

## Transcendence and Transformation

Over the years we've encountered innumerable intractable patterns of conflict that are seemingly impossible to manage.<sup>1</sup> When conflicts reach this point, they almost always reside in the sphere of harm, which makes the search for alternative forms of communication imperative. Parties engaged in difficult conflicts tend to be stuck in particular patterns of interaction that require them to rethink the ways in which they communicate with one another. New patterns of communication that can *transcend* the stuck pattern and *transform* the relationship are necessary for movement toward the sphere of value.

Most of the time people find acceptable and effective ways to manage their differences. They may use simple persuasion to influence one another. Often they negotiate solutions, and sometimes they just agree to disagree and learn to live with the conflict. Too often, however, people get enmeshed in situations that plague them for a long time and do great damage.

Such conflicts might be related to moral differences, such as that between the Branch Davidians and federal officers in Waco, Texas (chapter 5); ethnic, cultural, or religious differences, such as those that occurred in Maluku, Indonesia (chapter 9); or even historically entrenched interest clashes, such as those in the Middle East. Although many difficult conflicts do occur on the international scene, they can also occur in families, communities, and organizations. This chapter is devoted to discussing ways in which frustrating and harmful patterns can be overcome and even prevented.

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### TRANSCENDING CLASH

Harsh conflict makes productive communication difficult. When conversation with an adversary quickly becomes hostile, people have

a hard time thinking of new ways to talk about tough issues. They fall back on old patterns of argument, repeat the same points endlessly, strike out against the other in a verbal assault, or—worse—move from words to “sticks and stones.” Because direct communication is uncomfortable to many people, they opt for avoidance. If you ask people why they are not talking to the people with whom they have an unresolved issue, they will probably tell you that they have nothing to say or learn from “people like that.”

### **Finding a Path to Productive Talk: The Learning Conversation**

How do we come to a new understanding of what we are doing when we interact with enemies and rivals? Can such interactions be framed differently? Is it possible to think about these sorts of conversations in more productive ways? Many groups are dedicated to creating forms of communication that, though they may not resolve the conflict, move the discussion to a new, more productive plane. We like to think of these as “learning conversations,” opportunities to learn significant new things about yourself, others, and the issue at hand. Learning conversations can accomplish a number of things.<sup>2</sup>

First, learning conversations open up new topics of conversation that can transcend difference. This does not mean that differences are erased or minimized. Indeed, they are often acknowledged, though they may eventually be understood differently than they were before. Second, learning conversations can change the relationship from adversarial to exploratory. Here parties come to think of one another differently and they join together, even if only temporarily, into an inquiry or quest for new ways of thinking about their differences. Finally, learning conversations create opportunities to discuss the powers and limits of a variety of perspectives on the issues they are facing. They can reveal and expose what each point of view might be able to achieve as well as what each cannot do.

William Gattis brought a number of members of the United Methodist Church together to talk about the issue of homosexuality, which is quite divisive within the Methodist community. Instead of arguing whether the church should accept homosexuality, participants were asked to do something else: “Learn all you can from others about the points of view with which you disagree . . . compare and contrast your own point of view with the viewpoint of others . . . [and] compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of each point of view.”<sup>3</sup> Because the participants were willing to engage in these dialogues, they were successful in turning an otherwise contentious situation into a learning conversation.

Participants in learning conversations can also look for joining places, or common threads, they might explore to learn more, expand their awareness of options, and widen their perspective on the issues at hand. Nola Heidlebaugh says that dialogue is like weaving two very different fabrics together.<sup>4</sup> You don't just lay them side-by-side and sew them together; instead, you find loose spots where individual threads can be woven together to create a common place. This new common place is not the same thing as common ground or shared opinion but new possibilities for joint exploration and new knowledge. For example, you might disagree adamantly about abortion, but you could share an awareness of the impact of one's personal experience on this issue and recognition of gray areas that neither pro-life nor pro-choice advocates can explain away.

**Box 10.1**

Heidlebaugh uses the metaphor of weaving. Think of two or three other metaphors that could help students understand a learning conversation. What would these metaphors be like in real life?

We know that liberals and conservatives will clash on many economic, political, and social issues, but what could they talk about in a learning conversation? Could the nature of the interaction change if new common places were created for such a conversation? The key would be to reframe the issues, to think in terms of new categories on which constructive discussion might occur, including, for instance, compassion, community, reference, diversity, justice, and courage.<sup>5</sup> When you cut the issues in new ways, patterns of interaction will change, and transcendence can occur. This is what the creation and exploration of new common places is all about.

Two keys are needed to unlock the door between destructive interaction and productive dialogue. These are careful attention to *process* and creative management of *context*. In other words, we want to be very deliberate about *how* we talk with one another, and we want to select the subject matter that best affords an opportunity for transcendence and transformation.

### Managing Process

When most people engage in a difficult conversation, they concentrate on the issues, their opinions, their goals, and what they want to be heard. These are normal and important concerns, and disputants *should* be thinking about these things. At the same time, however, pro-

cess is vital, and parties to a conflict should think about *how* they want to have challenging conversations. One of the best reasons to use a mediator or facilitator when issues are contentious is that third parties can help structure the process.

When we talk to clients in our own practice about planning a meeting, a mediation, or a dialogue on issues of concern—whether conflict is present or not—we always invite them to collaborate on designing a process that is as comfortable and productive as possible under the circumstances. If we get bogged down in a moment of tension and unproductive interaction, as facilitators, we may stop the meeting and ask whether the process is working and how the tenor of the conversation might change in order to build a higher level of comfort and a more constructive tone. The whole purpose of ground rules or guidelines is to help structure the process so that it can achieve these ideals.

The Public Conversations Project (PCP), based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is a leader in dialogue on difficult issues.<sup>6</sup> Among other things, the PCP has sponsored dialogue sessions on abortion, in which pro-life and pro-choice advocates come together to have a “new kind of conversation” on this issue. The group has been successful in large measure because of their careful attention to process. As family therapists, the PCP facilitators knew that people could not have a productive conversation about this issue without setting up a safe environment and constructive process. The Public Conversations Project typically does several things:

- They contact clients in advance to invite them into a new kind of conversation and discuss their concerns and ideas about how to do it.
- They negotiate ground rules that help to keep the conversation safe.
- They carefully structure the agenda so that participants are invited to address a series of questions that enable them to (1) share their personal experiences, (2) learn about the complexity of the issue, (3) discover important new things about one another, (4) abandon a polarized stance, (5) build curiosity about other people and about the issue, and (6) come to respect people who hold very different positions on the issue.
- They emphasize listening and provide opportunities for people to speak without being interrupted.
- They keep conversations private and safe in order to allow participants to take risks and to explore ideas without the threat of personal recrimination.

- They take time for participants to get to know one another as persons and to explore the issue creatively and constructively.

Good process matters whether the group is experiencing an open conflict or not. Even when a group anticipates challenging differences, they can actively think about how to structure the process to keep communication productive and to avoid open, ugly clash. Each group will be different, and each will require a somewhat different process. In general, several sensibilities can help guide process design work: affirmation, empowerment, connection, inclusion, inquiry, and creativity.<sup>7</sup>

*Affirmation.* The sensibility of affirmation is the belief in possibilities and faith that participants will have positive resources to engage in constructive communication. Affirmation tunes into opportunities to explore and make use of previous successes, visions, values, and good will. It allows participants to think about what they appreciate in themselves, others, and in the situation.<sup>8</sup> The spirit of affirmation does not mean that we ignore, or even minimize, problems and concerns—only that we are willing to move beyond them to look for forces that can transcend hostility, rigidity, and polarity.

Sometimes people are willing to be affirmative from the beginning—especially when an open conflict has not yet erupted. People may also be willing to express affirmation late in a conflict cycle, when they are fatigued and ready to move to a more positive place. However, disputants in hard conflicts are not usually ready to be affirmative. Participants may feel cheated if they do not have an opportunity to vent, to express strong emotion, to share their worries and anger. The process may permit or even invite this within a safe environment, but will not stop there. As soon as possible, good dialogue processes mine the positive visions lying below complaints and problems, explore stories of success, and seek out common values and interests. We like to call this the “wisdom in the whining,” which means that complaints always contain a more positive vision of how things might be. If you are upset that you are not getting your mail every day, you must value prompt service; if you are tired of a coworker’s radio, you must value peace and quiet; and if you wish your pastor were a better preacher, you must desire to be engaged, inspired, and spiritually awakened in worship. Each negative complaint has a “positive shadow,” and an affirmative sensibility will lead process designers to think creatively about ways to bring this out.

We were once called in to work with a highly conflicted nursing department in a local hospital. When we talked to them individually, the nurses expressed extreme anger and disappointment with one another. They were unable to interact professionally and had com-

pletely lost respect for one another. We had originally intended to conduct individual mediations among these coworkers, but it was clear to us that they would be unable to talk constructively in mediation sessions. We realized that as a group, they would first need an opportunity to hear new kinds of things from one another and to begin to build a positive base for conflict resolution.

We invited the nurses to have a facilitated meeting to begin communicating in a new way. Using a strong set of ground rules, we started by asking them, one at a time, to share a story about a time in their careers in which they felt affirmed, strengthened, encouraged, and effective. During this go-round, the coworkers were able to talk about their careers in positive terms without having to worry about being interrupted, refuted, or ignored. They were free to talk about positive rather than negative stories, which was an entirely new pattern for them. In the next round, we asked them to indicate what changes would be necessary in the workplace to make it possible for them to do their jobs effectively. A rule used during this round was that they could not refer to other members of the group, but had to think of the workplace as a whole. We then asked each person to indicate how they thought the group could work together in a way that would integrate a diversity of personalities and styles. Once we gave the participants a chance to address these questions, we invited them to ask questions of curiosity to one another, to learn more and to understand their respective experiences more completely. Again, we followed a set of ground rules to make sure that people did not use their questions as a form of attack, defense, or posturing. This turned out to be an effective dialogue process for this group, and they began to build some trust. It did not solve their issues, but it did make it possible for them to move on to private mediations where they could address specific workplace issues in a safe, private environment.

*Empowerment.* A process that enables participants to express what is most important to them and to do so in a way that can be heard by others empowers them. Empowerment means finding the means by which individuals can use their own sources of power—their own best forms of expression—to “say” what they have experienced, what they think, how they feel, what they want, and what matters most to them. Unbridled expression may allow one person to be clear, while stomping on others’ abilities to do the same. For this reason, the process must be one that permits both expression and reception—talking and listening. You are not empowered if others cannot hear or appreciate what you have to say. In process design, empowerment may require a variety of things:

- You may need to include opportunities for different forms of expression. Not everyone is empowered by speech. In fact, reticent individuals may find “talking,” especially in large groups, intimidating.
- You may have to pay attention to potential problems of domination in which certain individuals will want to “set the agenda” or lead the course of the discussion, which can derail attempts to allow everyone the freedom to establish what is important to them.
- You may need to build in a variety of “venues” or structures of dialogue, including, for example, individual writing, dyads, small groups, and large groups.
- Participants may need to have opportunities to revisit and reconsider their ideas, to reality test their ideas, and to change their minds.
- The process may need to include opportunities to get information and increase knowledge.
- A detailed agenda and focus for discussion can be empowering because it enables people to think clearly about various issues and to clarify what is important.

An effective tool for empowerment that we learned from the Public Conversations Project is the “go-round.” Using this technique, participants in a dialogue group each take a turn to talk about their experience or to address a question without interruption. The go-round is a listening exercise, in which the goal is to express and hear what is important to each person without formulating a response, answer, or rebuttal to what he or she has to say. All participants are asked to prepare their presentation in advance. As a result, the go-round encourages listening; you are not rehearsing or planning your comments while others are speaking. And for those who may, for whatever reason, feel they do not want to contribute, a pass rule makes it possible to remain silent without question.

We recently facilitated a meeting of about 120 teachers at a local high school who were experiencing considerable strife among themselves and with the administration. We knew going in that emotions would run high and that some teachers would not feel safe to talk about the issues involved. Safety and empowerment would be key. In order to maximize empowerment, we did a variety of things:

1. We asked the administrators to be “keynote listeners” so that they would be in a new nondominating role and could hear clearly what was important to teachers. As keynote listeners, they participated by listening rather than speaking.

2. We gave participants individual writing time to think through what they wanted to say.
3. We had both small and large group discussions.
4. We had participants build a wall mural of issues of concern.
5. We gave out a form so that participants could write their responses if they felt they had something to say that was not heard.
6. We interviewed the keynote listeners (the administrators) at the end about what they heard the teachers say, what seemed most important to the teachers, and what the next steps should be.

**Connection.** Dialogue processes should enable participants to think beyond their individual needs and aims and to become conscious of a system of relationships. Our conflicts are made by social interaction between people, but disputants do not always realize or recognize this. Good dialogue processes help participants become aware of communication and connection and allow them to build on the new skills collaboratively.

Connection can be established by exploring common history, shared concerns, community values, or goals that require collaboration to achieve. *Timelining* is an interesting method for initiating connection. Members of a community or organization put a large piece of butcher paper on the wall with a line running horizontally down the middle and years placed at intervals along the line. They then put their names at the appropriate period in which they joined the group and talk a bit about what was going on in the organization or community at that time. The timeline goes beyond the current date into the future, and members can talk about what they would like to see happen with the group in coming years and decades. This is an excellent technique for building a common history and beginning to generate a common vision for the future.

One of the most common and effective methods for establishing connection is to help participants move from negotiating individual demands to framing and working together to solve a problem. This approach—integrative problem solving (also discussed in the appendix)—involves framing the issue as a problem, generating options for a solution, deliberating together, and making decisions about how to proceed. Families have this kind of dialogue from time to time. Instead of arguing about whether a sixteen year old can get a car, the family could discuss ways to meet everyone's transportation needs. Several options, including a car for the teen, can be weighed and discussed jointly. The car issue cannot adequately be discussed in isolation. Because family members are connected, their needs must be looked at together, and trade-offs may be necessary. If the teenager

gets the car, his need for status and transportation will be satisfied, but the parents will have to sacrifice some money and perhaps a good deal of sleep.

If two workers were having a mediation over how to organize a storage room, the mediator might ask them who uses the room, who cares most about how it is organized, and who is most impacted by decisions related to storage and the way it is organized. The sensibility of connection raises the question of who should be at the table and involved in the dialogue. Which connections are most important and which relationships are most impacted by the discussion?

*Inclusion.* This sensibility honors the value of difference. We want processes that include a diversity of perspectives on the issues at hand. In certain cases, this means making sure that all stakeholder groups are represented at the table. Sometimes this is not possible, so we try to be as inclusive as we can. If it is not possible to have full inclusion at one event, perhaps multiple events will add diversity to the mix.

The spirit of inclusion is more than getting many people into the room. It also means designing processes by which different points of view can be heard, respected, and used as a basis for any action that might come out of the discussion. Inclusion and empowerment complement one another; they must exist side by side. Empowerment centers on what participants can contribute, and inclusion centers on what they can gain.

An attitude of inclusion alerts us to the need for diversity, but there are practical considerations that make it challenging. Certain parties may not be willing to participate in the dialogue. Certain participants may make other participants feel unsafe, endangering their sense of empowerment. The size of the group and/or resource constraints may make full inclusion impossible. In general, we use the following guidelines to make decisions about who should be involved in a process.

1. How many people can effectively engage in the process? Sometimes space, time, and money allow a few hundred people to participate, and other times only a small number of participants is possible.
2. Who has information, important perspectives, and ideas that would enhance the discussion?
3. Who are the most important stakeholders? In other words, who has the most to gain or lose from possible outcomes?
4. Who is involved in key relationships, and what relationships may need to be transformed?

5. Who would most benefit from the kinds of learning that will occur in the dialogue?
6. Who, if left out, might try to subvert the process?

When we are creating processes for conflict management, we try to be inclusive from the beginning. In a two-party mediation, we will ask the parties to talk about their needs and how best to approach the mediation. We may check with them at several points in the mediation about whether the process is working. If a small group is involved, we may interview everyone in advance to discover their process needs and to solicit process suggestions. In a larger group, community, or organization, we will work with a design team consisting of a diversity of representatives from the system.

We once facilitated a multistakeholder engagement process to plan improvements in information technology for the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (see chapter 11). The diverse design team worked for nearly a year, before and during the process, to make decisions about how to proceed. One of the most important questions was who should be included in the processes, and we spent considerable time on this issue. We knew that it would be fruitless to limit participation to the tribal colleges, so we expanded participation to include representatives from government, funding agencies, technology companies, tribal governments, the general public, and even international representatives of indigenous education systems abroad. Over the year, we worked with various size groups ranging from 40 to 150. Since then, we have worked at several individual tribal colleges facilitating strategic planning processes. When we do this, we want to make sure that faculty, students, administration, staff, board members, and community members are involved. In the best cases, the college will sponsor several planning meetings for particular stakeholder groups, so that each voice can be heard.

*Inquiry.* The spirit of inquiry leads us to think about the interaction differently. Instead of arguing, debating, pressuring, or winning and losing, we see ourselves as engaged in a process of mutual discovery. We shift from, “Who will prevail?” to, “What do we have to learn?” We shift from an “all-knowing” position to a “not-knowing” one. Instead of viewing communication as an opportunity to influence, we see it as the foundation for exploration, or “collective tinkering.”<sup>9</sup>

You can tell that change is afoot when a mediator, after hearing long series of harangues, summarizes what each person has said and then says, “Okay, it is clear that you have very different opinions on this issue and that neither of you are really persuaded. What do you want to do about this?” This question invites the parties to shift gears

and to think about discovering a new path. The same kind of shift can happen after the opening statements of an environmental negotiation, when the facilitator says, “Thank you for offering your initial perspectives and hopes. In order to move forward constructively, we will need a common body of information and facts. Let’s talk about how to proceed with fact finding in a way that is acceptable to all of you.”

As another example, consider the case of a young man who drops out of college during his junior year. His parents are furious. After having spent thousands of dollars on his education, they feel betrayed. Their natural response is to strike out: “What?! How can you do this?” and then to demean, “You unappreciative jerk . . . after all we have done for you!” The son’s reply—if there is one—will be predictable: “Get off my back. You think that you control my life. Forget it, I don’t want your money.” This exchange will probably make relations a bit chilly for a few months (years?), but could be transformed into a very different kind of dialogue in which the parents eventually talk openly with their son about his frustrations, goals, hopes, and fears, and he opens up to their worries, experience, and ideas. Shifting from a polarized atmosphere of hostility, this family can move into a dialogue of inquiry—to learn from each other, to ask hard questions, and to explore important issues of life.

When we facilitated public engagement events on protection against mountain lions in Arizona (chapter 5), we knew the discussions could become quite contentious and heated. Some participants, such as foothills homeowners, would strongly favor removing, even killing, the lions in order to protect the residents. We knew that other stakeholders such as conservationists would favor protecting the animal and preventing developers from building homes so close to wild lands. Transforming the conversation from a debate into a mutual inquiry would be important. Instead of having participants stand up and give a series of speeches, which would almost certainly lead to arguments, we asked instead that they systematically explore in small groups various options for how the fish and game agency should respond when there were (1) sightings, (2) interactions, (3) threats, and (4) attacks. In other words, we tried to shift the process from one of contention to one of inquiry.

*Creativity.* Another factor that should be taken into consideration in process design is a creative sensibility, the understanding that there are no pat formulas or formats—that dialogue processes require creative thinking and adaptability. Good mediators and facilitators are creative, even imaginative, in how they think about process. Wise parents, smart managers, effective educators, and experienced diplomats maintain the same attitude: “Hmm, this is interesting. How can we



structure a process here that will be engaging, safe, constructive, and effective?" Barge says that community engagement processes require "capturing the imagination of participants, which involves creative events that inspire one's imaginative abilities."<sup>10</sup>

Creativity in design does not mean wild experimentation where anything goes. Participants as well as mediators and facilitators will have had experience with various processes that have worked in the past. They may need to explore new combinations or even construct new tools and techniques as needed. Design teams can be very helpful, in part because they expand the number of creative minds working to develop a process. We commonly train a design team in various standards, goals, and techniques for dialogue processes and then facilitate the team's creative discussion of how to design a particular upcoming event or events. Often this is an incremental process: The design team may put a macroprocess in place, establishing the stages or series of events to be conducted, and then after each stage more specifically design the process for the next stage.

Just thinking back on the many processes we have participated in designing, here is a list of some techniques we have used to (1) engage participants, (2) empower them, (3) bring out their best thinking, (4) use difference as a positive resource, and (5) break destructive patterns of interaction:

- Collaborative wall murals
- Fish-bowl interviews in which a small group is interviewed by the facilitator in a circle surrounded and observed by the larger group of participants.
- Participants interviewing one another
- Written forms and questionnaires
- Metaphors and stories
- Individually created posters
- Collaboratively created charts
- Creating newspaper headlines
- A dreamcatcher basket in which participants placed written hopes and dreams
- Honoring ideas on scrolls tied with ribbons
- Guided tours
- Native American dancing and prayers
- Songs and music

We could go on and on. We include this list just to illustrate how imagination can help when trying to achieve constructive communication, but we have to be careful here, because we don't want to give you the impression that dialogues are always just cute "techniques." They must be part of carefully crafted, purposeful, adapted, and effective overall processes for change in what often proves to be difficult conversations.

Process design, then, is an important element in helping parties to communicate in new ways. The second key to making such communication possible is setting the right context or focus for the discussion. What questions does the group address? How do they frame their issues, and how do they organize the topics they want to talk about? These are questions of context.

### **Finding the Best Context**

The context is the topical frame for dialogue. It is the question that the group addresses. The context of discussion may be broad, narrow, wide-ranging, or quite focused. Constructive conversation depends in large measure on how the issue is framed. Individuals, groups, and organizations embroiled in conflict may find it unsafe to talk about allegations and hostilities, but it might be possible for them to talk about common values, goals, or future visions. It may be hard to talk about anger, hurt, and resentment, but easier to talk about personal experience. A community terrified about opening the subject of race relations may be able to explore "cultural richness." Concerns about

crime and violence may lock a group into certain ways of thinking that are released and broadened when they shift the topic to “community safety.”<sup>11</sup> An organization that is riddled with complaints about unprofessional and disrespectful behavior may find it possible to move forward by having a dialogue on how to make a productive and comfortable work environment.

Once a topic becomes too dangerous to discuss—or too risky—it becomes an “undiscussable issue.” Issues can become undiscussable when there is a strong history of hostility between the parties, disputants are unable to frame the issue in a way that will lead to any kind of constructive conversation, the issue brings forth an unwanted repetitive pattern that does damage, or the parties worry that discussing the issue will result in personal attack, misunderstanding, or loss of face. Undiscussable issues also arise when the parties are so entrenched in their own point of view that discussion of solutions seems fruitless. Talking to the “other side” might even show some level of weakness that disputants are not willing to admit. It is amazing how family, coworkers, and community members will tell you privately exactly what is bothering them but find it impossible to discuss the problem with one another. Undiscussable issues signal a stuck spot that must be transcended if parties are to move forward together.

*Context Setting as Scoping.* The metaphor of the scope, be it a telescope or microscope, is helpful because it implies that a lens is pointed at something. Just like a photographer looking for the right frame, you can always “scope out” to a broader topic, “scope in” to a narrower one, or “scope around” to different perspectives. When people were unable to talk about their views on abortion in any constructive way, the Public Conversations Project was able to help them *scope in* to discuss the details of their experience. When community members were stuck on the issue of crime and violence, they found it helpful to *scope out* to the broader subject of community safety.

Mediators are very good at helping parties move from one context to another. When divorcing parents are unable to get past their disagreement about sharing time with the children, the mediator will ask them to shift topics from time demands to their children’s needs. When coworkers are attacking one another for workplace behavior, the mediator may ask them to talk about the work environment in general; and when one neighbor is complaining about a barking dog, the conversation may shift to what makes a good neighborhood or what the neighbors like about living in the area. Not only may conversation take a positive turn when the context shifts, but the parties may find the seeds of fruitful discussion on the original issue. Spending some time talking about their children may help the parents better



understand the children's needs and what each parent can provide. A discussion about the workplace environment may help coworkers see that problems are not personal but systemic, and discussing the qualities of a good neighborhood may bring a variety of issues to light on dog barking, including the need for peace and quiet as well as safety and security. In each of these cases, scoping to a new context can provide the basis for collaborative problem solving in each case. Notice that in each case of scoping—redirecting to a new context—the parties fundamentally shift the question they are discussing. When parties get stuck, they would be well-advised to query, “Are we even asking the right questions here?”

*Context Setting Questioning.* The questions a group addresses will determine in large measure the content of their discussion. If you ask participants what they want, they may engage in a struggle between competing demands. For this reason, many mediators never start with this question. If you ask participants why they think they are right, they will exchange arguments and look for you to decide who is correct. Such questions may be appropriate in legal proceedings, but they are not very productive for establishing a dialogue. Notice how each of the following sets of questions, suggested by Ferdig, focuses the discussion in a different direction.<sup>12</sup>

*To focus on identity:* Who am I? What is important to me? Who are we together? What do we both care about? What does each of us bring to this conversation based on our previous experience around the topic that brings us together?

*To focus on principles:* What do I stand for? What do we jointly stand for? How do our choices and actions reflect our individual and collective values? How do we want to interact with one another? What might that process look like? What can we agree on?

*To focus on intentions:* Where am I going? What do I want to see happen here? What are we up to in this conversation? What can we create together that brings us to where we want to be?

*To focus on exploration of possibility:* What are the things you value most about yourself? What are the core factors that give “life” and “energy” to the group? What are the possibilities of that which we can create together based on the best of who we are?

The Vietnam dialogues, sponsored by former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara between 1995 and 1998, provide a magnificent example of the power of a carefully crafted question. The war, which occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s, involved North Vietnam on one side and South Vietnam and the United States on the other. Ending with the reunification of the country, the war resulted in about 50,000 American deaths and untold numbers of Vietnamese casualties, not to mention significant social and political disruption in the United States and in Southeast Asia.

About 20 years after the war, McNamara invited U.S. and Vietnamese officials and scholars to participate in six dialogue sessions on this question: “In the light of what now can be learned from the historical record, what U.S. and Vietnamese decisions might have been different and what difference would they have made in the course of the war—if each side had judged the other side’s intentions and capabilities more accurately?”<sup>13</sup> McNamara wrote:

I hoped to examine a hypothesis that had gradually taken shape in my mind: Both Washington and Hanoi had missed opportunities to achieve our geopolitical objectives without the terrible loss of life suffered by each of our countries. There were, I hypothesized, opportunities either to have avoided the war before it started or to have terminated it long before it had run its course. Were there such opportunities? If so, why were they missed? What lessons can we draw to avoid such tragedies in the twenty-first century?<sup>14</sup>

Although not all participants wanted to talk about this question immediately, they eventually did take the question seriously and

embarked on a joint dialogue of inquiry in which they could see, through years of hindsight, that each side had misunderstood the other in fundamental ways and that they had missed important opportunities to change the course of the conflict. The guiding questions of the dialogue were not: “What happened? Who was right?” or “What caused the war?” Instead, the group focus created a learning conversation on missed opportunities. Productive conversation on a potentially undiscussable issue was made possible by careful context framing.

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## TRANSFORMING THE RELATIONSHIP

We wrote earlier that individuals and groups embroiled in difficult conflicts must find a way to transcend the patterns of communication that flummox them. As we have seen, new patterns of communication can help groups explore difficult issues in a way that can lead to insight and, in some cases, even solutions. Such conversations can do something else as well: They can help to transform relationships.

### I and Thou

For Martin Buber, human relationships are of supreme importance.<sup>15</sup> Too often, Buber wrote, we treat other people as objects to be changed, reduced, and manipulated. This he called an *I-It* relationship: I put myself in the position of assessing, influencing, and controlling others. This kind of relationship is especially common in conflict situations, in which people move against one another as if they were objects. The key to finding new relationships is a shift toward what Buber calls the *I-Thou* relationship, in which people treat every person as a complex being who cannot be reduced and should not be treated as an object. Buber wrote that *dialogue* is a process of walking a narrow ridge between one’s own experience and that of others, or, as Pearce and Pearce state it, “holding your own ground while remaining profoundly open to the other.”<sup>16</sup>

The I-Thou relationship embodies *respect* for difference. It means that we may disagree on issues, but we respect one another because of a deep understanding that our beliefs, values, and actions are products of unique and complex life experiences. We may need to coordinate actions to make temporary solutions and resolutions, but we work out ways to do these things with respect. The dialogues of the Public Conversations Project discussed earlier in the chapter show how a shift from disrespect to respect can happen. In their sessions on abortion, no one really changed his or her mind on the issue, but nearly all participants experienced profound shifts of the second-order, from avoidance to engagement, from defensiveness to safety,

and from disrespect to respect. Indeed, they often expressed amazement at the changes they felt in their attitudes toward people with different points of view after experiencing the dialogue process.

We have seen this happen many times in mediation. Participants who are initially nervous, suspicious, defensive, and polarized begin to relax a little, see the other person's point of view, and come to a new level of understanding and sometimes even respect. For us, a mediation is successful if the parties are able to achieve this kind of shift, whether they reach a negotiated agreement or not. In chapter 9, we described a dialogue process used in Indonesia among village leaders following the destructive four-year conflict in Maluku. The 40 participants repeatedly expressed their satisfaction, even pleasure, of discovering dialogue as a form of communication in which they could shift their relationship from hostility to cooperation. For example, one participant wrote: "We are required to learn about each other's knowledge and experience, and to gain understanding about the differences so that the feelings of unity and association can be reconstructed so that there will be greater reconciliation between people."<sup>17</sup>

This kind of transformation also happened on the other side of the globe in Catron County, New Mexico. Catron County is a vast territory in the beautiful wilderness of western New Mexico. With a population of only 2,500, the region is sustained mostly by ranching and forestry. This economic base was greatly threatened in the 1990s by federal environmental measures that sparked a conflict that not only caused considerable stress for the whole community, but threatened violence as well. At the moment when "war" seemed imminent, a small group of citizens decided to take another path and asked the New Mexico Center for Dispute Resolution to make a visit.<sup>18</sup>

At their first meeting, the facilitators and a small group of ranchers, loggers, environmentalists, and others agreed to air a variety of perspectives on the issue using strong ground rules. In subsequent sessions, the number of participants grew, and they began to explore their visions for the community, discovering in the process significant common values and concerns. Over time, they explored numerous topics and eventually focused specifically on five areas of concern—education, dispute resolution, land stewardship, economic development, and youth development. The dialogue expanded from the conflict that had originally brought the group together to wide-ranging discussions of quality of life in the community. Discussions took many forms, including dialogue groups, planning committees, field trips, mediations and negotiations, community visioning meetings, and youth meetings. Additionally, community members were trained as facilitators, and a local group took on the responsibility of organizing meetings in the future.

The process in Catron County did not always go smoothly. The conflicts were not always resolved, and tensions did return from time to time, but in all, a new base of respect emerged and enabled the community to begin to manage its differences constructively.

### Achieving Dialogue

In this chapter we have presented a variety of thoughts and cases about how to transcend negative patterns of communication and to transform relationships among individuals and groups that experience challenging differences. Collectively, we refer to transcendent and transformative communication as *dialogue*. To summarize, dialogue:

- treats all participants as “fully formed, whole, and complex human beings.”
- empowers communicators to “be assured that their stories will be heard and allow others the same privilege.”
- opens “new territory where joining places may be found.”
- is “multivoiced and nonpolarized.”
- addresses “fresh, constructive questions that demand critical, creative thinking.”
- aims to educate by allowing “participants to learn important new things.”
- builds “relationships of respect.”<sup>19</sup>

#### Box 10.2

Remember a time when you were fighting for something you believed in. If you saw your perspective as a “story,” what was the moral of the story? Did the moral endure throughout the interaction? Did it change at all through the interaction?

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## HOW YOU CAN USE THIS CHAPTER

This chapter presents a variety of principles that you can use in all situations where the management of difference is challenging. We urge you to spend some time looking for insights you can use.

1. No conflict is just what it is. Every difference is socially constructed and could be constructed differently if the parties were willing and able to do so. Harm can be transcended, and relationships can be transformed.

2. Remember the I-Thou relationship: You can hold your own ground, while remaining profoundly open to others. One choice is to stay in the tension.
3. Exclusion will almost always lead toward harm; inclusion will almost always lead toward value.
4. Be conscious of face in every interaction. Destructive facework almost always leads toward harm; constructive facework almost always leads toward value.
5. Although dialogue is not always possible, it is the ideal in matters of managing difference. Aim for dialogue whenever possible.

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### Interactive Case Study

#### CONFLICTING MORAL ORDERS

*Context:* You are going to address some personal destructive interactions that could happen in the lives of you or your classmates.

*Opening exercise(s):* Think about a moral issue or point of view that is deeply rooted in your own life experience. Imagine that another person or group in a conflict situation challenged this moral stance. Perhaps this has already happened to you. How would you, or did you, feel and act? Get into small groups. Take turns telling about areas in your life in which conflict would become, or has become, a deep moral challenge. Record some notes about each of the situations, as each of your examples will be used to address one of the focuses below.

***Focus #1: Managing Process: Talking and Listening***

Choose one of the examples from your small-group opening exercise. For this example, go through each of the bullets for empowerment outlined earlier in this chapter and discuss how you could avoid harm and move toward value by paying attention to this type of communication.

***Focus #2: Managing Process: Inquiry***

Take another example from your opening exercise. What questions could you ask in the situation, either implicitly or explicitly, to stay away from harm? Instead of seeking “Who will prevail?” shift to, “What do we have to learn?” If the participants in this situation were engaged in a process of mutual discovery, what could be learned?

***Focus #3: Managing Process: Creativity***

Take another example from your opening exercise. Look at the sample creative processes discussed in this chapter. Use your imagination to depict this potential destructive interaction in a new way. Try to create a depiction that frames the issues in a way that opens up communication rather than closes it down. Share these depictions with the rest of the class.

**Focus #4: Managing Context: Scoping**

Take another example from your opening exercise. Isolate the issue that could bring this difference to the most harmful sphere. Scope out to the broader context and try to discuss the issue in your group using that frame. Now scope in to a narrower dimension of the issue and try to discuss the issue in your group using that frame. What changed as you changed the context? How might you invite people with a different moral view to change the scope?

**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Stephen W. Littlejohn, "The Transcendent Communication Project: Searching for a Praxis of Dialogue," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 21 (2004): 337–360.
- <sup>2</sup> Stephen Littlejohn, "Moral Conflict," in *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Communication: Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds. John G. Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), pp. 395–417.
- <sup>3</sup> William A. Gattis, "Transcendent Discourse and Moral Conflict: The Use of Dialogue Groups to Improve Communication in Long-standing Moral Struggles" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, 1985), pp. 184–185.
- <sup>4</sup> Nola J. Heidlebaugh, *Judgment, Rhetoric, and the Problem of Incommensurability: Recalling Practical Wisdom* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).
- <sup>5</sup> Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics* (New York: New Press, 1994).
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, Richard Chasin, Margaret Harzig, Laura Chasin, Corky Becker, and Robert R. Stains, "From Diatribe to Dialogue on Divisive Public Issues: Approaches Drawn from Family Therapy," *Mediation Quarterly*, 13 (1996): 323–344.
- <sup>7</sup> Adapted from J. Kevin Barge, "Dialogue, Conflict, and Community," in *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Communication: Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds. John G. Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), pp. 517–544; and Mary A. Speke Ferdig, "Exploring the Social Construction of Complex Self-Organizing Change: A Study of Emerging Change in the Regulation of Nuclear Power" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Organizational Development, Benedictine University, Lisle, IL, 2001).
- <sup>8</sup> David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999).
- <sup>9</sup> Ferdig, "Exploring," p. 185.
- <sup>10</sup> Barge, "Dialogue," p. 538.
- <sup>11</sup> Examples taken from the Cupertino Community Project. See Shawn Spano, *Public Dialogue and Participatory Democracy: The Cupertino Community Project* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2001).
- <sup>12</sup> Adapted from Ferdig, "Exploring," pp. 182–183.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), p. 17.
- <sup>14</sup> McNamara, Blight, and Brigham, p. xi.
- <sup>15</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1958).
- <sup>16</sup> W. Barnett Pearce and Kimberly A. Pearce, "Combining Passions and Abilities: Toward Dialogic Virtuosity," *Southern Communication Journal*, 65 (1999): 161–175.
- <sup>17</sup> Carmen Lowry and Stephen W. Littlejohn, "Dialogue and the Discourse of Peacebuilding in Maluku, Indonesia," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 23 (2006): 405–528.
- <sup>18</sup> Melinda Smith, *The Catron County Citizens Group: A Case Study* (Albuquerque: New Mexico Center for Dispute Resolution, 1998).
- <sup>19</sup> Littlejohn, "Moral Conflict," p. 409.