TRANSFORMING CONFLICT: FROM RIGHT/WRONG TO RELATIONAL ETHICS*

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ABSTRACT: The author speaks about the transformation of conflict and particularly introduces the idea that dialogue really is a way out of the conflict and out of the consensus. This is connected with a notion to which she refers as a relational ethics. She analyzes the implications of dialogue, transformation and relational ethics in terms of how families, communities and education are thought of. She does not talk about a particular way of positioning yourself in front of conflict, or about some specific and practical ways of doing it, but hopes that this relationship with families and education will arise from the conceptual analysis she develops. The author introduces the idea of dialogue, neither as any form of communication nor as conversation. Dialogue is a special form of interaction that does not happen very often and usually does not occur spontaneously; it can certainly happen, but often opportunities to engage in genuine dialogue have to be created. By taking Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogue —when he speaks about the dialogue as a responsive activity (responsive dialogue)—, the author poses that being responsive places us as practitioners in what she considers a relational ethics, which is when you are attentive to the process of being related in itself. In other words, instead of focusing on individuals, rather than focusing on certain forms of action, in certain behaviors, in certain objects, in certain entities or contexts, you really should look at what we do together, what is what we are doing or creating together; what kinds of opportunities are emerging? So, if you take this approach on dialogue, it is recognized that there are always multiple ways of looking at a situation. Then the most important aspect of the dialogue is that although there professionists trained on how to handle dialogue, at a certain

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way, it does not mean that it is the only way to look at a situation. When you think about the families or educational contexts with whom you work, or when you face conflicts and differences within the community, it is important to maintain the idea that there are multiple realities that are constructed, and how you can be responsive to this multiplicity, without judging them.

Key words: dialogue, transformation, relational ethics.

LA TRANSFORMACIÓN DEL CONFLICTO: DE LO CORRECTO/INCORRECTO A UNA ÉTICA RELACIONAL

Resumen: La autora habla de la transformación del conflicto e introduce la idea de que el diálogo es una manera de salir del conflicto, así como del consenso. Esto lo conecta con una noción de ética relacional. Ella analiza las implicaciones del diálogo, la transformación y la ética relacional en términos de cómo se piensan las familias, las comunidades y la educación. Asimismo, no habla acerca de una manera de posicionarse ante los conflictos o acerca de algunas formas específicas y prácticas que puedan ayudar a hacerlo, sino que espera que esta relación con las familias y la educación surja del análisis conceptual que desarrolla. Introduce la idea de diálogo no como una forma de comunicación, ni como conversación. El diálogo es una forma especial de interacción que no sucede muy a menudo y, por lo general, no ocurre de forma espontánea; ciertamente puede suceder, pero, a menudo, la oportunidad para entablar un diálogo genuino tiene que ser creada. Toma la noción de diálogo de Mijaíl Bajtín —cuando él habla acerca del diálogo como una actividad responsiva (diálogo responsivo)—, la autora plantea que el ser responsivos nos sitúa como practicantes dentro de lo que ella considera una ética relacional, que es cuando se está atento al proceso de relacionarse con sí mismo. En otras palabras, en lugar de enfocarse en los individuos, en lugar de enfocarse en ciertas formas de acción, en ciertos comportamientos, en ciertos objetos, en ciertas entidades o contextos, realmente se debe observar qué es lo que hacemos juntos: ¿qué es lo que estamos haciendo o creando juntos?; ¿qué clases de oportunidades están emergiendo? Así, si se toma este enfoque acerca del diálogo, se reconoce que siempre hay múltiples formas de observar una situación. Entonces, el aspecto más importante del diálogo es que, aunque haya profesionales entrenados acerca de cómo manejar el diálogo, en cierta manera, eso no significa que esta sea la única forma de observar una situación. Cuando se piensa acerca de las familias o los contextos educativos con los que se trabaja o cuando se enfrentan los conflictos y las diferencias en las comunidades, es importante mantener la idea de que hay múltiples realidades que son construidas y de cómo se puede ser responsivos ante esta multiplicidad, sin juzgarlas.

Palabras clave: diálogo, transformación, ética relacional.

> Truth is not […] to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people […] in the process of their dialogic interaction (Bakhtin 1981).

Bakhtin (1981) claims that dialogue is a responsive activity. When we are responsive to others, our words and actions are not entirely our own, they carry our history of relationships and the beliefs and values these relationships have crafted.

This responsivity of dialogue situates us, as practitioners, within a relational ethic where attentiveness to the process of relating is centered, rather than adherence to some abstract, decontextualized set of principles. Dialogue, as an ethic of relationally sensitive practice, respects the diversity of locally situated beliefs and values. Thus, dialogue allows practitioners to let go of imposing judgment, assessment and evaluation of others' actions and opens the door for attentiveness to the coordination of diverse social orders. In this respect, the relational ethic of dialogue has much to offer our understanding of family, education, and conflict.

THE DIFFERENCE OF DIALOGUE: TOWARD A RELATIONAL ETHIC

In her foreword to *Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies* (Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna 2004), Julia Wood says,

> genuine dialogue depends less on self-expression and other transmissional aspects of communication than upon responsiveness […] [which] arises out of and is made possible by qualities of thought and talk that allow transformation in how one understands the self, others, and the world they inhabit (2004: xvi).

If we are responsive to others —particularly to others who seek our "expert" opinion— then we are also open to altering our own commitments and beliefs. The responsivity of dialogue requires questioning one's own world view just enough to allow *space* for the *rationality* of the other's view. The focus is on making space for multiple rationalities. In professional practice (i.e., in our work with families and communities, as well as in our educational practices), this means that our job is not to impose our "expert" understanding on the other but to create a space where multiple (and often diverse) understandings can co-exist.

What is dialogue?
As noted above, Bakhtin (1981) describes dialogue as a *responsive* activity.

Dialogue is not limited to self-interest, psychological or relational improvement, nor to crafting cooperative, conflict-free ways of "going on together" (Wittgenstein 1953). Dialogue is about responsivity. In dialogue,
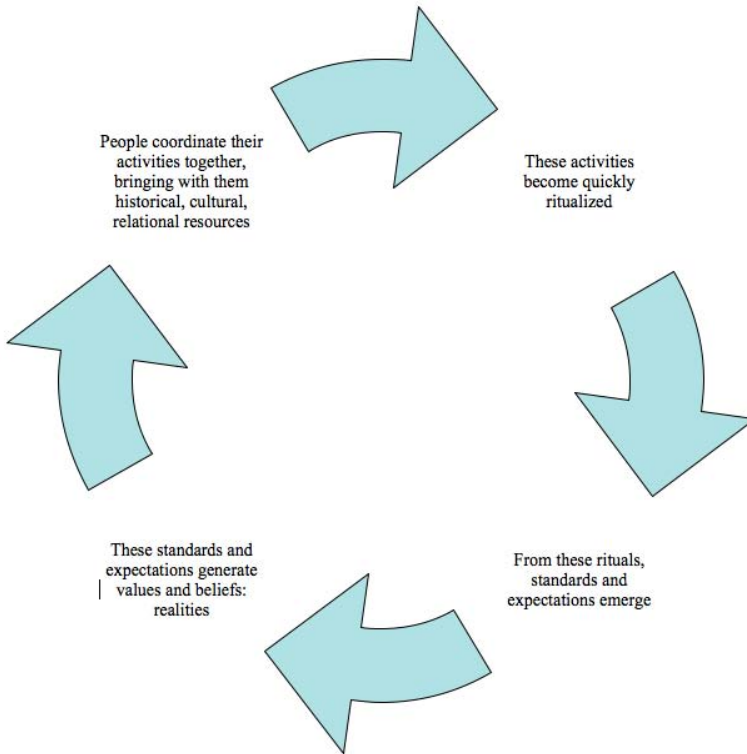
> (1) communication is [...] a fluctuating, unpredictable, multivocal process in which uncertainty infuses encounters between people and what they mean and become, [...] (2) interlocutors are immersed in a process that shapes and forms them even as they shape and form it and one another in ways that are not entirely predictable or finalizable, [...] (3) tension is inherent [...] and integral to (the process) [...] (4) (there is no attempt to) idealize or seek common ground, [...] and (5) (participants) are realized in the *process* [...] (1981: xvii-xviii).

Yet, I must be clear. Bakhtin's responsivity should not be equated with assumptions of equal partners with equal values seeking equal outcomes. To Bakhtin, as to Buber (1970), dialogue occurs when conditions of *curiosity* are fostered, despite differences in values and beliefs. Participants in dialogue engage with respect and curiosity.

In contrast to dialogue, Bakhtin (1981), Sampson (2008) and others would describe our common, individualist understanding of communication as *monologic*. Monologism is characterized by a focus on what Sampson (2008) calls the *self contained individual*. To understand communication, one only needs to understand the person — his or her motives, beliefs, intentions, and cognitive abilities. Dialogism, as proposed by Bakhtin (1981), offers us a very different understanding of human interaction. As Sampson (2008) says, in dialogism "*the most important thing about people is not what is contained within them, but what transpires between them*" (2008: 20, italics original). Further, Sampson (2008) tells us that in dialogue, the "emphasis (is) on the idea that people's lives are characterized by the ongoing conversations and dialogues they carry out in the course of their everyday activities" (2008: 20).

Monologism, which is also our taken-for-granted way of being in the world, focuses on the individual and his or her private meanings, feelings, and motives. How often do we focus on individual family member or individual families and the ways in which they "measure up" to the cultural norm? When we focus in this way, we ignore any concern for the ways in which conversational partners make meaning together. We adopt, instead, a "mentalist" approach where the assumption is that one must "get inside the head of individual families or members of families in order to "really" understand what is happening. This is very much the model of most professional practice; it holds individuals accountable for their own, private meanings and intentions. Yet, the dialogic understanding of meaning that Bakhtin (1981), Sampson (2008) and a host of others are proposing is concerned first and foremost with appreciating the complex processes by which our worlds are made.

These processes start when people coordinate their activities with others in interaction. From these coordinations/interactions, rituals quickly emerge. These rituals generate a sense of standards and expectations that we use to assess our own and others' actions. With these standardizing modes in place, values and beliefs are generated; in other words, entire realities —moral orders— are constructed. Thus, from the very simple process of coordinating our activities with each other (interacting), we develop entire belief systems, moralities and values.

People coordinate their activities together, bringing with them historical, cultural, relational resources

These activities become quickly ritualized

These standards and expectations generate values and beliefs: realities

From these rituals, standards and expectations emerge

If we are blind to this process (as traditional, monologic modes of being are), we can easily locate meaning, intentions, values, moralities, and all that is meaningful in our lives to the private world of the individual mind. And, in so doing, our attempts to move beyond personal or relational conflict toward some sort of livable future is thwarted because the decisions about how we should live, the decisions about what counts as "normal," and about what counts as equality or justice, will remain in the hands of those in positions of power (professionals) who are granted the ability to make these complex decisions because the presumption is that they *know* how to preserve the *right* values. But, the question must be asked: *by whose standards are we*

determining the right values? What are the standards by which professionals claim their position of authority (over someone else's life)?

Dialogue is not a constant, nor a common, form of relating. As Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna (2004) describe, dialogue "exists in moments rather than extended states, cannot be lionized, cannot become business as usual, and cannot be planned precisely or made to happen" (2004: 15). To engage in dialogue is not to impose our professional knowledge on others. Dialogue requires that we extend our curiosity about the profuse and diverse realities that emerge when people come together and coordinate their activities. We must extend that curiosity to those with whom we work, opening possibilities to explore alternative understandings of a person's life situation.

Penman (2000) writes about the ways in which various types of interaction and communication allow for genuine participation, and how they influence the wellbeing of participants — whether that wellbeing refers to their private lives or issues of broader public concern. She discusses "good communication" from a dialogic orientation as necessarily implying a morality: communication is "good" when it is human and good to people, *not when it is clear and concise*. This last statement distinguishes a dialogic understanding of human communication from a popular, technique-oriented approach to communication — an approach associated with a modernist, individualist understanding of communication and meaning.

A dialogic interaction must acknowledge those present and the values and beliefs they bring to the conversation. The most important aspect of any conversation is the *interactive moment* — what those present are doing now and the histories, cultures, and traditions they bring with them. In addition, any conversation must remain open to the possibilities that emerge within the interactive moment; there is no prescribed route toward a pre-determined goal. In other words, dialogue is not focused on any particular technique or content. In dialogue we are more attentive to *what we are doing together*. Additionally, dialogue is marked by openness to diverse understandings, which are the by-product of coordination's among participants. Finally, no meaning, no conversation is ever ultimately complete. Meaning is always open to further supplementation and thus to the construction of new understandings.

Positioned with this relational ethic, we are less focused on the content of what people are doing and saying and more attentive to the *processes* in which they engage and *how their actions* invite each other into particular rituals and relationships. This is not to say that content does not matter. Of course it does — particularly in the workings of our daily lives. However, the dialogic focus I am proposing here encourages a "pause," if you will, in our attention to content. The emphasis in dialogue is on *building a conversational domain where people can talk in different ways about the same old issues*. This means that our first task is to explore ways of creating a context (physical, relational, and personal) that *invites* participants to talk differently about

"the same old topic." This does not mean that differences of opinion, conflict or competing worldviews must be suppressed. This also does not imply that differential power positions are ignored nor that professional expertise is put aside. Rather, to be in dialogue is to engage in the tensionality produced when one holds one's own position while simultaneously remaining open to the position of the other (Stewart and Zediker 2002).

The risk of holding one's own position while allowing others —often with opposing views— to do the same, and to be open and curious about the *coherence* of those very different positions, creates a very unique relational context. It is a context that is more democratic and concerned with broader issues of human and social wellbeing. It is, in other words, a useful process for professional practice. Dialogue, and the relational ethic it embodies, places our attention on what we are co-creating with others. This is a radically different focus from traditional professional ethics where being ethical means using professional tools and knowledge to make assessments and chart a course of action for remedying problems.

Dialogue implies that we begin by presuming the other's *rationality*. In other words, the challenge is to find a way to approach the other as another who is coherent and rational within his or her own community of significance. As mentioned, this stance moves our focus away from *assessment* of who is right and who is wrong or who is a good person and who is not. It places our focus on understanding very different life forms *on their own terms and temporarily suspending evaluation*. Such a stance invites space for multiple rationalities as opposed to persuasive rhetoric where securing the rightness of our own form of life is our main concern. This is not to suggest that preferred forms of action or preferred "ways of being" are ignored or avoided. The point is to open professional practice to the co-construction —the relational achievement— of "preferred" forms of action. The main question to explore is how professional practice unfolds if we *begin* our work by confronting others dialogically. From this different origin, new possibilities for coordination can emerge.

So, our challenge is to create opportunities for dialogue. How do we foster such opportunities within families and communities? How might we introduce a relational, dialogic ethic into our view of education?

CREATING CONDITIONS FOR DIALOGUE

The first task is to explore ways of creating a context that *invites* a different form of conversation — a form of conversation that embodies the tension of dialogue. As described, a dialogic stance brackets the typical persuasive moves professionals are trained to adopt where the very act of being a professional seems to require imposing common standards of good and bad, right and wrong on the situation and/or actions of the other.

I offer some resources for action that can assist us in creating the very different conversational space of dialogue; a space that opens possibility for new understandings while simultaneously not terminating with easy answers about what is moral or good or right and what is not. In other words, these resources for action remind us that diversity of meaning is part of the human condition and engaging diversity with respect and curiosity helps we appreciate the power we each have to construct liveable futures together. Let me offer a set of practices that I believe direct our attention to the process of constructing bridges among competing meaning-making communities. This is not to suggest that all forms of life are acceptable, viable, or in any way condonable. It is simply to refocus our attention on *how* a life form emerges and in focusing on this process, creating the opportunity for a conversation where new understandings can be generated.

Bakhtin (1986) claims that language is never a representation of the world as it is but is, rather, a creation of the world as we construct it. If we take seriously the relational sensibility required of dialogue, we might enter into our daily activities in very different ways. We might, for example, enter into a counseling session or an educational context with curiosity about *how* a family's, a child's, or an individual's problem emerged and what purpose it was serving, as opposed to attempting to understand *why* there is a problem and *who* is at fault. And similarly, we might enter into a smoothly flowing relational moment with a fresh curiosity for how, among all the complexity of human affairs, we manage to become engaged in such preferred performances. The relational ethic of dialogue is rich with potential, opening interactions to the continual reconstruction of meanings.

Shotter (2004) suggests, "for something to make a difference that matters to us, something must surprise us, be unanticipated, unexpected, fill us with wonder." I would like to propose some general notions that, I believe, orient us toward the creative possibilities of dialogue and thereby position us within a relational ethic. These resources are by no means exhaustive. I offer these as only an opening into the imaginative construction of further dialogic potentials.

Reflexive critique

First, and probably most contrary to our traditional, individualist orientation to the world, is the constant use of reflexive critique. Here, the attempt is to entertain doubt about our own certainties. Reflexive critique can take many forms in any interactive moment. We might, for example, pause at the moment we *know* we are correct, we *know* we have the best method or plan; we *know* how something should be. If we pause and ask ourselves, "how else might this be," "what else could I do at this moment," "is there a different way to make sense out of the other person's comments or actions," we open ourselves to the sort of inquiry that invites alternative meanings (McNamee & Gergen 1999).

This is just the sort of inquiry Jaakko Seikkula and his colleagues (1995) engage when they respond to a psychiatric crisis. Rather than assume they, as the professionals, should provide a diagnosis and treatment plan, Seikkula and his team (1995) gather all interested parties together (the person in crisis, family members, friends, neighbors, medical professionals — anyone who might have something to contribute). Collaboratively they discuss the situation, offering multiple perspectives, and develop a plan of action that is responsive to the diverse ways of approaching and understanding the problem. The person in crisis is an active participant in this process. Seikkula calls this process *open dialogue*. It requires a suspension of the professional's certainty that s/he can provide an accurate diagnosis from which a successful treatment plan can be developed. Open dialogue is not limited to psychiatric contexts. Inviting multiple voices and multiple stakeholders into a conversation that expands our descriptions and understandings rather than selecting the "one, correct answer" is useful in all contexts.

When we engage in self-reflexive critique like this, we avoid certainty. And, while certainty (as one hallmark of the competent individual) logically sounds appealing to us, it is precisely the stance that closes us to alternative views. Certainty also separates participants by establishing levels of expertise. Ironically, one of the very qualities we are trained to develop —certainty— inhibits our ability to act in ways that encourage transformation — in other words, in ways that are relationally ethical.

Give voice to life stories

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

This is aptly illustrated in the work of the Public Conversations Project (e.g., Chasin et al. 1996). They show us how dialogue, among people with incommensurate views, is facilitated by inviting them to talk about the relational communities within which their beliefs (i.e., abstract positions) have been constructed. We can remain

in dialogue if we appreciate the *situated* coherence of each other's position. And, in order to craft a reality together, remaining in dialogue is necessary. Thus, we can see that speaking from abstract positions closes our opportunities to *go on together* and locks us in endless attempts to achieve agreement (which we may never achieve). Avoiding abstraction helps we focus on recognizing the *local* significance of opposing views and in that recognition lies the potential to remain in dialogue. Specifically, the interaction (and thereby the relationship) shifts from one where the professional provides expert advice to one where the professional engages in *generous listening* to the narratives that lend coherence to the other's current situation. A professional might disagree with the values or actions described by a family but by listening to the family's story, the professional can understand how it is that this action or belief makes sense to the family members. The professional no longer sees the family as crazy or evil or wrong. The family is viewed as having a different story, a different rationale, a different history of relationship. The professional is much better equipped to continue the conversation with this form of understanding.

Coordination of multiplicity

Another relational resource for ethical action is attention to the coordination of multiplicities**.** When we confront difference, our tendency is to find any means to move toward consensus. Yet, consensus has its problems. Frequently, consensus is reached by participants removing from consideration the issues about which they are most passionate (and by association, the issues upon which their different world views emerge). The "common ground" or consensus that emerges from the process of negotiation most often focuses on smaller, less significant issues and thus, issues with which participants have little investment. To this end, consensus works to accelerate distrust and conflict rather than dissolve either. Consensus privileges problem solving over dialogic connection with the other. If the problem can be solved, there is little need for relational responsibility (McNamee and Gergen 1999) and attentiveness to the other.

Rather than approach problems as opportunities to develop consensus, in transformative dialogue we attempt to coordinate multiple discourses. The challenge is to become curious about all forms of practice and to explore the values and beliefs that give rise to them without searching for universal agreement. Can we create dialogic opportunities that invite *generous listening*, *curious inquiry*, and *a willingness for co-presence*?

Using the familiar in unfamiliar ways

We might also explore using our familiar forms of action in unfamiliar contexts**.** Often when we feel that we lack the resources to be attentive to others'

needs, we search for *new* tools or strategies that will create the desired change. In fact, one of the reasons professionals are in such high demand is because culturally we believe that experts can teach us successful strategies for change. Yet, I would like to suggest that learning *new* strategies for coordinating conflict might not be necessary. Gregory Bateson talks about "the difference that makes a difference" (1972: 272) and Tom Andersen sees this difference as introducing "something unusual but not too un-usual" (Andersen 1991: 33). Here, I am suggesting a variation on this theme.

We all carry with us many voices, many differing opinions, views and attitudes — even on the same subject. These voices represent the accumulation of our relationships (actual, imagined, and virtual). In effect, we carry the residues of many others with us; we contain multitudes (McNamee and Gergen 1999). Yet, most of our actions, along with the positions we adopt in conversations, are one-dimensional. They represent only a small segment of all that we might do and say. The challenge is to draw on these other voices, these conversational resources that are familiar in one set of relationships and situations but not in another. In so doing, we achieve something unusual.

Using familiar resources in contexts where we do not generally use them invites us into new forms of engagement with others. If we think of all our activities as invitations into different relational constructions, then we can focus on how utilizing particular resources invites certain responses in specific relationships and how it invites different responses and constructions in others. All represent various attempts to achieve coordinated respect for the specificity of a given relationship and situation. If we can encourage ourselves (and others) to draw broadly on the conversational resources that are already familiar, perhaps we can act in ways that are *just different enough* to invite others into something beyond the same old unwanted pattern. To the extent that we can invite the use of the familiar in unfamiliar contexts, we are coordinating disparate discourses. What we are avoiding is co-opting one discourse as right and another as wrong. The novelty of enacting the old in a new context becomes, I believe, fertile soil within which to craft generative transformation.

Imagine possibilities

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

Along with "as if" conversations, we might engage in "what if" talk. As with "as if" conversations, when we play with potential scenarios beyond the expected, we have a stronger chance of inviting our relational partners into the crafting of new scenarios. Often, both "as if" and "what if" conversations can be usefully positioned within a broader dialogue about the future. When we speak from certainty about abstract positions, we tend to focus our attention on the past and why things have emerged as they are. However, when we engage in talk about the future and our idealized hopes for how we might jointly craft that future, our focus shifts from why to how our views and practices are in conflict. This shift to how from why suggests a final resource we might use to encourage dialogue.

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

As we can see, when our attention is focused on coordinating a multiplicity of voices within a context where the notion of absolute truth is suspended, we invite a relationally sensitive ethic. This relational ethic moves beyond right and wrong, judgment and assessment. Instead, a relational ethic is attentive to the very unique ways in which participants, in their situated contexts, craft a sense of value in their lives. Appreciating these nuanced values and beliefs on their own terms, opens the possibility for further coordination's that often might include alternative beliefs and values. In sum, transformation is the likely by-product of appreciation, respect, and relational engagement. This is what a relational ethic offers.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Clearly, there is more to be said about dialogue and relational ethics. My hope is that these reflections open further possibilities. Dialogue is a joint performance wherein participants are responsive to each other and to their environment. Such responsivity renders dialogue unusual and unexpected. Yet, entering into dialogue so as to invite the unexpected requires preparation. It requires us to give up our desire to explain the present by pointing to the past. It requires us to replace our abstract positions with our lived stories —the richly textured, relational scenarios we engage in with others. It requires us to listen for, to provide the space for, and to invite difference— for ourselves and for our dialogic partners. This unusual aspect of dialogue opens possibilities for engaging with others relationally.

We live in a relational world. Cultures are thrown into ever increasing contact. And yet, for the most part, we operate within an ideology that privileges the thinking, acting, feeling individual. There is both pragmatic and theoretical demand for forms of practice that emphasize our relational interdependence because it is from our relations that all we take as valuable emerges.

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