

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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Are Relational Practices, Dialogue, and Collaboration Enough?

I think it is safe to say that we are horrified watching what is happening in Ukraine. There is senseless loss of life, the destruction of cities and villages, entire ways of living are being uprooted, tearing apart families, friends, neighbors. But the war in Ukraine is not the sole locale of today's terror and conflict. Governments around the globe are engaging in clashes between extremist positions (both conservative and liberal). Every day as I read the newspaper, I feel that humanity has taken ten steps backward. Human rights – that is, the belief that we can have equal social opportunities and protection under the law, regardless of race, religion, gender, class, etc. – are regressing in ways we never thought possible. Some say that we have taken democracy for granted and ask, “Where did we go wrong? What did we do that initiated this decline in humanizing forms of life?” These are provocative questions, to be sure. However, perhaps imagining a global citizenry that is bound by an appreciation of difference rather than disdain for diversity, as well as an interest in collaboration as opposed to competition would ignite hope. How would the world be different if our dominant theme was coordination of our diversity rather than elimination of it? If we work together, how could we address issues of poverty, food insecurity, global warming, racial and social inequalities? But I must ask, what does “working together” look like? What does it mean in the face of such enormous global challenges?

This is where the very ideas that bind our Taos community together should be of critical importance. My idealist inner dialogue wonders why world leaders fail to see that, in cooperating with each other and working together, everyone gains. And then my realist inner dialogue – acknowledging the thrill of power and wealth – asks, “Is dialogue the answer?” “Is curiosity about diverse beliefs enough?” “Is giving all voices an opportunity to be heard useful?” “Is acknowledging that I am because you are – that, in other words, we are relational beings – going to help us move beyond destruction of each other and the globe?”

I think we all realize the power of imagining how things *might* be. There is enormous inspiration in admitting that the ways in which we interact with each other and with our environment make a difference – that we *can* change our understandings and our ways of living if we work together. But how do we do this on a scale that surpasses the dyad, the family, the organization, or the community? This work is hard. How do we call others to dialogue when their interest is only directed toward wealth and power? How do we adopt a curiosity for ideas that are so different from our own? Is it possible to refrain from judgment of one who believes that the color of one's skin is surely linked to the degree of one's humanity? How do we cultivate curiosity about another nation's apparent disregard for human life?

There are, thankfully, illustrations of work that take on some of these challenging issues. But I think most will agree that we need to amplify and put into practice the generative ways in which constructionist ideas can make a difference.

I invite you to share your thoughts and experiences by leaving a comment at www.taosinstitute.net/unfolding-dialogues. I think it is safe to say that we all view constructionist ideals as potential resources for challenging global issues. What I wonder is if we can make those ideals real.