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The Work of the World [2006 Keynote Address]

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the work of the world

Diana Chapman Walsh

President, Wellesley College



*given on the occasion of the launch
of the Difficult Dialogues initiative
at Clark University, November 1, 2006*

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introduction

I'm pleased to be here, and honored to have been selected to help you launch this important project. I've enjoyed reading your materials and learned much from them. It's already clear to me that I have as much to learn from you as to offer in return. So thanks for the invitation.

I met with Sarah Buie and Miriam Chion in early September to begin thinking together about what I might bring to this time with you. At that point I had lofty ambitions about taking advantage of your intriguing invitation to re-immense myself in the widely dispersed literature related to your project, to offer you a fresh analysis, a creative synthesis on difficult dialogue – a topic about which I've thought, off and on, through my 13 years as President of Wellesley College (and before) – but never as systematically or thoroughly as I've always wanted to do.

And then life intervened. The past three months have been without question the most hectic and busy of my presidency. When I announced last April I would be stepping down at the end of this academic year, after 14 years, I didn't anticipate the cluster of wholly new pressures that would build in the transitional year.

And the last two weeks have been utterly out of control: wall-to-wall obligations morning noon and night, literally. So I come to you tired, harried, and not nearly as grounded or clear as I wanted to be – a state in which I think many of us are finding ourselves these days more often than we would like to admit, even to ourselves.

You did a thorough job of advertising this talk (which of course upped the ante for me as I began to take in your high expectations). One of the notices I saw, which arrived in my e-mail box from a higher education listserve, identified me as the former President of Wellesley College. That gave me pause

and a momentary temptation to ask for an extension for a year. But here I am...without the thesis I thought I wanted to write for you – the dog ate the homework – much less the internal work that would have brought me to you in a state of serenity.

Now that, of course, is one of the big challenges we face when we attempt to engage one another in the kinds of dialogues described so lyrically by William Isaacs, among others. You quote Isaacs in the “appendix” to your faculty development reader on effective dialogue. (Wonderful materials – capture the possibilities beautifully – and the aspirations). Isaacs writes of:

A conversation with a center, not sides...a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before...lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups...

Jon Kabat Zinn is your next entry – he’s a friend of mine and I’m sure of many of you. Jon speaks of a “spaciousness and openheartedness” that allow the emergence of “the greater intelligence that seems to reside in the group.”

That sounds right to me...consistent with my experiences of the kinds of groups and moments in those groups that keep me coming back into these dialogue processes.

My point here is that both definitions (as most others we might cite) assume stores of energy, and power, and presence that, in turn, depend on an investment of time, and on a state of receptivity, equanimity, and patience. Difficult dialogue, we know, begins and ends with deep and open listening – to each other, and to ourselves. It begins and ends in presence, as Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer and their colleagues have written.

It requires an effortlessness that, paradoxically, comes only after the significant effort of doing the work before the work. I think of the woodcarver (in Thomas Merton’s translation of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*) who fasted for seven days to still his heart and guard his spirit before venturing out into the woods to find the tree in which the bell stand would appear before his eyes.

Or the “simplicity on the far side of complexity,” Oliver Wendell Holmes’s arresting insight. He had no time for the simplicity on the near side of complexity (and would, I think, be horrified by the glib superficialities served up by our increasingly anti-intellectual culture), but he saw the simplicity on the far side of complexity as a destination most devoutly to be wished. In our academic world, we could call that true scholarship.

People who write about and practice the quality of dialogue you are seeking know that we don’t achieve it without finding the hidden wholeness that underlies the fragmentation of modern life. And that discovery doesn’t occur without discipline, focus, and time – a “certain kind of peace,” as Toni Morrison wrote in a lovely essay called *The Dancing Mind*, a peace “that is not merely the absence of war [but is] the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one.”

So if I come to you feeling fragmented, then I’m assuming there’s a learning in that fact for us – and I suspect it is a basic lesson about a precondition – perhaps the precondition – for the dialogue you are working to create. Thomas Merton, who understood “the hidden wholeness of everything,” also anticipated the fragmentation that has, since his time, been increasing almost daily, and exponentially, as instant electronic communication ratchets up the pace of modern life. Merton named it violence:

There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist...most easily succumbs: activism and overwork.

The rush and pressure of modern life are...perhaps the most common form of its innate violence...The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his [her] work [and] destroys the fruitfulness of [that work] because it kills the root of inner wisdom that makes work fruitful.

So our task tonight is to hold on, as best we can, to the root of inner wisdom that makes work fruitful. We come to it where we are – and who we are. And we are enough. I join you with as many questions as I have answers. What we can hope is that my questions will stimulate your questions...and eventually your answers, in the spirit of Rilke. I'm certain you'll stimulate my further thinking (when I am a former president, perhaps). I very much admire what you are doing and how you are doing it and only wish I had more time to hang out with you.

To prime the pump for our interaction, I decided to do what presidents do in a pinch – ask questions. I have seven questions (perhaps inspired by the woodcarver's seven-day fast) and, as a mnemonic device (I hope not too hokey), I'll label them all with a single word beginning in the letter *S*. Silence, Structure, Scarcity, Story, Scale, Synergy, Success. I won't belabor them much; already I think you can imagine your own questions connoted by each of those deceptively simple words.

Before I put forth my questions and open our dialogue, I want first to underscore two more general points about why I see this work you are doing as so important – and so urgent. The first relates to the work of the world at this moment in history; the second to the work of the academy.

the work of the world

First, I believe you are tapping into a social movement, one that I hope is gaining momentum to which I hope your work may contribute in some way. That movement has many

manifestations and points of focus that I won't belabor here, but for now I'll call it (with a touch of grandiosity) a movement to create the conditions for the human race to engage in vital conversations that can possibly pivot us off of the darkness into which we are staring now, and toward a source of light that many of us are yearning to find.

"The darkness around us is deep," William Stafford wrote in his evocative poem, *A Ritual to Read to Each Other*. I gave a copy to Sarah and Miriam and (if you haven't already been using it), we may want to read it together later.

This movement in which your work loosely fits has a long history. It's been largely out of the mainstream in our culture generally, and certainly out of the mainstream in the academy. And yet, if it is a movement – I think it's increasingly clear from recent world events – that it is one we urgently need to advance now, if we are going to come to terms, as a species on this planet, with problems like global warming, weapons of mass destruction, and the widening gap between rich and poor in our own country and around the world.

We need to find a way to recognize and grapple honestly with our contradictions – the tension of opposites of which E.F. Schumacher wrote in *Small is Beautiful* – to strain ourselves to a level above ourselves. We need to muster the courage to keep seeking more of the truth about ourselves. We need to stop fooling ourselves and one another about what we know to be true...all of the possibilities named in your reader, and inchoate in your project.

Schumacher's words are worth thinking about:

...through all our lives we are faced with the task of reconciling opposites which, in logical thought, cannot be reconciled...How can one reconcile the demands of freedom and discipline in education? Countless mothers

and teachers, in fact, do it, but no one can write down a solution. They do it by bringing into the situation a force that belongs to a higher level where opposites are transcended – the power of love...Divergent problems ...force us to strain ourselves to a level above ourselves; they demand, and thus provoke, the supply of forces from a higher level, thus bringing love, beauty, goodness, and truth into our lives. It is only with the help of these higher forces that opposites can be reconciled in the living situation.

Partisan politics are part of the problem now because they are increasing the polarization that makes opposites seem irreconcilable. But the mud slinging simply masks the larger systemic forces at play that we need to be working harder together to understand.

With that caveat (that is, please don't hear this as partisan politics), I want to read to you from an e-mail my daughter forwarded me the other day. It drove home powerfully to me what the stakes are in the work you are doing – cast in the largest context.

It was an editorial from *The National Catholic Register* about the attack on the small Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania.

“To see such a peaceful people brutally attacked would surely leave any decent human being appalled,” the essay said, but “our newspapers are full of brutal and barbarian violence day after day after day.”

“It was not the murders, not the violence, that shocked us [the most]; it was the forgiveness that followed it for which we were not prepared. It was the lack of recrimination, the dearth of vindictiveness that left us amazed. Baffled. Confounded...that the Amish community itself simply refused to hate what had hurt them.”

And, the editorial suggests, part of what we find so unnerving in the story is that “down deep we know that we had the chance to do the same. After the fall of the Twin Towers we had the sympathy, the concern, the support of the entire world.”

“You can't help but wonder, when you see [how the Amish responded to the brutal attack on their innocent daughters], what the world would be like today if, instead of using the fall of the Twin Towers as an excuse to invade a nation, we had simply gone to every Muslim country on earth and said, ‘Don't be afraid. We won't hurt you. We know that this is coming from only a fringe of society, and we ask your help in saving others from this same kind of violence.’”

“‘Too idealistic,’ you say. Maybe. But since we didn't try, we'll never know.”

In some ways I think it can be said that what you are seeking to do is to give this non-violent pathway a try here in your small microcosm of the world, which is all any of us has: our own piece of the puzzle. So that's the first reason I'm excited about your project.

the work of the academy

The second reason is that I believe an important goal of what you are doing is calling the academy back to its highest purposes. I spent the better part of last year leading an inquiry into Wellesley's future (in a commission involving trustees, faculty, staff, and students).

Over the summer I took a month and wrote up some of the findings of that work, and some of the implications. That's a much longer story that we have time to dig into now, but I came away from that experience with a much fuller appreciation of the mounting pressures on the academy and, particularly, on faculty.

There are the time pressures on all of us that I've already mentioned and there are also serious pressures from the explosion of knowledge, together with disputes over the legitimacy of alternative claims about knowledge and truth. Our year-long inquiry only began to touch on complex questions about the trustworthiness of information sources, the growing segmentation of the country and the world into self-contained identity enclaves listening only to themselves and others who reinforce their beliefs, and tendencies fostered by the world wide web to look for the quickest answer and to value direct, personal connections with information, especially when it reinforces one's own preconceptions and prejudices.

The Internet has provided everyone with a voice, and the cacophony of clashing worldviews and faith systems, overlaid with political and commercial agendas, is creating new social dynamics that we noted with concern. We worried about rising anti-intellectualism, an "erosion of Enlightenment values" that could undermine the very ground on which a liberal education stands and we noted that teaching students the skills to engage and learn from their differences is a vital task in these contentious times. You have readings in your materials that make a similar case.

Derek Bok observes in his new book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, that most students arrive at college – and leave – as "naive relativists; they think that different people have different views and that there is no valid basis for judging the opinions of others." Vartan Gregorian, in a sobering 2004 speech, asserted that "we must reform higher education to reconstruct the unity and value of knowledge." He laid the "atomization" of knowledge at the feet of the academy, and warned that failing now to work with students at a reintegration of knowledge "is a missed opportunity of staggering dimensions." For the absence of intellectual coherence, he argued, can leave a vacuum in which the human "craving for wholeness" can be "manipulated by radical theologies and

militant ideologies...that practice hatred and intolerance while proclaiming superiority and exclusivity."

So I see at the heart of your project profound intellectual questions the academy needs to be taking up in our difficult dialogues, and profound institutional questions as well: Who our students can be if we attend more closely to their true intellectual needs. How our work lives can be, if we attend to one another, our aspirations and our struggles. What our institutions can be, if we attend to the whole enterprise as a shared responsibility.

And the world we could create, if we could learn to engage each other fruitfully across the differences and the silences that are polarizing and disempowering us and undermining our ability to govern ourselves responsibly. How do we take some risks and break down some of the barriers that perpetuate the over-commitment, overwork, accelerated pace, and resulting isolation, polarization, suspicion and mistrust that are, I think, the arch-enemies of thoughtful dialogue and, with it, deep and integral learning.

seven questions

So those are some of the stakes I see. They are high. And here are my seven questions, quickly. Then I want to hear from you about what you're learning, and what we can discover together this evening.

silence

How do we cut through the cacophony of noise that has taken over our lives and create spaces for the silences without which we will not be able to hear ourselves in dialogue with others?

In Sarah Buie's interesting graphic representation of a continuum of discourse types, she indicates that her varieties

of what I'll call combative discourse produce silence suffused with fear. "Dialogue," alone, in her model, creates silence that is "open to the unknown," to "collective wisdom."

I liked that model and it set me to thinking about silence. I grew up in the Quaker tradition and, as a small child, sat in silence on many First Days, noticing what people were wearing (clothes and especially shoes), how the sun angled into the room and the how the fire in the fireplace smelled and popped, who was nodding off, the chorus of curious breathing patterns, the deepening of silence through the hour as people settled into it, and its collective quality once we became truly still.

At other times in my childhood I experienced a very different kind of silence during tensions at home – one that was alienating and isolating. And I think – just as Eskimos have more words for snow than we do – my early experiences gave me a nuanced appreciation of silence: how it could shift from open and inviting, grateful, hopeful, or curious to fearful, fraught, angry, judgmental, hostile, or dangerous. Silences aren't simply binary; they, too, move along a continuum from life-giving to death dealing, with much nuance in between.

In our noisy, wired world, I think we've lost the ability to appreciate – even to tolerate – silence. So I wonder what would happen if we were to send our students off to study the sounds of silence (the Simon and Garfunkel song), or if we were to take that on: what the field feels like when it grows silent, what the elements are in the silences between comments when people are listening to each other, in the spaces between them, what it feels like to try to channel through oneself the currents of energy in a silence, how one's own feelings and perceptions shift with shifts in the quality of the silences that emerge in the group, when and how the group dynamic shifts...questions like that.

structure

What are the essential structures that can support difficult dialogues – get them started and keep them going deeper and deeper?

Much has been written about procedures and conditions for creating hospitable spaces and establishing clear ground rules to support dialogue – structures on the micro level. There's much about that in your materials, especially the extensive ones from the Public Conversations Project, and from other sources, many of which emphasize the importance of exquisite attention to the details of scheduling principles (tempo, pace, rhythms, a welcoming environment, a graceful ambiance, seating and other specifics) and well as listening principles and aspirations.

The Harvard Negotiation Project's readable book, *Difficult Conversations*, and Parker Palmer's *A Hidden Wholeness*, are additional sources that I particularly value. There are many different frameworks for creating what Parker calls "circles of trust," and one question to ponder is how do they vary, and which elements work best – for what specific aims and under what specific conditions. I don't know if there's much empirical research on these questions of micro structure, but my sense is that there isn't. (Maybe you'll tell me I'm wrong?)

And then there's the question of structure on the macro level – organizations, institutions, the mass media, the government – the ways in which they structure our perceptions of reality, which in turn will affect what – and who – we bring to our dialogues.

One reading I especially enjoyed on this provocative question is a book called *Mediated* by Thomas de Zengotita. He argues that all of our lives are "composed of an unprecedented fusion of the real and the represented...[are] shaped by a culture of performance that constitutes a quality of being, a type of person, the mediated person." At some level, he suggests, we're all method actors now, living in a "bubble of self-regarding self-representation that has insulated us for so long

from the suffering of millions in a world dominated by our interests and our institutions.” How do we break that bubble and find our way to something approximating an authentic self?

scarcity

Where will we find the resources – time, space, energy, good will, hope and belief – to sustain our own commitments, and that of others, to this work? How can we wedge it in to lives that are already overflowing with obligations?

Every summer, I try to carve out at least a week to do something out of the ordinary, something that will replenish me, bring me back to myself (maybe deflate the bubble a little bit). Usually, the something I select fits somewhere in this general category of seeking deeper wisdom or dialogue.

This summer one of two such gifts I gave myself was a week on Bainbridge Island with Parker Palmer and other friends working with him to spread what they’ve been learning about the power and the uses of these circles of trust they’ve been testing and refining. The organization that supports this work is called the Center for Courage and Renewal and they offer professionals opportunities to restore their vocational commitments and reconnect who they are with what they do.

So this summer we convened at an environmental learning center with a group of about 30 people – change agents who are devoting their lives and careers to aspects of this work – peace making, holding tensions, modeling hope, preserving spaces, public and private, for democratic engagements of a kind we have lost in our larger culture. In preparation we read a recent essay of Parker’s called *The Politics of the Brokenhearted: On Holding the Tensions of Democracy*, and I commend it to you if you haven’t read it.

But the text on which our retreat was based was a short poem by Wendell Berry that ended with the sentence, “What we need is here.” There is a poverty in our affluence, Parker

pointed out. It prevents us from seeing and trusting that we have what we need. The whole capitalist system, of course, hinges on its ability to convince consumers that they have unmet needs and wants.

Even the social sector preserves its legitimacy and ensures its growth by selling scarcity: perceived shortages of intelligence fuel the educational system, of health fuel the medical system, of expertise fuel the professions. Ordinary citizens are then discouraged from joining generative discussions – the work of democracy – for fear they have nothing to offer (leave it to the experts).

Our question, then, is how do we invite people into an engagement that assumes abundance – within them and between them – so that they can move away from the disempowering presumption of scarcity that becomes an excuse for bailing out? What can help us truly believe that what we need is here?

story

What stories should shape a difficult dialogue? Who sets the agenda? How do power relations affect the narrative that is allowed to unfold and what can be done to insure that the buried wisdom in the voices from the margins is brought forward into the dialogue and truly heard?

In the inquiry we conducted at Wellesley last year on the future of the college we deliberately began by telling and soliciting stories, viewing them as data that might illuminate directions in which we would hope to see the college grow in the future.

On the theory (borrowed from a process called “appreciative inquiry”) that planning is most effective when it incorporates existing strengths, that human systems tend to grow in the directions to which they pay attention, and that “words create worlds,” we invited stories of moments, times, or incidents in which people experienced the college at its best. We sought

stories that would illustrate, for a variety of individuals, what, to them, is good, and strong, and special about Wellesley College.

Very quickly, our tendency towards critique and skepticism kicked in. We worried that a strong (“conformist”) culture tends to exclude some people, and that a “self-congratulatory” culture can stifle innovation, even become “ossified.”

Nevertheless, the story telling did highlight some core values and a felt sense of the college at its best. It reminded us, even as we worried that it might be masking our limitations, that if we can be these things some of the time for some of us, then presumably we can be them more of the time for more of us. And this shared aspiration freed the group to begin examining with genuine curiosity some of the places where we might be stuck or falling short.

As you train your attention on the processes for engaging your conflicts and differences, making of them a resource for learning and forward growth, the question of the content remains to be addressed. The process is merely prelude, a tool or a means to an end, and, as your materials point out, leaves you still with the question of whose stories you want to hear and tell – and why.

scale

Can we move beyond our small dialogue circles to address larger issues that seem both pressing and intractable now – issues in our communities and institutions, in our nation and the world?

How do we believe large-scale change occurs?

Parker Palmer spoke to us this summer about a “movement model of social change” that begins when “isolated individuals reach a point where the gap between their inner and outer lives becomes so painful that they resolve to live divided no more.” If they can discover each other in small, informal groups, they can perhaps form what he calls “communities of congruence,”

from which they may find a public voice, develop alternative reward systems, both external (jobs, income, status) and internal. They can “transform the logic of rewards,” with a deepening understanding that “no reward can be greater than to live divided no more.” If they can gain enough momentum, sometimes their energies can bring them full circle from abandoning institutions (where they started out) to transforming them in the end.

What models of social change underlie this project, I wonder, and do we imagine that small, intense encounters could ultimately contribute to the solution of large and looming problems across a wide canvas?

synergy

Are there creative alliances that could accelerate this movement (to the extent that it is, or could be, a movement) and what would have to happen to produce new global networks that would take the work to a higher level of intensity and effectiveness?

My second summer foray this August was to Stowe, VT for a week with Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer and their colleagues from the Society of Organizational Learning (SoL) for what they call their “Executive Champions Workshop.”

SoL is very much rooted in systems thinking and they have been asking questions about how to add something to the mix of the many organizations (like yours) and networks that already exist – something that isn’t just additive but might be multiplicative, that might leverage what is already in place.

As we wondered together what those meta processes might be, Peter Senge said something that struck me forcefully. “I’ve always thought,” he said, “that there was only one problem, and everything else is a manifestation of it. We are weaving this incredible web of interdependence around the world – it’s a unique time in history – and we don’t know how to live interdependently.”

We talked about this a lot during our time together in the wedding field in the Green Mountains behind the Trapp Family Lodge. “The human race is a young species,” Peter said later. “We haven’t found our place. It’s only recently the case that how we act truly affects people and other species all over the globe. We had a local place where we had social rules that worked reasonably well, but now rather suddenly our place is the whole planet. We are going to have to find ways (and soon) to expand our awareness to be commensurate with our impact.”

These challenging thoughts from Peter raise the question of whether we can find the deeper pools under the roiling surfaces of our differences and connect a group in a collective awareness. Can we then identify the even deeper currents that might eventually connect multiple groups in an awareness of their fundamental interdependence?

success

What constitutes success in a difficult dialogue, how do we know it when we see it, and might our conventional notions of success be utterly wrong?

Two years ago, on the Wellesley campus we hosted eight Tibetan nuns who spent two weeks in our art museum (attended closely by large audiences) painstakingly crafting a colorful sand mandala, a symbol of compassion. When it was complete (and it was exquisite), they swept it up into urns, walked them in a procession down to our lake while chanting Buddhist prayers, and released the piles of bright sand from a footbridge into the brook.

In doing this unusual work, they explained to us, they were carving out a small space for peace, holding the complexity and the pain of the whole world by maintaining an ancient tradition with reverence and discipline. Although this sort of “intervention” (not a word they would recognize) runs completely counter to Western notions of causality, it struck

me as analogous to being part of an orchestra whose wind section has been blown out. If the rest of the orchestra can go on playing, then the winds will have a place to which to return when they are able.

What if the most we can offer in a crisis is simply to do our part to keep the music playing? What if all we can do is our best with what we have? If, as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. used to say, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that,” is it possible to conserve the light and sustain the love by doing the intentional work of holding a space for sanity and peace? And how would we know that our efforts weren’t futile? Do we think our way into a new way of living; or do we live our way into a new way of thinking?

Those are my seven questions and they are really only one question framed in seven slightly different ways, all of us are living now: *What am I called to do now, what is mine to bring to the relentless violence in the world?*

Many of Dr. King’s teachings were prescient on this very question, and I want to end with a quotation from his last presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967:

Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites – polar opposites – so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love.

We’ve got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.

Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time.

I'd like to stop there and hear from you now.

difficult d!alogues

diana chapman walsh is the twelfth President of Wellesley College, the nation's leading college for women. During her tenure at Wellesley, she has emphasized the practice of dialogue as a vital aspect of campus intellectual and cultural life.

difficult dialogues is about creating a culture of dialogue on campus in which the practice of dialogue is recognized, appreciated and practiced both inside and outside the classroom. We hope to do this by: building skills of dialogue among a sizeable number of faculty, staff and students; creating opportunities for the community to engage in dialogue around significant and controversial issues common to us all; and integrating dialogue into a number of academic courses across the curriculum, thus ensuring it's success. For more information, visit our website: www.clarku.edu/difficultdialogues

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