

RE-VISIONING RELATIONAL MEETINGS

Part 2

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Second Phase

Here, the experience of I-Thou can expand.

As we reflect on the energy and mystery in each person and the process as a whole, we can perhaps begin to see a “shimmer,” a “glow,” a “new life” in the people we have come to know; and in our own self.

And as we experience those dimensions of life-with-others as real, we may experience the same kind of encounter not just with humans, but with other living organisms as well. This is the experience of St. Francis of Assisi, of countless indigenous people past and present, and countless naturalists, all over the planet. We begin to *recognize* Earth, with all its creatures and support systems.

We may find our selves talking with plants, other animals, even all kinds of creepers and crawlers, above and below the grass. Or our four-year old grandson may invite us to see the world as he sees it, where joy and wonder are natural and plentiful.

We may go so far as developing a daily spiritual practice, to keep ourselves open to other humans and the other living beings. We may re-visit the scriptures of our particular wisdom tradition—and other traditions— to see what they say about creation, or nature. We may feel drawn to increase our literacy about Earth’s biosphere— its air, water, soil, life— and the energy of our Sun. We may wake up to the crisis of Earth’s climate and species crises: our *recognition* of Earth, its species and systems, widens and deepens.

Perhaps we begin to talk all this over with people, in a new level of relational meetings. In these conversations, we may begin to see each other as revelations of more than “the world” of the political economy. We may see in each person our radical relationality with all living organisms, all of Earth’s creatures, all of the work of our biosphere. An alternative world-view and practice emerge and deepen, an ancient but new creation myth, a story-system for our time.

But that discernment may also bring us into awareness that almost all of us live our everyday lives as if we have *no root connection* with Earth and its creatures and systems. Our planet, with all its life and beauty, is for most of us most of the time, an *object* merely for our use. Our culture has wrapped hundreds of millions of us in a kind of saran-wrap, sanitizing our relationships with nature, dumbing and numbing our own sensitivities, cutting us off from nature’s energies and teachings.¹

¹ A book of stories about the Native American perspective on this is *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer (Milkweed 2013.) Dr. Kimmerer is a mother, a member of the Potawatomi Nation, and a distinguished botanist. As a child, she fell in love with plants.

We may wind up learning that, for five hundred years, the political economy of the rich nations has had us conceiving of ourselves as *separate* from and *superior* to Earth and its creatures. In this view, Earth's biosphere—our air, water, soil, life, and the Sun's energy that energizes it all, are all objects, for our sole extractive use, without respect, without recognition, without regard for the sacredness of their life.

And this realization may break in on us, cracking our walls of indifference, filling us with deepest sorrow, weeping, in full-blown grief, for the passion story of Earth and all its creatures, streams and oceans, for our own families, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and especially for our young.

In 1947, when I was ten, our family took a road trip from Chicago to LA. Coming across Idaho's panhandle, we dropped down to follow the Columbia, and stopped at a place on the river just inside Oregon. I got out of the car and walked toward the river. There, young and middler men crouched and knelt far out on rickety platforms, poised with spears, plunging and drawing them up, salmon writhing, all suspended precariously over the surging river, white water falling over and roiling around great rocks, girls taking the salmon from the spear-fishers, carrying them, some still wriggling, up the shore to their mothers, aunts and older sisters, who were cleaning and storing the finally-still fish: it was a scene beyond my world, strange but stunning, holding me then, and since.

In early 1994, shortly after Carole and I moved to Portland, we drove through the Columbia Gorge to find this place, Celilo, almost fifty years later. At the spot on the map, we stopped and walked toward the great river. Again I was stunned, for now the river was untroubled and smooth, of course, without platforms, empty of people and their work. There were a few fragile shacks up the shore, on the other side of the Union Pacific tracks. But at the river's edge, there was only a small metal page of words, telling tourists that this was the place named Celilo, now covered and smoothed over by the water held back by the dam at the Dalles. Nothing really to tell us of the great seasonal dramas here, going back several thousand years, where the indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest gathered to trade their news and goods, to fish, and to conduct their ceremonies of gratitude for creation. Almost no sign at all, except for this piece of metal and the memories of the people here then and now, and deeply placed within this once small boy now grown, unable to speak, flooded by grief for the loss, especially to the remaining tribal people, but to us all, I feel—the loss that I would say now is both social and natural, the energy and tenderness of a sacred blanket holding people, nature's place and meaning together, sundered in the early 1950s, yet still that blanket and its people, fish, river itself, and Earth—all are remembering and weeping here.

At that point of realization, we may confront the question: Has my grief over such immense damage and loss, and dread over our future suffering—has it now become a *pressure* on my family and local community?

But because of our relational work, we can ask the leaders of our *local* communities to look at these questions with us; we can raise all of this within our own families—and let the fur fly, perhaps learning with both sides of our brains that awakening is full of suffering, promise, and healing.

We may find that our local communities can use the relational organizing process to better understand these larger questions, and understand them among people we have come to know and trust.

For Earth’s crisis, in climate and species-loss, has local expressions, everywhere. Those local expressions become serious pressures on our families and local communities.

They are serious threats:

- to human health, from diseases ranging from asthma and allergies, to heart disease, to mental imbalances;
- to water supply and quality;
- to air quality and temperature;
- to ruined soil and costly, unsafe food;
- to forests, homes and communities, from fires, floods, slides and sprawl;
- to local and regional economies from the resulting chaos;
- to viable, even survivable futures for our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

These local expressions can be “broken down” into issuable, organizable components.

And we can take the same approach to engage the enormous *opportunity* here, in the Great Work of creating Earth-supporting local economic enterprises, saying *yes* to Creation.

High-quality relational organizing can give us the confidence, skill-set and lens to conduct real conversations with each other about what I’ve called the YES/NO/YES of our situation—including our massive layers of denial, and ways through them.² From these conversations, we can create appropriate public expressions of *lament* over what the system-story of our political economy, with our complicity, has done to nature, and hence to ourselves—and over what we will continue to lose.

Here is what I see as possible, in multiplying local arenas: Through our one-to-one process, as our fields of energy and imagination deepen and expand, we can begin to *transform our separation*, not just from other humans, but also from the rest of life, throughout nature. As experiencing I-Thou takes on more depth and meaning, we can come to see more clearly the scale of suffering—caused by our species’ social, financial and technological inventions— in Earth’s systems, hence the suffering ahead for our own families, communities and species.

² See “Recognizing Our Grandchildren: Organizing Reconsidered.” The first YES is Creation. The NO is the Threat from our political economy. The second YES is the Opportunity, the Great Work of creating the next economy, culture and politics.

We can no longer delude ourselves, by continuing to insist, in denial, that 500 years of poisoning and exterminating Earth's life-forms and systems will have no consequences: that blow-back is already here. We are inside the crisis already. And no magic of digital or money-creating technology is going to let us off the hook.

How many of the issues we're working on now in fact seem "safe" because we are *not* connecting them with our larger planetary emergency? Are we perhaps telling ourselves, "I know our house is burning down, and our kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids are stuck inside, but let's go scrub the bathroom."?

There are times when this reality feels overwhelming. I write not to overwhelm you but to alert you and make some suggestions. Yes, we will come to places where we confront the depth of our civilization's confusion and brokenness, and to the place where there is no hope, the place where we "hit bottom" and can do nothing but moan.

But because we will have done our relational work, and have been partially healed in the process, we can have local communities where people know each other, even love each other, people who are well-acquainted with suffering, mystery and healing energy, who are therefore no long afraid to confess to each other our Earth-ruining addictions—and so may find ourselves lifted from our moaning bottom by our local community, embodying the source and expression of Earth's life, in radical relationality, what we might call I-Thou at a larger scale.

As that "outrageous" hope emerges among us in our local communities, we can adapt our life-styles together, cut our energy use together, and develop new local enterprises that do not war with nature but support it, enterprises that help us stay resilient, even survive: doing our relational work, amplifying our understanding and action, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

I'll say it directly: this healing, courage and imagination can emerge from our relational work. If we do it well, we can live in dignity and die well.

Threat

But effective organizers and leaders are also deeply aware of destruction, especially unnecessary destruction, and the despair it generates. I cannot testify to my experience with relational work, and the immense opportunity it opens for us, without including the great threat, the NO, the dominant culture's I-It quality, and its sources.

However, due to space limits, in this paper I want to focus on the YES sides of the YES/NO/YES name for our situation—the First YES of Creation and the second YES of our Great Work, the opportunity and the I-Thou dimensions which are available to us when we put on those other glasses.

Here, I'll simply mention core elements of the Threat. They rise from the system-story of our political economy, in the deep relationships among:

- our money system;
- our energy system;
- parts of our Enlightenment world-view;
- the culture and politics manufactured and captured by financial capitalism's Sales Effort.

Our elites in charge of these system- drivers create an insistent, endless demand for unlimited growth, which in turn creates massive imbalances in both nature and society. Among humans, those imbalances turn into wide-spread addictions, especially in the rich nations and among refugees and “climbers” in emerging economies. We are ensnared in massive layers of denial and unacknowledged grief about these addictions and their sources.

In our new century, this Threat drives the growing phalanx of pressures on our families, local communities, and their social and natural habitats. It is the ground and source of most of those pressures.

Our crisis, unprecedented in human civilization, emerges from across-the-board collisions of our political economy with Earth, its living organisms—including us— and their systems.

How do we see high-quality organizing in the face of this Threat, the NO, the dominant I-It?

Understanding the core of the NO system in our political economy—how its core drivers actually work— is part and parcel of understanding both the YES of Creation and the YES of our Great Work: our ground and opportunity for organizing. I'm claiming that this understanding—this lens— can emerge through a maturing practice of relational meetings and a new set of leadership workshops.

Let's now return to my main theme here, for the third phase of how one-to-ones might develop in our time.