



HUMAN SYSTEMS
DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

50 E. Golden Lake Road
Circle Pines, MN 55014
HSDInstitute.org
866.HSD.INST

Change the World

May 2016

Public Discourse:

This Intractable Problem Belongs to All of Us

By Glenda Eoyang

What happened to the civil public discourse we knew in the last century? It has gone the way of the buggy whip, and I am glad. The conditions for that polite engagement were simple: Privileged people talked to other privileged people about things they held in common. The rules were clear, the membership was limited, and the conversation remained in the hands of those with power and money.

Today the world is different. Social media gives more people voice. People who used to be in the conversation are being pushed out, as power concentrates in the hands of the hyper-rich. The Baby Boomers who were cowed by the rules are leaving the scene, and Millennials who demand voice are coming in. Global communications and news-as-entertainment deluge us with more information than truth. Frankly, it is hard to tell the difference these days.

I will not try to judge the value and worth of these demographic and socioeconomic changes. People are doing that from both sides of the debate. In my view, value and worth do not really matter at this point. Arguments about why we are in this mess and finding who is at fault are, in my opinion, wasted effort. We are not going back. The future will be more of the same. We have two choices. 1) Change the game or 2) Come to terms with the consequences of playing, and losing, the old game.

To create a new game, we have to ask ourselves a single question, "What does civil discourse look like in a community that is (rightfully) angry, dispossessed, diverse, frightened, literally and figuratively hungry, perpetually connected, and (in many nations) armed?"

In the habit of good Adaptive Action, I would much rather take conscious stock of public discourse as we perceive it; consider what we, as a community, want it to be; and do something to shift the patterns away from the violent and ignorant discourse in the echo chamber and toward more constructive engagement. We need public discourse that respects the diverse voices of many. One that uses conflict as a resource for learning and adaptation. One that does not die, either in false consensus or open hostility. We

Nothing is intractable.

need a new way to be together in understanding, decision making, and action taking.

We need a practice of inquiry.

Our theory and practice tell us that inquiry is the only way to hold a productive conversation in conditions like our current society: Disrupted, out of control, and unpredictable. Inquiry may sound like a simplistic answer, but it is really a very wicked question. How do we set conditions so that we can come together to explore this uncharted territory? How can we create communities, institutions, and governance structures that will survive the stress of the world we see and the ones we cannot yet know?

Obviously, I do not know the answer, but I would like to propose an experiment. I tried it myself, and I hope you will too. It is relatively simple. Pick some thorny issue—the more wicked the better. Step into inquiry. See where it takes you. See what happens to the dialogues that cause and are caused by that issue.

At the HSD Institute, when we say, “step into inquiry,” we mean something very practical and specific:

- ▶ Turn judgment into curiosity
- ▶ Turn conflict into shared exploration
- ▶ Turn defensiveness into self-reflection
- ▶ Turn assumptions into questions

I tried my experiment on the nasty political wrangling that is going on right now in the US. I started with my own point of view, exaggerated it a bit, and ended up with the following transformations.

Judgment	Rich people cheat. He/she is rich, they must have cheated.	What were some major decisions in his/her life? How did he/she make them, and what did they learn?	Curiosity
Conflict	They don't care about people like me, so I should fight them.	What do we know about each other, and how can we learn more?	Shared Exploration
Defensiveness	The nasty things they say about people like me are not true, and I'll show them.	What is true about me, and how can I live that out more clearly?	Self-Reflection
Assumptions	People should go into politics to serve the common good.	Why did he/she go into politics? What do they say? What do others say? What does the data say about their motives?	Questions

That was helpful. Though I don't have answers to the questions, I do think I will engage differently the next time I run into someone who is on the other side of political questions. More important, though, was another question that arose for me.

What do people on the "other side" see as their judgments, conflicts, defensiveness, and assumptions? What might I learn by trying to stand in their patterns for a bit. This is what came out for me in that reflection.

Judgment	We deserve everything we have, and we shouldn't give anything away.	What do we have, really? What might be taken away? What will we have no matter what? What could we share gladly?	Curiosity
Conflict	The others are a threat to us, and we have to defend ourselves, even with force.	Who poses what kind of threat? What will be the most effective security for all of us over time?	Shared Exploration
Defensiveness	The past was good, the future is scary. Let's hold on to whatever we can.	Who is the hero and who is the victim in the story I tell myself? What would it look like if the two switched roles?	Self-Reflection
Assumptions	If they knew as much as I do, they would agree with me.	What do they know that I don't?	Questions

This reflection does not tell me what the other really thinks, but it does inspire me to more empathy, and it certainly will help me ask more interesting questions the next time I have a chance. That, I guess, is the point. We live in a world that is complex and messy and unpredictable and dangerous. If there are no reliable answers, then we had better learn to ask excellent questions. We need dialogue that is grounded in inquiry, if we are to have any hope of a coherent, productive public dialogue on any important issue.

What does that look like for you?

What does it look like for your team? Your organization? Your family? Your community? Your nation? Our world? Ultimately, it may not be better than what we have today, but it is hard to imagine how it could be worse.

You can download your own reflection guide to help you explore the patterns that inquiry might reveal for you and your community. Let me know what you discover!

Glenda Eoyang

May 1, 2016

Nothing is intractable.

CTW. Public Discourse

1May16

Page 4

Inquiry Experiment

Judgment			Curiosity
Conflict			Shared Exploration
Defensiveness			Self-Reflection
Assumptions			Questions

Nothing is intractable.