

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

June 2021

Beyond the Blinders of Separation



By Kenneth J. Gergen, PhD, Taos Institute co-founder and Board President

The creative capacities of human beings are enormous. Even within the past century we have harnessed atomic energy, flown to the moon, and developed technologies for communicating instantaneously around the globe. Strangely, however, when we turn to our relations with each other, we find little to match such achievements. Despite thousands of years of living together, daily life is pervaded by distrust, prejudice, callousness, and selfishness. On a larger scale, we continue to confront polarized conflict, injustice, oppression, and bloodshed. Why have humanity's creative capacities failed to make significant, positive changes in our ways of relating to one another? Perhaps the very language we use in our deliberations stands in our way.

This is no small matter, as the global challenges become ever more threatening. With the emergence of globe-spanning technologies, every local problem is potentially global, all traditions may antagonize others, and new movements may burst forth at any moment. As it is said, we now confront "wicked problems," that is, problems of urgent importance but so complex, ever changing, and requiring so much information, that they defy solution. In my new book, we break with the traditional tools of understanding and open the door to a radical departure in comprehending ourselves, our world, and our ways of living together.

To appreciate the potential, consider the common presumption that the social world is made up of separate persons. We thus focus carefully on the qualities and characteristics of individuals. We have thousands of terms for talking about an individual's mental states - emotions, thoughts, memories, moods, values, and so on. These are the tools we use in making decisions about our lives and our future. And when things go wrong in our relationships, we thus begin to ask, who is responsible? Which individual is at fault? This same focus on the independent units also fills our discussions of families, schools, organizations, and nations. We focus on the quality of family life, the character of the local school, the make-up of the police department, and so on. In the case of nations, we have libraries filled with accounts of individual nations, their origins, histories, and characteristics. Essentially, our vocabulary of understanding is dominated by a *presumption of separation*. In contrast, our vocabulary for talking about the relations among the separate entities is impoverished. It's as if we have thousands of terms for describing individual chess pieces but little to say about the game. For champions at chess, the reverse is true.

With these words I began a new book that the Taos Institute will be publishing in the coming months. *The Relational Imperative: Resources for a World on Edge*, is about suspending the focus on bounded units to explore the potentials of a relational perspective. If all our actions – including our views of what is real, rational, and right – owe their existence to this process, it is to this process that we must give our primary attention. It is the positive potentials of this process that must be realized in practice. While this book draws from an earlier work, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*, I have become deeply troubled by our inability to confront the increasingly complex and lethal challenges of our times. My effort here is to lay out in simple and consequential terms the need and potentials of a paradigm shift in our ways of going on together. And in all this, I carry the voices of so many of my Taos colleagues. It is not my work, but ours.