Transformation Through Dialogue

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Preface

In 1992, fifty-five people died and property damage exceeded $1 billion as a result of riots triggered by the beating of Rodney King. Mr. King, an African American construction worker on parole for robbery, was stopped by Los Angeles police for a routine traffic violation and was subsequently brutally beaten by four Los Angeles police officers. A bystander videotaped the iconic event, which had also been observed by the police officer's supervisor. Widespread media dissemination of the video led to the conflagration that enveloped the second largest city in the United States and led people around the world to reconsider questions of police brutality, racism, and the American social justice system.

Twelve years later the victim, Rodney King, uttered what became a famous tag line, "Can't we all get along?" He did not want to be known as the spark that ignited the devastating riots in Los Angeles, but rather as "the person who threw water on the whole thing." He said that he wanted to be remembered "as the person who tried to keep peace in this country, that I did my part."

Very few people have the opportunity to

publicly express such a high ideal for a society after suffering so incredibly at its hands. Mr. King's vision of a better society for us all was not offered without thought. He recognized that making things better for us all requires energy and determination. He captured the essence of societal transformation when he said, "We're working through change, but it's a slow process." The King incident opened up a national dialogue about civil justice that continues today.

In this paper, I will not discuss finding a "common ground" for social change, because that thinking denies our culture's disparate nature and the ingrained individualism represented within it. Instead, I will argue that we can develop new cultural models for conversation that do not attempt to unite our thoughts but can provide an alternative means to civil discourse, where, as Philosopher Richard Rorty said, "the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts."[1] Civil discourse does not seek universal truth but instead a universal society comprised of "persons whose paths through life have fallen together, united by civility rather than a common goal, much less a common ground."[2] We, as a nation, must keep the

conversation going as well as find new ways to listen to one another and make our conversations more meaningful.

Introduction

My view, my vision, my dream, and my perception of service to humanity have been strongly influenced by my experiences. The original idea for my work was not conceived as ministry; rather, it came in the form of a response to forces acting upon me from the flood of ideas I heard from the Chautauqua Institution's interfaith speakers - Rabbi Irwin Kula, Rev. G. Weldon Gaddy, and a young visionary, Eboo Patel, to name a few - during the summers of 2006 and 2007. My first *reaction* to these speakers was to get involved in the conversation. My first *action* was to embrace the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Chautauqua, New York. Crossing the boundaries of my own imagination, I found inspiration and hope working on interfaith dialogical projects, and within a short time found myself leading efforts to promote dialogue that might build bridges to better understandings between people of divergent religious beliefs. My UU congregation at Chautauqua encouraged me to reflect the group's values to the Chautauqua community, stood by me when programs became problematic and returned my embrace with love and

the opportunity for leadership within the congregation.

The idea of my interfaith activities at Chautauqua becoming a ministry did not develop until after I enrolled at Meadville Lombard Theological School. Until that time, I had thought of ministry only in terms of congregational ministry and pastoral care. But my studies have galvanized a *reasoned* approach to theology with an emotional desire to work on behalf of humanity for a better world, which I now defined as my ministry. Its underpinning is Unitarian Universalist theology but I draw inspiration from a wide variety of religious and philosophical sources and I have received sage advise from wonderful mentors on ways to develop it.

Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams (1901-1994) said, "This time like all times is a very good one if we but know what to do with it." Vision can help us know what to do with our particular time in history. Having a vision puts us in the position of "making history in place of being merely pushed around by it." This dual insight forms the basis for what I believe my ministry could be about. The first insight Adams provides is a timeless

axiom, one that declares that *this* moment provides as many opportunities as any other to do my work. The only obstacle is knowing *what* to do. The second insight provides the positive and hopeful message that I can be an agent of change affecting history, not just a helpless creature being affected *by* history.

Being an agent of change is both liberating and challenging - liberating in that I'm seeing a world full of opportunities, and challenging in terms of needing to make the right choices and seize the opportunities that will make me an effective agent for change. Opportunities appear to be abundant, from advancing a dialogical approach to interfaith work, to developing our individual and collective theologies through congregational small group discussions, to working on various interfaith projects like the Islamic Life Center at Chautauqua. However, an expanded perspective has emerged for me now, defined as "gifts for ministry" by Anthony B. Robinson in his book *Transforming Congregational Culture*. Today I see a larger role for myself as a minister outside the four walls of a church.

Approaching ministry as an agent for change from an institutional perspective, as opposed to an individual point of view, reframes my idea about my

relationships with my congregations, Chautauqua, the UUA and Meadville Lombard Theological School. My revised view asks how do I, as an individual, position myself to serve the institution so as to help people identify, claim, and exercise their gifts. Robinson helps me think in terms of empowering others, inspiring others to "identify their gifts" and connecting them to an opportunity to serve others. The institution is an inanimate object by and unto itself, but "the decisive forms of goodness in society are institutional forms." [3] And being an institutional representative presents opportunities that I can use to best help people realize their passion and the essence of their commitment through a spiritual growth process. That *is* my vision of institutional ministry.

James Luther Adams speaks of faith as only being adequate when "it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions" [4] in an effort to shape history. A belief in my ability to help develop, as he further suggests, "new channels for love and new structures of justice" in a time that continues to present cultural challenges to the role of the church in our society is key to my discernment.

The 2007 Pew Research Forum on Religion & Public Life "Religious Landscape Survey" provides us with statistics that show a continual decline in religiosity in America, but this falling away is not new. Many have spoken to the issue of reconciling the church with the personal, social, and cultural perspectives over time, but Adams's perspective makes my endeavor normative by saying, "each generation must anew win insight into the ambiguous nature of human existence and must give new relevance to moral and spiritual values."[5] What are the new channels and structures that will make the work we do relevant to others? To be sure, relevancy defines where we must focus because it also connotes effectiveness. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association tells us to be "willing to push beyond pre-determined boundaries."

Thus, much of my thinking has turned to work on the institutional side of ministry versus continuing to execute initiatives mostly on my own. This means becoming located situationally within church leadership in order to break out of the fuzziness about ministries of the ordained and lay leaders and to impress upon others the importance of breaking out of the mold we have cast, too often to our own

detriment. Of course, we do not know what will work. We simply must try new approaches, perhaps some that are brave and risky, realizing that culture is "the form of religion" which era by era expresses "intimate movement of the soul," as 20th century philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich so profoundly said.[6]

If my dream ministry should not come to pass, I have already experienced the joy of transformation, and others have told me they have experienced change because of, or through me. This is the elixir of my life and I recognize that having the opportunity and experience - that profound connection to others and the individual ability to transcend myself through life with others in fellowship has indeed been a privilege.

It could turn out that I am like Rudyard Kipling's "The Cat That Walked by Himself"[7] and will find, as the cat did, that idealism is always subject to the bargains we must make in life. In negotiating how to be the agent of change that I aspire to be, and where I will ultimately end up is still a mystery, but wherever that is, I will still be that cat that walks by himself, going "out to the Wet Wild Woods or up the Wet Wild Trees or on the Wet Wild Roofs, waving

his tail and walking by his wild lone." But, at least I will know that I have tried to develop the ministerial agility that will allow me to do what the world requires of me.

Theology involves the interplay of three dimensions: the rational/intellectual dimension, the emotional/spiritual dimension, and the practical/lived dimension.[8] The combination of the three dimensions is the basis for creating a religious life: that which makes sense (reason), feels right (emotion), and leads to meaningful practice (action). However, the foundation for rational/intellectual inquiry - making sense of it all requires an understanding of what is meant by "truth."

A number of years ago at the Chautauqua Institution, I heard Rabbi Irwin Kula speak about the concept of multiple truths that ultimately led me to accept Unitarian Universalism as my chosen path to spiritual understanding. Subsequently, I read Rabbi Kula's book, *Yearnings*. In it he tells a creation story that is particularly important to my theological formation. The story imagines that God, who possesses Truth, sees value in creating humankind that will search for the Truth, and therefore Truth on Earth cannot be what it is in heaven. When God

casts Truth down to Earth, it shatters into pieces and Adam, the first human created out of those pieces, which had become dust, possessed only partial truths. Thus God created no human on earth who possesses all of the Truth.

The fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, cannot be perceived if one assumes that an absolute truth exists on earth, making the ancient story about multiple truths even more palatable. Embracing this particular creation narrative makes that free and responsible search for truth and meaning come alive with possibilities and becomes my foundation and support for all other Unitarian Universalist Principles. For example, one cannot diminish another person's beliefs, dismiss their perspectives and opinions or deny their inherent worth and dignity (the first principle), if you accord them the same right to possess a personal understanding of truth as you accord yourself.

The central text of Rabbinic Judaism, the Talmud, provides another way to understand the concept of truth. It contains four hundred years of recorded debates between two schools of thought, Hillel and Shammai. Both schools considered

questions concerning the lived experience and created answers (decisions), almost always in opposition to one another. But, Rabbi Kula reminds us that more expansive and profound truths can be found within every conflict; they are just waiting to be discovered. And the Talmud says about both the teachings of Hillel and Shammai, "these and these are the words of the living God." Although Hillel's opinions usually prevailed, it was not because of a claim of greater truth, quite the contrary, it was because Hillel understood and also valued the truth of Shammai.

The idea that there is no such thing as certain knowledge or ultimate truth makes for an uncertainty that empowers us to engage in a free and responsible search for our own personal truth. It provides the basis for reasoning, the weighing of alternative ideas, and making choices that make sense to us, leading to a community where, "we each have our own truths and our own knowledge, according to our circumstances." The particulars of our own experiences as perceptions of truth undermines any idea of fixed knowledge, dogma, creed or sacred text literally interpreted "by stressing

the role of human reason in the discernment of religious truth" as opposed to divine revelation.

The emotional/spiritual dimension of my theology finds its home in theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher's "intuition or feeling" that he believes is inherent within us all. Schleiermacher said that human beings could not reason their way to God. The two approaches, reason or feeling, neither of which can be an absolute (in my mind), build on the concept of multiple truths that allow each individual to develop their own theology, either through their thinking or through their feeling - or more likely, a combination of both. Each approach must be accorded equal value because both relate to our individual experiences. Whether we develop our cosmology through reason or emotion speaks only to the way in which our individual brain encounters the lived experience, not to the validity of how we transcend or go beyond, ourselves. Thus, we each must emulate Hillel and see the truth in one another through "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations," the third Unitarian Universalist principle.

Philosophers Thomas Reid, Francis Hutcheson, and Richard Price provide me with a theology that applies both the rational/intellectual and emotional/spiritual elements to a single cosmology entitled "Scottish Common Sense." This theology supports both a reasoned and a feeling path to understanding through our senses or our experiences. The reasoned path is not abstract; rather, it's stated as "external kinds of perceptions as sources of knowledge," coupled with, "an innate moral sense (that) enables us to perceive the moral right." Simply put, this connects "innate moral sense to human reason and moral agency."[9]

The third dimension of my theology, the practical/lived dimension, is an imperative that I have adopted from James Luther Adams. In his essay, "Guiding Principles for a Free Faith," he makes a case for moral and social progress through social action as an essential part of the religious life. This requires a commitment to create and nurture social institutions and voluntary associations. He describes the "holy thing in life as the participation in those processes that give body and form to universal justice," without which, "freedom and justice in community are impossible." Embracing Adam's view

I believe that action is a public expression of my reasoned/intellectual and emotional/spiritual discernment, which affirms the Unitarian Universalist's second principle, "justice, equity and compassion in human relations" and to the sixth principle, "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." For me, action is the reflection of my principles acting within the public square that will fulfill my responsibility to humankind.

My theology is an invitation to the associational life. That is to say that the nature of theology as reasoning/intellectual and emotional/spiritual within the practical/lived dimension is contextual and will always involve a search for relevancy in the here and now. As James Luther Adams puts it, "each generation must, anew, win insight into the ambiguous nature of human existence and must give new relevance to moral and spiritual values." Cutting through all differences of belief and opinion, I believe that the very struggle of being human requires intellectual integrity, amplitude of perspective, and social relevance in pursuit of a religious life.

I consider myself a student of the philosophy of religion; which can be defined as the philosophical

examination of the central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions. This subject involves all the main philosophical disciplines: metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics and value theory, as well as the philosophy of language, science, law, sociology, politics and history.[10] In this thesis I borrow from cultural anthropology in arguing that the critical characteristics of contemporary American sociability, discourse, and communication are rooted in American history, and that engrained behavior and the psychology of both group and individual habit as a result of this history have lead to a divisive society incapable of solving the problems it faces. Moreover, the philosophies of language, semantics and ethics contribute to an understanding of the effects of mass communication both as a confirming agent for the beliefs people already hold and as a purveyor of news as entertainment and drama, which contains a significant amount of misinformation.

Value theories make the manner in which individuals form perceptions and worldviews unique unto themselves and bring them to life. The discipline of psychology provides insights into the way we enter into discussions, dialogues, and deliberations through an argumentative process, and

into the innate skills individuals possess to practice epistemic vigilance. And finally, the science of medicine is employed to show how the philosophy of secular meditation proves that people are biologically built for change and transformation, which is the essence of this thesis. The significance of this endeavor may be that by offering a useful and hopeful approach to improving the way we talk with each other, the way people think about both the way we are and the way we might become are transformed.

"Perception, insight, sensibility, vision of possibilities." - William James.

Interpersonal change, shift, and transformation are all terms believed by many people today to be associated only with life changing spiritual or religious experiences not applicable to one's every day experiences. In fact, the idea that human beings can change their behavior is met cynically in many quarters; one often hears laments such as "I'm just who I am," or "people don't change" and "you can't change people." Contemporary thought in many circles characterizes individuals as rigid, fixed in place in their ideas and their behavior.

Unfortunately Rodney King's plea for civility, "Can't we all get along?" only became the brunt of late night television humor and even today his words can be heard as a one- liner that dismisses the idea that change, shift, and transformation are possible for individuals or for society.

The proposition I set forth challenges this view from three perspectives: cultural anthropology, psychology and neuroscience. Through cultural anthropology, we can see the effects of group behavior, particularly in groups of like-minded people, as expressions of how the American culture has adopted behaviors that are contrary to creating a beloved community. From psychology, we become aware of how humans reason and how argumentative theory may help us recognize how we each form our own biases as well as how biases are formed by others. And from neuroscience we discover, through recent research, that the plasticity of the brain provides evidence that humans can change.

Each of the disciplines explored offers hope by showing how we might escape our history through behavioral shift using the tools we innately possess

for change. Through the work of practitioners in each of these fields, we find hope for the future.

My interest in exploring the ideas about the nature of conversation results from my exposure to the programming at the Chautauqua Institution in Western New York State. I was first introduced to Chautauqua and its commitment to "life long learning" nine years ago and my involvement in small group dialogue sessions, sponsored by the Institution's Department of Religion under an Abrahamic initiative, led to my own personal transformation. I developed a personal cosmology that includes understanding that "truth" is a personal perspective, not an absolute and that religion as an intelligent (reasoning) and emotional experience can provide a pathway to changes in behavior - behavior grounded in a belief in every individual's inherent worth and the inter-dependence of us all.

A broad understanding of why we do what we do is fundamental to any personal change or transformation. In this thesis, I endeavor to amalgamate relevant theories to further the understanding of how we engage each other in conversation and how we wittingly or unwittingly

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influence others through and in groups as we address the issues that face us as part of a civil society. The purpose of this process is to provide a foundation upon which to build models for dialogue that not only engage in topical discussions but also provide learning experiences for the participants. In developing these models, the objective is to make it possible to see in others what we cannot see in ourselves, opening a door to self-realization and consequent change.

Hypothesis

The purpose of this thesis is to show that how we talk to one another influences our opportunities for change and transformation just as much as what we say to one another affects how we interpret the subject at hand. To construct a platform for change or resolution requires an underpinning of practices and rules of engagement that guides us in developing modern models for civil discourse.

Important questions, including human survival and the very survival of the planet Earth, need to be addressed. For example such vital questions as climate change have failed to be examined closely because those who debate the validity of claims made by opposing sides cannot currently engage one another in a productive manner. Positions are staked out without regard to the seriousness of the questions, and no consensus even exists that allows us to agree upon basic scientific research. Forms of government and economic systems are often equally endangered by a lack of sincere dialogue by opposing parties. The failure of politicians to engage in meaningful dialogue jeopardizes the state of the economy, and sometimes even the very ability of

government to govern. And finally, while political violence rages unchecked throughout the world, our leaders talk about spheres of influence and vested interest with little or no aim to stem societal disruptions, which in some cases, such as the Middle East in the first part of the twenty-first century, have led to globally devastating results; the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the displacement of millions more, and the destabilization of an entire region of the world.

Thus, it is important in all areas of human endeavor to find ways for people to engage one another, to come to the conference table, the negotiating table, and the kitchen table to solve problems through meaningful conversation. It is important for us to develop new methodologies of understanding and new models for the process of conflict resolution, for if we ignore our current dysfunctional conversation models, as a society we will by default ignore the issues and challenges we face as a species. If we fail to understand the flawed nature of our discourse, slogans like "never again" will be only empty promises of a better world.

Core elements of my thesis include making a case for diversity by showing that like-minded

groups embrace riskier courses of action than any individual member would take by him or her self. As we explore the nature of individual reasoning, I argue that our "truths" are but perceptions of reality based on pictures in our heads; that the human argumentative process provides us with intrinsic communication skills, and that the words we use describe experiences we have never had ourselves. Moreover, I argue that neuroscience provides us with new evidence that humans are biologically built for change and that the adaptation of existing therapies provides a basis for creating learning platforms that can, indeed, change behavior.

Integral to any personal change is becoming aware of our own behavior, both individually and in the groups in which we all participate. Awareness is fundamental to change in our culture, and a variety of existing institutions can play instrumental roles in conducting behavior-changing workshops and events. Municipal town hall meetings, corporate board rooms, and even the war rooms of governments can all provide the necessary venues to effect change. Small group ministries within religious congregations can play an important role based upon reference to the sacred scripture of their tradition's

form of the "Golden Rule." Educational institutions can expand current models of social engagement to include the kind of models for dialogue that go beyond promoting inclusion and pluralism to creating an *awareness* of the practices and rules of engagement that promote a meta-discussion of our behavior as individuals and as participants in groups. And finally, I propose that by changing the constitutive rules for dialogue we can move beyond ourselves with the promise to create a community in which every individual stands in reciprocal relationship to every other individual to build the beloved community we all desire.

Chapter One

Cultural Anthropology

Two concepts, both of which are related to the history and tradition of American culture, are foremost to be considered when addressing any social change. First, we must consider the nature of our people as "like-minded" immigrants to the New World and how those cultural patterns that were firmly established during the American colonial period remain the foundation for contemporary American society. And second, the nature of groups in general must be taken into account as well as an evolutionary development with characteristics that transcend American culture.

The Nature of a People

America is widely considered one of the most religious cultures in the world and, in many ways America reflects a connection between faith and culture more than any other nation in the world. The foundation for this cultural development was established in colonial America, where many independent-minded people fled to escape the church/state controlled culture of Europe. They

immigrated to America to establish a new "City Upon a Hill" where they founded a community with a new church polity that was intrinsically tied to a unique form of self-government that conjoined religion and politics. Although a fair number of these immigrants had no more than a passing interest in church affairs,[11] newly founded Massachusetts, along with its neighbor Connecticut did become a Bible commonwealth as evidenced by "The Fundamental Orders" promulgated in 1638, which provided the basis for a congenial community. Ironically, the colonial communities, which began as enclaves of (supposedly) like-minded people, began to unravel rather rapidly into pluralistic societies, primarily as a result of divergent religious beliefs.

The early pilgrims settled in locales separate from those who believed differently, i.e. the "other," not only because of the mandates set down by their commercial sponsors but also because they hoped to control outside influences representative of divergent ideologies. Consequently, when diverse ways of thinking emerged within their communities, they quickly acted to squelched any and all unorthodox thought and behavior in order to protect the congeniality of a community founded on common

religious beliefs. Although most pilgrims envisioned a new "City Upon A Hill", (as expressed by John Winthrop, standing on the tiny deck of the *Arbela* in 1630 off the Massachusetts coast) where they would be free of religious persecution, they would, in fact, recreate intolerant communities reminiscent of those they had left in Europe. They did not seem to realize that the communities they were forming were actually replicating the orthodoxy of ones that they had just escaped.

The earliest Puritan colonies "were all in substantial agreement on matters pertaining to Christian doctrine and the ordering of God's church"[12] but individuals who did not conform to the prevailing orthodoxy were persecuted. Colonial communities were bonded together by a group belief in a single church and a single orthodoxy. The Puritans were like-minded people who punished those who did not think or behave in accordance with the singular ideology of the group. They often rounded up those who did not attend church and fined and/or imprisoned others for independent thinking. Those who were thought to be the most recalcitrant were expelled from the community. The Massachusetts Bay Colony, for example, expelled

free thinkers like Roger Williams to Rhode Island, Anne Hutchinson to Pocasset, William Coddington to Newport, and Samuel Gorton to Shawomet. All of these doubters eventually became affiliated with the unique Rhode Island colony that was a sanctuary for Baptists, Quakers, and other independent spirits, including those who wished freedom from any kind of religious obligation.[13] And it is this historic form of group behavior, which demands that faith and inquiry be inseparable themes, that makes the study of culture an important path to understanding the nature of our contemporary, divisive culture. Our tradition divides our states into red and blue, our citizens into sectarian and secular, and our neighborhoods into "us" and "them" and we have habituated these deep-rooted behavioral characteristics into modernity. Thus, it is through an understanding of human "groupishness" and its origins that "we can begin to understand morality, politics and religion"[14] in contemporary culture.

The Nature of Groups

One characteristic of a successful group is thought to be increased similarity, not diversity; a togetherness that is embellished by singing, marching, and dancing together - and whatever

other activity creates a sense that we are one or we are a team - anything that builds trust. The evolutionary explanation advanced by English naturalist Charles Darwin traces this behavior to "social instincts" emanating from the desire for safety within a group, which means that competing against "other" groups increases bonding in opposition then to other groups, increasing love for the in-group.[15] Dr. Jonathan Haidt, a Professor of Psychology at New York University's Stern School of Business, puts forth a theory called the "Hive Hypothesis," in his book, *The Righteous Mind*. Dr. Haidt's hypothesis, that human beings are conditional hive creatures stems from a view that individuals possess a "hive switch," which he calls "an adaptation for making groups more cohesive, and therefore, more successful in competition with other groups."[16] Dr. Haidt developed a view of group behavior helpful in understanding how groups thrive by providing an environment where individuals can transcend their selfishness and work in concert for a greater good. The "hive switch," Haidt argues, allows us to turn off individual competition in favor of group cooperation and intergroup competition.

However, for all of the purported good resulting from the hive switch proffered by Dr. Haidt, there is also a great weakness. In his research, Dr. Haidt conducted studies using oxytocin, a hormone and neurotransmitter that the brain secretes naturally "when you have intimate contact with another person." When applied through a nasal spray, the result was a feeling of increased "trust." Research results showed that while oxytocin does indeed bond people to their group (those with whom they are the most intimate) it doesn't bond people to *all* of humanity.[17]

Consequently, embracing a hive theory not only makes for a better understanding of colonial American behavior, but also provides insight into the current nature of a divided America where self-identifications are conjoined with the groups to which individuals attach themselves.

Cultural Communications

Dr. Haidt's insights help us to understand why like-minded groups of people become more cohesive and lead to stronger emotions collectively than what would be assumed to be the case based upon the individual beliefs of its members. His evolutionary theory is supported in general by cross-cultural

psychologists who believe that the way people deal with contradictions may largely depend on folk conceptions about the nature of the world[18] and may, therefore, differ according to the culture in which these concepts have emerged.[19] Generally, people do not however differ in their bias toward favoring their existing beliefs. Cultural differences notwithstanding, Westerners generally think analytically and Easterners think holistically. Westerners tend to frame concepts in terms of right and wrong while Easterners frame concepts in terms of the truth being found in two contradictory positions. Studies[20] have shown that participants from different cultures favor the views *they* already hold. For instance, experiments[21] comparing French and Japanese students showed that both groups have a tendency to favor their own point of view within their cultural context, showing a bias toward their own perspective that is based on their own traditional and preferred style of argument. Culture is vital to understanding context.

Although this evolutionary view makes it appear that American culture is more tribal than one would like to believe, it is clear from the cross-cultural studies that the hive theory seems provable

in most cultures and is not unique to America. The constant appears to be that "What makes it expressively rational for individuals to adopt particular beliefs … is not the truth of those beliefs but rather the congruence between those beliefs and individuals' cultural commitments"[22], says Professor Dan Kahan of the Cultural Cognition Project at Yale Law School.

"Most of our misbeliefs are culturally transmitted misbeliefs rather than individual mistakes, distortions, or delusions," says cognitive scientist Dan Sperber.[23] Communications from a long transmission chain are the source of most human beliefs (lore), and this is particularly true of orally transmitted cultural beliefs. Individual beliefs about food, health, morals and ethics are examples of beliefs primarily transmitted orally within a cultural context. Of course, misbeliefs may be culturally transmitted as well, but regardless of whether the belief is true or false, its validity is less important than "who you share them with." Cultural sharedness and acceptance by the relevant group creates a basis for acceptance and the epistemic value of the belief.[24]

Cultural information such as the propagation of religious beliefs can achieve high social success, particularly if institutionally developed. Individuals "vouching" for information as conventional wisdom facilitates proliferation of cultural beliefs and any disagreement with the premise or the content represents a disagreement with one's own culture and this may compromise one's cultural competence and social acceptability.[25] Culturally shared ideas may be accepted by people who have "no independent reasons for doing so … because they trust the source rather than because of any evidence or arguments for the content." One example of this condition is the Jewish belief about kosher food.

Generally, kosher food has been thought to be healthier and cleaner than conventional food and, in fact, kosher slaughter is perceived to be so sanitary that kosher butchers and slaughterhouses have been exempted from many USDA regulations.[26] And, even though many Jews believe that the religious laws regulating kosher food products are no longer necessary due to advances in modern health regulation and inspection processes, the cultural belief in kosher practices remains strong. However, a recent yearlong research project by F1000

Research[27] has shown that almost twice as many kosher chicken samples tested positive for antibiotic-resistant E. coli than did those from conventionally raised birds.[28] But because of the culturally transmitted belief that kosher means "healthier and cleaner" the interpretation of this information becomes complicated. A New York Times article quotes a researcher as saying, "I was pretty sure that blessings wouldn't protect chicken from antibiotic resistance." Further, Jewish law commentary denies that rabbis "bless" food to make it kosher and Jewish discussion on this point refers to the kosher food process as a "certification process" in which, a rabbi examines the food and its processing to make sure it meets religious dietary restrictions - but not health regulations. Still, clearly for many people, the word has a stronger cultural connotation than just that which relates to dietary laws. Thus, human beings as the creators of their culture cannot escape the historical influence of myths, beliefs, or misbeliefs they may have acquired through acceptance of the cultural norms and practices, even if those ideas were inadvertently produced.

Dr. Haidt's "hive switch" theory constitutes the

evolutionary attribute in human nature that is ever present in all societies, and that drives individuals into groups. This process creates polarizing behavior and perpetuates self-reinforcing lines of communication that support a divided society. Understanding how people engage with society both as individuals and as group members as a result of their cultural heritage is foundational to changing the paradigm from assuming that society will always be dysfunctional to creating a more hopeful projection of a society that can transcend its historical influences.

While humans clearly have the unique capacity to pass along accumulated knowledge they are seemingly beset by unquestioned traditions, routinized habits, and unchallenged beliefs about human nature[29] that lead to unique perceptions and beliefs but give them little direct knowledge of reality. Alfred Korzybski (1879 - 1950), a Polish-American philosopher and scientist, theorized from the development of a general semantics theory that human progress would be exponential from generation to generation, given this unique human capacity to steep ourselves in a particular culture. But he was appalled at the lack of human endeavors

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to effectively address society's ills. Key to understanding Korzybski's point is that every human being carries forth a set of assumptions about reality that forms the lens through which "we observe and what we fail to observe," determined by our assumptions, and which frequently lead us to "define first and then see." Korzybski refers to this as "intentional orientation" - where we create a mental map, which becomes not only our territory but also *the* territory.

Beyond our assumptions, each individual holds human beliefs acquired through communications received from trusted sources, even though they may not be founded on any evidence and any contradicting factual information may be disregarded. Humans acquire their misbeliefs though communication in the same way they acquire their beliefs. Both beliefs and misbeliefs are transmitted from one person to another within a cultural context not based on relevant evidence (facts) or experiences directly available to an individual, but on the "words of others."[30] Acceptance of these beliefs (or misbeliefs) is rooted in trust in the source and in secondary sources defined as one's family and

friends who will vouch for the trustworthiness of the source.

Anyone who has ever been part of the children's game "Rumors" in which, a statement is whispered into the ear of one individual in a group to that of another and again to another until the final person restates what the first person whispered, knows that an information transmission chain is often less than reliable, and the longer the chain, the more pronounced the chance of misinformation. In the case of Rumors, what the first person said is ineffectively communicated in the long transmission process. This is how orally transmitted cultural beliefs are passed on in a society. As a result, beliefs often fail to have grounding in either personal experience or verifiable fact. This is also the case for theologies, in which the grounding of religious beliefs is particularly susceptible to failure during transmission because the transformation of the beliefs of the previous generation,[31] are well beyond the individual's ability to accurately assess any validity of content.

When individual members of a cultural group hold a certain representational belief, that belief also frequently provides a sufficient rationale for all

members to embrace it, regardless of its validity. Since both beliefs and misbeliefs are acquired through communication, an examination of the cultural history of communication in general, and in America specifically, can provide insights into how individuals hold onto their beliefs.

The American cultural form of communication has its roots in religious attitudes.

The primary motivation behind most immigration to America, beginning with the Puritans, was an attempt to trade an Old World for a New World along with the idea that, that act could be in itself redemptive. It is a belief Americans have never quite escaped."[32] Although not the sole reason for immigration, religion was essential to the establishment of moral meaning and the kingdom of God in the New World. Transport of the Christian community to establish and extend Christianity to the heathen communities of the Americas was seen as a form of "communication."[33] Beyond the encounters with Native Americans, this communication was later personified by the early America era of the revival preacher who, speaking from the back of a cart or at the podium of a revival

tent erected to hold thousands of willing listeners, delivered the Christian message.

From 1740 to 1840, revivals were the most important feature of American religious life.[34] And for a decade, beginning in the 1830s, revivalism - the symbol of the Great Awakening - was as much a fragmenting force as a cohesive force in American society.[35] Americans freely moved from one congregation to another as religions competed for adherents, and it is this feature of American religious history that led Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam to conclude that, "People gradually, but continually, sort themselves into like-minded clusters - their communality defined not only by religion, but also the social and political beliefs that go along with their religion."[36] This perspective provides a view of both the extreme sociability inherent in the population as well as the activism of the people in searching out like-minded brethren - the proverbial "birds of a feather" proverb.

By the nineteenth century, technology in communications became another important form of religious communication. Influential NYC pastor and author Gardner Spring (1785-1873) exclaimed that

America was on the "border of a spiritual harvest because thought now travels by steam and magnetic wires," acknowledging that the emergence of the telegraph and rail travel had changed the form of religious communication. Teacher, author, and renowned abolitionist Rev. James Batchelder (1816-1909) declared that, "the Almighty himself had constructed the railroad for missionary purposes," and Samuel Morse prophesied with the first telegraphic message that "the purpose of the invention was not to spread the price of pork but to ask the question, 'What Hath God wrought?'"[37] Thus, for Americans, the meaning of communication and transportation "was the extension of God's kingdom on earth"[38] and was envisioned as a transmission of religious knowledge and ideas ideal for the "conquest of space and populations,"[39] argues James W. Carey, dean of the College of Communications, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"Most human endeavors are based on unquestioned traditions, routinized habits and unchallenged beliefs about human nature"[40]

Without understanding our cultural history, much of our contemporary culture would seem

ambiguous. Unquestionably, the parts of our cultural history that focus upon the conjoining of religion and self-governance are particularly important to a discussion of modern civil discourse. But equally important are the non-cultural aspects of both individual and group behavior, some of which are intrinsically interwoven into the American life, and some of which prevail in all cultures but simply find different expressions in the American culture. And finally, to complete the picture of who we are as a people, it is necessary to understand the influences of both cultural and non-cultural forms of communication and the extent to which they determine the traditions we embrace, the habits we adopt, and the beliefs we hold.

Chapter Two

Like Minded People

From the historic cultural elements of religion expressed in politics (an American universal given when it comes to group affiliation), Americans have continued to polarize into groups based upon ideological ties to cultural issues. Those who hold progressive views and those with conservative cultural views cluster and each is attracted to political "homes" where they feel culturally most comfortable. Even non-cultural issues such as taxes and government spending carry strong cultural overtones and individual's social values (which underlie his or her political affiliation) predict what position she or he will take on any given issue. Individual identities are generally formed relative to a particular social context because "we are social beings through and through."[41]

However, it is often very difficult to discern from the available data just how institutional groups are representative of any particular individual, as individuals within well-defined groups are considerably diverse. For example, a recent study by

Pew Research Center shows that 50 percent of evangelical Christians believe that the government should do *more* to protect morality, but ironically, 48 percent of Evangelicals want a smaller, less intrusive government. Further, 58 percent of those who belong to mainline churches believe that government is too involved in morality, but only 36 percent of them identify as politically conservative (those least likely to favor government intrusiveness).[42] As seen in these examples, assumptions about an individual's values and beliefs based on their group affiliation can frequently just be wrong because individuals don't reflect all of the values of the group – rather, individuals reflect only selected values. It remains, however, that group behavior does have a strong influence on individual behavior.

An individual 's stance on a particular issue is reinforced when he or she learns that others also share the same position. For example, studies shows that when deliberating in criminal cases, jurors express greater confidence in their judgments when they discover that their fellow jurors largely share their views; further, eyewitness confidence is dramatically enhanced if witnesses learn that another person corroborated their identification.[43]

Communal reinforcement drives individual rationalization, making it easier to conclude that one's beliefs are correct. Thus, conversations individuals have, either prior to or during group discussions, reveal information about another person's position on the issues under consideration and may unduly influence the group's decisions. This behavior, known as assimilation bias, draws a listener closer to a speaker's idea because the speaker's comments are within the latitude of acceptance[44] of the listener, and the perceived consensus elevates confidence,[45] supporting theories that demonstrate the magnitude of the influence of those who surround us.

In 1938, Robert L. Thorndike stated in *The Journal of Social Psychology* that it is difficult to know if the results of group deliberation are affected by members of the group knowing the opinion of the other members and shifting to conform to them, or if group superiority is due to a "simple summation or averaging of individual contributions." Since Thorndike's 1938 work, the question he posed has been reviewed and answered: Knowing the opinion of other members of a group causes a shift not only

to more conformity but also to a more extreme stance than the individual would otherwise embrace.

In four studies conducted by a team at the University of Iowa, reported in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* in May 1996,[46] researchers found that when an individual learns that others share his or her position on an issue, the individual will then feel "greater confidence" regarding that stance and will be willing to endorse more "extreme views" than he or she would otherwise hold. The perception of a consensus elevates confidence, and the extremity of a participant's opinion increases "even in the absence of novel, persuasive arguments." The research shows that a shared discussion prior to a group meeting validates individual arguments and plays a primary role in forming group opinion. In fact, the studies show that nonverbal cues such as laughing at political jokes linked to, say, conservative radio show host Rush Limbaugh or liberal television personality Rachel Maddow during the social time *before* a group convenes can provide cues that will heighten the extremity of political opinion as easily as the verbal discourse that occurs *during* the discussion.

Thorndike's question brought forth the comparison of the "persuasion" and the "social comparison" schools of how attitudes and judgments become more extreme following group discussion. The persuasion view argues for a process of persuasion wherein individuals only become more polarized following group discussion, and "only to the extent that discussion exposes them to previously unconsidered and persuasive arguments favoring their original position." The social comparison view argues that polarization occurs in part from information sharing and also in part from a discussion that allows participants to compare and corroborate their own personal judgments with those of others. The process also allows each participant to identify as "average or above," fortifying his or her self-esteem and image.

Corroboration

Robert Baron and his associates at the University of Iowa argue that the "corroboration perspective" can heighten one's opinion extremity "even in the absence of novel, persuasive arguments." When others seem to agree with an individual's stance on an issue, personal validation occurs and will generally result in an individual's

opinion becoming even more extreme because his or her confidence and self-esteem increase. Baron argues that this is particularly the case when someone is in a tentative or minority position vis-à-vis the group. Thus, like-minded individuals use group discussion to validate arguments that they all mutually shared prior to the formal discussion." This type of social influence is normative and "does not require the exchange, understanding, evaluation, and integration of persuasive material into one's value or belief system nor does it even require knowledge of other's specific actions or opinions. In fact, in many cases, the social influence can be quite ubiquitous, coming from very informal, brief social interactions. Where there is a perceived consensus one's confidence in the validity of their stance is considerably enhanced.

Authority and Experts

Authority and the presence of expert opinion are two other elements that have a profound influence on individual opinion. Stanley Milgram's shock experiments conducted in 1963 at Yale University were designed to test an individual's reliance upon obedience and authority to commit acts that were contrary to personal conscience. In a

"teacher – learner" experiment the teachers applied an electrical shock to learners when they answered questions incorrectly. The premise was that the experiment would study the effects of punishment on learning ability. The results were overwhelmingly beyond anyone's expectations: 65 percent of the participant teachers administered maximum - and massive - electrical shocks to learners when supervisors insisted that they proceed with the experiment, even though learners demonstrated severe pain and stress from the shock. Participant teachers rationalized their behavior in three ways: Some said the results were not their responsibility - it was the fault of the experimenter; others said what happened was the learner's fault, blaming the learner for being stupid or stubborn; and still some other teachers assumed responsibility, felt badly, and were harsh on themselves. The influence of the supervisors, the ultimate authority, was considered profound upon the individuals administering the shock. Other researchers repeated the experiment with similar results and confirmed that a high percentage of people would go beyond their personal conscience to obey those in authority.

Another way of viewing the effects of authority upon an individual comes from studies that test how "expert" opinion affects an individual's view of a set of facts. Dr. Dan M. Kahan of the Cultural Cognition Project at Yale University provides an example in the controversy over the HPV vaccination for schoolgirls recommended by the federal government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Constructing a study to test how expert opinion affects debate, fictional male experts were created (using pictures and mock curriculum vitae) to make it appear that they had distinct perspectives. Eight hundred participants unwittingly matched their values to the phony expert they thought represented values similar to their own, and these participants became even more entrenched in their position for or against the vaccine, further increasing polarization. But when the experts reversed their roles and aligned their arguments with participants, individuals shifted their positions, and polarization disappeared. Studies[47] have shown that a dissonant message from an expert will be rejected if its source has little credibility (similarity of values and beliefs) with an individual but expertise can also play a positive role in argument evaluation.[48]   Thus, "discussions

between laymen and experts are likely to be most productive when the layman disagrees sufficiently with the expert's position to genuinely require arguments - arguments that the expert should then be in a good position to provide."[49]

Congeniality

From infancy to old age, humans live their lives within small groups and it is no secret that individuals associate with others who share the same attitudes and values as they do: these are called congenial groups. In fact, "informal conversations with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers" have more impact on individuals than the mass media have, according to Yale psychologist William McGuire. Our social reality is a set of conventions agreed upon by participants within each group, and even when people are not identifying with a well-defined group, they are enormously influenced by the people around them.[50] This affirming socialization process has the effect of validating opinions an individual holds, but it creates a variety of cultural conditions that may be in tune with neither the reality of a pluralistic society nor the promise of a true democracy.

How Groups Become Extreme

"When people talk to like-minded others, they tend to amplify their preexisting views and do so in a way that reduces their internal diversity"[51] says Dr. Cass R. Sunstein, professor of law at Harvard University. Dr. Sunstein, in collaboration with associates, has conducted experiments designed to challenge the idea that a homogenous culture - communities of like-minded people - are healthy for a democracy. In Colorado in 2005, Dr. Sunstein, in collaboration with Reid Hastie and David Schkade, created an experiment to test this theory. They assembled sixty people from which they formed ten groups. The participants were screened so as to form groups that could be easily constructed and composed of either, politically liberal or conservative members, or a mix of the two. The groups were then asked to deliberate on three contemporary controversial issues, civil unions, climate change and affirmative action. The question the experiment was designed to answer was, "How would people's private, anonymous statements of their views change as a result of a brief period of discussion?"[52]

In the first part of the experiment each participant was asked anonymously their opinion on the subject to be discussed using a scale of 0-10, with 0 as "disagree very strongly" and 10 as "agree very strongly." The participants were then formed into groups of liked-minded people, realizing that each participant felt more or less strongly about the subject to be discussed, but each identified and was screened to be part of either the liberal or conservative perspective. The results showed how each group participant felt about the subject *after* the group discussion as opposed to how each felt *before* the session. The data revealed that those who felt less strongly before the discussion felt more strongly afterwards. In other words, through the group interaction, participants had become more entrenched in favor of or in opposition to the issue - in Sunstein's language, "more extreme." Those, for instance, who were "mildly favorable" toward affirmative action before the discussion on the liberal side became strongly favorable after the discussion and those who were "firmly negative" before the discussion became even more negative in their opinion afterward.

An equally important revelation from the experiments was how each group became more homogeneous. At the beginning of the group conversations, there was "a fair bit of disagreement," but in the process over a relatively short period of time, diversity of opinion was squelched. As a result, in the end, both the liberal groups and the conservative groups were more divided on the subjects when like-minded people talked with one another. The process of civil discourse amplified their views, reduced their internal diversity of thought, and distanced them from the opposite stereotypical group.

In further support of the proposition that like-minded people become more polarized when connected with each other in groups, Dr. Sunstein and his associates conducted a second and similar experiment,[53] this time examining how federal judges behave when impaneled with those of like mind. The Federal Court of Appeals is comprised of panels of three justices, each of whom can be identified by their political affiliation, either Republican or Democratic appointees. When comparing the behavior of panels composed solely of

either Republican or Democratic appointees with those composed of two of one party and one of the other party, distinctive voting patterns can be ascertained.

As was the case in the previously described 2005 Colorado experiment, Federal Court of Appeals panels composed entirely of one persuasion, either Republican or Democratic, showed markedly different voting patterns than those of mixed affiliation. Panels of all Democratic appointees "show especially liberal voting patterns" and panels of all Republican appointees "show especially conservative voting patterns." Dr. Sunstein's team gathered tens of thousands of judicial votes, mostly in ideologically contested cases, and their analysis shows unmistakable patterns confirming the Colorado findings: "When they sit with like-minded others, they become more extreme."

The importance of these findings cannot be overemphasized when it comes to the development of dialogical groups to teach civil discourse. Individual transformation or change clearly does not take place within a group of like-minded people. Not only do the groups themselves become less diverse

in opinion, but they also distance themselves from groups of the opposite persuasion. Sharon Welch, provost and professor of religion at Meadville Theological School in Chicago, summarizes and warrants – although not directly - Dr. Sunstein's findings, saying, "Unlike theorists who argue that the prerequisite of solid moral reasoning is a cohesive community with a shared set of principles, norms, and mores, I argue that material interaction between multiple communities with divergent principles, norms, and mores is essential for foundational moral critique."[54]

I previously made the argument that American religious thought was foundational to communication in the national culture, and while science and technology have become more dominate in shaping contemporary culture, religion still represents a pervasive force. One need only look at the current cultural wars that represent the top stories in the news media to verify that religion continues to be a very important mediator of values and morals. The Catholic Church is currently involved in over seventy lawsuits nationwide over a government mandate that employer's healthcare plans cover "contraceptive protocols." State legislatures have become

battlegrounds over abortion and same-sex marriage, and one's position on these issues is now a standard Christian litmus test for any candidate running for political office. These are just some examples of religion's influence on communication within contemporary culture. Vocal religious based groups maintain a cry for a return to the nation's Christian roots, and rivals still fight over prayer in school and religious symbols in public places, such as a plaque of the Ten Commandments recently erected in a public space.

A culture war exists in American society and it's not so much about whether the law should reflect "our" values or "their" values, but instead it's about whose *view* of the *facts*, theirs or ours, social policies should be based upon.[55] The Cultural Cognition Project at Yale Law School "asserts that people's beliefs are shaped by their core values." When individuals think about controversial issues like the death penalty, climate change, gun control, or the minimum wage, they relate their opinions to those of "people like them," and challenging those beliefs could actually cost them a friendship. Thus, when responding to these issues by saying that "the death penalty doesn't deter murder" or "climate change is

a natural phenomenon" or "gun control will reduce violent crime" people don't think of these beliefs as being merely right or wrong, but they also believe that challenging such opinions would be contrary to what people who are similar to them would assert or deny.

When individuals receive incongruent input from people closest to them, the input will be discounted more than if the input came from someone more distant. So, rather than accepting input from friends, colleagues, or family members, individuals frequently reject arguments from those closest to them (in-group members), preferring to accept arguments from strangers outside of the group more readily than those within it. Dr. Julia A. Minson at Harvard University argues that this tendency might be exacerbated because in-group members who disagree with group beliefs violate cultural expectations that assume that those closest to them harbor similar opinions. In addition, Dr. Minson suggests that when the individual believes that their own opinions are "an objective reflection of reality," they also believe that when others disagree, the others are in error, contributing to how participants in her study gave "roughly twice as

much weight to their own judgments as those of their partner."[56] Moreover, the gap in beliefs causes individuals to "discount judgments in proportion to how much those judgments differ from their own."[57]

In research supported by the National Science Foundation, The Cultural Cognition Project conducted a series of surveys and experiments involving five thousand Americans, the results of which were published in 2007. The principle findings of these studies were as follows:

a) "Individuals of diverse cultural outlooks—hierarchical and egalitarian, individualistic and communitarian—hold sharply opposed beliefs about a range of societal risks, including those associated with climate change, gun ownership, public health, and national security. Differences in these basic values exert substantially more influence over risk perceptions than does any other individual characteristic, including gender, race, socioeconomic status, education, and political ideology and party affiliation.

b) In the wake of the mass shooting at Virginia Tech in April 2007, Americans were culturally polarized on whether stronger gun control measures at schools

and universities would reduce the incidence of campus gun massacres or instead render it more difficult for students and teachers to defend themselves against such attacks. The tragedy did not change public views on gun control overall.

c) In the future, there is a substantial likelihood that Americans will become culturally polarized over what are currently novel, relatively low profile risk issues, including the dangers associated with nanotechnology and the vaccination of school age girls against HPV infection. The source of such divisions is the tendency of individuals to process factual information about risk in a manner that fits cultural predispositions.

d) Individuals' expectations about the policy solution to global warming strongly influence their willingness to credit information about climate change. When told the solution to global warming is increased antipollution measures, persons of individualistic and hierarchic world views become less willing to credit information suggesting that global warming exists, is caused by humans, and poses significant societal dangers. Persons with such outlooks are more willing to credit the same information when told the solution to global warming is increased reliance on nuclear

power generation.

e) How individuals respond to arguments about the risks associated with mandatory HPV vaccination for school age girls is highly dependent on the perceived values of the persons making such arguments. Individuals who are culturally predisposed to a particular position are even more likely to form that view when an advocate who shares their cultural outlooks espouses it. Such individuals are less likely to form that view—and cultural polarization is reduced generally—when a person who shares their values advocates a position on the HPV vaccination that is contrary to such individuals' cultural predispositions."[58]

Taking just one of these culturally charged issues as an example, the issue surrounding climate change, provides insight into the characteristics of all value issues. Those predisposed by their values to accept or reject climate change theory become more accepting or dismissive, as the case may be, when presented with *more* communication from the scientific community because individuals cannot corroborate the information they receive with their respective cultural group. Professor Dan Kahan of the Cultural Cognition Project summarizes this point,

saying, "Individuals can be expected to form perceptions of risk that reflect and reinforce values that they share with others." This form of polarization is called "cultural cognition" and refers to "the influence of group values" upon individual perceptions and beliefs.

In the case of climate change, those who identify with a cultural group that represents a high degree of individualism - and therefore, views collective interference with distain – tend to reject climate change because they perceive that acceptance of such claims would invite more regulation of commerce and industry. Meanwhile those who hold a more communitarian worldview and perceive commerce and industry with suspicion tend to favor government action to control risk on behalf of society. As individuals reinforce their values through group participation and become more entrenched in the belief that their opinion is "right," they embrace riskier courses of action as a group than individuals are willing to engage in themselves.[59] Like-minded people become more cohesive, leading to a collective emotion stronger than what would be assumed to be the case based upon the individual beliefs of its members.

As a group becomes more extreme, more moderate individual members have two choices: Leave the group and risk losing members' good will (or suffering something worse, depending on the acrimony that ensues), or stay with the group and provide a moderating voice in an attempt to lessen the move to more extreme group behavior. Exiting the group guarantees that the group will move to more extreme positions as the group becomes smaller and the lack of dissenting voices leaves only those with the most extreme views talking with each other. Moreover, the remaining group members will represent a higher level of solidarity and become more like family, resulting in the worst kind of polarized and extreme element.[60]

Group discussion ideally presents an opportunity to pool ideas, but in fact, most ideas presented will favor the dominant viewpoint of those within the group. We can all recall examples of groups that coalesced for good purposes, such as the Peace Corps that gained thousands of adherents in the early 1960s for the purpose of doing global good. And, generally, such groups provide the basis for civil society. Social organizations like churches, sororities, book clubs, weekend sports teams and the

like are the platforms for our associational life. Unitarian parish minister and Meadville Lombard professor from 1936–1943, James Luther Adams, says that groups such as these make for relationships and they are what unite us. But Sunstein reminds us that "much of the time, groups of people end up thinking and doing things that group members would never think or do on their own,"[61] making a group more extreme than the average group participant. And sometimes, rather than resulting in something good for society, it can result in something evil, such as in the case in Germany in the late 1930s when the Brown Shirts of the Nazi Party specialized in beating up people who disagreed with them. But regardless of their purpose – either good or evil - like-minded groups demonstrate a behavior that may fail society as a whole in its quest for finding answers to the most compelling questions that face humankind.

Confirmation by Groups

Research shows that individual group members will search for information based on the alternative they believe the group will choose. Since groups have become increasingly important in decision-

making within virtually all forms of organizations, the extent to which this practice occurs has significance for society.

People often rely on group decisions over individual decisions believing that diversity of thought within a group will result in the exploration of the greatest number of alternatives. However, a variety of studies[62] show that both before and after a group decision is made individual group members will seek confirming information *on their own* to support the alternative they believe the group will choose, thus affirming the theory that group participants prefer to use confirming information over conflicting information. More importantly, it shows that reliance on group decisions may be ill founded, because group members will act as affirming agents for the alternative that is thought to be most acceptable to most of the group.

Congenial groups made up of like-minded participants, or at least participants who have a common objective, are both the most prevalent type of groups in society and those most subject to reliance on shared information; however the "greater the diversity of individual preferences present in the group, the more reliance on shared information is

reduced."[63] This group-level phenomenon does not seem to be affected by the group being more or less homogeneous or heterogeneous or by the age of the participants. Only in groups where sizable minorities exist does informational bias noticeably decline. Even in groups of "experts," research confirms, "minorities counteract a confirmation bias in information seeking."[64]

Group narcissism. When groups become intolerant of independent judgment.[65]

Interest groups (sometimes referred to as special interest groups) emerge in all communities in the form of individuals coalescing around a single issue. Such groups can be beneficial in terms of bringing all voices to the table for discussion. However, group narcissism often results when pursuit of a single point of view trumps pursuit of the "truth." In these cases groups not only become intolerant of other groups with different viewpoints but they also become intolerant of individuals within the group who voice dissent or protest the direction the group is taking. Rather than "make waves" within the group, individuals frequently choose to "hide behind the value system of the group and fail to ask ethical questions about the taken-for-granted

assumptions of the group."[66] Both philosopher Martin Buber, best known for his philosophy of dialogue, and Søren Kierkegaard in his writings *On the Dedication to "That Single Individual"* refer to the concept and the importance of the "single one," the person of courage and conviction that would place themselves in front of the group, separating themselves from the group to speak their "truth," risking "one's narcissistic desires for status in a group and recognition in a community."[67] As Buber concludes, "The final line of resistance to conformity in a group pursuing a dubious cause is the solitary individual…"[68]

Intentionally employing methods enhancing polarization between groups is a common way to develop group solidarity but fails to move groups closer to any resolution of conflict between them. This technique splits people into different camps, creating an "us and them" that only gives "an illusion of sharpness of perception when in reality there is a refusal to gain new insights by listening to the other's viewpoint."[69] The Occupy Movement that developed in America in 2007 to protest the institutions of power and money represented by Wall

Street and banks suggested that the 1% in the nation said to be the wealthiest individuals were representative of the evil in the American economic system. Activists who tried to push the relationship of the two groups into more polarized viewpoints hoped to somehow benefit from a class conflict. Rather than enlist the 1% to help them reach their goals, the Occupy Movement alienated them, and thus insured their own failure.

Martin Buber developed a quite different approach from that of the Occupy Movement, one he called a "third alternative" that "requires walking the Narrow Ridge between extreme positions."[70] He believed this approach might contribute to a more productive outcome when groups come into conflict. If the Occupy Movement had adopted Buber's alternative they could have avoided the attempt to demonize the 1% and, while maintaining their convictions, could have remained open and sensitive to the opinions of those who possessed the power to create the change the movement demanded. A prime example of this approach is that of Mahatma Gandhi who bridged the gulf between his movement and his British colonial opponents by developing

friendships with high-ranking British officers. Martin Buber sees the Gandhi style of communication as more hopeful, avoiding the polarization that widens the chasm between opposing camps. His view of a "narrow ridge" as an alternative approach to a constructive and healthy form of dialogue provides a path to learning from the opposition, leaving one open to the "power of another's argument."

The colonial American ideal of forming communities of like-minded people was rooted in a history of oppression, which cannot be denied. However, this cultural imprint has had unintended consequences that are incompatible with a contemporary globalized world, and in particular with a much more highly secular society that finds its heritage bound by neither a dominant Christian ethic nor a white homogenous society. By analyzing groups of like-minded people, we find that our American cultural basis is incompatible with today's pluralistic society or, in fact, with the hope of a workable democracy.

However, the established transmission form of communication, developed during the Puritan era in America and still used in an attempt to mediate

behavior by religious, political, and economic interests, remains a powerful force in driving people of like minds together by supporting their myths and beliefs.

Chapter Three

Agents of Communication

Mass communications even in the modern technological age are not grounded in "truth." They suffer from an epistemological inadequacy rooted in drama rather than knowledge. "Truth" in this context is defined by James Carey as "no more and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on,"[71] - not an interesting argument or a philosophical conclusion, but an honest sorting-out of information. Arguably, "journalistic truth" should be more than mere accuracy; it should be a disinterested pursuit of truth stripped of "any attached misinformation, disinformation, or self-promoting information developed by a press focused on synthesis and verification.[72]

If this ideal of truth existed in modern communications, people could trust their information sources, but in reality, modern forms of communication are not only biased, but in many cases, also untruthful. Therefore, a significant amount of misinformation is disseminated to the

public. This problem actually makes citizens less informed and skeptical of all media sources except those that confirm their already existing beliefs. The challenge becomes not only *whom* to believe, but *what* to believe. The credibility of the communicator and the content of the message are inextricably tied to the acceptance of controversial information.[73] Although individuals are endowed with cognitive mechanisms designed to filter out misinformation, this innate epistemic vigilance depends on two conditions to be effective. First, the evaluation of the source of the information and second, an evaluation of the arguments communicated. Both require a "stance of trust."

There exists today in America an almost constant battle over control of the political, religious, and economic templates of communication that guide the behavior of Americans and that act as an impediment to epistemic vigilance. Controlling communications in all forms within the culture is a key ingredient to achieving political, religious, and economic goals and objectives. Thus, our communication models have become social institutions for the promotion of particular attitudes,

forms of address, and tones and styles, which in turn have become embodied in our institutions and are then used to very powerful social effect.[74] These models also serve to promote the polarization of various cultural groups within society, because the communicated messages affirm the "prior stereotypes, prejudices and selective perceptions of the audience."[75] Societal cost is measured by the number of people who base their policy preferences on false, misleading, or unsubstantiated information that conforms to their political preference,[76] or information that they believe to be true because they deem the source to be "reliable and trustworthy." For example, take the phenomenon of cable television as an institution that promotes distinct values to an audience that seeks confirmation for their already existing beliefs and opinions.

Six independent public opinion studies have shown that politically charged cable channel news is a major source of misinformation for Americans.[77] Some popular cable channels feature primarily political themes that otherwise support the bias of the channel itself such as Fox News and MSNBC. Conservatives are more likely to watch Fox News

than MSNBC, and contrarily a liberal is more likely to be an MSNBC viewer than a Fox viewer. A comScore Data Mine study of February 2011 revealed that 62 percent of Fox News viewers identified themselves as Republican compared with 17 percent who identified themselves as Democrat, and only 20 percent of MSNBC viewers identified themselves as Republican. A 2011 Pew Research Center report stated, "Staunch Conservatives are more than twice as likely as any other group to watch or listen to Fox News commentators Glenn Beck or talk radio host Rush Limbaugh." Although it is armchair knowledge that Fox represents conservative bias and MSNBC represents liberal bias, data from Pew Research supports this view finding that in Fox's coverage of President Obama, the ratio of negative to positive stories was 46-6 while MSNBC's ratio was 3-71.

But, this propensity for viewers to look for confirmation of their existing beliefs from corroborating sources goes well beyond cable news. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in their 2011 report found similar evidence relative to print media. They found that 18 percent of those who self-identify as "Solid Liberals" read *The*

New York Times, but just 1 percent of those who identify themselves as "Staunch Conservatives" said they read the Times regularly. And a new Ohio State University study that observed 156 college students reading online magazine articles about current controversial issues like gay marriage found that students spent 36% more time reading articles with which they agreed. The Ohio State University study revealed "partisan selective exposure" according to Dr. Natalie Jomine Stroud, author of *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice*. In this comprehensive view of the extent to which partisanship influences media selections her studies explore behavior that leads individuals to select news sources that match their own views.

Jason Zweig, a senior writer for *Money* magazine, argues that investors in general have a strong confirmation bias seeking information to support whatever the investor wants to believe. He cites a recent analysis of psychological studies involving nearly 8,000 participants that shows that "people are twice as likely to seek information that confirms what they already believe as they are to consider evidence that would challenge those

beliefs."[78] In the investment world, there is no shortage of information on regulated market instruments, be they stocks on an exchange, bonds freely traded, or contracts on commodity futures. Conventional wisdom suggests that any investor would want to have all the information available before risking his or her money, but Zweig in his *Wall Street Journal* article "How to Ignore the Yes-Man in Your Head" writes that this is not the case. Professor of psychology Scott Lilienfeld at Emory University in Atlanta adds, "It's simply easier to focus our attention on data that supports our hypothesis, rather than to seek out evidence that might disprove it."[79]

It might be concluded that those distributing the news and commentary are in fact providing their audiences with exactly what they demand: confirmation of opinions already held by listeners and viewers.

"Communication entails a risk of manipulation"[80] whereby misleading information is communicated for the purpose of benefiting the addressor, and "communicated information involves ... the adaptive problem of dealing with a significant amount of false information."

The epistemological inadequacy of all forms of widely transmitted information has clearly driven The Pew Research Journalism Project over the last three years to develop nine ideal core principles for journalism: (1) Journalism's firm obligation is to the truth; (2) Its first loyalty is to citizens; (3) Its essence is a discipline of verification; (4) Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover; (5) It must serve as an independent monitor of power; (6) It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise; (7) It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant; (8) It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional; ((9) Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.[81]

These ideas are rooted in the American ideal of a democracy that is based upon a "free" press (note, I did not say truthful press). But Thomas Jefferson must have envisioned a truthful press when he said, "Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government." The context of Jefferson's view must have been ensconced in the idea that a free press disseminating information would be as close to true and factual as possible. But, I believe that Jefferson's faith in the

concept of a free press would certainly be shaken by the state of our media today - media that includes free-form blogs and un-sourced inferences we now call news. Margaret Sullivan in the Public Editor's Journal of *The New York Times* wrote a contemporary view that Jefferson might have envisioned. On July 17, 2013 she stated "that news organizations ought to go out of their way to state established truths when they can and not give equal weight to both sides," and that there should be no "False Balance," that is, giving equal weight and credit to a different point of view even though one is untrue. It is unlikely, however, that the motivations of mass communicators are going to change anytime soon. Therefore, a more promising solution to ameliorate the current flood of misinformation probably rests with the development of methodologies that can help individuals use the epistemic vigilance they innately possess.

People of all political stripes distrust the media and view it as biased. The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press reveals that in January 2012, 67 percent of those polled believed that news coverage was biased, and only 10 percent thought it not biased at all.[82] This negates the first condition for

epistemic vigilance, because to be effective, a source must be considered trustworthy. But there is substantial disagreement on exactly which sources of information are trustworthy. All evidence supports the idea that the sources people consider to be trustworthy too often, turn out to be only those they *already* trust. Thus, the true evaluation of information is impeded by the biases, prejudices, and beliefs of the recipient. So to ask a politically conservative individual, for instance, to spend time watching MSNBC is a waste of time, because an individual who embraces a conservative political philosophy most likely will not see liberal-leaning MSNBC as a viable and trustworthy source for information. To establish trust in the source of information, an understanding of people's access to information becomes part of the evaluative process. Television and print media aside, the most common source of information in American society today is the Internet.

People commonly believe that the Internet is a trustworthy source of information and you often hear people say, "I read it on the internet." But it may well be that the degree of epistemic vigilance required to navigate the credibility of information

found on the Internet may be even greater than what's needed when navigating other media because the bias of the source is less apparent online. Much of the information individuals acquire today is through Internet search engines such as Google. Most, if not all, search engines employ algorithms that produce pages ranked by relevance based on the number of links to them from still other web sites.[83] The process leads the user to think that the top-ranked links are both the most relevant and the most worthy links to the subject search, when in-fact the top-ranked links represent only the most common sites viewed by others who conducted similar searches or used similar phrases in their search. Reliance on information garnered from Internet search results may be ill-founded, as there appears to be no evidence that individual users actually investigate the source of the information displayed by following up with a search on the author's competency or credentials. All of which points toward a general lack of epistemic vigilance. One can safely conclude that while people have access to more information than ever before in human history, they do not necessarily have access to more knowledge.

Facts Don't Change Minds

The consequences of disseminating misinformation are significant, and the correction of such misinformation is problematic. Studies conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan in 2005 and 2006 found that when people were given misinformation in news stories and were later exposed to corrected facts they rarely changed their minds.[84] In fact, evidence revealed that people in situations like this often become even *more* convinced that their beliefs are correct, making the misinformation even more powerful. Once someone receives misinformation, it is very difficult to overcome its initial effect, and providing more information simply does not overcome the misinformation they held to be true. Although scientists have promoted the idea that misconceptions are due to a lack of knowledge and suggest that by providing more information people would change their opinions, this "information deficit" model is now clearly understood to be wrong.

In fact, a variety of studies have shown that simply correcting misinformation has little effect on misbelief. University of Michigan professor Brendan

Nyhan devised an experiment in which a provably false claim (that there were weapons of mass destruction found in Iraq) was disseminated to participants. This information was then followed by a correction to the claim. The result was that "participants who self-identified as conservative believed the misinformation … more strongly after being given the correction."[85] The "I know I'm right" syndrome not only tells us that people resist correcting misbeliefs, but it also provides insight into what appears to be a correlation between misinformation and people who hold the strongest opinions. In a 2000 study by James Kuklinski of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, participants who were "the most confident they were right were by and large the ones who knew the least about the topic" (in this study the questions focused on welfare payments). In fact, "only 3 percent of the people got more than half of the questions right."[86]

As part of its regular Sunday night viewing fare, CBS broadcast an episode of *60 Minutes* in October 2013. Lara Logan, a lead correspondent produced a segment on the attack that took place

earlier in the year on the American embassy in Benghazi, Libya that resulted in the death of the ambassador and several staff members. The incident was already a politically charged issue in Congress but the *60 Minutes* report once again fueled controversy over the details. After the broadcast South Carolina senator Lindsay Graham declared that he "planned to block all administration nominations until congress was granted access to all of the survivors of the attack."[87] Two weeks later, CBS broadcast an apology for the story after discovering that the prime source for their story had "misled" the network, and the sources's claim that the ambassador and his staff could have been supported with reinforcements was not credible. But Senator Graham publicly announced after the retraction by CBS that he stood by his threat despite the new information. More information has little effect on changing minds and how to present information in forms that are agreeable to culturally diverse groups can be problematic. If the truth carries implications that threaten cultural values, it is likely to harden individuals' resistance to the new information and "increase their willingness to support

alternative arguments, no matter how lacking in evidence"[88]

Why contrary evidence is ineffective in changing minds is frequently referred to as the "backfire effect." John Cook and Hollyn Johnson, too, point out in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, that in many instances, trying to correct misinformation only leads individuals to strengthen their erroneous beliefs. Cook and Johnson argue: "To avoid these 'backfire effects' an effective debunking requires three major elements: First, the refutation must focus on core facts rather than the myth to avoid the misinformation becoming more familiar; second, any mention of a myth should be preceded by explicit warnings to notify the reader that the upcoming information is false; and finally, the refutation should include an alternative explanation that accounts for important qualities in the original misinformation."[89] The technique Cook and Johnson suggest is helpful, but fails to account for the prevalent journalistic style that places corrections in very small boxes far from the front page.

There is however, a tipping point that will result in a change of heart or mind; people can reach

a point where their most firmly held beliefs erode as a result of receiving new contrary information. Humans are motivated to maintain and support existing evaluations, but change is possible after a certain amount of disconfirming information. For example, recent studies[90] have shown that voters become more supportive of a preferred political candidate in the face of negatively valenced information. Such behavior or motivated reasoning however does not continue *ad infinitum*. At some point, motivated reasoning processes give way and are overcome by repeated disconfirming information.

For example, research headed by Dr. David P. Redlawsk of Rutgers University shows "experimental evidence that such an affective tipping point does in fact exist." In effect, Redlawsk's experiment shows that once a voter receives enough incongruent information about a candidate, "affective intelligence" overrides motivated reasoning. In other words, the voter becomes more anxious about the choice he or she has made and begins to more carefully consider new information. Eventually, overwhelming new information overrides the motivation to retain their existing belief. Of course,

exposure to new and contrary information is a requirement of this process and individuals frequently do not consider sources of contrary information as credible.

A "stance of trust" involves the individual's readiness to "adjust one's own beliefs to a relevance-guided interpretation of the speaker's meaning, as opposed to adjusting one's interpretation of the speaker's meaning to one's own beliefs."[91] Such a stance does not involve an acceptance of the arguments of the speaker, but rather being open to the claims the speaker advances. This stance puts the listener in a position to be *biased* in favor of the information received, not to necessarily or ultimately believe it. Individuals possess an evaluative mechanism to screen the content of communications received in order to filter out communicated misinformation.[92] However, it may well be that individual mechanisms "are not geared to filtering information on a large scale"[93] such as that received through all forms of modern communication; rather, it may be more appropriate within the context of a face-to-face interaction, where intuition may provide more direct information about the trustworthiness of

both the source of information and its content. The first condition for epistemic vigilance – trust in the source of information, as shown above - is highly problematic. But the second condition, being able to evaluate the arguments communicated, offers a more hopeful use of our innate epistemic vigilance based on reasoning and argumentation.

Chapter Four

Argument and Reason

Hugo Mercier, an Ambizione Fellow at the Cognitive Science Center at the University of Neuchatel[94] and Dan Sperber, a French social and cognitive scientist[95] believe that one way listeners and speakers can improve the reliability of communication is through arguments. Mercier and Sperber theorize that humans are built to devise and evaluate arguments; that "the function of reason is to produce arguments in order to convince others, and to evaluate arguments that others use in order to convince us."[96] ("Argument," defined here as synonymous with reason or supporting statements that are used to convince or advance particular ideas in an attempt to persuade ourselves or others of a particular position.) The unique human ability to reason is clearly linked to language and conceptual representations that can be "consciously represented and verbalized."[97]

Mercier and Sperber argue that reasoning "is generally seen as a means to improve knowledge and make better decisions"[98] and that there is no

evidence that such ability occurs in nonhuman animals. In short, Mercier and Sperber provide a wonderfully designed understanding of the human mechanism to "yield epistemic improvements" from sustained argumentation - the back and forth verbal interactions between the producer of an argument and the evaluator of an argument. This is a hopeful design for conversation that provides meaningful dialogue and deliberation where reasoning is used among people who disagree, but who are ready to change their minds when confronted with good arguments.[99]

Reasoning is the tool used by human beings for epistemic vigilance, which enables us to evaluate arguments "so as to be convinced only when appropriate." Humans have cognitive mechanisms that allow them to survey information they receive and either accept or reject it based on the source of the information – on whom to believe. Mercier and Sperber argue that because the major problem with communicated information has to do with the interest and honesty of the speaker, epistemic vigilance becomes indispensable because of the risk of deception, which is confounded by a communicator's desire to present information that's

most likely to convince the other party, whether the information is true or false. Although communicators should do their best to be truthful - and may believe themselves to be so - strong cultural biases and prejudices embedded in everyone make "pure" forms of communication unlikely. However, Mercier and Sperber have found "When participants argue - when they reason together - they are often able to sift through poor arguments and retain the best ones with an uncanny accuracy,"[100] a process which generally results in true deliberation.

"An activity is deliberative to the extent that reasoning is used to gather and evaluate arguments for and against a given proposition."[101]

According to Mercier and Sperber there are important distinctions between reasoning and deliberation. Reasoning can be as simple as finding arguments that support one's own opinion, whereas deliberation takes place only to the extent that one makes an effort to find and evaluate arguments for the opinion of others (as well as evaluate one's own). The key to creating the best conditions for deliberation is evaluation; otherwise, one will only produce circuitous arguments and counter-arguments. If neither party evaluates the argument

of the other, deliberation will not occur. However, an anomaly of this otherwise productive human characteristic is how well people construct arguments while engaged in a discussion. Mercier and Sperber argue the methodology is a meta-representational device that examines representations in a most serial manner until it finds an argument good enough to support one's position,[102] the result of which is twofold: (a) individuals usually don't pick the best argument to support their position first, and (b) discussions may become tedious and time consuming because there is no penalty or risk to not first advancing one's best argument.

Agreed Upon Sources of Information

Objective information is assessed relative to beliefs already held (which may or may not be open to revision) and from a source that has been agreed upon to be reliable. The argumentation form of reasoning advanced by Mercier and Sperber suggests that "reasoning should exhibit a strong confirmation bias" and thus "confirmation bias is not a flaw in reasoning, but rather a feature that is to be expected in a mechanism designed to persuade others by use of arguments." Initially all forms of argument must contain two relative components: who? and what?

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Who communicates the information is the first line of defense, because before any test of the argument, a failure to trust the source of the information will generally intuitively result in rejecting all arguments presented. However, sources are frequently unfamiliar or not vetted, and since people are basically trustful by nature, the cognitive mechanism for epistemic vigilance will not become activated until the argumentative phase of the communication takes place. A willing listener may hear and understand a communication, but without argument, the listener will more often than not refuse to accept it. The *argumentative theory of reasoning* also provides a guideline for the conditions under which a group's deliberative performance can be assessed.

Seeking a good performance from group deliberation requires the acceptance of the foundational ideas that (1) there are better and worse answers to the questions groups ponder, and (2) there must be a fit between the task to be undertaken and the function of the group in order to have a good result. Moreover, there must be a feedback loop - arguments and counter-arguments that represents an exchange of arguments between "reasoning from at least two opinions." Sperber and

Mercier say that even if you voice no arguments in a group you participate "to the extent that you are making an effort to find and evaluate arguments for our opinion as well as for yours."[103] The point is not whether someone voices their argument, but rather that someone considers several opinions and "uses reasoning to find arguments for and against these opinions."[104] It should, however, be noted that there is sufficient reason to believe that silent members of a group fail to achieve meaningful participation unless they articulate in their own words the position they take and provide support for that position.

Most experimental psychology domains support a classical view of reasoning from the standpoint that the main function of reasoning as a cognitive mechanism is designed to correct misguided intuitions. Mercier and Sperber, while acknowledging that reasoning relies on intuition about whether a given premise is a good reason to accept a given conclusion, suggest that the argumentative process goes beyond intuition. Argumentation also means incorporating a process of sorting through the best support for the opinions advanced and an evaluation process in which the primary goal is to decide if an argument is good

enough to warrant changing one's mind about the conclusion. Mercier and Sperber offer that the argumentative process is also supported by the fact that people who have a strong commitment to a point of view are not going to intuitively accept information without reasoning that is supported through an argumentative process.

Another argument used by classical psychologists who test Mercier's and Sperber's hypothesis is that, on average, individuals do poorly in standardized reasoning task exercises. It is a fact that people do perform more poorly in reasoning tasks individually, and it is also a fact that a person's performance improves when in a group. The argumentative theory of reasoning specifically supports a view that reasoning is a social activity and foundational to how we communicate with one another. Therefore, the fact that individuals perform poorly on solo reasoning tasks simply reinforces the relational aspect of the argumentative theory.[105]

The value of deliberation has not been proven to the satisfaction of many political scientists who have conducted experimental programs in pursuit of the theory of deliberative democracy. They pose questions about the "transformative properties" of

deliberation - does deliberation lead to a better understanding of information and a higher level of civic-mindedness, or some other conclusion? Admittedly deliberation sometimes leads to homogenizing group attitudes, and sometimes it leads to their polarization. Participants may or may not engage more often in political activity as a result of the deliberations, if that is, in fact, the objective. There is, however, no conclusive data to show that groups make better decisions than individuals do. But in creating models for dialogue, these may not be the only objectives or considerations.

The proposition put forth by Mercier and Sperber with regard to argumentative reasoning and epistemic vigilance is consistent with Martin Buber's idea of the "power of another's argument," making it possible to structure a more ideal way to navigate a world in which our current forms of dialogue fail to measure up to the challenges we face as a society. Buber's belief that the give and take of argument might free humankind from the "long shadow of polarized communication" provides the greatest support for Mercier's and Sperber's theory. How else could the chasm between opposing camps be bridged but by dialogue, where each party has an

opportunity to argue their position under constitutive rules that obligate each party to be open to being convinced? Thus, we then argue our position with the understanding that our listener will create a legitimate space within which to fairly hear what we have to say. Ideally as each party listens we can expect that they will be vigilant in their evaluation of the arguments presented and accept or reject them based on their soundness.

Martin Buber's narrow ridge postulate metaphorically represents a higher place in concert with Mercier's and Sperber's idea of deliberation being a state beyond dialogue, and Buber devises some constitutive rules for individual behavior. He states that above the abysses on each side of the ridge are where one stays open to another's viewpoint, remains sensitive to the idea that every issue is multi-faceted, and instead of falling into the abyss of polarization, one can be open to being persuaded by the power of another's argument, which forms the basis for deliberation. His idea further suggests that the possibilities for dialogue between people can bridge the gap between opposing opinions, but only when that possibility emanates from the commitment to listen to and

understand the opposing opinion. Thus, each willing party argues their position, expects a legitimate hearing, and seeks to reach a compromise between opposing viewpoints.

Buber's philosophy assigns a special value to diverse group opinion in deliberations because, characteristically each participant of the group will propose reasons that "support their own position, while exercising vigilance towards the arguments proposed by others and then evaluate them carefully." But, if all members of a group share the same viewpoint, no governing mechanism exists to check for confirmation bias and determine whether or not members can vigilantly evaluate the opinions of one another. The discussion can then often turn to absent opponents and polarization will be enhanced; producing even more extreme views.

In brief: Epistemic vigilance is dependent on debate and argument with a common search for truth through agreed-upon sources of information. Both individual and group efforts should establish procedures for evaluating the competence of those offering information, including an evaluation for the potential bias of any experts used. Thus, humans are

innately equipped to communicate with each other in ways different from those used by other animals.

Ideally, if we shed the idea of a "common good" and replace it with the "common objective" to make this world a better place for future generations, we can personify the idea that we leave this world a better place than we found it. If we discard the colonial view that we must form societies of like-minded people, and instead embrace the reality of a global and pluralistic society in which a variety of opinions will aid in the problem-solving process, we can create an openness to the "other" and invite collaboration, not corroboration. If we understand what influences us, and seek, with others, to sort through the information available to inform our opinions we can engage in deliberation.

Chapter Five

Philosophical Argument For Change

"Man is made for creative transformation as a bird is made for flight," writes American philosopher and theologian Henry Nelson Wieman. A philosophical view of man's ability to change is encapsulated in Dr. Wieman's theory of "Creative Interchange." As Professor David Lee Miller writes in *The Experience of Creative Interchange*, creative interchange is an extension of the idea of relational power - simply put, the ability to affect others and be affected by them. Miller claims that the secret of relational power "lies in its capacity to enable people to meet one another with a basic openness of heart and mind, thereby rendering them progressively capable of yielding, whenever appropriate, their most reassured and cherished beliefs and values."[106] Eliminating the impediments to creative interchange rests in every individual's ability to meet one another without any preconceived notions that may have been created by labels and stereotypes.

Walter Lippmann (1889-1974), an American intellectual, writer and reporter, said our worldviews

are fashioned from "pictures in our heads," and that all people "live in the same world, but think and feel in different ones." Moreover, he states that most people mistakenly believe that those images we create carry the same meaning for all of us and that everyone claims the same reality. Semanticist Alfred Korzybski supports this view from a different perspective.

Korzybski argues that reality, as a process, contains three elements. First, a word or symbol used to identify an object is not really identical to that object ("the word is not the object."). Second, no matter how well an object is described, the description does not include all possible information about the object. Third, we employ language for talking about language, statements about statements, and evaluations about evaluations.[107] In essence, a symbol or word is not actually the object it stands for; rather, it is our best description for that object or event, but it does not include a detailed account - it is merely an abstract representation of that object. Stereotypes, prejudices and selective perceptions we have about one another are the result of our tendency to create internal pictures

from the limited words and symbols we have available, with no regard for the pictures others may have distilled from the same words and symbols. A prime example is the word, "family."

The American family is changing so rapidly that few people actually recognize the enormous changes that have occurred just within the past few decades. "Researchers who study the structure and evolution of the American family are astonished at how rapidly the idealized traditional American family has changed, the transformations often exceeding or capsizing those same experts' predictions of just a few journal articles ago."[108] The days of two-parent families, composed of Mom, Dad and the children, all of like race, religion, political ideology, and economic class, are over. Society today has a much different social reality than that of even the 1950s. Increasingly, blacks marry whites, atheists marry self-identified religious people, and Democrats marry Republicans. Furthermore, many don't marry at all. In a recent survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 48 percent of women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four said they lived with someone to whom they were not

married,[109] and 40.7 percent of American babies are born to unmarried women.[110] The nation's birthrate is half of what it was in 1960, and those that do have children average two apiece now, compared with three children per family in the 1970s.[111] Birth rates are tracking the nation's widening gap in income and opportunity: 90 percent of women with bachelor's degrees put marriage before giving birth to a child, but 57 percent of women with high school diplomas or less are unmarried when they give birth to their first child.

Moreover, "Paycheck Mommy is now a central organizing principle of the modern American family."[112] The share of mothers now employed full or part-time accounts for 75 percent of the women who have children at home. Thus, we find support for Korzybski's idea of reality in that "the word is not the object," and no matter how well "family" is defined, the description does not encompass all that a "family" might mean today.

Clearly, "what we observe and what we fail to observe are determined by the assumptions under which we operate in making our observations."[113] Individual assumptions and perceptions of reality

make every human being unique, and every worldview emanates from such a personal perspective. This concept has existed at least since the time of pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Protagoras, who said, "Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are, of the things that are not that they are not." In essence, things are or are not true according to how the individual perceives them, i.e., "truth" is relative to individual perception.

We employ language for talking about language, statements about statements and evaluations about evaluations, and we are frequently indiscriminate in doing so. Many people attach labels and stereotypes that marginalize others who do not share their "pictures" in order to protect their own "pictures," a process which may preclude their ability to engage in meaningful dialogue or relate to one another.

Labels and Stereotyping

Ronald Arnett, chair and professor at McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, argues that stereotyping is a sign that we fail to discriminate properly, that we are indiscriminant. By

stereotyping, we actually group people into categories (such as feminist or conservative) as though each person so labeled is alike, "instead of meeting each person as an individual with a unique opinion."[114] Again, we cannot assume that everyone we meet thinks as we do. To do so only closes the door on dialogue and does not allow for anyone else to express their unique set of arguments and evidence. Arnett refers to this behavior as "indiscriminant listening" where the listener fails to "discriminate properly".[115] This behavior only tends to stifle voices that would otherwise add to a meaningful dialogue, especially in a public arena.

Walter Lippmann, in his book *Public Opinion* published in 1921, coined the term "stereotype" in the modern meaning and suggested that "a catalogue of general stereotypes" forms the basis of how many human beings look at the world. For example, stereotypes like "blondes are dumb", "Polish people are stupid, and Asians eat dogs" can become cruel humor that too often becomes ingrained in the culture to such a degree that it truly marginalizes whole groups of people, and which many times leads to hurt feelings and even major

social divides. In support of Lippmann's argument, Franklin D. Gilliam Jr., dean of the School of Public Affairs and professor of Public Policy and Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles, examined the public's enduring understanding of government welfare, rooted in political rhetoric from President Ronald Reagan's administration. It was "Reagan's iconic representation of the African-American welfare experience on white people's attitudes about welfare policy, race, and gender"[116] that created the stereotype "welfare queen."

Gilliam declares, "the notion of the welfare queen had taken on the status of common knowledge" with two key components: Welfare recipients are disproportionately women, and women on welfare are disproportionately African-American, ergo -the stereotype endures. As a result of exposure to this portrayal, white Americans became less supportive of welfare programs, increased their stereotyping of African-Americans, and elevated their support for traditional gender roles. As a script, the narrative creates the image that all welfare recipients are African-American women. Factually, the "largest single group 'on welfare' is children," and African-American women "account for only a bit

more than 10 percent of the total number of welfare recipients." But the stereotype created by the Reagan rhetoric falls into the category of congenial communication as described by Professor Dan Kahan: language designed to appeal to the values of a particular demographic, i.e., white voters who think the government waste tax money on people who should "get a job and pull themselves up by their bootstraps."

Perceptions

Psychologist Dr. Wendell Johnson wrote that facts "are a matter of social agreement" and that "every fact appears different" depending on where you stand on any issue. He argues that our view of facts should be governed by an understanding that "any given fact is (1) necessarily incomplete (since it is impossible to know all the facts about anything), (2) changeable, (3) a personal affair, and (4) useful to the degree to which others agree with you about it."[117] Albert Einstein supports Johnson's view, saying, "Our notions of physical reality can never be final. We must always be ready to change these notions …"[118] These are the constitutive rules upon which to build a workable basis to improve dialogue and deliberation in a pluralistic society.

Constitutive Rules for Conversation

"A constitutive rule is defined as a rule that gives stability, provides a way of understanding the world, and is rooted in a high awareness about the pattern of our behavior in community with one another."[119] Philosophically, this means being open to new events, which reflects Wieman's thinking and "is at the center of the American philosophical tradition, and event, in this tradition, means passage, disclosure, and growth." This is where people can locate themselves "in order for new combinations of ideas and actions to emerge."[120] We need to rebuild the model of communication as a "restorative value in reshaping our culture,[121] and that will take what American philosopher and psychologist Williams James called old fashioned "will." We must be aware of the forces that shape our lives and adjust and adapt to rules appropriate to the historical moment. If there is any common belief required to form a foundation for adopting the constitutive rules promulgated for creative interchange, it must be that "will is the capacity to organize one's self so that movement in a certain direction or towards a certain goal may take

place,"[122] according to psychologist and author of *Love and Will*, Rollo May.

Will

Within philosophy, "will" is considered one of the most distinct parts of the mind, and along with reasoning and understanding, has provided a path to escape the pre-determination ideology of Puritan thinking. As opposed to the Puritan focus on human desires individuals may have, our will deals with the general capacity to have desires and also act upon them according to whatever constitutive rules apply.

Personal will can empower individuals to think in terms of choices; of voluntarily making decisions about self-discipline; and training and control of oneself, one's desires, one's urges, and one's conduct not only for personal goals but also for shared improvement. By definition, personal will suggests an ability to change one's mind. This philosophical grounding for the argument that people can change leads to the scientific evidence that shows human beings are biologically built for change. My argument is not one of either/or, but one of binaural action concerning the plasticity of the brain, supporting the philosophy of mind over matter

with scientific research that only recently has been possible.

Chapter Six

People Can Change – Neuroscience

Plasticity of the brain is an intrinsic human property representative of "evolution's invention to enable the nervous system to escape the restrictions of its own genome and, thus, adapt to environmental pressures, physiological changes, and experiences."[123] The concept of seeing plasticity of the brain as a mechanism for development and learning was first introduced in 1890 by Harvard's William James. In *The Principles of Psychology,* James first introduced the term "plasticity" to psychology in reference to human behavior modification. But until relatively recent times, neuroscience practitioners preferred Nobel Prize-winning physiologist Santiago Ramon y Cajal's viewpoint: in 1913, he determined that the adult brain was, "fixed, ended, immutable."[124] For many years it was believed that the human brain was "hardwired," meaning that certain areas of the brain were permanently connected to certain parts of the body. For example, the left side of the brain connects to and controls the right arm, etc. But

beginning with William James, who first made the case for the connection between the brain and behavior - and more recently, those in medical science who have supported the theory that, changes in one area of the brain can lead to changes in another - researchers and scientists now both argue, that we should not consider the brain as stationary, but instead we should think of it as a continuously changing structure.

James's behavioral theory relates to contemporary research and recently developed investigative procedures represented by breakthrough research at The Center for Non-Invasive Brain Stimulation, Department of Neurology, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center at Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts and home to Alvaro Pascual-Leone, Amir Amedi, Felipe Fregni and Lotfi B. Merabet, who co-authored *The Plastic Human Brain Cortex*. The Center has concluded that: "Behavior will lead to changes in brain circuitry, just as changes in brain circuitry will lead to behavioral modifications."[125]

Pascual-Leone and his colleagues have focused their research on the "acquisition of motor skills, the recovery of function after a stroke," and "cross-

modal plasticity following sensory loss, i.e., blindness." The details of their studies contain a key finding for our purposes: Common to both stroke victims and those who had lost their sight was the ability of subjects to relearn skills and preserve functional behavior involving "shifts" across the neural network. These studies determined that whether the principles of plasticity apply to the motor system or the sensory system, the fundamental nature of plasticity is evidenced by how changes in areas of the brain formerly thought to be associated with processing information for one function actually can be recruited to establish new pathways to physical function that has been lost or damaged.

In support of the work done by Pascual-Leone and his associates, at The First International Workshop on Neuroimaging and Stroke Recovery held in February 2004 in New York City, a broad group of participants set an agenda to "improve understanding of the mechanisms underlying brain reorganization after stroke" using neuroimaging, primarily fMRI. They concluded that the human brain not only has the capacity to "activate alternative regions during recovery, but that the system is a

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dynamic one, subject to behavioral and pharmacological interventions that could potentiate recovery."[126]

Additional support for this work comes from Edward Taub, currently a behavioral neuroscientist on the faculty at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Dr. Taub has worked most of his professional life on research intended to help people who have been disabled by stroke. In 1990, he determined that a damaged region of the brain could be "remapped to handle new jobs."[127] The rehabilitation exercises he devised were intense, and while the results were not immediately apparent, they were proven to be very effective over time and most patients "regained most of the use of their 'useless' arm and hand."[128] Various parts of the brain took over the work of damaged areas, and in some patients the reorganization of the brain was dramatic, demonstrating that neuroplasticity enables the brain to reassign jobs. The evidence supporting the ability of the brain to reassign tasks in stroke patients, confirmed by fMRI studies, validates the concept of the plasticity of the brain relative to motor functions.

Parallel research on the loss of sight reveals an entirely larger dimension to the plasticity concept because it shows that functional areas of the brain can actually take on functions for which they were never thought to be intended. Braille reading depends on complex mental adaptations, and evidence of this adaptive ability of the brain has also been reflected using fMRI.[129] The ability of the brain to adapt to the challenge of reading by touch depends on "remarkable adaptations that connect the somatosensory system to language." Current research based on those fMRI studies suggests that in response to blindness areas of the brain retain their "intrinsic mechanisms, which become adapted to the challenge of reading by touch."

Dr. Pascual-Leone and his colleagues conducted research in which sighted volunteers spent five days blindfolded twenty-four hours a day in a safe environment to test how the brain would cope with learning Braille and fine-tuning the volunteers' hearing. Their findings support the idea that the human brain adapts rather quickly to the human's environment. Participants experienced a marked change in their visual cortex, which had

"switched professions, processing hearing and touching instead" of visual input.[130] In a relatively short period of time - five days – the subject's brain function had changed as a result of the training, confirming the theory that plasticity is the mechanism for development and learning.

Plasticity is an intrinsic evolutionary property of the human brain that enables human animals to adapt to their environment. Beyond the brain's ability to reassign physical functions, such as the left side of the brain taking over from the right side to control the right arm in stroke patients or switching the visual function to a sensory function in a blind person, is the idea that "mental practice alone may be sufficient to promote the plastic modulation of neural circuits." Further studies show that the brain can also change as a result of our personal experiences and in response to our mental activity.

Evidence of Mental Adaption - The Mind and the Brain

Alvaro Pascual-Leone and his team at Harvard University also provide an example of how "mere" thought can change the brain.[131] Their research, using fMRI neuroimaging techniques, document the plastic changes in the brain required to play a

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musical instrument. The plastic reorganization of the brain relates to the "acquisition of new memories and skills as an obligatory consequence of perceptions and motor actions."

Generally we think of physical practice as the only methodology for a musician to master a piece of music. However Dr. Pascual-Leone and his team have developed evidence that mental practice - the imagined rehearsal of a motor act - may in fact be as effective as physical practice, but with the added benefit of avoiding hand injuries (in the case of a pianist) to the musician. It is alleged that two of the world's most renowned pianists, Vladimir Horowitz and Arthur Rubinstein, both mentally practiced before concerts to avoid physical over-practice and risk damage to their motor functions. Pascual-Leone's experiments show that "mental simulation of movements activates some of the same central neural structures required for the performance of the actual movements" and also that the combination of mental and physical practice leads to a better performance than just physical practice alone. Thus we see that skill acquisition is tied directly to plastic changes in the brain whereby, performance

improvement using thoughts alone can and does result in brain changes similar to those of physical practice.

In support of Pascual-Leone's studies on plasticity of the brain are additional teams at Harvard, Yale, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology whose studies further "suggest that meditation practice can promote cortical plasticity in adults."[132] Researchers at these institutions have found the first evidence that meditation can physically increase thickness in parts of the brain that deal with attention and processing sensory input. "Our data suggests that meditation practice can promote cortical plasticity in adults in areas important for cognitive and emotional processing and well being," says Sara Lazar, leader of the study and a psychologist at Harvard Medical School. The results suggest that participation in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a therapy that uses meditation and yoga developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts, is associated with changes in gray matter concentration in brain regions involved in learning and memory, processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and

perspective taking.[133] As small as they are, these studies show that meditation does increase the thickness of the brain and that the change is more pronounced in older participants than it is younger participants. Relatively short meditation periods (forty minutes a day) resulted in an increase in brain size. In these studies, a relatively simple form of "insight meditation" was used, a type of meditation that asks a participant subject to "focus on whatever is there, like noise or body sensation" with a goal of paying attention to sensory experience.

Modern neuroscience research argues that, not only can human beings change, but, also that biologically we are indeed *built* for change. But let us not forget William James in our discussion of the flood of neurological research. Just as the findings outlined above provide evidence about the plasticity of the brain and its ability to grow and to reassign and retrain areas of the brain to perform new tasks, another area of research emanating from these studies and therapies is the plasticity of the brain as it refers to the susceptibility of human behavior to modification. And because Pascual-Leone and his colleagues see plasticity as the "normal ongoing

state of the nervous system throughout the life span," we can reasonably rely on plasticity as the mechanism for development and learning how to modify specific behavior.

Mind Over Matter - intentionally Changing Our Own Brain

Neuroscience teaches us about plasticity of the brain and that change is indeed possible. It thwarts the conventional wisdom that people don't change or that people can't change. Other researchers, such as Dr. Richard Davidson, professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and founder of the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, also challenge the static brain theory. Much of his work has focused on studying Buddhist monks and the effects of contemplative practice on brain function. Dr. Davidson established a relationship with the Dalai Lama in 1992, which resulted in an extensive study of the effects of meditation and the plasticity of the brain using monks who had meditated for between 25 and 50,000 hours. Dr. Davidson too has concluded that we are biologically built for change and emotionally capable of change.

Dr. Davidson's research provides hope for change – that how we are is not how we must be in

the future. In America, civil discourse suffers as a result of increased polarization, but civil discourse is essential to a diverse democratic society and the peaceful development of a beloved community. People don't change unless they are exposed to an environment in which they can acquire the tools necessary for transformation. Dr. Davidson summarizes his findings, saying, "based upon everything we know about the brain in neuroscience, that change is not only possible, but change is actually the rule rather than the exception … it's really just a question of which influences we're going to choose for our brain." He explains that our brain is wittingly or unwittingly being continuously shaped. Dr. Davidson has spent considerable time testing whether we have the capacity to "shift," that is, to intentionally change our own brains. His answer is yes, we can.

He argues that even adults, who often believe that how they are is how they will forever be, can change as a result of "experience" as well as "purely internal mental activity - our thoughts." And, as seen above in Dr. Pasual's work, Dr. Davidson concludes that, "we can intentionally change our own brain." The idea that the visual cortex can radically "change

jobs" by processing signals from the fingers passing over Braille or that the traditional function of the left side of the brain that controls the right arm can change in stroke patients so that the right side of the brain controls the right arm, are but two examples of the brain's plasticity. Another example of a change in brain function is found in people who, deaf from birth, receive peripheral vision information "not only in the visual cortex but also in the auditory cortex." That we can increase our physical performance by simply imagining the task - such as when the piano player practices in her head or the athlete who creates an image of his physical movements to practice complex routines – clearly demonstrates the veracity of this research. The diver who focuses on "the precise sequence of movements" required for a forward two-and-one-half pike is a further example of how the part of the brain that controls the muscles for the task will actually expand during the thinking process, according to Dr. Davidson.

Simply by using the process of mediation we can change or reinforce behavior and brain function. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is the most widely taught secular form of meditation today at both European and American medical centers,

where clinical trials have proven that meditation can "relieve psychological distress in breast cancer survivors, reduce side effects in organ-transplant recipients, relieve anxiety and depression in people with social anxiety disorder, and help people cope with chronic pain.[134] Although some of these therapies require significant time for meaningful results, other research by Dr. Davidson shows that a relatively short training period is also promising. Dr. Davidson in connection with Jon Kabat-Zinn studied one such therapy.

Jon Kabat-Zinn developed MBSR as an eight-week course: one two-and-a-half-hour session each week plus one all-day retreat. In 1999 Jon Kabat-Zinn and Dr. Richard Davidson conducted a study designed to determine whether or not simply using MBSR protocols could reduce anxiety levels in participants. They found that patient's symptoms fell by about 12 percent as a result of the therapy, and participants "showed a significant shift toward greater left-side frontal activation," which tripled after the eight-week session. The study revealed that brain changes were the direct result of people practicing this form of mental training, and that by redirecting their thoughts and feelings, participants

activated new paths in the brain, further demonstrating the plasticity of brain connections. With the discovery that brain changes that accompany meditation could be achieved in just eight weeks, Dr. Davidson explored the possibility of whether an even shorter experience with meditation could be meaningful.

In 2007, Dr. Davidson recruited volunteers for a study on how to improve a person's sense of well-being. The group learned a form of "speed - compassion," meditating for just thirty minutes a day for two weeks. Also using fMRI, participants were examined both before and after the training, which then revealed that activity in the part of the brain (the amygdala), which is associated with distress, was lowered, resulting in an increased sense of well-being, more compassion, and a willingness to help others they perceived to be suffering. To understand this point, it is helpful to know that when someone feels distress, it interferes with their "compassion quotient" (the desire to help). A lower level of distress equates to a more compassionate nature; a higher level of distress makes for less compassion. In meditation training, using pictures that depict world hunger can simply depress someone, but

compassion meditation training helps develop a stronger inclination to help those who suffer as opposed to simply becoming more depressed about the situation. Both of these studies confirm behavioral modifications as a result of mental training that uses the brain's plasticity as to tool to improve one's worldview and outlook on life. Dr. Davidson's work has been supported by the work of neuropsychiatrist Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz, who has written extensively about neuroplasticity and the power of mental force.

Dr. Jeffrey W. Schwartz of the University of California at Los Angeles has focused for many years on patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), those people who experience "upsetting, intrusive, unwanted thoughts, or obsessions." Rather than treat his patients with typical pharmacology therapies, he has more recently employed his own form of Buddhist meditation practice called "mindfulness training," which "involves observing your thoughts and feelings from the perspective of a nonjudgmental third party." The therapy was designed to train patients to think about their thoughts in a new way, learning to experience an OCD symptom without reacting to it emotionally.

After many hours of training, patients did improve, and neuroimaging showed that "activity in the orbital frontal cortex, the core of the OCD circuit, had fallen dramatically compared with what it had been before mindfulness-based therapy."[135]

Confirming Dr. Schwartz's work in 2002, Dr. Nili Benazon at Wayne State University completed a major study involving therapy closely related to that used by Dr. Schwarz. Dr. Benazon showed effective results in the treatment of children with OCD. Scientists at the University of Toronto have also successfully developed similar therapies for depression by teaching patients to regard depressive thoughts as simple electrical events in the brain.[136]

In other work at the University of California Los Angeles, researchers who credit Dr. Schwartz for his consultation enrolled twenty-four adults and eight adolescents with ADHD in an eight-week feasibility study using mindfulness-training therapies. The results, first reported in 2007 in the *Journal of Attention Disorders*, showed that the majority of participants completed the program with improvements made in both their anxiety and depressive symptoms. The researchers concluded

that mindfulness training is a "feasible intervention in a subset of ADHD adults and adolescents and may improve behavioral and neurocognitive impairments."[137]

There appear to be even simpler forms of mindfulness training that can be effective in changing behavior, such as self-affirming exercises and changing the construction of words. Self - affirmation exercises can make individuals more accepting of new information that is contrary to their beliefs. John Cook, postdoctoral fellow and researcher at the University of Queensland, Australia, has conducted studies that show that self-affirmation can make people more receptive to new thoughts and ideas that otherwise might threaten their worldview. Dr. Cook found that when he had participants "write a few sentences about a time when they felt good about themselves because they acted on a value that was important to them,"[138] their sense of well-being increased. We also now know that affirming self-esteem before trying to persuade someone of something will generally make him or her more willing to listen.

Whether an individual has high or low self-esteem, they will be similarly defensive in response to arguments that confront firmly held beliefs and attitudes even if those new arguments include compelling evidence. Three studies, led by Stanford University's Dr. Geoffrey L. Cohen, used self-affirmation techniques and engaged people in a discussion of highly controversial issues, such as the death penalty and abortion, to determine how volunteers would respond to various positions with regard to the issues. The studies showed that self-affirmation significantly reduced the participants' defensiveness when exposed to information contrary to their strongly held beliefs. Participants, it seems, "felt less threatened by evidence that impugned their attitudes when they first received an affirmation of an alternative source of self-worth." Researchers are not sure whether defensiveness was reduced because the counter-attitudinal information "trivialized the importance of the originally held attitude" or if it "simply made participants less extreme and confident in their attitudes," but in either case the end result was that participants were less biased.

However, Dr. Geoffrey D. Munro at Towson University argues that there is also a dark side to this kind of affirmation: by ameliorating the threat, he says, "self-affirmations can elicit less effective reasoning strategies."[139] But this argument appears to speak positively to the effectiveness of Dr. Cohen's studies, since both researchers admit the results show that the therapy in fact is effective in changing outlooks and convictions. Because beliefs can be such an important source of identity, providing people with an alternate source of identity can change how they perceive information.

Two leading researchers who examined political misinformation, Dr. Brendan Nylan at the University of Michigan and Dr. Jason Reifler, currently at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, argue - and their studies[140] show- that *how* you say something and the context within which you say it affects its effectiveness. As an example, their study focused on the political debate over the religious affiliation of President Barack Obama. The president self-identifies as a Christian, and as evidence points to twenty-some years of attendance at a Chicago Christian church. But regardless of this

fact, many Americans hold the strong belief that the president is a Muslim. The Nylan/Reifler study looked at two ways in which the president might answer the question about his faith: He might say, "I am not a Muslim" or he might say, "I am a Christian." In the first case, he denies the claim, but in the second case, he affirms a truth. The study examines which statement would be the most effective way to change the mind of those who believe that the President is a Muslim. Affirming statements such as "I am a Christian," appear to be more effective at convincing people to abandon or question their incorrect views according to the study."[141]

In *The Will to Believe*, William James said, "There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear as an absolutely single fact."[142] Individuals may be uninformed or misinformed, and in the case of the former we want to provide more information to clear up the misperception, but in the case of the latter we want the individual to "unlearn" their existing belief. And, if we all took to heart Mark Twain's proverb "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure

that just ain't so." we might actually improve the ways in which we talk to one another.

Shift and Transformation for Society

All of the relevant neurological studies to date show that human beings can indeed change because of the plasticity of the brain and further that willing individuals can repair and improve themselves physically and mentally by employing new brain-changing therapies.

Moreover, technology has given the medical community new neuroimaging tools not heretofore available that provide brain activity feedback and insights that give researchers the ability to validate the theory of brain plasticity.

One example of the broadening social applications and acceptance of this science is that meditation is now used by the American military to help Marines improve their ability to focus during long periods of boredom. Amishi Jha of Miami's Contemplative Neuroscience Mindfulness Research & Practice Initiative states: "If they (the Marines) practiced less than 12 minutes or not at all, they degraded in their functioning."[143] Also, meditation is now used in academics by graduate students who

spend ten minutes a day for two weeks practicing mindfulness to make significant improvements on the verbal portion of the Graduate Record Exam (GRE).[144]

Notwithstanding the literally hundreds of studies that show beneficial results from meditation, some researchers are concerned about the possible unwanted side effects of this training. One such person is Dr. Jonathan Schooler at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Dr. Schooler's studies have shown that meditation may interfere with a person's ability to be creative; as creativity appears to be enhanced when the mind is allowed to wander. He says, "When you're staring out the window, you may well be coming up with your next great idea."[145] Further, Georgetown University researchers have identified another potential drawback to mindfulness training. They say that some tests they performed show that mindfulness training "may not be useful when you want to form new habits" because it may impair the process of "implicit learning" that occurs without conscious awareness.

However one looks at mindfulness training, it has moved out of the American yoga studio and into the world of medical science. This amalgamation of

Western medicine and Eastern meditation practices has materially expanded the concept of plasticity to include the ability to change - working through the mind to change our brain - for the better. The idea that people have the power within themselves to change the brain is revolutionary and provides the basis to claim that we can create new models for civil discourse if the proper training is developed. When we become more aware of who we are versus who we would like to be through mindfulness training we have the opportunity for transformation.

Chapter Seven

Models for Dialogue

The Copernican Revolution provides a wonderful metaphor for embracing Martin Buber's narrow ridge - a balancing of concern for one's self with a concern for the "other." Just as the Copernican Revolution was the paradigm shift from the Ptolemaic model of the heavens (which positioned the Earth at the center of the galaxy) to the heliocentric model (which has the Sun at the center of the solar system), the shift from the outdated systemic and historic puritan American character to Buber's narrow ridge heralds a shift, from ourselves as the center of society, to one in which the center is *all* of humanity. "The Copernican Revolution offers a call to readjust our assumptions and begin to alter our actions."[146] The center of society will not likely emerge from a common religious or political base, nor from mutual economic interests, but rather from an emerging and determined concern for creating a better world to pass on to future generations. But to do so will require a new national vision, one where people

meet one another on the narrow ridge of global acceptance, with the understanding that we are but one step away from the abyss of polarization and divisiveness. We are dependent on both the person before us and the person behind us to safely traverse life's challenges. To do this effectively will require new models for dialogue (and a new vocabulary) that incorporate disparate beliefs as well as common goals. This is the ideal.

Typical communication forms used by Americans today are primarily those that still represent the same past, singular, cultural values of the dominant religious, political and economic powers that were set in colonial America. However, our nation has changed considerably in 350 years and although we have adopted new technologies for transmission of communication, we have not adopted Buber's narrow ridge nor changed the way we converse. For example, we rely heavily on modern media, particularly cable television, information news and "talk shows," but we too often see "discussions" where participants talk over one another, all vying to be heard. This sort of conversation only serves to make what statements we do hear almost

unintelligible. Moreover, many media presentations intentionally promote only the most extreme viewpoints designed to appeal to audiences who hold the most extreme social positions. These presentations are neither conversations nor dialogue within the bounds of civil discourse, they are rather just bizarre forms of entertainment that only offer ideological pronouncements supported by sketchy data from questionable sources. This form of entertainment mostly provides intense confrontations designed to produce winners and losers rather than allow honest conversations that feature epistemic qualities or even true rhetorical content.

Although the definition of "rhetoric" varies and often has negative connotations, for our purposes we'll think of it to mean both to inform and to persuade, regardless of its form of delivery – or widely, as defined by Aristotle as "finding all available means of persuasion."[147] Few of us actually argue for the fun of it or for entertainment, and experience shows that few of us argue about something that we don't actually care about. However, rhetoric can go beyond seeking only to accomplish one's own purposes; it can instead seek

unity of the speaker and the listener. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Had A Dream" speech is a classic example of rhetorical speech that can be used to exemplify Buber's narrow ridge.   If rhetoric points toward "analysis, data gathering, interpretation, and synthesis,"[148] it can also qualify as deliberation in pursuit of the truth, and regardless of the palatability of the truth, speaker and listener become indissoluble. The aim of the rhetorical process is not to homogenize argumentation but to allow for the communality of interests and even, to a significant degree, unite a group in effecting their methods and aims.[149]   Each party's interests may become transparent and complementary in search of a logical expression of the dialogical process.

Communications between people in contemporary American society are too often dysfunctional. In an age of high-speed Internet and novel communications tools Americans have lost the art of how to talk to one another in a meaningful way. Resolving conflicts, both personal and social has become increasing more difficult over the past quarter century, as too many of us have adopted intractable ideologies and worldviews that are irreconcilable with those of our neighbors, our friends

or our families. We're told to "never to speak of religion or politics" in polite society, but this represents a timeworn American philosophy contrary to the kind of engagement suggested here. Learning *how* to speak about religion and politics is key to developing a model for civil dialogue, resolving heated disputes and preventing violence. Unless people learn how to speak with one another important societal problems will continue to go unresolved to the detriment of society at large.

Finding a methodology from which models for conversation can develop is critical to the future of society and to the safety and well being of us all. If we continue to accept our current dysfunctional conversation models we will be ignoring the issues and challenges that determine our personal survival and perhaps the survival of the planet. Failing to understand the flawed nature of our discourse will result in slogans like "never again" being empty promises of a better world without any legitimate process to change the world.

Chautauqua

I have spent six summers at the Chautauqua Institution working on programs that have led me to

explore ways to change the paradigm of how we engage in civil dialogue. I hope I can use this knowledge to develop dialogical models in the future both at Chautauqua and elsewhere.

The Chautauqua Dialogues represent an opportunity for a "transformative learning process" that suggests ways in which adults make meaning of their lives and is particularly applicable to the dominant older audience at Chautauqua. Dr. Jack Mezirow, professor at Columbia University focused his teaching at Columbia on adult education and he argues that transformative learning for adults is the process of changing our perspective whereby we critically examine our worldviews that stem from our prior interpretations and assumptions. Dr. Mezirow and others who have advanced the theory of transformative learning believe that "emancipation from sometimes mindless or unquestioning acceptance of what we have come to know through our life experiences is possible."[150] Moreover, they see "those things that our culture, religions, and personalities may predispose us towards, without our active engagement and questioning of how we know what we know"[151] as the primary impediments to the goal of becoming autonomous, responsible thinkers.

To facilitate transformative learning Dr. Mezirow calls for us to redefine our discourse by understanding that "the way human beings communicate as a common learning experience not exclusively concerned with significant personal transformations"[152] opens the way to "a greater likelihood of finding more dependable interpretation or synthesis."[153] The Chautauqua Dialogues provide ideal conditions for participants to learn from each other through "critical reflection, awareness of frames of reference, and participation in discourse."[154]

First and foremost to the process is to provide people an environment within which to change through group interaction. This begins with requiring, as a condition of participation, an affirmation of the idea that opinions are tentative and that being willing to change our opinion, the moment the facts indicate we should, is a positive virtue - a virtue that requires reinforcement and that provides participants with a license to think and speak freely. Understanding that our own statements carry with them a set of facts and inferences based on assumptions makes us aware that how we say something is just as important as what we have to say. Understanding

that factual statements tend to lead to agreement and inferential statements tend to lead to disagreement is "the beginning of wisdom," says Sanford I. Berman, Ph.D. in *Opening the Closed Mind: Making Assumptions, Jumping to Conclusions*. Dr. Berman argues that the most important question to ask ourselves is, "What am I assuming when I am thinking, talking and behaving?" This question enables self-evaluation as if we were a third party observing someone else's behavior, which can lead to behavioral changes in ourselves.

In the summer of 2012, I became part of an experiment in dialogue entitled Chautauqua Dialogues. These were small group discussions held during the nine-week season at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York State. The program, sponsored by the Department of Religion, is still a work in progress, but to date, it has provided many people with new insights into alternative models for communication.

The "creative interchange" within these small groups (twelve to fifteen adult participants per group and five to seven groups per week) qualifies on several fronts as "deliberations" both within the definitional burden of political scientists and Mercier

and Sperber's argumentative theory of reasoning. Deliberations have undeniably proven to lead to (a) a better understanding of information, and (b) a higher level of civic-mindedness as required by political science standards. Further they can also be considered deliberations because reasoning is used to gather and evaluate arguments both for and against a given proposition.

For the nine-week summer program at Chautauqua, the Institution formulates nine distinctive themes, one for each week, from which the Department of Religion formulates a lecture platform to examine, under an interfaith banner, a question relative to the theme. The dialogues are based on analyzing the questions and ideas posed by these lectures. For example, in 2014 the week two theme will be "Feeding a Hungry Planet," and the morning lectures will examine, from a variety of perspectives, "increasingly stressed global food supplies." The afternoon lectures sponsored by the Department of Religion will examine, with a focus on economic justice, *our moral obligation* to feed a hungry planet.

Mercier argues that focusing on a single topic allows groups to end up with epistemically more

sound beliefs. He cites a variety of studies that show that "encouraging results emerge with problems more topically related to politics."[155] And studies[156] have shown that group deliberation is substantially improved when groups consider singular issues, particularly when there is diversity of opinion. A narrow topic provides an opportunity to measure the individual transformative qualities of deliberation by comparing pre-discussion to post-discussion opinions. And the Chautauqua experience has confirmed, through post-discussion interviews with group participants, that transformation did in many cases result from the discussions. Many participants claimed that following the session they did indeed "think differently" about a topic as a result of the deliberations and have given testimony to a self-identified transformative process. Many participants returned for more sessions, proclaiming the process was a valuable learning tool for them to take back to their homes and their communities.

Educated, experienced volunteers who are able to enhance "the constructive gathering of different pieces of information"[157] facilitate each Chautauqua group. Sessions begin with each participant articulating the "Big Idea" they've garnered from any

one of the week's five themed lectures. This form of pre-discussion provides a basis for measuring individual opinion changes (pre-discussion versus post-discussion opinion), which allows facilitators to later identify those participants who have changed their opinions during the course of deliberation and ask them to articulate the nature of their experience. Mercier argues that a diversity of pre-discussion opinions enhances group performance, and supporting laboratory studies show groups can complete tasks "better than their best member" does alone, arriving at better-reasoned conclusions. This was our conclusion at Chautauqua as well. The power of group reasoning appears in many real-life situations today that include business and educational models designed to help employees and students master challenging material. It is generally agreed among researchers in the field that these experiments conclusively show that deliberating groups end up with more informed beliefs, more convincing conclusions and, where relevant, more compelling policy proposals than do individual deliberations.[158]

Of course, it can be argued that the evolution of the participants' attitudes in the group experience

is primarily a result of having more information. But, Mercier argues that more information is unlikely to have a "strong effect on participants" for two reasons: First, participants see information as only a precursor to deliberation and second, in studies where control groups are given information but not given the opportunity for dialogue, participants experience "no attitude change." It appears that the argumentative reasoning process advanced by Mercier and Sperber is, in itself, an example of transcendence.

German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas created a set of five rules of engagement for constructive dialogue. He argues that "Validity and truth are ensured where the participants in a given discourse respect five key processual requirements of discourse ethics: (1) No party affected by what is being discussed should be excluded from the discourse (the requirement of generality); (2) All participants should have equal possibility to present and criticize validity claims in the process of discourse (autonomy); (3) Participants must be willing and able to empathize with each other's validity claims (ideal role taking); (4) Existing power differences between participants

must be neutralized such that these differences have no effect on the creation of consensus (power neutrality); and (5) Participants must openly explain their goals and intentions and in this connection desist from strategic action (transparence)." Finally, given the implications of the first five requirements, we could add a sixth: Unlimited time.[159]

The first of Habermas's five rules, the requirement of generality, which applies primarily to conflict resolution situations, is not easily achievable in mock situations designed to teach the art of deliberation. However, the question of diversity in these small groups often arises, particularly when one senses that the participants all come from a pool of people who share a common interest or are part of a common social or economic group. The groups formed at the Chautauqua Institution could be viewed in this light because they are composed primarily of white, upper middle-class, educated, politically liberal, and Christian attendees. Given this construct, one could conclude that the groups are made up of "like-minded" people. However, observations made by facilitators and their experiences do not support this proposition, as the

diversity of opinion in the groups has been substantially broad.

In reality, voluntary groups (groups not intended to bring like-minded people together) will always have diversity of opinion, but not necessarily all opinions will be present at the table. A most important part of the dialogical process is summarized by Jürgen Habermas: "argumentation insures that all concerned in principle take part, freely and equally, in a cooperative search for the truth, where nothing coerces anyone except the force of the better argument." The call to participants here is to honesty, humility and a will to transcend their own inherent social and cultural biases and prejudices to reach a reasoned consensus that respects the inherent worth of every individual and their perceptions and beliefs. Moreover, it is again important that everyone present participate. It is the facilitator's job to gently draw out those members of the group who are initially reserved and silent. Once encouraged to speak, the quieter participants too generally feel free to engage in the process. Variety and diversity of opinion in conversation is the essence of the dialogue process

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and provides the epistemic vigilance needed to evaluate arguments presented.

We can alter or modify the models for dialogue when they become inadequate, or we can amend them as a result of experience. But active participation in discussion by all participants is always required. Researchers have found (and the Chautauqua Dialogues have confirmed) that passive eavesdropping, for instance, does not lead to attitude change - even though both participants and observers hear the same words. Without articulation nothing changes in the mind. Only participants, who actively engage in discussion and articulate what they have heard "in their own words,"[160] seem to realize any impact from the discussions. University of Washington professor Dr. Anthony Greenwald's attitude research affirms that, "People who actively reformulate a persuasive message in their own words are most influenced by it"[161]

This brings us to the idea of connection as defined by Dr. Sharon Welch, professor at Meadville Lombard Theological School, in her book *Sweet Dreams in America*. She uses a musical metaphor that says, "listening and playing off each other's

strengths and limits — as in jazz— coalitions can make their work for justice swing." She suggests that answers are "found in connections — to people and nature, of the past, present, and future" and adds that the development of connections is having a "discussion of ambiguity and difference, and the importance of learning is "to see the world through multiple lenses."

Habermas's second rule states that all participants should have equal opportunity to present and criticize the validity of the claims expressed by others. But opposing the ideas of the other requires that we not oppose, but rather affirm the *right* to oppose one another in argument, as historically stated and attributed to Voltaire in the famous quote: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Dialogue is a practice, and there is risk in the practice, a vulnerability that comes from the free flow of ideas and from not knowing how people will interpret a meaning, what conflicts may arise, or how best to adjudicate the differences.[162] Every individual embraces a particular cultural tradition and many people also embrace (or discard) particular

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religious traditions that form their set values and beliefs. However, to fit Buber's definition of a "great character," one must stand above those convictions in order to seek answers faced by the community, not just by the individual.[163] Seeing beyond our own values and convictions is often the most challenging part of the dialogue process.

The third Habermas rule says that participants must be willing and able to empathize with each other's validity claims. "It is clear that narrative about community cannot rest on just one philosophical system or moral ground,"[164] nor can it rest on a single perception of truth. As previously discussed, the American "socially constructed view of reality" has a tradition of individual "rights" and individual "freedoms" that have produced a society in which people "conceive of themselves in very specific ways."

Walter Fisher, professor emeritus at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, introduced the narrative paradigm to communication theory, which helps us understand the importance of another person's self-conception, his or her world view, and the need to "bridge the gap" in a way that does not

"negate the self-conceptions people hold of themselves."[165] People with differing opinions reach Buber's narrow ridge when they find respect for the self-conception of another's narrative and encourage one another to climb above their tradition and engage in deliberation. William James was a pragmatist who walked Buber's narrow ridge with an understanding that American individualism includes strong cultural elements that also define the country's need for social conventions. James "called people to an individualism sympathetic to community"[166] in order to overcome the inherent failings and come together as a nation.

The fourth Habermas rule stands in opposition to the thinking of French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault. Both men espouse a theory about how power effects dialogue. However, Habermas requires only that any existing power differences between participants be neutralized to the extent that the differences have as little effect as possible on the creation of consensus. The motivation for entering into any dialogue may seem self-serving on the surface, but overriding our self-interest is the realization that we stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single center, and that we must

stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another,[167] a viewpoint echoed by both Habermas and Buber. We do not need to possess the same power, class, or status in order to have an opportunity for meaningful dialogue, and furthermore, a relationship of "equal" power doesn't necessarily produce a good deliberative relationship. Habermas sees the ideal practice of good and fair argumentation and deliberative dialogue as a grounding factor for the democratic process. Unlike Foucault, who challenges Habermas on the basis that power and privilege within a society dictate the conditions for dialogue, Habermas sees an ideal of free participants in a cooperative search for truth, without coercion, as a practical and realistic goal. If one assumes that power will always prevail in capturing the agenda for conversation, then entire categories of people will be marginalized and the most predictable outcome will be that problems are only solvable by insurrection - and society will therefore conclude that learning new ways to enter into meaningful dialogue is a waste of time.

There is no completely power-free process for rational communication, deliberation, or debate. Natural social structures result in disparate group

populations, and as George Orwell shows in *Animal Farm*, "some pigs are more equal than others."

Habermas's fifth rule requires that participants must openly explain their goals and intentions, and in this connection "desist from strategic action." While this rule may seem more appropriate to conflict situations in which people arrive with an agenda, this rule does come into play in non-combative situations such as the small group dialogues at the Chautauqua Institution. Early on, facilitators noted that some participants did arrive at the group session with their own agenda. They usually introduced themselves, citing their name, title and/or profession - thus establishing an "authority" and often intimidating others in the group - and immediately presented a conclusive opinion they believed should be recognized as the "truth." And at times, when it became clear that the discussion would focus on shared ideas for synthesis, those with an agenda would leave. After observing more than twelve hundred participants in ninety groups, we confirmed that in almost every instance, one or two participants rehearsed their opening lines to convince the group of their perspective.

The facilitators realized that a technique was needed to negate this behavior. A modification technique was then implemented at the beginning of each session. Participants were called on to state *only* their name and hometown, then were asked by the facilitators to articulate "in one sentence" what they thought was the most important idea they heard during the week's lectures. This method of opening the dialogues became known as the "Big Idea" opening routine. This technique had two objectives, both of which were realized: it provided an immediate but short venting opportunity for any zealous participants, and it allowed ideas from all participants to be presented on an equal footing. It also provided the facilitators with a basis to measure any obvious individual transformation by comparing pre- and post-discussion opinions.

The sixth rule: The amount of time for group discussion is an important factor to establish in advance of any session. Buber speaks of the person who can "labor with others and slowly awaken"[168] to a "sense of trust, belonging, and purpose." This rule represents the conventional wisdom that a "safe" group environment where "confidentiality" becomes a covenant between participants must be created

before dialogue can occur. Buber believes that new insights will be gained only after long periods of group interaction where trust has been established. But this "slow and deliberate inviting of the essential we" impedes the development of a pervasive culture of deliberative dialogue for two reasons: First, it makes promises it can't keep by suggesting that safety and confidentiality are truly achievable goals when in fact no facilitator or participant covenant can guarantee either one. Second it sets a standard for a substantial time commitment, which most people are not prepared to make. However, as we have seen, numerous examples of substantial physical change and adaptation have occurred (due to the brain's plasticity) in relatively short periods of time in both stoke patients and those who have lost their sight. Similarly, change attributed entirely to mental training has occurred in very short periods of time, i.e., the speed compassion study. And the Chautauqua experience has demonstrated that a single one-and-a-half hour group dialogue session can result in transformational attitude change.

Dialogue is both a unique form of communication and a momentary occurrence.

"Dialogue is unique because it evolves through a process and particular quality of communication whereby parties achieve a 'connection.' This connection between participants allows for each party to potentially change the other, or be changed by the other."[169] "No formula or technique exists that can prescribe how to create an atmosphere of concern for both parties in a relationship."[170]

"Dialogue is also a momentary occurrence; it does not define an entire interaction."[171]

The experiences at Chautauqua have demonstrated these points well. The occasion of dialogue rests on each individual's experience, a self-realization that becomes apparent to a particular participant, but not necessarily to other participants in the discussion. Confirming Buber's theory, the dialogues at Chautauqua do not often produce an observable transformation or one in which, all participants (or anyone observing the session) might verify that transformation has taken place. However, testimonials from participants at the end of the sessions, often tell of "connections" and real personal change. Even then, however, we cannot measure exactly how much a participant may change during a dialogue. But even those who do not testify to

having experienced a transformative moment do, unquestionably, articulate that the practice of dialogical engagement does make them more aware of what it takes to listen and understand other people's worldviews. True and meaningful dialogue does require that participants place a "high value on other people's viewpoints" and even while embracing their own views, in doing so most people will maintain an openness, curiosity, and respect for the beliefs and convictions of the other. The Chautauqua Dialogues experiment is not an exact formula or technique for change; rather it's a path to "search for genuine alternatives to extreme communicative positions."[172]

The question before us is whether we can give up communicative strategies of the past and begin to discover ways to communicate and work together…"[173]

Dr. Sharon Welch speaks directly about the new and "creative forms of institutions and coalitions" needed to change the nature of our conversations. Dr. Welch calls for a society in which those who challenge the norm are not made scapegoats for what is wrong with the culture but are simply seen as having "different claims about not only social policy but also about the very nature of

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good and evil, of justice, order, power, and chaos." Her vision for society echoes that of Buber's, described by Maurice Friedman in his book *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge*, where he writes, "Buber's greatness lay in his insistence on starting with the chaos as the reality given to him and on transforming this chaos through the discovery of direction."[174] Welch also envisions the possibilities that can come from chaos, ambiguity, improvisation, risk, difference, and change as we face the reality that perfection is not the goal. Rather, the goal is that we take the risk to act.

While the goals to improve society and achieve social justice may well seem illusory and require us to face the possibility of failure we must remember that we are not ushering in a new age, we are not part of a cultural revolution, and we are not fighting the war to end all wars. Instead we are, like all generations before us and all those to come, learning to walk. We are just feeling fully the limits and boundaries of life.[175] The Chautauqua Dialogues is just one step toward seeking change in our society by presenting an alternative to chaos. The value of the Chautauqua Dialogues is not offered as a

prescription for mass social change but as a model and an organized basis for conversation about how we collaboratively seek answers to complex and divisive issues in our community through deliberation.

Dr. Welch further suggests that rather than trying to create a "safe space," we allow ourselves to grow through conflict, because that is the reality of life. In other words, the way we learn from each other is to first experience the pain (chaos) of disagreement in dialogue where we can be challenged and hurt. The basic guidelines listed below were adopted from Dr. Welch's writing as the constitutive rules of engagement for the Chautauqua Dialogues and were recited by facilitators in different ways both at the beginning of sessions and throughout them, when conversations were stopped in order to have a meta-discussion about the deliberative process.

- A participant should feel free to leave the group for a momentary period or permanently.

- Disagreement and inquiry as to the reasons someone believes as they do is not

disrespect. Understanding the reasoning is imperative to your growth and learning why others see the world through a different lens.

- Take the risk of being wrong, of expressing ideas you may abandon minutes later.

- Confidentiality is not guaranteed and the dialogues are not advertised as safe places and each participant should consider the environment before disclosing very personal information.

- Offensive comments are bound to be made and the best way to deal with them is simply to say "Ouch." Name-calling or placing labels on someone (zaps) can be countered with "Ouch."

People are accustomed to opening group discussion by having everyone introduce him or herself, tell where they are from, and make a statement about how they have spent their lives. The experience at Chautauqua has been that such an introduction presents two impediments to a constructive deliberation: First, some participants will include some element of their experience that

gives them expertise in the topic to be discussed; and second, these disclosures frequently impart information that either elevates or diminishes the value of certain participants, who then either attempt to dominate the conversation or, in the latter case, are reluctant to speak their opinion at all. The Chautauqua model for dialogue was modified to equalize the value of inputs by eliminating introductions.

In pursuing the work of forming and facilitating small groups at Chautauqua, three guidelines developed by Dr. Welch were used for extracting the truthfulness from our analysis and strategies: (1) their actual effect on the lives of people; (2) their openness to further critique and hence modification, and (3) their resiliency in the face both of critique and unintended consequences. To fulfill the first guideline, of measuring the actual effect on the lives of people, at the end of every dialogical session the Chautauqua facilitator poses the following question to the participants: "Do you think or feel any different about the topic now than you did before this discussion?" The response to this question by most participants has been "yes." To fulfill the second guideline, facilitators met weekly to share

their experiences, explore strategies, and make self-evaluations. As a result of these meetings modifications were made to both the format of the sessions and the techniques employed by the facilitators. In fulfilling the third guideline, resiliency was measured by the feedback from participants who revealed the unintended consequence of the engagement: A recognition that the rhetoric of persuasion involves genuine argument and risk, and that an argument may make one see and realize more fully the structure of one's own perceptions and feelings.

"Our communication models become, in themselves, social institutions."[176] *Raymond Williams*

Prefacing one's opinion by attributing its veracity to a source prejudices participants from accepting the argument advanced by those who do not consider the source of the information as being creditable; the idea advanced is then often lost in a debate about the source. Often a Chautauqua Dialogues participant would say, "I heard a piece on NPR" or "so and so on Fox News said" seeking to affirm their opinion with that of an authoritative or expert narrative, but more often than not, suspicion

of the source became the focus of the discussion and the information itself became suspect - often relegated to the misinformation heap. As a result, all Chautauqua Dialogues facilitators are trained to preface sessions with a request that participants advance their ideas without blatant partisan attribution. This technique permits the groups to focus on ideas unencumbered by celebrity or ideologically biased sources. John Cook writes in his *Debunking Handbook* that the effectiveness of advancing an opinion is dependent on framing it in such a way that is less threatening to a person's worldview.[177]

The experience of actually engaging in dialogue under these rules provides some assurance of achieving the four sub-events Henry Nelson Wieman found essential for a "creative interchange": "emerging awareness of qualitative meaning derived from other persons through communication; integrating these new meanings with others previously acquired; expanding the richness of quality in the appreciable world by enlarging its meaning; and deepening the sense of community among those who participate in the creative event of

intercommunication."[178] As Wieman observed, "any present stock of knowledge, beliefs, and values is fallible … (and) we must abandon many of our habits, and some, perhaps much, of our tradition … (seeking) to encode, as it were, creative interchange into the center of all of our experiences."[179]

Our social reality may not be entirely objective, but it does contain a cultural "set of conventions, norms, and beliefs that have been agreed upon by participants"[180] in our community. The ways in which we talk about things accord various meanings to them,[181] and the ways and means of our communication are fundamental to the context of our culture and to our history as a people. And from that defined context and culture come both acceptable and dominant modes of civil discourse. However, the dominant modes of contemporary discourse do not often include room for marginalized or excluded perspectives, nor do they allow for alternative beliefs and perspectives. Although our view of democracy and the Freedom of Speech Amendment to the U.S. Constitution hypothetically allows all citizens to speak out, the public arena is generally dominated by the more acceptable and

"correct" perspectives disseminated through the complex media channels that blue-pencil our text.

"When does communication reach beyond individual goals to promote and develop a sense of community?"[182]

But the Chautauqua Dialogues is a work in progress. To date, the results have been very encouraging, and we are committed to creating a viable model for civil discourse. Developing our model for dialogue is a social process, an experience of creative interchange out of which we hope to "build, correct and rebuild our individual lives, our societies, and the one world to which we are inescapably connected."[183] Creative interchange is experience, the kind of experience that transforms us in ways we cannot transform ourselves.[184] Our universal goal is to be safe and secure in our communities, create order from chaos, sustain our planet, and insure that our species survives. We can achieve this only by working together.

Conclusion

Austrian neurologist Victor Frankl offered three steps to find meaning in life, two of which are applicable to civil discourse: (1) one can give something to the world; and (2) one can take something from the world.[185] Martin Buber's narrow ridge speaks to affirming self and others, tradition, and change, and the concept embraces the importance of contradictions where life is not *either/or* but simultaneously *yes and no,* changing the context in which we interpret our own lives by changing the myths and stories that guide us.[186] We started this journey to find a way to cross the boundaries of difference by listening to the appeal of a black man who had been brutally beaten by Los Angeles police who asked, "Can't we all get along?"

I believe we can.

Anyone living in America today knows that we are living in a pluralistic society that creates a deeply divided community. We cannot deny that the divisions are complex, multilayered and daunting. Our divisiveness goes beyond the color of one's skin, one's gender, and the outward identifiable

differences that can separate people, to even broader cultural separations, such as Red States versus Blue States, rural versus urban cultures, conservative versus liberal political views, economic classes (the 1%, the 99% and the 47%), and sectarian and secular affiliations. These socially constructed divisions create the issues that drive the policies relative to the hot-button issues of the day. Cultural issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage as well as non-cultural issues such as unemployment insurance, healthcare and the minimum wage are provocative, often heated, sometimes dangerous, and generally toxic roadblocks to civil discourse when they are explored in an open forum. Briefly speaking, they give us ample opportunity to establish a "we" and "them" worldview, much to the detriment of both personal and social relationships.

Much of the passion that drives these negative forces may be rooted in a nostalgic view of a little - but fondly remembered - past and a fear generated by our all-too-uncertain future. In fact, there is no such thing as a perfect past. Neither safety nor security was ever guaranteed in our world. The past

was never ideal, just different - much different - from the present, which is our current reality and the one that desperately needs addressing.

However, viewed together, both a retrospective analysis of our past and an introspective review of our present may provide us with tools that can contribute to a transformative learning process, one that allows us to view our circumstances more gently and help us find practical solutions to age-old and current problems by working together.

The narrow ridge Martin Buber asks us to walk seeks a balance between "expecting all to accept a single social reality and permitting each to do his or her own thing."[187] We must accept the current reality of multiple perspectives and seek to find rules that can pull us together within those divergent belief systems.[188] This, of course seems to present a challenge without a prescription for its resolution. However, by exploring our cultural anthropology, our psychological behavior (both as individuals and in groups), and our biological makeup we have a traveled path to follow. In this paper we have explored ideas set forth by many thoughtful people

who have given us greater insight and understanding into ourselves and our culture, and who have provided us with some rather convincing support that human beings are capable of change. Both Buber and Wieman understood our social challenges long ago. And I would argue that Buber and Wieman had great foresight at a time when America was a relatively homogenous nation, a place far from the diverse, pluralistic community in which we live today.[189]

Pluralism means that people of various beliefs, values and lifestyles who live together in divided communities are often forced by circumstances to interact with one another in hostile and semi-hostile environments. We are all faced with two alternatives: to either clash with or learn to accommodate one another. Dr. Diana A. Eck at Harvard's Pluralism Project takes this definition one step further by outlining four points to consider:

- Pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity;

- Pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference;

- Pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments; and

- Pluralism is based on dialogue. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the "table" will agree with one another, but does invoke a commitment to being at the table with one's commitments.[190]

Failure to acknowledge the social reality of pluralism in a shrinking world with multiple perspectives and its limited alternatives can only end in social disaster. The question of pluralistic alternatives and multiple perspectives has led Dr. Barnett Pearce, currently at The Taos Institute, and his associates to approach communications through "The Coordinated Management of Meaning" theory, which they define as the contemporary challenge to find ways to "act together" and to create a broad social environment that does not take the form of culture wars, but instead creates a dialogical framework whereby individuals and groups can retain the comfort and stability of their own traditions without denying that same privilege to those who embrace other traditions.[191] The insights of Buber's "narrow ridge" and Wieman's "creative

interchange" can help us to understand and to transcend our own limited worldviews. And perhaps, by combining them with, and following Dr. Eck's guide to understanding pluralism, we may have the raw beginnings to build our contemporary bridge for social change.

Religious philosophy examines the central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions but it also includes the study of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics and value theory, the philosophies of language, science, law, sociology, politics and history.[192] Each of us must draw on some or all of these resources to define our spiritual views and to achieve personal growth. The imperative for the transformation of one's spirit and of one's attitude toward the larger community is the personal dimension wherein we all assume responsibility to form our own worldviews and to make the world a better place in which to live. The true essence of our search for truth is an aspect of spirituality. My theory of transformation through dialogue deals with the larger issue of social transformation, but it also embraces individual

change, one person at a time, learning to look at ourselves through another's lens.

Thich Nhat Hanh's writings on encounters are of particular interest to me. He says, "If you look at me, the me in myself may be different from the me you perceive." In other words, we need to have a direct encounter with one another in order to perceive each other accurately. And, in the words of Harper Lee's Atticus Finch, "To know a man you have to walk around in his shoes." (*To Kill a Mockingbird*).

The Chautauqua Dialogues bring people into conversation where the "me" can emerge. Hanh captures the idea, saying, "May I learn to look at myself with the eyes of understanding and compassion." Once we use understanding as a key to open the door of love, we can experience acceptance of ourselves and others. Then if we cannot accept others, it is because we do not yet accept ourselves.

Hanh believes that for dialogue to be successful, we need to breathe deeply "our own traditions" and, at the same time, listen "deeply to others."[193] "For any dialogue between traditions to be deep, we have to be aware of both the positive and the negative aspects of our own tradition." We, as participants in any meaningful dialogue, "cannot

monopolize the truth," for we are a world of multiple truths and we must "allow what is good, beautiful, and meaningful in the other's tradition to transform us."

According to Rev. Dr. Henry Wieman, creative interchange is the experience of spontaneous "human-heartedness and human-thoughtfulness" which serves to open us to wider and deeper appreciation and understanding of ourselves and others.[194] Thus, the art of listening to others is truly the basis for civil discourse.

Here are a few simple listening guidelines written by Pearce W. Barnett in *The Coordinated Management of Meaning*:

- "Treat all stories, your own as well as others, as incomplete, unfinished, biased, and inconsistent.

- Treat your own stories as personal, dependent on your own perspective, history, and purposes. We all have convictions and agendas.

- Treat stories that differ from your own as valid within the framework of the other

person's perspective, history, convictions and agendas.

- Be curious about other people's stories. They are a great source of knowledge."[195]

American-Canadian novelist Thomas King's characterization of the human being as an organism composed of stories forces us to return to the preface of this paper and the story of Rodney King. Rodney King did not want to be known as the spark that ignited the devastating fires in Los Angeles: rather he wanted to be "the person who threw water on the whole thing" and this describes a personal transformation of the highest order and social responsibility. Another such story comes from the recent passing of Nelson Mandela. Thomas Friedman wrote in *The New York Times* about the unique way in which another black man, Nelson Mandela, used his country's famed rugby team, which was on a mission to win the World Cup in 1995, to transcend the personal for the communitarian. Mandela, serving as president of South Africa, thought that a way to start the healing of the nation after years of racial divide was through its national sport, rugby. The rugby team was all white, and although those

who had come to power with Mandela pushed to change the name and the colors of the team's uniforms to reflect a "black African identity," Mandela denied their efforts, suppressing the potentially destructive zeal. He believed that such a change would not serve the nation because it would uproot the cherished symbols of the "white community." In Friedman's words,[196] the moral lesson here was Mandela's ability to tell his own people what they didn't want to hear and, at the same time, ask white South Africans to cede power to a black majority rule. Rodney King and Nelson Mandela both chose to transcend themselves, and each man embraced Gandhi's ideal to "be the change you wish to see in the world." May this be the universal guide to life.

More than a narrative about what is, this thesis is a vision of my hope for a better society stemming from the roots of dialogic communication. Some might say this is a view of utopia or urge me to remember that people can't change. But my hope is that the evidence presented here reaches the cynic's "tipping point" by not only showing that we are able to change but also by providing some ideas about

communicative strategies that might allow us to become better as a society.

Thomas King says, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are," and asserts that it is through stories that we learn. In his book, *The Truth About Stories*, King speaks from the Native American tradition he learned from his Cherokee father. This is a book both of stories and about stories, a meaningful oral history, whereby each story teaches us something about ourselves; many times by analogy. Some stories are transformative and some are so harshly introspective that we don't want to hear them, but at the end of each story King's closing words provide a haunting element that keeps the reader from denying the truth once it is revealed: "Don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now."

What we learn from others by hearing their personal stories – and everyone has a story - is interpretative, like poetry, and in many ways that is how I feel about my journey in creating this paper. Some of what I've read was not new information (although plenty was) but hearing it discussed,

philosophically and clinically, and from the pens and mouths of others, allowed me to understand the material in new ways, synthesize it, and make it my story.

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