

## **DIALOGUE, CREATIVITY, AND CHANGE**

**Sheila McNamee and John Shotter**

It seems odd to us to write about dialogue, creativity, and change without attempting to explicitly integrate the conversational partners with whom we are engaged. This means not only incorporating others' ways of describing dialogue processes, but also, embodying in our text *our* voices as respondents to each other. Thus, we begin this chapter with a transcript of a conversation we had about dialogue, creativity, and change. After our initial comments, we each take some time to elaborate our specific points. In this way, our hope is to present a chapter that is emblematic of open dialogue (Seikkula, Aaltonen, Alakara, Haarakangas, Keranen, & Sutela, 1995).

### *Our Conversation*

John: Sheila, a central reason for my interest in dialogue is that I think it makes possible a special kind of first-time creativity, the creation “out of the blue” of a way of acting in response to, or in relation to, the unique character of one's current surroundings. In a moment, I would like to say something about how this might come about. But let me first invite you to say something about the reasons for your interest in dialogue.

Sheila: Well, where I would like to begin is really only arbitrarily a beginning because it is actually a *response* to you. I was caught by your comment about creativity and coming “out of the blue.” This is where I want to focus – on the construction of possibilities. But I am also interested in another dimension of dialogue. I'm interested in how we

position ourselves in conversation as if we already know what the other person is going to say. It is as if we can be certain about how things will unfold. We come from a tradition where we often rehearse a scenario, whether it be the first time to declare love for somebody or trying out different possibilities for disciplining your child. I believe that our presumption is that we think we know how things will go. And having this presumption affords us the opportunity to rehearse. I see this as adding a significant second dimension to dialogue that appears to be just the opposite of what you were just describing. There is the unimaginable *newness* of dialogue along with what seems to be the predictable. My own curiosity is with the former feature; how do we capture the unknown, the sense of creating something anew? I think we are both interested in putting more emphasis on that domain. Yet, I think it must be discussed against the backdrop of how we assume we can predict dialogue.

John: Yeah, so precisely, on the one hand, a clear set of expectations before the other person responds, and on the other, the possibility of being truly surprised and being “arrested” or “struck” – of having something quite other than what you expected influence you in some way. As I see it, it’s in this way that dialogue can bring about change in us that nothing else can.

Sheila: Yes, I agree. An impetus for my work is to try to find ways of talking and writing that alert people to this possibility of the unknown, of the surprises, of the newness. This goes back to the pioneering work of the group associated with the Mental Research Institute (e.g., Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). They talked about first and second order change. Often, something in a conversation with another could really be an opening to

something entirely different, but it's read as, or interpreted as, a variation on the theme, the same old thing. I think what I see as an important step is the opening of possibilities for people to pause and consider various other voices that they could use. We all know how communication quickly can become ritualized within given relationships or situations. What I find useful is to find a way to draw on the other voices that we have within our repertoire of actions. We should become curious about how we might use other voices, other responses, actions, or moves that are simultaneously quite familiar to us but very strange within the situation with which we are currently engaged. It is only in that moment that I think we really can appreciate this creativity, this newness. Otherwise, we do feel like we're doing the same old thing day in and day out in our conversations.

John: Something Arlene Katz (Katz, Conant, Inui, Baron, & Bor, 2000) has emphasized is that one cannot just say: "Let's have a dialogue. Let's set up, between people who haven't properly met before, the opportunity for them to meet." We have found that one needs quite a degree of preparation – where preparation is quite different from planning. Preparation has to do with one's orientation, with one's background expectations, the kind of overall language-game one thinks of oneself as involved in; planning has to do with ground rules and such like.

Sheila: Absolutely. I've come to think of this feature – the preparation for dialogue – in very specific terms. I have found it useful to focus on two notions that seem to "tell it all" for me. One is, as of course you know, that I like to draw on Wittgenstein's notion of "How do we go on together?" (Wittgenstein, 1953). To me, he raises *the* central question.

Social interaction, human engagement, is not concerned with explaining something or with figuring out why relationships or people work this way or that. Rather, our focus should be on how we craft liveable futures together. This is a very important issue. In the simplest, and probably also vaguest, terms, this question suggests the need to create the conversational space, where *different* kinds of conversations can transpire. For me, this implies that planning is not really the central feature but rather, that the preparation for generative dialogue should be central. What I mean by this is that we must engage in reflexive inquiry where we consider how to invite participants to engage in the dialogue with *different* voices. This is where my second focus – creating a context where participants avoid speaking from abstract positions – becomes significant. Often in conversations, we find ourselves speaking from abstract positions. This frequently takes the form of statements like, “This is what I believe,” “This is true,” “This is right,” “This is wrong,” and those are abstractions. Instead, I like to invite people to root those abstractions in a life story of their own. It doesn’t need to be extremely self-disclosive, but it’s rooted in a story. And while I may disagree with your position on something, I can’t tell you that your story is wrong. And that opens a possibility for us to be in a different kind of conversation than we would otherwise have.

John: Your first thing, emphasizing going on together, and then the second, rooting what you say in some personal experience, connects for me with what seems to be the major theme in what makes a dialogue a dialogue: that everything is connected to everything else in terms of what can simply be called “spontaneous living responsivity.” It matters that people genuinely talk in response to what either the immediate situation requires or what

somebody else has just said.

Sheila: Or what they imagine, and this goes back to my opening comment. Often, people are responsive to what they imagine the other person will say based on a history of a relationship. But, that is not what *has* to happen and that's where conversations go awry quite often, I think. And so, what you called responsivity I would call "relational responsibility" – being attentive to the process of relating. If I'm truly being attentive to the process of relating, no matter how many times you and I may have gotten into an argument about something, when I'm talking with you now I won't necessarily – I won't be too fast to – listen to what you're saying *in that frame*. Rather, I will be attentive to what we are doing *right now*. And the history of that becomes a part of it, but doesn't dominate it. And that leaves, again, that open space for the creativity.

John: Yes, and it's in that space where Bateson's (1972) notion of "information being the difference that makes the difference" can operate. The difference arises at that moment when, on the one hand, you have an expectation, and on the other hand, it isn't exactly fulfilled as you expect. Thus, there is a difference between that expectation and its fulfillment. And in a dialogical context, that's where the otherness of the other comes in. In a marvelous phrase of George Steiner's (1989), "The 'otherness' which enters us makes us other" (p. 188).

Sheila: Yes, yes.

John: And that is how it is, at least for me. Not only is dialogue creative, but it can make for a genuine change. Not a mere change, one more bit of information, or a change in opinion. It's actually changing you and your active, living relations to your surroundings.

Sheila: Right, I love that Bateson phrase too, “the difference that makes a difference.” And the question is how can we build that in, that kind of sensibility of pausing and waiting to hear the potential difference. And another thing that quote always draws me to thinking about is how we talk about dialogue as a natural activity. We engage in dialogue every day. And in contrast, we think of debate as something in which we must be trained. In debate, we have all these rules and procedures to follow. You know, my opening statement, then, in so many minutes, you respond, I respond, so on and so forth. There is an order to it. So, I have started playing around, ironically, with the need for rules about this seemingly ordinary activity. That is, in order to make the difference, for these different kind of dialogues, for the newness to emerge, we must make the ordinary unusual. To make the familiar unfamiliar by providing ground rules when we can. One can do that whether setting up a formal dialogue session, as I frequently do in various communities, or in an interpersonal relationship. It is not so difficult to say, “Let’s make a rule before we have a conversation that we won’t talk in this way or we won’t be too quick to judge each other.” Personally and intellectually I find that those operations remind us that dialogue is full of potential. But we need to be reminded by making it into something that’s foreign. This speaks directly to the point we both have been making concerning the need for *preparation* for dialogue.

John: I’ve got two responses to that which may, at first, seem contradictory, both with each other, and in disagreement with your need to make dialogue into something “foreign.”

Sheila: That’s okay. We can contradict each other.

John: One, concerns how conversation connects with our “natural” reactions to things, with

what we might call our animal natures. As perhaps you know, recently I have become more and more intrigued – particularly by that program, “Why Dogs Laugh And Chimpanzees Cry” – with just looking at animals’ very, very natural reactions to each other, their social reactions, and their understandings of each other’s (what psychologists might call) “states of mind,” or whatever (Shotter, in press). They care for each other much as we do. As I see it, conversation is a very natural extension of our animal responses to each other. We cannot *not* care when the others around us suffer and things like that. We find it very difficult to turn off these very basic, spontaneous responses. On the other hand, your comment about making our ordinary ways of going on strange is like the lights going down on the theater auditorium and coming up on the stage. We create a little magical setting as if something very special is going to happen. I think this is very important too. And I think both these comments are connected. What we could call our every day Western ways of going on have become so infused with so many routines, so many taken for granted assumptions. These taken for granted routines and assumptions have got to, in some way, be broken up, deconstructed, and our practices opened up to see in them the new but unnoticed possibilities they still offer.

Sheila: Right. This reminds me of my intermediate-level family communication class. We’re talking about all these ideas in terms of the family, and so I want them to be able to know the difference this way of talking offers. So, what I do is I ask them to create a simulated family. And of course, at first, what happens is they call this a “role play.” I never use that term so it is always very interesting to me that they immediately term it such. It seems to me that, once identified as a “role play” activity, they feel compelled to wait.

They look at me as if to say, “Well, am I the mother? Am I the father? And what’s our story?” I say, “No, no you’re a family, go ahead, just start.” And so they start by drawing on extremely stereotypical images. Yet, slowly they create an identity that is beyond any one of them – a beautiful illustration of the performative notion of developing into who you will become. They engage in precisely the sort of creative, unusual, and spontaneous reality that we have been describing. They create identities, relationships, and even *histories* that are part of all of them but not identifiable with any single one of them. They engage in a conversation and questions are asked and accusations made and things happen. And then, if those of us observing ask them questions, we find that our questions can change the direction or nature of what is being created and so forth. And it becomes so powerful that in every single instance of doing this there has been at least one person in the simulated family who has felt it necessary to declare openly to the class, when it’s all said and done, “I am not like that! That is not who I am. I don’t act that way. I don’t believe in those things.” Anyway, I think of this activity as an opportunity for students to see the power of being in dialogue and how they never question *how* we accomplish the creation of beliefs, values, and identities in this ordinary practice called dialogue. They might believe that it’s ordinary to be a mother this way or be a father that way, but very quickly it becomes unusual, not ordinary. It becomes an incredibly unique and unpredictable dynamic. The interactive moment constructs the identity of the family, of each individual and so forth. And so as you were talking, I was thinking of that as an illustration of the tension in dialogue to recognize the routine, to take for granted the assumptions and routines with which we engage while

also recognizing the open potential for transformation, something beyond the usual.

John: It does seem to me that in our last forty or fifty years of intellectual talk in the West, we've created some extremely empty and neutral circumstances for ourselves, as if our surroundings are purely physical, and the only subjective things in the world are in our heads. But the idea that we can be in an environment, a conversational or dialogical environment that, itself, takes on an anthropomorphic quality, is a tremendously powerful idea. When we say things like, "Society tells us" or "This is the way it has to be done" without ever identifying the dialogues that construct these abstract beliefs, we are operating within this idea. And, as perhaps you know, I have begun to think back to people like Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1926), and what he calls "the mental functions of inferior peoples," and his claims of how this "participatory" or "anthropomorphic" thinking was an enormous mistake, and how we have now grown beyond it. Whereas, in fact, rather than growing beyond it, I think we've simply failed to recognize the enormous importance and power that such forms of thought – in which we feel the presence of a personified agency "calling" on us to act – still have for us.

Sheila: Enormous, enormous. Think of how many times in a day someone says, "Society says," "Society tells us." My question always is, "Who is society?" It's us. I see this all the time in the classroom. I often ask people what they would consider the features of an outstanding, learning environment/classroom in a university setting or in their lifetime. People can list off all sorts of features. For example, they tell me that in a formal educational context clear lectures, good note taking abilities, raised hands when questions occur are typical. It is as if the best learning situation is already scripted. And then I say,

“Now tell me what *your* best learning experience was like.” They have no problem describing their experiences but these stories have *none* of the features they have already listed in response to my first question. There’s nothing like those activities. Instead, they say things like, “Oh, we would go outside and we’d talk about things, and we’d gather around coffee and talk ideas and do this and that.” For me, this illustrates how these abstractions become a dominating discourse, as when people say, “society says.” We often forget how we create possibilities moment by moment in dialogue with others. I don’t know if we’ve gotten off track.

John: I think we’ve provided a good beginning from which each of us individually can now expand in our own directions.

Sheila: All right.

John: Thanks very much, Sheila

Sheila: Thank you.

*Joint Action, and the Chiasmic Inter-Relating of Spontaneously Responsive, Bodily Activities:*

*John Shotter*

I mentioned that I would like to say something about how dialogue makes possible a special kind of *first-time creativity*, the creation “out of the blue” of a way of acting in response to, or in relation to, the unique character of one’s current surroundings. In referring to a “first-time” creativity, I have in mind a phrase of Garfinkel’s (1967). In his discussion of a community’s shared “accounting practices,” he remarks that by their use, a member of a community “makes familiar, commonplace activities of everyday life recognizable *as familiar*,” and that, on each new occasion, it is done for yet “another first time” (p. 9).

As is well known, early work by Mills (1940), followed by Scott and Lyman (1968), directed attention toward the importance of all members of a speech community being trained into an extensive network of normative “background expectations.” It is these anticipations that work to hold all the different actions within that community together as an intelligible whole. Members failing to satisfy such background expectations in their actions will puzzle, bewilder, or disorient other members who will then question their conduct.

But it is precisely these background expectations that make it possible for us to use our utterances in new ways. As Bakhtin (1986) notes, “An utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing and outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable” (p.119). This kind of continuously occurring, first-time, unpredictable, and unanticipated but nonetheless (once it has occurred) intelligible creativity, has not yet, I want to claim, been adequately appreciated and characterized in our social thought. Although recently, Wittgenstein-inspired accounts of this problem have begun to appear (Johnson, 1993; Mulhall, 1990). Indeed, the pervasive Cartesianism (Taylor, 1955) at work in our everyday accounting practices, has led us both to locate the sources for all our social activities inside the heads of individuals and to characterize these sources in terms of rules, or laws, that is, in terms of regularities and repetitions. It has led us, also, to ignore precisely those events which occur only *between* people and which occur *only* once.

Thus, to understand what is possible for us within such dialogically-structured events, and only within such events, we must think of such relations in some radically new ways. Indeed, as we shall see, we must think of them in *extra* ordinary terms, in terms that can perhaps

shock us into spontaneously responding to the events occurring around us in uniquely new, first-time ways.

As an initial step in this exploration, let me first turn to the importance of our living, bodily responsiveness. This is basic, because we cannot *not* be responsive both to the others and the othernesses around us in our surroundings. Thus, in such a spontaneously responsive sphere of activity as this, instead of one person first acting individually and independently of an other, and then the second replying, by acting individually and independently of the first, we act jointly, as a *collective-we*. And we do this bodily, in a “living” way, spontaneously, without us having first “to work out” how to respond to each other. This means that when someone acts, their activity cannot be accounted as wholly their own activity – for a person’s acts are always partly shaped by the acts of the others around them – and this is where all the strangeness of the dialogical begins (see Shotter, 1980, 1984, 1993a, 1993b).

Our dialogical actions are neither yours nor mine; they are truly “ours.” Indeed, what is produced in such dialogical exchanges is a very complex mixture of not wholly reconcilable influences, which Bakhtin (1981) refers to as both “centripetal” tendencies inward toward order and unity at the center, as well as “centrifugal” ones outward toward diversity and difference on the borders or margins. Further, because the overall outcome of any exchange cannot be traced back to the intentions of any of the individuals involved, the “dialogical reality or space” constructed between them is experienced as an “external reality” or a “third agency” (an “it”) with its own (ethical) demands and requirements. Thus, as Taylor (1991) points out, more is involved here than individuals merely coordinating their actions. From their embedding within the common “rhythming” of their activities – be it moving a piano, sawing with a two-person

cross-cut saw, dancing, or participating in a conversation – the individuals involved become participant parts of “an integrated, nonindividual *agent*” (p. 311, emphasis added). As such, they answer to the “demands” they all feel coming to them, not from other individuals, but from the jointly shared activity within which they are all involved. “The word [in an utterance] is a drama in which three characters participate (it is not a duet, but a trio)” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.122).

But from whence does this strange dialogically-structured, dispersed agency emerge? How are all the influences that go into its formation inter-linked with each other to form such an integrated unity? We can take *binocular vision* as a major analogue in bringing out this aspect of the peculiar nature of dialogically-structured activities into the light of day. Why? Well, Bakhtin (1984) remarks that: “A *plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses . . . combine but are not merged in the unity of the event*” (p. 6). In other words, just as the two different, moment-by-moment changing views of a landscape before us, given us by our two different eyes as we scan over it, are not merged into a blurred, average, two-dimensional image, but work together to create for us a sense of *depth*, a third dimension, so the different voices speaking from different momentary positions in a shared “space” can also give us a sense of that space as having some “depth” to it, can constitute it as a “landscape” of possible places to “go on” to, of “mental movements” that one might make.

In Bateson’s (1979) discussion of the question of “What bonus or increment of knowing follows from *combining* information from two or more sources,” he picks up on two of our themes – the importance of the “differences that makes a difference,” of “news,” that is, of first-time events, and of the unmerged combining of “at least two somethings to create a difference” (p. 78). In particular, something special happens, he notes, in the optic chiasma (the crossing of

the optic nerves from the two eyes in the hypothalamus of the brain): “the *difference* between the information provided by the one retina and that provided by the other” works to help the seer add “an extra *dimension* to seeing” (p. 79), the dimension of depth. Instead of seeing things as just large or small, we see them as near or far.

But in considering seeing with two eyes, are we, perhaps, getting just a little ahead of ourselves, and moving to a higher level of complexity before considering seeing “something” with just one eye? Perhaps we should consider, first, what is involved, even with one eye, in scanning over a face and seeing it – with all its changing expressions – as the *same* face, only now as a smiling face, now as frowning, now as sad, as welcoming, as threatening, and so on? How do we join together all the different fragments collected at different moments into a coherent, unitary whole, into the “seeing” of a person’s face? That seeing a person’s face *as a face* is an achievement in which it is possible to fail, is shown by Sacks’s (1985) Dr. P. Although he knew perfectly well what eyes, noses, chins, etc., were, he could not spontaneously recognize people’s faces as such, and thus it was that he mistook his wife’s face for his hat.

In other words, what is at work here is a kind of understanding which, in Wittgenstein’s (1953) terms, “consists in ‘seeing connections’” (no. 122), a kind of understanding we might call a “relationally-responsive” form of understanding, to contrast it with the “representational-referential” forms of understandings more familiar to us in our intellectual dealings with our surroundings.

But these relationally-responsive forms of understanding all entail our seeing connections and relations within a living whole, a whole constructed or created from many different fragmentary parts, all picked up in the course of one’s *continuous, living, responsive*

*contact* with a particular circumstance in question, whether it is a text, a person, a landscape, or whatever. So, perhaps we were not so ahead of ourselves in seeing the kind of chiasmatic interweaving that occurs in binocular vision, as paradigmatic of the creation of many further “relational dimensions” in other spheres of understanding. As Merleau-Ponty (1968) points out, chiasmatic interweaving seems to be involved in all our bodily understandings of our relations to our surroundings: “There is a double and a crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one” (p. 134). Indeed, “my two hands touch the same things because they are the hands of one same body . . . [and] because there exists a very peculiar relation from one to the other, across corporeal space – like that holding between my two eyes – making my hands one sole organ of experience” (p. 141).

These understandings – the creation of these relational dimensions – might range all the way from simply “seeing” a person’s facial expression as a smile or their utterance as a question, to “seeing” quite complex connections between people’s behaviors in their lives – as, for instance, Margaret Schegel in E. M. Forster’s (1989) *Howard’s End* “saw” connections between her forgiveness of Herbert Wilcox’s sexual peccadillos and his lack of forgiveness of those of her sister. But all such understandings have their beginnings in those moments when something occurs that “moves” or “strikes” us, when an event makes a noticeable difference to us because it matters to us.

There is, it seems to us,

at best, only a limited value

in the knowledge derived from experience. The knowledge imposes a pattern, and

falsifies,

for the pattern is new in every moment  
and every moment is a new and shocking  
valuation of all we have been (Eliot, 1944, p.23).

In other words, for something to make a difference that matters to us, something must surprise us, be unanticipated, unexpected, fill us with wonder. But, as Fisher (1998) notes:

The experiential world within which wonder takes place cannot be made of unordered, singular patches of experience. We wonder at that which is a momentary surprise within a pattern that we feel confident we know. It is *extra* ordinary, the unexpected. For there to be anything that can be called “unexpected” there must first be the expected. In other words, years or even centuries of intellectual work must already have taken place in a certain direction before there can be a reality that is viewed as ordinary and expected.” (p. 57)

And it is against this background, the background of our ordinary, everyday, shared accounting practices, that such events can occur, and strike us with wonder. And it is our passion for wonder – the gift made to us by our shared dialogically-structured accounting practices – that distinguishes us from all other living animals.

*Shifting our Orientation to Everyday Practices: Sheila McNamee*

John’s comments serve as an invitation to me to offer some specific, yet fluid, resources we might use to promote dialogue in our everyday interactions (see McNamee, 2002a, 2002b). It allows me to fill in the pragmatics (so to speak) of constructing something out of the blue, unknown, new. Basically, my interest is with how to orient ourselves to the mundane activities

in which we participate such that – when so desired – the predictable or expected does not re-emerge. It is important to note that I am not suggesting that this is how we would prefer to engage in every interactive moment. Yet, those that appear so ritualized and unwanted, old routines that have become cumbersome, can be transformed only if we orient ourselves differently. In a similar vein, those relationships that are haunted by conflict, discord, and animosity might well shift toward generative patterns of engagement if only we orient ourselves within a relational frame.

John references Bakhtin (1986) in his proposal that language/activity is never a representation of the world as it is but is, rather, a creation of the world as we construct it. The former, modernist orientation with its focus on both individuals as independent units with certain capabilities and deficiencies *and* its focus on language/action as a vehicle for representing the world as it is has given birth to our unquestioned orientation to everyday activities. Specifically, if we believe that we are autonomous beings, each equipped with our own, private abilities to accurately represent reality, then, obviously, we approach our everyday engagements as if each participant either knows or does not know, can do or cannot do, will excel or not excel – precisely the sort of routinized, predictable orientations we were discussing earlier. On the other hand, if we take seriously the relational sensibility required of dialogue, we would probably enter into the mundane activities of our lives in very different ways. We might, for example, enter into a conflict with curiosity about *how* it emerged and what purpose it was serving, rather than from the perspective of *why* it was occurring and *who* was at fault. We might just as well enter into a smoothly flowing relational moment with a fresh curiosity for how, among all the complexity of human affairs, we manage to engage ourselves and others in such a coordinated

performance. The distinctions between the individualist and the relational sensibilities are miles apart in terms of the possibilities they invite.

John has suggested that “for something to make a difference that matters to us, something must surprise us, be unanticipated, unexpected, fill us with wonder.” So, for me, the issue becomes one of re-orienting ourselves to daily activities. How might we enter into dialogue *expecting* to be surprised or filled with wonder rather than enter into dialogue *hoping* we will somehow magically encounter the unanticipated?

I would like to propose some general notions that, I believe, orient us toward the creative possibilities of dialogue. These resources are by no means exhaustive. I offer these as only an entre into the imaginative construction of further dialogic potentials.

First, and probably most contrary to our traditional, individualist orientation to the world, is the constant use of reflexive critique. Reflexive critique can take many forms in any interactive moment. We might, for example, pause at the moment we *know* we are correct, we *know* we have the best method or plan, we *know* how something should be. If we pause and ask ourselves, “how else might this be,” “what else could I do at this moment,” “is there a different way to make sense out of the other person’s comments or actions,” we open ourselves to the sort of inquiry that invites alternative meanings (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). This is just the sort of inquiry Jaakko Seikkula and his colleagues (1995) engage when they respond to a psychiatric crisis. Rather than assume they, as the professionals, should provide a diagnosis and treatment plan, Seikkula and his team gather all interested parties together (the person in crisis, family members, friends, neighbors, medical professionals – anyone who might have something to contribute). Collaboratively they develop a plan of action that is responsive to the multiple ways

of approaching and understanding the situation. The person in crisis is an active participant in this process. Seikkula calls this process *open dialogue*. It requires a suspension of the professionals' certainty that they can provide an accurate diagnosis from which they can develop a successful treatment plan.

When we engage in self reflexive critique like this, we avoid certainty. And, while certainty (as one hallmark of the competent individual) logically sounds appealing to us, it is precisely the stance that closes us to alternative views. Certainty also separates participants by establishing levels of expertise. Ironically, one of the very qualities we are trained to develop – certainty – inhibits our ability to move beyond conflict and discord toward transforming dialogic possibilities.

Another resource I find useful, as I mentioned earlier, is to avoid speaking from abstract positions. As with the stance of certainty, abstractions invite hierarchy and thus, separation – features not found in dialogue. Principles, values, and beliefs are crafted out of our day-to-day engagement with others. Understanding the principles from which you speak, the values that so strongly shape your position, or the beliefs that you hold dear, requires some sense of the relationships, the communities, the situated activities that have given these abstractions meaning for you. If you tell me a story about your family's rituals, I am more likely to appreciate how you raise your own children. Such appreciation does not require agreement. Yet, the difference between acknowledging the coherence of your beliefs or values and simply declaring them wrong, evil, or bad (because they do not fit with my beliefs or values) is tremendous.

This is aptly illustrated in the work of the Public Conversations Project (e.g., Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin, Becker, & Stains, 1996). They show us how dialogue, among people with

incommensurate views, is facilitated by inviting them to talk about the relational communities within which their beliefs (i.e., abstract positions) have been constructed. We can remain in dialogue if we appreciate the *situated* coherence of each other's position. And, in order to craft a reality together, remaining in dialogue is necessary. Thus, we can see that speaking from abstract positions closes our opportunities to *go on together* and locks us in endless attempts to achieve agreement (which we may never achieve). Avoiding abstraction helps us focus on recognizing the *local* significance of opposing views and in that recognition lies the potential to remain in dialogue.

An additional resource that orients us toward dialogic potentials can be called the imaginative. Here, I find it useful to engage in conversations where we allow ourselves and invite our conversational partners to talk “as if” (Anderson, 1997). Can we talk “as if” we are the other in this situation? Can we talk “as if” we were a spouse, rather than a colleague? How might we invite the other in a situation to speak as if he or she were curious about alternative views? These questions open dialogic possibilities by encouraging participants to move beyond sedimented images of self and other.

Along with “as if” conversations, we might engage in “what if” talk. As with “as if” conversations, when we play with potential scenarios beyond the expected, we have a stronger chance of inviting our relational partners into the crafting of new scenarios. Often, both “as if” and “what if” conversations can be usefully positioned within a broader dialogue about the future. When we speak from certainty and abstract positions, we tend to focus our attention on the past and why things are a particular way. However, when we engage in talk about the future, our idealized hopes for how it might be crafted jointly, our focus shifts from why to how our

views and practices are in conflict. This shift to how from why suggests a final resource we might use to encourage dialogue.

When we focus on how we differ (or even how we manage to coordinate our activities together so well), we attend to our joint activities. How do *we* do this *together*? My actions alone are not wholly mine. They are *ours*. They are responsive to the situated moment, to our traditions of discourse, and to our imagined futures. We should not be concerned with asking, “How did we get here?” but rather be interested in asking, “How can *we* get *there*?” These pragmatic resources can enhance our potential for inviting ourselves and others into the openness of dialogue.

#### *Some Concluding Remarks*

Clearly, there is more to be said about dialogue, creativity, and change. We hope that our reflections here open further possibilities for the future of dialogue as a means for social transformation. We have tried to articulate the tension created by our typical focus within dialogue on the ordinary, routinized, taken-for-granted aspects of interaction while largely ignoring the open potential within dialogue for transformation. Our own emphases, as we offer them here, remind us that dialogue is a joint performance wherein participants are responsive to each other and to their environment. Such responsivity renders dialogue unusual and unexpected. Yet, as we have tried to point out, entering into dialogue so as to invite the unexpected requires preparation. It requires us to give up our desire to explain the present by pointing to the past. It requires us to replace our abstract positions with our lived stories – the richly textured, relational scenarios we engage in with others. It requires us to listen for, to provide the space for, and to invite difference – for ourselves and for our dialogic partners. This

unusual aspect of dialogue, we believe, opens possibilities for creativity and change.

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