Chapter 3: There Is Not One Right Answer

A "writing out loud" excerpt from the working draft of "Collaborating with the Enemy: An Open Way to Work with People You Don't Agree With or Like or Trust" by Adam Kahane, forthcoming in 2017 from Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

"The truth is…!"

When I joined Shell in 1988, at 27 years old, the thing I enjoyed most was the debating. The company's renowned scenario planning department was staffed with smart people recruited from across the company and from external think tanks. Our job was to challenge Shell executives to pay attention to changes in the world that could present new business risks and opportunities. We did this by constructing scenarios of possible futures, through reading and talking with actors and observers from around the world and then arguing amongst ourselves—for months and months—about what we were seeing and what it meant. From the window of my office I could look down on the British Houses of Parliament, and I fancied that we, like the parliamentarians, were employing robust and reasoned debate to find the best answers. I loved arguing and especially winning and being right.

My pre-Shell education and training had prepared me well for this activity. I grew up in Montreal, bookish and comfortable, and did well in school. In 1979 I went to McGill to study theoretical physics. I liked being in such an elite discipline and was happy to spend my evenings writing out mathematical formulas that proved, for every problem, the one correct solution.

During one of my summer breaks I attended a meeting of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, a global organization of scientists initiated by Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell to contribute to averting nuclear war. At this meeting I heard a presentation on the problem of environmentally-sustainable energy and was attracted to the idea of working on such an important public issue. So in 1982 I started a graduate degree in energy and environmental economics at Berkeley that ended up including research postings in Vancouver, Vienna, Paris, and Tokyo. In each of these places I was given the same kind of assignment: to figure out, for a complex public challenge, the optimum policy response.

In 1986, after I graduated from Berkeley, I got a job as a Corporate Planning Coordinator at Pacific Gas & Electric Company, the energy utility for Northern California. Here what was expected of me was to come up with succinct answers to business questions that the company's executives posed, and to do so quickly. By now it seemed self-evident that in any situation smart people could, through rational argument, figure out what needed to happen and then, through their authority, make it happen. During these years, the most common feedback I got was that I was intelligent but arrogant, which I thought was an acceptable tradeoff. Shell people had a similar reputation and so when I got there I thought that I fit right in.

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The confident certainty I had in my own thinking when I joined Shell was not so unusual for a young man from my privileged background. Gradually over the years that followed I saw, in myself and others, that such certainty had its limitations, including that it didn't leave much room for the thinking of others. It also presented a major impediment to tough collaboration.

I saw a vivid example of this in 2010, when my colleague Steve Atkinson and I made our first visit to Thailand. Our hosts organized back-to-back meetings over three days with some 30 top leaders from across the spectrum of Thai politics. A few months earlier, pro- and anti-government forces had clashed violently in Bangkok, and in these meetings we heard radically different accounts of what had happened and why and who was to blame. I found this series of disjointed conversations about this complex and unfamiliar subject completely confusing. But on reflection I realized that there was actually one thread that ran through all of the accounts we had heard. In one way or another, every single person had said: "The truth of this situation is…"

This level of certainty is the typical starting point for tough collaborations. Usually most of the people involved are convinced that they know *the* truth about their situation. They are right and others are wrong; they are innocent and others are guilty; and if only the others would listen and agree with them, then the situation would be rectified. And in hierarchical social systems like Thailand or Shell, this level of certainty can be dangerous. A belief that "I am right and you are wrong" can easily slip into "I deserve to be superior and you to be inferior." This is a recipe not for generative collaboration but for degenerative imposition.

One basic problem with searching for a single right answer to a social (as contrasted to technical) question is the concealed assumption about for whom the answer needs to be right. This was the mistake I made when I transposed the way I had worked on physics problems to my work on public policy ones. In the latter, there is never only one "whole" whose interests need to be optimized: is the relevant whole a given individual or community or organization or country, or is it other ones? Each of these entities—which is a whole in itself and also part of larger wholes—has its own needs, interests, and ambitions. This means that, unless the solution is to be imposed, there are multiple right answers that have to be taken into account to find a workable way forward.

I often made this mistake when I facilitated multi-stakeholder groups. I focussed on the objectives of the group as a whole, implicitly asking participants to leave their individual and organizational objectives at the door. Although this prioritization of "the good of the whole" could help generate fresh thinking, by definition it devalued the interests of the group's constituent wholes. I didn't notice that the interests of these larger and smaller wholes were identical only for me and for a few of the group's organizers. We overlooked the fact that we were the only ones who, when we championed the interests of the whole group, were at the same time championing our own interests.

As I worked more with politicians and activists, it became clear to me how sloppy my abstract thinking about the good of the whole was. I was surprised when Antonio Aranibar, who ran a political scenarios unit of the United Nations Development Programme, sponsored the Spanish edition of *Power and Love*. When I asked him why he thought this book was useful, he said that in his view the art of political action was entirely about being able to work effectively, as the book suggested, with multiple wholes and parts.

Betty Sue Flowers, Director of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, suggested I read Robert Caro's biography of Johnson. There I found a riveting account of what I had *not* being doing: finding a workable way forward by attending carefully to the particular interests of different individuals and groups. In describing what it took for Johnson to enact the landmark civil rights legislation, Caro writes: [to be added].

It took me a long time to grasp that holding on tightly to one's own truth, however heroically or egoically appealing it might be, can present an insurmountable obstacle not only to achieving larger societal objectives but also to achieving one's own smaller ones. In 1993, I worked on a project that involved multiple parties in the conflict in Northern Ireland. One of the participants was Brian Feeney, a seasoned local politician who had spent some time in South Africa. I mentioned to him how much I admired (even though I didn't agree with) the unwaveringly principled political stance of the hardline Pan-Africanist Congress. Feeney scoffed at me: "The Pan-Africanist Congress is just like the Irish Republican Army: they would prefer to have 100% of nothing." British Prime Minister Tony Blair said about his experience with peace-making in Northern Ireland: "It is easy to forget how simple and superficially alluring wallowing in the feeling of injustice or retribution for past hurt can be. The alternative requires the development of a wholly new narrative, the admission that the other side might have a point." Developing such a new narrative requires loosening our hold on our existing one.

Eventually I came to understand that we hold on to being right not only for rational and emotional reasons but also for more fundamental existential ones. In 2009, while I was attending the international climate change negotiations in Copenhagen, I had a brief exchange with Free University of Berlin researcher Anja Koehne. She was criticizing the German stance towards other countries in the negotiations and used a phrase that penetrated me like an arrow: "feeling superior as a condition of being." This phrase showed me that I was attached to winning arguments and being right in part because I saw being superior as integral to my identity. I feared that if I was wrong I would lose a vital part of who I was: that I would not just fail but would *be* a failure. I could not relax my grip on having the right answer until I could relax my identification with success.

Multiple truths

Although I joined Shell at the peak of my youthful certainty in the correctness of my own answers, once I was there I started to learn an alternative way to work with difficult questions. My teacher was Kees van der Heijden, the 56-year-old economist who was the head of the scenario planning team.

The premise of Shell's distinctive approach to strategic planning was that it was not possible either to predict the future of the company's business environment or to calculate the optimum strategy for the company to deal with it. Our team's role was therefore to construct multiple scenarios of different possible futures and then, with these scenarios as informative and provocative inputs, to facilitate strategy conversations among the executives that would enable them to make informed judgments about what they should do next. This conversational, scenario-based approach strategic planning was a significant departure from the rationalistic, forecast-based used by Pacific Gas & Electric and most other large companies.

Van der Heijden insisted that we ground our work not in our own thinking about what was crucial or correct but in the thinking of the Shell executives whom our work was intended to help. We therefore always started off our scenario projects by interviewing each of the executives in depth about how they thought about the situation they were in and the concerns and questions they had about it. I was impressed by the humility and discipline with which van der Heijden listened to the thinking of the interviewees, rather than—as most people do—either projecting his own thinking or making a judgment about theirs.

With the material from these interviews as a touchstone for what would be relevant to the executives, we then constructed a set of challenging scenarios. At this point we brought in our own thinking as it had been informed by the other actors and observers with whom we were interacting. Our objective was not so much to be right—to accurately forecast the future, so much as to be useful—to help the company adapt and thrive in an ever-changing world. This was my first experience with facilitating other people to find their own answers rather than trying to convince them of mine.

Van der Heijden had an elegant explanation for the usefulness of scenarios. He said that groups of people who are trying to get something done typically face two pitfalls. Either they all have a different story about their situation and so cannot agree on what to do (fragmentation), or they all have the same story that turns out to be misleading and therefore dangerous (groupthink). Scenarios, because they are an agreed set of multiple stories, neatly avoid both pitfalls.

It was this methodology for scenario-based strategy conversations that le Roux and Maphai thought could help South Africans find a way forward through their political transition, and this is why in 1991 they invited me to facilitate the Mont Fleur exercise. Van der Heijden had advised me that situations like the South African one could not usefully be understood as "problems" that people could solve; they were "problematic situations" that were problematic to different actors in different way, and that at best people could work through.

What I discovered at Mont Fleur was that the structured and creative process of constructing scenarios that I had learned at Shell turned out to be an excellent way for a heterogeneous group of stakeholder leaders to build a shared understanding of their problematic situation and how they needed to work with it. The fact that they were constructing a shared set of multiple scenarios, rather than only a single forecast or vision, created the space they needed to take account of (rather than subordinate) their multiple truths.

The Mont Fleur team, with their radically different understandings of the South African situation (which had been amplified by apartheid separation) eventually agreed on four scenarios that would be useful to tell. All of the team members then presented these stories faithfully—even the ones that some of them had found less convincing during the team workshops—as an input to strategy conversations in their respective organizations and in public forums. These conversations contributed to South Africans effecting a successful national transformation.

I understood this new transformative scenario planning methodology to be an innovative means to achieve a more fundamental end: enabling collaboration among people who did not agree with of like or trust one another. The need for such a methodology was obvious in South Africa, where the apartheid system of codified racial separation had exemplified imposition instead of collaboration. But many other systems were also characterized, less obviously, by polarization and fragmentation along racial, class, cultural, or political lines, and so transformative scenario planning was taken up in many such contexts around the world.

In 1996, after I had left Shell and emigrated to South Africa, I worked on a uniquely dramatic collaboration in Colombia. Colombians had been engaged in a violent internal conflict since the early 1960s, with continuing clashes among the military, left-wing guerrilla forces, right-wing paramilitary vigilantes, drug traffickers, and criminal gangs, characterized by kidnappings, executions, massacres, and no-go areas. The Destino Colombia project convened leaders from all of the armed groups (except the traffickers and gangs), together with politicians, activists, peasants, academics, businesspeople, trade unionists, and young people. The diverse members of this team therefore brought to the work different *kinds* of knowledge. So as much or more than at Mont Fleur, these participants held radically different truths about their situation.

The way the organizers and I set up this project created a container in which this exceptionally heterogeneous team could work together productively. Like with cooking in a pot with a tight lid, we managed space and time to create both protection and pressure. The meetings of the team (including the members from the illegal armed groups) were authorized by the government; the workshops were held at a small, simple, rural hotel, which was guarded by soldiers; the guerillas, who did not think that it would be safe to travel to the hotel from exile and prison, participated in nine days of meetings by speaker phone; and the agenda included long days of challenging work on the scenarios followed by long evenings of eating, drinking, singing, joking, and talking.

This container enabled the team to speak frankly about their different realities and truths. In one session, landowner César De Hart said that he had had a lot of first-hand experience of the conflict with the guerillas, that he did not trust them at all, and that he believed that the country's best hope for peace would be to intensify the military campaign against them. He was courageous to say this because he was directly challenging not only the guerillas, but also the hopeful belief of the rest of the team that a negotiated solution was possible. He was willing to be direct and impolite, but by this point the relationships in the team were strong enough to hear such a statement without the team rupturing. Furthermore, when De Hart said exactly what he was thinking and feeling, the fog of conceptual and emotional confusion that had filled the room lifted, and we could all see an important underlying dynamic in the team and in the country.

Building on their multiple truths, the Destino Colombia team agreed on a set of four scenarios as to what was possible in Colombia: continued conflict and stagnation, a peace accord negotiated among the combatants, a military pacification of the country by the government, and a social transformation led by citizens. The team did not at all agree on which scenario was preferable—which way of dealing with the conflict was best—and so these narratives were presented simply as alternative possibilities, in broadcasts and newspaper articles and meetings all around Colombia.

In the years that followed I returned to Colombia many times. I was gratified that the scenarios and the extraordinary process that had produced them remained a touchstone in debates about what Colombians could and should do. At different times over these years, each of the four scenarios seemed to explain what was happening in the country at that time, and so these narratives continued to help Colombians make sense of their situation. Furthermore, Juan Manuel Santos, the politician who had helped initiate the project in 1996 and who was elected president of the country in 2010, frequently described his government's strategy with reference to the fourth scenario, "In Unity Lies Strength."

I was curious abut the significance Santos assigned to Destino Colombia, given that there had been many more substantial national change efforts over these decades. When I was in Bogota in 2012, I met Alberto Fergusson, a psychiatrist and friend of Santos, and I asked him about this. Fergusson's explanation was that for Santos the crucial lesson of Destino Colombia, which had animated his political work ever since, was that, contrary to received political wisdom, it *is* possible for people who hold contradictory positions to find ways to work together. This simple lesson struck me as enormously valuable.

Several of the people involved in Destino Colombia continued to organize similar multi-stakeholder processes to work on important public issues. In one such meeting which I facilitated, a group was wrestling with a difficult set of issues when one politician demanded that before they went on they had to agree on a certain point of principle. I thought that such an agreement would not be possible at that time, and urged the group to carry on nonetheless, and they did. But I was surprised that by the end of the workshop the group had agreed on many initiatives to work on together, notwithstanding their not having agreed earlier on the point of principle.

The next day I related this puzzling incident to Antanas Mockus, a social innovator and former mayor of Bogota. "Often we do not need to have a consensus on or even to discuss principles," he said. "The most robust agreements are those that different actors support for different reasons." People who have deep disagreements can still get important things done together.

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Then in 2013, almost 30 years after I had left Montreal, I moved back there with my South African wife Dorothy, to open the Canadian office of Reos Partners. This gave me the opportunity to see my home through two pairs of fresh eyes. I found this experience delightful and also puzzling: after many years living in other places, there was something in the unagitated way people did things in Canada that seemed distinctive, but I wasn't sure what to make of it.

The following year, in connection with the upcoming 150th anniversary of Canada's founding, my colleagues and I conducted interviews with 50 Canadian leaders. We asked them the open-ended question of what they thought it would take for Canadians to succeed in creating a good future.

The interview that struck me most was the one I conducted with Khalil Shariff, the CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation Canada, an organization established by the worldwide spiritual leader of the Shia Ismaili Muslims. Part of the backdrop for our conversation was the acrimonious debates that were taking place, in Canada and internationally, about the place of Muslims in Western societies. Shariff had a thoughtful perspective on the culture of Canada that I had never heard before:

> In the world as a whole, the notion of homogeneity is quickly disappearing, for two reasons. First, we're more aware of our individual differences—our "selfness"—than ever before. Second, we have experienced demographic movements that historically were unheard of. These two factors mean that the idea of managing difference and being able to live in some kind of common framework might be fundamental for any society today.
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> Someone once told me that, for an individual, humility is the king of virtues. What is the king of virtues for a society—the virtue from which all other virtues and capacities stem? I wonder if the capacity for pluralism might be the source from which all others stem.
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> If you can build the social capacity to deal with pluralism, then you can deal with a host of other questions. The scaffolding of Canadian society—this commitment to pluralism—is invisible to most Canadians. We don't always understand it explicitly, and we might take it for granted, but it is embedded in us.

Sharif's thesis that for a society pluralism is the king of virtues made sense to me. In the introduction to the book that reported the 50 interviews, *Possible Canadas: Perspectives on Our Pasts, Presents, and Futures*, I wrote: "The picture presented by these interviews is not simple or straightforward: it is richly complex, in places contradictory, even confounding. I offer only one, tentative conclusion of my own: that such intentional pluralism might be part of the best of what Canada is, and of what it would take for Canadians to succeed in creating a good future."

Shariff also offered me a personal challenge. He said: "Perhaps this work you have been doing around the world in enabling collaboration among diverse actors, which you are so proud of, is not simply an expression of your personal gifts. Perhaps you have been expressing something of the culture you were brought up in." Canadian culture is not the only one that values pluralism, and Canadians often also express contrary values. But Shariff was pointing out the crucial importance of pluralism to being able to live with—to co-exist amidst—multiple contradictory and confounding answers.

The blind men and no elephant

The starting point for most tough collaborations is that the participants do not agree on what the solution is or even on what the problem is. They each have their own truth about what is going on and why and who needs to do what about it. More fundamentally, they each have their own truth about who and what really matters and so need to be paid attention to and dealt with.

One way to approach this situation is to understand the participants as the blind men with the elephant. In this fable, the blind man who feels a leg says the elephant is like a pillar, the one who feels the tail says the elephant is like a rope, the one who feels the belly says the elephant is like a wall, and so on. This metaphor suggests that each of the participants in a collaboration has a different perspective on the situation they are all part of and care about, and that if each revealed their perspective then together they would be able to construct a more complete picture.

But the construction of a single agreed model of the whole situation is often not possible. Futurist Don Michael pointed out that "in today's world the most advanced among us know about little more than one small piece of the elephant, and there are now so many different pieces, they change so rapidly and they are all so intimately related one to another, that even if we had the technology to put them all together we would still not be able to make sense of the whole." So tough collaboration involves something more than simply fitting together different truths to form a single larger truth.

Political philosopher Isaiah Berlin took this line of argument further. He said that trying to agree on and implement a single set of understandings and values is not only unachievable but dangerous:

> If you are truly convinced that there is some solution to all human problems, that one can conceive an ideal society which men can reach if only they do what is necessary to attain it, then you and your followers must believe that no price can be too high to pay in order to open the gates of such a paradise…

> The root conviction which underlies this is that the central questions of human life, individual or social, have one true answer which can be discovered...[This idea] is false. Not only because the solutions given by different schools of social thought differ, and none can be demonstrated by rational methods—but for an even deeper reason. The central values by which most men have lived, in a great many lands at a great many times—these values, almost if not entirely universal, are not always harmonious with each other…
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> So we must weigh and measure, bargain, compromise, and prevent the crushing of one form of life by its rivals. I know only too well that this is not a flag under which idealistic and enthusiastic young men and women may wish to march—it seems too tame, too reasonable, too bourgeois, it does not engage the generous emotions…The denial of this, the search for a single, overarching ideal because it is the one and only true one for humanity, invariably leads to coercion. And then to destruction, blood.

Collaborating with diverse others does not usually or primarily involve reaching an agreement on a single truth or answer or solution. It involves finding a way to move forward together in the absence of or beyond such agreements.

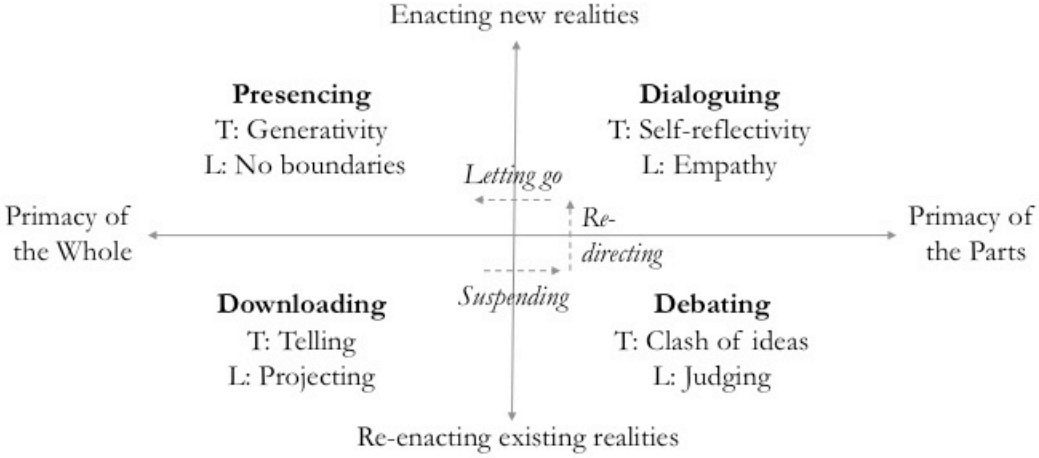
How to work with multiple truths

If pluralism is a key principle for collaborating with diverse others, then what are the key practices to implement this principle? I learned one core set of practices from the 1998-2000 Visión Guatemala project.

The major contribution that this team made to helping Guatemalans move forward after their civil war was not the scenario stories they agreed to tell or any single vision or plan they came up with. It was that many members of this heterogeneous group, including former combatants, succeeded in working together over the decades that followed, in different configurations on a range of important national initiatives. During one of their workshops I asked Ricardo Stein of the Soros Foundation of Guatemala, one of the project's funders, if he thought that his money had been well spent. He looked around at the inter-sectoral huddles: "This networking alone is worth the money. The most important outcome of this project is the buddy system that was established and persists. The network gets activated immediately, for quite daring initiatives. Perspectives are shared without fear. People are bonded, probably for life."

What I noticed about this team was how their way of relating with one another shifted as they began to work together. Massachusetts Institute of Technology researcher Katrin Käufer led a group of researchers who interviewed members of the team about their experiences of the project. She identified an evolution in the way the team talked and listened that accorded with a model that her colleague Otto Scharmer had been developing. This model posits that there are four distinct ways that we can talk and listen which are differentiated by the place from which we are operating.

Figure 4: Four Ways of Talking (T) and Listening (L)


Enacting new realities
Presencing
T: Generativity
L: No boundaries
Dialoguing
T: Self-reflectivity
L: Empathy
Letting go
Re-directing
Primacy of the Whole
Primacy of the Parts
Suspending
Downloading
T: Telling
L: Projecting
Debating
T: Clash of ideas
L: Judging
Re-enacting existing realities

The beginning of the first workshop of the Visión Guatemala team started awkwardly and formally. The participants were deeply mistrustful of one another. Project director Elena Diez Pinto recalled:

> When I arrived at the hotel for lunch before the start of the initial meeting, the first thing I noticed was that the indigenous people were sitting together. The military guys were sitting together. The human rights group was sitting together. I thought, "They are not going to speak to each other." In Guatemala, we have learned to be very polite. We are so polite that we say "Yes" but think "No." I was worried that we would be so polite that the real issues would never emerge.

This is the first way talking and listening, which Scharmer calls *downloading*. Here I listen from within my self and my story. I am deaf to other stories; I only hear what re-confirms my story ("I knew that already"). The talking associated with downloading is telling: I say what I always say, either because I think that my story is the only true one or is the only one that is safe or polite to tell. I assert that there is only one whole and I ignore or suppress others. The leaders I met on my first visit to Thailand were downloading. Downloading is the typical behavior of dictators, fundamentalists, experts, and people who are arrogant or angry.

Then during the course of that first Visión Guatemala workshop, the team expressed their different views of what had been going on in the country. One of them recalled:

> The first round in the first session was extremely negative because we were all looking back to the events of recent years, which had left a deep imprint on us. A first moment full of pessimism was generated. Suddenly, a young man stood up and questioned our pessimism in a very direct manner. This moment marked the beginning of an important change, and we continually referred to it afterwards. That a young man would suddenly call us "old pessimists" was an important contribution.

This second way of talking and listening is *debating*. Here I listen from the outside, factually and objectively, like a judge in a debate or a courtroom ("This is true and that is false"). The talking associated with debating is a clash of ideas: each of us says what we think. At Shell we debated, and some people and ideas won and others lost.

During the second Visión Guatemala workshop, the team engaged in a particularly difficult conversation about what had happened during the civil war. Julio Balconi, a retired army general, was struggling to get the others to understand how he had done what he thought he had to do to defend the country, which was a perspective that most of the others were not sympathetic to. Raquel Zelaya, the Cabinet Secretary of Peace charged with overseeing the implementation of the Peace Accords, leaned over and said to him gently, "I know that nobody enrolls in the military academy in order to learn how to massacre women and children."

This third kind of talking and listening is *dialoguing*. Here I listen to you as if from inside you, empathetically and subjectively ("I know where you are coming from"); this was how van der Heijden listened when he interviewed Shell executives. The talking associated with dialoguing is self-reflectivity ("This is where I am coming from"), like De Hart did in Destino Colombia.

Also during the first workshop, the incident occurred in which Ochaeta told the story of having witnessed the exhumation of a mass grave, which was followed by the five minutes of silence in the team. This was the incident to which many members of the team later referred, and that one said was "like a large communion."

This fourth way of talking and listening is *presencing*. Here I listen not from within myself or you, not paying attention just to one specific idea or person, but from the system as a whole. When I am in a group that is presencing, it is as if the boundaries between people have disappeared, so that when one person talks they are articulating something for the whole group or system, and when we listen it is as if to the whole group or system. Ochaeta was not a core member of the Visión Guatemala team and although he told the story, we did not really hear it as *his* story. We heard it as an expression of a crucial aspect of the Guatemalan reality than we needed to pay attention to and act on.

The crucial implication of this four-stage model is that if we spend all of our time downloading and debating, then we will only re-enact existing realities. We will continue to think what we have been thinking and do what we have been doing; in a heterogeneous group we will remain in conflict and stuck. At times some of us will be judged to have prevailed over others, but such victories will usually only be temporary. If we want to make our way forward together to enact new realities—as the Visión Guatemala team did—then we need to be able to spend at least some of our time dialoguing and presencing.

The key to employing this model is to learn how to be aware of and to shift how we are talking and especially how we are listening. When I was writing *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities*, which builds on this model, Betty Sue Flowers said to me: "I am happy that you are writing about different ways of listening. Most people don't realize that there is more than one kind of listening, just as they don't realize that there is more than one kind of woman." We are used to making distinctions in the creative, masculine function but not in the receptive, feminine one. But the leverage to shift how a group is operating comes from shifting how we are listening.

The first transition, from downloading to debating, is *suspending*. This transition is the most crucial because it is the one that enables us to escape from the trap of holding on to the one right answer. I suspend by hanging my current thinking out in front of myself, as if from a string, so that it is visible (not concealed) and so that both I and you can look at it from different perspectives and inquire about it. When I suspend, I hold my thinking lightly; perhaps later I will take it back unchanged, or perhaps through the process of suspending I will end up changing it. Scharmer refers to this as the shift to an open mind. Suspending is a crucial act because in doing so I am explicitly acknowledging that my idea is not the whole of the truth about the situation and that my idea is not the same as—is not identified with—me; you can attach my idea without attacking me.

Suspending means opening up the possibility that our thinking might be incorrect or ignorant. Sociologist Richard Sennett says, "Often when you need to work with very different groups of people, one of things that you have got to admit to yourself is that you don't understand what the others want. But they want it and we're comrades and we want to work together. Accepting the idea of 'not getting it,' that there are limits to your own understanding—that is a way of cooperating with someone else." Suspending opens up new possibilities and new realities: that our current understandings of what is and what ought to be can change. This is the crucial opening that Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Patton pinpointed in the title of their book, *Getting to Maybe: How the World Is Changed.*

Suspending sounds easy but often it isn't. I once taught a course on collaboration to a group of consultants in Japan. We were using the topic of the future of work as a case study. I was impressed with the participants' capacity to collaborate in doing the case study: their culture and training enabled them to work more inclusively, creatively, and efficiently than groups I had worked with in other countries. But at a certain point they were talking about what changes in working practices could mean for them personally, and suddenly their conversation got stuck. The challenge of suspending is to be able to do it even when the work we are doing really matters to us, we have strong opinions or feelings about, or touches on our identity.

Consultant Louis van der Merwe offers a lighthearted and effective tip for suspending. He suggests that people who are pounding the table with certainty that their idea is *the* truth, should simply insert "In my opinion" at the beginning of their sentence. If that doesn't work, they should insert "In my humble opinion." These insertions remind us that our ideas are only hypotheses and not the truth about the situation.

The second transition, from debating to dialoguing, is *redirecting*. This means that I listen to you, not just from outside you so as to form a judgment about whether you are right or wrong, but from inside you so as to see how things look from your perspective. When I redirect, I pay attention to the reality from which you are speaking. Scharmer refers to this as the shift to an open heart.

Miha Pogacnik is a Slovenian concert violinist who teaches group creativity. The first time I saw him working with a Shell team, he played a short piece of music and then asked us what we had heard. One person answered, "I liked it." Pogacnik replied: "I didn't ask whether you liked it! Tell me what you heard!" He was trying to help us become aware of differences in the music's tempo, color, mood, and energy. Our biggest impediment to such awareness is our habit of making a judgment rather than an observation. Listening without judging is useful because judging cuts short the process of paying attention to what is actually unfolding.

Redirecting is also important because it enables me to empathize with you even though I might disagree with you. Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility." In my workshops with heterogeneous groups, the activity that participants usually rate the most highly is the simplest one: inviting each person to choose a partner who is most different from them and then with this partner to go for a walk. This activity is powerful simply because it opens up the possibility of a new empathetic connection—the disarming of hostility—and hence new collaborative action.

The third transition, from dialoguing to presencing, is *letting go*. This means that I listen to what is being said not simply as an expression of each of the speaker's personal views and realities, but as if each is speaking *impersonally* about what is happening. Letting go requires me to loosen my tight grip not only on what I think and feel and want, but more fundamentally to what I am: to the boundaries and characteristics of my identity. Scharmer refers to this as the shift to an open will. I interpreted the phrase I heard from Koehne in Copenhagen, "feeling superior as a condition of being," as a challenge to let go of my attachment to being separate and superior.

The clearest expression I have ever heard of these shifts in listening was in a workshop that Dorothy and I facilitated in 1996 for the Synod of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. The bishops were intent on changing the way their church did its work, and they understood that this could only happen if they could escape from downloading: from repeating, without listening to each other and to their situation, what they had been saying and doing. So when the workshop started they wanted to come up with ground rules that would help them open up their listening. One of them suggested, "We must listen to one another"—which later I realized meant suspending. A second said, "No, brother, that's not quite it: we must listen with empathy"—redirecting. Then a third said, "That's still not quite what we need: we must listen to the sacred within each of us"—letting go. This is the kind of listening most needed in tough collaboration: listening for the highest potential in ourselves and in the situation we are part of.

When we encounter people whom we don’t agree with or like or trust, our instinct is to defend, tighten up, and contract. Tough collaboration is challenging because it requires us to do exactly the opposite: to open up, let go, and stretch.