

RE-VISIONING RELATIONAL MEETINGS

Part 3

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Adapted from *Story of Power and Power of Story*

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Third Phase

I once knew a mountaineer-geologist who over his lifetime climbed most of Earth's mountains. Toward the end of his life, on a long walk-about with Australian Aborigines, he began to wonder about his relationship with a particular mountain in the outback. After weeks of walking around it with his friends, he saw that the mountain was in fact *an event*, of great dynamic power, in deep geological time—and so was he an event of great dynamic power, a result of the same immense process in deep space-time that gave birth to the mountain.

And just as he was declining toward death, so the mountain was wearing down, from rain and wind. While he and the mountain were on different time scales and speeds, they were both parts of Earth's great cycles and systems, which in turn emerged from cosmic creativity.

Both he and the mountain were letting go of their current forms, to return to Earth, its other creatures and systems. They were both participating in the great mutual feeding process of Earth and Cosmos: all energy events sacrifice themselves in order to nourish the Whole. He sought, and found, order and meaning in the living and dying he shared with the mountain. He was profoundly content as he told this story.

In 2005, in a late Spring filled with expanding war and runaway real estate speculation, Carole and I encountered Crater Lake, in Southern Oregon. We drove up the mountain, pulled into the parking lot, and got out. The parking lot seemed to be filled with overweight tourists and their stuffed trailers. The government building where we used the restrooms seemed framed in plastic, a commercial icon to the culture rather than a restful place honoring nature. We crossed that cluttered lot, and stepped up the small lip to view the lake.

Its startling blueness pulled me into the depths of Earth, into the deep space-time of its birthing, its volcanic eruptions in this place, its water, its meaning for ancient and contemporary indigenous peoples. It was as if, beholding, I was beheld, in recognizing into the farthest depths of this place, I was recognized. Carole and I were silent there, for a whole and *kairos* time. We then turned and walked, holding hands, to the car. She drove and I tried to write what had just happened. In the encounter with the lake and its blue deepest center, my self had shifted. Away from the turmoil and fragment of politics and economy, to a truer, more peace-filled and more powerful place. Of integration, bedrock if you will, a whole in place and time, a powerful healing moment for me, in a year of great destruction, chaos, and despair in our political economy.

Two years later, I encountered the fullness of Earth's biosphere in the dawn at Oceanside on the Oregon Coast. In this experience, I found that I was part of the Whole—of fog-filled air, quiet incoming tide, seals greeting ocean, plants and humans becoming visible up the hillside, first birds singing, sun's light emerging over the

mountains behind me. I was whole, belonging in the Whole, not a spectator or tourist—within, not separate from biosphere and the cosmic process that birthed it, held in unbound power, healing.

On several later occasions, I've had similar experiences in the grove of cedars in our local park, and in my backyard garden. Kneeling next to a raised-bed of vegetable starts, I am enveloped and suffused by Sun's energy on my back, igniting my nerves to pay attention to air, water in soil, the pulse of each tender root, my own pulse, all ensembling: shape-singers, or jazz or chamber quartet, or chorus and orchestra, gathered, collaborating and working in this small ecology behind our home.

There are times in my neighborhood walks when I'm astounded by some ridiculous, audacious cluster of grass struggling up between the sidewalk slabs: by the force of the green shoot driving each blade through, showing off its life to the rest of us weaker beings, demanding recognition, teaching, just through its beauty and strength. From where did this life-strength come? If I stop and pay attention, it is not hard to understand that this scraggly little band of grass-blades has emerged from the same Earth-Cosmic process as me, and that makes us relatives.

What about you? I'll wager that you've had many experiences like this. But perhaps you've let them slide from your memory, or haven't told them to others or written them down. Please consider it.

I see these events as examples of I-Thou encounters. And I've discerned that in my particular case, my ability to enter these experiences at least in part rises from my years of relational work with the people of many local communities.

Here's what I see through this third phase of relational meetings: as we remember and recover our radical connection with all living organisms, we may discern that Earth, with all its creatures and systems, was born of a process larger and deeper yet—the creative evolutionary process flowing and building throughout our Universe, through 13.8 years of time and across some 170 billion galaxies.¹

In a power-filled encounter with another person or a tree, bird, flower or meadow, or with a set of night stars as we lie on our backs in that meadow—we may see that all living organisms, humans included, have emerged through that Universe-wide process. We are embedded in the opulent and generous fullness of Creation, the single process throughout the whole of the Universe.

¹ See Brian Swimme and Mary Ellen Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (Yale 2011). Swimme is a mathematical cosmologist with a poetic flair. Tucker is a historian of religions. I use "Cosmos" as "ordered universe." The first person who introduced me to the narrative Universe was Thomas Berry, in 1981. Berry, who died in 2009, is now known world-wide for his vision. Two of his later books are *The Great Work* and *Evening Thoughts*. *Wikipedia* offers a brief overview of his life and work.

Our scientific community has brought us this story-system of our Universe just this past century, and all of us are struggling to understand it and absorb its meaning.

The unprecedented scale of our crisis calls us, not into merely expanding what we've been doing, but into an equally-unprecedented response.

That response calls for an unprecedented *resource*. I think that resource is now coming into our awareness. It is the system-story of Creation— of Earth, our Universe and the I-Thou dimension at the center of their creative development.

We have access to the *experience* of that story-system and its transformative power, through a new generation of leadership workshops and expanding the scale of our relational work along the lines I've been exploring here.

Again, my own discernment is of “seeing” in relational meetings the concrete emergence of the stories of our people, within our political economy, within nature and all its magnificent and gorgeous gifts, and as welcomed participants in Universe with its wondrous, soul-startling creativity. That discernment in part rises from a long-term and continuing “habit” of having great conversations.

Those relationships and stories have brought me into recovery from my own serious addictions, restored my basic trust in the mystery and gift of other persons, of Earth and Cosmos, and in the process made me something of a mystic.

Re-vision²

*This is no paradisaal dream.
Its hardship is its possibility.*

As a result, here is what I see: the mystics of the great wisdom traditions—including those of the indigenous peoples— are right, in their insight that matter throughout Universe is not inert and isolated, but always in radical relationship with energy, and that all of reality “shimmers.”

The world's mystics have seen, in contemporary language, that each energy event in our Cosmos carries a tiny surplus of creativity over destruction; that from that nano-surplus of creativity, life in Earth, including humans, emerged; and that this unified energy-matter carrying the conditions for life has always been present. We are enveloped and suffused by this energy-matter. We, and our children, are created through this work. This process summons us to *participate* in its work. In our era, this participation is our species' Great Work, our vocation. This work gives us purpose and meaning and enormously deepened energy and imagination.

² Based in part on Wendell Berry's poem, “A Vision.”

How? We are the first human generation to see the Whole, all of Creation, and how it is working. The scientific community (alongside the evolving Wisdom traditions) is bringing this story-system in our time, new and wondrous news coming every day, right alongside terrible daily news of climate and species chaos.

This system-story *re-sets us*, telling us: we are *not* separated from Earth; this is our immediate home and hearth. So we don't have to go around screwing ourselves up pretending we're in control. We can stop chasing MORE, and enter recovery and remembering. We can let go of our huge illusions and delusions, slow down and stop, and in beginning to heal, open ourselves to the hope, energy and imagination that Creation in Cosmos and Earth is offering us. And in this time, in this opportunity, we do not have to feel we must reject those gifts. We can, I trust, accept and absorb them. We can choose *real* life, not mere commoditized existence.

As we recognize all of Creation, we are re-set and re-purposed, as creative, participating *members* of the community embodied throughout Earth and Cosmos. Members, as Tom Berry says, of the community of subjects, where all is sacred, all gift, all sacrament, all, to use Buber's term, I-Thou.

*Memory, native to this valley,
will spread over it like a grove,
and memory will grow into legend,
legend into song,
song into sacrament.*

When we recognize the Cosmic process and its story, we can *re-recognize ourselves*. First, the universal creative process is in our every fiber, breath and pulse-beat, every charge of every synapse of both sides of our brain. This process is bringing our species into awareness, into consciousness of the Whole throughout its development. We are beginning to articulate its story. In the emerging now, we are the dimension of Universe which is reflecting on the Whole, on itself. We use Universe's gifts to reflect on ourselves, on the process that brought us to this point of awakening.

Second, that means that each person is cosmically significant. Each person has a cosmic dignity, sacredness and purpose—to love and celebrate all of Creation, especially our home planet, and our local place where we live, play and work; hence to work *with* our home planet and place, not against them.

Third, when we recognize that the universe's process suffuses and enlivens us, we are being asked to enter *mutual recognition* with Cosmos.

In this third phase of relational work, in gifted one-to-ones, we can see more than “the world” of human history, even more than all living organisms—though that would be by itself a huge turn away from our current stance. I'm claiming that we can see in each other our ordered and shimmering creative Universe, our Cosmos, working in and

through us as we give and receive each others' stories, in every local community where we are called to work.

We may discover, in metaphorical terms, the presence of a tender dimension, in the deepest reach of cosmic energy-matter, in every living and inert Creation-event throughout our Universe. That dimension is compassion. Order and newness emerge in every energy event, in every moment-and-place, every here-now. Everything that is, unfolds from this slight but extraordinarily-powerful surplus of creativity over destruction, compassion over indifference.

This dimension of tenderness, in the depths of every energy-matter event in the immense flow of cosmic evolution, is always present, and is always gift. But because of our species' particular structural limits, especially in the I-It quality of our own culture, humans fear this gift; we resist and mistrust it. We fear its healing, because to accept this gift, we must let go of our illusions and addictions. Recovery requires deep change; we love, and cling to the Egypt of our familiar suffering.

Yet in part because we will have communities with organizational cultures of relational power, in the coming tsunami of chaos, we will experience, perhaps, enough basic trust, love, and hope to receive this gift, the originating, ongoing, and re-grounding mystery of creativity, healing and recovery. The gift is focused, healing energy-matter, the source and nurture of power-among and power-within.

As well, because we will have done our relational work and helped construct a new generation of leadership development, perhaps we will discern the power of mutual recognition among Person, Local Community, Earth and Cosmos, an ancient but new creation story emerging in our time, a creation story which enhances those of our wisdom traditions.

And then we may see, celebrate and embody the immense ocean of creative energy in which Cosmos, Earth, our Local Communities, and each of us breathe, swim, sing and work,

where we do creationjustice *with* our local place and our gorgeous Earth,

where our teachers are the living organisms and systems of our local place, of Earth, and their emergence through our cosmic process,

where our children lead us by example, in their leaping joy,
I-Thouing with all of Creation,

and where our elders tell these evolving creation stories and remind our leaders that it's still true that seven generations are one.

Glimpsing Biocommons³

You may be saying at this point: Okay, Dick, nice poetry, but what's it look like on the ground?

Here's a brief sketch, a glimpse.

It's not some rigid and hard-ass utopia, nor is it la-la land. It's a *process*, an organizing process emerging from IAF's core practice of relational meetings; but absorbing and integrating the resources we've been discussing here:

—the three story-systems of our political economy, Earth, and Cosmos;

—the I-Thou dimension of experience available to us in all three of those story-systems;

—our new glasses, which help us awaken into an evolving 21st century world-view, and which re-sets us within immense new pools of energy and imagination.

Through that lens, I claim that it's possible to see any *locale*, from our backyard, block or neighborhood, out to city, county or metro area, as an expression of the creative process running through Earth and Cosmos. Universe is in my hand, in this breath, in this tiny spot of soil-covered-with- asphalt where I'm standing, this place of creek water covered with concrete.

We can see our immediate *watershed*, slowed but still struggling to flow under all our paving and building; our *airshed*, composed of our immediate air, thoroughly polluted but still working, covering our local area; our *food-and-soilshed* (think of your farmers' markets). These are nature's gifts, all local, in every place, now.

That may get us to seeing our *social* inventions differently, as well: What about labor and capital, politics and culture? But you may find that "shed" only gets you so far. What word instead?

So I've put two words together:

—*bio*, standing for life, for Earth's biosphere, and the immense cosmic process that gave birth to Earth and its living organisms and systems; and

—*commons*, a traditional American word standing for relationality and for equity, as in stake and equality; in late medieval Europe, it carried both social and natural meanings.

³ See "Organizing in Biocommons," in *Story of Power*.

And then I replaced *shed* with *commons*. It's imperfect for sure, even awkward at points, but what if we imagined local flows of re-organized capital and labor, each as a commons? Or a set of smaller commons— of education, health, transportation?

What if we brought both sides of our brains to this process, of grounding each sector of our local economy, politics and culture in the process of Cosmic-Earth creativity, re-integrating society and nature?

What if we saw our local communities of faith, labor and education through this lens?

What if a new generation of local communities helped to seed and catalyze a new generation of collaborating enterprises: B corporations and employee-owned firms; credit unions investing in those local firms; collaboratively-owned land and affordable housing, perhaps as community land trusts? New forms of both rural and urban agriculture, perhaps based in permaculture practice?

What about schools in which Earth's local living organisms and systems are the curriculum and primary, experience-based pedagogy? Or human health practices based on natural systems?

Is it possible to see local economy, culture and politics based, no longer on separation from nature, but on our true radical relationality with all of Creation? No longer built with indifference to inequality and imbalance, to *unnecessary* social and natural destruction; but turning instead to the I-Thou wholeness and grounding available to us when we pay attention?

Is it possible to disengage from the vision-less morass of our current political economy, and to re-engage locally, in the Great Work that Larry Rasmussen has so beautifully called *Creationjustice*?⁴

There are many names, emerging locally in all parts of the world, for the enormous variety and number of experiments, where people are struggling to create alternative practices, markets and enterprises that build on our true radical relationality. I've offered one name here, out of my own experience, to encourage this growing conversation.

In my own imagination, *Biocommons* is *both process and lens*, through which we engage and see our local social and natural reality, as an integrated expression of the great creative work of the Cosmic-Earth process.

What matters is not the name, but the act of putting on a new pair of glasses, and opening ourselves through our local communities' relational work to the I-Thou dimension of all three great story-systems of our time.

⁴ *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (Oxford 2013.)

Close

Here's my close: We are grappling with an enormous shift in paradigm, world-view, world-story—whatever word you prefer—and how good organizing can get hands and minds around this Mother of all crises. Here we are doing it through the humble organizing practice of one-to-ones, two imperfect but magnificent creatures at a time.

We work here with three phases of the *capacity* of relational meetings, and we emerge with a focus on the power of mutual recognition, at three levels, scales, or stories:

—Our political economy.

—Earth, its living organisms and systems.

—Cosmos.

In each phase of capacity, relational meetings, done well, have the potential in which we can discover the I-Thou dimension of everyday experience.

I'm positing or claiming that local organizing work done with this lens, this new set of glasses, brings a new resource for a new response that is *commensurate* to the catastrophe that we face.

Yes, the threat of our crisis is unprecedented in human history. But so is our opportunity. Our new glasses are *bifocal*: we see both sides of the crisis.

Finally, the arena of organizing is first in local places, at specific points where our political economy has been impacting Earth and its living creatures, including us. This means several things:

—We're in a planetary emergency. Our house is burning and flooding *now*.

—Every local impact can be broken out into issuable pieces.

—Think of this as another power analysis.

—The biggest barrier to organizing in our crisis is denial, the cover for unacknowledged, unrecognized grief. If we don't include processing grief in our organizing, we won't get very far: read Breuggemann on lament.

—There are now no silos between traditional social justice and creation justice issues. We can see them as symptoms, breaking out all over the place, but symptoms of a raging addiction, a metastasizing cancer, a runaway fever— all words for deep imbalances in the body. Once we re-see the whole body, we'll know how to move. Chasing symptoms as if

they're isolated is whack-a-mole. What's driving and relating the obviously-related symptoms?

—The key is to learn how to teach this stuff, to develop workshops that integrate people's experiences, your best existing workshop content, and this new material. It's still trial and error, experimenting, but now it's about survival and resilience—creativity for the highest stakes.

I look forward to your critique, and learning from it.