

## Six observations about seeing

by Chris Corrigan

In *Presence*, one of the core pieces of clarifying purpose and moving to action is basing your work in deep seeing and sensing skills. I have been experimenting with various strategies to deepen seeing and find the core truths that form powerful purposes and visions. This paper is a collection of six short observations on seeing.

### I

During a conference at which we were both working, my friend Dave facilitated his first Open Space<sup>1</sup>. At the time he was the CEO of an organization responsible for setting up a governance structure for Aboriginal child welfare on Vancouver Island. His facilitation gave us an opportunity to talk deeply about what it was like to manage from a position of “holding space.” After he had opened space, we did a little exercise together once the groups were meeting. I asked him to look very hard at what he was seeing in the room and tell me what he saw. I wrote down the list as he noticed things: the groups are all engaged; there is lots of space in the room and only some of it is being used; there is activity at the edges and emptiness in the middle; people are using technology that is appropriate to the task; and so on.

I asked him to step outside the room and tell me what he saw. From outside he said that it was hard to tell what was going on. When he got right inside, sitting in with a group, he was interested in how engaged they were and how there didn't seem to be a world outside of the conversation.

I asked him how he felt and he talked about the struggle with control he was having as a facilitator, identifying where it hurt, where his buttons were being pushed. He noticed that his role was very different from the one he occupies at work where he is supposed to be in charge of the process. Most profoundly, he noticed that, although his organization back home was known as “an authority,” the actual authority in the room lay with the participants.

At the end of this 30-minute exercise in seeing and sensing, I gave him the list of the 40 or so things he had noticed and wrote at the top “A vision for my organization in ten years.” He immediately recognized that what we were seeing in this small three-hour Open Space event was exactly the kind of organization he wanted to begin working toward. He recognized his role in the vision, too, and realized that the emotions he was feeling while holding space were those he had been blocking by exerting more control at work. We talked about the list a little more and discovered some questions that we could ask his stakeholders back home, questions that would propel the system forward to an evolving, emergent Open Space.

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<sup>1</sup> Open Space Technology (OST) is a new way to hold better meetings, to enable all kinds of people, in any kind of organization, to create inspired meetings and events. With groups of 5 to 2000+ people—working in one-day workshops, three-day conferences, or the regular weekly staff meeting—the common result is a powerful, effective connecting and strengthening of what's already happening in the organization: planning and action, learning and doing, passion and responsibility, participation and performance. For more on OST: [www.openspaceworld.org](http://www.openspaceworld.org).

## II

When he received the Harvard Medical School's Global Environment Citizen Award, Bill Moyers in 2004 gave a stirring speech in which he implored the world to use its heart to see what is unfolding around us:

"On the heath Lear asks Gloucester: 'How do you see the world?' And Gloucester, who is blind, answers: "I see it feelingly.'

I see it feelingly.

The news is not good these days. I can tell you, though, that as a journalist, I know the news is never the end of the story. The news can be the truth that sets us free—not only to feel but to fight for the future we want. And the will to fight is the antidote to despair, the cure for cynicism, and the answer to those faces looking back at me from those photographs on my desk. What we need to match the science of human health is what the ancient Israelites called *hocma*—the science of the heart... the capacity to see, to feel and then to act as if the future depended on you."

This capacity to see from the heart lies at the core of what it means to sense the emerging future. And seeing from the heart means sensing the patterns of our emergent future in the grains of sand that are our present, right now, right here.

I once found myself working with a Mohawk Elder, Sonny Diabo from Kahnawake. From him, I learned that recovering this capacity to see may well be the one emerging Aboriginal leadership capacity that distinguishes 21st century leaders from those who have gone before. The utter domination of scientific materialism (along with the empirical measurement craze of the last couple of centuries) has relegated this ancient skill to the bargain basement bin of divination and idealism. The result has been a civilization where we shut off our human responses to the world and trust our senses only if they are confirmed by some mediated third party

Seeing the future in the present consists of two parts, I think. It first means "seeing feelingly" or apprehending the truth of the world as it appears in front of us. All of the forces and the obstacles and the obfuscations that stand between our eyes and what is really happening. Seeing with the heart is the only way through this mess, to truly sense what is upon us.

Second, the capacity for seeing involves what Sonny describes as "getting my foot in the door." In other words, there is a subtle ability to discern opportunity in all of the mess of the world. Sonny's work these days consists of being an Elder to several processes across Canada that are purporting to make a difference for First Nations people. Two of his pet projects are Aboriginal Head Start and long term care for the sick, disabled and elderly. He decided to throw his commitment into these projects because being born and dying are our deepest connections with the spirit world and the experiences of the first and last years of life are the most important for defining what it means to be Aboriginal. He sees this clearly, and sees the processes he is working on like doors that are opened a crack. He sees those cracks as potential, which he can help realize by supporting them as an Elder. And for him, once he has sensed this "rightness" he

sticks his foot in the door and does not let it go. For to simply witness these opportunities coming and going is not his game. He is there to extract the most he can for Aboriginal people. There is no decision to be made—he simply stays in the knowledge and belief that holding space and keeping it open allows the potential he sees to become manifest for everyone.

At an Art of Hosting workshop once, my dear friend Toke Paludan Moller had a realization that he shared with us. It is that at every moment we are together as humans—collaborating, creating and enjoying ourselves, we are embodying something of the future we want to see. In our very act of being with one another, we are saying “this is how it should be.” Toke asked the question “what if the way we are together is the future?”

Questions like that force the eyes and heart open to seeing the world feelingly, in a way that allows us to see where we are and to seize the future contained in the Now, to seed it and grow it.

### III

"...most of us live as if we are separate from nature. Whereas a deer is fully in its body, we have retreated into our minds. By thinking, we have set up parameters that divide the universe into things that can be categorized, and we call that understanding. This gives us a sense of power and control. We look at a forest and say, “That’s a white pine. That’s a white oak. Over there is a sugar maple,” and we think we know the forest. But we have no real contact with those trees. We miss the details - the subtle curves of the branches, changes in the texture and colour of the bark as the light fades or the wind blowing on the dying leaves. We do not embrace the forest with our whole being; instead we label it with our minds...

...Our security does not lie in the control we have over nature, but rather in the quality of attention we bring to our lives. If we care about our relationship with nature or our relationship with other human beings, that caring demands our attention. Caring is attention. When we really care about another person, we want that person’s needs to be met. We are present and attentive. That person’s needs are our needs. We pay attention to them. There is then the possibility of sensitivity, intimacy, communication, and harmony. The tracker in the forest is in love with his or her surroundings. In nature, we are open to a larger perspective of self. We learn to walk carefully on this planet. We learn to see it."  
– from *Tracking and the Art of Seeing* by Paul Rezendes pp. 21-23 *passim*

When I was in university, I researched and wrote a paper on the James Bay Cree and their efforts to negotiate a deal with the governments of Canada and Quebec in the early 1970s. The deal, which became the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, was negotiated between communities of largely traditional indigenous peoples and two levels of Canadian government, with a very sophisticated industrial utility, Hydro Quebec, watching in the wings.

In the paper, after doing mountains of archival research at McGill University, my co-author Gary Heuval and I discovered that the Cree negotiators, all of whom were hunters, had actually viewed the entire exercise as a hunt for unfamiliar game in strange territory. To prepare, they readied themselves as they would have for a hunt, including consulting with the community about its needs, dreaming the territory, equipping themselves with the right tools and becoming

familiar with this prey they were seeking. By adopting a traditional approach, they were able to negotiate a treaty and bring home what the community was requesting, as if they had spent a winter out on the land dreaming up moose and fish, and harvesting enough to support everyone.

This is what seeing is. As Paul Rezendes points out, seeing is a process of becoming unified with one's environment so that you understand yourself as a part of it, rather than as an aloof observer. Becoming wholly integrated with your environment means that you can begin to dream the opportunities that are inherent in it, much as a traditional hunter dreams about the place where he or she will meet the deer that will become food. Only with the utmost care and attention, does seeing, in this deep sense, result in this integration.

Rezendes was once interviewed on this subject:

"It has more to do with stillness than with movement. It is about slowing down and blending in. It is the ability to melt into the forest," he says. Tracking allows people to drop their everyday personae, until the forest no longer realizes that you're there. When you become the forest, when you're silent inwardly and outwardly, the forest starts to wake up, to move. "It's amazing what can happen," says Paul. "And we become more sensitive to what usually goes unnoticed. This kind of intimacy then naturally begins to manifest in our everyday life. By seeing, feeling, and following without threatening or disturbing, we discover that everything we encounter is what we're looking for."

We can find that field of practice in the forest or in the office. Organizations are nature too, as are the environments in which organizations operate. But to bring this capacity of deep seeing to those settings, we need the same degree of care and attention as the tracker does: we need to be able to "become sensitive to what usually goes unnoticed." Simply running numbers, doing surveys and conducting consultations will not make clear the opportunities that are inherent in the chaos of the present. We must practice a little deeper, take all the information and sit with it until the future emerges into our sight, like a deer track in the jumble of forest litter.

#### IV

From a conversation with Krishnamurti, on the art of listening:

"Sir, what is seeing, and what is listening, and what is learning?"

I think the three are related to each other: learning, hearing and seeing. What is seeing, perceiving? Do we actually see, or do we see through a screen darkly? A screen of prejudice, a screen of our idiosyncrasies, experiences, our wishes, pleasures, fears, and obviously our images about that which we see and about ourselves? So we have this screen after screen between us and the object of perception. So do we ever see the thing at all? Or is it the seeing is coloured by our knowledge, mechanical, experience, and so on and so on, or our images which we have about that thing, or the beliefs in which the mind is conditioned, and therefore prevents the seeing, or the memories which the mind has cultivated prevents the seeing? So seeing may not take place at all. And is it possible for the mind not to have these images, conclusions, beliefs, memories, prejudices, fears, and without having those screens just to look? I think this becomes very important

because when there is a seeing of the thing which I am talking about, when there is a seeing you can't help but acting."

David Bohm, after many conversations with Krishnamurti, developed the concept of Dialogue in which seeing and suspending were intimately related. Krishnamurti here points to suspending biases and conditioning that allow us to both see to the root of things and listen deeply to one another.

I'm curious about how people might do this in daily life. It's one thing to enter a deeply reflective state in a retreat and practice seeing and listening, but in daily life, when these practices are critical, how do we quickly enter that state where real seeing is possible? What do you do to set aside your biases, prejudices, assumptions and conclusions? How do you suspend in the moment?

V

Recently, my facilitation practice has increasingly involved helping people to set a simple vision for their work and then to invite them to find a place for themselves in that vision. In Open Space we call that "passion and responsibility" but the truth is those two dynamics are the yin and yang of getting anything done well.

Focusing groups on passion involves facilitating seeing. I find especially that "what if?" questions help a lot in this respect. Asking "what if?" proposes a future, but doesn't worry itself with the details. And it also allows each person to immediately see themselves in that future.

For example, in a recent community safety planning process I was engaged in, we played with the question "what if we won an award for community safety and that we were cited specifically for how each community played a specific role in achieving our goals? What would your role be in that scenario?" This gathering involved everyone from elderly neighbours to sexually exploited youth in a tough community plagued by tough dynamics. And yet everyone knew that unless solutions involve everyone, nothing will change for the better. Command and control hasn't legislated the problems away, in fact it has made them worse. Positing a simple vision of safety for everyone in the community and inviting them to steward that vision is what got on the table and what got them working together.

A "what if?" question is tasty, and demonstrates exactly an important power of seeing: once you see a desired future, you can't put it back in the bottle. As Thomas King says about stories of transformation, you can do a lot of things, but you can't say you didn't hear them. Jonathan Schell, in *The Unconquerable World*, argues that this quality of real vision is what makes the democratic impulse so strong in people—once participatory democracy is unleashed on the world, it cannot be refuted. Taste freedom or inspiration once, and it's hard to deny its full emergence.

"What if?" questions bring the sophisticated process of seeing to a very practical point. I find that increasingly, my work is about helping people shift from one place to another. Any kind of transformation process requires this kind of forward viewing in order to provide some idea of

where we are going. So I am finding "what if?" questions, and the accompanying challenge to individuals - passion AND responsibility, remember - to see themselves in that new future to be useful in just about every context, be it planning, consultation, community building or organizational development.

I've been following the work of Adam Kahane for a while now, and have just been reading his latest book, *Solving Tough Problems*. In it, he recounts his experiences over the years of working with groups to varying degrees of success engaging in the practice of talking and listening deeply. It's a wonderful book.

Talking and listening are the implementation side of good visioning. Kahane is a master of scenario planning, having worked for years at Shell and subsequently on the Mont Fleur scenario projects that played a significant role in inviting South Africa's diverse political players to envision post-apartheid futures. On the surface these exercises seem naive, dreaming up possible futures. But the reason for powerful and symbolic views of a future emerging reality is, as Kahane says, that the future is unpredictable. And why is it unpredictable? "One reason the future is unpredictable," says Kahane, "is that it can be influenced."

The trick to influencing the future is seeing now how that future might emerge and to find a way to influence it for the best. Using "what if?" questions to cast very basic but compelling visions helps us to set the stage for the deep dialogue, engagement and conversation that loosens up our present and takes us to new levels of participating in the emerging and envisioned future.

## VI

Fouro has it right:

"Had a conversation this weekend—several, actually—about how one goes about changing an organization. In the course of chatting I realized something simple: You can't change organizations. You can only reveal them to themselves. And they like what they see. Or not."

Once we reveal ourselves to ourselves we can begin to heal, effect changes, choose futures, reconnect pieces and establish life again.

And organizations reveal themselves through story seen through eyes and ears attuned to deeper meaning.

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