

# RE-VISIONING RELATIONAL MEETINGS

## Part I

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Dick Harmon

Adapted from *Story of Power and Power of Story*

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***Dick Harmon worked with IAF from 1961 to 1977, and from 1994-2008; in the interim he helped build the Brooklyn Ecumenical Cooperatives (BEC). Since retirement, he has served as a co-teacher for a class, Organizing In Biocommons, co-sponsored by Eco-Faith Recovery, Wilderness Way and Leaven. He lives in Portland, Oregon with his spouse Carole.***

## **First Things**

Relational Meetings are the core practice for the IAF<sup>1</sup> tradition of organizing. This paper is primarily addressed to veteran leaders and organizers, people who have deep experience with this “habit.” But it may also interest people with other levels and areas of experience—especially young people who already realize the limits of social media in building long-term civil sector power for non-partisan democracy.

*Here’s the core of this paper:*

—We are in the midst of a transformation in our view of both Earth and Cosmos;

—we are all grappling with the how and what of that shift, whether we are aware of it or not;

—it comes at a time when Earth’s crisis, in its systems, of climate and species, confronts us;

—this shift transforms how we view our political economy, our civil sector organizations and communities, and our families and the human person;

—a new generation of high-quality relational meetings can become an expanded practice or habit for understanding this shift and transforming our organizing.

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<sup>1</sup> IAF is the acronym for Industrial Areas Foundation, a community organizing network founded in 1940 by Saul Alinsky.

## **“Relationals” As Lens**

During these intentional conversations, we *see* each other through our lens—through the world-view that we each bring.<sup>2</sup>

That world-view emerges from both sides of our brain. It is both abstract and concrete, both ideas and emotions, both curiosity and anxiety.

Our lens develops and matures as we develop and mature; especially as we *reflect* on the ongoing experience these encounters give us, and particularly from this question: How did her story impact my own story?

How am I agitated, stirred, *changed* by his story? How is my own self-understanding, my own story, altered by that event?

As we do more one-to-ones, we become less anxious, more comfortable, more competent, more energized; with practice, like learning to play a musical instrument, we discover a *habit*, as if our brains were re-wiring as we go.

In retrospect, over long periods of good one-to-one work, I’ve observed what appears to be three phases of development in what we can discover through “relationals.”

### **First Phase**

We usually begin with open-ended questions about pressures on family, and then on our local communities of faith, labor, education, or NGO. (I’ll use “local communities” here to describe them all.)

As local organizing communities use this process, letting these questions do their work among us, we discover dimensions of both *power-among* and *power-within*. The order of these discoveries varies widely, depending on the variety of our experience and where we are in our own developmental tasks.

Power-among brings us into the experience of *radical relationality*. This is the sense of genuine connection, of being-*with* the other person. In this experience of radical

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<sup>2</sup> I wrote an earlier version of this paper in January 2014, for the Biocommons class in Portland. It ties directly to “Recognizing Our Grandchildren: Organizing Reconsidered,” and both are adapted from sections of two almost-complete manuscripts: *Power of Story*, which is about my own development, and *Story of Power*, which attempts in story-form a power analysis of the US. I am interested in serious critique, so I can improve how these ideas are presented and received.

connection, we begin to discern that we are enveloped and suffused by a field of energy, which is bigger than both people in the meeting.

As we continue the conversations, our reflection on them, and *pay attention* to each other's public story, we experience each other more deeply. We move beyond the surface of the other person's story; we discover more of "who the other really is." This is usually different from what we thought before we talked; different from the "fixed" picture we had of each other, the "box" or stereotype around the other.

We begin to move from stranger to known-person, from isolation to relationality, from invisible to *recognized*.

This movement is a surprise, a gift, which grows in us, especially if we reflect immediately after each conversation, and then as well at the end of our day.

Some of this movement below the surface can happen in the first conversation; it grows in the second, third and fourth conversations with each person. It *takes time*—slowing down—and developing the discipline of paying real attention, both to the other, and to your own response. It takes going with your curiosity, and having questions and openness ready for each intentional conversation.

In this first phase of relational work, three significant outcomes often emerge:

First, we begin to see the other person's public story *embodied* in her or his face and body language; and through that embodiment, our imagination goes to work and helps us to see the great stages and streams of historical drama which held the other person's family, going back three and four generations, maybe longer: Wars, economic booms and busts, migrations, politics and culture, bearing in on each generation, causing great suffering, forcing each group to develop coping strategies, lifting up resilient heroines and heroes, victims and scoundrels, each person and generation contributing to the cultural DNA in the person sitting with you.

Through the story of this person, we see the drama of human history—what theologians sometimes call "the world." I call this *our political economy*, as both *story* and *system*.

Simultaneously, we experience more understanding of the impact of our political economy upon our own story. Each story is slightly altering the other, at several levels. Each story becomes larger and deeper; it takes on more meaning for each person. Often, we are each moved to ask remaining elders in our own family what happened to that aunt or those grandparents, and why: Please consider asking before it's too late.

The second significant outcome of one-to-one work in this phase can be a glimpse of what Martin Buber called *I-Thou*. As the other person's story emerges, we experience the field of energy enfolding us, present to us as we talk. We begin to sense being held in that flow, which can increase our *focus*

on each other's story. We become more open, more available to the power of each other's story and being, more trusting. For each of us, the other person, no longer an object, is becoming a subject, with a unique identity, spirit, and mystery.

Deep changes are going on, in both the *with* and the *within*. Power-among and inner power are both present to both persons. We experience power as energy doing its work between and within each of us, converting one level of understanding, both outer and inner, to another, deeper level.

The conversation draws out our public and personal stories, in life-changing ways. The energy of that connection slightly alters each of us in our self-understanding; this may take the form of making us more aware of the limits of our own false self, opening us to the emergence of the true self. When that happens, we move forward more deeply into maturity, with wider connections to all aspects of reality, and less anxiety about both our inner world and challenges from the political economy.

At times in these encounters, we have a sense of something deeply yearned-for and unique, something truly special; we might even use the words soulful, spirit-filled, or *sacred* to describe that experience.

I don't want to suggest that any I-Thou experience lasts more than a few seconds or minutes. It's a transformative glimpse, but just a glimpse. However, living in a culture where, because everything is increasingly objectified and commodified, we find ourselves numbed to I-Thou experience. As a result, much of our experience becomes I-It, utilitarian: *the other is for my use*.

But these conversations, when they mature and move into I-Thou moments, show us that the deeper dimensions of reality are, in fact, present and available to us. They point out that it may be our anxiety and stereotypes that prevent us from experiencing more of the compassion and creativity that actually surrounds us all the time. As well, doing this quality relational work over time may re-wire some of our mental patterns, so that we experience I-Thou epiphanies more often.

Even without such a big break-through, often when we end a relational meeting, we experience some deepened awareness or sensitivity: we find ourselves saying, silently, *something different and important happened here*. And with it comes a new kind of energy moving us forward. We find ourselves responding, again silently, to the other person's story: *I've got to **do** something*. Obviously, not something to "fix" the other person, but to keep building power-among-and-within so we can get leverage on the deeper causes of un-ease within both of us.

This brings us to the third significant outcome in this phase. When we conduct these meetings within and among local organizing communities, we organize through *teams*.

Those teams, selected and actively supported by the community's clergy, president, senior educator, or NGO leader, move through a series of leadership development workshops, and then conduct an extensive series of relational meetings.

I'll treat the stages of team development, and the qualities of leaders, in another place. Here, I want to remain focused on the relational meetings themselves, except to say one thing: Once or twice a year, each team invites potential and current leaders into the leadership development workshops. This ongoing, highly intentional and invitational process aims at creating *a culture of relational power*, over a period of 3-5 years, in each local community participating in a contemporary broad-base.

It is that power-with and power-within, drawn from the large numbers of individual conversations, that forms the organization's negotiating agenda with decision-makers or protagonists, over policies or programs, government or corporate, that require changing. Within negotiations, one of the outcomes may be the conversion of power-over to power-with, as both sides develop relationships, discovering common interest that well serves both sides.<sup>3</sup>

This intentional relational work is a kind of drawing-out process, which yields *part of a power analysis*, about how institutions and their leaders, using power-over, maintain their interests and positions; and how, together, they form *a system*, at the local and larger levels. Obviously, active research and study provide other key aspects of a power analysis. But the point here is that we learn a great deal about power-over from the gathering "cloud" of each others' stories.

Active research and negotiations also involve local leaders *recognizing*, first, a specific institution or interest in the political economy, then gradually growing into understanding the whole system and its root drivers, as both system and story. Conversely, as the organizing effort and leaders' collective maturity grow, important segments of the political economy recognize these leaders and their organization. *Mutual recognition* begins to grow in the arena of decision-making, or *polis*.

As well, all of this growing understanding and mutual recognition feed into the ongoing *internal* process of relational work. Individual stories and questions continue to expand, explore, and agitate. Deeper understanding of public events long hidden emerges into visibility. As a result, people continue to grow into maturity, and the organization stays fresh, at the edge.

In our maturation, local people are participating in *both* internal and external aspects of organizing; both aspects are *intentional*. No longer are we strangers to each other or spectators to public decisions. Across the board, we are *participants in mutual recognition*—which could have the effect of drawing upon the deeper, fresher waters of story, energy and imagination available to us in our time.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Power of Story* for stories where both sides discover mutual interest.