

Taos Institute Brief Encounters

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Coordinated Action



By Sally St. George

We often talk of coordinated action, or as John Shotter would say, how we go on together; or as Sheila would say, dialogic practices; or as Ken would say, a social achievement; or as Mary would say a performance; or as Harlene would say a conversational space.

These are great descriptors, and I would like to tell you about coordinated action that I experienced with transportation in Hong Kong and on a summer visit to Ho Chi Minh City (still called Saigon) that can only be partially described by any of these words. I spent 5 weeks teaching in Hong Kong negotiating the MTR (subway/train system). The system itself is easy to use because of the color codes and maps posted everywhere. It is the coordinated actions of so many people getting on and off the MTR in a very short period of time before the train doors close that is amazing. It seems to me that everyone must move simultaneously because there is no sequential order. Furthermore, there is no room or time to wait or to defer—the doors will shut and the train will be gone. Yet, everyone gets on; there is no emotional charge.

During a long weekend holiday in Hong Kong, I traveled to Viet Nam with Dan, my daughter, and her boyfriend to meet Hieu, one of our University of Calgary colleagues who grew up in Viet Nam. In addition to being our translator for meetings with some Viet Nam social work colleagues, Hieu became our tour guide. Within hours of arriving in Saigon, Hieu had hired 5 motorcycle drivers to take us around the city. From that vantage point of zipping around the city we came to taste, smell, and see Saigon as the local residents might. Now this is a city of 5 million people who occupy 1/3 of the space that one million people in Calgary occupy.

None of us could figure out the traffic—rules or patterns—we could not make sense of how drivers were making decisions or who had the right-of-way. Without familiarity, traffic appeared chaotic, without order, and unpredictable, and each of us independently decided to focus on the sights rather than on our fear—but we all agreed it was coordinated. None of the drivers seemed stressed, there was no honking, all travelers seemed to get to where they were going. But our adventure became even more exciting when the skies let loose with the largest raindrops I have ever seen. Our drivers had seen this coming and donned their plastic ponchos—they dropped us off at the Cathedral of Notre Dame (which was one of our hoped-for

tourist stops) for refuge. After an hour of waiting for the rain to subside and it didn't, the drivers left us.

When the rain lessened we were asked to leave the church, so we embarked on our next adventure--becoming pedestrians. Standing on the corner of an intersection with no traffic lights to direct anyone, we could see cars, buses, and motorcycles coming and going in every (and I am not exaggerating) direction. Each of us visiting Saigon for the first time was horrified; each of us gasped aloud. Hieu, a gentle guide, had us all hold hands in one straight line and simply instructed us to walk with a regular pace, without stopping or running or changing direction. In this way the drivers could predict our movements and go around us. Weeks later it sounds sensible because we better understand the coordinated efforts of Saigon traffic, but then it sounded outrageous. It took us several days to discern the pattern of traffic and I am not certain we really get it, but clearly it is a finely coordinated action.

What I draw from this remembrance of unfamiliarity, fear, and new realization is all that can be accomplished with coordinated action. By joining together, all of us on those Saigon streets could safely move throughout the city and get to our destinations. There are lessons to be learned about how we, as Taos folks still have room for holding hands and crossing some new streets. I am looking forward to the ways in which we will do this.