

YOU CAN NEVER STEP INTO THE SAME RIVER TWICEⁱ

Collaborative and Dialogic Practices in Therapy and Social Change:
Honoring the Past and Creating the Future Conference
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*You can never step into the same river twice,
The river is not the same and the man is not the same.*
Heraclitus

We are here in this small piece of paradise for three days, and with us in this space are the ancestors, ghosts and spirits of our colleagues that Dan Wulff gifted us with in his “honoring” and “remembering” presentation: Tom Andersen, Insoo Kim-Berg, Gianfranco Cecchin, Steve De Shazer, Harry Goolishian, Paul Watzlawick and Michael White. They are here with us “sitting on the edge.”

Sitting on the edge of a move from the classical world view of formulating theories to understand human beings, their lives and their behaviors as categories, types and kinds, of inherited often invisible, taken-for-granted knowledge that is centralized, fixed, discoverable and re-discoverable, and of distant, dualistic, hierarchical relationships and static structures.

Together, we are sitting on the edge of a move to a world view of understanding human systems (singular and plural) and their lives and behaviors, as unique, active, engaged participants in the construction of knowledge that has local relevance and fluidity. This alternative perspective and attitude about our world and the people who inhabit it is a theme that runs through the works of those we honoring and ours. Each, regardless of what they called their work—conversational, dialogical, narrative, solution-focused, collaborative, reflecting or open-dialogue was impacted and inspired by the clusters of ideas that make up this alternative perspective.

Time today does not permit a description of this different world view and its influence. Nor is it possible to portray the evolution of the clusters of ideas and practices influenced by it. I will highlight the ideas of a few of the authors who influenced our forbearers and what these authors called our attention to, keeping in mind that none of the ideas stand alone.

Regardless of the author’s discipline, each is a critical theorist and part of an irreverent movement. I will highlight a few of their ideas and what they called our attention to, keeping in mind that none of the ideas stand alone.

It was Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others, who called our attention to a different way of understanding “language.” In his words:

“Let the use of words teach you their meaning.”

“A picture held us captive and we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”

It was Hans George Gadamer, among others, who called our attention to a different way of understanding “understanding” as participatory process that does not mean agreement and that is filled with uncertainty. In Gadamer’s words:

“To reach an understanding in dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.”

“Understanding, like action, always remains a risk Understanding is an adventure and, like any other adventure is dangerous.”

It was Heidegger who called our attention to the connection between language and change. In Heidegger’s words,

“Changes in the world necessitate changes in language, and changes in language affect what we are able to grasp about the world [and how we grasp it] By searching for new ways to speak about new situations and experiences, language develops.”

It was Mikhail Bakhtin who called our attention to a new way of understanding language and words, and their relationship. In his words, the use of language is

“always individual and contextualized in nature”

And although a word is an

“Expression of some evaluative position of an individual person”

that person cannot determine how that word affects another person, what it expresses for that person.

It was Maurice Merleau Ponty, among others, who called our attention to the role of perception in our understanding of and relating in the worlds in which we live.

It was Giambattista Vico, Heinz von Foerster and Humberto Maturana, among others who called our attention to the notion that we are always wearing multiple interpretive lenses and the notion of observing systems. The

“observer is part of the description” (Vico)

“Everything said is said by an observer to another observer” (Maturana)

And

“believing is seeing” (von Foerster).

It was Jean-François Lyotard who called our attention to the seduction of grand narratives. He challenged that there are, in his words,

“no grand narratives of legitimation”

“Confrontation of the notion of meta-narratives as privileging and oppressing”

It was Michel Foucault who called our attention to the not-so-invisible and often invisible power discrepancies that inherit our language, our words, our relationships and our societies. Words have, he suggests,

“hidden mechanisms of coercion and predefinition of relationships of power”

It was Jacques Derrida who called our attention to the importance of deconstructing philosophical texts, along with the notion of decentering the subject, in our practices.

All of our ideas and practices, of course, have been influenced by the myriad of contributions of Gregory Bateson. One of my favorite Bateson quotes is

“To entertain the new and the novel, there must be room for the familiar”

I have translated this to say, in my words, “in order for there to be room for me--my presence and my voice--there must first be room for yours.”

More recently Lynn Hoffman and Christopher Kinman have called our attention to the “rhizome” metaphor of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to describe the growth and transformation of ideas—the propagation and expansion of ideas and practices including the surprise as to the form they take and where they pop up.

Applying this rhizome (and nomadic) notion to the development and hence evolution of the works of the authors quoted, editor Christopher Norris (1989) suggests that they “impose no fixed and sedentary boundaries on a territory [e.g., of ideas and ensuing practices], but occupy a space to the extent of their capabilities and then move on. . . . Gradually they become less recognizable, more sprawling, and occasionally surreal.” They become, he continues, “A difference differentiating itself, like a theme in the Vinteuil sonata in Proust, which returns, [and now in the words of Deleuze] ‘but each time changed, in a different rhythm, with a different accompaniment, the same and yet other, as things return in life’.” (1989, p. 11)

Discussing not only the influence of Deleuze and Guattari but other critical theorists as well, Norris (1989) suggests that their cumulative works are “typically many years ahead of the academic disciplines and teaching disciplines that have obvious reasons of their own for preserving the *status quo*.” This conference attests that our forbearers were rhizomes and that we are as well: the rhizome effect has helped keep their ideas alive and living in our practices thus a continuing challenging to the status quo.

ⁱ A paper prepared for this conference as part of a plenary (“You Never Step into the Same . . .” – Flowing Ideas, Practices and Relationships with Sue Levin and Sylvia London.