

guests. Neighbors suddenly appeared with food, offering it simply because they had heard of the event and wished to contribute. At the dinner, Dana recounted, each person from oldest to youngest was given a chance to speak, to say what was happening in their lives, to share their accomplishments. All were fully *seen* by the attending crowd, drawn out of themselves. I will never forget her conclusion: "This is the secret to health!" In a setting like this, every person can be fully received, realize they belong, has a chance to voice what he or she is doing. This is the same part of the world featured in a popular yogurt commercial on television that implied people here live to a very ripe old age because of the yogurt in their diet. I have since wondered whether it was rituals of this sort, rather than the yogurt, that made the difference!

This unselfconscious capacity for conversation cannot be achieved simply by declaring it so or seeking to reinvent a lost society. For we have largely lost the ability to simply talk and think. Today we often see talking together as a "waste of time" if we do not have a specific objective. Under pressure, our conversation fails us. So while this ability to converse may be interesting to hear about, most of the time we simply cannot re-create it, especially in professional settings, where the norms all seem designed to prevent any kind of genuine contact.

Using dialogic practices, we need to see how conversation can evolve with groups of people, and finally extend to much larger, more complex settings like organizations and communities. The principles that underlie all these levels are the same. It is a method, or theory, that, once learned and incorporated into our conversations, must be dropped completely so that we can live and speak naturally again.

P A R T I I

BUILDING CAPACITY

FOR NEW BEHAVIOR

When you hear a word like *dialogue*, you probably think of conversations with others. But strange as it may sound, dialogue begins with yourself. In fact, all great practices always begin with the individual, no matter how many people one eventually touches. The saying "Physician, heal thyself" stems from long tradition that saw the deep connection between the individual and the wider world with which the healer interacts. This same tradition applies to dialogue. To be effective, we must first ask ourselves, How successful am I at listening to and speaking with *myself*?

The four practices named in Chapter 1, listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing, are the key building blocks to accomplishing this task. This part explores each of these, providing you with ways you might both understand and develop them within yourself.

DEFINING A PRACTICE

A "practice" is an activity that you do repeatedly to help you to bring about a particular experience. Yoga, playing the scales in music, the particular sequence for asking questions when taking a medical history, all have deliberate design and intention that, when used well, produce a defined result: expansion of awareness,

musical accuracy, or vital information to aid in a diagnosis. You cannot tell a medical student how to sense the story behind a person's presenting medical difficulties, so that he can swiftly perceive the underlying causes. But you can give him the scaffolding that leads him to discover this deeper understanding for himself.

A practice is usually theory based, meaning it derives from deep principles that have been developed over time. In this sense it is not a recipe so much as a meditation: It requires constant repetition, over years, with the understanding that one will always be learning. A practice, finally, usually arises in the context of a community: groups of people establishing a tradition for accessing this knowledge. The community reinforces the necessity of the practice, supporting continuous reflection and improvement. Often the most senior members of the community guide the newer members in developing their understanding.

The practices I recommend for dialogue are not fully developed in the same way that some of the others mentioned here are. After all, yoga and the healing arts have been under conscious development for several thousand years. I believe dialogue, to be effective in groups and in larger social settings, requires a similar kind of development, a set of practices that can help us to understand it and let it blossom.

Taken together, the dialogue practices I propose here create a sense of wholeness in conversation. When you express them together, you experience balance, resilience, strength, life. When one or more are absent, conversations are less whole, less effective—they feel dead. The idea here is that wholeness is reflected in a certain set of *capacities for action* and that these can be articulated and brought forth by individuals, groups, organizations, and larger social communities. The practices provide a way to anchor these in yourself.

As you will see, they also work together and underscore the principles of participation, coherence, awareness, and unfolding. The practices described in the following chapters are each underscored by a principle that flows from the invisible architecture for dialogue. These deeper principles inform the way you can use each of the practices described here. So beneath the practice of listening is the principle of participation; behind respecting is the principle of coherence, behind suspending, the principle of awareness, and behind voicing, the principle of unfolding. In this part I will discuss these practices and show you how to develop them within yourself.

But we cannot stop there. If we are conscious only of ourselves, we will be ineffective in groups. Dialogue requires that we learn to think together with others. The four individual practices can also be applied in groups of all sizes. Group level practices draw directly on the individual practices but expand to take into account a wider frame and broader sense of the dynamics of interactions among people.

F O U R

Listening

The heart of dialogue is a simple but profound capacity to listen. Listening requires we not only hear the words, but also embrace, accept, and gradually let go of our own inner clamoring. As we explore it, we discover that listening is an expansive activity. It gives us a way to perceive more directly the ways we participate in the world around us.

This means listening not only to others but also to ourselves and our own reactions. Recently a manager in a program I was leading told me, "You know, I have always prepared myself to speak. But I have never prepared myself to listen." This is, I have found, a common condition. For listening, a subject

we often take for granted, is actually very hard to do, and we are rarely prepared for it. Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher, put the challenge this way:

I do not 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.¹

To listen is to develop an inner silence. This is not a familiar habit for most of us. Emerson once joked that ninety-five percent of what goes on in our minds is none of our business! We often pay great attention to what goes on in us, when what is actually required is a kind of disciplined self-forgetting. This does not have to be difficult. It is within the reach of each of us.

To do this you do not have to retreat to a monastery or to be converted to some new belief. You do, though, have to do some deliberate work to cultivate settings inside yourself and with others—where it is *possible* to listen. In other words, you must create a space in which listening can occur.

The ways we have learned to listen, to impose or apply meaning to the world, are very much a function of our mental models, of what we hold in our minds as truths. But the physical

functioning of our ears, and how they differ from other senses, can shed light on how we can learn to "make sense" in new ways.

THE SENSE OF HEARING

The sense of hearing is ever present. You cannot turn it off; there is no switch. You can close your eyes. You can become less sensitive to or even limit your sense of touch, or taste, or smell. But unless you are deaf (or becoming deaf), you cannot stop yourself from hearing without external aid.

In her book *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman says that hearing's job is:

partly spatial. A gently swishing field of grain that seems to surround one in an earthly whisper doesn't have the urgency of a panther growling behind and to the right. Sounds have to be located in space, identified by type, intensity, and other features. There is a geographical quality to listening.²

Our hearing puts us on the map. It balances us. Our sense of balance is intimately tied to our hearing; both come from the same source within our bodies. We listen in a way that tells us about the dimensionality of our world. Hearing is *auditory*, of course, relating to sound. The word *auditory* and *oral* have the same roots as the word *audience* and *auditorium*. Their most ancient root means "to place perception." When we listen, we place our perceptions.

Our culture, though, is dominated by sight. We see thousands of images flashed across our minds in an hour of television or the Internet. The result of this external bombardment of visual impressions is that we tend now to think in these ways. In the Western world we have begun to be habituated to this

quick pace, and are impatient with other rhythms. But seeing and listening are very different.

The substance of seeing is light. Light moves at a far more rapid pace than sound: 186,000 miles per second as opposed to 1,100 feet per second. To listen, in other words, you must *slow down* and operate at the speed of sound rather than at the speed of light.

The eye seems to perceive at a superficial level, at the level of reflected light.³ While the eye sees at the surface, the ear tends to penetrate below the surface. In his book *Nada Brohmn: The World Is Sound: Music and the Landscape of Consciousness*, Joachim-Ernst Berendt points out that the ear is the only sense that fuses an ability to measure with an ability to judge. We can discern different colors, but we can give a precise *number* to different sounds. Our eyes do not let us perceive with this kind of precision. An unmusical person can recognize an octave and, perhaps once instructed, a quality of tone, that is a C or an F-sharp. Berendt points out that there are few "acoustical illusions"—something sounding like something that in fact it is not—while there are many optical illusions. The ears do not lie. The sense of hearing gives us a remarkable connection with the invisible, underlying order of things. Through our ears we gain access to vibration, which underlies everything around us. The sense of tone and music in another's voice gives us an enormous amount of information about that person, about their stance toward life, about their intentions.

To listen well, we must attend both to the words and the silence between the words. I once held a dialogue retreat in Amsterdam with a group of consultants, managers, and civic leaders. On the first day, people were quite frustrated and contentious: Some found the conversation going too slowly, others felt there seemed to be no coherent theme. People developed many different opinions about what was happening and what ought to happen. The afternoon of the second day I opened the proceedings by simply asking people to reflect on the day's

events. To people's surprise, there was a profound silence. The silence filled the room like a rest between the notes. The silence seemed to take us in, bring us alive, evoking a profound state of listening. In that state all one's words feel inadequate, almost an imposition. Slowly people began to put their thoughts into words. Many later reported that like a jazz ensemble playing together, they felt they had to improvise, that all of their previous ideas seemed out of place. They tried to speak in a way that matched the intensity of the silence.

LISTENING AND THE PRINCIPLE OF PARTICIPATION

Our capacity to listen puts us in contact with the wider dimensions of the world in which we live. It lets us connect to it. Listening can open in us a door, a greater sense of participation in the world. I see listening, properly understood and developed, as an immediate gateway that can connect us with the much-touted but much-misunderstood notion that we live in a "participative universe," one of the four key principles that underlie the approach to dialogue proposed in this book.

The principle of participation builds upon the realization that individuals are active participants in the living world, a part of nature as well as observers of it. At the heart of the matter here is the idea that human beings participate intimately in their worlds and are not separate from them.

Ideas like these fly directly in the face of what science has told us about the world over the last three hundred years. We have had the belief that man was separate from nature and needed to control it. Descartes, in many ways the founder of modern rationalism, declared in the seventeenth century that there was an absolute split between thinking man and the world he observes. Today, what we

call "real" are the things we can quantify and measure objectively—views stemming directly from Descartes and the canon of modern science that grew from it—"specific location." This idea is simply that if you cannot find a precise measurement and location for something, it does not really exist.

There is clearly validity to this perspective at the physical level of things. But it gets more problematic as we move into thoughts and feelings. Science now has attempted to help us "locate" our thoughts by conducting brain scans; but as I indicated earlier, this tells us only about the external surface, not the interior contours of our thought.

The principle of participation that lies behind the practice of listening is well demonstrated by a hologram. A hologram is a three-dimensional image created by the interference pattern of two interacting laser beams. This interference pattern is captured on photographic film or a holographic plate. When a laser is directed at this special plate, it produces a three-dimensional reproduction of the image that was recorded.

All the information contained on the plate is enfolded into every part of the plate. For instance, if you were to break this plate up into smaller pieces and shine the laser through it, you would still see the whole image. As the pieces of the plate get smaller, the image becomes dimmer and more diffuse as well; there is less information on it. The density of information on the original plate made the image bright and clear. But every piece of the holographic plate contains the whole image. Similarly, as David Bohm argued, information about the whole of the universe is "enfolded," or contained, in each part.

To get a sense of how this might work, consider the experience of listening to music.⁴ Music acts in a slightly different way. Music, too, is experienced as a living whole. Though any one note may be discerned individually, it is held in the context of reverberations of the notes that came before and the antici-

pation of those that will follow. Each part of the music contains information about the whole piece. If we heard one note at a time, we would not tend to think of this as music. Bohm suggests that the universe itself is like this: Each part is enfolded into every other part. There is a surface-level order that has only a relative independence, like the individual notes of a piece of music. Everything is interconnected.

We are part of a much larger universe in ways that may continue to surprise us. Henri Bortoft tells us in his book *The Wholeness of Nature* that the night sky is also enfolded in each aspect of it:

We see this nighttime world by means of the light "carrying" the stars to us, which means that this vast expanse of sky must all be present in the light which passes through the small hole of the pupil into the eye. Furthermore, other observers in different locations can see the same expanse of night sky. Hence we can say that the stars seen in the heavens are all present in the light which is at any eye-point. The totality is contained in each small region of space, and when we use optical instruments like a telescope, we simply reclaim more of that light.⁵

A telescope focuses the light, making the holographic image brighter and stronger.

Language Is Holographic

Our language is also holographic. Each word contains not only the wider context of paragraph and sentence but the deeper context of our lives. When you first interact with someone, their initial words carry the entire hologram of their consciousness to you. The full meaning might not be completely clear to

you initially, since the information may not be focused enough—like seeing without a telescope, not enough light has been captured to let you see what is actually there. But when you know someone for a long time, or have a close relationship, the richness of the information changes. I can remember hearing my mother say my name at different times while I was growing up and knowing that just that one word could mean anything from “I want you to do something for me” to “You are in big trouble.” Most of the time I knew precisely which it was. These meanings, and many others, were enfolded in me and her and influenced how we both interacted.

Every part of ourselves is enfolded in every part of our conversations whether we realize it or not. But we cannot always tell the extent of our participation. There is not enough information to produce a clear and coherent understanding. We lack a focusing process—a way of containing the enormity in a small space. Dialogue is the focusing mechanism for the hologram of conversation. Through it we can expand our awareness to include ever-greater wholeness. Dialogue is a process that can allow us to become aware of our participation in a much wider whole. Like the telescope, it focuses the available light more completely so that we can see more.

The Earth Listens to Us

The mechanistic view of life that we have inherited tells us that the world is an objectively existing, separate place. We hear the sounds of the world. But this view of things is quite insular. In preparing ourselves for dialogue, it is helpful to recall that there was a time when human beings were much more intimately involved in the landscape, where our very language mimicked and was developed from the music of the earth itself. We not only listen to the earth; it listens to us.

Writer David Abram, in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, outlines the ways in which human language was deeply rooted in the physical sounds of the earth—the birds, the forces of weather, the rivers. To the indigenous peoples, the earth itself spoke. Oral cultures had a deep attunement with the nuances of their physical surroundings. It was the arrival of written language, according to Abram, that gradually marked a shift away from human beings feeling that they are participants with the earth, toward a more objective stance.

When someone claims that his indigenous ancestors had a more intimate connection with the earth than he does, this may seem quaint to modern, sophisticated ears. The idea that the earth “spoke” to the indigenous peoples may fit into one’s picture of an earlier animistic culture—one in which all of nature was endowed with conscious life. But most would not see it as anything more than that—a belief—that science has long since disproved.

But notice: When you read these words, it is very likely that you are hearing them inside your head as you go along. The words of our written language *speak to us*. We endow them with voices. They come alive. We enter into a strange, almost dream-like state with the words. Says Abram,

Our senses are now coupled, synaesthetically, to these printed shapes as profoundly as they were once wedded to cedar trees, ravens, and the moon. As the hills and the bending grasses once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so these written letters and words now speak to us.⁶

Animism is not dead; it *has just changed form*. It is in fact a fundamental human capacity—our ability to let our senses fuse with the world around us and so enable us to participate directly in it.

Through a detailed process that Abram traces in his book, this capacity has gradually been redirected toward written language.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

Learning to listen begins with recognizing how you are listening now. Generally, we are not all that conscious of how we listen. You can begin to listen by listening first to yourself and to your own reactions. Ask yourself, What do I feel here? or How does this feel? Try to identify what you feel more carefully and directly. Beginning with the perception of your own feelings connects you to your heart and to the heart of your experience. To learn to be present, we must learn to notice what we are feeling now.

Be Aware of Thought

As you begin to listen, you can also begin to notice what you are thinking. Focus your thoughts on someone you care about for a moment. Almost immediately, you may find that you are flooded with thoughts and images of that person. You may also experience a range of feelings. Your memory plays a very powerful force in how you perceive those around you.

To listen is to realize that much of our reaction to others comes from memory; it is stored reaction, not fresh response at all. Listening from my predispositions in this way is *listening from the "net" of thought* that I cast on a particular situation.⁷

Let me give you an analogy. England has been inhabited continuously for many centuries. A large number of people occupy a relatively small geographic space. As a result, almost every corner, every piece of land, is settled, cultivated, occupied. There is a certain density to people's memories about this place, and you can feel this as you travel in the country. It is not a land of wide-open spaces that have yet to be explored fully. Here you get the sense that

everything has been explored very fully for a very long time. It is rich as a result. Every stone in every building has many stories it could tell compared to, say, a stone in rural Nevada.

The landscape of our listening works in similar ways. We know well and have explored fully certain parts of our inner lives. Listening in this mode, from the net of our thought, from this rich background, may make us feel quite clever. After all, we seem to know a lot about what is being said, have things to say, reactions to express, opinions to voice. But just as a densely populated area like England can feel claustrophobic, this kind of listening is not always very expansive. This net of our thought, however finely woven, is still based on memory. It is limited, even unintelligent, in the sense that it cannot respond in a new way to what is happening. The word *intelligence* is quite revealing on this score. It comes from two Latin roots, *inter* and *legere*, which mean "to gather between." Intelligence, then, is the active, fresh capacity to think, to gather between already existing categories. In other words, we can learn to listen either from the net we already have, or to the spaces between.

"Be aware of thought" was a piece of advice Krishnamurti often offered. He would ask someone, "Why do you walk that way?" And they might respond, "Because I do." He would retort, "Well, that's your thought." To be aware of thought is to learn to watch how our thoughts dictate to us much of our personal and collective experience. Much of what human beings do happens simply by virtue of our agreements that it should. By agreement alone—not because there is any particular reason, some countries drive on the left and others on the right, for instance. What do you do that is simply your thought?

Stick to the Facts

A common joke about someone who has an overinflated sense of himself is "He is a legend in his own mind." We need to learn to

listen with a great deal more humility. This typically means literally coming down to earth and connecting what we think with the experiences that lead us to think it. While this may seem obvious and easy, in practice people continually jump to conclusions, speak abstractly, and fail to notice they are doing so. A new discipline of listening to what is said can make a real change.

This is not always so easy to do. We are often unaware of the extent to which we assume what we see is what is there. A colleague of mine tells the story of a man who went one day to pick up his high-school-age daughter and another girl. As he drove up to the place he was to meet her, he saw her leaning on a black BMW sedan. Standing nearby were two young men, both with pagers and cell phones. One had a ponytail. This man's immediate thought: drug dealers! But he noticed how he had begun to judge them, and stopped himself. He went up and started to talk to them, and found that they were volunteer firemen, that the BMW was used and much older than he had realized, and that the young men were very gentle, very bright, and capable.

As they were driving away, his daughter's friend burst into tears. When asked what was wrong, she said, "I wish my parents would talk to me the way you just talked to them."⁸

The Ladder of Inference

We need to distinguish between the inferences we make about experience and the experience itself. One powerful tool for helping to do this is called the Ladder of Inference. This tool, developed by Chris Argyris, a professor at Harvard, is a simple model of how we think.⁹ It suggests that what we experience we process and create inferences about our experience, typically at lightning speed, without noticing that we are doing so. What we do not notice principally is the difference between a direct experience and our assessment of it.

For instance, if I called a meeting for two and someone

showed up at two-thirty, several people might think to themselves, "She's late." Someone else might further think that she did not care about the meeting. A third person might say, "She is always late on Thursdays." All of this happens in milliseconds: The assessments are made, the reactions are in, it all seems obvious and true. But is it? In what ways?

We draw conclusions like these all the time. Our conclusions have the simple reasoning that "this is the way it is." But I have found that these sorts of conclusions are never fully accurate.

For instance, in the story above, what is the directly observable data? Many people would say it is the fact that she was late. But is late really directly observable data?

Can you see, touch, smell, hear, or feel "late"? "Well, yes," a student once replied to this question. "The clock says two-thirty, the meeting started at two, she's late! What's the discussion about?" he exploded. Gradually, we explored the idea that "late" is an inference drawn from the fact of the clock striking two-thirty, a foot crossing the threshold, a prior statement about the meeting time, and an agreement to meet. People sometimes hear this as doubting whether this person is late. I am sure she was, *by the standards of our community*. But that is a long way from saying that is an observable fact. It may be a valid judgment.

Why is this important? One of the ways we sustain the culture of thinking alone is that we form conclusions and then do not test them, treating our initial inferences as facts. We wall ourselves off, in other words, from the roots of our own thinking. And when we are invested in an opinion, we tend to seek evidence that we are right and avoid evidence that we are wrong.

Errors of this sort can have devastating consequences. Some thirty years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, several academics brought together the Russian, Cuban, and American leaders in charge at the time of the crisis to reflect on the causes of this near-devastating conflict. A series of three meetings were held in

Boston, Moscow, and Havana. Included on the Russian side were Ambassador Dobrynin, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, the son of Nikita Khrushchev, and the Soviet generals responsible for installing the missiles in Cuba. American participants included Robert McNamara, Ted Sorenson and other members of Kennedy's inner circle, and for the Cubans, Fidel Castro himself. Simply getting these leaders together was an important step toward greater dialogue about international conflict. Their meetings revealed some important facts not previously understood or well known, and shed light on the disastrous consequences of drawing conclusions.

One important component of this crisis was the fact that the Cubans installed missiles without notice ninety miles off the coast of the United States. A U-2 spy plane caught sight of these and noted one striking fact: There was no camouflage on them. It seemed to some in Kennedy's inner circle that the Soviets were aggressively moving forward, not even bothering to camouflage their missile installations.

Thirty years later another side to the story emerged. As it turns out, the Russian army, which installed the missiles, was accustomed to installing missiles in Russia, where there was no need for camouflage. Like any good military bureaucracy, when ordered to install missiles in Cuba, they did it the way they normally did: without camouflage. Some three decades later in conversation, the Russian general in charge of the installation made it quite clear that there was no ulterior intent in leaving the camouflage off. What was taken by some as clear evidence of aggressive intent was essentially based on an erroneous presumption.¹⁰

We jump to conclusions all the time. Many of us assume that this is a normal way of conducting business: to set things up in oppositional fashion, draw sharp conclusions, and let the chips fall where they may. What we miss in this is the systemic way in which we may err. We do not remain in touch with our

experience but draw abstract inferences from it. And then we assume our inferences *are* the reality, just as Kennedy's advisers did. But we can learn to listen in a way that challenges this process, that distinguishes all the stories people make up about a set of facts from the facts themselves.

We can notice how we progress from our conclusions about subjects to assumptions we construct about them and finally to beliefs that we adopt—views that, once they take hold, tend to remain relatively stable and hard to change. These beliefs then reinforce what we select out to see. We can easily become locked into a way of thinking that is hard to change.

Listening this way can help us resolve differences. We can become more attentive to the "data" that leads us to make our conclusions, and so open a much different quality of inquiry.

For example, a company with which I am familiar was in the process of making the transition from an entrepreneurial firm to a more mature, managed firm. Previously, things had been quite informal. Now, by contrast, the corporate setup included a human resource manager, more policies, and structure. One event triggered a crisis. The human resource manager sent out a memo asking that everyone make deliberate requests for vacation time. (Previously people had just informed one or two of their coworkers and left.) One manager took a look at this memo and thought the spirit of the place was being destroyed. "Oh, no, we're becoming more like IBM," he thought to himself. Another manager saw the memo and thought, "Finally, structure!" People saw two very different meanings in the same event, or data.

The managers locked horns over this, and the memo became a symbol of the very problem that the company now faced. As we looked more closely, however, we discovered something interesting: The first person had reacted not to the memo but to the way the memo arrived on his desk—unannounced, as if it were a done deal. The second person saw the memo—a copy

of which had also been sent to his mailbox—and was delighted. These differences show that people extract different meanings out of the same data, or they can see entirely different data. In this case the same memo evoked very different responses.

What happens when people bring controversial things to your attention? Do you have reactions that seem utterly justified to you but may not in fact be based on experience that you can point to directly? When we make claims about the inevitability of our choice of interpretations, we run the risk of closing off others and limiting ourselves. The ladder of inference invites us to see the difference between what we think and what leads us to think it.

Follow the Disturbance

Slowing down our thinking and listening in this way is not so easy, in part because the landscape is not neutral. Some of the memories we have are painful. They move very swiftly and grab us by the scruff of the neck. By the time we realize their influence, we are caught.

Often when we listen to others we may discover that we are *listening from disturbance*; in other words, we are listening from an emotional memory rather than from the present moment. If I say something to you that you do not like, you may be triggered by what I say, perhaps intensely so. Your future listening will be colored for a while by this. If I call you an idiot, it will be very hard for you not to react to this, to defend yourself against it. The simple word *idiot* conjures up for many a host of reactive memories—most of them probably quite painful, perhaps even to the point where one cannot hear anything but disturbed feelings and thoughts.

Both the steelworkers and the managers I worked with were deeply skeptical, for instance, that they could have a conversation together that would make any difference. After all, some forty

years of hostility was not likely to change quickly. To everyone's surprise, we had a very energizing first session. People spoke openly and freely. They began to relax. This led the plant president to speak more directly than he would have otherwise. He later said that he thought to himself, We are really getting somewhere now, so I should really tell them the truth. He told the group that man-hours per ton needed to be reduced. It was, in his mind, a simple statement of the manufacturing and competitive facts. Competitors' plants were more efficient.

The union heard this comment as a betrayal. They were being told, in code, they thought, that some of the people in the plant would lose their jobs. One way to reduce man-hours per ton of steel is to have fewer men making the steel! They "went ballistic" and reacted, much as they always had. One steelworker fired a remark right at the president:

I feel pissed off and pissed on. I was very optimistic at the first meeting. I haven't heard anything new [today], except a lot of criticism . . . I was real optimistic . . . all I heard today is bullshit.

They listened to the conversation from this point of disturbance for the next few hours, triggered and reactive and unable to hear anything new. Disturbance of this sort usually leads people to listen in a way that is self-confirming: They look for evidence that they are right and that others are wrong.

But there is another step you can take in listening. You can start to see what you have been missing. You can "follow the disturbance"—you can learn to listen for the sources of the difficulty, whether it is in you or others.

Instead of looking for evidence that confirms your point of view, you can look for what *disconfirms* it, what challenges it. Gradually, this happened with the steelworkers. The managers be-

gan to understand the betrayal that the steelworkers felt by the comment about worked hours per ton. The steelworkers realized they had imposed their history on the managers—blaming this generation for things the previous managers had done. The managers, in turn, began to see the extent of the frustration and pain that the steelworkers had known. This brought up its own exasperation:

How do you get by all the pain and all the patterns and all the hurt and all the mistrust that's built up over the years, that weren't necessarily created by anyone in this room specifically? I don't see us advancing to the next step unless we're able to do that, and it seems a monstrous job. I mean, I wouldn't have a clue. I sit here and hear what these guys are saying, and they've been hurt and abused. You hear some of the worst words that you can think of, and I'm saying to myself, How can we get beyond this? Realistically, can we get beyond this?

The asking of questions like this, impossible though it may seem, is an essential first step toward genuine change. Listening in this case becomes reflective: We begin to see how *others* are experiencing the world.

And then we make the most difficult step of all: We begin to connect what we do with what we say. Am I acting consistently, I might ask, with what I profess? In what ways am I behaving? In what ways am I doing to others the very things I claim they should not do?

We learn to listen for the gaps. *No one* acts consistently with their words. Some of us are more aware than others of how large this gap is, how systematic it is. Listening to our own actions, we begin to see what we have been doing to others. The result with the steelworkers was impressive. As the union pres-

ident, walking out of the first gathering, said: "That was the first time we got together where no one got whapped!"

Listen Without Resistance

This is an approach developed by two colleagues, Sarita Chawla and Ken Murphy. It relates directly to the challenge of listening beyond the net of our thought, and even the disturbances we may feel. We can learn to listen in a way that recognizes and then puts aside the resistances and reactions that we feel to what someone else is saying. This may be better put as "listen *while noticing* resistance." The challenge here is to become conscious of the ways in which we project our opinions about others onto them, how we color or distort what is said without realizing it. If you watch, you may find that there is an almost irrepressible tape in your mind that plays, especially when you feel a reaction to another. It is in these moments that you face the challenge of simply watching what comes up. Watch, keeping in mind the phrase "Now this, and now this" as each opinion is heard.

Stand Still

Perhaps the simplest and most potent practice for listening is simply to be still. By being still in ourselves, quieting the inner chatter of our minds, we can open up to a way of being present and listening that cuts through everything. Think of this as calming the surface of the waters of our experience so that we can see below to the depths. As we learn to lift ourselves out of the net of thought, the conclusions we jump to, the disturbances of our heart and resistances of our mind, this surface sea of reactions can calm down. We discover that there is another world of possibility for listening. We can listen *from silence* within ourselves.

This practice is captured quite beautifully in a poem by

David Wagoner. He conveys advice given by a Native American elder to a child who might find himself lost in the woods. He is told to "stand still," that "the trees ahead and the bushes beside you are not lost."

To stand still is to come into contact with the wholeness that pervades everything, that is already here. It is to touch the aliveness of the universe. To be lost is to lose contact with this wholeness.

There are many traditions worldwide that encourage people to cultivate inner silence. Often this is done as an externally imposed renunciation of the world to achieve some end. But joyous release of inner noise is not the same as suppression of oneself! Silence is a state of being into which one can let go.

Listening from silence means listening for and receiving the meanings that well up from deep within us. These creative pulses may move in us, but often we are too busy to pay attention. Stand still.

QUESTIONS

- What am I feeling in my body?
- How does this feel?
- How is this affecting people?
- What are the different voices trying to convey?
- What voices are marginalized here?

PRACTICES

- Be aware of thought.
- Stick to the facts.
- Follow the disturbance.

- Listen without resistance.
- Stand still.

THE ART OF LISTENING TOGETHER

Listening is usually considered singular activity. But in dialogue one discovers a further dimension of listening: the ability not only to listen, but to *listen together* as a part of a larger whole.

This entails making a fundamental shift of perspective. It means taking into account not only what things look like from one's own perspective, but how they look and feel from the perspective of the whole web of relationships among the people concerned. This requires more than empathy, which might imply trying to put oneself in the other person's shoes while also sustaining one's own angle. Instead, we can enlarge our sense of ourselves—our sense of identity—so that we become what a colleague of mine once termed "an advocate for the whole."¹¹

When people listen together, dialogue can sometimes evoke a deep and unusual experience of common understanding and communion. It is unusual because people come to realize that they do not need to know every detail of the personal histories of the individuals they are speaking with to have the feeling of profound connection. This is what is meant by a term coined by the early Christian communities at the beginning of the first millennium: *koinonia*. It means "impersonal fellowship." In this state, people connect very intimately with one another, but not intrusively.

To listen together is to do what people in Grand Junction gradually learned to do during the health-care dialogue project we conducted there: Make the transition from listening alone, as separate individuals and organizations, to listening as if one were a part of a larger whole.

Our initial meeting eventually brought this out very clearly. For many years people in the community had acted as if there were no underlying differences among them, thinking all the while to themselves that the intensity of their rivalry was troubling and seemingly out of place for health-care professionals. In our early sessions, people began to explore this contradiction and the impact this was having on their effectiveness.

For instance, an inquiry into the issue of physician contracting revealed the intensity of competition for good doctors and the economic dependencies the different hospitals all had on one another. However, they came to realize that their values for human compassion and care were at risk.

Subsequent dialogue sessions carried the conversation further. What began as a fragmented debate about who was to blame for the rivalry and paranoia in the system eventually became an honest inquiry into the personal sources of the trouble. One doctor, for instance, began to realize the degree to which he had contributed to the pain many were beginning to acknowledge.

I am struck by the last couple of comments, how absolutely schizophrenic my behavior is—when it comes to care of a patient and my care of you. When I deal with patients, there's a [belief] that's hammered into you, that you never resolve a set of symptoms on the level of diagnosis. To jump to a diagnosis is a disaster. A chest pain can be a spider bite, an ulcer, pneumonia, or a heart attack. The minute I call it one or the other, I ignore the other possibilities. I don't deal with patients and medicine that way, yet I do deal with all of you that way.

His words encouraged people to step beyond thinking only about themselves and led them to inquire into what made

sense for everyone. Becoming an advocate for the whole means listening not just for what *I* have done, but together, for the meaning that might have an impact on everyone.

The Grand Junction health-care inquiry, motivated at first, at least in part, by the hope of reducing the damaging effects of competition, evolved into an exploration of the nature of well-being itself, and what role the community was to play in establishing and sustaining health. Below the "seamless system" were a lot of overworked and pressured people sacrificed for the cause of good health.

It gradually became clear, for instance, that people held the belief that they were the last best hope for health for the community. But this responsibility was also one that few believed they could really uphold. Instead of discussing this, they did their best to assuage their sense of inadequacy. One way they did this was to purchase expensive technical equipment. The request for a more efficient collaboration came from the realization that costs were spiraling out of control and the federal government and/or the changing face of competition toward more managed care would greatly limit them. The group eventually began to meet together regularly to talk about the how to resolve technology needs in a way that suited everyone in the community, something that would never have been done jointly prior to the dialogue project there.

PRACTICES FOR CATALYZING LISTENING IN GROUPS

Listen for the Dilemmas

One of the reasons people struggle to say what they think is that they are in a dilemma. No matter what they say, they fear they'll be in trouble. For instance, note this conversation that took place among several leaders of business units in a consumer goods firm

as they sought to design a companywide strategy, while at the same time taking into account their cross-divisional differences. All of these people had said on the one hand that they wanted the best outcome for the company overall. But they also privately believed that their own division's efforts must not be jeopardized, and they harbored views that others were out to take over, or take advantage of the situation. Listen as Fred, the leader of the task force, and Joe, one of the major players, interact (this is drawn from actual conversations and interviews).¹²

Fred's Unspoken Thoughts

FRED: I know that Joe is going to hold out. Maybe I can flush him out a little.

FRED: Whatever that means.

FRED: This guy is holding out. There is no way he will agree to anything we propose here if it runs counter to what he was already planning.

FRED: This is hopeless.

What Fred and Joe Said

FRED: Is everyone willing to commit to the outcomes of this task force?

JOE: I am very much committed to outcomes here. I would be willing to commit at any option, but only if I felt there was some good in it.

FRED: But you are not in favor of having us sell directly to the customers.

JOE: As you know, we have built our entire business around creating and then selling through powerful channels [the suppliers to the end users]. Going direct would completely change our business. We cannot just go do that, and we will not.

FRED: Okay, let's try to get something defined that will meet all our needs.

Both Joe and Fred left this part of the conversation with the feeling that the same old impasse was likely to be sustained.

In situations like these, people typically fail to hear what the other actually intends. Often there is a fair degree of "noise" in the communication. Joe says he is open but also sends a mixed message. We are left guessing what he means. Fred pushes, but without inquiring into why Joe seems stuck.

We might look instead at what seems to have been the underlying dilemma in Joe's thinking. To oppose Fred in the way that he did *could* look like pure politics, which is what Fred attributes it to. But most people do not think to themselves, I will play this situation for what it is worth. Instead, they look out for their own agenda. If we asked ourselves What is Joe's underlying dilemma? we might consider that it was to protect the integrity of his own strategy as well as that of the whole group's efforts. Joe's dilemma is that to do anything else is to get him in trouble, either with the task force or with his boss. By digging in like this, he is announcing that he is in a kind of trap, though he does not know how to say this. If Joe does not take care of his agenda, he may lose. If he does, he believes he may also lose in the eyes of Fred and others. He is trapped, and no one is offering him an alternative.

By listening for and underscoring the underlying dilemma, you can learn a great deal about a situation and free people to own up both to what they intended and the impact they actually had. For instance, I asked Joe to tell us what he was concerned about, realizing he was not trying to be difficult or critical. He eventually admitted his dilemma and began joking about how he might have to steal other divisions' business. This eventually began to free things up.

In a conversation that you wish to turn into a dialogue, your own and the group's ability to be sensitive to—and name—the dilemmas people face can open doors.

THE DARK SIDE OF LISTENING

For all the wonderful qualities of listening and the fully engaged participation that can be evoked through it, there is also an underside to this practice. As mentioned before, we tend to think in ways that lead us away from wholeness and into fragmentation. Again, fragmented listening is *abstraction*, which literally means "extracting meaning from something." A part of me can listen and be fully participative while another part can abstract and fail to attend to what I hear—or attend only selectively. It is only by becoming aware of those parts of ourselves that *fail to listen*, even as we try hard to listen well, that we may break through to a new experience.

A part of me can, in other words, remain high on the ladder of inference, and so have perceptions not grounded in directly observable experience. Instead of listening without resistance, I listen but resist what I hear, selecting what I want and discounting what I do not want to hear. When we have an ax to grind with someone, we tend to hear the grinding of the axes, not what the other person has to say.

Instead of allowing a quality of stillness to pervade our listening, it is easy to be in motion, seeking to "grasp" or "take in" what is being said. Our listening becomes more intellectual. We are "here," others are "there." We try to "get" what they say. Our thought is doing the interpreting. We are separate from the person, and then the "transmission" model of listening prevails. Have I received from them what I needed to perceive rather than what they were actually saying? Listening in this sense objectifies the other person. It is possible to listen in this way, but we end up treating the other person as an object to manage not a being with whom we can create new possibilities.

What are we to do? The challenge is to become aware of

the fact that especially when we try hard to listen, we will often still have a part of us actively failing to do so. The key is to simply become aware of this, to make conscious just what we are doing. Awareness is curative; as we stand still, our listening can open us into frontiers we did not realize were there.¹³

R e s p e c t i n g

Most of the time we see only single facets of people, flashes of light that come to us in this instance or that, revealing qualities we like and perhaps some we do not. We often see ourselves in this same way: the gradual revelation, sometimes over years, of a many-sided gem.

To be able to see a person as a whole being, we must learn another central element in the practice of dialogue: respect. Respect is not a passive act. To respect someone is look for the springs that feed the pool of their experience. The word comes from the Latin *respecere*, which means "to look again." Its most ancient roots mean "to observe." It involves a sense of honor-

ing or deferring to someone. Where once we saw one aspect of a person, we look again and realize how much of them we had missed. This second look can let us take in more fully the fact that here before me is a living, breathing being.

At its core, the act of respect invites us to see others as *legitimate*. We may not like what they do or say or think, but we cannot deny their legitimacy as beings.¹ In Zulu, a South African language, the word *Sawu bona* is spoken when people greet one another and when they depart. It means "I see you." To the Zulus, being seen has more meaning than in Western cultures. It means that the person is in some real way brought more fully into existence by virtue of the fact that they are seen. As in most indigenous cultures, the memory of a sense of participation in nature has not been completely lost. To say "I see you" is to sustain you in this world.

A year into the steelworkers' and management dialogue, we met a significant crisis that revealed the power of respect. The union executive board was by now quite experienced with dialogue. Its members, on the other hand, were fearful that in learning dialogue they had lost their ability to attack management, and said so in those terms.

This came out in stark relief during discussions about the renewal of the labor contract between union and management. Historically, each such negotiation was intense for both sides. This time was particularly tough. The Kansas City, Missouri, plant in which we held the dialogues was a division of Armco, a large steel producer. Armco had decided that this division, which specialized in grinding media and steel wire, was incompatible with pursuing the stainless steel and other specialty markets in which it wished to compete, and put the division up for sale. It also made it clear that if the division was not sold within a set time, they would close it down and sell off the assets.

Shortly afterward a venture capital firm put up money to

help management buy itself out. Now suddenly the new contract was no longer only a labor agreement, but a symbol of the future of the plant. It had become clear that without a new contract, the deal for the buyout would collapse. The union's agreement became central to the future of the entire business.

That pressure took both management and union by surprise. People suddenly stopped seeing the negotiations as an opportunity to prove out the goodwill that had developed between union and management over the past year, but as a two-edged political battle. Management sought, under pressure from the venture capitalists, to have a new "business discipline," which really meant ensuring they would recover their initial investment from the company as quickly as possible. They also wanted to impose a rigorous new contract, asking for a wage freeze and greater employee responsibility for health benefits. No one calculated the impact of these moves on the container that held the union-management dialogue process.

Certain factions within the union felt themselves under similar pressure, and sought to find ways to capitalize on this situation to promote their own bid for leadership and show that the union could flex its muscles in its first serious vote under a new company.

All this combined to cause the union to turn down management's initial contract after an anxious and rushed vote. Now the pressure was on; the banks threatened to withdraw from the deal unless the union voted in favor of the contract. Management was caught because they could not tell union people what was behind the contract—how it meant the guarantee of their future and a likely substantial increase in wages over the next five years—for fear of being accused of unfair bargaining tactics.

In the midst of this we held a dialogue to talk through the situation. Many people predicted that the union would boycott the meeting. Instead, some forty people from both union and management came. In this meeting, the skills of a year of dia-

logue came to life in one of the most revealing truth-telling sessions I have ever seen.

Managers revealed their despair over the possibility of losing the opportunity to create a new company. Union people admitted they wanted the deal to fail simply because of their intense anger at the company for decades of perceived abuse. They also expressed their frustration with the process and their feelings of being caught between prohibitions about union-management negotiation and their deep desire to have others in the plant understand things in a new way. There were long silences and challenging exchanges in the meeting as people confronted years of difficult relations and betrayal.

Nonetheless, the polarization between management and union, perhaps now at its height, was held in a climate of respect that was quite astonishing. No one tried to convince anyone else of his position. There was no tone of accusation exchanged between managers and labor leaders. People tried to understand what was happening without resorting to blame. They asked themselves: Where had the unexpected dissatisfaction come from? Why were people in the plant angry and reactive? What had stopped people from seeing that there was a bigger picture here, while the promise of a new plant and new future hung in the balance? What had each party done that had kept them from seeing their mutual interdependence?

Later, people asked union officials to comment on their view of their differences with management. One union man said that he was troubled by the oversimplifications that everyone seemed to want to make—that either management or union was right. "It is just not that simple. It is striking to see how few people understand this now, and yet how clear it is to those of us who have been through this process."

This was an example of a dialogic inquiry in action, one in which deep polarizations and different positions were respected

even under the enormous pressures of politics and emotional turmoil. After a year of sustained practice, this group of people, who had begun a pilot experiment to explore the value and impact of dialogue, found themselves applying it directly to their lives and their future.

This situation also revealed some of the limits of the work we had done. The delicacy of bringing about a new ecology, while profound to those who had participated, had not been successfully shared more widely. No one could say in a few words what had taken months to come to understand—especially given the politicized climate. The container was not yet large enough to hold the intensity of people who had had no contact at all in the process. This was to be a lesson and a question for the future: How could we bring new understanding more widely without necessarily requiring everyone to have an identical experience?

The union, after much late-night lobbying, eventually voted to approve the contract and the company, renamed GS Technologies, became independent. But the ratifying of the contract and the process of change in company ownership left some deep scars on people who somehow expected miraculous change and were not prepared for another cycle of investment and sacrifice.

RESPECT MEANS HONORING BOUNDARIES

Respect also means honoring people's boundaries to the point of protecting them. If you respect someone, you do not intrude. At the same time, if you respect someone, you do not withhold yourself or distance yourself from them. I have heard many people claim that they were respecting someone by leaving them alone, when in fact they were simply distancing themselves from something they did not want to deal with.

When we respect someone, we accept that they have things

to teach us. As this comment from a steelworker suggests, both sides felt this strongly at the steel mill in Kansas City:

For the first time in my life here, I've seen management truly recognize that I was an individual; I was a need to this business; the union was a need to this business. The president of our union was a need to this business. I've seen the people in the union recognize that we need a plant president; we need the people in management doing what they're doing to make it all come together, rather than trying to get everything we can from one another, by lying and deceiving one another.

Discovering the depth of respect that managers and steelworkers, for example, could have for one another beneath all the political noise that had persisted for years was one of the single most transforming experiences for these people, one that they talk about to this day.

In the prisons where he runs weekly dialogues, Peter Garrett describes a culture that epitomizes the extremes of respect and disrespect. Prisoners' individual boundaries are continuously monitored and managed by others: the times for sleeping, eating, and recreation are all controlled by formal and stiff rules. These prisons use what they call a dispersal system to keep prisoners from becoming too powerful in any one setting. With less than one hour's notice, any prisoner can be moved to any one of the other prisons in the dispersal system, and often are. Prisoners who have taken part in dialogues in the prison each week for a year might one week simply not show up and never be heard from again.

And yet through the dialogue process a very different climate is evoked. In these settings a level of mutual respect and maturity is created that affects the people who visit it. The warden of one of the prisons, who had been skeptical of the dia-

logue work, visited one session. The prisoners had prepared themselves the week before for this visit. Initially, several of the prisoners wanted to confront the warden about prison conditions—to make him feel their anger. They talked this through to the point where, by the time he visited the session, they did not acknowledge his presence in any particular or special way. He simply joined the conversation like any other participant. The warden was impressed. Afterward, he commented: "This has been therapeutic for me personally." The climate of the dialogue had transformed a traditional authority relationship into one where there was much more mutual respect.

In his book *A Different Drummer* Scott Peck tells the story of a monastery that had fallen on difficult times. The order was dying. Only five monks were left, and were all over seventy years old. The abbot of the monastery, desperate for help, thought to speak to a rabbi who occasionally visited a hut near the monastery. The rabbi and the abbot commiserated about their lives and the loss of spirit that seemed to pervade everyone's experience. As the abbot left, the rabbi said: "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you." The abbot conveyed the rabbi's words to the monks. As they thought about his words, they began to consider which one the rabbi meant. They were suddenly faced with a profound choice: to take seriously the legitimacy and presence of the people now in their midst, or to discount these words. They looked at each other, thinking: Is it him? or him? or is it me? Gradually, they began to treat themselves and one another, says Peck, with "extraordinary respect," on the chance that one of them might be the Messiah. People around the monastery sensed a change, and slowly began coming again to visit. Soon the monastery was thriving again.

Treating the people around us with extraordinary respect means seeing them for the potential that they carry within them. I have heard another version of this story expressed as a

practice: Treat the person next to you as a teacher. What is it that they have to teach you that you do not now know? Listening to them in this way, you discover things that might surprise you. This does not mean being blind to gaps in what they might say and what they do, nor does it mean being overly slavish in pointing out their faults.

Respect is, in this sense, looking for what is highest and best in a person and treating them as a mystery that you can never fully comprehend. They are a part of the whole, and, in a very particular sense, a part of us.

THE PRINCIPLE OF COHERENCE

There is an already existing wholeness to life. The universe is an undivided whole, whether we are able to perceive that or not. Embracing this principle in dialogue, I am more likely to look not for what needs to change, but what Humberto Maturana might say needs to be "conserved," that is, how the existing system works now and what aspects of it I wish to sustain. By looking for the coherence in difficult situations, I am able, when I am with people with whom I disagree, to pay attention to the underlying forces that have brought me and the others I am with to this pass. I learn to take seriously the possibility that what is happening is unfolding from a common source. In dialogue, I cultivate this in practice by developing my capacity for *respect*—for myself, for others, for difference, and for those in particular who oppose what I have to say.

Much of the science of the past few hundred years has consisted of competing proposals defining the notion of order. Each of them has had a kind of underlying coherence, though some support an image of the coherence as a set of interlocking parts, while others, such as the ideas now emerging in quantum

physics, propose a coherence based on a very different sense of order—one where the world is not composed of separate and distinct parts that all interact according to a set of universal laws but, rather, is an “undivided whole.”

The notion that the world consists of separate parts emerged from Descartes, who believed we could understand nature by thinking of it as a giant clock, a machine set in motion by God and then left to run. Descartes’s ideas have led directly to the idea that the world is a machine. His image has been woven into the fabric of industrialization so that most of us take it to be real, not a metaphor—a defining feature of our world.

A hundred years later, the physics of Isaac Newton gave us a set of laws with which to predict the motion of all physical matter, from atoms to stars. Reality, from the view of Newtonian physics, consists of discrete particles whose forces could be measured precisely. As Danah Zohar has pointed out, this perspective has pervaded social and scientific thinking, leading to a preoccupation with mechanism, prediction, and control.²

Much social thinking has flowed directly from Newton’s insights. Hobbes, Adam Smith, Freud, and even Karl Marx all posulated a set of universal laws that, if they were fully understood, would reveal the patterns and forces of human and social behavior. In organizations this thinking culminated in the idea of Frederick Taylor, the father of scientific management.³ Taylor’s ideas were drawn directly from Newton’s mechanics. He divided jobs into pieces, microscopically assessing each movement and motion, leading to a modern revolution in the organization of work. The concept of the organization as a machine was the culmination of this way of thinking. And despite much talk to the contrary, functional, hierarchical organizations still dominate the organizational landscape. While the machine view has a kind of coherence to it, it is also a fragmentary perspective: It divides things up in order to understand them.

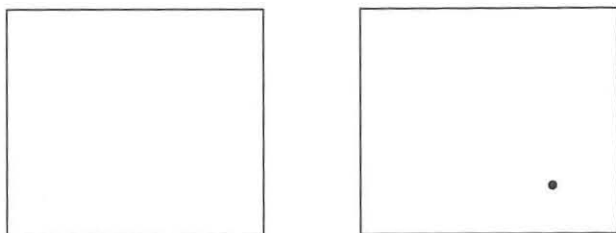
Physics today proposes a very different set of ideas. It holds that the observer and the observed *cannot* be separated. The new physics proposes that human beings are intimately part of the overall fabric of life. It suggests that the wholeness of a situation is the objective thing that directly influences behavior rather than of immutable laws that always apply everywhere, as the Newtonian theorists told us.

In one famous experiment, known as the double-slit experiment, physics showed this new notion of coherence quite powerfully. In the experiment, a beam of electrons is shot through two parallel slits, both of which are open, to a wall behind. The electrons pass through each slit and create an interference pattern on the back wall. As they do this, the electrons show a wave-like behavior. But when one slit is closed, something interesting happens: The light going through the other slit no longer spreads out. It acts like a group of particles, going through the slit and hitting the back wall in a focused pattern.

The electrons change their behavior, at times acting like waves, at other times acting like particles. According to classical or mechanistic physics, the patterns on the back wall should not change simply because one slit opens or closes. This is because the laws of mechanistic physics require that the two slits have some kind of physical interaction to influence each other. In fact, they do not. But the patterns change anyway. The underlying meaning of this experiment has been a source of considerable debate. But electrons are now no longer viewed as separately existing particles; they must somehow be considered parts of a larger whole.

Architect Christopher Alexander suggests that the electrons in the experiment behave differently according to the “structure of wholeness” in which they move. He maintains that this concept of wholeness need not seem a vague thing, but instead reveals great precision. According to Alexander, the two aspects of the double-

slit experiment have different powers of “wholeness”; they confine space differently, and create different impacts as a result. Take a simple example proposed by Alexander: a blank page and a dot placed on an otherwise blank page:



The dot on the page constrains the space of the page. The blank page is a “whole,” actually it has many subwholes all blended together. The page with the dot suddenly now has several distinct subwholes: rectangles caught by the dot on the right side and underneath, and so on. The wholeness of the page has been modified.⁴

According to Alexander, the coherence we see is the relationship among the parts. We have been conditioned to see only parts, and to assume that the parts comprise the whole. But the holistic view suggests that the whole precedes the parts. Alexander endeavors to teach his architectural students to see the relative wholeness of any structure. The principle of coherence in dialogue teaches us to experience the wholeness or lack thereof in conversation.

Perceiving coherence in dialogue involves perceiving relative degrees of wholeness within conversations. Typically, most people do not know how to listen to the whole flow of a conversation; we select out pieces of it, aspects that matter to us or perhaps that irritate us. But we can learn to listen to the whole, and participate within the whole. This requires that we step back from the details, soften our focus, and hear what is going on in the overall space of the conversation. One steelworker in

a dialogue described this well. Listening in the midst of a dialogue, he said, is like having “my ear attached to a funnel, and everything that everyone is saying is going in, and at some point—maybe in a few days—boom—I will understand it all.”

Peter Garrett, who developed the process of dialogue in England with David Bohm, provides a vivid illustration of how to look for coherence in dialogue. In the dialogues he conducts in maximum security prisons in England, he works with some of the most serious offenders—serial murderers, serial rapists, felons of all sorts. I once asked him what the most important thing he had learned from his work. He said simply, “Inquiry and violence cannot coexist.” He was speaking here of more than a set of conversational skills for inquiry; he was referring to the stance of deep respect and inclusion that must lie behind inquiry for it to have any real effect. And behind his stance is something else: an appreciation of the principle of coherence. By exploring what actually lies behind the sometimes horrendous actions of violent offenders, one finds a coherent story—a set of factors that almost inevitably seem to lead to the difficulties one can observe. These factors lie below the surface; they are often not readily apparent, but they can be found. Says Garrett: “The impulse behind intentions is pure, even though the intention may be distorted and the impact not what was intended. Inquiring deeply enough to reach the original impulse will always reveal wholesomeness. This provides the confidence to enter the loudest confrontation and the darkest territory without fear that it will get forever worse.”⁵

PRACTICES FOR RESPECT

The core questions to help us *learn to respect* involve asking ourselves, How does what I am seeing and hearing here fit in some

larger whole? How does this belong? What must be sustained here that others are missing? What is happening right now? The following are a set of practices designed to assist you to explore these questions.

Stand at the Hub

To respect someone, we must first remove our attention from the whirl of activities all around us—as I said earlier, to stand still. This gives us perspective, something essential for coming to the point of accepting someone as they are.

Picture a spinning wheel. The hub seems to be moving slowly compared with the outer rim. In fact, at the very center it seems as if it is not moving at all. To the extent that our attention and focus is placed on the “outer rim,” the daily, nonstop flow of activities and actions and events, everything will seem like it is moving too fast. If we can begin to shift our awareness to the “hub”—which might be thought of as the essence of things—we may find we have in fact more time than we imagined. Our ability to *perceive*, in other words, is a present-moment competence. It diminishes as we think about the past or worry about the future.

Centering

I have worked for some years now with a variety of practices that explore the physical dimensions of learning. Most of these derive from the martial arts. Almost all of them take seriously the notion that effectiveness means becoming centered—not fixed and rigid but fluid, like a branch in a tree. Rooted, but flexible.

Centering is the practice of finding the center of gravity, a point of balance, of quietness in yourself. This is not a placid state but a focused one. The following is an exercise in getting

centered. To do this, you need to get ready for it. Take a minute to prepare yourself. Ready? Here we go . . .

Now, think for a moment about the shift you made inside yourself as you read the previous paragraph. What did you do to get ready? *That* is getting centered.⁶ Before you walk into a big meeting, a high school dance, an important exam, the big presentation: Do you prepare yourself? Whatever you do represents your intuitive way of moving yourself in the direction of being grounded and centered.

There are two simple exercises two aikido masters, Richard Moon and Chris Thorsen, have developed that you might try with another person. First, stand up and have her push you very gently on one of your shoulders. Do you flop around like a wet noodle, or resist them? Focus your attention on your impulse in response. Then come to a more centered position in yourself, and see if you can let your center of gravity drop down to the point where you feel like you have literally grown roots. Have her push you again. This time, do not resist, but don't cave in either. Absorb the energy of her hand and remain intact. A little practice with this will bring out your ability to center more and more.

Second, sit quietly in a chair, feet flat on the ground, with nothing on your lap. Take a deep breath and another. Let yourself come to rest, breathing quietly, letting go of any tensions that you might feel, any thoughts that are floating through your mind. Call this state in which you now find yourself Level One. Now let yourself relax, and drop down to Level Three, several notches deeper in yourself. Notice your breathing. Then, after giving yourself another minute, drop to Level Five, even further down, even more quiet in yourself. Take a moment to reflect. What did you find? What did you like about this? Many people discover that they get calmer, more alert, more sensitive. These are some additional starting points for centering.⁷

Aikido is a martial art that seems particularly well suited to dialogue because it invites practitioners to become aware of and blend with the energies of one's "assailants," whether they are hostile individuals or challenging circumstances. One acts from this place of centeredness, constantly inquiring into circumstances, constantly alert to sustaining one's center. This is something that all practitioners continuously do. As Richard Moon points out, centering is an ongoing practice. It is not, he says, that the great masters of aikido never lose their center. They only discover it sooner and recover it faster than novices.

Listen as If It Were All in Me

Respect also implies taking seriously the fact that there is an underlying coherence in our world, and that we fit into this scene. We are participants, not observers. Accepting this means taking responsibility for ourselves. In this state, it is no longer possible simply to blame others for what happens. Our fingerprints are all over our world. The adage coined by Walt Kelly in a Pogo cartoon applies here: "We have met the enemy and it is us."

I was first introduced to a way to discover more about the underlying coherence of my world by Cliff Barry, who outlines a set of listening practices where one deliberately applies different lenses for listening. One lens that can reduce the temptation to blame and increase respect is to listen to others from the vantage point that says, "This, too, is *in me*." Whatever the behavior we hear in another, whatever struggle we see in them, we can choose to look for how these same dynamics operate in *ourselves*. We may be tempted to say that a given behavior is all "theirs"—I do not have anything like that in me! Maybe so. But the courage to accept it as not only "out there," but also "in here," enables us to engage in the world in a very different way. If you can perceive it, it is also in you, you are bringing it forth

whether you realize it or not. To maintain that it is separate from you is to fall prey to a pathology of thought: that there is a world independent of how you think about it and participate in it. The art of thinking together invites us to a different level of thought, to notice that for us to perceive something, it must somehow be in us, or it literally would not connect to anything in us. Even something that we feel is an enemy is connected to an image or perception in *us* of that enemy.

One of the more powerful, though challenging, practices for dialogue comes from using the disturbances one feels with others as a means of including those factors and providing them with space to be who and what they are. This is a kind of internal magic that involves no effort to "fix others," or tell them to change. It requires only a willingness to meet the difficulty outside of oneself *in oneself*.

In a dialogue I recently led, for example, a bright, very well educated Malaysian man spoke of his concerns about the utter lack of cultural awareness he found in management education programs led by North Americans. He held himself out, not as a participant himself, but as an expert commentator. His comments reflected the stance of an observer of the process: "This is all well and good, but you need to take into account how practical people would respond to what you are saying here. In particular, you need to take seriously the cultural differences between what is being said and how it would play out in other parts of the world. Have you thought about that?" His points were valid, I thought, and I acknowledged them, though I also noted how he distanced himself from the process.

As the dialogue deepened, others in the group began to speak more openly, talking about the questions they personally struggled with. The silences grew longer and more still. One woman expressed her deep appreciation of the silence and her sense of relief from having to have something to say all the time. She said this slowly, taking her time; her actions echoed the feeling she stated.

Immediately afterward, this same Malaysian gentleman began to speak again, very quickly, this time about the historical differences among the Asian Tiger economies. I could not figure out how to connect what he was saying to what had just been said. He was, it seemed, giving us an erudite lecture on cultural differences: "Now, you have to go back a while to really understand how this works," he began. "These cultural differences really matter. For instance, in . . ." He said that some cultures could feel left out of the kinds of experiences that people voiced here, that people would never express such things. He spoke as an expert, distancing himself from everyone, setting himself out as the one who understood what was happening and implying that others did not understand as well as he.

People's irritation with this man was palpable. The tension in the group began to rise. He was subtly accusing everyone of something and acting as if he were not guilty of it as well. The contrast in the comments was stark.

I then got an insight into what was happening. I suddenly saw that he was speaking about himself and his own sense of isolation in this group. He was not only lecturing us about others, he was making a plea to be understood. I could have pointed this out right then and there to the group; but instead, I listened to try to find these same feelings in myself: times when I have felt isolated, left out, excluded. I waited until I actually connected with these feelings in myself. When I did, I felt a kind of "click" that I had; suddenly what he was saying was no longer just him, it was me too. I then spoke, acknowledging this feeling and respecting him for raising it in the group. I asked others to reflect on ways that they, too, might have felt excluded somewhere. I pointed out my observation of his comments and asked him to start to speak from the first person, from his own experience. He did that for the first time all week. The tension in the room abated. People thanked him for speaking about his experience.

To listen in this way is to take seriously that what goes on around us exists not merely in others, it is also—however hard it is to see at the time—within us all as well. We get a clue about this most directly when we find ourselves irritated with others. We then know for sure that there is something in *us* too; it is in some ways already under our skin, or else we would not be feeling the disturbance! The challenge is to come to the point of acknowledging it.

Put differently, one of the secrets to the dialogic way of being is the willingness to forgive that which we see in another and come to the point where we can accept it as being in us. This implies coming to a place of respect both for others and for ourselves.

Make It Strange

Another practice for building respect involves highlighting what seems different or impossible to understand. We are often compelled to try to indicate to someone that we understand them. I want to propose a practice of generating respect that asks you to do the opposite.

Instead of assuming you understand someone, try this: *Make them strange*. In other words, look at them as if they were strange, incomprehensible, different from you, unique. Try to not assimilate them into a category you already have worked out. "Making strange" means seeing the other as Other, not at all like you. With this as a starting point, you have a way to begin to understand them in a new way.

One of the exercises that Edgar Schein uses in a course on change at MIT is what he calls the "empathy walk." I recommend you try this. Think of someone who is as different from you as you can imagine. Find such a person, spend up to two hours with him, and then write something about your experience. The students we have asked to try this have sought out a

wide variety of people: homeless people, prostitutes, drug dealers, their own classmates, people with very different racial or religious backgrounds. Almost always the students discover—sometimes to their amazement—that they have many things in common with these people. They sometimes spend much more than two hours together. They look for what is strange and different and discover what is held in common.

RESPECTING

QUESTIONS

What is at risk in this situation?

Dominant preoccupation?

Conversation be drawn to include those who might be impacted?

PRACTICES

Stand at the hub

Centering

Listen as if it were all me

Making strange

Respect in Groups

Often differences that emerge in a conversation ruffle feathers and disturb things to the point where people can no longer act as if all were in agreement. The effort to cover up and regain a polite veneer often can be enormous. But to enable a dialogue, a group of people must learn to do something different: to respect the polarizations that arise without making any effort to “fix” them.

In a dialogue session several colleagues and I conducted in Red Lodge, Montana, a woman told us of her intense anger toward her husband. He had left her recently. But what incensed her most was that he had left her for a man. He had hidden from her for years the fact that he was gay. She said, “I know I am supposed to be tolerant. But this is just not right. There is something that is simply not right about these people.” As she finished, I looked around the room to see two women looking at each other, trying to restrain themselves. They had not said much up to this point. Trying to remain calm, one of them said: “I am sorry, but my partner and I cannot simply sit by while you say these things. Please tell me what makes you so sure you are right.” Her partner was the other woman. These two gay women were deeply hurt by the insinuation that there was something wrong with them.

Over the next few moments these three women said what they felt and thought, both about the original comment and about how it felt to be talking together now. No one else in the circle reacted to what they were saying or tried to correct or “help” them. They simply provided a quiet space of reflection. It eventually became clear that there were two very different points of view in the room and that neither required the other to change. What surprised everyone most was the fact that both views had been exposed quite openly, and yet no one had then come forward to negate the other. The three women sat after the session for some time talking energetically together. Later they reported back to the group that they had found the experience quite profound—they had not shifted their views, but they now had a sense of mutual respect and understanding. The content of their conversation didn’t matter as much as the feeling it generated.

PRACTICES FOR CATALYZING RESPECT IN GROUPS

Support the People who Challenge

Making deliberate space for people who have a different point of view is vital to learning to share in dialogue. Respectfully encouraging people to speak can bring about a balance in the conversational ecology that otherwise might not have occurred. This requires a willingness to hold the space open for inquiry once new perspectives come out.

This can seem a crazy move in a setting where people are angry or on the warpath. But someone must find a way to integrate these voices or they inevitably will interrupt and seek to destroy the gathering.

Learn to Hold Tension

One of the most challenging things a group can learn in a dialogue is to hold the tension that arises and *not react to it*. Typically, when faced with this kind of cross-current in the conversational ecology, people begin to "vote" on which person or perspective they feel is "right." This relieves the tension for them, but, ironically, intensifies it for the rest of the group, since this reduces the space in which a new understanding can emerge. One of the group competencies of dialogue is the capacity to sustain respect for all the perspectives that arise, long enough to inquire into them.

Related to this is the acceptance of the multiplicity of voices that we find within ourselves and in expression through others. A dialogue with a group of people can begin to be a mirror of the different things that go on inside everyone. As these

voices emerge, we can choose either to reject them or recognize that they may have some relevance and place "in here," in me. Whether we like to admit it or not, we all have many different voices in ourselves—some of which we have inherited from places we no longer recall, some of which we created for ourselves.

I have a friend who used to run a two-acre organic farm. He said he always grew enough for the insects *and* the people! Managing the tensions within ourselves is a bit like this. We make room for all the perspectives and voices without trying to get rid of any of it.

Holding tension means accepting without intensifying the deep divisions that we sometimes feel within ourselves.

THE DARK SIDE OF RESPECT

When we do not respect, we impose on others. For instance, in one dialogue session one man began to speak at length about Buddhism and how it connected to dialogue. A woman who was a professional facilitator apparently felt he was speaking in a way that was inappropriate and began to "facilitate" him. She felt the lecture the group had received from this participant was wrong. She stepped in to try to stop it. Ironically, in so doing she herself did what she was accusing the other of doing—lecturing him and the group on how best to behave. She shifted from being a participant to being an expert but did not have the permission of anyone to do this. This jolted the group, although at the time they did not know quite what to do. The woman had removed herself from the process and evidently had an angry tone to her words. Others began to get angry with her, claiming that she had no right to behave that way.

A wildfire of judgment erupted in the group. People

blurted out comments, charging each other with misdeeds, without reflecting either on the impact this had on others or why they thought it. Once the circle of respect was broken, people's interpretations of what was happening and what should have been happening, according to their particular internal model of "dialogue," came into conflict.

People began to advocate their point of view. Some felt that the "official" facilitator should intervene to stop the interaction. Others felt he should not. The person being "facilitated" was confused; the unofficial facilitator was fed up with what she felt was a lack of direction and so she stepped in, in part, she said later, to show people how things might be handled.

The projection of many different opinions and points of view all at the same time often evokes the opposite of respect. It brings out the experience of conversational *violence*. This is the shadow, the opposite, of respect. In these moments there is a breakdown of the kind of mutual respect people aspire to have.

The loss of respect manifests in a simple way: My assessment that what you are doing should not be happening. The source of the trouble lies in my frame: My belief causes me immediately to look for a way to change you, to help you to see the error of your ways. It causes me to avoid looking at my own behavior and how I might be contributing. People on the receiving end of this attitude experience violence—the imposition of a point of view with little or no understanding.

Remaining aware of those parts of us that *do not* respect others may be the most instructive thing we can do to help become aware of how to deepen our capacity for respect. As before, noticing the times when you seem to be doing the opposite of the practices listed above can be quite helpful. For instance, notice times when you are not standing at the hub of your world but are clearly revolving around the periphery of it,

perhaps feeling tossed around. This is very likely to be a moment when you will be unable to respect what others are saying and doing. When you are uncentered and therefore unaccepting of yourself and where you are standing, you are also unlikely to be able to do this for others. You might notice times when you are listening to someone and thinking, This is all about *them*. This has nothing to do with me. That moment might also be a clue to reflect more deeply on your own defenses. Finally, you might notice moments when you think you understand someone else well, when you believe there is nothing new to learn. The more confident you are about this, the more likely it is that you are not fully able to respect what is different about that person, or new in the situation, that you have not previously understood.

S u s p e n d i n g

When we listen to someone speak, we face a critical choice. If we begin to form an opinion we can do one of two things: we can choose to defend our view and resist theirs. First we can try to get the other person to understand and accept the “right” way to see things (ours!). We can look for evidence to support our view that they are mistaken, and discount evidence that may point to flaws in our own logic. This produces what one *New York Times* editorial writer called “serial monologues” rather than dialogue.

Or, we can learn to *suspend our opinion* and the certainty that lies behind it. Suspension means that we neither suppress what we think nor advocate it with unilateral conviction. Rather, we

display our thinking in a way that lets us and others see and understand it. We simply acknowledge and observe our thoughts and feelings as they arise without being compelled to act on them. This can release a tremendous amount of creative energy.

DEFINING SUSPENSION

To suspend is to change direction, to stop, step back, see things with new eyes. This is perhaps one of the deepest challenges human beings face—especially once they have staked out a position. It is difficult in part because we tend very quickly to identify what we say with who we are. We feel that when someone attacks our idea, they are attacking us. So to give up our idea is almost like committing a kind of suicide. But nonnegotiable positions are like rocks in the stream of dialogue: They dam it up. One of the central processes for enabling us to enter into dialogue is the practice of suspension, the art of loosening our grip and gaining perspective.

In one of our dialogues with workers and managers, a union leader said, “We need to suspend this word *union*. When you hear it you say ‘Ugh.’ When we hear it we say ‘Ahhh.’ Why is that?” This man had broken with the tradition of constantly defending his union and opposing management, probing more deeply into the underlying assumptions people held. The innocence and clarity of his question opened up a rich vein of conversation.

The word *suspend* comes from a Latin root *suspendere*, which means “to hang below.” But its most ancient root is the Indo-European (*s*)*pen*, which means “to draw, stretch, or spin.” From this root we get the words *spider* and *spinner*. To suspend something is to spin it out so that it can be seen, like a web between two beams in a barn.

The absence of suspension, as I have indicated earlier, is certainty. The word *certainty* comes from a root that means “to deter-

mine" or "to distinguish." It has come to mean a rigidity about the distinction we have made. Some ideas have absolute certainty or necessity attached to them—they carry a nonnegotiability to them. These "noble certainties" are part of everyone's experience and are one of the limits to dialogue. What are your "noble certainties"? What makes you so darned sure you are right? Only by asking such questions will you be able to practice suspension.

Access Your Ignorance

This points to yet another dimension of suspension, which I borrow from my colleague Edgar Schein at MIT: *Access your ignorance*. Most conversations are conducted by people who know what they think and why they think it. These people cannot get to dialogue. Dialogue is characterized by people who surprise themselves by what they say. They do not have all of their thoughts worked out in advance but are willing to be influenced by the conversation itself. They come with questions to which they do not yet have answers. And they do not demand answers of others.

I was once called in by a CEO to "diagnose" his organization. After a long series of interviews with people throughout his organization, I reported to him, "I've finally found the problem with the organization."

He was obviously excited by the news. "What is it?" he asked.

I took a deep breath. "It's you." And then I explained how everyone had looked to him for leadership but found him to be less genuine than they would have liked, and too enthusiastic about everything. He left no room for anyone to say what they thought, to challenge his views.

There was a moment of shocked silence before he asked me to go. But he kept thinking about what I had said. Later he described to me the internal transition that followed: "It took me a while to realize that this was in fact helpful news. In

telling me about my behavior, it was my *certainties* that you were talking about. I had missed many things because of what I was so certain of. This was news I hated to hear, but it really helped me start to look again."

To access your ignorance is to recognize and embrace things you do not already know. The range of possibilities before you opens dramatically. This can be scary. But fear can be a helpful rather than a hurtful element in suspension. It is like the feeling you get when you peer over a large cliff at the vast expanse around you. You may feel fear, but you also feel exhilaration at the new perspective. The willingness to engage in this can change your life.

NATURAL BRIDGE

Some years ago a friend of mine and I were traveling through Oregon, his native state. We decided to visit a place called Natural Bridge, an ancient intersection of water and rock formed by the flow of lava across a large river. The lava had covered the rock and forced the river underground for about three hundred yards. In places, the water would emerge in a series of natural Jacuzzis before disappearing again underground. My friend and I went up to one large round pool of flowing water and stood at the edge. I could tell he was thinking about jumping in for a swim. I said to him, "Let's wait and watch." We stepped back and had lunch. Later we walked back over to the spot. I had grabbed a stick to throw in the water. Slightly below this pool was another one about eight feet wide. The water flowed over the edge of the first pool and drained into the lower one. I could also see an underground hole in the rock connecting the two pools. I threw the stick in to see where it went. But just as I did this, my friend jumped in the pool. The stick got sucked downward and disappeared; it did not come out into the lower pool. Neither did my friend.

It is in moments like these that time stops. I began counting the seconds. I knew he was underwater, now under the rock. I was standing above, in the sunlight, thinking about my friend drowning below me. I began counting the seconds: "ten, eleven, twelve." But there was no sign of him. "Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two." At nearly two minutes I found myself fighting the thought of his picture in the newspaper obituary.

A few seconds later, and over a hundred yards away, I heard a splash and saw my friend emerge upright from the rock, alive and triumphant. He had been sucked down below, tried to get back to the pool above where the light was, and was gradually drawn into the darkness. He finally gave in and began to swim under the water. Ahead of him he saw nothing but blackness; behind him, the slowly dimming light. Suddenly off to his right he saw a small patch of light through the water, and he swam for it. It was a very narrow hole in the rock, just wide enough for him to slip out and through.

We were both relieved and shocked. We walked around without talking, not knowing what to say. Embracing death and life in a place where water flowed under the rock, we both had experienced a profound turning point: his beneath the rock, turning away from the light and letting go into the void, the blackness, which turned out to be a choice that saved his life. Mine above the rock, letting go of a dear friend—an encounter with death's wind, the shock of being able to do absolutely nothing.

This forever changed our friendship—changed the meaning of it for me and so changed our ways of being together. Suddenly we were in a kind of immediacy of aliveness and connection with life in a way that had not been so before. This sense has never left us, now some twenty years later. This experience forced us to *suspend* our habitual ways of being together. It put everything on hold; but more important, it gave us perspective, insight, and ultimately understanding.

FROZEN GREASE AND FROZEN FRAMES

We may not all be faced with life-threatening situations that require us to step back and see things from another perspective. But opportunities to suspend our certainties and remain fluid present themselves every day, moments in which we can practice suspension.

Once while I was driving at sixty miles an hour with a friend on a road through the middle of some Wisconsin cornfields, racing to catch a plane, the hood of the car we were in suddenly popped up and caught on the safety hook. It seemed as if it might fly open at any moment. We stopped and tried to slam the hood down, but it would not stay shut, constantly popping up and catching. The danger seemed apparent: Driving along the road, the hood could suddenly fly completely open, breaking the windshield and causing an accident. We were stuck. Nothing we did seemed to work. All I could see was a broken hood, inconvenience and malfunction, and the chance of missing my plane. I tried bending the latch slightly so that the hook could catch the edge. No luck.

We managed to find a mechanic. He stared at the hood for a moment and then walked back to his shop. I thought he would come back with a wrench and try to bend the mechanism back into place. He came back with a can of lubricant, sprayed it on the hood lock, and pressed the hood down. It shut and stayed closed. "It's been real cold over the past few days," he said. "The grease froze."

The same situation produced very different interpretations for both of us. He saw temperature effects where I saw mechanism. He saw a simple solution where I saw the possibility of having to dismantle the entire latch and replace it. My interpretation kept me stuck. His freed us to get on our way. His experience enabled him to see this situation from a different point of view. This is the "muscle" of suspension in action.

Staked out in a point of view, we remain frozen, unable to

move. The first step in suspension is to step back. Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, conjurs this when he talks about the parable of Jesus drawing in the sand. Jesus tried in this story to divert people's attention, buying time for perceptions to clear, for new options to be seen:

Debate doesn't really change things. It gets you bogged down. If you can address or reopen the subject with something new, something from a different angle, then there is some hope. In Northern Ireland, for example, a new metaphor for the way we are positioned, a new language, would create a new possibility. I'm convinced of that. So when I invoke Jesus writing in the sand, it's as an example of this kind of diverting newness. He does something that takes the eyes away from the obsession of the moment. It's a bit like a magical dance. People are suddenly gazing at something else and pausing for a moment.¹

Often the last thing we wish to do when the stakes are high is to pause, to look with new eyes, to refocus. Our obsessions blind us. To stand above the pool of your own perceived possibilities is the art of suspension.

HOLDING THE LIGHTNING

Suspending your assumptions in this way can force you to handle a great deal of intensity. David Bohm once told the story of how he, while attending a dialogue in Sweden, found himself forming a criticism in his mind about another person in the room. He wanted to interrupt this criticism, but to do so in a way that could let him see its nature and structure. He did not want to just let it go on unchecked, nor did he wish to suppress

it. As he watched his own reactions, he said he felt like a bolt of lightning was moving in his body: Containing and reflecting on the energy of criticism brought up great intensity in him. To suspend criticism is to observe its motion, to take back into yourself the force you might otherwise put off onto others around you. If you neither suppress this energy, disavowing it (what, me critical?), nor express it (those idiots deserve what they get), you are left with having to hold it in yourself and explore its meaning and dimensions. This can be quite uncomfortable, which may be why it is rarely done. But it can lead to enormous insight, for instance, about the pervasive habits of judgment we can impose on others. The very act of inquiring into one's reactions in this way produces a change: To observe one's own thoughts and feelings is to bring into them a perspective and attention that can transform them.

REFLECTION IN ACTION

The kind of thinking I am speaking about here is something we do *while* acting. Educator Donald Schön, in his renowned series of books on professional effectiveness, once described this capacity as "reflection-in-action": the ability to see what is happening as it is happening. Schön spent much of his career arguing that this kind of ability was not only an intimate part of what we call spontaneity, but necessary to it. Reflecting in this way means we are able to free ourselves from habitual ways of responding and stay fresh and alive.²

Seeing one's own thought in this way is a little like opening the mind's factory door and looking at the processes inside. Typically, we are aware only of the products of this factory, our thoughts. We are not all that aware of how our thoughts are produced. Suspension is the act of looking at these thoughts.

TYPES OF SUSPENSION

In dialogue we can divide suspension into two types, one of which leads to the other. *Suspension I* is to disclose, to make available for yourself and others the contents of your consciousness so you may see what is going on. Many psychological techniques, psychodrama being perhaps one of the most prominent, help people to externalize their thoughts and the "voices" in their minds so that they may see themselves more clearly. To do this, you must locate, name, and then display for others what you are aware of, as Bohm did by describing his experience to his colleague in the example above.³

An opportunity for this kind of suspension arose during a critical dialogue with the steelworkers. The division in which these people worked was in the process of being sold; suddenly the labor contract between union and management had become an important political bargaining chip in the process of the sale. Usually all labor contracts are negotiated through the international union, who sent representatives and tried to get roughly equal terms for all contracts. Typically, the corporate leadership would also attempt to dictate terms to the plant and division leadership.

In this rare case, both plant and union leadership were concerned that the contract would become a political football, and that the corporate leadership and the international union would not comprehend the kind of progress being made in the dialogues. The union president told management, "I personally want to do a contract with the people in this room, not [others]. We know what we need." And the plant president agreed:

Well, if you talk about ideal negotiations, ideally it would be the people in the room who know really what is best. The union people know what is best for the membership here and we think we know what is best for the plant.

This led the union members to react with concern: Did this mean the international union was going to be cut out of the picture? But unlike other conversations, where management and union would polarize and propose only competing ideas, this time the union people openly admitted the potential for misinterpretation their new-found alignment with management might stir. Said one union man:

I think that was a fear out in the mill, to do it locally, without international help. You know, we're sitting here talking and someone's gonna misinterpret this that you're gonna negotiate the contract without the international, that's what it sounds like. And if it gets down to the mill, we'll cover for you for a while, but we can't hold 'em off for that long. [laughter]

Here a union man offered a perspective, both on the current conversation and on its likely impact beyond this group. This forced everyone to examine the matter. They were suspending the idea of negotiating without the international's imposition, an enormously hot issue, considering its pros and cons.

It had not always been possible to do this. In one of the first meetings I asked if the union people would like to review the list of managers proposed for the dialogue, and if the managers would like to do the same. People reacted almost violently: "We don't tell them what to do and they don't tell us what to do." The "brotherhood" of the union also meant they would take a closed-rank approach to most problems. Controversial matters were always to be raised outside the hearing of management. But here, in this dialogue, union people were speaking about ways their own actions could be taken, and doing that in front of managers.

There is another level to the practice of suspension (*suspension II*). In this we become aware of the processes that generate that thought.

To suspend in this way is to move upstream—to make ourselves aware that our thoughts do not simply arise from nowhere but have an origin of a very particular and deterministic sort.

For example, I might become aware of anger that I have toward someone. I can become aware that I am “thinking anger”—that is, thoughts come to my mind like, They have no right to treat me this way. How dare she? Who does she think she is? and so on. As I look at this, I begin to see that all of this is in fact simply a stream of thought that is being triggered by a set of impulses within me. In a very real sense, I am *causing* this line of thoughts to flow. “They” are not doing anything to me. It is emerging strictly from within me, in particular from my inner ecology and the memories I have about these experiences.

By observing my thought processes in this way, I transform them. This is one of the central transformational vehicles of dialogue.

THE PRINCIPLE OF AWARENESS

Underlying the practice of suspension is the principle of awareness. To be aware is to allow our attention to broaden and expand, to include more and more of our immediate experience. The central idea here is that we are capable of coming to understand what is happening as it is happening. The mechanistic notion of the universe, which does not see human beings as participants in the whole, discounts knowledge that can be consciously gained by a first-person observer. But in a worldview emerging within cognitive science, philosophy, and the humanities, first-person knowledge is highly relevant. This view holds all aspects of experience have an “interpretive” element. It says, in other words, that human beings experience the world through the structures of their consciousness, not “directly.”

BIOLOGY AND THE AWARE UNIVERSE

For instance, two South American biologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, have led a frontal assault on this “representative” theory of cognition that most of us still believe—that there is a world “out there,” and that our brain makes pictures in our minds of that world. This leads us to listen with a “transmission” theory of communication in mind. This is the “if I speak loud enough they’ll understand what I’m saying” school of communication. Listening in this world means turning up the volume.

Maturana and Varela argue that our biology of cognition simply does not work this way. They say it is more complex and somewhat more strange sounding: “Based on what I hear, and how my personal biology and past history work, this is the world of experience I choose for the moment to live within.” They say we do not simply observe the “world,” we actively create our experience of it through the structure of our nervous system and consciousness combined with stimuli from the environment. The world is very much already in us in the sense that we have thousands of years of evolution guiding and determining how our nervous systems work. But we also have our entire social history, which is also in us and which also deeply influences our perception. The world participates in us, and we in the world.

These ideas are particularly relevant to cultivating awareness in dialogue because through them we may come to the realization that we cannot simply “make” change happen as if we were separate from the thing we seek to change. It may be that only by entering into a dialogic relationship with the situation that we seek to change may we discover the ways in which the existing structures affect us and might evolve. This implies, practically speaking, that you would not seek to “manage” an organization but, rather, cultivate the conditions under which it might evolve and change.

Rather than seeking the “levers” for change, or the “tools” to “drive” change—images that flow from a mechanistic worldview—you would seek to inquire into the way the system works, the principles that guide it, and the underlying coherence within it.

PROPRIOCEPTION

In dialogue we can apply these insights in a very particular way: cultivating an awareness of the nature of the ecology of our thought. Try this: Raise your arm for a moment. Shut your eyes and move your arm around. You can tell where it is at any moment. This is because you have the capacity for proprioception, a self-perception at the physical level. Proprioception is a long word that simply means “self-perception.”

David Bohm tells the story of a woman who lost this capacity. She was suddenly awakened one night by an attacker. The more she fought off the attack, the more intense it became. Eventually, she struggled over to turn the light on, and when she did, she realized that she was striking herself with one hand and fending her arm off with the other. She had lost her unconscious awareness of her arm.

Bohm goes on to suggest that we have lost proprioception, or self-awareness, at the level of our *thought*. The idea here is that just as we have an impulse to move our arm, we also have impulses to move our minds. While we are aware of the impulse at a physical level, we usually are not so aware of what might lie behind our mental processes. In fact it seems to us that our thoughts just “appear.” I am suggesting that this is not so. Suspension can give us access, enabling us to perceive the impulses that lie behind everyday thought.

To get a sense of this, try reflecting for a moment about a time when you really wanted something. It does not matter what it was. Now ask yourself, if you actually got what you

wanted, what did that give you? Go beyond the immediate answers. Ask, what else did this fulfill; or if you did not get it, what was left empty in you? Then ask, why did you want it? These can be challenging questions to explore but can put you in touch with the underlying impulse, which may not be all that obviously connected to the object of your desire.

PRACTICES FOR SUSPENSION

Learning to suspend, which is at the heart of the process of dialogue, is a discipline in itself. There are a number of practices that can help you learn how to suspend. All of them begin by inviting us to stop and ask: How is this working? What is going on here? How does this problem work? Suspension asks us to put on hold the temptation to fix, correct, or problem-solve what we see so that we can begin to *inquire into* what we observe. For those of us addicted to problem solving, this can be a challenging skill to develop.

The following are a set of practices and principles to develop suspension.

Suspend Certainty

Suspension requires that we relax our grip on certainty. As we see that our thought is just a medium by which we can understand the world, we realize that thoughts are in a very real sense “things.” They have a particular shape, size, depth, and density. Normally, we experience our thoughts as inner maps of outer experiences. But they are also deeply a part of what we see and how we see it. Like film director Kurosawa’s famous film *Rashomon*, in which a man is robbed and the story is told several times over from the perspectives of the different characters—there are many different views of reality.

How do you let go of the conviction you have about something? You might begin by asking yourself, Why are you so damned sure about this? What is leading you to hold on to it so intensely? What could the payoff be to you? What would happen if you let it go? What is at risk if you do? What might you lose? What do you fear you would lose?

Mine for the Questions

Most of us live in a world where it is unsafe to say "I don't know." In both our professions and our families, we are supposed to have answers to problems. I know of many companies where the engineers are seriously penalized if they report a problem or ask a question for which they do not yet have the answer. Naturally, they do not report these things, which only leads to delays and a lack of coordination. This is no climate in which to foster genuine inquiry.

Instead of good answers, we need good questions. The power of dialogue emerges in the cultivation, in ourselves, as well as in others, of questions for which we do not have answers. Identifying one good question can be vastly more significant than offering many partial answers.

In cultivating a dialogic stance, I encourage people to develop a capacity to "mine for the questions." By this I mean to look for the really important, hard questions that keep people up nights and go to the heart of our concerns. Each of us, I have found, has several questions that are at the very center of our lives. You might try reflecting on what questions live within you.

Finding good questions is not always easy. What immediately comes to mind is not always relevant. When people ask me to help them solve their problems, the first thing I do is listen for the quality of the questions they are asking themselves.

I listen in particular for the degree of self-reflection in the questions. To what extent, I ask myself, do they see their own part in what they are exploring? To what degree do they attribute their problems to sources outside of themselves?

To do this implies that we actually know what a question is. An estimated forty percent of all questions that people utter are really statements in disguise. Another forty percent are really judgments in disguise: "Do you really think she deserved that raise?" Only a small percentage of "inquiries" are genuine questions. Real questions are often notable for the silence that follows their utterance. People may not know the answer! In fact, it becomes clear that finding an answer too quickly is not necessarily a wise goal.

President Clinton, at one point in his year-long program of race dialogues, turned to one of the participants and asked him if he was in favor of the kind of affirmative action that produced Colin Powell. He was asking the other person to tell him where he stood. But he pushed the person he was addressing into a very difficult bind. Does the other party say no, he is not in favor of the affirmative action that produced a Colin Powell—and run the risk of looking absurd? Or does he say yes, implying that Powell needed affirmative action to succeed? Does he challenge the President's question itself? Some difficult dilemmas arose in this moment, which neither Clinton nor the person questioned seemed to recognize or articulate. As a result, the conversation froze.

More generally, we should ask, what does getting *any* kind of answer do to move a conversation forward? This kind of exchange distances the questioner from the conversation, keeping his or her own views hidden and therefore inaccessible. Such questions also imply that there is a right answer, and that the questioner already knows what that right answer is.

Finding a question is one thing. Allowing oneself to tolerate the tension that arises with its articulation is another. This ability to

let oneself see what emerges instead of leaping out of the discomfort of an unanswered question is crucial. The poet Rilke begs us

to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions* themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.⁴

To mine for questions is to cultivate the suspension of answers and to open the way for the dialogic way of being.

Seek the Order Between

The idea that we must take a position in order to get our view across is seemingly built into our culture. This is the essence of "good debate." While it is popular, it greatly limits the potential intelligence and inquiry we might obtain from a conversation—particularly one with tough issues. One way to develop suspension is to look for what David Bohm called the "order between" the extremes. This does not mean looking for compromise so much as looking for the unresolved issues around which people are polarizing.

This is difficult, because the positions that people voice are always partial, always limited, and almost always call up the opposite point of view. Thinking positionally polarizes. It tends to lead us down a path that says things are either this *or* that. To find the order between we must recognize that positions in this sense are always false, because they are pieces from a whole cloth. We have many such examples. A notorious one is the

phrase "mind and heart." The words imply that the two are distinct and separate. But—they are distinct only in thought, though our language leads us to think of them as clearly differentiable. More genuine probing asks us to suspend polarizing our differences and look for what exists between the extremes. Inevitably, there is a range of questions that neither position can embrace or react to. In the Clinton race dialogues, for instance, the issues that might come to light might have to do with America's unresolved relationship with its history of slavery and the treatment of blacks in subsequent years. What is the relationship between affirmative action and no affirmative action? Perhaps this could lead us into an inquiry about why we are having the conversation in the first place. Suspension is the art of finding the "order between" the positions that people take.

Try Frame Experiments

Suspension is also the art of trying to see people in a different light. The term "frame experiment," coined by Don Schön, refers to a way of bringing a different perspective to the fore and trying it out on a situation to see what we might learn. For example, a senior manager in a major consumer company was known for being a bully. Every time the senior group would talk about difficult strategic issues, he would take over the conversation, reveal his "superior" knowledge, and intimidate people. Even the CEO felt stymied by this fellow; he clearly knew a great deal, perhaps more than anyone else at the table. But his ways of working were destroying the spirit of the top team and limiting its ability to lead. Another manager particularly was having difficulty with this situation, and was prepared to either challenge it openly or leave the company.

A colleague of mine began to coach this second fellow. She suggested that he see the first manager not as a bully, and instead see him as a protector of the culture of the organization. This was met

with some incredulity at first. But the second manager tried it. They traveled together on the company plane, relatively tight quarters! Afterward, the second manager said to me, "You know, he wasn't actually as bad as I had thought. We had a very good conversation." Sometimes the change comes because you put on new glasses and not because the world outside of you changes all that much. You can learn to see things that were there all the time but overlooked by you.

Externalize Thought

Another critical practice to develop suspension involves externalizing thought. What does this mean? In some of our workshops we do an exercise where people who do not know each other are asked to come up with a dilemma they face for which they have no clear solution. They then "borrow" two other people and ask them to represent the two sides of this dilemma, the two sides they picture in their mind. These two people stand up, face each other, and replay the thoughts rumbling around in the other person's head. For example, a woman stood up once and said, "My dilemma is, do we go to his parents for Christmas or mine?" Everyone laughed, recognizing the challenge. "Every time this comes up, we have a huge fight. If we go to his, my parents are disappointed and I feel I have caved in. If we go to mine, I feel guilty that I have imposed my parents on him. I am stuck."

This person found two others who quickly got in the spirit. One began, speaking as the woman: "You know, I want my parents to see their grandkids. We do not see them very often as it is. And my husband gets his way most of the time." The other person replied, also speaking as this woman: "Is this really fair? Am I imposing this on my husband? Maybe we should have Christmas at our home and have everyone come to us! But that would be even crazier." The conversation got quite

heated, and apparently quite realistic, according to our initial volunteer.

Everyone in the group tried this exercise using their own examples. Another woman debated with herself about whether to promote a younger employee to a senior position. She was torn, because this younger man was her friend, someone she had mentored. But she was not certain about his abilities and feared she might bias the decision inappropriately. Many reported being somewhat stunned that strangers could seem to understand exactly what was going on in their heads, as if they had read their intimate diaries. "They knew exactly what to say!" "I saw myself very clearly, and I told them only the smallest bit of detail." You can try this yourself by finding two people to display the different voices in your head, or you might simply write down the different perspectives, stepping back to see them both and how you feel about each. A process like dialogue can help us to see that there are aspects of all of us in each one of us: I am in the world, and the world is in me. What is needed today, I believe, is not individual transformation, but a shift of a completely different order: a process of dialogue that can help individuals experience firsthand the degree to which the world is in them and how responsible *they* are for their experience. The challenges people in organizations face, for instance, are not merely personal, they are systemic—in a way they are everywhere and nowhere. They are in this sense in all of us. But we share much more than we might realize or like to admit; we share a common ecology or network of thought.

Ask: What Am I Missing?

Perhaps one of the most powerful ways to suspend thought is to ask the questions. What is it that I am or we are systematically leaving out of this conversation? What are we ignoring

completely or failing to pay sufficient attention to? Inevitably, some see this more clearly than others do, and so this practice is often best cultivated with a group of people. To reflect in such a way that encourages us to ask this question greatly increases the chances for learning and growth.

This practice can take many forms. You might ask yourself at the end of a day or at the end of a meeting, What is it that I did not do, or left out somehow? Reflect on the results you got (and the results you did not get). Then ask yourself why you got the results you did and what you might have done that you were unaware of at the time that encourages this.⁵

Ask: How Does the Problem Work?

One of the great temptations many people face is that of trying to "fix" or correct what they imagine to be wrong or problematic with themselves, with others, with the world. This is especially common when it comes to a special someone who is driving you up the wall. We can see so clearly how, if that person would only act differently, things would be so much better. Especially for us.

Yet leaping in with advice on how others can improve themselves is not always welcome. Many think of change in mechanistic terms: The "machine" is broken, someone needs to fix it. Their central question is What can I do to fix this? This kind of thinking reinforces fragmentation. When someone arrives with an attitude that says "Hello! I am here to change you" (or, the marginally more subtle "I am here to help you change") it's not surprising why people shy away from them.

Suspension involves asking a very different question: How does this problem or situation work? In other words, what are the forces at work that have produced this problem in this way in the first place? It is framed with the realization that even if you helped the person change to alleviate today's problem, the

odds are low that you would have helped them when they came to face tomorrow's. In fact, you may well have weakened their capacity to address the issue for themselves.

Asking How does the problem work? opens an inquiry into the problem itself. You're really asking, How have things come to be this way? Why this way and not some other way? What impact does it have? How do people feel about it?

QUESTIONS

What leads me to view things as I do?

What is the question beneath the question?

What themes, patterns, links, do I perceive underneath what is being said?

In what alternative ways can I perceive or frame these things?

PRACTICES

Suspend certainty.

Seek the order between.

Try frame experiments.

Externalize thought.

Ask; What am I missing? How does the problem work?

SUSPENSION IN GROUPS

Collective suspension means raising to the surface issues that impact everyone in a way that all can reflect on them. Suspension at the group level, like at the individual level, has to do with interrupting the habitual functions of memory and inviting a fresh response.

Group memories hold enormous sway and are not easily

released. For instance, one high-tech company I worked in found it enormously threatening to have someone propose an alternative approach to a strategy. This company has been quite successful, and as a result quite unwilling to move off its familiar path. "That is not how we do it here," one man complained to his team after I had explained the idea. "This is making me very nervous," he said. I said, "The problem you are facing is really much tougher than any you have handled before, by your own admission. What is it about this approach that makes you nervous?" "We have not used it before," he replied.

Most groups will have a number of critical issues that limit their effectiveness—issues that they are unable, for whatever reasons, to see clearly. Much of the time the ecology of a group is such that it is impossible for much reflection in action to take place. Things happen too fast. The pressure to produce results is too great. The fear that arises in people at the thought of slowing down the process is too overwhelming.

Interrupting these habitual patterns can be quite powerful. In the presentation made by steelworkers and managers to the management conference I mentioned earlier about their dialogue experience, a union participant said, "We have learned to question fundamental categories and labels that we have applied to each other." One manager in the audience raised his hand and said, "Can you give us an example?" "Yes," the union member said. "Labels like *management* and *union*." The manager's jaw dropped. He had never heard a union man so willing to refrain from defending the union to look at it objectively.

Collective suspension is the practice of shifting the ecology of a group so that it can begin to see it has alternatives, to understand that it no longer needs to be limited to a single point of view. A group can develop this ability over time by talking together. It can also be assisted by a facilitator.

PRACTICES FOR CATALYZING SUSPENSION IN GROUPS

Create a Clearness Committee

Invented by the Quakers many years ago, this process consists of having a group of people, selected by you, ask you questions about a subject that you identify as important. The group's job is not to provide you with answers, only questions. Having a group of people ask you questions over a hour or two can be enormously illuminating; people frequently discover that what they thought was essential was peripheral, and vice versa.

Sensing the System

For many people, participating in a group conversation—especially one where there are more than eight people, can be quite distracting, even overwhelming. A practice that is well worth cultivating is one where you learn to think of the people in a meeting as aspects of a single whole.⁶ You approach this group with a curiosity about its collective behavior. You can ask yourself, How is this group as a whole behaving? How is what is now happening impacting the least powerful person in the group? the silent ones? the strong ones?

Learn not to personalize every emotion but to look around and see what is happening with others. Ask the question What is this group seeking to "conserve"—to sustain? Biologist Humberto Maturana shares this question as he looks at the evolution of social systems. We must look not only at what is changing, he suggests, but at what stays the same, or is being "conserved." We can do this in a group dialogue by asking the same question.

THE DARK SIDE OF SUSPENSION

While a part of us may be willing to be open and to explore other perspectives, to step into the other guy's shoes, there is also a part of us that has no interest in this whatsoever. "I like my opinions," this part of us says. "And often I am right!" Acknowledging that we hold to what are certain about, and that we may be quite unwilling to relinquish these things, gives us a sense of where we stand. It can also tell us how flexible we are and uncover the choices that we face if we are to suspend our reactions. If I am unable to step back from what I think, I remain invested in it, certain—perhaps to the point of nonnegotiability.

The shadow of suspension is that part of us that wishes to be certain. It is also the part that tends to see *others* as certain: "They are so opinionated." But to make such a claim is a contradiction: We are being opinionated about *their* being opinionated! We do to others in this sense what we abhor in ourselves, and often fail to notice it. When two people, or two groups of people, meet who are both full of certainty in this sense, conflict is inevitable. The absolute inviolable status of Jerusalem to the Israelis leads them to say they shall never partition the city. Yet this conflicts with the absolute necessity of the Palestinians—that Jerusalem be acknowledged as part of their heritage. The inability to step back from this perspective prevents suspension, and genuine resolution.

When do you hold only certainty? When do you look only for answers, not questions? Can you recall a time when you were unable to see things from any other point of view? Or when you realized you never asked yourself, "What am I missing?" These questions will give you a sense of those times when you are not able to suspend your thought, and may help you to activate this ability.

S E V E N

Voicing

To speak your voice is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of genuine dialogue. Speaking your voice has to do with revealing what is true for you regardless of other influences that might be brought to bear. "Courageous speech," says poet David Whyte in his book *The Heart Aroused*, "has always held us in awe." It does so, he suggests, because it is so revealing of our inner lives.

Finding your voice in dialogue means learning to ask a simple question: What needs to be expressed now? To do this you need to know how to listen not only to your internal emotional reactions and impulses—or to the many images of how you think you should behave—but to yourself.

For many of us this is no small feat. We have been inundated with numerous messages about how we ought to behave, what we ought to say, in all the different circumstances of our lives. To discover what we think and feel, independent of these things, requires courage.

This is true in part because our authentic voice is not a rehash of others' words. So we are unlikely to find someone else speaking what we ourselves need to say. We may sometimes find others saying things with which we resonate. Think for a minute of someone you truly admire. Now consider, what about him or her is it that you find so attractive? You may find that it has to do with the fact that their expression is authentic and unique. They reveal themselves. This experiment can show you something about yourself, because you are unlikely to notice qualities you admire in others unless they are already present in you in some form, at least. This person you admire carries an aspect of your voice, temporarily holding it for you as you find your way back to it.

As we begin to embody our own genuine expression, we find our voice has magic in it. Consider the magic word itself: *abracadabra*. It comes from an ancient Middle Eastern language, Aramaic, thought to have been spoken from around the seventh century B.C. to the seventh century A.D. The phrase is said to come from the Kabbalistic tradition, a form of Jewish mysticism. It was the incantation used to remind the Kabbalists of the power of their speech. *Abra* comes from the Aramaic verb *bra* meaning to create. *Ca* translated to "as." *Dabra* is the first person of the verb *daber*, "to speak." In other words, *abracadabra* literally means "I create as I speak." Magic!¹

Speaking our voice can transform our circumstances. At an annual meeting of MIT's Center for Organizational Learning, five managers and five union steelworkers talked about what they had learned after six months of dialogue. A group of about 125 managers from leading companies around the United States listened to

them. That the managers and union workers were able to sit together and talk openly about respectfully of one another about what they had achieved was enormously impressive. After all, here were two groups that had mistrusted each other for decades; now they were thinking together. They spoke freely and unrehearsed. More than one person said later that tears came to his eyes.

Toward the end of the presentation, one manager from a high-tech industry challenged their apparent success: "You seem to have your team working well here. But what about shocks from the wider system? The price of steel, the price of scrap metal, the environment? How do you plan to overcome that hurdle?" No one replied for a long while. Then Conrad, the vice president of the local union said, "Well, we don't really have a plan. We just take things one step at a time."

He went on. "You know, sitting up here has been very uncomfortable for us. We do not usually do presentations like this. We were not sure what would happen. But now I see that we have a container that is large enough even to include all of you." There was no bluster or defensiveness in his words; he simply drew a larger circle. Our authentic voice can set a new order of things, open new possibilities. It comes out even more clearly in dialogue, where the challenge is to speak the new word. And to do so at that very moment. Conrad took the "external shock" of the high-tech manager's comment to the group and included it in the same fashion they were including and dealing with all their problems.

Our organizations give us many mixed messages about expressing our own voice. On the one hand, we hear of endless "empowerment" programs, transformation initiatives, and development plans in companies large and small. On the other hand, we are expected to toe the line and defer to the authority figures who reign supreme. Corporations are in many ways one of the last bastions of feudalism.

Despite the democratic climate in which most modern

corporations have arisen and function, in many ways life within them is a direct denial of the freedoms that guarantee their survival. A former company president, a woman CEO colleague of mine who emigrated from then-Communist Yugoslavia when she was a twenty-three-year-old engineer, tells a poignant story of the paradox she discovered in her quest for her voice:

When I was working in an organization there, under Tito, it was acceptable to say more or less anything you wanted to your boss. After all, you had a job for life. What could he do? But you must never, ever say anything bad about the president of the country. It was not only injurious to your immediate health, you could get locked up and disappear. People did, all the time. Your words of dissent would be viewed the same as pulling a gun on the president. So I came to America, the land of free speech and democracy, looking for new opportunity. And can you imagine what I found? You could say anything you wanted about the president of the country. But God forbid you say anything bad about your boss! Is that free speech? Is that democracy?

SELF-TRUST AND VOICE

It takes determination to speak your own voice. The pressures that arise both from within yourself and from your organization often seem designed to sap your energy. The antidote is self-trust. Only as you learn to take seriously the possibility that what you think might be in fact valid for others do you find the backbone and confidence to share it. In his marvelous essay called "Self-Reliance," Ralph Waldo Emerson prods us to take this step:

A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his own thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.

The journey to finding and speaking your voice entails feeling the confidence that what you are thinking is valid, and fits. Emerson continues:

Great works of art have not more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.²

Finding and speaking one's voice requires first a willingness to be still. Daring to be quiet can seem like an enormous risk in a world that values articulate speech. But to speak our voice we may have to learn to refrain from speaking, and listen. Not every word that comes to us needs to be spoken. In fact, learning to choose consciously what we do and do not say can establish a great level of control and stability in our lives.

Many people feel "pressure" to speak. Containing and holding that pressure, something can form within you. Let what is in you take shape before giving words to it. It is like letting a picture develop; you do not want a partially formed picture but

a whole one. Sometimes the cycle of development will be quite fast. Sometimes it will take longer.

Speaking one's voice also requires a willingness to trust the emptiness—the sense of not knowing what to do or say—that sometimes appears first. One of the reasons people chatter away is that they are lonely. They are afraid of silences; they fear that there is not a creative space in them but an empty void. There may be creative pauses, spaces into which new energy has not yet rushed and filled. But a little patience will be rewarding. What is often most lacking in us is the confidence that what does appear actually has merit, is worth saying—that we are worth listening to.

Such speaking requires a leap into the void. This presumes courage, a willingness to enter into the dark forest of one's own lack of understanding. Often the voice that is genuinely ours is not well developed. We may be an expert at mimicking others but not speaking for ourselves. In dialogue this emerges as the willingness to speak in the circle without knowing what you will say. More than a gimmick, this is the very motion required to unleash our locked-up energies. Fear often reigns. To leap into a moment of silence with a thought that is not well formed or one that is potentially controversial, whose utterance might change relationships, terrifies. In these moments we can easily retreat into planned speech, the things we have said before. We can cover our tracks through practiced routine, or we can practice speaking without knowing in advance what we are going to say.

Finding and then speaking your voice also means finding the right words. Yet most of our words are designed to sustain our separation. When we speak words that come from a place of wholeness and actually articulate that wholeness, we can sometimes feel as if they are not entirely our own. This may be because we are speaking from a part of ourselves that is unfamiliar, one that is larger than we might have realized—one that is connected to a much larger field of awareness and attention. If we rise up to

speak in these ways, sometimes the smaller parts of ourselves can feel nervous or concerned. But the integration of all the different aspects of oneself is a part of the discovery process of a dialogue.

One of the most common experiences people have in dialogue is the discovery that the whole is somehow larger than the parts. Now, this is not something that we are typically trained to expect or understand. Despite a plethora of words about synergy, we are generally inexperienced when it arises and unaware of how to sustain an ecology that lets it continue.

Paradoxically, we may hear our own voice most powerfully when we are with a group of others in dialogue. There is a deeply communal dimension to speaking together that is typically lost on us. If I speak, it is often to make *my* point, to indicate my superiority, to claim my ground. Often I lie in wait in meetings, like a hunter looking for his prey, ready to spring out at the first moment of silence. My gun is loaded with preestablished thoughts. I take aim and fire, the context irrelevant, my bullet and its release all that matter to me.

Dialogue offers us another possibility, which is to discover that in speaking I can create. My voice is not simply something that reveals my thought, or even parts of myself; it literally can bring forth a world, conjure an image. But this kind of speaking requires that I learn to listen for the distant thunder that may ultimately turn out to be my own voice waiting to be spoken. This sometimes occurs as the feeling of being tapped on the shoulder by destiny. Suddenly I have the sense that everyone is waiting for me, that it is somehow my turn, that I have something for others that must come out. Often I find people who have this experience look around anxiously for someone else to fill their shoes, to do this job for them. "They can't have meant me." Yet this inner call can be answered only by you, and in answering it one finds one's own voice and one's own authority. Everything else pales by comparison.

THE PRINCIPLE OF UNFOLDMENT

Behind the practice of speaking your voice is another principle for dialogue. This principle encourages us to remain aware of the *constant potential waiting to unfold through and around us*. By doing so I am able to take seriously the possibility that there is something to listen to.

Bohm's notion of the implicate order is one development in science that correlates with this principle and illuminates it. The implicate order is based on a premise about the nature of "unfolding and enfoldment," where reality unfolds from a patterned invisible level into the visible world that we see, and then folds back up again into the invisible state. Reality consists both of a surface level "explicate order," which has a relative independence, like the individual notes of a piece of music, and a deeper implicate order out of which the explicate flows. As David Peat, Bohm's biographer, indicates, Bohm "proposed that the reality we see about us (the explicate order) is no more than the surface appearance of something far deeper (the implicate order) . . . the ground of the cosmos is not elementary particles, but pure process, a flowing movement of the whole." The implicate unfolds, both in an external sense and in thought, to produce the explicate world we experience.

Earlier in his career Bohm developed the first equations to explain the state of matter called plasma. A plasma functions in a collective fashion, as a whole. Yet it is made of individual particles, each of which moves freely and individually. When viewed close up, it appears as a random movement of particles, moving freely. Bohm was able to create two sets of equations, one to explain the collective behavior, and the other to explain the free individual movement. He then went on to show that the two descriptions were part of a single whole, and that each is enfolded in the other. This was the genesis of his idea of an

"implicate order," in which there is both an underlying wholeness and relative independence of the external parts.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Bohm gave a particularly striking image of how this might work in nature. A seed, he said, is more like an aperture through which reality unfolds, not merely the source of the tree. This perspective challenges our ordinary perceptions; it prods us to see the world with new eyes. Bohm expanded his view, saying Nature itself could be constantly unfolding and folding back up again:

If you were to look at this on a long scale, of say fifty or one hundred years, there would be changes, you would see that trees were in different positions. And you might think that a tree had moved across this space from one place to another. In fact, what happened is that one tree has enfolded into the ground and another tree has taken its place. Now, that is the picture I would like to suggest of the fundamental particles, the electrons and protons and so on—quarks, according to the latest theory that make up all matter. The evidence from quantum mechanics would suggest that these particles are not little balls which are permanent and just cross space like a billiard ball, but rather they are constantly unfolding and folding back and unfolding again in a slightly different position. . . . This happens very fast so it will appear continuous and constant to us on the large scale.³

The implicate order unfolds into an explicate, relatively differentiated order, which is not separate from the implicate. There is separation without separateness. Bohm compared the explicate order to the patterns in a river. The swirls in the river are distinct forms, and in some cases can have high de-

grees of stability. But these patterns emerged from and are an integral part of the totality of the system of the water.

Thought and the Implicate Order

Of particular importance to dialogue is the linkage Bohm began to make between the implicate order and the processes of thought itself. What if ideas, perceptions, which appear as distinct things to us were themselves the explicate version of some more implicate order? This corresponded well to my own subjective experience. It is possible to have a relatively abstract idea, like beauty, but when one tries to grasp it, one realizes that it is too subtle, is in fact comprised of a much broader range of tacit perceptions that one can know but cannot precisely define.

A central point here is that everything that is emerging is doing so from a common source. Behind the complexity of the explicate, external world is a process of unfoldment that is proceeding everywhere in the same way. I find that as we look for this principle in operation in a dialogue, we can, for instance, see a common thread of conversation emerging through several people at once.

There is always a larger cycle unfolding in and through me, whether I am aware of it or not. I can become aware of it, and give voice to it, as I accept responsibility for myself and for my connection to this larger implicate order. In this sense "vision"—an overused word in business and organizations—could be understood as the capacity to see this larger creative cycle. The application in dialogue of this principle begins with the practice of *voicing*, of listening for and speaking my authentic voice, which ultimately flows from the implicate order.

LEARNING TO FIND YOUR VOICE

There are specific practices that you can use to develop your capacity for voice:

Ask: What Is My Music—and Who Will Play It?

My colleague Michael Jones, who now makes his career as a successful improvisational pianist, having sold over 1.5 million CDs, was once asked a very penetrating question by a complete stranger. Earlier, Michael left music to work as a consultant in Toronto. Yet he kept his music alive, finding time during the breaks at the seminars he led to play the piano. People often commented to him that they recalled the music more than the content of the seminars! Once, while playing, an older man came up to him and they began to speak. The man asked about his work and what the music was that he had just played. "That was an arrangement of 'Moon River'," Michael said. "No, before that" said the old man. "That was some of my own music," Michael replied. The man then said, "You're wasting your time with 'Moon River'." He then continued, asking Michael, "Who will play your music if you don't do it yourself?"

We might each ask ourselves this question. Who will play my music if I don't play it myself? People often say it is hard to know what their music is, no less find the courage to offer it. Sometimes we know what we would express but require the courage to bring it out. The resolve that wells up from within us first to find out what our music is, and then to give ourselves the permission to give it, is the molten core energy of your voice.

Overcome Self-Censorship

Imagining what you might do is a first step on this journey. We all have a tendency to self-censorship, for withholding what we

think for fear of upsetting others or disturbing the order of things. But finding our music involves listening in a deep way to what we may not have dared voice. The practice here entails a continuous willingness to ask yourself, What do I most long to create in the world? And why do I long to create it? Setting aside all the counterforces that would tend to dismiss this question as impractical or irrelevant is an enormous part of this process. But holding Michael's simple question in your heart can go a long way toward opening doors you would not expect to open. Finally, we must also ask ourselves what might be at risk if you do not bring it out, as well as if you do? What choices are you making now about how much of your voice you express?⁴

Jump into the Void

One way to get a feel for this experience is to step into an improvisational spirit in conversation. In our workshops we invite people to try this. Michael Jones plays a piece of music from memory, and then at some point seeks to shift into improvisation. We ask participants to see if they can notice when the change occurs. Afterward we ask people to see if they can continue by speaking from the same place that the music came from. People are surprised to find that they do not have all that much to say at first.

The reason for this, I believe, is that we know how to speak from memory, but we are less experienced when we have to think in the moment, without a preplanned notion of what we should say. We develop a repertoire, a way of working that lets us handle situations. But suspending this, we must think again. To speak spontaneously and improvisationally requires a willingness not to know what one is going to say before one says it. Jumping into this void can be quite scary but is tremen-

dously powerful training for finding and expressing your voice. Without planning things out, parts of you that you may not be familiar with are free to speak. And what comes out is often not at all what you expect.

Sometimes in a dialogue a feeling may arise in you that seems to bring pressure to speak and yet one's mind may be blank. I am learning to recognize these moments as precursors to creative expression (not just invitations to sheer terror), where the pressure builds in me and, at times, can emerge through words.

In these moments of emptiness, it is as though someone had tapped me on the shoulder and is asking me to participate. When I do say something, I then find I had something to say that fits with what is happening, but that is not entirely predefined by me. I hear myself articulating something that I sense is present in others.

Ask: What Do You Want to Be Known For?

One of my Ph.D. dissertation advisers, Chris Argyris, once asked me a question very similar to the one posed to Michael Jones. Unlike others who had spoken to me about my work, Chris did not begin with my written proposal or the academic references that he thought I should follow. He simply asked, "What do you want to be known for?" He was asking me, What is my music? This cut through the fog and let me speak what I had made a forbidden subject for myself—what I truly cared most about. In that moment I realized that it is not only the "dark" and unsavory aspects of oneself that get repressed, it is also the golden parts, the noble aspirations. The answer for me lay in seeking to uncover the reasons human beings subvert their own intentions—why despite a lot of good intentions we have a world that is not what it might be—and proposing a way to overcome this pattern of thinking and interacting.

VOICING

QUESTIONS:

What needs to be expressed here? By you? By others? By the whole?

Designed with intention, what purpose would this pattern serve?

Animating this conversation, relationship, system?

Trying to emerge? What is it?

PRACTICES:

Ask: Who will play my music?

Overcome Self-Censorship?

Jump into the void?

Ask: What do you want to be known for?

Speak the forbidden?

FINDING VOICE IN A GROUP

The voice of a group differs from that of an individual. In every group one can ask the questions, "What is it that people together are endeavoring to say here? What is it that they want to say all together?" This is *not* the same as assuming that everyone says the same thing, or even that they agree on critical matters. It is a matter of listening for an emerging story or voice that seems to capture more than what any one person is able to articulate, and saying that.

The voice of a group of people is a function of the emerging story among them. The narrative voice, the voice of the storytellers, is unlike that of the rational, analytic mind. It does not

break things up or categorize. It makes distinctions, but these are always seen as part of a larger weave. So, for instance, the steelworkers had a forty-year-long story of abuse and difficulty at the hand of management. Management had a similar story about childish steelworkers, untrustworthy people for whom management wanted only what was best. After a year of dialogue, when the union president was able to say "You notice? We are not talking about the past as much. Something has changed here," he was acknowledging the shift in collective voice, the change in the underlying story that had gripped him and his colleagues.

This is in fact the other major feature of the emergence of a collective voice: the realization that the collectively held images that everyone had sustained, must dissolve. Doctors in Grand Junction admitted that they were uncomfortable having to sustain a charade of composure continuously, in the face of disease and death. They acknowledged that some of the costs of health care were attributable to this fear, assuaged by steady investments in technology that was not in fact always necessary or that contributed only marginally to effectiveness while adding enormously to costs. Senior administrators admitted to not having a clear sense of how to organize their systems despite the pressure to act as if they knew just what they were doing. The community as a whole confronted, though did not resolve, the realization that they were in the disease-care business, not the health care business.

PRACTICES FOR CATALYZING THE COLLECTIVE VOICE IN A GROUP

Let the Sound Cascade

The sounds in any conversation have a powerful impact on what is intended and stated. One practice, developed by Risa Kaparo,

is to let someone speak and then to listen as the sound of his voice cascades into silence. People typically notice that there is a notable change in the meaning of what they heard as they wait a moment or two and make space to let the meaning bloom. Often, of course, the energy in the conversation is such that speaking quickly is the norm, and waiting is seen as awkward or even impolite. Giving a moment of space is a practice that a group could choose to adopt as the norm.

The idea here is to make space for what is seeking to be spoken to come through. To free this kind of space is to enable what the poet Rilke speaks of as uncontrived words: "I believe in all that has never yet been spoken. I want to free what waits within me so that what no one has dared to wish for may for once spring clear without my contriving."

Speak to (and from) the Center

In dialogues that seem to flow powerfully, people begin to realize that they are speaking to the common pool of meaning being created by all the people together and not to each other as individuals. They are seeking to gather a new quality of meaning and understanding together. In a dialogue, people are not just interacting, but creating together.

To be aware of the challenge of speaking to the center enables the collective voice of a group to emerge more quickly. This can be quite awkward if people use it as a strategy, as a rote step. It may help to think of the "center" here as the center of each person, the center of meaning emerging in and through everyone. The center of the circle can be seen as a reminder of this emerging, invisible fact.

People in groups quite often concentrate on the circumference of a circle, and this is the orientation of most group-dynamics approaches—they explore the nature of the interpersonal and shared assumptions and patterns of relationship among people.

Yet it is the center that is most important.⁵ By literally looking only to the center, you may be able to break the habit of focusing only on interpersonal relationships. One must come to the point of listening fully to the center of each person.

THE DARK SIDE OF VOICING

One of the most challenging moments I have ever had occurred in an early dialogue session we held. We had gathered some forty people together to reflect and think about Peter Senge's new book, *The Fifth Discipline*, which had just been published. During the dialogue, a woman began to speak about how she felt about the injustices of the world, both toward herself and toward others. She spoke vigorously. She was very articulate. And she was very long-winded. After an initial ten-minute monologue, I began to get uncomfortable. I felt she was dominating the conversation and seemed not to notice that this was the case. Others were looking annoyed.

I nodded my head as I listened, silently thanking her for her words, hoping she would recognize my signal as a cue for her to stop. She did not. She continued to speak for another twenty-five minutes, almost forty in total. People, growing impatient, would try to ask her questions and engage her in conversation. She would thank them, say that what they were saying reminded her of another point, continue on. It was infuriating and deeply challenging. The content of what she was saying was that no one ever really made room to listen, either to her or to others. So to try to stop her was to do the very thing she was nearly pleading not to have done in the world. On the other hand, she had so alienated people that I thought we might have a riot.

Why is this kind of thing infuriating to many people? Why did the group respond as it did, where people felt angry but were unwilling to say that? I believe it is because this woman

and the group touched the shadow of finding your voice in a way that impacted everyone. She represented for everyone that part of us that feels, on the one hand, silenced, unheard, and often unable to speak, and, on the other, the part that does not know when to stop, that *must* be heard, even to the point of dominating everyone around us. The dialogue seemed open and inviting, and so she seized the moment. The group then had the challenge of deciding how to receive her efforts to express her voice, and generally took the stance that what was happening was wrong and should have been stopped.

There are two aspects to the darker dimensions of our voice. When our voice is underdeveloped, we are too quiet, unable to bring out what we think in a way that lets us create what we want. When it is overinflated, all we know how to do is speak, occupying enormous territory, crowding out others. Neither extreme represents balance, revealing our true voice. Learning to speak your voice entails acknowledging those aspects of yourself that participate in both extremes.

One reason we get caught in these extremes is that we live out of an image about what we think we are and should be. I met a lawyer the other day who was quite senior in his profession. He exuded "lawyerness." He introduced himself as an attorney. He began speaking about his important work and some of the well-known people with whom he worked. I began to feel a bit insignificant! I realized I was interacting with a role, not a person. I had the sense that this person was so deeply involved in sustaining his persona that finding his center was nearly impossible.

Idolatry emerges as we create and sustain images of ourselves and our worlds without realizing that this is what we are doing. We become addicted to a certain view of ourselves: We need to notice that we are doing this in order to overcome it. We can begin by asking ourselves, What voice is speaking now? Is it mine? Or one I inherited or absorbed from others?

P A R T I I I

P R E D I C T I V E

I N T U I T I O N

In retrospect, it all seemed to be ill-fated. Yet when Madeleine Albright went to Ohio State in Columbus in the autumn of 1997 for a town hall meeting to explain the Clinton administration's reasons for bombing Iraq, she had no reason to suspect what lay ahead. Her intent was to explain that the extraordinary and consistent violations by Iraq of the UN resolutions regarding inspections of potential sites for biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons manufacture required a serious response. But what she found was a crowd that challenged her every move.

Perhaps if the White House had thought more clearly about history, about war protesting, about Kent State, said the handlers later, it would have gone differently. Or perhaps the event just needed to be better orchestrated. Some thought that if President Clinton himself had been there, the teacher who felt criticized might have been hugged rather than insulted, the vociferous and questioning students mollified, the hecklers acknowledged but not yielded to. The great communicator could have managed this one easily. But bringing Clinton out in public for this kind of showing was seen as ill timed, given the sex scandal swirling around him. And there was every reason to think, in retrospect, that Clinton would have faced the same hostility from the crowd.

Furthermore, even if he had "controlled" the crowd, having Clinton in Columbus would have been counterproductive. Despite his good intentions, someone with skills like his can