

## Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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The recent election outcomes in the United States have brought with them shock and distress for many in our country, and around the world. My aim here is neither to decry nor denounce, but to open discussion on what social constructionist ideas can offer in terms of the road ahead. Many colleagues are discussing dialogic practices for healing, and this is most important. But as I see it, more is at stake. Let me first share my own sense of why the nation has been torn asunder by the election. As many commentators agree, the election outcome primarily reflects the frustration and anger of millions of voters toward “the Establishment.” The voters do not so much share an alternative vision, as they have taken the rare opportunity to exact revenge.



The Establishment is scarcely monolithic. One must recognize a range of different – and interdependent - institutions. These would include corporations, financial institutions, and government, as well as institutions of education and medicine. For me, there is one major characteristic of these institutions: they are all organized to sustain and enhance themselves. In most cases, they are also guided by a mechanistic metaphor. Each in its own way attempts to maximize efficiency, minimize costs, and increase productivity. From this standpoint, all those who are outside the institutions may either be ignored, or used as the raw material necessary for their survival. They are variously objectified as consumers, customers, voters, students, or patients - objects to be persuaded, manipulated, treated, instructed, and so on. Otherwise, they do not count – victims of our machines of exclusion. The election was indeed an opportunity for pay-back to those institutions.

What does this mean for the Taos Institute network? The day after the Presidential election, in Cleveland, Taos mounted an international conference on relational practices in healthcare. The event was teeming with excitement, as one participant after another spoke about practices of collaboration, inter-professional cooperation, team building, and so on. Most important, the patient in these cases was not defined either as someone to be “worked on,” or “cared for,” but as an active participant in the healing process. This erosion of the boundary between inside and outside also extended to the patient’s family, and to the surrounding community. Collaboration abounded.

If you were to scan the many other activities in which Taos Institute participants are engaged, you would discover many similar or resonating practices. Consider the “Business as an Agent for World Benefit” initiative at Case Western Reserve University, along with the creative developments in collaborative therapy, relational welfare, relational research, dialogic pedagogy, narrative mediation, appreciative inquiry, peacebuilding, grief counseling, and relational governance – for example! All challenge the boundaries of separation, and build toward societies in which we all participate together.

In my view, the election is of signal significance in dramatizing the importance of the work in which so many of our colleagues and friends are engaged. We must celebrate and support each other as we take on the challenge of replacing our machineries of exclusion with inclusive relational processes.