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Dialogical Recovery of Life

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During a recent dialogue training, Dr. Peter Rober, from Belgium, said, “listening deeply, going beyond categories, creates dialogical space in which life can come... into this space will come life and super reality.” It seemed with those few words Peter unlocked a space of my own thinking about dialogue and recovery. The space in which new ideas breathe new life.

This understanding makes me wonder about the description of the anguish from which I recovered. A narrow medical description of my mental distress often interfered with my recovery. Instead of opening new space, medicalizing my life’s woes closed down spaces by labeling them. This deadening effect of easy explanations of life’s challenges was captured by playwright Eugene Ionesco when he said, “[Explanation separates us from astonishment, which is the only gateway to the incomprehensible.](#)”



http://www.searchquotes.com/quotation/Explanation_separates_us_from_astonishment%2C_which_is_the_only_gateway_to_the_incomprehensible/224650/

By translating recovery into other languages we have learned more about the issues. We have found that the best translation of recovery in Spanish is “recobro de la vida,” or “recovery of [ones] life.” This translation, seems intuitively close to the truth of our experience. But what does it mean? I think it means that when we are disconnected and lose touch with our feelings, we die inside. Our heart may beat, but without enthusiasm or spirit, our life force seeps out.

It seems that all of us in this society need to recover from the constricting effect of isolation and the black and white thinking that separates us from our feelings. Implementing recovery needs to occur beyond the clinical context. Recovery principles and culture needs to be adopted throughout society because every relationship we engage in has the capacity to enhance or degrade our recovery by nourishing or smothering our life force.

I think that a major aspect of bringing recovery to society is through understanding and practicing dialogical relationships in every day life. This might be considered a type of community dialogue. I have carried out several training programs here in Mass. based on six basic principles of dialogue (the first 4 come from Isaacs, 1999, the 5th from my own experience and the sixth from Yankolovich, 1999):

1. Listening deeply together
2. Suspending our own beliefs, going beyond categorical thinking
3. Respecting and valuing differences and the wholeness of each of us
4. Speaking from our deepest truth, from our heart
5. Connecting on a heart to heart level
6. Valuing each other’s humanity deeply enough to see we are all equals

But why are these principles of dialogue so important. Because they create a space that we all want and need. A psychological space in which we experience our life more fully. On the other hand, the top down monological world of everyday life in the present is killing our life forces within and between us. To this degree, the green movement, the recovery movement in mental health , and the dialogue movement have a common unifying goal: **to create a society which nourishes the life force in each and every living being through dialogical relationships.**

Rober cited an ideal of dialogical space in Jacque Derrida’s (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Derrida) concept of hospitality. According to Derrida, when meeting another person we need to show an interest. Before we ask any question we need to assume a position of yes. We need to welcome without words. In recovery language, we need to believe in the person. We need to talk but words, according to Derrida, are inherently violent. Hospitality is an ethical ideal never realized. When we fail to welcome all the dimensions , and all the voices of another in full polyphony, we are creating a condition of violence.

By this criteria, most of our day-to-day culture is violent.

It would seem that severe mental health issues are basically matters of life and death. We need to understand that the deepest meaning of life is much more profound than the vital signs of breathing and heart-beats. Just as surely as we know when our breathing is impaired or our circulation is compromised, at a more profound level we know when our wellspring of internal life is being poisoned or starved. Some of us are much more sensitive to compromises in our life force. When we experience a fading of that force we protest in a variety of ways that are called symptoms. Rather than symptoms of disease these protests are actually creative attempts to restore our life force. Alfred Adler described symptoms as attempts to solve problems. It seems there are two major ways that we creatively seek to restore our life force and solve the problems of our life being extinguished:

1. Creating connections even if they don’t appear to exist: this is the creation of voices, imagining that the TV has special messages for you, and imagining that the CIA is following you. These waking dreams are all attempts to replace the most intolerable state of having no response with an imagined response, which the mental health system and much of society call hallucinations, ideas of reference, and delusions.

2. Severing connections which are violent, oppressive, or toxic or bring back such memories: withdrawal, refusal to speak or express emotions because human interactions are considered violent, or as David in David and Lisa said, “touch kills;” another way to distance oneself in through substances that reduce the intensity of one’s reactions to toxic influences of traumatic relationships

I gained more insight into my own recovery by interviewing my former therapist, Dr. S. George (as he was comfortable being addressed) still practices today as he did 40 years ago, in a very relaxed and accepting manner. I kept asking him how he used the approach he used and what was it. What did he think of me? You were always very earnest and determined [that has not changed.] He told me of his childhood, which involved great privation while a refugee in Europe after WW II. He had also worked as a shrink in Vietnam. From that experience he learned that people can often rapidly, and completely recover from psychosis, when treated as directly and humanely as possible. So at the end of the interview I commented that I felt I had learned nothing of what was most important in our 4 years of work together. In frustration I said, "All we did in these two hours was have a conversation." To which George replied, "That was what we did then too." Though I think he is selling short the importance of his experience as a therapist and his life experiences, I have since marveled at the power of the conversations I had with George. Perhaps most important, was the manner in which he approached me. It was very respectful and empowering. Whenever I was impressed by an insight he delivered, he would say, with great sincerity, that I had come up with the insight and he had merely delivered it. His approach was very close to Derrida's ideal of hospitality.

In passing, George referred to the Santiago Theory, though that did not inform his practice. Instead, it merely reinforced instincts he had learned through life.

Here is Fritjof Capra's description of the Santiago Theory of life from his book the Web of Life:

"The understanding of the process aspect of living systems... implies a new conception of mind, or cognition. This new conception was proposed by Gregory Bateson and elaborated more completely by Maturana and Varela, and it is known as the Santiago theory of cognition.

" The central insight of the Santiago theory is the **identification of cognition, the process of knowing, with the process of life**. Cognition, according to Maturana and Varela, is the activity involved in the self-generation and self-perpetuation of autopoietic networks [autopoietic is the quality of the living cell or organism captured by the term: self-creation, self-making or self-producing]. In other words, cognition is the very process of life [and it depends on the living organism to form itself].

It is obvious that we are dealing here with a radical expansion of the concept of cognition and, implicitly, the concept of mind. In this new view, cognition involves the entire process of life – including perception, emotion, and behavior – and does not necessarily require a brain and a nervous system.

The Santiago theory of cognition, I believe, is the first scientific theory that overcomes the Cartesian division of mind and matter, and will thus have the most far-reaching implications. Mind and matter no longer appear to belong to two separate categories, but can be seen as representing two complementary aspects of the phenomenon of life – the process aspect and the structure aspect. At all levels of life, beginning with the simplest cell, mind and matter, process and structure, are inseparably connected. Mind is immanent in living matter as the process of self-organization. For the first time, we have a scientific theory that unifies mind, matter and life."

From this beautiful description, we can see the mistake of narrowly defining mental distress as a form of biological illness just like diabetes and claiming that medication(s) will bring about mental health by balancing our chemistry. It is short sighted to claim that a medication by itself will bring mental health. I am not claiming mental illness is a myth, for I can clearly recall periods of terror and paranoia. Instead, I would say that for many people the medical model is too narrow a description. Mental distress can only be understood within the context of our social networks and in all the realms of our existence: mind, body, and spirit. Furthermore, the importance of self-creation of living systems supports the recovery movement's central principle of self-determination. Recovery is what people do to create a new life, it can not be done to or for a person.

The process of thinking proposed by these scientists, I believe is mapped out in greater detail by the proponents of dialogical practice. For in the interplay of dialogue, new meanings are generated that neither person had previously dreamt of. They give life to new ideas, which can then inform their lives and others with renewed meaning. This weaving together of your world and my world goes beyond our own narrow world and opens new horizons. We are brought together by our shared anguish. We can through dialogue dream together. We share in new ways, as Ionesco stated: "Ideologies separate us, while dreams[through dialogue] and anguish bring us together."

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