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From Lacrosse to Healing Our Species:

Thought Passing Toward a Goal

(Excerpt from an edited
conversation of Tom
Callanan with John Ott)

Tom Callanan: During college I was a member of Middlebury College's lacrosse team. During my senior year, we were playing Williams College for the New England championship. I'd read about sports teams entering "the zone," but I'd never really experienced it until that game. From the opening whistle we entered this space that seemed like everything was happening in slow motion. Roy would win the face-off, and I knew where he was going to run and where he would pass to me. And I'd move in that direction, and he'd make the pass just as I'd seen it. I would turn, and I knew exactly where A.J. would be for my pass, and then for his shot on goal. In that first five minutes we scored five unanswered goals. Not only did it seem like the moves of my teammates were scripted, but it also felt like the other team was somehow participating in the dance as well, like I knew where they would be as well. The whole thing had this incredible, magical quality to it. I don't know how it was broken. Perhaps after we got so far ahead and realized what was going on, and became enamored with it or something, I can't really say. What I can say is that I will remember that five minutes for the rest of my life.

Commentary on From Lacrosse to Healing Our Species:

There is a Lakota Sioux war chant, that translated means "the spirit goes ahead of us." It was the warrior's expression of being at peace with oneself and a recognition that we are not isolated from the rest of the universe. There are times in groups when a synchronization kicks in and we experience ourselves as part of an unfolding unity. These moments, in Tom's words, are "magical." Tom sensed a flow and movement, as if "scripted," and even the actions of the other team seemed as part of the unity he experienced. Thought and action were revealed to be connected and only when they appeared again as apart, "perhaps...we realized what was going on, and became enamored..." did the spell lift.

The physicist, David Bohm, makes this same point in his reflections on his own development as a scientist and philosopher: "I see that even as a child I was fascinated by the puzzle, indeed the mystery, of what is the nature of movement. Whenever one thinks of anything, it seems to be apprehended either as static, or as a series of static images. Yet, in the actual experience of movement, one senses an unbroken, undivided process of flow, to which the series of static images in thought is related as a series of 'still' photographs might be related to the actuality of a speeding car."

What enables an apprehension of wholeness and movement? What conditions are necessary? How is our own puzzling about the nature of movement related to thinking and in a larger sense, to the nature of reality? As with Finn's experience of the world café, there is this initiation point in which a part becomes aware of the whole. How does this pattern reveal and replicate itself in different groups settings?

In the interview, Tom talks about some of his initial assumptions. His lacrosse experience, though not uncommon in sports, is still a rare event. His team was relatively homogeneous, its focus assured by the nature of intergroup competition, its discipline determined by years of practice with each other. Although he is left with an experience that he will remember for a lifetime, there is the possibility that the experience will remain isolated, a fond memory in a sea of static images. For Tom, as for all of us, some group experiences will be better than others, more focused than others, more personally meaningful than others—but Tom recounts this story because he suspects its an initiation into another way of "knowing." What was it he glimpsed?

Let's continue with a second story from Tom, years later...

Tom Callanan: I had another experience of group synergy in Essex, Massachusetts, at an *Introduction to Dialogue* training by Glenna Gerard and Linda Ellinor. There were about 30 participants in the group—mostly women, a number of lesbian women, a number of women of color, and four white men including myself. It was one of the most diverse groups I'd ever been a part of. And when I first came into the circle, I thought, "Gee," the last thing I was expecting was an experience of group unity. My assumption was that the more homogenous the group, the more well practiced, the more like a traditional tribe or family or sports team, the more likely you're going to get group synergy. And the more diverse—the more difficult it would be.

Indeed, for the first three days, I struggled and we struggled. We'd been working on the building blocks of dialogue, of "suspending judgment" and "questioning our assumptions" and "deep listening" and "waiting for the call to speak" and "looking for a sense of shared meaning coming from the group." And it just wasn't happening. We were trying too hard, like thinking too much about your tennis swing and not letting it happen.

On the fourth frustrating day, this woman began telling a story about a relationship—a very painful story. It was very personal and intimate. I couldn't imagine telling that kind of story in that group, but she did it. Her courage took the whole group.... It was almost like you could feel the energy of the group sinking to a deeper level as we sat like trusted friends around this woman as she opened her heart. I remember her crying, and many people in the circle were crying with her. We'd been trained through dialogue to not come in and try to rescue her, or fix her, or run away from the moment by intellectualizing, or changing the subject to something lighter. So we just sat with her.

This woman did an amazing thing. She asked a question about relationships that invited us all into the inquiry with her. Rather than just plopping her story down and saying, "poor me," she said, "Here's my story, and the story is in service of a question that I'd like to put at the center of this gathering."

Answering her call and her courage, another woman stepped forward and told her story. It was different, but still within the realm of relationships, and what she offered deepened the inquiry. Then another person stepped forward, and another, and another, telling their stories and offering their experiences and questions. I got this sense that there was a stew that we were making together, a stew called "an inquiry into relationship." There was this cauldron in the center of the circle and into which each of us was throwing our piece of cauliflower, or broccoli, or meat.

It became more than just a story-trading session. It was like we were all leaning forward and smelling the stew. Did it need something conceptual, or an image, or another story? If we had what it needed, we offered it without rehearsal. Every once in awhile, someone would throw in something weird, something from left field. But then, after a few other people would speak, we'd realize that the weird comment was the essential spice for our conversation.

All this happened within the period of about an hour, maybe two. From the outside it might have looked like just a group of people talking. But it was totally magical. Toward the end, I would say something, and somebody across the room would say, "You know, I was thinking the same thing." And

Principle

Element of the Experience

Movement of the Whole

People describe times in the group when the boundaries normally experienced between them seem to dissolve. At these times, people seem to make the deliberate choice not to see their interests as separate from anyone else's, and in so doing, they begin to experience the sweetness of unity, and the harmonious forward movement of the whole. The gathering settles into a graceful and profound flow of communication, understanding, and knowing with all present. There is no loss of identity, rather there is a heightened sense of each one's essential part in the whole, and a rightness about every word that is offered and every action that is taken. This is a liberating formation in which people are able to practice knowing their sameness, and simultaneously offering their unique gifts.



"It's not like the separateness is lost, but the separateness exists within a wholeness, rather than just as separateness."

—Red Pele

"You are speaking more from the emerging whole, more from the center of the circle, rather than as a single individual within the circle."

—Otto Scharmer

"And when I did speak it was almost egoless, like it wasn't really me. It was, in a way, something larger than me [that] was speaking through me."

—Beth Jandemoa

"Funny, we spend all this time trying to bridge with others, trying to touch. We build these amazing suspension bridges between our little nodules, trying to make connections across our differences, when actually, if we were to sink down into the water of our collective consciousness of which we are all an essential part, we'd meet and bridge each other effortlessly."

then they'd follow with something that had just entered my mind. And I'd have the sense for who would speak next, and they would. It was very much like the lacrosse experience. I remember sitting forward in my seat spell-bound and listening harder and deeper than I ever had in my life. Listening with my whole body. New thoughts began coming to me about the nature of relationship that I'd never had before. I'd never really thought about what a new thought looks and feels like. [My past assumption was] you basically have the same number of thoughts like letters of the alphabet and you just recirculate them or combine them in different ways.

I often struggle with my participation in groups. I question the value of my thoughts. I rehearse what I want to say; I second guess myself; and then I often step forward very tentatively. But in this circle I knew instinctively what my offering was. And I knew that if I didn't add it, the ball would be dropped, the stew would suffer. When I spoke, I was clear, confident, and uncensored.... I felt more essentially myself. I imagine that others were feeling the same way. Everyone had something to offer. Our diversity wasn't just tolerated, or even honored—it was essential.

This is where things got interesting. In the past, I've juxtaposed individual and community. If you join a community, you have to compromise, or become more homogenous with the rest of the group. You have to give up some of your individuality or freedom. You quiet your voice a bit. But here, I was feeling so powerful and unique and, at the same time, so much a part of this very diverse group. The two (individual and group) seemed to grow hand in hand. And, unlike my experience with lacrosse, we barely knew each other. We were unpracticed novices at dialogue. We were as heterogeneous as they come.

In retrospect, I imagine that our group had somehow tapped into our shared mind or collective consciousness. David Bohm said that we exist in a sea of thought and emotion, almost as if we are walking around within this fabric of shared consciousness. I had assumed that this meant some kind of a mechanistic phenomenon. As in—my consciousness meets yours and others and, if we get along, we have group consciousness. I asked two researchers in the area of consciousness research about this and they said that actually collective consciousness is primary, and individual consciousness comes out of this sea, almost as little nodules that pop up. Funny, we spend all this time trying to bridge with others, trying to touch. We build these amazing suspension bridges between our little nodules, trying to make connections across our differences, when actually, if we were to sink down into the water of our collective consciousness of which we are all an essential part, we'd meet and bridge each other effortlessly. What seems to happen in these magical groups is that with twenty individuals, "one plus one plus one plus one" doesn't equal twenty—it equals more than that. Something emerges in the center of the group. That's alchemy.

I'd experienced this sense of unity and connection before with meditation practice. I know that meditation is a powerful tool for healing and purifying individual consciousness. Could it be that what we were practicing at Essex was a social form of meditation aimed at healing our collective consciousness? This sounds so esoteric, but what I do know, and what I felt deep in my body, was that something very important was revealing itself at Essex, not just for me but for our species. Could it be that this particular dynamic and practice of coming together across differences, while simultaneously becoming more uniquely ourselves, is a fractal for a new way of being in

the world? What would happen to our society if we began to discover that we were knit together, not just through forces of kinship or ideology or culture or nation, but through a shared collective consciousness that cuts across all boundaries of race, ethnicity, culture, etc.?

Commentary on From Lacrosse to Healing Our Species: (continued)

Tom's second story harmonizes with the first in its sense of movement, each highlighting the experience of flow. In the game of lacrosse, the physical object of the ball makes visible the movement of the players interacting. Tom's description of the game includes both the physical connections of players to each other as well as the flow dictated by the impersonal task—making or defending the goal. There emerges, in moments, an exquisite coherence and rightness to each action. In his group experience, a similar pattern of coherence emerges as members begin to experience resonance with each other and then collectively begin to create meaning.

Bohm's image of dialogue begins with his description of the word itself, as a "river of meaning flowing around and through the participants." Thoughts, passed back and forth between members, take on direction and meaning. What is revealed in dialogue is the hidden connections that lie around and through participants—the way our past experience informs our thoughts and the way our thoughts impact each other. This different way of knowing has the effect of healing, not because of any direct attempt to remove emotional blocks from any one participant, but as a consequence of becoming aware of a connection to a larger "implicate order" surrounding and including us. The "aha" of this experience can feel magical, as if the events are scripted ahead of time. Paradoxically, the experience can also feel utterly spontaneous and synchronistic, as when an individual having a thought hears it voiced by another member, almost instantaneously.

What else can we make of the pattern of Tom's story? How does it inform us about this aspect of collective intelligence? Tom began with some assumptions about homogeneity and continuity. How could a group in which there was both diversity and relatively new relationships among members be expected to achieve synergy and shared meaning? He found that these criteria were not only peripheral but that the diversity of experience acted as substance and spice for the stew that was being created together. He wondered how a group not practiced in a common discipline, so different than his lacrosse team, could achieve deeper connection with the task. He discovered that being "practiced" was a function of opening to the wisdom of the group rather than any specific skills. And he assumed that creativity was predominantly a personal experience or a recirculation of existing thoughts. He came to see how creativity could be experienced at a collective level and that thoughts not previously held could appear both internal to the individual and with others. What is also suggested by Tom's story is that understanding is not necessarily a bridge between different people or experiences but a dropping down together into the waters of collective consciousness. The imagery of water here suggests that collective consciousness can include unconscious material not immediately available to the ego state.

How did this occur? We know that a group invited to give serious attention to a task but without a clear direction or detectable leadership can experience anxiety, frustration, and annoyance. This is clearly evident in Tom's description of struggle for their first three and a half days. Often during this period individuals attempt to give the group direction or wonder if they should leave. Often members discover and reveal unacknowledged needs and purposes that open the group to opposition or polarization among members. During these times, issues such as superficiality vs. depth or real work vs. process or even depth vs. spontaneous action can appear insurmountable and projections between members can begin to take hold. The group is sustained by these

Principle

Significance of Gathering

Re-membering

People are drawn together in groups to remember who they really are. To re-member, meaning to join, to become whole, to fill the place where a part was missing. There is a part in each person that has not forgotten that we are one, and so there is a natural desire in each of us to return, and to experience again the joy of being a part of the whole. This cannot be accomplished individually and separately. We are required to join with each other, literally in group gatherings, and also across distances—to level the playing field, remembering for each other, enabling all to experience joining in one mind and one spirit.



"There is a level where all—where you, I, God—are one, and are trying to respond to the need that Earth has to heal herself. The world is under blessed, the country is under blessed. I think that's so vital, that if we could create an atmosphere in which giving blessing would be easy and natural, it would be such a joy!"

—Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

"We've stretched separateness as far as we can stretch it. And we've learned the gift of it, because it clearly is a gift. And now we're coming back to the realm of oneness and collectiveness."

—Red Pele

Metaphor Cluster

Water and Fluid

questions spilling over • developing pool of common meaning • carrier wave of communication • dipping into words • cleansing the group • owning the alchemy of water in the mixing bowl • sea of possibilities • joining streams of experience • I was cold, not so deep into flow • ripple effect • a water crunch • philosophical juice • pools of resources • dialogue as shared flow-through • rivers cleaning themselves • priming the pump for creativity • a sea of thought and emotion • sting of indictment washed through me • the bottom percolates and bubbles up • a vortex like a tornado • large questions in floating conversations • a sponge with listening nodules • the place of the juice • plunging • islands of privacy • channel of intention • a pool of data • dark moving silences on the river • hearing the whole is like a flood • freeze him out of the group • in the same boat • infused with nourishing humanity • sensitive to currents under the surface • being in waterfall's gushing power • cloudiness in a group • stirring memories • blowing people out of the water • going down a rapid into a hole in the water that was so much more • structured time evolving fluidly •

conflicts to a point and tilts between resignation and creativity. And then, as Tom's story illustrates, a shift can take place.

In this pattern story, the shift revolves around a personal story placed into the center of the circle by a participant. What is significant about the story is that it was understood as both personal and an invitation to a larger inquiry—in Tom's words, "the amazing thing about her story was...a question that suggested something larger...the door to other people's stories, inviting other people in to join her in an inquiry around the nature of relationship...." Coming at just the right moment it catalyzed a movement into a developing pool of common meaning. The emotional truth of her story resonated through the group and ushered in further stories. Instead of helping or rescuing the woman, others began to take off their own masks, an experience one of our interviewees described as "authentic nakedness."

This shift, what some describe as the emergence of group mind, allows for a new level of creativity and insight, unavailable to individuals or groups reacting in more familiar ways. Patrick de Mare called this aspect of dialogue *koinonia*, a word meaning impersonal fellowship and which might be understood as the moment when partnering and initial self governance is achieved—as a consequence of the persona or personal mask being let down.

This period of increased coherence is immensely seductive and it is the period during which group members report a "high" or experience taking off into new discoveries. Group members can feel a tremendous sense of belonging, security, and personal renewal. However, it can also be an obstacle to further development. As group members wish to hold onto the experience or recreate it everywhere they go, they can subtly block the group's reentry into confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety—energetic elements that often precede discoveries of new depths. Bohm writes that only in persisting with the discipline of dialogue, its cyclic movement from incoherence to coherence and back again, do the more subtle realms of understanding reveal themselves. Parallel in ways to Tom's speculation about his lacrosse experience, the ego's awareness of having scored five goals can bring a halt to the flow. We might also speculate that the experience of flow cannot be sustained without intermittent periods of disorder.

Finally, what might we say about Tom's intuition that this initial experience was a fractal pointing to the possibility that shared meaning might be a force for healing and hope across divergent aspects of society? Bohm's interest in dialogue was not to champion one method but to make visible the possibility of achieving shared meaning, of healing the fragmentation of thought that he believed lay behind the disputes and violence that marked modern societies. In essence, the group is a cauldron in which choices are made. At one extreme, it is a bubbling cauldron heated by warring factions, power, history, and the illusion of separateness. Yet the cauldron can also be a place for discovery, spiced by diversity but fueled by a common search for an underlying unity. Where does one look for evidence of this aspect of groups? How does one prepare groups to sustain the uncertainty and anxiety so fundamental to the process? Why bother? We only know that this different way of knowing marks those who have experienced it and leaves them transformed. One observation is that the specialness associated with this transformation does not feel exclusive of others or personal as in simply wanting more. Though this can be the case, there is more often a sense of urgency, a premonition that one is being called, and a feeling that one is in service to something larger than oneself. ■