

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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By Samuel Mahaffy

Won't You Please Come to Chicago, Just to Sing...? An Invitation to Relational Practices

Remember the words from the song by Graham Nash: “Won't you Please Come to Chicago, Just to Sing...”? Yes, I date myself! The song was written in the days of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young and was a plea to come to Chicago to raise money for the defense of the Chicago 8. These were the formative days of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. With sometimes unruly behavior, we raised our collective voice in opposition to the Vietnam War and in favor of peace. We were out to change the world! It was an exciting time when we were empowered that by raising our collective voices, we could make this world a better place.

We've learned some things since then. That the voice for justice must never be quieted. That we must find ways to give voice to the voiceless. That positive messages are more powerful than negative ones.

Where is the compelling voice for a better world today? One place I hear it clearly is in the movement toward more *relational* practices. The Taos Institute is the epicenter for enhancing a relational paradigm, much as Chicago in 1968 was the epicenter for the anti-war movement.

In November 2012, I experienced firsthand the power of the relational approach to change the world. It was at a gathering of peacemakers from around the globe in San Diego, California. The conference was called *Relational Practices in Conflict Transformation, Mediation and Peacebuilding: From the Intimate to the International*. Sponsored by The Taos Institute, the commitment of those present at this gathering to be instruments of positive change in the world was palpable.

In the Mission Bay harbor of this beautiful city, peacemakers from around the world gathered to share the rich possibilities of peacemaking from a relational perspective. I was deeply moved and honored to be part of this gathering. This gathering was not about peace as an abstraction, but about *living* into peace in the world. In the words of Diana Whitney, captured in poetic verse by Gita Baack: “remind people--they already know how to do peace – *be peace*.” After more than two decades of mediating conflicts in organizations, I left this conference convinced that *relational practices* are the greatest pathway to peace-building and conflict transformation.

Much of the work in relational practices first grew out of communities-of-practice of psychotherapists. Indeed, one of the most significant new works on relational practices has just emerged from a family therapy center in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The subtitle of *Patterns in Interpersonal Interactions is Inviting Relational Understandings for Therapeutic Change*. It could just as well be *Inviting Relational Understandings for Global Change*! This work is about focusing on *wellness* patterns rather than

pathologizing ones (<http://samuelmahaffy.com/2015/01/patterns-interpersonal-interactions-inviting-relational-understandings-therapeutic-change/>).

The universe of relational practices has grown far larger than the world of psychotherapy and the human sciences. It has grown to become a global network of scholars and practitioners focusing, in diverse disciplines and communities, on the “processes by which humans generate meaning together.” (<http://www.taosinstitute.net/theoretical-background>).

The *relational* practices and understanding brought forward in the community known as the Taos Institute is extraordinary. It is a pivotal time, I believe, for this community. This is the time for some *transmission* of vision and process from those who first rattled the academic and practice world with social constructionist ideas. I expect now we are in the wide open process of discovering multiple ways to bring those ideas forward in many arenas.

Relational understandings of human engagement are causing us to redefine the boundaries of academic disciplines. More importantly, the emerging conversation about relational practices is challenging us to explore new and life-giving practices at the family, community, and global level. In the social constructionist world “everyone has a role to play in making change.”

"Won't you please come to Chicago, just to sing?" If we have constructed a world that is divided by conflict and engaged in un-sustainable practices, we can surely re-construct it differently.

Together, we can change the world!

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