meet their own needs.

Because it makes space for people to explore very difficult things, this methodology must be handled with great care - very gently and very ethically. This means that we must, as those designing and leading dialogues, be aware of our own power and of the seductive power of the process and ensure that it is not coercive. We must build real safety within the experience.

What Purpose Does Dialogue Serve?

I think of dialogue as seeking to build deeper understanding, new perceptions, new models, new openings, new paths to effective action, and deeper and more enduring, even sustainable, truths. Dialogue's purpose is to honor development of individuals and ideas and organizations, at a very deep level. It opens paths to change and clears space for organizational transformation by changing the inner landscape. We change the world by changing the way we perceive the world, the way we think about cause and effect, the way we conceptualize the relationships among things, and the meaning we ascribe to events in that external world. Organizational change means changing our internal landscapes as leaders. Such change is undertaken by us only when we reach a place in our lives where we want to change those landscapes. Such changes are encouraged by the openness and the reflective and collective process of dialogue. Dialogue opens pathways for change - within us and among us. From that opening comes space for organizational and social change.

Most of the traditional thinking about change is more mechanistic, and shows change as structured and planned, change as engineered and driven into organizations. We believe that resistance is a necessary component of managing change. We say that managing change means managing resistance. Perhaps we should note instead that resistance is a natural part of managing change the way we have managed it so far. It is "natural" no doubt, when change is managed in instrumental, mechanistic ways. But dialogue builds capacities that dissolve resistance.

What Capacity Does Dialogue Build Within Us?

Dialogue builds capacities in the same way that exercise builds capacities in the human body, slowly and over time giving us new strength. Those capacities may include:

- Listening as an ally, listening for understanding, for the piece of the mosaic that might be missing from our own and the collective understanding, the piece which is key to a decision or to successful implementation.
- Asking questions from a "place of genuine not knowing." Dialogue increases our skills at inquiry.
- Allowing for the time and space to finish a thought. Bringing forth thoughts in real time that are not finished, that are fresh and passionate and alive.
- Finding value in silence, in time to think, in reflection.
- Granting others the respect of being an authority about their own thoughts and feelings.
- Noticing our own internal responses and learning to coexist with those responses. We notice what is happening in our response to an idea, without needing to actually respond.
- Building a hospitable, bounded and open place for the consideration of perspectives so that we can build a powerful mosaic of common understanding.

- Learning to be provoked and not close down, to step into the center of the provocation, to consider equally the ideas which provoke us and those that resonate with us.
- Learning to listen deeply without the urge to fix, nor counter, nor argue.
- Noticing the nature of our thinking. We learn to give up blaming and judging others, and to become more compassionate with ourselves.
- Dialogue helps us to develop the capacity to move into difficult issues in a welcoming fashion because we can notice the difficulty without being "hooked."

We come then to understand dialogue as a way to build mental, spiritual and interpersonal muscle with power in our lives and in our organizations. It builds it, not overnight, but over time and that muscle develops differently in different people.

I recall a dialogue with a CEO and part of his leadership team on "freeing the human spirit." Originally I had designed this strategic dialogue as being about "quality, diversity and change." But the CEO had said that while he realized that such specific topics were more understandable to engineers like himself, the real challenge to the corporation was "freeing the human spirit" and we might as well say it straight out. He was convinced that we had to learn to make it possible for people to come to work with all the talents, energies, and power that were potentially theirs. Now we were in the midst of a three day exploration of how to free the human spirit, and were using excerpts of readings from a broad range of literature (Martin Luther King, Peter Senge, Charles Handy, Paula Underwood, Carol Gilligan, and others) to spark our conversation. We were talking about learning, and knowing, and mental models.

The morning's readings began with Plato's "Allegory of a Cave" in which the ancient Greek philosopher describes human beings chained to a wall, looking at shadows cast by figures behind them, figures which, because of the chains, they don't know exist. They see the shadows as the only possible reality. This is the conversation about mental models and how we know what we know, from over 2000 years ago. Tough and serious questions emerged.

"Once we've been out of the chains and realize the nature of reality, what are we required to do?" someone asks. "We're required to return to the cave..." someone answers. "And?" Long silence. "And tell the others what we've learned." "Or to take their hand and lead them out." "But they are still chained." One executive, a senior woman says, "I don't want your hand. I just want you to listen to me." Stunned silence. What does it mean to listen to those we believe are chained? Who are wrong? Who are not yet enlightened? The question is still on my mind eighteen months later. And on theirs.

In a later dialogue, a group of engineers is wrestling with the same reading. I have given them a task: "Draw the cave that Plato describes. Do the specs of the cave." A group of men are circled around the flip-chart calling out to the man with the magic marker "No, no, it says right here that there is a wall in the back of the cave, and

so it would have to be this way, so the light comes in at an angle..." Detail by detail they sketch the cave, more and more clearly. As they finish, one engineer says "Well, you could draw it the way we have, or..." he says, flipping to a clean sheet of newsprint, and doing a quick sketch "you could draw it like this." His sketch is of the human brain. There is silence.

After a small group dialogue about what Martin Luther King had to say to us in his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," and after reflecting about what great gap King would now point to between our vision and current reality, about what he would require of us, and about what action we should take, one of the plant leaders says, "My life is changed by this letter. How could we ever have seen King as just a trouble-maker? The issues he raises are for all of us, not just for Blacks. I, for one, am going to take this letter back and read it with my guys in the plant. We all have to read this and talk about what it means for us."

How Do We Start Dialogue and How Do We Sustain It?

There are many possible prompts or beginning points to dialogue: meditation, quiet, writing, reflective exercises, readings, music, the practice of certain communications techniques. Bohm suggested that there be no explicit prompts, no formal process, yet many of us may find it less daunting to enter a space of dialogue by following some recognizable road signs, or paths.

For me, perhaps because my early training was in literature, I find the written word, particularly carefully excerpted pieces of literature from diverse genres and diverse cultures, an effective prompt to dialogue. People have said to me that because of such readings received and read in advance, they find themselves in a different frame of mind when they arrive at a dialogue, as if they have begun an internal dialogue already, which then becomes collective and involves the voices of others, when they come together with others around the table. The readings create a reflective space in advance of our coming together. Readings that are classic, or from other cultures, remind us of the seriousness and importance of those issues with which we are struggling, and they remind us that the thoughts of others can be a resource to us in the struggle.

I would suggest, moreover, that whatever the opening to dialogue, it should encourage our examining of our own assumptions, and ways of thinking, and it should also move us to consider different ways of thinking that allow for healthy change.

We might characterize dialogue as a profound openness to the vitality of real diversity. It is a process which, even with a facilitator, produces a collective examination of ideas, a collective sense of participation, and a collective wisdom. It is a collective process in which wisdom emerges not from our finding the appropriate path of thinking like the wise one at the head of the table, but rather from coming to a deeper understanding than any one of us had to begin with.

Dialogue is perhaps born out of a sense of incompleteness, of needing something more, and of being hungry for something that is currently beyond us. It seems to reflect a collective sense of needing to move beyond where we are at the moment, without necessarily having a destination in mind nor a particular problem or crisis that pushes us. It is an inquiry, a questioning, a wanting to move to a more satisfying place, together.

What Contributes To Dialogue?

Here is my list of what contributes to dialogue. I encourage your additions, from your own experience:

- a. Readings, sent out in advance, which put people in a different frame of mind; they model the image of multiple voices and perspectives, over time and space, and make considering the diverse wisdom within the room less of a leap since we are already considering the wisdom from outside the room. Individual reflective writing, completed quietly as a prelude to dialogue, is also very effective.
- b. A program design which focused on "emptying" a space for people to fill with reflections, rather than filling an already-crowded space with more concepts.
- c. The choice of a setting which is reflective, calm, away from the fray.
- d. A round table or circle to give people a sense of shared leadership and to allow all individuals to see each other more completely, listen more completely, and be heard more completely.
- e. Communication about the process that puts people in a frame of mind to slow down, back off, listen, and reflect. Here we must attend to the introduction of the process in a way that meets people where they are and enables them to settle into the process. It is important not to suggest that dialogue is something that only the initiated can do. Dialogue taps a capacity in each of us that can easily come to the surface, given the space in our lives to do so. It is important to set the stage in quiet ways, ways that value who people are and where they are, and in ways that open pathways to dialogue. Beginning with some thoughts about the process itself and having individuals do some quiet work on personal perspective-setting is helpful. I often begin with Ira Proffoff's stepping stones exercise, asking people to list for their own reflection the steppingstones that have brought them to where they are in their lives as a way to put this present time of their lives in perspective. Sometimes I provide simple written or verbal guidance on dialogue, for each of us to use to reflect on our own contributions to the process. The guidance includes:
 - Speak from the heart and the moment, and from your own experience; listen from the community, from the collective;
 - Listen without thinking about responding;
 - Listen for information, not confirmation;
 - Begin thinking in terms of "I wonder..." or "Where I am on this issue now is..."
 - Allow for silence; it may mean people are thinking, considering;

- Suspend assumptions and consider alternative ones that might be just as useful;
- Assume that the ideas and observations of others come from a desire to contribute;
- Expect that ideas build upon each other even if they don't link logically one to the other;
- Remember that difference of opinion can be helpful, because it sharpens our understanding;
- Move away from conclusions and toward observations; notice what you are noticing, and what meaning you are making of it;
- Sometimes in communication, less is better, and slowly is fine.

With this guidance, I believe we help people rediscover the power of dialogue, the capacity for its emergence everywhere in their lives and in their organizations.

(Strategic Sonatas - continued from page 27)

Skeptics may suggest that this is colorful, but peripheral. Not so. Indeed, these sentiments are being echoed by mainstream management thinkers. For example, Gary Hamel put it starkly: 'We are coming to the end of our ability to treat management as a science. We need imagination and creativity. There is a vast amount of literature on creativity and cognitive patterns, but how much of it has penetrated business schools and consultancies? We can learn about the creative process from the arts, from music.'

These are words that would be applauded by Sir Ernest Hall who as both a distinguished musician in his own right, and an industrialist, was moved in 1983 to buy the then defunct Dean Clough textile mills in Halifax and establish a new thriving centre for business, the arts, design and education. He himself accompanied Miha Pogacnik in a recent lecture and workshop for the Royal Society of Arts on how music can help transform the economy. 'To be a successful entrepreneur one needs a vision of greatness for one's work,' he wrote. 'If we dream extravagantly we will be inspired to forge a reality beyond the straitjacket of our limitations.'

MINDSHIFT: STRATEGIC DIALOGUE -

How can we as a team improve the way we think about the work we do? What strategic challenges do we face? What dilemmas have we encountered that need to be resolved? Questions such as these lie at the heart of strategic dialogue, a special type of collaborative inquiry which supports the discovery of breakthrough insights that can substantially improve business results.

Strategic dialogue is built on the operating principle that the stakeholders in any system already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges. Given the appropriate context and support, it is possible for members of an organizational community to access this deeper knowledge about underlying causes and leverage points for change. The role of outside content "experts" is minimized in favor of the kind of support that allows members to draw deeply on their own "memory of the whole" in order to think in systemic ways about key challenges and opportunities.

Strategic innovation is more likely to occur in an organization when its members are able to articulate the mental models which shape key decisions as well as the deeper beliefs and core assumptions underlying both thinking and action. Strategic dialogue enhances this capacity for interactive learning, transforming new knowledge into coordinated action. The reflective skills developed in strategic dialogue can help strengthen the organization's resiliency and sustainable advantage in a rapidly changing environment.

SCENARIO 1: The Strategic Imperative

Our leadership team was uneasy. Our responsibility was to chart the organization's strategic course. In recent strategic planning sessions we had studied trend data, statistical reports, financial results, and forecasting models. Our company's mission, vision and values had been distributed widely throughout the company.

Still, something was missing. Even though we were not in crisis, it was clear the game was changing. The next stage in the life of our company would require a quality of thinking and strategic insight that our traditional planning process somehow never seemed to produce. We knew that our choices and the thinking behind them were more important than ever. They would impact not only our business results but our key relationships with employees, customers, suppliers, the community, and other groups with a stake in our future.

We agreed to go off-site to experiment with strategic dialogue in an effort to understand our strategic issues more clearly. We realized that, like all development work, strategic dialogue was not a one-shot deal. It would involve a number of follow-up conversations. I knew that team members held very different views on the company's challenges. I wondered if there would be conflict once we really began to look under the surface.

Making Decisions of Strategic Importance

We are all faced with the challenge of making decisions of strategic importance in the face of critical uncertainties. These are decisions in our personal lives as

well as those taken by a management team on behalf of the organization. Decisions are strategic in nature, according to Peter Vaill, when the choice:

- involves commitment of significant resources,
- may move the organization into a new domain not in the organization's prior experience, "a whole new ball game,"
- involves long cycle feedback - it won't be known for some time if the decision was a wise one and if the intended benefits are occurring.
- will have lasting impact.

The strategic imperative is to reflect on these choices using the highest quality of collective thinking. We are all too familiar with "group think" which has been described as the tendency to confirm our existing assumptions without question in order to avoid conflict or responsibility and to save face among peers. Even the fact that the current assumptions guiding business strategy have been rewarded with past success doesn't guarantee that they are appropriate in today's rapidly changing environment. High stakes in the midst of uncertainty creates the genuine imperative for strategic thinking.

Strategy-Making Requires Both Analysis and Synthesis

In his 1994 article in the Harvard Business Review, "The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning," Henry Mintzberg makes an important distinction. Strategic thinking must integrate what executives learn from all sources - from their own and other's experience, from analysis of financial data, and from trends in the larger environment - into a coherent sense of direction for the business. Strategic planning isn't strategic thinking. One is analysis and the other is synthesis. They inform one another. Strategic planning, with its usual focus on analysis of trend data and performance figures, has not proved adequate to produce breakthrough thinking among management teams. It does not assure that core assumptions will be explored and improved. Planning often relies on outside expertise in a way that doesn't create and refine shared mental models to guide decision-making throughout the organization. Strategic dialogue creates a continuing conversation in parallel with the regular cycle of strategic planning. It supports a team in doing what Ikujiro Nonaka has called articulating the company's "conceptual umbrella" - identifying the core concepts that link seemingly disparate activities into a coherent whole.

Metaphor & Analogy Provide a Language of the Whole

In his landmark 1986 book, *Images of Organization*, Gareth Morgan explores how strategic objectives are embedded in dominant metaphors that guide the organization.

Organizations enact metaphors. To manage an organization as if you were operating a mechanism, steering a ship or wielding a weapon is to embody that metaphor in action. Managers may unwittingly construct a reality they dread through an incapacity to reflect upon the metaphor in use.

Sherrin Bennett & Juanita Brown

Senior managers give voice to a company's future by articulating metaphors, symbols, and concepts that orient the knowledge creating activities of employees. These images shape the organization's possible future. Shift in strategy often requires a shift in guiding image.

Strategic dialogue becomes a forum for exploring these guiding images and the deeper assumptions which give rise to them. In strategic dialogue, the language of metaphor and analogy helps us move from tacit or implicit knowing to the explicit realm where, together, we can see relationships and strategic opportunities that were not evident before. As Susan Bethanis points out, "Metaphors make language come alive: language becomes action..."

SCENARIO 2: The Spirit of Inquiry

Our leadership team gathered for the dialogue in the large library of a nearby inn. The comfortable chairs and warm tones created an atmosphere of relaxation and informality as we sat in a circle to begin. I opened the conversation. "Strategic dialogue may help us chart new territory and make new maps. We have all our trip equipment and supplies - ourselves and our previous experiences with the dilemmas we are facing as well as all the information and data we could ever want. Let's go for it."

Then I introduced Carlos, a skilled facilitator, and Janis, a specialist in visual language and systems thinking. Janis would use the large wall panels that surrounded us on several sides to record in words and images the linkages and patterns of our key ideas as they emerged.

If there were one core question that underlies all the strategic challenges you face, what would it be? Why is that question important to you?

Carlos asked us to listen carefully to each person and notice when our own question (or a better one that arose as we listened) could link to or build upon what we were hearing. He asked us to notice when we felt uncomfortable or disagreed since that could be a sign we were bumping up against our own assumptions. He emphasized that strategic dialogue is not about agreement or consensus. Rather, it's about listening for deeper understanding and insight. And that's not easy. I was surprised at how uncomfortable I felt with the ideas of several other members. I realized how hard it was to listen fully without jumping in with my own reactions.

As we were checking in, Janis was recording our questions with colorful graphics on the large wall panels. After the check-in we were invited to go on a "gallery tour" to begin to get a "feel" for the questions which had been contributed. People seemed intrigued and started to comment on common threads.

As we adjourned for the evening we knew that whatever happened, this was going to be an important conversation. I could tell that people weren't yet saying all that was on their minds but this opening session had been different and engaging. People left curious to see what would happen when they gathered the next morning. Many went to the lounge to continue talking.

Creating a Spirit of Inquiry

One of the fundamental goals of the early phases of strategic dialogue is to create a climate of discovery, questioning, and exploration - even mystery and adventure. Without this spirit of inquiry, it is more difficult to move through the tension that often accompanies the process of strategic dialogue. Developing a spirit of inquiry is also important in order to reach the deeper understanding of underlying assumptions, organizing images, and core beliefs that are crucial to strategic thinking. In the early stages of a gathering there are several key elements that can help "create the context" and evoke the spirit of inquiry:

- Choose a setting where the normal distractions can be minimized.
- Encourage informality, relaxation, and personal relationships.
- Assure that all voices are heard and "in the circle" from the very beginning. Create opportunities early for members to discover what they have in common. For example, it is useful to hear the ways in which people, despite their differences, care about the challenges they face together.
- Honor the knowledge that is alive in the people present. Evoke initial questions that will enable members to look toward the "heart of the matter" from their own experience of the situation.
- Focus on questions which create curiosity, "wondering" and anticipation rather than abstract lists of issues or topics.
- Acknowledge that it is normal for people to experience uncomfortable as well as comfortable reactions to others' perspectives.
- Demonstrate innovative and interesting tools, like visual language and graphic recording which enable people to begin to "see" the connections between ideas.

The Art of Strategic Questioning

Strategic questioning plays an important role establishing that the deeper insight we seek is "findable" through the dialogue. Fran Peavey, a pioneer in the architecture of powerful questions, shows how they serve to energize a "resonant field into which our own thinking is magnified, clarified and new motion can be created."

Continuing to focus on questions rather than answers in a strategic inquiry has a paradoxical impact on the evolution of both individual insight and collaborative discovery. Clear, bold, and penetrating questions which elicit a full range of dynamic responses and energy tend to open the social context for learning. They enable individual members to discover that we need not be limited by our individual isolated positions or static political alliances.

Questioning together begins to demonstrate that as individuals we have the capacity to become part of something larger than ourselves. Those in the dialogue begin to share a concern for deeper levels of shared meaning. People begin to realize "If we continue to think

like we've always thought, we'll continue to get what we've already got." It rapidly becomes clear that, in these dynamic and turbulent times, "what we've already got" will not create the kind of future we desire.

SCENARIO 3: The Dynamics of Dialogue

The next morning we began to delve more deeply into the core strategic questions which we generated the previous evening and added others as they arose. We established a rhythm of work in which we periodically "stopped action" to reflect on our own working process and to notice the principles and practices of the dialogue itself as it unfolded. Carlos encouraged us to notice both what was happening within ourselves as well as among the team as a whole.

We did not dampen or "cool down" passionate stances as too dangerous to handle. We learned to see each other's passion and advocacy not as an indicator of one person being closed to others but as a sign of deep caring about a question. Rather than "cooling it down" we were encouraged to "slow it down" so that we could "listen into" the varied perspectives that were being expressed.

We were asked to listen underneath the tone and style and even the words to search for the special contribution that might be present in each person's offering to the conversation. At one point, a member of the group who had been silent through most of the morning commented, "I'm just realizing as I try to listen to what we're saying here that even though we're all from the same company we speak different languages. We don't mean the same thing even when we use the same words. No wonder we have trouble talking together."

That started us on a path of exploring more deeply what people were saying - the distinctions and interpretations embedded in the language we used - the meaning beyond the positions. All the while, the graphic recorder was capturing key ideas and images and the group began to help the recorder, making sure that what she was capturing reflected the essence of what we thought was being shared. "It's really amazing how Janis seems to be building a kind of web out of our different viewpoints," the Director of Operations commented.

But, it wasn't easy. People felt frustrated as they got stuck in their long-held certainties. At times, things got polarized. Slowly we learned to see polarization as a resource - an opportunity to see how we identify positions with people and then "take sides." At one point Carlos asked, "Is there some common pattern underneath the apparent irreconcilable differences here?"

That did it. We began to see that what we had in common was our rigidly held assumptions and beliefs. No matter how apparently "right" they seemed to one or more of us, our "noble certainties" were inhibiting our capacity to see new possibilities for strategic leverage and coordinated action. Like peeling an onion, we began to "unpack" the assumptions underlying the different positions and the perspectives being explored.

By this time, the conflicts which flared up earlier and

the differences that seemed to divide people began to take on a new tone. People began to metaphorically place their different points of view into the center of the circle and graphically onto the wall panels to be "held by all." Our frustration and fragmentation was yielding to a new level of coherence and collaboration as we began to "think together."

Noticing The Dialogue Within Us and Between Us

In the practice of dialogue, participants focus both on the dialogue within and the dialogue among themselves. When we hear another speak from their unique perspective, we typically notice a process of comparison that goes on within the listener sensing whether or not the other's meaning matches our own. Agree or disagree? Disagreement is often felt as tension within the body and is expressed as defensive reaction or restatement of our own preferred view. Agreement usually leads to head nodding and statements in support of the other. This judgment generates the usual argument or debate.

Strategic dialogue goes deeper. We move from advocacy to inquiry and from evaluation to exploration in service of the whole. When feeling disagreement, we search for differences in the assumptions or core beliefs underlying our views. This practice deepens the conversation into dialogue. As each of us reflects on and shares our underlying assumptions it becomes clear that others have constructed their own knowledge and meaning in another way.

Allowing Listening to Transform Us

Listening deeply and taking in the other's meaning, we risk being changed by what we hear. In this sense, listening is a radical act. The willingness to allow this process to unfold gives dialogue its transformative power. We cannot enter into the mutuality of dialogue while maintaining defensive and reactive postures. It requires humility, softening our certainties, and allowing ourselves to learn and change in the company of one another. Through mutual reflection, dialogue begins to clarify the places where our assumptions are tangled or seem to contradict themselves. David Bohm suggested that dialogue can function like the immune system in the body. It clears up material that cannot be assimilated into the existing pattern of dis-ease. At a social level, dialogue recognizes and clears up the incoherence of our thought. This happens both within us and between us. Dialogue is a core process for improving our own "pictures of the world" as well as refining and extending the shared mental models that guide decision-making for the business. As a community of colleagues, we make shared meaning of our diverse perspectives and experiences by surfacing, testing, and improving our collective thinking in the context of a changing environment.

SCENARIO 4: Shift Happens

By this time the room was alive. The tone was spontaneous, playful, irreverent. The team was beginning to have "serious fun". Several of the walls and

the large panels surrounding the circle were covered with drawings, diagrams, and key phrases reflecting areas of connection or need for further exploration. There was a special wall panel which contained subjects on which people felt they had reached a common perspective or a greater sense of clarity. These were not agreements or decisions but rather leverage areas where we had come to share a new frame of reference within which to see our challenges and core strategic questions. It was not the shift of "content" but rather the shift of "context" that seemed to make all the difference and opened new possibilities.

It had become clear that no one had all the answers. One of the guys said, "Whew! I thought I had it all figured out before I even came in here the other night, but I think we've got to deepen our understanding and explore the larger picture. I don't think we've ever really gotten this close to the heart of it before." One of the women in the group said, "You know, we've all been really humming together. It's great but we've been at it now for several hours non-stop. It's amazing how time has seemed to dissolve. Maybe we should take a little walk and get out in the fresh air. Let's take some time alone to see what new ways of thinking might come up."

When we reconvened, people were very thoughtful. There had been pauses in the conversation before, but this time the silence seemed to have a different quality. The tension of earlier times in the conversation was gone and people simply sat together, enjoying the quiet. One of the members spoke up. "Something different is happening here. It feels like we are all a part of something important that is larger than just ourselves in this room." The Finance Director added, "I really believe that the questions we have been exploring are going to make a difference not only for the company's bottom line but also for us personally." The head of Sales added, "This kind of thinking together can also make a difference for our employees, our customers and suppliers, and the larger community. Somehow, we've come to another level together." The marketing guy commented, "I have confidence in the direction we are sensing here but it's important to now explore these questions and insights with others. We need to continue these meetings ourselves and also begin these kinds of conversations with larger circles of people who have a stake with us in the future of the company."

The Pot Thickens

We feel a shift of mind when learning happens - Aha! Learning in community means getting to "aha" together. As Senge has said, "Through learning we perceive the world and our relationship to it...A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it."

What are the conditions that make this shift possible? Strategic dialogue is like making a good stew. At first the broth seems watery and thin. We add ingredients with different textures and flavors while spices bring their special aroma to the mix. We continue to stir. As we keep

the heat on, there is often a moment when we notice that "the pot thickens" and what, only a few moments ago, appeared to be a thin mixture has now become rich and fulfilling without losing the unique qualities of its original ingredients.

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

In Spanish, there is the word *el meollo*. *El meollo* means the essential nature or substance of that which is being seen or explored. In strategic dialogue the search is for the essence, the source, the heart of things. It is symbolized by the center of a conch shell that has been cut to reveal the spiral pattern of growth. In the dialogue we sense a spiraling downward as we follow underlying assumptions and discover how they are linked. The conversation deepens. Silence seems full rather than empty. And from this depth of reflection we return as the energy shifts releasing upward new insights and creative opportunities.

In dialogue, the process of change feels like giving birth to new meaning, out of which we realize creative possibilities for action. Then we know what Rainer Maria Rilke recognized: "That which we call the future goes forth from within...the future enters into us in order to transform itself long before it happens."

This is the unfolding of the implicate order Bohm described. With it comes the profound realization that the way we have linked concepts in our minds gives rise to patterns of thought and feeling as well as perception of the world and thus our actions in daily life. If we have difficulties, they are our difficulties, and the resolution of them often lies in re-conceiving with one another our pattern of thought itself. These cognitive structures frame the issues we perceive and our sense of what is worth doing.

The opportunity is for strategic dialogue to serve as one key approach for initiating and linking generative conversations and creative action throughout the organization. The challenge is to recognize innovations in thinking as they occur and to integrate them into an increasingly effective set of core assumptions and guiding images which enable the development of coherent strategy.

Strategic dialogue can help uncover patterns in apparent chaos, resolve strategic dilemmas, and open new possibilities. This type of learning expresses itself as knowing in action which does not require the level of formal planning and control that characterizes traditional hierarchies. Strategic dialogue encourages the kind of self-management required by the more flexible and responsive organizations that are now emerging.

With patience and discipline, the practice of strategic dialogue can become part of a dynamic and reinforcing process which helps create and strengthen the "communities of commitment," which Fred Kofman and Peter Senge emphasize lie at the heart of learning organizations capable of leading the way toward a sustainable future.

DIALOGUE AS SOCIAL CHANGE - Adam Kahane

The approach to strategy in corporations is at a kind of crossroads, where each of us has a choice to make about the way we look at the future. Will we be most effective by trying to adapt to what is happening in the world around us? Or by choosing to participate in shaping the future?

Looking back on my own career, I can see that I have been working on this question for the past fifteen years, both in large companies around the world, and in public projects in Canada, South Africa and Colombia. Like many people engaged in following the thread of an idea, my work on this has become a kind of hero's journey. The hero's journey, as Joseph Campbell has written about it, is not only for great mythic or public leaders. It represents the journey we all take on our path to learning our life's work. Campbell identifies stages that all of us meet along the way: the call to adventure, crossing the threshold, the road of trials, the supreme ordeal, and the return and gift.

From my journey so far, four lessons about strategy have stayed with me. They have come from experiences in the cauldron of public conflict, but I think they are particularly pertinent for corporations and other organizations creating strategy for themselves.

1. The Man With The Answers

In the early 1980s, when I was a physics student at McGill University, I went to a conference in Calgary organized by Pugwash, an organization of scientists striving to prevent nuclear war. I found it very inspiring, particularly a talk by a woman from Sri Lanka who spoke of energy availability as a critical challenge for developing countries, more pressing than nuclear weapons. I also met a professor, John Holdren, who invited me to pursue a graduate degree in energy economics with him. So I arrived at the University of California at Berkeley in 1982, eager to learn to use policy to make the world a better place. In fact, Professor Holdren taught a course called "Tricks of the Trade," about influencing the world. The essence was having the right answer quickly, so that when testifying before a Senate Committee (which we all aspired to do), we could say, "Well, Senator, that's a good question, and I think that the right answer would be exactly 3.2 terajoules, and that's why you should support this legislation."

When I graduated from Berkeley and joined Pacific Gas and Electric, The Northern California energy utility company, I learned more of the same. The way to be a star was to have quick answers to your boss' questions. Then I was recruited to work at Royal Dutch/Shell in London in the Group Planning Coordination, eventually to head up the social-political-economic-technological scenario team. For somebody interested in strategy and scenarios, this was the pinnacle. By this time, I was very analytical in my approach, with a lot of knowledge about the energy industry; that's why I was hired. But I had lost most of my interest in changing the world. I was dispassionate, even cynical. At the same time, I loved the Shell environment. I found the people incredibly smart and

knowledgeable. If they were arrogant it was because they were the best. I admired them and was proud to be one of them.

I learned the scenario method there. My teacher was the Group planner Kees van der Heijden, who taught me that the purpose of scenario planning was to observe the world and to help the organization adapt to it. Talking from the stance of idealism, about the things we wanted to see happen, was not just improper, but dangerous. It led people into trouble; thinking about their desired futures, they might act outside their proper domain, or miss important signals that didn't fit with their desires. It was critical to differentiate clearly what you could and could not influence. As Kees says, "If you're a hang glider, then you have options as to how you lean and distribute your weight. But you only have scenarios for the direction of the wind. And if you start talking about options for wind direction, as if your wishes about wind direction could influence it, you would get terribly hurt."

I was not completely happy with this approach. It implied that Shell, one of the largest corporations in the world, didn't and shouldn't really have much influence on the world. Shell's leaders and planners both thought that it would be irresponsible to try to exert influence outside a closely-circumscribed proper domain. Except in matters that directly affected the business, our task was to observe and adapt as best we could.

This is the dominant paradigm in most thinking about corporations and corporate strategy. But I wondered if it was a responsible stance. I wouldn't have said it then, but in retrospect, this period represented for me a phase that Joseph Campbell describes as 'The Wasteland': a time of living inauthentically. I learned a lot but in retrospect I did not fit. When Kees retired from Shell, he was replaced by an outsider, a visionary lawyer and businessman named Joseph Jaworski, who had founded the American Leadership Forum and is now my partner in the Centre for Generative Leadership. Joe caused a ruckus at Group Planning; he wanted the scenario work to be activist, and to try to contribute to shaping a better world. He was also interested in the question of the higher purpose of the company, beyond simply observing, adapting, making money and surviving.

This stance sparked deep disagreements in Group Planning, but it struck a deep chord within me. I found my energy, which had been sapped, coming back. Campbell calls this experience 'The Call to Adventure': you hear a call, you don't know what it is, and you don't even recognize it as a call. But something is awakening.

In 1991, Shell was invited to send a staff member to South Africa to facilitate a series of workshops at a conference center near Cape Town called Mont Fleur, and Joe encouraged me to go. The project would use the Shell scenario method to improve the quality of strategic thinking and conversation among South African leaders about the future of their country. Being asked to do this work was ironic for me, since my idealistic Berkeley friends had tried to convince me not to join Shell because

of its presence in South Africa.

Working on the Mont Fleur project was very exciting. South Africa had just begun the transition from apartheid to a democratic government. It had only been a year since Nelson Mandela had been released from prison and the left-wing opposition legalized; the first all-race elections would not be held for two more years. There were many activities where people who had been in deep conflict were getting together to try to find a collaborative way forward.

Scenarios were already well-known in South Africa because during the 1980s a scenario exercise led by Clem Sunter, a senior executive at the Anglo American mining corporation, had played an influential, public role in building discussion, particularly among the white population, about possibilities and options. But the Anglo American scenarios, for all their insights, fell short of their potential because they were developed by a fairly homogeneous scenario team and in effect handed to the country as a set of answers. The Mont Fleur scenarios were different. The multi-racial scenario team included 22 members from across the spectrum of South Africa's diverse constituencies: community activists, conservative politicians, African National Congress officials, trade unionists, mainstream economists, and senior corporate executives. Our objective was to develop a set of alternative stories about what might happen in South Africa, to provoke debate and forward movement. One scenario from Mont Fleur, called "Lame Duck," envisioned a prolonged transition with a constitutionally weakened transitional government. Because the government "purports to respond to all, but satisfies none," investors hold back, and growth and development languish amidst a mood of long, slow uncertainty. This was an important scenario because a coalition government was in the midst of being negotiated, and now they could see the potential dangers and how to mitigate them. Another scenario, called "Icarus," suggested that a black government could come to power on a wave of public support, embark on a huge, unsustainable public spending program, and consequently crash the economy. For the first time, a team which included prominent left-wing economists discussed the possibility of government trying to do too much.

The Mont Fleur project was influential. It contributed to the building of a common language for talking across different groups about the opportunities and challenges the country faced. This shared understanding - together with the fruits of countless other workshops, meetings and negotiations - eventually helped lead to the unprecedented "miraculous" transition in 1994 from minority to majority rule. One specific contribution of the Mont Fleur project was creating a more realistic assessment of the crucial economic dimension of the transition. Most people had focused only on the political, military and constitutional dimensions. Personally, I was overwhelmed by this experience. I like the South Africans. I found them warm and I admired their

extraordinary capacity to listen to each other. And I respected the sacrifices that these people had made to bring their country to this transition. At the same time, I was struck by my own effectiveness as a facilitator. In fact, I was more effective in the Mont Fleur project than I had ever been before and than I would be again for many years. Clearly, I had done something right, but I didn't know what it was.

Eventually I figured it out. In Mont Fleur, I had had almost no time to prepare. With more time, I would have done my normal PG&E or Shell thing. I would have read up on the problem, formed opinions, and come in with a recommendation for what they should do. I was effective because I arrived in ignorance and respect. One of the participants said afterwards, "Adam, we couldn't believe anyone could be as ignorant as you. We were sure that you were just pretending. But when we realized you really didn't know anything and you were really there just to support us, we decided to trust you."

This was my first lesson: I was much more effective when I gave up the stance of knowing and arrogance and replaced it with one of wonder and reverence. This had allowed me to enter into what Martin Buber calls an "I-Thou" relationship.

2. The Messy Gray Zone

Mont Fleur was the start of a series of love affairs for me. I fell in love with the country, with this new kind of "servant consulting" work, and with Dorothy, the project coordinator. I ended up marrying Dorothy, resigning from Shell, moving to South Africa, and starting to work internationally as a strategy consultant to both private companies and public institutions. In Joseph Campbell's terms, this was a period of 'Crossing the Threshold' into another world.

I wondered for a long time whether the Mont Fleur scenarios were actually scenarios. Were they stories responding to outside events, like the Shell scenarios, or were they, in fact, options that people might choose? Kees van der Heijden convinced me that, technically speaking, the Mont Fleur scenarios were scenarios. Nobody in the room had the option of choosing South Africa's future. They could only choose options for themselves based on an understanding of what was going on around them. But on the other hand, I could see influential South Africans using the scenarios, in the years that followed, not only as a guide for their own choices, but as a way to talk through and influence the destiny of the country.

I also wondered about a comment made by Rob Davies, a member of the team. "The exercise was very good," he said. "But I felt that I had to compromise." Why, I wondered, did he feel dissatisfied? Joseph Campbell talks about the hero's 'road of trials,' in which valuable knowledge may be forgotten. In fact, I forgot the first lesson almost immediately. My old arrogance came back, my learning slowed down, and I began to consider myself the North's gift to South Africa. In 1994, I

organized a meeting in Berkeley with Steve Rosell, Don Michael, and Ed Schein - all highly respected theorists on collaborative learning. I wanted them to tell me how to make these projects work. It was a terrible meeting, and eventually Ed said, "You know, Adam, your approach is foolish. Here you are living in the world's greatest laboratory of collaborative futures and you're asking us what to do." In retrospect, this was the nadir of my knowing attitude not allowing me to see what was in front of me.

I was working at the time with Kees van der Heijden on a scenario project with Steve Rosell for the Canadian government. Like most public enterprises, the Canadian government had never done scenario work. Why do scenarios when you control the fate of the country and can simply choose the future you want? But when Kees and I got there, this assumption of control was being questioned. "We have these levers that as civil servants we've been trained to use," one of them told us, "but the levers don't seem to be connected to anything any more." At the same time, I was working in South Africa with various collaborative "forums," composed of businesses, government, opposition parties, trade unions and community organizations, sitting together trying to find a way to reshape the country's institutions. People in the forums joked that there was both "a practical and a miraculous solution. The practical solution is that we all get out of our chairs, get down on our knees, and pray for a band of angels to come and solve this problem. The miraculous solution is, we stay here, work together and find the solution ourselves."

I learned my second lesson from the contrast between these two experiences. People seemed much more effective when they gave up the illusion of being in control, and instead tried to work things through with others. When they held onto the need to deal only with what was under their control, they weren't effective. They operated in an all-or-nothing, black-or-white, win-or-lose world that didn't reflect the way the world really works. The South Africans, by contrast, were playing in a gray zone between complete control on the one hand and no influence on the other: a 'generative domain' where they had less control than they wished but more influence than they expected.

3. The Dimension of the Heart

Some time later I became involved in a larger scenario project on the future of Canada, in the context of fierce debates over economic and social policy, Quebec secession, and other issues. Modeled on Mont Fleur, these sessions brought together Canadians from across the spectrum: Quebecois and Western leaders, business people and trade unionists, community leaders and aboriginal people. I found this project difficult. The group took a particularly long time to come to consensus and we had to add an extra session. In the workshops I felt fogged in, as if I couldn't see clearly the picture we were trying to create.

The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has said: "Just because English Canadians don't move their faces much, doesn't mean we don't have feelings." As a Canadian I certainly had strong feelings about the subjects we were discussing, but I didn't pay much attention to them and certainly didn't articulate them. Most members of the group behaved in the same way. So although the rational arguments often had an emotional edge, peoples' feelings were rarely put on the table. Somehow this slowed things down.

Around the same time, in South Africa, Dorothy Kahane and I facilitated an uplifting strategy session for the Synod of Bishops. Archbishop Desmond Tutu had retired and Winston Ndungane, his successor, wanted to get his thirty-two bishops together to make plans for the future of the Anglican Church. We knew this would be a very special workshop within the first fifteen minutes, when we were putting together ground rules for the meeting. Someone suggested that "We must listen to each other." So far, nothing out of the ordinary; that rule was usually suggested. But then a second bishop said, "No, we must listen to the sacred within each of us." In corporate strategy sessions, we have to downplay the spiritual dimension of the work. That wasn't necessary with bishops. We started every morning in church, and we went to church at the end of the day. Perhaps it was helpful that these Anglicans were facilitated with empathy but some distance by a Jew and a member of the Dutch Reformed church (me and Dorothy). Although there were many clashes during the workshop, people dealt effectively with difficult and important issues, including some that had been undiscussible for decades.

I learned my third lesson in contrasting these experiences. Strategy work is not only work of the mind - which was the only training I had ever had for it - but work of the heart and spirit as well. Without open acceptance of that heart and spirit, you cannot have true connection. Now I had a clue to Rob Davies' meaning about compromise. To compromise means to give in; he had been hoping for a consensus, a true accord. The bishops had the capacity for true consensus because they were able to evoke more than only the mind.

4. Changing The World

In Joseph Campbell's language, the "supreme ordeal" refers to the peak experience on the journey, after which the hero is never the same. If such an event has taken place in my own work, it was the scenario project I facilitated in Columbia in 1997. Columbia had been our metaphor at Shell to describe everything going wrong. Shell scenario planner Ted Newland used to refer to "Columbianization" as the drifting of an economy into downward spiral of criminality and impoverishment. Now I was going to facilitate a scenario exercise in the middle of a guerrilla war with tens of thousands of people under arms, with one of the world's largest drug trafficking operations, under a corrupt political and economic system. One of the jokes told at the workshop

summarized he mind set of the country well. "In Columbia, the optimists say, 'The way things are going here, we're all going to end up eating shit'. And the pessimists say, 'Yes. and there won't even be enough to go around.'"

At the same time, the forty-four members of the scenario team were wonderfully intelligent, sensitive and humane. Colombians are known for being the most poetic Spanish speakers. We divided our evenings between earnest debate, personal storytelling, and singing. Furthermore, the team members were far more diverse than the Mount Fleur participants had been. There were academics, business people and trade unionists; representatives of black people, indigenous people, and youth. I think that about a third of the participants had lost an immediate member of their family to the conflict that they were discussing: somebody's father had been assassinated, somebody's sister had been kidnapped, somebody's son had been killed in the conflict. They weren't just observing this situation, they were intensely engaged as you can imagine.

Technically, it was a challenging project. One right-wing paramilitary leader had just been released from prison, but all the top leaders of the left-wing guerrillas were either in hiding, prison or exile. So for the ten days of the workshops, four guerrilla leaders participated via speakerphones. One of them, in exile in Costa Rica, called in from a different phone every workshop. Another once called from a prison pay phone, saying "I only have a few coins, but I really need to give my input on scenario B." If that sound too strange to be true, remember that this is the country that produced the Nobel Prize winning surrealistic novelist, Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

One thing I noticed was that those people who had suffered most in the war were, in many cases, the most humble, open and respectful of the others. This reminded me of my first lesson; the importance of wonder and reverence. I had seen the same phenomenon in South Africa: In these terrible, terrible situations, the people who are not destroyed by the conflict are purified by it - touched by grace. These Colombians realized that they were in a war that nobody could win, and that they had to struggle together to resolve. So every day, they lived with the second lesson: the need to move from the illusion of control to the grey zone of influence.

The third lesson was often demonstrated as well. These participants had the capacity to speak from the heart. When they did, suddenly the fog in the room would lift and the stark dynamics we were trying to study became clear. We could see some of the underlying structure of the system we were trying to understand. During one workshop I said that I was concerned about some of the participants being mortally afraid of each other. One of the guerrillas responded over the speaker phone: "Why are you surprised at this fear, Mr. Kahane? Of course the fear that pervades Columbia is also in the workshop room".

I returned, in my mind, to my argument with Kees. Were these scenarios or options? If they were only scenarios, only efforts to develop better ways of coping with outside events, then why was there this energy in the room"? Why were these participants so passionately engaged? Why did they come at all? Then the other shoe dropped for me. I realized that this project was not really about understanding and adapting. People were there to influence and improve the world, and for no other reason. The fourth lesson from my journey, then, is this: We must give up the assumption that we are powerless, that we can only react to the world, and that we are passive in its face. If we have the courage to step forward, we can participate in helping the future to be born. We can create generative scenarios and strategies, in the sense of helping emerge the future that accords with our highest aspirations, and that we can see trying to come forth.

I see these four lessons as a kind of gift, from the activists, bishops and guerrillas, to corporate leaders. I believe that we would be more effective if we could take a different, broader approach to the future. First, we must let go of the arrogance of knowing and move towards wonder and reverence. Second, we must move away from the black-and-white, secretive approach of trying to try to keep things "under control", towards the grey zone of greater openness and influence. Third, we must move away from the idea that strategy and learning are purely affairs of the mind, towards engaging other parts of ourselves as well, including our hearts and spirits. Finally, we must move away from a passive attitude of only adapting and reacting, towards intentionality and generativity. Of course all of these lessons are easier to talk about than to practice. But I think they carry a prize worth struggling for: the opportunity and the capacity to make the world a better place.

LISTENING - Linda Ellinor & Glenna Gerard

It is nearly impossible to find words that will do justice to the role of listening in any conversation, and most particularly dialogue. Listening is the doorway through which we allow the world to enter. How we listen, to what and to whom we listen, and the assumptions we listen through all frame our perception of reality. Listening may be the single most powerful creative act we perform; we listen and create reality based on what we hear in each moment.

In group dialogue, the power of our listening increases exponentially because of collective listening and creation of shared meaning. With such power available, it becomes important to ask ourselves about the way we are listening. Are we listening from our past history, from our prejudices (prejudgments), from what we already know to be true and right, or from curiosity and a desire to expand our horizons, to see from new perspectives?

In this chapter we'll see how important listening is to creating collaborative partnerships, developing shared meaning, and participating in shared leadership. We will explore three dimensions of listening essential to dialogue, the relationship between suspension of judgment and listening, and the role listening plays in collective intelligence.

Listening, Collaborative Partnerships, And Shared Meaning

Without the ability to listen, collaborative partnerships cannot be born or sustained. Listening is an absolute necessity for the health of any whole, be it a work group, an organization, a family or a community. Consider our physical bodies, a prime example of a highly functional collaborative partnership. Every cell listens to its environment. If our bodies are not constantly listening, without the lapse of a single microsecond, we would die. When a part of the body loses the ability to listen for its relationship with the whole, disease such as cancer is often the result. A group of cells become a body unto themselves without regard for how their unlimited growth affects the health of the whole. The result is often death.

Without listening, our bodies would die. Without listening, dialogue cannot exist. In the absence of listening, the streams of meaning that move among a group of people become disconnected and often invisible. Individuals and subgroups within the larger whole begin to behave as if they were unrelated fragments. Collective learning and aligned action disappear from view.

Three Levels Of Listening

For groups to develop collective intelligence and shared meaning, individual members must learn to listen across three dimensions simultaneously. First, you listen to others, to identify what you see as important and to expand your own understanding. Second, you listen to yourself, to your internal conversation and your own voice as you speak. Third, you listen for the collective

themes, for the shared meaning the group is continuously creating and for new streams of meaning that may want to emerge. We'll consider each one in turn.

Listening To Another

Consider the impact of listening or its absence on interpersonal relationships. Have you ever met anyone who didn't want to be listened to? Who among us wouldn't like to feel that another person might stand beside us and look out at the world through our eyes, even if only temporarily. When we listen to others in this way, we acknowledge the value of their perspectives to a whole view.

Listening to another person is a powerful act. It is an act of respect, of valuing. Conversely, not listening is often experienced as disrespect.

Substituting the word listening for love gives a flavor for the power of listening in relationship with another. When we listen with a willingness to hear what is real and important to another, both of us become more real. Listening adds color and life to our relationships. Not listening bleaches and flattens them, until they virtually disappear.

Among the most frequent complaints heard from people, whether in professional or personal life, are: "No one is listening. Sometimes I feel invisible in this group, like no one hears anything I say. Why bother speaking up? No one wants to hear what I've got to say anyway."

Why is no one listening? "No time. Don't want to hear. Judgments. Feelings of helplessness. I've got my own problems. If I really listen, they'll want more." Actually, from an early age we receive messages to not listen. "Pretend you didn't hear that." "We don't listen to those kinds of statements around here." "Don't listen to him/her."

Listening To Self

Internal conversation often makes it difficult to create and maintain a focus on what the other person is saying. It is often filled with judgments, doubts, preparation for what to say next, thinking up rebuttals, or wondering how much longer this is going to take. Perhaps no one speaks more directly and eloquently to this phenomenon than Krishnamurti.

Listen...

*I don't know if you have ever examined how you listen,
it doesn't matter to what,
whether to a bird, to the wind in the leaves, to the rushing
waters,
or how you listen in a dialogue with yourself,
to your conversation in various relationships
with your intimate friends, your wife or husband...*

*If we try to listen we find it extraordinarily difficult,
because we are always projecting our opinions and ideas,
our prejudices, our background, our inclinations, our impulses;*

when they dominate we hardly listen at all to what is being said...

*In that state there is no value at all.
One listens and therefore learns,
only in a state of attention, a state of silence,
in which this whole background is in abeyance, is quiet;
then, it seems to me,
it is possible to communicate.*

Real communication can only take place where there is silence.

Krishnamurti

To listen deeply and fully to another requires focused attention and internal silence, to listen from a position of neutrality and detachment with a willingness to consider all perspectives. In many ways, this runs counter to our cultural experiences.

Consider that as we were growing up most of us were taught listening as a defensive skill. Listening was about getting clear on what was expected of us so we could remain in the good graces of authority figures. When we were unsuccessful, it usually meant trouble. As adults, many of the dynamics within organizations, communities, and families continue to reinforce this kind of listening. We listen to discover what will help us fit in, keep our job, learn about how to deliver what someone else wants. We listen to figure out who has the power. We listen to anticipate possible danger.

Defensive listening can be a highly developed and tuned skill, honed by fear and an instinct for survival. It is also limiting. When we are fearful, we naturally strive to separate ourselves from whatever it is we fear. We build walls and peer over them. Listening becomes defensive information-gathering about the adversary. We use our active listening skills. We do perception checks, we paraphrase, with the goal of gathering accurate information. We might even invite our adversary to lunch. But never do we let that person beyond the walls, into our interior, into our operations center, not willingly. This is, after all, a matter of survival.

We have become accomplished at listening from a position of competition, of win/lose, of "it's me or you." Listening from this vantage point, our judgments become very important. We must be able to analyze incoming data very quickly, sorting for good/bad, useful/garbage. A capacity for rapid-fire judgment, decision, and action can be crucial to survival.

Now imagine a different scenario, where the focus is on learning and creating collaborative partnerships. Example. We are members of a team sitting in a dialogue circle. I'm being asked to listen as a partner. This has been described to me as "listening as if we are all interrelated parts of a whole. Listening with the recognition that our individual well-being and the well-being of the whole are inextricably interconnected and are equal priorities. Listening as if what each person has to

say, the view through her eyes, is important to my health."

So, I try. But the judgments simply will not stop coming. Judgments about whether a certain idea is good/bad, useful/silly. Judgments about how someone speaks, how he didn't use the best words to describe something, how she forgot to include something important, how they're uninformed. It just goes on almost nonstop. Sometimes people say things I strongly disagree with. And, you want me to listen for wisdom here? Then give me some wisdom to listen for, not these crazy, off-the-wall, impractical ideas! Help! We're not getting anywhere here.

Not so easy, is it? It would be wonderful to be able to simply stop our internal conversations, to quiet our internal judges, and then turn them back on when we wanted them. But even people who have spent their lives in a discipline of seeking inner silence, such as Buddhist monks and contemplatives, find this difficult. Developing some degree of mastery in suspending judgment and remaining open and willing to listen is essential to discovering new possibilities in situations where this often seems impossible.

Listening For Collective Shared Meaning

Most of us have weak collective-listening muscles. We are not used to listening for collective themes or patterns in a conversation. We tend to listen like the blind men who found themselves positioned around an elephant. One had hold of the trunk, another the tail, and a third one the leg. Each described the reality they were touching as if its totality was simply a large version of the part they were in contact with. Of course, each described a very different reality. They did not listen to one another to see what reality might fit all three of their descriptions. The blind men were "listening" at the individual level. At this level there are two primary assumptions: 1) What I see, feel, hear, and perceive is representative of the whole, and 2) If someone else describes something different, they are talking about a different and separate entity.

Listening for collective meaning assumes that what we each feel, see, hear, and perceive is one window on a common reality. If we listen for the interrelationships among all the perceptions, the whole will become visible. We understand that we are each touching different parts of an entity that possesses a tail, a trunk, a large leg, and no doubt a number of other aspects, which when seen collectively are an elephant.

Listening for the collective view is not better than listening to others or ourselves. We need all the individual perceptions of members of our group, team, or family. It is these multiple views that add depth and substance to the whole image. When we listen using all three levels simultaneously, the interrelationships appear and the whole elephant is revealed.

Most of our organizations today are beginning to flex and develop collective listening muscles. One example of this is the increasing interest in systems thinking.

Systems thinking is grounded in collective listening.

Example. A team is convened to solve a repeating problem. A series of individual events are disturbing upper management. Late deliveries have increased. The time for a salesperson to close a sale has increased. Billing errors have increased. Sales are off. Customer service staff is complaining of overload. Each department - sales, marketing, customer service - has a different idea about what the problem is and what they need to do to resolve it. In our example, management puts more pressure on sales by increasing the sales targets and encouraging them to make a greater effort. Sales responds. Not only do they need to make up for lost customers, but their bonuses depend on making more sales. Sales is even making sales that may be difficult to deliver. Service is irritated, because they feel that they have to clean up when sales are pushed through inappropriately; however, management is really pushing for new sales, so they decide they had better just keep quiet and do the best they can.

From your more neutral position as reader, you can probably see how all the efforts being made are interrelated and are in fact reinforcing the problems of all three groups. Each group is listening from its individual perspective and thinking they will fix the problem by working harder and smarter within their separate area. Sales is contributing to the problems of service, which are, in turn, resulting in lower customer service rates and loss of sales, which is pushing sales to do more of what they have been doing, and so on - a self-reinforcing loop. Only when they begin to listen collectively for the interrelationships among the events will they begin to perceive the whole reality and become able to work to create a healthier system.

Einstein spoke with wisdom when he said "no problem can be solved at the same level at which it is created." Many problems or dysfunctions stem from operating out of the assumption that parts, people, or departments are separate and unrelated. We may be diverse and distinct, but we are also interrelated. When we try to solve problems listening only with our individual ear, looking no further than our own back fences, we are addressing the problem at the same level of disconnected thinking it emerged from. When we begin listening for the collective meaning, expanded understanding and new possibilities become available.

Listening for shared meaning can also inform us about the culture of our organization or work group. It can reveal subtler webs of collectively held assumptions. If you want to learn about the norms and assumptions that guide your group's decisions and actions, listen for:

- how people are rewarded;
- the priorities that repeatedly gain the group's attention;
- how the group spends its time;
- whose presence is necessary for the group to function well and why;
- how decisions are made; and
- what the undiscussables, or taboo topics are.

If you listen to the group's conversation and

behaviors over time, you will begin to get a picture of the worldview or thinking that sits beneath the surface and drives the group's strategies and results. One way to explore this is to imagine yourselves as anthropologist observers who have been asked to write a report on the culture of your group based on its behaviors and conversations. What would your report say?

As a general rule of thumb, if you want to know what people believe about how something happens, if you observe them doing it, you'll be looking at their assumptions in action. What we believe is reflected in what we do and don't do, what we say and don't say. Here is an example of a conversation that took place at the end of a weekend dialogue. By listening for collective themes and patterns and observing our actions, we discovered a number of assumptions the group had about how intimacy and community are created.

A reflection. The weekend has been volatile and, for some, traumatic. There has been pain and disruption, talking it through, forgiveness, and mending. It is Sunday morning. Reflection time. Someone asks, "What exactly is it that we've been exploring this weekend?" The question asks us to focus on our collective listening. In the next few moments the elephant we have all been groping is unveiled. It is intimacy. We have been talking and acting out stories and assumptions about intimacy; how intimacy is formed; the roles of pain and forgiveness, separation, and reconnection. We begin to look more closely at the assumptions about intimacy and community reflected in our words and actions. Statements like "There's nothing like a crisis to pull people together" take on new meaning. Did we actually create crisis to experience intimacy and community? Perhaps. We begin to look at the connection between our own willingness to be open to another's pain. It seems easier (perhaps safer?) to be open if the other is in pain (perhaps they are temporarily less dangerous?). We've all heard stories about how separation creates pain. We begin to wonder what assumptions we may have about pain being a doorway to connection and how they might affect our behavior. We leave the weekend with many questions.

Collective listening leads to revelations and new questions. Each dialogue is like an act in a play. When we listen for the collective meaning, we reveal the plot we are enacting. Often there are many levels, some more subtly veiled than others. By becoming aware of our stories about how things work, we begin the process of reclaiming our ability to rewrite the plots, reshape the cultures of our organizations, communities, and families. We listen for what is and we listen for what may be wanting to emerge. We begin to intentionally participate in the process of self-organization that sustains our core identity in relationship with a continuously changing environment. Listening for collective shared meaning informs us about who we are together. Listening for emergent threads of meaning speaks to us of who we are becoming together.

STRATEGIC SONATAS - Hugh Pidgeon & Alex Knight

Bringing together areas of life that might at first glance seem unrelated, even at odds with each other, can provide remarkable and fresh insights. Ashridge's Strategic Management Programme recently broke new ground by featuring one of the world's leading violinists, Miha Pogacnik accompanied on piano by Schumann, Haydn and Bach much to the surprise of the workshop participants.

The session on the strategy programme was entitled 'Organization Development, and Change' and was part of the third week of the programme. We suspected that the participants had probably just about had enough of models, frameworks, and conceptualizing. And so much of the language of organizational development is visual in its reference. We wanted to invite them to move beyond talking, to engage in a physical experience that appealed as much to emotion as reason, to the passion of human endeavor as to the practice of management.

We had both met Miha Pogacnik and had been hugely impressed by his energy and vitality. Alongside his international touring schedule as a concert violinist, he has explored the future rôle of the arts in providing a common ground between ideological hostilities: socio-economic, transcultural and business. He has inspired over 80 multi-discipline festivals and conferences during the last 15 years, for the most part in crisis areas of the world: Tibet, the Amazon region, Dubrovnik. Pogacnik stood playing on the Berlin Wall as it was pulled down and is equally at home at conferences and in strategy planning sessions with companies like Novartis, Esprit, IBM, Auchan and Shell.

Paul Robertson, leader of the Medici String Quartet, has convincingly argued that musical evolution and the evolution of our species are completely and intricately linked. Sound is associated with our earliest neurological development even before we are born. Our ears were open long before our eyes. Miha Pogacnik's personal conviction is that music is one of the primary processes in all human interaction. He sees in the business world the same concentration, creativity and mastery required in the arts. 'Business isn't about growth, it's about development - which is what happens with music,' he says.

The link between music and management has been recently explored by a number of figures from both worlds. Harvard Business School's John Kao wrote Jamming which compared the improvisational skills demanded by jazz music to the flexibility and improvisational skills required by contemporary managers. And the conductor Benjamin Zander has a successful and developing sideline as a motivational business speaker and author, drawing on his experience of leading the orchestra. Business is taking an increasing interest in funding performances of all kinds - the most recent Rolling Stones' Voodoo Lounge tour was sponsored by Volkswagen, one of Ashridge's clients.

Miha Pogacnik's focus was on the music itself. In one remarkable morning, he managed to demonstrate that management needed music quite as much as music needed sponsorship from management. He took his audience through pieces section by section, then again from beginning to end, inviting us to become sensitive to natural progression, to really listen, to notice how we would anticipate what was to follow, to feel when something was missing or not quite right; to experience the piece as a whole.

With that extraordinary gift of exposition that comes from being totally familiar with every phrase of the music - matched only by Diana at the piano who was required constantly to return to earlier sections, separate the two hands or play tricks with false endings - he showed us how the different phases of the compositions progressed from pioneering to differentiation to integration. He recreated musically the crisis point as the condition under which a new understanding emerged.

We noticed just how hard it was simply to follow the music, to allow the structures to develop and change. He challenged us to attend to many voices simultaneously; to recognize every single voice or line in the music and the part it played in the larger composition. In music, as in business, and indeed in life, we were invited to find the seed of action, the seed of direction, contained in the very

first note of the piece as the two of them began to play. With every iteration, the underlying form and pattern of the music began to emerge.

It was not difficult to make the translation from the language of movement, pattern and relationship to

the challenge every manager faces in attending to the underlying pattern of things, to shifts and changes in the market, to changing personal relationships. Listening so intently to the music provided a direct experience of the constantly shifting nature of change, and the complexity of interaction involved in the life of an organization. It was both highly structured AND fluid, setting off whole new trains of thought and association.

We have been reminded since of how powerful a metaphor this is at the recent funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales. It is inconceivable that the day would not have been marked by music. Once again as it did soon that morning with Miha Pogacnik and Diana Baker playing, it reminded us of the greater sweep of human endeavor. As Paul Robertson put it in his television series Music and the Mind: 'The profoundly significant patterned sound we call music stirs a much more ancient system of memory than can be articulated in words. This archetypal response recalls us to our basic human heritage and provides us with a life-giving and inspirational centre from which we can all draw intellectual, emotional and physical energy.'

'Business isn't about growth, it's about development - which is what happens with music.'

(Continued on page 15)

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