



## *The Worm Hole of Generative Dialogue*

By: Rick Smyre

President, Center for Communities of the Future

It was Saturday and I was tired. Between drooping eyelids I sank in and out of consciousness. The TV was on for background noise and little else. I was just beginning to tune consciousness out when I caught a glimpse of the scene on one of those made for TV 24<sup>th</sup> century space odysseys. The female pilot was navigating the small vessel through worm hole after worm hole. Within seconds the ship and its crew had traveled 500 light years. “How wonderful it would be if we could navigate the obstacles of human conversation the way she navigated the obstacles of space,” I remember thinking just before I drifted off into my own inner space.

I have been a fan of space and the future since I was young. Jules Verne’s *To The Earth and Back* caught my imagination as a six year old in 1948. In the late ‘60s, I did not miss a *Star Trek* episode, and was on the edge of my couch in the early morning hours as the words “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” were beamed from the moon to the earth. In the ‘80s the idea of a worm hole appeared in popular culture as advanced technology inspired the depiction of concepts beyond man’s capacity to understand.

In 1994 the Web brought the concept of the Internet into everyone’s home and understanding. Graphical images and networked connections made space again dominate the imagination of earthlings. This time it was virtual space that transformed the nature of communication. Real time and asynchronous time merged into a web of space-time continuum where information expanded almost beyond anyone’s capacity to cope.

The impact of quantum theory has provided us with the technical capability to revolutionize the hardware of communications. When combined with effective software, this hardware exponentially increases the quantity of information that can flow at the speed of light. As computers have been connected, not only has the quantity of information increased, the quality of that information is enhanced.

With the speed of light, bits of information flow around the world without ceasing. The very mechanics of words and numbers are more efficient than ever in history. The explosion of information and web sites has grown beyond our human capacity to use in appropriate and effective means. This we understand. We talk

about the need for “information managers” to handle the quantity of information and to find a way to select information that will impact decisions and human needs positively. What we are just beginning to realize is that we humans are better at developing and manipulating new software for the hardware of computers than developing new concepts, methods and techniques for our human communication.

### *The Disconnect of Human Technology*

Any technology is designed to solve a problem, fill a void or create an innovation for new needs. It is the premise of this paper that, although our electronic technology borders on magic, our human technology of thinking, connecting and interpersonal understanding is out of date and incapable of responding to the needs of a constant changing, interconnected and increasingly complex society.

Nowhere better is this illustrated than in a recent meeting I had with a very competent and fine associate. I met “Tom” in Houston at the World Future Society. It was obvious from the moment I met him that he was able to think systemically and could see connections where others saw isolated obstacles. We chatted on e-mail from time to time, and recently I asked him to have breakfast with me on my way from Washington, DC to Lexington, KY. I expected to be there just an hour before my wife Brownie and I resumed our trip. In fact, I stayed for three hours, and had one of the most important “aha” moments of my professional life.

I wanted to find out about Tom and his work, and was very pleased when he was willing to take 45 minutes to outline his professional life as a regional planner and the diversity of his interests which ran from history to geopolitical thinking to trends of the future. Of course, he and I connected at a deeper level when either of us talked about trends and their impact.

However, when Tom asked me a question and I began to make statements of my own beliefs, I was interested in the way he responded. No matter what I said, he would shake his head almost imperceptibly from side to side, say “no, but” and then bring up another point that was connected to what I was saying, without affirming my point. The more this happened, the more I became intrigued about why it was occurring because at no time was Tom contradicting what I was saying. I finally realized that it was simply the fact that Tom had another factor in his mind in the same category of conversation that he felt was more important than mine.

Tom was not debating me. He was only introducing another factor to consider. However, the method of introducing his point could have been easily perceived as “debating” me. In fact, if this had been more than a decade ago, I would have interpreted what he was doing as contradicting my point of view and I would have been irritated...or at least impatient with his lack of affirmation of any of my comments.

And then it struck me. Tom was programmed to do this. He was a planner. Most planners are structured in cause and effect decision making and structured thinking. In

addition, as we discussed the educational system and how it needed to be rethought and redesigned, another thought struck me. All of us, to include Tom, are the product of an educational system that focuses on one answer thinking, cause and effect decision making, and testing that divided knowledge by asking for accountability of learning through the use of true-false and multiple choice tests.

In other words, *Tom was incapable of dialoguing with me because he had been taught to debate and discuss....which demanded finding the one thought or the one right answer that was appropriate for the moment or the situation.* He had been taught to deal with one thing at a time. He didn't possess the human technology that would allow him to connect at a deeper level of communication and interaction based on integration or blending of thoughts, and thus would always be perceived as in conflict in any conversation.

When I asked Tom if he realized that no matter what I said he would shake his head, say "no, but" and add another factor to the discussion, he expressed surprise. I then told him of my journey to try to break my habit of debating people and mentioned that one of the key breakthroughs for me was the recognition that I needed to change how I thought to be able to change how I communicated. I then told him I believed the combination of structured thinking and the reinforcement of his profession as a planner, prevented him from connecting with my thought before he wanted to present his key factor. I was very gratified when Tom paused, and said to me "you know, my career counselor has told me I would always be in conflict with my superiors, but could never tell me why. I think you have just told me why."

It is my opinion that our traditional way of thinking and dealing with knowledge gives us a *disconnect* in two ways: 1) we are linear thinkers and see outcomes and causation in terms of one thing at a time...thus we cannot think systemically, and 2) we cannot dialogue because, in most cases, each of us has a different factor that is most important to us, no matter what the concept, issue or conversation. And until we are able to see value in what someone says and no longer see single answers to all issues, we will always be perceived as disagreeing and in debate. Thanks Tom for the first major aha moment I have had this year.

### *Rethinking Fundamental Assumptions*

Over the last two years the idea of dialogue has been an important concern for me. It has become obvious that the ability to communicate at a deeper level with individuals will require more than traditional talking. The need to be able to develop group environments where continuous innovation will flourish is somehow connected to this issue of deeper relationships.

The more I think about how to co-evolve the two in some dance of mutual support, the more I realize that there are fundamental issues at work. Let me see if I can

explain what I mean. For years I have heard it said that we should be self-sufficient. The older I get, the more I realize that, not only is that impossible, but that it is not healthy in a time of increased interdependence. I believe in self-reliance, where one is willing to make every effort to be productive and continues to grow new abilities throughout life.

However, in a time of mutual interaction and interconnection, our western cultures need to rethink the idea of what individuality is and how it operates within our evolving culture. If traditional thinking about the role of the individual prevents us, as individuals, from having the capacity to connect with others in sustaining ways, then we need to consider what needs to be changed and why. It is my premise that the very concept of individualism based on self-sufficiency prevents us from connecting with others in a time of constant change and increasingly complexity.

When the idea of self-sufficiency intersects with the strong value of material wealth and power, a block to collaboration is established that is both deep and wide. My point is this: if our culture values fundamental ideas that, by themselves, are inappropriate in our evolving society, we need to consider what might be appropriate.

The intersection of the ideas of total self-sufficiency with the view of the central importance of power and money leads to excessive competition on the behalf of the individual. I will suggest that the present inability to form strong relationships on the part of a majority of people in our society is a direct result of this intersection taken to excess. Not that strong individuals are unimportant to the growth, innovation and development of all aspects of our society. Of course they are. Not that the effective use of money and power are unimportant, of course they are.

However, when the average CEO pay is 4-700 times that of an average employer; when there is no time for family life because of the pace of other life; when the ends begin to justify the means without regard to ethics and morals, we must face the fact that there is something drastically wrong.....and I submit that the intersection of the fundamental principles of total self-sufficiency with a search for wealth and power has helped create our present state of cultural instability.

As our culture grows more complex and interdependent, we rightly have recognized the need to foster collaborative relationships for many diverse reasons. What the majority of us have not done is to understand that collaboration requires a transformation in the way we think, the values we hold dear, and the way we connect with each other.

Why is the way we think important to resolve this block to collaboration? It is very simple in my opinion. Let me illustrate it from my own journey. Twenty years ago I had the pleasure of serving on a school board in North Carolina. As chairman from '78-'80, I had very strong opinions about what was good for educational policy and what was wrong. I saw things in either/or and black and white terms. My thinking in either/or terms was based on my personal educational experience. I was presented knowledge in either/or terms by a teacher or professor who presented the "right" way to think about history,

physics or any other subject. I often was tested in either/or terms through true/false and multiple choice tests.

As one example, I remember leading a personal crusade among the members of the board to prevent a family from home schooling. There were many good reasons for doing so. Of greatest concern to us was the quality and bias of knowledge children would be getting if left to parents. The irony of this is that twenty years later, I wrote a chapter for the recently published book, *Creating Learning Communities*, which was written and edited by different national leaders of the home schooling movement. I am still a very strong supporter of the public school system. I also believe that good learning experiences can occur with home schooling. I no longer think in either/or terms.

Why is the need to think differently important to collaboration? It is very simple. *In an interdependent and increasingly complex world, one needs to be able to see value in more than one idea or factor simultaneously.* With constant change, no one idea or opinion will be *the reason* something occurs, something is done or some new innovation occurs. The richness of the diversity inherent in change and transformation requires that we learn how to think in diverse terms. Standard approaches to anything will be self-limiting and inappropriate outside of certain situations such as manufacturing.

What about values? The term itself defines what we think is important. It takes little insight to see our culture values many things. However, individuality, money and power predominate. But why is this the case? There are many people wiser than me that have thought and written about the American culture. One explanation and one observation have stuck with me for some reason. One I read years ago, one I read last year.

In his book, *Democracy in America*, Alexis d'Toqueville suggested that the reason people in our country are so focused on material wealth is the need for self-identity...."don't think that the people strive after material wealth for its own value, they search for their own identity." Could this be a reason that CEO's compete to be the highest paid executive, so they can feel good about themselves?

George Soros in his recent book, *The Crisis of Capitalism*, observed that our culture has gone to extremes in its emphasis of economic values, and encouraged the return to a balance of human, spiritual and economic values. Of course, one could ask if he had to make billions of dollars before he came to this conclusion.

I believe that George Soros and Alexis d'Toqueville are in the ballpark. Money and power are goals of many people. But it seems obvious that this journey brings no real meaning. The search for meaning for any individual in a culture based on these fundamental values is tough enough. In a time of transition and transformation to an interconnected society and world where collaboration and mutual support become fundamental needs, it is impossible. It is just becoming apparent that our individual search for meaning is caught in the web of relationships that we have as well as what we achieve individually. And if we think in either/or terms, we will not have the capacity to

connect with others. As my experience with Tom revealed, we would have to choose between individual achievement or family relationship. We would have to compete or collaborate. Thus, the needs to change how we think and the need for a balance of values fundamental to a sustainable, dynamic and increasingly complex society brings us to the need to learn how to connect at a deeper level.

### *Hitch-Hike Conversation*

For years I thought conversation was based on making comments to each other and having statements made in return. I now realize that this approach to conversation limits the potential of what occurs, and often ends up in debate because we have been taught to focus on one factor at the time. If my thoughts are the truth, then how can your thoughts on the same subject be the truth. Obviously one of us must be wrong....or so the framework of either/or thinking would lead us to believe.

Within the last several years I have changed how I see the need to communicate with others. I used to think I was a good listener. I now realize I was listening for those things that would affirm what I thought was correct. Because of my own insecurity ( which was subconscious at the time ) I would also listen to be able to say something in the next breath that would bring plaudits my way for such a well conceived idea. I now realize I was listening for the wrong reason. Although truly caring about my community and my friends, I too often listened so that I could say something that would be important so I could be perceived as a good leader, appreciated by others, and thus feel good about myself.

As a result of the journey of the last twenty years, I now listen for a different reason. I listen so that I can connect with other people and other ideas at a deeper level. Once I came to see the need to connect in this way, I realized that my methods of listening and talking with others had to change. The idea that has emerged over time I call "*hitch-hike conversation.*"

Although not everything one says is correct or even close to the mark, there is value in what anyone says if the other person has tuned his receiver to identify that value. Even if I think someone is off the mark completely ( which assumes I have the truth and is never the case ), I can find value in the question "why do you think that." My traditional approach to conversation by statements has been transformed to conversation by questions and statements. In so doing, not only am I finding value in what is being said, I am focusing on the opinions of the person with whom I am having the conversation. In other words, I am *hitch-hiking* my question or thoughts to his comments, and actually building upon what the other person has said.

What I have found is that such an approach opens up true dialogue and prevents the idea of debate. In fact, I never debate now. I still have strong opinions. But since I have evolved to the point where I want to connect opinions and honestly change those that I objectively feel are no longer appropriate, I want to know what the other person feels and why. If I look for value in what someone else thinks, it adds to my view of the

world. So the value of true dialogue for me has increased as I have seen a need to connect at a deeper level, become comfortable with being wrong, and searching for new ideas.

### *Debate and Dialogue*

In his recently published book, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, William Isaacs states that “the simple premise of this book is that neither the enormous challenges human beings face today, nor the wonderful promise of the future on whose threshold we seem to be poised, can be reached unless human beings learn to think together in a new way.”

One of his most important statements shatters the old idea of individual truth. “A decade and a half of writing about and conducting dialogue around the world has led me to realize that the most important parts of any conversation are those that neither party could have imagined before starting.”

This important insight reflects the need to be open to new ideas and the ability to connect at a deeper level to be able to generate new ideas, outcomes and decisions. Traditionally, conversations and interaction of people were based on the idea of debating truth. One person’s truth was another persons misguided thought. Adding to the sense of correctness of this method was the fact that a certain part of our reality in the physical world does operate by the rules of cause and effect, which leads back to either/or thinking. Only non-conformists of the past ventured out on the limb of heresy by suggesting that there may be subtle variations of multiple truths apparent in any situation that is interdependent. The problem with this traditional western approach is that it assumes an independent relationship of all factors.

As a result debating societies were the norm for our educational context. The roots of certainty grew deep over time and is one reason we see such a present struggle as we learn how to balance the need for certainty and the need for ambiguity and find it is not either/or...at times even within the same situation.

So if the concept of debate is inappropriate, what can meet the needs of connecting ideas and people at a deeper level? What can engender the trust that is necessary for people to listen to each other and help each other succeed in a constantly changing, interdependent society? It is the updated version of debate we call *dialogue*.

Again William Isaacs leads us to the watering hole with the following statement, “People come to dialogue for many reasons. Some want to resolve conflicts. Others wish to get along better with a particular person, a business partner, a boss, a spouse, a parent, and a child. Still others wish to solve problems more effectively. Dialogue can enable people to bring out differences and begin to make sense of them.”

I agree. This is a wonderful statement of the need for dialogue. It also reflects the difference in debate and dialogue. Debate is based on the assumption of truth and the

ability to have the intellectual power to make ones point more effectively than that which is being debated. Dialogue develops other capacities to connect people and ideas in a conversation, and the issue of control is usually absent. Often integration of existing thoughts lead to new ideas.

But what if the knowledge in the room does not allow for transformative ideas to emerge? What if the demands of change in an organization or community requires ideas, thoughts, strategies and actions that are counterintuitive to the existing knowledge? Will the traditional concept of dialogue suffice? Will the outcomes of the dialogue provide the potential for generating new ideas that are not consistent with the thinking of the people involved? And how can the actual process of the dialogue be constructed so that information and concepts not available in the moment are introduced in an effective and timely manner?

### *The Wormhole of Generative Dialogue*

Einstein once said that “we stand on the shoulders of giants.” As I think about the needs of our age, I realize that we must look back and forward at the same time. The need to integrate traditional ideas with new concepts within a context of the future demands new ways of thinking together. The concept of interdisciplinary thinking is emerging both within educational institutions as well as in books and articles. The idea of holistic and comprehensive problem solving are being used by businesses in new ways throughout the world. Of great importance, the idea of societal transformation is emerging.

“The twenty-first century will surely be one of continuing social, economic, and political turmoil and challenge, at least in its early decades. What I have called the age of social transformation is not yet over. And the challenges looming ahead may be more serious and more daunting than those posed by the social transformations that have already come about, the social transformations of the twentieth century.”

.....Peter Drucker

A thought giant of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Peter Drucker, has focused on the idea of social transformation....not just making more efficient what has existed for years, but a basic rethinking of the fundamental principles on which our society is based. Cutting edge thinkers like Drucker lead the thinking of our society by many years. In the past we had the luxury of time to let these ideas trickle down into mainstream thinking. That is no longer possible in an age where Ford Motor Company establishes a Leadership Institute to involve all associates in a transformation of thinking and decision making practices to change the very culture of the firm in five years in order to be competitive in a global economy.

One of the challenges to which Peter Drucker points is the need to develop broad “capacities for transformation” in the general populace. With change occurring constantly, new concepts of learning will be needed. For “learning communities” to be more than a slogan, learning for its own sake will need to become as important a value as is money and power. Today we seek learning to gain money and power. Learning gives us the means. In fact, learning itself, both secular and spiritual will need to become one of the key elements that give us meaning.

It is my opinion that dialogue will need to become central to the pursuit of learning. In an age where knowledge is exploding, we will need to become dependent on each other for “pieces of knowledge” that will need to be connected in new ways to meet the challenges of a 21<sup>st</sup> century society. Even the most far-reaching search engine only covers nineteen percent of all existing web sites. So how do we connect pieces of knowledge, and, at the same time, learn how to think together to generate new and appropriate ideas for our society and local communities? And how can new ideas emerge and connect with enough people in our democracy so that they are integrated into the thinking of local communities and utilized fast enough to have a real impact before they are replaced with a new idea?

For five years we have used the term “generative dialogue” as a part of our work of the Center for Communities of the Future. It not only focuses on the need to have diverse people connect their ideas at a deeper level, it opens the door for totally new thoughts. It is the concept and methods of generative dialogue that I feel will be central to help answer the questions just posed.

“Generative dialogue emerged as people let go of their positions and views. They found themselves attending simply to the *flow of conversation*, a flow that enveloped us and lifted us to a new level of shared understanding about dialogue.”

..... William Isaacs

One of the key aspects of our COTF work is centered now on the need to help local citizen leaders develop the capacity of “generative dialogue.” We emphasize the need to introduce trends of the future into the flow of dialogue because it is very possible to dialogue around ideas that are increasingly obsolete. Our experience is that few local leaders are familiar with trends outside their own profession...and often not even within their own profession.

According to Isaacs, generative dialogue “invents unprecedented possibilities and new insights and produces a collective flow.” We find this is true. We also find that without trends of the future being introduced into the dialogue, unprecedented possibilities and new insights may or may not be “transformational.” It depends on whether the framework of change is seen as “reforming” or “transforming.”

So why the phrase *The Wormhole of Generative Dialogue*. Returning to Star Trek: The Next Generation, worm holes allow the spaceship Enterprise to move at warp speed through physical space. I see an analogy with the need to speed up the way we learn to think together and to respond to an age of constant change. I believe that “generative dialogue” is that worm hole that will allow us to connect at a deeper level as our population becomes more diverse and as the society changes at speeds that, to us, will seem like the speed of light.

The idea of generative dialogue is new. The capacities for this concept are almost non-existent except for the pioneers like William Isaacs. Our work in Norfolk, NE and with other groups interested in “transformational learning” and “process leadership” has given us early examples of how to build the capacities for generative dialogue and how to utilize it as one tool in a toolbox of transformational concepts, methods and techniques.

One of the key research and development projects on which our Communities of the Future work will focus for the next several years will be the creation and evolution throughout the country of networks of individuals and groups in local communities who want to become conversant with and capable of leading generative dialogue. It is our opinion that generative dialogue represents a path through the conflicting fields of existing thought, and allows truly new concepts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to emerge in such a way that sustainable ideas, strategies and actions can be created and implemented for a dynamic, ever changing society. In this way it will be a cultural *worm hole* for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Conclusion*

This is just the first of many articles that will attempt to connect the idea of generative dialogue to the needs of local communities in the future. A first step will be to introduce this idea as a part of the work of the new and evolving national Center for Process Leadership that has been established in conjunction with Dr. Jim Kerley, President of LCC in Lexington, KY. Angie Woodward, recently retired as Director of Leadership Kentucky will become the Director of the Center. A collaborative relationship has been developed with Neil Richardson, formally with the Harwood Institute. Of special interest to the Center for Communities of the Future is the idea of a National Dialogue for Transformation that emerged from “generative dialogue” as a result of Neil’s initiation. Generative dialogue will be an important tool for both these efforts. It is the intent of the Center to utilize William Isaacs book, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, as a background reading for anyone interested in working with our ideas for societal transformation.