



Standing in Inquiry: *One Key to Solving the Intractable*

By Royce Holladay

In the ATTRACTOR last week, Glenda talked about keys for noticing and changing your ever-and-always voice when you find yourself stuck in what seems to be an intractable problem. This week's **Change the World** offers another path for getting unstuck from your ever-and-always voice. It's the ability to stand in inquiry.

The definition we offer for "inquiry" as a stance or way of being provides a set of guides for moving past your ever-and-always voice to move toward powerful alternative approaches.

- **Turn judgment into inquiry.** Much of the ever-and-always voice is about dividing the world into good or bad, naughty or nice, mine or yours. You assign value or judgment to ideas, issues, and individuals you encounter, depending of how well they align with your own ideas, positions, or personalities. Once you have judged a thing, it's difficult to see it any other way.

Turning judgment into inquiry interrupts the ever-and-always voice by reminding you to explore or consider how others' thoughts or needs may be shaping such seemingly unassailable positions. It helps you step into another level of questioning that can reveal more responsive, actionable perspectives of what had seemed like an intractable challenge.

Sometimes when I comment about a particularly challenging situation, I list all the reasons "others" have messed things up or ways they get in the way of our shared success. Luckily I work with colleagues who gently ask me how I might turn those statements into questions. Or they reflect their own sense of judgment in my statements. Or they exaggerate my ever-and-always voice in their feedback to me. This support from colleagues, family, and friends helps to remind me to stand in inquiry and ask questions to move beyond situations that feel intractable.

- **Turn disagreement into shared exploration.** Have you ever experienced a disagreement that became an intractable rift in a relationship? Some issue or difference triggered a response and created an intractable wall of disagreement. It's difficult, often, to get beyond that wall, and yet it's clear that effective, productive relationships require that you move past it.

Turning that disagreement into shared exploration draws both parties into a dialogue

to examine the trigger and to define agreements that help to break down the wall. When you turn disagreement to exploration, neither party is required to give in or to give up. What is “required” is that both parties commit to look for a way to move forward together. That often takes deep exploration of what is acceptable and why. It asks the parties to step beyond their ever-and-always voices and to move into open dialogue about what they need and want, what they are willing to give and receive, and how they can come together to find an actionable path.

Recently a client was considering options to engage with another group to collaborate in product development. On the one hand their shared interests were closely aligned, their individual assets contributed complementary possibilities to the partnership, and both groups stood to gain from the collaboration. On the other hand, earlier attempts by these parties to come together had failed in very public and painful ways. My client had created an ever-and-always explanation for the earlier failure, and it was shadowing the current judgment of the potential collaboration. By formulating questions that explored the situation from both sides, the client was able to step beyond the ever-and-always to develop a productive and profitable agreement for future collaboration.

- **Turn defensiveness into self-reflection.** When you stop to listen to your own ever-and-always voice, you might find that what you hear is largely triggered by defensiveness and fear. The fear that you might be seen in a bad light, or that you might be wrong, or that you might not be as valued as you believe you should be. That defensiveness, left to its own devices, can paralyze you into an intractable state of inaction. Frozen in your fears and defenses, you might be unable to make a decision, engage with others, or take meaningful action.

When that happens, self-reflection is a powerful path. Ask yourself why that response was triggered. Does it feel familiar? Does it touch a deep fear or perception that may or may not be a rational response? Does the triggering action make you feel unsafe, unsure, or excluded? If you can pinpoint what shapes the current response, you are better prepared to move beyond the lack of reality or rationality of the response. You can identify ways you are better prepared, more mature, or differently engaged in this place and time, and move beyond that wall of intractable self-talk.

I hate to go car shopping or to deal with anything relative to my car. In the past, my most intractable, disrespectful, and disagreeable self would emerge when I had to purchase a car or when I had to talk with a person who was repairing my vehicle. I did not like who I became, and I blamed the sales/repair people for what they did to me. What I realized is that my limited knowledge about cars and financial questions around cars makes me feel very unqualified in those discussions. I am afraid that I will be seen as unintelligent or unaware. I fear that I will be taken advantage of. I turn all those fears into an unpleasant, unfriendly, intractable wall of defensiveness. Knowing that has changed my more recent interactions and has enabled me to step into those exchanges in a more open and productive way.

- **Turn assumptions into questions.** Your ever-and-always voice carries with it the most basic and strongly held assumptions you hold about yourself, your world, those

who inhabit and shape your landscape. Your comments about what “they” always do or about how the system always functions, or about who you are or need to be are expressions of your own assumptions, and they often shape the intractable challenges you face.

When you listen to those messages you repeat, you will probably identify the assumptions that underlie the position you hold. When those assumptions come to light, ask your self and others about their validity or fitness. Ask questions that break down the barriers that create the intractable nature of the challenge you face.

I too often make assumptions about the reasoning abilities of young people. I have realized that I assume that since they are younger or more inexperienced than I am, they can't possibly make the contributions or have the insights that a more experienced, older person can. Imagine my surprise when that is not the case in real time as I work with people who are significantly younger than I am. I am learning to challenge those assumptions and step into questions with young people. I am learning to listen to them and build my engagements with them based on how they answer those questions, rather than on faulty assumptions I may have carried about them in my ever-and-always voice.

I invite you to find a way to move toward inquiry at work, at play, and in your families and communities. I invite you to check that stance when you feel you have bumped up against an intractable challenge that you must move beyond. Let us know how it goes, and what you learn about your colleagues, friends, and coworkers. Let me know what you learn about you and the questions you can generate.

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Inquiry:

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- ▶ Turn disagreement into shared exploration
- ▶ Turn defensiveness into self-reflection
- ▶ Turn assumptions into questions