

## Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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### “Holding Tensions”

by Dan Wulff

One of the ideas I associate with social constructionism is that of *holding* tensions rather than necessarily *resolving* them (or trying to resolve them). Holding issues open for multiple and alternative viewpoints is a useful idea for me in my work as a family therapist and as a teacher. Inhibiting resolution or closure seems to

keep open the possibilities for more voices and more diversity of ideas. But, at the same time, the drive for resolving tensions in order to achieve peace or closure is strongly with us and may be at times important to pursue. Being able to *hold tensions* to improve our lives and worlds *and also* being able to *resolve tensions* for the same reasons becomes a challenging and important skill to develop.



Holding tensions between or within ideas helps me acknowledge and appreciate the multiple points-of-view held by various members of a family I work with in therapy. I do not need to boil their difficulties down into one primary or guiding viewpoint or strategy in order to be helpful. There is room for small voices or marginalized viewpoints. The points-of-view of the children or others who are problematized are legitimate and could hold generative potential. Oftentimes a minority viewpoint or opinion that initially may seem far “off the mark” can turn into important grounding for improvement.

In the classroom, developing and maintaining space for multiple competing viewpoints prevents rallying to a conclusion which could mask the complexity and fluidity of the situation or idea we are discussing. A single correct or preferred notion or understanding could dominate and thus create limits. Allowing for other ideas or viewpoints to surface encourages broadened thinking that appreciates marginalized perspectives along with mainstream ones. There is no need to find a/the truth. This process is continuous—like playing chess when there is no checkmate.

Another arena where I notice the importance of maintaining tension is in ballroom dancing (the tension I am referring to here is *not* the stressful/irritating/frustrating interaction type). Establishing communication between partners requires a bodily tension or muscular tone between

them through their frame together. The connection that is tensed/toned allows communication to flow between them. Without this, communication is extremely problematic. It is this tension that allows the leader to indicate a move to begin and allows the follower to respond in coordination or to signal something else. A weak or (non-tensed) connection prevents the transmission of information back-and-forth, inhibiting the coordination to produce the dance. That felt tension is ideally always present in order to communicate what is going on and what might happen next. Without it, there is no dance partnership.

This tension is elusive. When this tension is too strong, the relating can become rigid and stiff and actually inhibits the flow of communication and understanding. When the tension is too loose, communication is lost. When the tension becomes useful and workable, the partners' abilities to give and receive produce an excellent joint performance and the ability to create. But this useful and workable tension is never static. It resembles the work of the tightrope walker who must constantly use adjustments and small amounts of imbalance to maintain him/herself on the tightrope. This tension is not to be taken-for-granted.

We know that a tent is held up by lines that depend upon tension. Violin strings produce music by being stretched to different tensions. A tow rope can pull a car if it is taut enough to pull the weight. Tension is useful to us in many ways. However, it is only fair to point out the tension between the "values of tension" and the "difficulties with tension." Tension can show up in "hypertension," "tension headaches," or stress/irritation. If tension works like this, we want that sort of tension removed or resolved.

Looking at the ways in which tension can be a friend or a muse invites us to embrace difference as not only desirable, but also generative in our lives. Tension as a "resistor of resolution" provides the interactive relational space for communication, initiative, and diversity of thought. Holding tension between viewpoints/perspectives (not to freeze it, but to make and keep room for it) can become a sort of crucible of thinking—a place and space for innovation and creativity.

Consider the aspects of your life where you maintain unresolvedness — places where the conversation/dialogue is allowed to continue and maybe even grow. Is it a place you protect and nurture? Or do you seek closure and resolution? How much tension can you tolerate and even appreciate? When is it better to bring tension to a close? I invite you to consider keeping this topic unresolved.