**Intentional Relational Conversations:**

**Power, Vision, Maturity[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Dick Harmon**

**10.5.14**

**Importance**

Intentional Relational Conversations are the primary, central act of organizing. They are the *habit* or *practice* in which healthy, effective organizing is grounded.

They are the way we build *capacity* in our civil sector communities of faith, labor and education—the ability to hold institutions of market and government sectors accountable, and the ability to help transform our economic and political policies and impacts from death-centered to life-centered .

They are the way we discover the three types of *power*, which we’ll get to shortly.

They are the way we can discover the *experience* of transformation in our personal and public relationships with other people—and, in our time, a transformed relationship with nature.

**What’s In A Name?**

The first widely-used name for the practice was “individual meeting.” These meetings are also sometimes referred to as “one-to-ones.” Although the name, Intentional Relational Conversation, can seem somewhat artificial, it expresses the unique character and focus of these encounters.

First, these meetings or conversations are *intentional*. They are not random, accidental. They require reflection before and after the actual event. At first, they are part of a well-planned organizing process; as the habit builds, they become what leaders and organizers do each day with people from whom we want to learn, or with whom we want to collaborate—whether they’re strangers, acquaintances, friends, or family members.

Second, the word “Relational” stresses that *all reality is relational*. It conveys *encounter*, in which significant meaning emerges.

Once this became clear in our collective organizing experience, we dropped the use of “individual,” which carries the unhealthy and inaccurate cultural baggage of America’s “rugged individualism—“you’re on your own, buddy” is an ideology that has helped to gut our democracy.

“Conversation” comes from the Latin, *com*—together or with; and *vertere*— to turn. “Conversation” is to turn with. “Converse” comes from *com*, or together; and *conversari—*to dwell with or keep company with. Synonyms for “conversation” include communion and intercourse. So conversation is not chit-chat; the word means both parties to the conversation will be changed, even stirred or agitated.

**Power**

I see power as *focused energy*. Simple, everyday examples include:

—Consider the electrons firing toward the light-bulb in the lamp you’re reading by; they’re *focused* by the wire that carries them.

—Or when you start your car (combustion engines): A spark of electrical energy fires into a spray of gasoline within the compressed space of each cylinder chamber; as each cylinder rises up the chamber, the hot, fired gas becomes more compressed, more focused—and drives each cylinder back down, turning the flywheel, crankshaft, differential, and your wheels. Power is the capacity to do work, to convert one form of energy to another.

—Or when you move your hand: electrons, in synapses, “bridge” the gaps between cells, and carry information through nerve endings; muscles move.

—Or when you work or play: washing dishes, holding a child, moving boxes or mining data, pulling weeds, playing music, writing a class presentation, negotiating with another leader, eating, drinking, praying—all these activities involve focused energy moving through your whole system; all require the *capacity to act.*

We use three *types* to describe power:

—*Power-over* is domination. Most of us have extensive experience with this type of power, from an abusive parent or spouse, sibling, teacher, loan officer at the bank, financial aid officer at the school, poorly-trained police man or HR head or supervisor at the corporation. In each case, you feel the *mis*-use of power, the violation of your self and values, a deeply *un*-equal relationship. Power-over in its extreme forms rises out of the human species’ *separatio*n from nature and its sacred dimension.

—*Power-among* is the kind of power that good civil sector organizing tries to nurture. Most of us have glimpses of this experience in rare or best-friend-only conversations; here we both listen deeply, don’t judge, try our best to understand the other person, take their story seriously. Here is where we can discover the field of energy which embraces both of us, moves us into a new “zone” of being, draws us forward into action. Here we experience genuine equality, where both parties are *recognized.*

*—Power-within* emerges as we are agitated by our experience of power-among. This is *interior capacity*, perhaps even the first discovery that our interior, spirit, our deeper and truer self, is important, even sacred. If we develop a practice, we find the *ability to discern* the flows, shapes and shifts of our deepest self. Obviously, we bring this new interior capacity to bear as we attempt to build power-among in our organizing community.

Developing power-among and power-within helps us to counter the overwhelming power-over of our captivity system and its subsystems.

There are deep links here between 1) power-among and power-within; 2) the crisis of the *polis*, or democracy; 3) the mostly-dysfunctional cultures of our present communities of faith, labor, education, and NGOs; 4) the crisis of our economic-financial system; and 5) the crisis of Earth’s systems of climate and species.

We wake up to the existential threat of the power-over system of our time, struggle to extricate ourselves from our complicity in it, and do our best to find and help build alternatives. We can start, in my view, in our own civil sector communities.

**History**

From the late 1950s through the late 1970s, most local, ground-level organizing was focused on a narrow definition of “issue”—which organizers and leaders saw as *content*, as grievance or problem; organizers would approach leaders, say, of churches, and with the minister’s list in hand, go see people who “might be interested in taking some action.”

The organizer would, indeed, find people interested in, say, getting a street light or cleaning up a slum building; bring them together with like-minded people from other congregations; run research actions to discover the responsible decision-makers; insist on an appointment, and negotiate.

Lots of small, medium-sized and even large-scale wins came out of this work; many leaders of that era became highly competent in this version of organizing.

But by the late 1970s, this kind of organizing suffered a series of burn-outs among both leaders and organizers. Many organizations folded or were in dire need of basic re-organization. Something fundamental was missing.

From the culture—especially from feminism and (in my view at least) process philosophy and theology—came a new emphasis on *relationships*, at all levels of reality, and at least a start on the turning away from our atomized, over-individualized, commodifying way of seeing other humans and every “thing” else.

Out of this discovery, over time, emerged a new element in this art and craft —what we now call “relational organizing,” where we see “issue” as *process and content*—the way you go about it as well as the outcome; the kind of learning that goes on among leaders and members, as well as the conventional “win” or “loss”; how many potential new leaders and dollars are attracted; and what kind of disciplined evaluation closes a campaign, instead of the usual “party.” In short, more organizational depth and staying power, less breathless, reactive activity—calling forth builders instead of traditional activists.

One final factor in this brief historical note: In the mid-1980s, my own part in this development of a more mature organizing culture, seems to have focused on discovering the power of story emerging from all these intentional relational conversations.

For reasons in my own development, and the many story-carrying cultures of Brooklyn where I was working at the time, it became possible to see that we were working with a new “lens” and method—of organizing grounded in *story-based relationships*; and the possibility of creating a *culture of relational power* within and among our civil sector communities.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**So What *Are* They?**

Take some time with the comparative list on page seven. Then we’ll get into

how at least one person sees the radical center of this work we call organizing.

**Intentional Relational Conversation**

**What It Is NOT What it IS**

**Interview, Survey, Data Points Significant Conversation**

**Coffee-hour chit-chat Real life pressures, issues**

**Unscheduled, random Definite appointment**

**Social Media, phone Face-to-Face**

**Late to arrive for appointment Start and end on time**

**No definite time-frame 20-40 minutes**

**No silent reflection afterward Make notes *immediately* after**

**No preparation beforehand Meditation or prayer**

**Fix-It or therapy Let energy-spirit do the work**

**Half-attentive Paying attention, high focus**

**Information Story, passion, interest**

**One-On-One One-to-One**

**Prying into private story Probing for public story**

**Social lens Social, spiritual, ecological**

**lens**

**Unimagined, hanging out Imagined, Intentional**

**Intentional Relational Conversations: Power and Vision**

During these intentional relational conversations, we “see” each other through our “lens”—through the world-view that we bring.

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 self-understanding, my own story, changed by that event?

As we have more intentional relational conversations, 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.

I’ve observed what appears to be three phases of development, over long periods of good one-to-one work.

**First Phase**

We usually begin with the classical questions about pressures on our family, and then on our faith community, local union, or local school community.

As local organized 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 connection, of *being-with and becoming-with* the other person. In this experience of radical relationality, we begin to discern that we are enveloped and suffused by a field of energy, which is bigger than both people in the conversation.

As we 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 if we reflect immediately after each conversation, and then as well at the end of the day. We find that, in each one-to-one that day, we were also moving beneath the surface of our own story and self.

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 the developing discipline of paying real attention, both to the other, then to your own response. It takes going with your curiosity, and having your questions and openness ready for each intentional relational conversation. (See page seven.)

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

First, we begin to see the other person’s story *embodied* in their 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 contributing to the cultural DNA in the person sitting with you.

We see the drama of *human* *history*—what theologians often call “the world”— through the story of this person. Simultaneously, we experience more understanding of the window on human history in 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.

The second significant outcome of doing this relational work can be at least a glimpse of what Martin Buber called *I-Thou.* As the other person’s story emerges, we experience the field of energy “present” to us as we talk. We begin to sense being “held” in that flow, which somehow increases our *focus* on each other’s story. We become more open, more available to the power of each other’s story and being. For each of us, the other person, no longer an object, is becoming a subject, with a unique identity 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.

Often, when we end an intentional relational conversation, we part filled with deepened awareness or sensitivity, and with it comes a fullness of energy moving us forward; we find ourselves saying, from the other’s person’s story: *I’ve got to do something*.

This brings us to the third significant outcome. When we conduct this process within local faith communities, unions and school communities, we move through these steps:

—Teams, actively supported by the organization’s clergy, president, or senior educator, move through a series of leadership development workshops, and then, within each participating organization, conduct an extensive series of intentional relational conversations.

—The teams bring together small groups of those people in “house meetings” where each person shares stories of pressures, hopes and dreams.

—The teams then invite the people of those house meetings into one or more assemblies, in each organization, where they discern together which pressures, rising through the storying process, can become issuable.

—The teams then bring all their people together into an assembly for all participating organizations, discern again in this larger setting, and vote to act together.

—Leaders design a campaign strategy and conduct focused negotiations, to get some aspect of the first issuable “pressure” changed. They are supported by large, high-energy but orderly gatherings of the members who went through the process from the beginning.

—Leaders evaluate each campaign and negotiation, and develop a public narrative that becomes part of a larger, emerging, common story.

—At each stage, each team invites potential and current leaders into the leadership development workshops. This ongoing, highly intentional leadership development aims at creating *a culture of relational power*, over a period of 3-5 years, in each participating organization.

In this organizational culture, members and potential members know each others’ stories, interests and passions; they are no longer strangers. Hence, the organization and its people experience a significantly larger and deeper aquifer of energy and imagination.

**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 all living organisms. We may find ourselves talking to plants, other animals, or soil-mites.

We may go so far as developing a daily spiritual practice, to keep ourselves open to both humans and the other living beings.

We may re-visit the scriptures of our wisdom tradition, to see what they say about creation, or nature. We may decide 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 systems. [[3]](#footnote-3)

We may begin to talk all this over with people, in a new level of relational conversations. In these conversations, we may see each other as revelations of more than “the world” of human history. We may see in each person our relationality with all living organisms.

But that discernment may also bring us into deep anger, weeping, in full-blown grief, for both Earth, our own families, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and especially for our young.

We may ask the leaders of our local faith communities, unions and schools to look at these questions with us; we may raise all this within our own families. We may come to see that our local organizations can use the relational organizing process for these larger questions. Earth’s crisis, in climate and species systems, has local expressions everywhere; those local expressions can be “broken down” into issuable components. We can do the same with the Great Work of growing Earth-supporting local economic enterprises.

Relational organizing can give us the confidence, skill-set and way of seeing to conduct real conversations with each other about the YES/NO/YES of our situation—including our massive layers of denial.[[4]](#footnote-4) From these conversations, we can also create appropriate public expressions of lament over what we have done to nature and what we will continue to lose.

As the fields of energy continue to deepen and expand through this process, we begin to transform our separation, not just from other humans, but also from all life. Experiencing I-Thou takes on more depth and meaning; we begin to see more clearly the scale of suffering in Earth’s systems, and the suffering ahead for our own species.

We confront the depth of our civilization’s confusion and brokenness, our own local organizations’ confusion and brokenness. We come to the place where there is no hope, the place where we “hit bottom” and let go of all our illusions.

But because we have done our relational work, and have been partially healed in the process, we can have local faith communities, unions and school communities whose people know each other, who are acquainted with suffering, mystery, and healing energy, who are not afraid to discover each other—and so may find ourselves lifted off the bottom by the source and expression of Earth’s life, of radical relationality, what we might call “I-Thou” at a larger scale.

**Third Phase**

Finally, as we grow in relationality with all living organisms, we may discern that Earth, with all its creatures and systems was born of a larger, deeper process, the creative process of evolution throughout spacetime, through 13.7 billion years and across a trillion or more galaxies.

We may see, in an intentional relational conversation with another person or a tree, flower or colony of ants, or a set of night stars, that all living organisms, humans included, have emerged from that process; that we are *embedded* in the opulent fullness of the single process of our universe; that humans are apparently the first species with capacity for reflecting on the whole of that creative process; and that our relationship with this immense creative process, as species and persons, gives each of us unique, enormous meaning.

I once knew a mountaineer-geologist who over his life 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, 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 deep spacetime process 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 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 and its 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.

In 2005 I encountered Crater Lake, in Southern Oregon. Its blueness pulled me into the depths of Earth, into the deep spacetime of its birthing, its volcanic eruption in this place, its water, its meaning for ancient and contemporary peoples. This experience provided powerful healing for me, in a year of great destruction and chaos in US history.

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 foggy air, quiet incoming tide, seals greeting ocean, plants and humans becoming visible up the hill, first birds singing, sun’s light emerging over the mountains behind me. I was whole, belonging in this Whole, within not separate from Biosphere, held in unbound power, healing.

I see these three events as examples of I-Thou experience. And I’ve discerned that the ability to enter into these experiences rises, in the most part, from my years of relational work with the people of many local congregations, unions and school communities. Those relationships have brought me into recovery, restored my basic trust in the mystery of our Earth and cosmos, and in the process made me something of a mystic.

We may discover that the mystics of the great wisdom traditions are right, in their insight that matter throughout our universe is not inert, but is always in relationship with energy, and that all of reality “shimmers.”

The world’s mystics have seen, in contemporary language, that each energy event in our universe carries a tiny surplus of creativity over destruction; that out of that nano-surplus of creativity, life on 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 its work. This process calls us to *participate*in its work; this participation is our species’ Great Work, our vocation. This work gives us purpose and meaning, enormously deepened energy and imagination.

In this third phase of relational work, in good one-to-ones we can see more than the world of human history, more even than all living organisms. I’m claiming that we can see in each other the ordered creative universe, our cosmos, working in and through us as we give and receive each other’s stories.

We may discover, in metaphorical terms, the presence of a tender dimension, at the deepest reach of cosmic energy, in every living and inert being across 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 powerful surplus of compassion over indifference.

This dimension of tenderness, in the depth of every energy event in the immense flow of cosmic evolution, is always present, and is always gift. But because of our species’ structural limits, 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, our addictions. Recovery requires deep change; we love the Egypt of the familiar, even if it does express death.

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 and ongoing mystery of creativity, healing, and recovery. This gift is focused, healing energy-matter, the source and nurture of power-among and power-within.

**Open Door At Ground Level**

**—**We start with intentional relational conversations with people we know or want to know better, in our family, friendship or work circles, among neighbors or members of our communities of faith, labor, school or NGO.

—We reflect on this intentional set of conversations with our community’s team that has taken on this good work. These reflection sessions enhance each person’s individual conversations with themselves, the “silent confrontation with my own self” of most of our spiritual traditions. These private and “team” reflections are key to our development as humans, as maturing citizens— of community, *polis*, Earth and *cosmos*—in the 21st century.

—In this experience, we discover *capacity* or *power-among* within our communities; now learning how to organize, how to mediate together for our members and negotiate together with the major players of government and market sectors. We enter the *polis* intentionally and effectively.

—Entering the *polis*:

* we resist the great threats from our Captivity System.[[5]](#footnote-5)

—we attract the talent and organize the money, from within or at the edges

of our communities, to nurture the new enterprises of land-food, labor,

capital and energy that can be the cornerstones of the new economy, of

what Larry Rasmussen has called *Creationjustice*; [[6]](#footnote-6)and from that

economy can emerge healthy, mature enterprises of culture and politics.

This is not just a matter of urgency, dawning on us as we grapple with the global carbon budget and its timeframe of ten to fifteen years; with the implications for our children and grandchildren of running out of time; with working through our denial into “decade zero.”

No, it is also an unprecedented adventure and opportunity, to restore our relationality with each other and all of creation— to do what is both right and existentially, viscerally necessary; in other words, to act from our deepest, truest selves, from our deepest value-interests, our deepest trust— participating in the I-Thou of creation, which includes each of us.

All this can start with this humble, common sense, and radical act of having an intentional relational conversation.

1. Prepared for Organizing in Biocommons (OBC) in Winter-Spring 2013-14.Revised for OBC Fall 2014. This paper attempts to expand the discussion about Intentional Relational Conversations among leaders and organizers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. My own story in this period is in a larger work-in-progress, *Power of Story.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Eco-FaithRecovery.org [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For immediate threats to Oregon, Washington and British Columbia, See “End of Eden? A Reflection on McKibben’s Question,” a forthcoming paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (Oxford, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)