

The Process of Dialogue and Place-based Leadership

Julie Auger

Saybrook University

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Nancy Southern, Ed.D & Kathia Laszlo, Ph.D.

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The mechanistic view of life that we have inherited tells us that the world is an objectively existing, separate place. We hear the sounds of the world. But this view of things is quite insular. In preparing ourselves for dialogue, it is helpful to recall that there was a time when human beings were much more intimately involved in the landscape, where our very language mimicked and was developed from the music of the earth itself. We not only listen to the earth; it listens to us. – William Isaacs (1999)

## **The Process of Dialogue and Place-based Leadership**

### **Introduction**

We live in a world of dichotomies; people of color vs. white people, republicans vs. democrats, religious vs. non-religious, male vs. female, poor vs. rich, powerful vs. powerless, and so forth. We live in a world where people choose their side and defend their position based on what they believe to be true and real. We attach labels to people and personify each other based on those labels. For example, poor people are lazy, ignorant, and abuse the welfare system; and environmentalist are tree hugging, ‘pot’ smoking, hippies who chain themselves to trees. The danger of such unquestioned generalizations is that it births opinions, which “thus tend to be experienced as ‘truths’” (Bohm, 1996, p. 9). Such unchallenged assumptions or “truths” infiltrate our culture and produce fragmented thoughts that guide our actions at the tacit level (Bohm, 1996). Consequently, we blame, we exclude, we discount, we defend, we impede creativity, and we shut out alternative possibilities. Furthermore, the disconnection from each other has manifested harmful and reckless handling of our planet.

The time has come, the tipping point (if you will), when the problems before us are so huge and interrelated that we can no longer afford to keep these lines drawn in the sand. We can no longer “‘block’ out what others are saying” (Bohm, 1996, p. 4). Isaacs (1999) states that, “People do not listen, they reload” (p. 18). We must come together, as a species, and truly appreciate and learn from our differences. It is time for us to face the realities of our actions, to

see through a different lens. In order to transform from an environmentally degrading and social unjust world into a life-generating planet a new conversation must emerge. Conversations create narrative, which in turn creates culture. Thereby, engaging in conversations that matter we can re-create our story and thus transform our culture. “Our experiences and our beliefs tell a story that celebrates life rather than denies it” and “before a new era can come into form, there must be a new story” (Wheatley, 2007, p. 16 & p. 21). “The competencies required for engaging in this kind of conversation overlap with the competencies required for designing more just and sustainable social systems” (Laszlo & Laszlo, 2005, p. 357). This kind of conversation is *dialogue*.

Dialogue as a process is essential for creating the container for authentic communication and for planting the seed for transformative change. I am inspired to facilitate and lead individuals, organizations, and communities towards a values-based life-generating evolution. My hope is that people develop a meaningful partnership with Earth and each other. I envision place-based leadership as an actionable area of which to realize this continuum. Place-based leadership combines the essence of leadership with the ‘idea of place’. It expounds on Renee Levi’s (2008) investigation into *place* and group transformation. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the ways in which the process of dialogue will be used to expand our consciousness of place and cultivate the capacity for new behaviors.

### **About Dialogue**

As mentioned, dialogue is a process for conversation. “Dialogue is a living experience of inquiry within and between people” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 9). The intention is to reach new understanding, to evolve, and “communicate coherently in truth” (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999).

Bohm (1996) states, “If we don’t share coherent meaning, we don’t make much of a society. And at present, the society at large has a very incoherent set of meanings” (p. 28). Bohm (1996) further explains that dialogue is about “making something *in common*, i.e., creating something together” (p. 3). Michael Jones (2006) describes the “commons” as being found in wholeness. He goes on to explain:

And because wholeness is invisible, we know it primarily through its effects. For example, we may know we are in the presence of wholeness when we feel ourselves to be deeply heard, perhaps because there is sufficient stillness amongst us to allow what we say to be fully received. Or suddenly we sense that our voice carries new clarity and strength, and those with us can hold strong voices without fear. Perhaps we know it because we feel whole and complete, and there is a warmth in us that lets us engage the deeper subtleties of meaning and connection. Often there is an accompanying, heightened trust in ourselves and others, so that we can move with grace and ease from a reliance on memory and past knowledge to the forming of new insights. Or we know that wholeness is present because we feel involved and engaged, that is we feel that we have a home here; the essence of our gifts has been taken in and embodied by the whole (p. 1-2).

The purpose of dialogue is to actualize this wholeness. In contrast, discussion is about advocacy, defending a point of view, and assuming the facts.

The process of dialogue provides the space for us to learn and become conscious of others’ perspectives in the absence of judgments, without arriving at conclusions. It regards noticing. It calls for being aware of the connection between thoughts (Bohm, 1996). To step outside of our self and reflect on what it is we are thinking and be aware of “how our thoughts dictate to us much of our personal and collective experiences” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 93). Thus, the process exposes our governing values, mental models, and underlying assumptions. Dialogue provides a container of which to free up our energy, generate creativity, and open our hearts. It gets us closer to the truth so that we may be collectively intelligent. The principles of dialogue include respect for diverse perspectives, speaking truthfully, inquiring through questions, being

present and aware, suspending judgment, and showing up as your self (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999). Dialogue values the art of listening as a means of putting “us in contact with the wider dimensions of the world in which we live” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 87). Dialogue is essentially an evolutionary learning process, which fosters meaning making, co-creation and wholeness (Laszlo, 2005).

### **About Place-based Leadership**

What is meant by *place*? Renee Levi (2008), a steward of The Powers of Place Initiative, was curious about the influence environment and location has on transformative change. She conducted a study on the effects of place, space, and environment on group transformation. The people Levi interviewed described place in a variety of ways and understandings. For example, one person described place “as containers for transformational gatherings” by way of “asking a place and environment to partner with us” (Levi, 2008, p.35). Another shared, “When people are authentic in a place, transformation happens” (p. 35).

*Place* was sorted into visible and invisible descriptions: geography and natural environment; design; aesthetics; history, meaning, intention; energy; connection to whole; love, respect, and reciprocity. Each of these descriptions were colored with insights into the effect place has on people. Her work advanced our curiosity of the possibilities *place* holds for the world, especially from a systems (or ecosystems) and leadership perspective. Several questions emerged for me (Auger, 2010) after reading Levi’s paper such as:

- If place has an influence on individual and group transformation, and leaders have an influence on individual and group transformation; then what influence do they synergistically have? In other words, how are the essence of leadership and idea of place related?
- If people express that they have a “relationship” with place, space, and environment, and it is agreed that “relationships” are essential to leadership; then what does a leader’s relationship with place look

like? How is this relationship with place used? Does place benefit from the relationship with leaders?

- How can leaders use the concepts of and awareness of place to inspire, influence, or provoke meaningful action?
- What is it that a place-based leader feels, is, and knows?
- One of the comments made in an interview was, “I think that authentic people and place imbue each other” (Levi, 2008, p. 30). Another spoke about “the relationship between personal authenticity and collective transformation in space” (p. 31). How then can an authentic leader partner with place to imbue members and hold the space for authenticity? (p. 8-9)

A Place-based Leadership and Transformational Change Forum co-hosted by Fetzer Institute-funded, Powers of Place Initiative, and Banff Centre Leadership Development was organized in May 2010. Twelve people came together in a two-day dialogue session designed to explore how *place* invigorates and inspires leaders to partner with place and lead from the presence of place. We began with sharing our personal histories in the context of what place means to us. In a teepee, we listened to an indigenous person recount the history of his people and their union with the mountains. We sunk ourselves in nature, walking barefoot and blindfolded through the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Then we immersed ourselves in architecture and design. We explored the potential impact of place-based leadership in the context of systemic transformation.

Too often we attempt to undertake large systemic transformational changes without taking into account the unique characteristics of the place that we are engaged with. Most communities are not at a loss for innovative ideas. What they may overlook however is how to partner with these unique qualities and features of the place they are in- the soil they inhabit - that enables these seeds of innovation to take root and grow. (Jones, M., 2010, p. 1)

A language began to form around place-based leadership. Place itself is alive and is both a power and a presence. The aliveness flows in and out of place. It becomes a place because of the attention we give to it. Feeling the soul of place, the spirit of place. Place is something we

return to or grow out from (Jones, 2010). We began to view leaders as *place-makers* and place as a journey. We spoke of listening to place, partnering with place, and healing through the generative power of place. Through story we discovered the power of re-discovering place. We shared childhood memories of building forts and of growing up in a place of culture. In our dialogue circle Michael Jones offered, “I think of place as a place in the question – how do I create that place inside of me that creates those possibilities again? Place in consciousness, place in awareness.” Another person said, “...but it goes beyond that because it’s about the relationships you have in place and how you create relationships.” We expressed emotions and insight around the soul of place and the spirit of place.

The forum ended with a continuum of questions and a notion of being in service to what we might create. How may we take this out into the world? How may leaders become place-makers and partner with place?

### **Place-based Leadership, Dialogue, and Community**

Toledo, Ohio is a community of differences. There is a lack of commons among the people and a lack of leadership. People are quick to disclose their opinions, yet are reluctant to listen to opposing viewpoints. The community is segregated on some fronts and equally collaborative on others. It is my experience that Toledo is without a clear identity, shared meaning, and direction. Toledo Mayor Mike Bell does not consider the environment to be a priority (Cady, 2009) despite the many grassroots organizations that do. Disconnect and disturbance among Toledo folks is felt and witnessed at many levels in a variety of venues. The people have forgotten or do not fully understand the richness of Toledo’s history and power of its gifts.

By inviting community members to participate in a two day Place-based Leadership

Forum, Toledo will be presented with the opportunity to re-discover itself. Under the context of *place* as a vessel for transformational change, Toledo can learn about itself, create relationships, engage more fully, connect to nature, appreciate its history, and become alive. The “how” is by participating in conversations that matter. The idea of place serves as a container, a large system that holds the space for dialogue. As Bohm (1996) explains, “We are not trying to change anything, but just being aware of it” (p. 21), to swim in the awareness of place so we can become alive in place and experience its aliveness.

If the people of Toledo can re-connect at the individual level then they can be more fully present and thus, recover at the organizational level. The community can begin to gain a sense of wholeness and generate inspirational and healing energy. By swimming in place together and sharing in place our own stories, we begin to change our language and fuse with our surroundings. “Our language is also holographic. Each word contains not only the wider context of paragraph and sentence but the deeper context of our lives” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 89).

### ***The Invitation***

How will people be invited? A colleague runs the local newspaper. I would request he run an article about the powers of place and invite people to attend the forum. Sponsors and promoters from different sectors (i.e. Toledo Grows, Old West End Bike Co-op, Collingwood Arts, Metro Parks, Rotary Club, Toledo Historical Society, Women’s Entrepreneur Network, Chamber of Commerce, and so forth) will be asked to take part. In context, they will be invited to briefly share their program successes and current ambitions. This element will be woven into the forum in order to ground the participants in the positive actions already in motion. Open invitations will be dispersed around town, as well as personal phone calls to key community members and leaders.

### *The Space*

On the first day, people will gather at the Oak Openings, the largest Metro Park and wildlife preserve in the area. There are both indoor and outdoor spaces to convene. We will take a guided nature walk and create space for individual silence in nature. Local groups, such as Toledo Grows, Mountain Mentors, and the Farmer's Market will give brief presentations in order to inform and connect people around how they are partnering with Earth. After an introduction about the purpose, principles, and process of dialogue we will share our stories and exploring our relationship with nature. Guiding questions will be used to instigate conversation.

On the second day, people will gather downtown. We will take a guided walking tour around the city to learn of Toledo's rich heritage, design, art, and community spaces. The afternoon will be spent in reflective dialogue. People will sit in circles of no more than eight with one person designated as the facilitator and another a note taker. Journals will be gifted to all participants.

A closing session will capture learnings and raise further questions about how we may lead differently with the awareness of place and how to nurture the continuum of the generative space of the commons. "As a generative space the commons is not designed to be or do anything outside of what unfolds within the structure itself" (Jones, 2006, p.5). The forum is designed to have aspects of both generative and strategic dialogue. A community website will hold the space for on-going conversations as well as a platform to share the experience with others. Circulating the stories and holding the space for more stories cultivates new language and new behaviors. My hope is that people choose to self-organize in on-going dialogue after the forum.

### **Conclusion**

Engaging in conversations that matter changes our language; changes our stories; thus changing our culture. To be fully infused in Earth and the fullness of our relationships means to listen. It means to raise generative questions and value differences. Place-based leadership has the capacity to open up our hearts further into the soul and spirit of place. Through place-based dialogue we can begin to break down barriers, expand our systems thinking, and make meaning together.

For Toledo, the power of place provides a common lens and raises a collective awareness, from which a shared vision may grow out of.

The beauty of the common space is the sense it can hold it all - that the potential of the moment is unprecedented. Entering into it without expectation conveys the sense of its newness. So to engage it fully we need to hold the commons as a neutral space. (Jones, 2006, p. 13-14)

The Toledo Place-based Leadership Forum is the seed. The capacity is there for Toledo to grow and discover its gifts. Through dialogue the community can begin to align its splendor with life generating actions and partner with place.

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