

On reciprocity: a contribution to our understanding of dialogue *Hugh Pidgeon*

Over the years, as a consultant, academic and therapist, I have become absorbed by the whole process to which we give the name dialogue: by its different schools, adherents, and exponents, and by how readily each seems to become pre-occupied within their own frames of reference.



The occasion that brought me up short, and I was forced to re-appraise my own entire understanding of dialogue, was the day the news broke of the take-over of a primary school in Beslan, in the Russian republic of North Ossetia in September 2004. It was to last 3 days and involved the entrapment of over 1,000 parents and children without food or water in a primary school gymnasium hung with explosives. It ended tragically with the deaths of 334 of them, more than half of them children. 156 children.

I remember it all because by chance, the first of the three days, September 1st, was the first of 3 days I was scheduled to run a 3-day workshop for the Ashridge Master's Degree in Organisational Consulting - on the subject of dialogue. In the great hall of the college through which each of us had to come, were all the day's papers spread out on a board-room table. It was on every front page. All of my plans for the 3 days, the notes I had prepared, the flipcharts, the books I had laid out - all lay entirely neglected.

The whole event affected me profoundly at the time, and I have to own to some level of despair in the years that followed whether any of this study I and others were making of dialogue would ever prevail over the relentless gravitational pull of tribal affiliation and personal self-interest, and our seemingly insatiable determination as the human race to sacrifice the ecological balance of the planet in pursuit of our own economic development.

But at the time of writing, I have just been reading a delightful tribute by Kate Mossman* to James Lovelock, the father of the *Gaia* hypothesis which - if that is not known to you - understands the Earth as a single, complex self-regulating system that itself could be understood as an organism that sustains all life, from the surface rocks and oceans to the atmosphere and humanity. His book *The Revenge of Gaia* was an intimation of the consequences should we persist in seeing ourselves as separate, and superior to the living systems that sustain us. Two years ago, he turned 100. It seems he still gets up in the morning at 5.00 a.m. to get some work done before his morning walk - and has a new book coming out in August this year! ** More than enough inspiration to prompt me to turn to writing this article!

In her tribute to Lovelock, Mossman quotes some lines of his from a book he had published only two years before, *Novacene*, in which he speaks of "the non-linear, intuitive insight", by which he claims to work: "Dynamic systems have a non-linear way of thinking," he says of the Earth. "**Some ideas lie beyond speech.**" ***.

And suddenly a flood of memories, moments of serendipity and insight came to me all in a rush. I knew what I wanted to write.

I remember the moment when I was asked by Ansel Woldt to speak at an AAGT conference in Puebla back in 2012 on the contribution of Martin Buber to our thinking about dialogue and our relation with Nature. I was immensely gratified to be asked and immediately started preparing what I was going to say. It had been my experience that many Gestalt therapists in training slip past the

fact that the first sphere of relation of which Martin Buber speaks in *I & Thou* is actually with Nature, and that his first example is with a tree. So that was the passage I would begin with. Except that as I began to really read the opening paragraphs of *I & Thou*, line by line phrase by phrase, I realised I had undertaken to speak for an hour on a relation Buber himself described as one that “sways in gloom beneath the level of speech”! There was no way round it: I would have to make a film. My first film! And with not many weeks to get it done.

It eventually acquired the title *Negotiating with Gravity*. I cheated a bit. I did involve Buber’s words but I spoke them aloud as part of the soundtrack. I immersed myself in the rhythm and prosody of the text, worked with a photographer, Steve Marshall, to create an entire photographic essay and introduced film of the West-Eastern Divan working with their conductor Daniel Barenboim – who I had heard speaking in a BBC Reith lecture of meeting Martin Buber. **“It was Buber who made me realise the necessity of always looking beyond one’s first impression, of digging deeper and finding connections.”**, he said. And through the miracle of the BBC’s archive, I had the recording!



Finding the connections– not making the connections. It is such a crucial distinction. It was to be the beginning of my really appreciating what Richard Hycner had given form to in his book *Between Person and Person* that to be in dialogue was beyond speech, as Lovelock had it, more an orientation than anything else and not really about conversation at all. As he put it in two memorable sentences that were an absolute inspiration for me when I first read them, and have stayed with me ever since: **“The term *dialogical* does not refer to speech as such, but rather to the fact that at its most fundamental level, human existence is inherently relational. By contrast, an individualistic model of the person first posits the existence of individuals as separate entities and understands the relational as a secondary phenomenon.....”** ****

In these two disconcertingly simple sentences, for me Hycner re-establishes the awareness that we are already in relation: that the relation is not to be established, but is inherent in our being alive; that relationship is not a secondary phenomenon consequent on the deftness and ingenuity of my ‘reaching out to the other’, or taking issue with the other from our shared state of separately conceived identities; that relationship is primary; that as Buber’s inclusion of Nature suggested, human existence is a singular manifestation of all existence; that at its most fundamental level, *all* existence is inherently relational - and as Lovelock observed, involved all forms of life.

I remembered from that harrowing day when we realised all of us were implicated in what we saw unfolding in Beslan, that I had kept a copy of something one of my students had written at the time: **“Individuals began to speak, one after the other, making sense of what had happened. It was not planned, there was no outcome prescribed or agenda set but...I had a real sense that a bigger meaning began to emerge....a sense that we were all interconnected”**.

The dialogue for me was in that shared realisation as much as in anything we said.

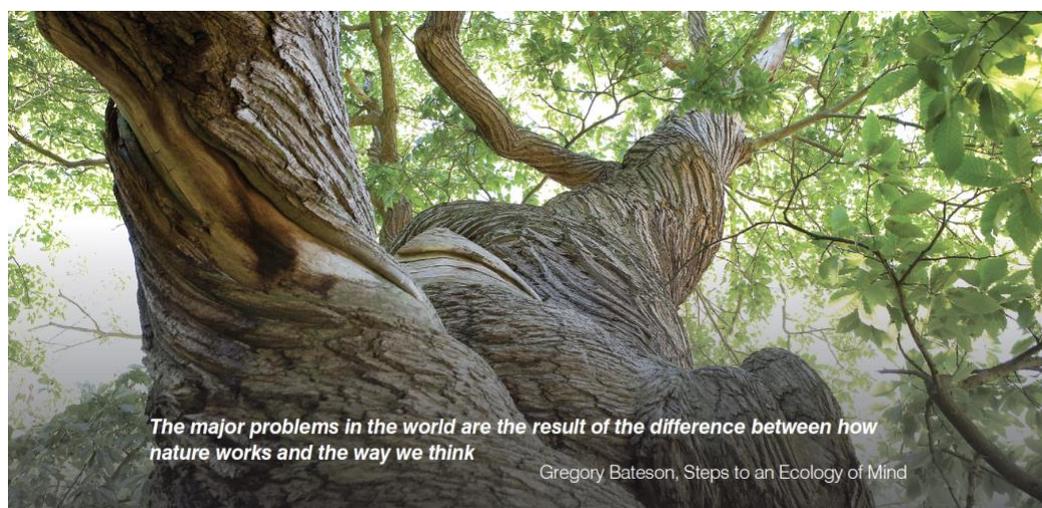
I remember too, discovering that the two obscure lines that appear on an otherwise empty first page of Ronald Gregor Smith's translation of *I&Thou*, attributed simply to 'GOETHE' were taken from a collection of poems by Goethe named the *West Eastern Divan* – the very name Daniel Barenboim and Edward Saïd had chosen for the young people's scratch orchestra they had brought together in 1999 from the countries of the Middle East to play at the festival being held in Weimar to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Goethe's birth. It had not escaped the attention of the young musicians chosen to attend, and most particularly those from Israel, that Weimar lay not far from the former Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald. The occasion was to transform all their lives.

I do not believe Barenboim would have known of Buber's dedication, and certainly not that it was to his then fiancée Paula Winkler whom Buber had met as a fellow student in Vienna when he was only 21. I'm not sure many students of Gestalt Psychotherapy would have known that either!

The two men were two generations apart. So for me it is all the more extra-ordinary a co-incidence that the creation of what became the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra and the writing of one of the most influential books on the subject of dialogue should both draw their inspiration from the same source: Goethe's collection of poems, the *West-Eastern Divan*.

The collection deals with the idea of the other as a manifestation or element of the Self, an idea that Goethe took from the Persian poet Hafiz. By way of example, one of the faculty of the Academy of Professional Dialogue in a webinar I attended recently - concerning her work in prisons - expressed the same idea when she described the simple act of respect in acknowledging the fact that the actions taken by the offender she was meeting would have made sense to him when he took them.

From the earliest formulation of their informing theory, Gestaltists would recognize this as 'inclusion' – the willingness to be impacted by the truth of the other. The work of the anthropologist/psychiatrist Gregory Bateson in turn has had a huge impact on the theories informing family therapy, offering a radical explication of the interrelationships and complexity that leads to dysfunction. In Bateson's case, in his examination of the nature of the mind "he saw the mind not as a nebulous something somehow lodged somewhere in the body of each man, but as a network of interactions relating the individual with his society and his species and with the universe at large" ****. Which again many in the Gestalt community would find familiar. It was this broader aspect that I wanted to bring into *Negotiating with Gravity*, and this became the first frame of the film:



More research led me to meet Martin Buber's grand-daughter, Judith Buber-Agassi in Tel Aviv, and to a long conversation with scholars at the University on how possibly to understand the line '**The tree is now no longer *It*; I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness**' *****. I never had been able

to get past associations with Gucci and Prada! I simply didn't know what it meant. After examining the passage in the original German, in Hebrew and in five other translations, we finally settled on 'I am caught up in the power of Being as it is' – and that is the line that went into the film.

I had already decided to conclude the film with an extra-ordinary passage from the Afterword to *I&Thou*, written by Martin Buber 20 years after the original 1937 first edition publication:

It is part of our concept of the plant that it cannot react to our actions upon it, that it cannot "reply". Yet this does not mean that we meet with no reciprocity at all in this sphere. We find here not the deed or posture of an individual being but a reciprocity of being itself – a reciprocity that has nothing except being. *****

To this day I remember the moment of serendipity when I realised only later that we had settled in our new translation on the use of 'Being as it is' which would now be echoed by that final line.

There was to be another such a moment. I had by then embarked on creating a sister film to *Negotiating with Gravity* which would celebrate the formidable contribution of David Bohm to our understanding of ourselves ultimately as internally related to everything, and give articulation to some of some of the most pressing issues of our time. Like *Negotiating with Gravity*, I felt it needed to finish with a quotation that carried a similarly defining insight.

I had already spoken in the film of the moment of clarity I myself had experienced when I first read David Bohm's observation - not simply that everything changes but that everything is itself flux. I had already anticipated that like the first words we hear, the very last words spoken would be by the sculptor Andy Goldsworthy whose work features so prominently in the film - that he too would speak of a moment of clarity, in words that are now echoed by what James Lovelock was to say.

"I think good work is a moment of clarity. It's not a mystery, it's like a shaft of light that just penetrates and for a moment it's very clear – and then it all becomes unclear again. These moments are quite astonishing – and it's inexplicable, beyond words....."

So clearly *A moment of Clarity* had to be the title of the film. There was just a final quotation, a defining insight to finish. To end *Negotiating with Gravity*, Martin Buber's remarkable words from *I&Thou* were already in place:

It is part of our concept of the plant that it cannot react to our actions upon it, that it cannot "reply". Yet this does not mean that we meet with no reciprocity at all in this sphere. We find here not the deed or posture of an individual being but a reciprocity of being itself – a reciprocity that has nothing except being.

I had inserted the following words of David Bohm before I realised what I had made visible – and I remember the shock of the realisation, the intake of my breath as I saw that from their entirely different backgrounds and quite different starting points, Martin Buber and David Bohm had ended up in precisely the same place, and in the final sentence in each case using the very same language:

Because right in front of me, for the sister film *A Moment of Clarity* the closing quotation now read: **The universal inter-connection of things has long been so evident that one can no longer even question it. In a mechanistic point of view, it is assumed that this interconnection can ultimately be reduced to nothing more than *interaction* between fundamental entities. But no given thing or entity can have a complete autonomy in its mode of being, since its basic characteristics must depend on its relationships with other things..... To distinguish this type of interconnection from mere interaction we shall denote this relationship as *reciprocal*: a reciprocity in which each has the potential not only to impact the other but to generate transformations in the nature of what each actually *is*. *******

It is remarkable to me that the two men, Martin Buber and David Bohm have significantly influenced two constituencies that know very little of each other and yet just through the defining significance

of this serendipity have so much in common: the Gestalt Therapy community on the one hand and many of the Organisational Development consultancies and more recently the Academy of Professional Dialogue on the other.

One of the longer terms aspirations we have for the UKAGP is to foster links between its core membership of psychotherapists and trainees and those many organisations and institutions that from one perspective or another have common ground in Gestalt theory and practice whether knowingly or not, and would welcome the stimulus and reciprocity of shared endeavour. That theory and practice itself is evolving rapidly, stimulated by publications like Gordon Wheeler's '*Beyond Individualism*' (Routledge) 2000, the fine international collection of essays in '*Relational Approaches in Gestalt therapy*' ed Lynne Jacobs & Rich Hycner (Routledge) 2009 – and of course the fine articles in this wonderfully refreshed newsletter!

Relational Approaches in Gestalt therapy has a moving Forward written by the now 99-year-old Erv Polster and I'd like to give the close of this piece to him. 🙏 He has been such an inspiration directly or indirectly for so many of us. This is what he had to say:

"People don't just meet moment to moment; they are in a joined endeavour, building a union that trumpets the reality that me and thee make we. In this augmentation from simple experience into the larger humanity of engagement, Jacobs and Hycner have created a rendezvous of minds sharply attentive to the indivisibility between self and other and to the security that comes with knowing that never, ever is anybody alone in this world.

Many people do experience themselves to be alone because of the individualistic impediments to feeling the 'we' in their lives. However, in the deepest understanding of life's gifts, there is a silent undercurrent of appetite for storyline, continuity and belonging." *****

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FOOTNOTES

* Kate Mossman (2019) 'James Lovelock at 100'

<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/environment/2019/07/james-lovelock-100-my-life-has-been-one-mass-visions>

** James Lovelock (2021) *We Belong to Gaia*. (Penguin Classics)

*** James Lovelock (2019) *Novacene: The Coming Age of Hyperintelligence* (Allen Lane)

**** Richard Hycner (1991) *Between Person and Person: Toward a Dialogical Psychotherapy*, introduction Maurice Friedman (The Gestalt Journal Press)

***** D. W. Harding (1972) "Single Mind, Double Bind: Review of Gregory Bateson's 'Steps to an Ecology of Mind,' " New York Review of Books, Oct 19th issue

***** Martin Buber (2nd ed 1958) *I and Thou*, transl. Ronald Gregor Smith (T&T Clark) p.20

***** Martin Buber (1970) *I and Thou*, transl. Walter Kauffman (T&T Clark) Postscript p.173

***** David Bohm (1957) in *The Essential David Bohm* ed. Lee Nichol (Routledge) pp.23 & 24

***** Lynne Jacobs, Rich Hycner Eds (2008) "*Relational Approaches in Gestalt therapy*", foreword Erving Polster, (Gestalt Press, published & distributed by Routledge, Taylor & Francis)

AUTHOR & RELATED PUBLICATIONS



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Field of work

I run my own dialogue consultancy in the fields of strategic thinking and conflict resolution, facilitating difficult conversations, supporting strategic judgement and intelligent responses in a wide range of complex circumstances. When people ask me what I actually do, I usually reduce that simply to facilitating difficult conversations and helping people make complex decisions when the stakes are getting high!

If I had to highlight any particular orientation in my work I am beginning to realise just how influential a number of years spent early in my career in the Far East have been on my thinking and practice as a consultant.

I have maintained a parallel psychotherapy practice over the last 33 years, which keeps my feet on the ground. I trained originally with Ischa Bloomberg, Roger Trencke Dalton et al and later with Bob Resnick, Gary Yontef et al at what was then the GTILA from where I gained my certification. I am Secretary of the UK Association of Gestalt Therapists

Areas of interest

The obduracy that descends on whole populations when they feel they are being coerced to relinquish their attachment to a lifestyle driven by consumption. And the effort to bring politicians into dialogue with the scientific exponents of climate change and ecological diversity.

Publications

Of particular relevance to this short article:

Paper, *Consulting from a dialogic orientation*. Published in 'Organisational Consulting, a relational perspective': Theories & Stories from the Field, 2007 (Middlesex University Press)

Film, *Beyond Words*: An introduction from a child's earliest experience of sound modulation to the young musicians of the West Eastern Divan Orchestra, their conductor Daniel Barenboim and philosopher Edward Saïd, all of whom feature in both the following films:

Film, *Negotiating with Gravity*: The contribution of Martin Buber to our thinking about dialogue and our relation with Nature

Film, *A Moment of Clarity* The contribution of David Bohm to our understanding of ourselves ultimately as internally related to everything: a sister film to *Negotiating with Gravity*.