

## **ToP Foundations**

facilitating consciousness of consciousness of consciousness

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## ToP Foundations

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### Introduction

As ICA's resident handyman in 1970, one day I went to repair a broken window in the Matthews apartment on the westside of Chicago. Joe was working on something. He had the TV on and I think the radio was also going. He had books and papers spread out all over the room. Furiously taking notes and writing, he hardly noticed me as I deconstructed and reconstructed his back window.

A lot of what we now call Technology of Participation (ToP) methods emerged from situations like that. Joe Matthews was a man of immense creativity and had an amazing ability to translate the extremely dense and esoteric language of the academics into elegantly simple steps, clear visual images and plain language. I am using Joe, because he was the driver. He was on a continuous journey of exploration in many areas. One of his beliefs was that it is necessary to enable people to move forward in spirit formation as well as in visionary and practical planning. His son, John, once said to me that beyond "Joe the Myth", he was "just an old man who works really hard."<sup>1</sup>

Joe obviously did not work alone all the time and much of the initial formation of what we know of ToP today came out of team teaching. Colleagues describe Joe and other professors riffing off each other with questions and ideas as they led classroom discussions and inquiries into theology and philosophy in the 50's and 60's.

Unfortunately, most of the early work that laid the foundations and pathways toward ToP methodology was not documented in writing and is now shrouded in the mists of time. The preference was for existential grounding over traditional academic discipline. The focus was on human thinking, acting and being in the world.

Those of us who were not there at the time have the results and have to make educated guesses at how we got where we are today. Although it is necessary to look deeply into the past, this paper is not an attempt to create a history of events and developments. The chronology and process through which these ideas formed a methodology is, I believe, virtually impossible to reconstruct. While it would provide us insight, we must take a different approach. It would be better to think of this paper as a report on an anthropological expedition into a body of knowledge.

This paper is focused entirely on understanding the central ideas that provide the foundation for ToP methodology as it is used today. It is an attempt to discover the roots of ToP methodology and the sources for the understandings and practices.

I obviously had to make some *back bearings*<sup>2</sup> in order to illuminate some of the foundations ToP as a distinct methodological approach. When I asked David McClesky about the roots of ToP methods, the first sentence that emerged from his lips was. "This is a phenomenological method." That wasn't entirely fresh news, but it did provide me with a focus. He suggested looking at the work of Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre. John Baggett suggested that the work of Rudolph Bultman and his approach to demythologizing was an important part of the formation of this methodology. Several others have helped by asking question and suggesting connections to explore.

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<sup>1</sup> John Matthews said this to me with read fondness when we worked together in 1971. He held Joe in high regard and loved him.

<sup>2</sup> From John LeCarre's "Smiley" novels in which George Smiley and Connie Sachs explore the life history of Karla, the Soviet spymaster, to understand his current actions and predict his future moves.

I have followed the clues I have been given and some that have appeared along the way. It is a bit like the conversation over the sanity of Hamlet. In the play, it is ambiguous and, since Shakespeare is not available for interviews, we are left to formulate our best understanding. In a way, I think this will remain an uncompleted task, because, without a doubt, additional memories will surface and new developments will take shape.

ToP facilitation methodology is built upon foundations of many disciplines. Since many of the key sources are philosophical and theological, I will explore them along with roots that reach into sociology, psychology, education and cognition. This is, by its very nature, a complex, tangled business with many connections and inter-relationships. It is absolutely non-linear and the many elements are entirely dynamically related. I am going to stretch the elastic far enough to see the pattern of the weave. In this case, to see patterns within the complex of ideas, assumptions, interpretations, processes and procedures that make up the ToP body of knowledge and practice. Where have these ideas come from? What do we have now? Where can they take us?

It is likely that not all of these philosophical insights explored below were self-consciously evoked in the development of ToP methods. Many were probably in the academic atmosphere as assumptions applied to the particular situations that the methods were designed to address. However, it is still valuable to recognize their source.

## What Does it Mean to be Profoundly Human?

As noted by Joop van Arendonk<sup>3</sup> in 1986, this has been one of ICA's perennial questions. Along with its more practical sibling, "What does it mean to do development?" these two questions have driven ICA's work.

### The Self is a Relation

One of the earliest and key sources for what we know as ToP methods came for the work of Soren Kierkegaard. This 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish theologian was one of the earliest to move toward what we know now as phenomenology and existentialism. We begin with the paragraphs from *Sickness unto Death*.

"Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that relation (which accounts for it) that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not that relation, but (consists in the fact) that the relation relates itself to its own self."<sup>4</sup>

At the end of that section, he concludes:

"This then is the formula which describes the self when despair is completely eradicated - by relating it to itself and by willing itself to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power which posited it."<sup>5</sup>

The first quote is like a plate of spaghetti in its interwoven phraseology. The second one is a bit easier to navigate. For the purpose of understanding this idea in a simpler form, the two quotes were combined giving us the sentence ToP veterans reel off from memory. This sentence is a construction designed to make the central idea clearer.

"The self is a relation, which in relating it to itself and willing itself to be itself, is grounded transparently in the power which posits it."<sup>6</sup>

Much clearer, but it is still a very complex sentence. To deconstruct it for the sake of clarity, it contains a beginning, an end and a clause in the middle.

- First clause - "The self is a relation,"
- Central clauses - " which in relating it to itself and willing itself to be itself,"
- Final clause - "is grounded transparently in the power which posits it."

With the beginning and end of that long sentence, he's saying that the fully realized, authentic self is grounded in the power that gives life to the self and places it in its situation. On its own, it is a declarative statement that says what the self is and illuminates its own transcendent significance. We will focus on the phrase in the centre of that sentence, "which in relating it to itself and willing itself to be itself" as one of the major reference points in the foundation for ToP methodology, This phrase describes the activity leading to transcendence.

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<sup>3</sup> van Arandonk, Joop, Unpublished talk given to ICA in its council meeting in 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Soren Kierkegaard writing as "Anti Climacus"- *The Sickness unto Death* – Translated by Walter Lowrie – Princeton University Press 1941 – Originally published in 1848

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> This is the reformulated sentence as it has been commonly used in ICA circles.

There are two movements, actions or steps in the process. We don't just run out and become a fully realized "self" straight away. There is no instant spirit in a box, just add water, here. For Kierkegaard, it's a two-act play and, they are acts. He uses spirit and self as very active words, because they represent activities the self does.

- Act 1 - the self *relates itself to itself*.
- Act 2 - the self *wills itself to be itself*.

In Act 1, the self faces the reality of itself in its personal and social context. We look our life right in the face and acknowledge our situation as it is, stripped of any pretense or illusion. It is our real life we look at, our real situation. If the illusion is not stripped away or popped like a balloon, we are relating to the illusory web we have spun around ourselves. It is not an easy thing to do and often takes a lot of time; plenty of prods and is sometimes triggered by a crisis or the surfacing of an existential question in our lives. We say yes to our situation. John Baggett, in "*Times of Tragedy and Moments of Grace*", talks about this step as "the willingness to face reality."

In Act 2, the self actually embraces reality and, stepping beyond acknowledgement, affirms one's real situation and decides to live in that reality. We bring the major pivot points in our lives into alignment. Our foundational understandings become related to the every detail of conscious life. Our values are reflected in our thinking, organization and action. Baggett calls this act "the grace to embrace reality."

When we go through those movements or processes, we become connected with or grounded in a power that is greater than our self. As a Christian theologian, Kierkegaard, although not articulating the name, is talking about the Christian God. No question about it. Had the same thing been expressed from another religious perspective, the last phrase may be expressed differently. Perhaps not. To self-consciously live one's way through this life journey is to live an authentic life.

### **Being – Self - Spirit**

This little, complex bit of phraseology points to the reason Kierkegaard is seen as one of the earliest to introduce phenomenology and existentialism into the way humans see and relate to themselves and their world. In the late 1840's, this was truly revolutionary thinking. Descartes and Kant both focused on articulating the essence of what it is to be human by examining humans as entities. This approach is, in some real ways, an exercise in psychology, anthropology and sociology that produces descriptive generalizations about the human character.

Seeing realization of the self as a process entirely in the hands of each individual that must be resolved internally and acted out externally was a departure from views related to fate and destiny. We must, Kierkegaard tells us, focus on our existence itself rather than the human qualities and characteristics that make us up.

I have always thought of myself as a guy descended from European peasants, born to a Midwest US farm family with a certain history, shaped by specific influences, possessing certain characteristics and abilities and beliefs. I can be described physically, historically, psychologically and sociologically. Any perceptive observer can say a lot about any individual. That description can be exhaustive and detailed. It also changes from time to time as the circumstances of my life change.

Kierkegaard says,

"Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> SK Sickness Unto Death

Here he is making an important distinction between “man” (the human person) and the “self.” “Man,” He is saying that the self that I am is not located in any description of my external characteristics. The self cannot be described like individuals, rocks, rivers or furniture. To be a self, in Kierkegaard’s terms, is to make our own existence the object of our thinking, relate to it and to make choices about it. He says our essence lies in our existence. We are aware of and involved in shaping our existence.

Martin Heidegger echoes this thought when he says we have focused our attention in the wrong place. Philosophy has focused on all the beings in the world, including the “world” itself, but has not been asking about “being” itself. We have created categories and generalizations in the disciplines of theology, philosophy, sociology and psychology to describe various entities and we’ve done an amazing job of it, but we have not brought our attention to the nature of being itself.

The self, he says, “does not have the character of an entity.”<sup>8</sup> He says rather than thinking about and describing ‘entities’, we must focus on the being within. It’s not being any particular sort of person or our personal history or qualities, but the interior beingness that gives definition to what it means to be human. I, the person, am the vehicle through which my ‘self’ navigates the world.

He calls this self “Dasein.”

“To work out the question of being adequately, we must make an entity – the inquirer – transparent in his own being. The very asking of this question is an entity’s mode of Being; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about – namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of Being we shall denote with the term “Dasein.”<sup>9</sup>

Literally translated from German, it is “there-being or “here-being.” Rendered in English usage, it becomes, “being-here.” He, along with several others, used these hyphenated phrases to indicate a single reality that is formed by the relationship among multiple ideas. It is a way of expressing a complex concept through exposing its elements. He talked about Dasein as “the being for whom its being is an issue.” It is what it means to be human, but not simply a living, breathing one. A sponge in the ocean lives and breathes, but is not self-conscious in the way humans are self-conscious. He is pointing to that dimension of being human that has the capacity to “ask the question of Being”<sup>10</sup>, to “project its own possibility.”<sup>11</sup> He is talking about the dimension of myself that is conscious of itself as a self-aware being and is aware of that consciousness. He says Dasein is “the being that we are ourselves.”

The *there* he talks about is this world, tangibly, concretely in this very situation. He used the term, “Being-in-the-world” to say that what it means to be human is to exist in the literal, physical here and now world all around us. He sees it as a single statement, a unity. He breaks it down even further to say that; “Being-in” is not as simple as ‘being-in-something’ as water is in a glass. It is not that we are side-by-side with the world observing it from a safe distance. In using the term, ‘being-in-the-world’, he’s saying our inner self and identity and the world we live in are one interwoven reality. Our ‘Being–in-the-world’ is given. To be is to be in the world. He urges us to discover for ourselves, in our own situation and circumstances, the nature of being. He pushes away the kind of inquiry that creates abstract categories and moves toward metaphysics and teleology. The focus is on the reality of our existence – our being. The approach is descriptive and ontological.

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<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, Martin – Being and Time

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger – Being and Time

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger – Being and Time – Translated by Macquarrie and Robinson – Harper Collins 1962 Original published by Neomarius Verlag 1926

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

Our beingness, the inner, self-consciousness we are, is grounded in reality. We think, we wish, we do things, produce things, attend to things, make use of things, let go of things, worry about things, accomplish things, give things up and 'be-in-the-world' in multiple ways. Heidegger says the fundamental nature of Dasein is care or concern. It is, he says, the way Dasein makes itself visible in the world. We are driven by our cares.

"Being-here" is being in relationship. Joe Mathews often said, "We are our relationships" and "we are a bundle of relationships." The term relationship is used in 2 distinct and very important ways. One is a 'givenness' that describes our situation and one is a matter of self-conscious choice.

Because I exist in the world, I find myself connected with and related to that which I encounter. All of these relationships are simple givens. Heidegger calls those relationships 'Being-present-at-hand-with' and talks about entities that encounter each other in the world. That does mean I am related to my family and friends as well as my barber, my government, my bank and a myriad of others. Those real relationships and the form they take are how I can be described as an entity. That's my history, psychology and sociology. Far more than the mere sum of my connections, I am a very complex algorithm of my relationships.

My being-here, my self or spirit is something entirely different. This is where the second use of the term comes into play. The self that I am *is seen* as I relate to the entity that I am and to other entities. Kierkegaard says,

“. . . the self is not that relation, but (the self consists in the fact) that the relation relates itself to its own self.”

To simplify that part of Kierkegaard's sentence, let me restate it as, "the self consists in the fact that the relation relates itself to its own self."

Relating is used here as a description of an activity; something we do with self-consciousness and intention. The 'self' or 'Dasein' is the being that self-consciously chooses one's way of relating to one's situation – the people, activities, questions and concerns around us. To be human is to be a self-reflective choice maker. We self-consciously construct our own relationship or attitude toward our given situation at any given time. It is something that we do as we move through the events and encounters that make up our lives.

The result is the current "bundle" of self-conscious choices or relationships I have taken to my situation. They help shape my sociological profile. Choices, decisions, attitudes and the actions that spring from these connections with others give shape and texture to each life in the world. They appear in the nature of the relationships with family, friends and the world. We decide to think in certain ways, do and say certain things and decide to be in certain ways. We continually reflect and re-forge those decisions and the relationships. It is a living, organic, dynamical life process, definitely not a once-off thing. When authentic self-reflection and choice making take place, the self emerges. That is when the self is seen. Our profiles change, however subtly, as we make these choices.

The always-present capacity for active self-consciousness, to perceive, reflect, interpret and make choices is our being. It is a dynamic force that is alive. It is our life, our spirit. It is the foreground and the background. We are that intensified consciousness, the relationship-taking capacity toward our givenness at any given moment in any situation. That is the self, the spirit. It is what it means, "to be."

ICA's traditional happy birthday song begins, "We celebrate your being-here." We're celebrating the active, self-reflective, choice making consciousness that has shown up here and now in this unique human person.

## Dynamics of being

Jean Paul Sartre says we are “made up” of two kinds of being or our being takes two key forms. He talks of two ‘regions’ of being.

### “Being-in-itself – *l’etre en-soi*”

“Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what it is.”<sup>12</sup>

We are given life and consciousness. We exist as a unique consciousness. We are exactly who we show up in the world being. Being-in-itself is our very existence, the dynamical totality of our givens at any moment, that which is. It is what it is. It is substantial and real. It is our circumstances – the facts of our lives – the events that happen in our world. It is our history; the relationships we have taken to things. Our situation changes and we become aware of new aspects of it as we explore our lives, but our life is our life. It is the objective reality of our lives at any given moment. It’s my profile and my history and my yearnings. This is me as an entity; a human person.<sup>13</sup>

### “Being-for-itself - *l’etre pour-soi*.”

“The being of consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question.”<sup>14</sup>

We live in the world in our own situation impacted by the events around us. This happens at the most mundane and specific level as well as, and in dynamical interaction with a “meta” or global level. That experience triggers within us an internal crisis and raises questions for us at the most existential level. We seek to escape from those questions, and we can take an authentic relationship to them. Being-for-itself, the self-conscious, relationship-taking dimension of our life is activated. It is non-substantial, fluid, moving and changing in dynamic ways related to the situation and choices we make. It is, as Sartre puts it, a “nothing”; in that it is pure possibility. It is pure dynamic activity. Being-for-itself, - “*pour-soi*” is consciousness and allows us to transcend the givens of our situation. It is the self-conscious relationship I take to the objective reality of my life. It is, as Kierkegaard says, the relating itself. It is our lived lives.

David McClesky, wrote a couple of key sentences in an email message in response to a question about these terms.

“*En Soi* is the thing or the self in itself. *Pour Soi* is the attitude we assume toward the thing or self in itself. In our methodology, the first *en soi/pour soi* interaction becomes the *en soi* for the next relationship to one’s self and so on.”

Sartre says:

“The appearance of the *for-itself* or *absolute event* refers indeed to the effort of an *in-itself* to found itself; it corresponds to an attempt on the part of being to remove contingency from its being. But this attempt results in the nihilation of the *in-itself*, because the *in-itself* cannot found itself without introducing the *self* or a reflective, nihilating reference into the absolute identity of its being and consequently degenerating into *for-itself*.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre – Being and Nothingness – Washington Square Press - 1941

<sup>13</sup> This is distinctly different from Paul Tillich’s use of the term, “being-itself”, a term he used to point to the ultimate or God; in the sense the term is use in the monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Sartre was using the term, being-in-itself.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre – Being and Nothingness – Washington Square Press - 1941

<sup>15</sup> Sartre – Being and Nothingness



If we are to alter our relationship to our situation, our current identity and sense of our self has to be let go; so 'being-for-itself' can take the stage. It is only being-for-itself that can do that. We die a little death or step into an empty space every time we contemplate, make and act on a self-conscious choice. We continually recreate our self, our beingness all the time. These dynamics of being interact all the time because being is alive. Our being is constantly striving to be a self. As it does, the 'in-itself', our situation in the world, changes. It dies and is reborn in a new form. It is the activity of self-conscious living. Sartre says we do this as a "presence-to-self" in that we have the capacity to stand aside from our selves, observe what we are feeling, thinking, doing and choosing as we do it.

## Forming a Methodology

John Epps says, in *Bending History – Talks of Joseph Wesley Matthews*, that Joe “understood that his task as a practicing theologian was to uncover the human meaning – the “so what” of Christian doctrines.”<sup>16</sup> He goes on to say that Joe’s aim, as a theologian, was to, “recover Christian doctrine and poetry as illuminative of profound human living in the contemporary world.” It’s the little phrase, ‘profound human living’ that leads to a crafted approach to living one’s life. Joe was on a continual search for ways to enable people to live lives with deep purpose and aligning their ways of thinking, organizing and acting with their most profound understandings.

This search has been and continues to be a very multi-disciplinary affair. Quite naturally, many of the roots came from deep examination of Christian theology and Western philosophy. In order to form a coherent approach to meaning making, it was necessary to be comprehensive and to develop an integrated approach that included human wisdom from many related disciplines. The most notable have been psychology, sociology, organizational behaviour, education and the cognitive sciences and literature and the arts.

## Ontology

“We assert now that *being is the proper and sole theme of philosophy*. Negatively, this means that philosophy is not a science of beings but of being or, as the Greek expression goes, *ontology*.”<sup>17</sup>

“You probably have noticed that the way I come at life is always to begin with the “is” and not with the “ought.” Each person and each authentic community forges their “oughts” out of the concrete “ises.”<sup>18</sup>

Edmund Husserl made the point that philosophy could and should be a description of experience; focusing on the things themselves. For Heidegger, this meant understanding that all experience is situated in a world and in ways of being. We exist in a network of experience and relationships. Heidegger took Husserl’s understanding that consciousness is always intended *toward* something and is always *about* something and said all experience is grounded in “care.” We show up in the world and we show up with care – our consciousness is always about something, things that are important to us. It is not that we should care. There is no moral imperative to care. Care is an indicative – the most foundational dimension of what it means to be human. To be is to care.

That care can be described, because it always appears as care about something in our situation. It is within the multitude of the real cares in this world that each of us discovers what it means to be human. Rudolph Bultman, who drew heavily on Heidegger and the phenomenologists for methodology, describes care in a series of developmental stages ranging from the most basic care for sustenance to our sense of duty and purpose.<sup>19</sup> He says we are driven into life in the form of these cares and it is life itself that leaves them finally unfulfilled. Yet they remain, and we find ourselves focused on things we care about. They may seem internal, like the quality of our character and they may seem external like a search for sustenance or understanding. Heidegger would say they are all that to which Dasein relates.

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<sup>16</sup> *Bending History*

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, Martin - *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1954) Published by Indiana University Press, 1975

<sup>18</sup> *Bending History – Talks of Joseph Wesley Matthews – John Epps, General Editor – Resurgence Publishing - 2005*

<sup>19</sup> Bultman, Rudolph – *Essays: Philosophical and Theological – SCM Press, London, 1955*

## Time and History

The relation between existence and time is, perhaps one of the most impenetrable and mysterious areas of philosophy. In the final chapter of Heidegger's "Being and Time", he uses 3 key terms.

The first is "Now-no-longer", which is about that which has already happened. He refers to it as "having-beenness" and "What-has-been." It may be perceptions, thoughts, feelings, states of being, events or actions. It is past and it is a realm of what both he and Sartre refer to as "facticity." These things have happened. We relate to them from the present moment.

His second term is "Just-now." He also uses, "Making-present" and "What-is-present." This is the real present – today – this second - a blink and it's gone. This is when things actually happen. This is the realm in which we stand. It is experience.

The "Now-not-yet" or "To-come" or "What-is-to-come" is awaiting realization. It is concerned with those things that have not yet come into being. It is pure, open possibility.

When we reflect on what has happened, we reflect in the 'just-now' about the 'now-no-longer.' When we project what might, should or will happen, we do it in the 'just now' in relation to the 'now-not-yet.' As we make these natural mental leaps, we are in the process of, as Kierkegaard puts it, relating our self to our self. Heidegger talks about it as a natural function of the being of Dasein. He's saying it is a foundational process of human consciousness and calls it, "making-present." That is to say we bring the past and the future into the present. Our recollection and projection happen in the current moment. We cannot live in the future any more than we can live in the past. To try to do so would be a form of pathology. To ignore what has been and blind ourselves to what can be would be equally pathological. To intentionally use the now-no-longer and the now-not-yet is to bring experience and possibility together in the current moment.

## Charting

One of ICA's study methods is "Charting." In one of his graduate study courses, Joe Matthews was introduced to "How to Read a Book"<sup>20</sup> by Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren who describe four levels of reading.

1. Elementary reading, which involves basic reading skills like vocabulary and grammar. At this level, we become literate; so we can understand what is being said.
2. Inspectional reading, which they describe as "skimming systematically." It is a very quick look in order to gain an overview.
3. Analytical reading is reading in depth for the sake of understanding.
4. Syntopical reading or comparative reading in which the reader seeks to analyze a topic through the reading and analysis of several works.

Charting, as we know it, was developed primarily from levels two and three. Without going into great detail, it begins with their level two, skimming the given work and highlighting key words, phrases and ideas.

In the section on analytical reading, Adler and Van Doren advocate creating an outline of a book. Their examples of outlines follow the traditional, vertical format. The special bit of magic that Joe reportedly learned in one of his seminary classes was to turn the page on its side in order to create a horizontal outline or a 'chart.' He introduced the idea of numbering the designated sections. In an essay, one numbers each paragraph in sequence. A horizontal line is drawn a third of the way down the paper and that line is divided into the number of paragraphs in the essay or the chapters of a book. This immediately creates a graphic that allows one to see the whole of the essay in one 'picture.'

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<sup>20</sup> How to Read a Book

The key words and ideas in each paragraph are written under the line. This is done quickly by skimming; so one can get a sense of the whole work. The next major step is to find the major sections within the work. Each section will focus on a distinct topic. The sections are given titles that reflect the major focus or point. Often these sections can be combined; so a long essay may be made up of several major topics and each major topic may be made up of sub-topics. This will provide the reader with a unified image of the major points the author is making in the given work. Finally, the whole work is given a title that summarizes what the author is saying. This has been referred to as a “topical” chart. As Gaely says, speaking of reading the Christian New Testament, “Integrity demands that we attempt to discover, impartially, what Matthew, Mark, Paul, John and Luke have to say – to allow them to speak for themselves.” The Baghavad Gita or the Torah or a novel by James Joyce can be viewed in the same way.

The same work may also be charted functionally. That is to say, one identifies the role and function each part plays in the whole in order to understand the structure of the writer’s thought. This facilitates a deeper understanding of the author’s thought structure. It would be a very useful tool for literary criticism, analysis and interpretation. Likewise, following Adler and Van Doren’s advice, one can create a ‘propositional’ chart. In this form, one works through the sections and states the author’s points in their own words. Finally, one creates what has been called an existential chart in which the reader describes the impact of each part and the whole on their own life. These have been called “levels” in the charting process, as each level reveals more to us.

Joe often talked about charting as a spiritual exercise in which one goes beyond rational study and opens one’s being to the possibility of being profoundly changed. Charting enables a state of openness and we set aside or ‘bracket’ all previous understanding, suspend our assumptions, and prepare to listen. One looks at what is actually being said in order to allow the writer to reveal the new and make an impact on the reader. It is at that point that one is prepared to relate to the work contextually and existentially. The reader allows their being to be altered in the encounter with another and describes the impact of the ideas and the choices they believe they must make.

### **The Seminar Methodology**

The combination of demythologizing and charting led to what has been called the seminar methodology. Its primary use was applied to the group study of books and essays. Briefly, the method involves several steps.

- A seminar begins with an objective text like an essay or a chapter from a book.
- The group creates a topical chart.
- The individuals in the group express their intuitive impressions and reflective responses.
- Together the group explores the context and engages in interpretative dialogue.
- Individuals and, perhaps the group as a whole, determine the transcendent significance for them and their decisions and commitments in relation to the topic.

The charting step begins the seminar with each person creating a chart of the essay. This is usually done solitarily; so each individual does their own work and works through the essay on their own. The facilitator then works with the whole group to create a common topical chart that serves as a point of reference for the rest of the seminar. In this step, individuals share the key words and ideas as well as the way they divided the article into sections as well as their titles for the various parts of the paper. The group is able to quickly grasp the basic content of the article and summarize it. It enables the author to “have their say.”

Following this, group discussion begins and progresses through the sections of the article. The facilitator guides the conversation enabling the participants to explore initial impressions, associations and responses. Once people are clear about what the author is saying and they become conscious of their response, the discussion moves to interpretation. In this stage, the context is explored and individuals express insight into the meaning, significance and implications of the article’s message in relation to their own existential questions. They engage in contextual interpretation. If the group is one that has a

common sense of identity and purpose, they will likely discuss an article as it impacts them and their work together as well as interpreting it as individuals. A group of random individuals, such as a class, will likely focus on the meaning for them individually. The final step involves questions that enable each individual to determine the impact of the ideas on their own lives and make their own decisions in relation to it.

### **The Art Form Method**

These processes are not in any way restricted to the study of academic texts, sacred literature and mythology. They can also be applied to poetry, narrative literature art and music. Susanne Langer explored the human mind's continuous process of meaning making through the power of "seeing" one thing in terms of another. She said there is a basic and pervasive human need to symbolize, to invent meanings, and to invest meanings in one's world. In some cases, meaning is signified through language and some cases, it is expressed through dreams, myths, rituals, visual arts, literature and poetry. She saw power in the arts that can release feeling, insight and vision.

Through art, we are able to 'experience our experience' because of its capacity to trigger reflection. She said, "The arts objectify subjective reality and subjectify outward experience of nature." By nature, she was pointing to our experience in the world. We become conscious in distinct ways in our interaction with the arts. When we interact with art, we participate in a 'trialogue' including the artist, the work and the ourselves as the observers. As we look or listen, we observe not only the work of art, but our own interior responses. We take in the elements and we note our surprise, revulsion or delight. Bringing them to consciousness enables us to more deeply feel the experience and peel back the layers to discover meaning.

Joe and his professional colleagues pioneered in the use of art forms as the concrete beginning point for conversations that enabled participants to see themselves more clearly through interaction with a work of art. Painting, sculpture, poetry, literature, drama and film were all used as gateways to insight, commitment and transcendence. The methodology, in this case, takes the form of a conversation that guides people through the layers of meaning.

Similar to the Seminar Method, it began with something tangible like a poem, a story, a painting, sculpture or a movie. People respond to questions that allow them to articulate their impressions; what they actually heard or saw in the same vein as allowing an author to "have their say." Then, the questions enable you to look just as seriously at your self; your own responses, your feelings, the associations triggered by the work and the personal questions that are raised. That reflection provides the platform of exploring insight and meaning and leads to deeper understanding and substantial commitments. As time went along, the conversation format became known as "the Art Form Conversation."

The seminar methodology, the art form conversation along with contextual lectures, became the basis for courses enabling people to examine their own faith and practice. These same methods, obviously, were used internally as ways of doing everything from theological inquiry to deciding about spending funds on new projects. They also laid the foundations for what would become a unique approach to group facilitation.

### **Modes of Thinking**

To be human is to be capable of thinking things through and understanding, projecting beyond our selves into the future and articulating what we want and intend. Karl Mannheim describes two types of thought, substantial and functional, each with two sub-types, rational and irrational.

Substantial Thought – Gaining understanding and insight into a given topic

- Substantial rationality - Acts of thoughts which reveal insight
- Substantial irrationality – Acts of thought that express impulses, urges, emotions and wishes

Functional Thought - Calculating one's actions

- Functional rationality - Organizing a series of actions to achieve a defined goal
- Functional irrationality - Everything which breaks through and disrupts this functional ordering<sup>21</sup>

These are pure types, none being valued any higher than the others. ToP methods use a phenomenological approach to all these forms of thinking and clearly acknowledge that human subjectivity plays a role beside fact.

In the earliest days, because of the nature of their work, our colleagues placed their focus on what Mannheim calls substantial thought. The purpose was to enable a process of spirit formation through which people would ground the connections between the Christian gospel message and their own life. The intended result of that experience is transcendent insight and understanding and commitment to act out of that understanding. The most lasting artifact of this effort was a 2-day course referred to, most prosaically, as Religious Studies 1. This course was directly focused on understanding the essence of the Christian core message and applying it in one's own life situation. The intent was toward understanding, dialogue and spirit formation.

The same core methodology is applied, in its own way, to functional thought. It was one of the 'giant' steps taken along this journey and it happened quite naturally when the question was raised of how to apply the Gospel message to one's social situation – to be 'being-in-the-world' in an authentic way. The earliest work in this area related to ways clergy could make plans for their own churches and their own accomplishments in ministry. Indeed, the earliest efforts in this area were incorporated into a course for parish leadership. If one sees substantial thought as the 'theoretics' of living in the world, this exploration into functional thought was an intentionally practical focus on how to go about living with authenticity. It sought to apply the same thinking structure to the practical problems of living. ToP facilitation methodology is the form the core methodology takes when it is used in situations of this nature.

### **Constructivism**

ToP methods are constructivist in nature in that they enable people to generate knowledge and meaning from their experience. Constructivism says our grasp of reality is based on reflection on our actual experience. In some cases, we take in information and experience and integrate it into our already established mental framework. We also re-frame our understanding of the external world based on new information and experience. We create our 'world' through our interaction with it. The roots of constructivism are in the work of Jean Piaget. His work was influential in shaping our approach early childhood education as well as our methodological approach in general.

Edmund Husserl, often called the "father of phenomenology, talks about 'Being as Experience.' What he calls the *principle of all principles* goes, "every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originarily offered to us in intuition is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there."<sup>22</sup> That's a long and complex way to say that subjective information has real validity within a given contextual framework.

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<sup>21</sup> Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction – Karl Mannheim – publisher - date

<sup>22</sup> Husserl

In this, he echoes Kierkegaard who, rejecting the essentialism of the day, says, "I always reason from existence, not toward existence, whether I move in the sphere of palpable fact or in the realm of thought. I do not, for example, prove that a stone exists, but some existing thing is a stone." In "Concluding Unscientific Postscript", Husserl says that because our understanding is dependent on the spirit, which we ourselves are, everything is fundamentally subjective. We live with uncertainty, he says, because the kind of absolute certainty often sought is unattainable. We must, therefore, take all of our perceptions, feelings, associations, hopes, fears and desires into account as we approach any topic. In doing so, we construct our world.

## Existentialism

It should be very clear by now that existentialist thought played a major role in shaping the foundations of ToP. Existentialism is a vast and highly complex approach to living and to fully describe it would be a project of its own. To engage in an oversimplification, two major strands of existentialist thought and practice have been woven together to form the foundations of ToP methodology. One flowed through Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre who were 'non-theists' in that they did their work outside the context of religious faith. They were philosophers and along with their existentialistic approaches, they were the phenomenologists who began developing processes of inquiry, understanding, forming conclusions and making choices. The other strand is made up of Christian theologians, including Rudolph Bultman, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and H Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, who adopted an existential approach to the practice of Christianity. They looked to the more secular phenomenologists when they sought a method that would enable them to demythologize and derive existential meaning from scripture. They utilized the insights of the phenomenologists in developing a methodology for the process they called 'demythologizing' sacred literature.

Our colleagues were deep in the heart of that movement. It provided the heart and soul of work for years to come. True to the spirit and practice of the demythologizing process was the understanding that each person had to do it for themselves, in their own most specific context. As a result, academics and clergy were engaging in a new form of dialogue. As these movements do, it began with a very small core and expanded throughout the Christian community in North America and Europe. They dived into an inquiry that resulted in an entirely new way of understanding and practicing one's most foundational understanding of what it means to be human. They took the advice of the phenomenologists and developed not only a cohesive 20<sup>th</sup> century theology, but they refined the phenomenological approach itself.

This is an immense 'body of knowledge' and I can only provide a very brief overview. My intent is to examine the core 'ideas' without exploring the many and very important nuances in depth. It is, I believe, this core that provides much of the foundation for the practice of ToP methodology. It is the most basic assumptions about life that we use as foundations for our values, mental models, and actions.

For many, these understandings are expressed most fully in a faith context. While the 'driver' was a search for foundational understandings made from within a specific context, it was done for the sake of how that meaning was expressed in one's lived life in the world regardless of one's faith, external conditions or situation. It was a search for the core characteristics of what it means to be human.

It must be recognized that all of these are dynamical elements that provide us with our ontological foundation. This is a response to Dr. van Arandouk's question, "What is it to be human? This is, as William Cozart pointed out in his 1967 essay on cybernetics, "to examine ourselves as a species."<sup>23</sup> As van Arandouk said, we have dedicated our efforts over the years to asking those foundational questions of 'being-human' and 'being-in-the-world-with-purpose'. They arise out of our work and are matured by our application and learning.

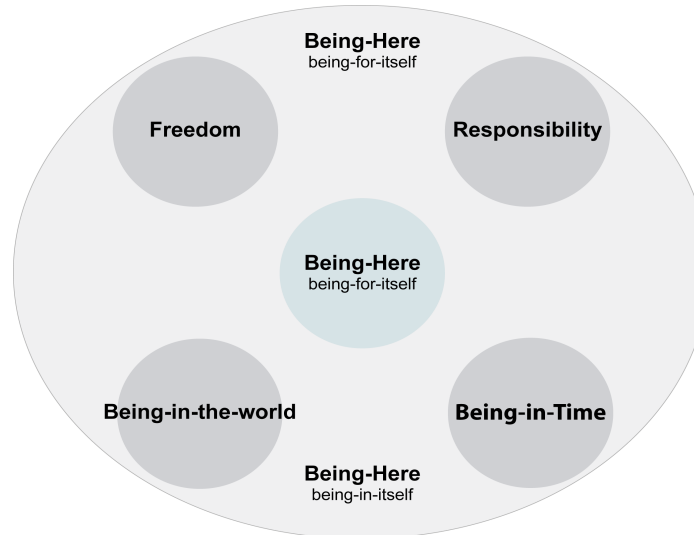
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<sup>23</sup> Cozart in IE '67

We have, over the years, created many models to represent what it is to be human. Each of them has been done from a unique perspective with specific focus and has been done by applying a disciplined approach with integrity. Each has contributed to our understanding and practice. This attempt at an image is yet another attempt from another perspective. As with all models, it is temporal and must change as we explore, experiment, practice and learn.

Building these models and trying to make sense of our situation in the world is a search. What we find in that search are some basic aspects of what it is to be human. It is difficult to isolate them, because they can only be seen as they function in a networked, interactive, dynamical complex. We find our being in their interaction. Isolating them is only creating a mental model. This is what makes modeling it a challenge.

This is one reality. The 'field' of our being. The self is the active 'being-for-itself'. It is the relating, choice making self. It is the core and, yet it is only activated in and by our real situation, 'being-in-itself.' Its only content is our real situation.



We exist as who we are in the here and now. We are grounded in this set of relationships and in this moment. This is 'being-in-itself', our real situation. We exist as ontologically free beings acting in profound responsibility. That is 'being-for-itself', self or spirit.

## Being-Here

Each one of us is a unique being and yet, that's only the surface of it. We are not only 'unique-among-others', we are each a unique consciousness. We are not simply conscious; we know we are conscious – we are self-aware. We are conscious of our consciousness. To be fully human is to be conscious of all that – conscious of consciousness of consciousness. As I work on a cabinetry project, I recognize that I am contented. I see that I am aware of my recognition. I become aware that my contentment is an expression of my pleasure in making something with my hands for another person. I see that is aligned with my desire to create beautiful things with my hands for others. We see all that. We can see ourselves being conscious of ourselves. It's what we call awake. To be awake is to have asked the question of my being. That question, raised in the midst of and from the experience of my real life in the world awakens consciousness.

We see ourselves. We experience our experience. We relate to our situation. We relate to others. We make choices. We make commitments. We do it all. In truth, it's a hassle. One thing after another and every one changes the field; so you start from ground zero every time. Taking a relationship to one's circumstances, opportunities and possibilities is no easy task. Self-consciousness is not for sissies. It's tough to just shut it off, although many try. It's easier to play mind games that provide escape. Keep things light and don't look under the rugs or behind the fridge. Self-consciousness is a choice; one that is made over and over as we move through our lives. To be human is to be intentionally self-conscious.



This is a solitary affair. In this case, it is exactly 'about me' as the unique individual I am. It's all about me. It's about each one of us. We are each distinct and unique. It has been said that one of the major characteristics of humanness is that we are each finally alone. It is true. We alone can live our own lives. We may walk in stride with others, but we do so as our own self. We may be born and die in the presence of others, but it is each of us is born alone and will die alone. No one can die another's death. Between the two, we live alone, 'alone-in-the-presence-of-others', if you will. Each of us must relate to our own situation and only I can acknowledge my own situation. I can get help and advice, but only I can choose how to relate to it. Only I can live my life. To be human is to assume responsibility for living one's life.

### **Being in-the-World**

We exist here, on this planet, in this place, in this society, this economy, this cultural context. We are grounded in many specific ways. Those are the factors that condition the field upon which we play out our lives. That we live in this world as it is 'facticity.' To be human is to acknowledge that this is my real situation.

We are related – connected in complex and subtle ways with the world. To exist in the world is to be an entity that is connected with other entities; individuals and groups and institutions and all that goes along with them. We are all part of many networks of relationship that range from the most formal and legal to the most implicit and unstated. We are social, yet still solitary, beings and exist in a web of relationships. We are in families, belong to groups have employers and employees and we have multiple networks of friends, relatives and colleagues, many of them intersecting. It is not a matter of choice. The choice comes in relating, as a 'self' to all my relationships. To be human is to recognize that we must self-consciously relate to all that is.

As self-conscious beings-in-the-world, we are driven into life by care. We are driven to basic sustenance, to close bonds and love, to truth and beauty, to duty and integrity. It's not like we are pedaling a bike here or trying. It just happens. We seek. We move forward. We are drawn toward the light of the vision we project. Our vision drives us into the future. It is a natural, ontological dimension of what it is to be human. It's a rush. It is filled with a sense of hope and possibility. Indeed, these very realities contribute to the core of what it is to be human. To be human is to move forward the evolutionary process.

Living-in-the-world reveals to us that we are limited, constrained, blocked and thoroughly grounded on this earth. We never seem to get enough and, indeed, we cannot, because we are ontologically driven into life. There are walls, barriers and obstacles appearing in our every path. Our best intentions are left as road kill. To be human is to acknowledge that this world is full of barriers and unfulfilled desires is the world I will live in.

As we live our lives, we reflect and make adjustments. We listen to others and learn from our experience. We shape our beingness in the world. We assess our situation in a myriad of ways, many of which are unconscious and we respond. We scan our intuitions. We build models. We seek consistency in our thinking, organizing and acting. We press ourselves to be-in-the-world in a positive, creative, evolutionary way. As we do it with self-conscious intention, we give shape to our relationship to the world. To be human is to live an intentional life.

## Being-in-Time

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. The clock just keeps on. Another 'just-now' becomes a 'now-no-longer.' Blink and it's faded, the beginnings of a memory. It is, because it happened as an event in time, still a facticity, even though it is past. As we reflect on it, we reflect on something real. We look into the future to catch a glimpse of what the 'now-not-yet' will look like. Alas, we can't touch it, yet we can capture an impression of it in this moment and design our actions in the now to bring that future into being. This is how we live our life, moment by passing moment. We live "in-the-stream" of time, self-conscious entities, anchored in this moment. To be human is to acknowledge that this is the moment in which I will live my life.

It is a 'taken-for-grantedness' that history is created. Our actions on a micro and macro level shape our world and our situation. As we develop strategies and approaches to the world's socio-economic-cultural challenges, we look for, catalyze and see changes over a relative sweep of time. We know it. We see it. We know we are not fated to evolve in a specifically predetermined manner. Nobody could have made this up. We know, like we have never known in human history that we can make a profound impact on the way the world is shaped in the future. To be human is to participate intentionally in shaping one's future and the future of the planet.

The existential problem related to time, that which most pointedly raises the question of meaning for us, is in facing our contingency – our death. It's lights out. When we die, we die dead. Death, of course, is not really the problem. It will happen. The question is raised in the midst of our lives. What's my contribution? What did I achieve? What did I leave behind? What am I for? It is the sort of question that keeps tapping on your shoulder, reminding you to be human is to be self-conscious about what you intend with your life.

To create and give shape to history is the ultimate relationship to time. You step beyond your own localized realm and set your sight on the comprehensive. What do you want this world to be like in the future? What directions do we want to see gain momentum in our society. What is the 'new' that needs to be created and put in place to make the world a more humane place?

If you look at the whole sweep of time and the formation of social structures and conventions, there is a sociological "No-Longer", a "Not-Yet" and a "Now." In the eternal quest toward a humane society, understandings, relationships, systems and structures that are formed, understood and have become static are the "no-longer." A paradigm out of synch with what is actually going on in the world creates social problems. It may be outdated systems that no longer truly address the needs of the people. It may be structures that have been altered, corrupted and perverted to the point they no longer function properly. They may be based on understandings that are based on the more formalistic paradigm of a 'pre-modern' worldview that has become archaic. We may find 'gold' in our experience. We may find examples of highly useful and humanizing systems and structures.

We do know that to create history is to stand beyond what has been established. There is a kind of 'no man's land' that is a radical present. We need to analyze and learn from our experience as individuals, as communities as organizations and as societies. As we do that, we bring the past – "no-longer" to this moment – "now" and give it meaning. We work out what elements of our history we are prepared to let go as not useful and what we want to retain as we look into our future.

We must also stand before and look into the not-yet, that which is before us and beyond us. The not-yet is the realm of projections, dreams, hopes and possibilities. We live in the in-between, the nothingness of the present. Our task as self-conscious beings is to stand in the now, beyond the known and stable, and act responsibly to bring about the best possible future.

To be engaged in bringing the future into being with self-consciousness and intention is a crucial aspect of authenticity. To step beyond what is accepted, known and structured to create new understandings, structures and systems for the future is a major marker of what it means to be truly human. To be human is to step beyond the just-now and live in the gap of invention between what has been and what will be. The ultimate form of authenticity is then to serve, and act, on behalf of all.

## **Being-in-Freedom**

We are given life. We show up in the world and in time as a consciousness. We don't have a say in it. We just appear. Tabula rasa.

We live in our world and in our moment. Some things go well. We're moving. Things are moving into alignment. Our projects are going well. We're happy and engaged. We feel being rippling in us like chi. Some times we discover our limits in extremely painful ways. We crash. We didn't get done on time. We could not maintain the relationship. The world turned flat. Our most cherished images and beliefs are revealed as illusory. The 'rules' don't fit. Truth crumbles to dust. What we thought was our ground is nothing. We're here, standing over nothing, no reference points and no map. We're surrounded on all sides by the fog of ambiguity. We see no way to move. We sense our aloneness and inadequacy most intensely.

We recognize, in those moments, that we are, surprisingly to us, because we thought it was a moral affair, still alive and struggling. The fact that we still exist, care, reflect and choose says we have life. We are, again and again given life without reference to what may be happening in our local, external selves. We are affirmed by life itself as we appear in this moment as the unique human beings we are. To be human is to say yes to ourselves, just as we are.

It is not the ragged, flawed, confused local self, being-in-itself that walks around in the world we are really talking about. That's the person we be in the world. It is "the real you" we are interested in entirely. We are talking here about 'being-for-itself', our inner, deepest self, the core of our existence. It observes, reflects, significates and relates to our situation. We can observe it or brood over it or ignore it or defy it or a multitude of other ways we try to escape living before the reality of saying yes. To be human is to say yes to our being a free-being-in-the-world.

To be human is to be pure possibility. We are unbound from our past and are free to live beyond guilt and shame. We live, every moment as a blank page to be written by each of us. And we do exactly that. We imagine and dream. We hope and plan. We create visions that guide us in the now as we move toward them. To be human is to be oriented toward the future - toward possibility - to see life as pure possibility. To be human is to stand before a totally open future and be free to make choices about it.

## **Being-in-Responsibility**

As we discover that we live before an open future, we recognize that we are both obligated by the connections and relationships we have and we are, at the same time, utterly and completely free. It is this realization that leads us to the possibility of responsibility.

To be is to be related. To be related is to form mutual connections, bonds and covenants. We are 'being-with-others' in a myriad of ways. We make promises and agreements and we exist in a maze of overt and unarticulated expectations. To be obligated is to live in a relative state of inter-dependence in the world. We are grounded by our obligations. To be human is to acknowledge our relatedness in the world.

To be obligated is also not simple. By itself, it is stifling and restrictive. I am caught in an uncompromising web of expectations, demands, legal and social strictures, promises, schedules and commitments. One truly feels quite the opposite of free and it is always tempting to allow others to manage the parameters of my existence. That being the case, I can escape my freedom by un-self-consciously navigating my way from the cradle to the grave without making any meaningful choices by allowing others to make them for me. In that, I literally hand my freedom over to others. It is in the midst of this, when it appears as a life crisis, that the real possibility of responsibility emerges. Being connected and obligated does not, in any way, diminish our freedom. Indeed, it provides an opportunity to relate to our situation that is responsible. We live as free people in a world with a multiplicity of tensions. To be human is to stand before all of one's obligations as a free person and make responsible choices about them.

We are driven by care. Our care is multi-dimensional and multi-focal. It, also, just is. As we exist in the world, our consciousness is always directed toward something, ranging from the most basic of human needs to the most transcendent. Our obligations exist not simply because we exist, but because we exist as beings whose care reaches to others. As we envision the future and expand our scope to the widest range, what begins as care is transformed into compassion for others and purpose. To be human is to intentionally direct one's compassion,

As we encounter the possibility of individual responsibility, we recognize that our collective future is a process of evolutionary unfoldment; so we search for appropriate actions that will shape our future as a society in a positive way. To be human is process events of consciousness in ways that lead to meaningful insight and responsible action.

As we look through all of these, the central, core, defining characteristic of human beings is the capacity for choosing that kind of self-conscious relationship to our given situation. It is about making our world and ourselves. For Heidegger, it is all about giving shape and texture to our being-here-ness. To circle back to Kierkegaard, we have the possibility of taking a relationship to our situation. A person is "a praxis" as Sartre puts it; or as Kierkegaard says, a "synthesis." I am one who is solidly grounded in the very tangible realities of my actual situation and the one who is dynamic and can step beyond the facticity of my existence into the world of possibility and give my life and my world their own distinctive shapes.

## Phenomenological Inquiry

This model provides us with profound complex reasons for facilitation as an operating modality of acting in the world and the core of an approach to the practice of facilitation. The process through which this body of insight was distilled guided and was shaped by the inquiry itself. As we've noted, those engaged in demythologizing utilized the insights from phenomenology in developing a process of distilling meaning from sacred literature. Heidegger says the word phenomenology is rooted in a combination of phenomenon and logos. He says it means ". . . to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself."<sup>24</sup> Extended, that sentence looks like this.

- **let that** - Our consciousness is directed toward something. It is that thing itself we examine.
- **which shows itself** – We are talking about something with characteristics we can perceive and describe.
- **be seen from itself** – It is to be seen as it is.
- **in the very way in which it shows itself from itself** – It must show its characteristics in a manner consistent with its own modality and in its own context.

### The Basic Steps of Phenomenology

Husserl describes three steps:

- Assuming the transcendental phenomenological attitude,
- Focusing consciousness directly on an example of the phenomenon or 'object' to be explored. With the help of free imaginative variation, intuiting the essence of the phenomenon being investigated
- Describing the essence that has been discovered.

It is very likely that these 3 steps are the "ground zero" of phenomenology, one of the earliest articulations of a phenomenological method. It is not difficult to see that the second step can contain several smaller steps and contains the seeds for future forms of phenomenological inquiry. There is no one, single set of steps that make up a phenomenological inquiry. There is no single, straight up, A-B-C way to go about it. In keeping with the nature of the idea itself, each topic or type of inquiry requires it's own specific approach. Phenomenology as a practice involves applying a process of inquiry appropriate to the situation and the objectives of the inquiry.

### The Phenomenological Attitude

Bracketing and reduction are two closely related parts of what Husserl termed phenomenological reduction which asks that we take an attitude open to the full range of possibilities when we engaging in any phenomenological inquiry. He contrasts the phenomenological attitude with what he calls the "natural" attitude which includes and engages our current set of perceptions, memories, understandings and assumptions.

Husserl introduced the idea of "bracketing" or "parenthesisizing" all questions of truth or reality so the contents of consciousness can be described and examined openly, objectively and on their own merits. It is a temporary suspension of any external beliefs, placing the focus solely on the focus of the inquiry itself. There are several aspects of it.

- Bracket all taken-for-grantednesses or accepted understandings.
- Bracket all interpretation and consciously surface whatever assumptions seem to need attention.
- Bracket all knowledge, all theory or theoretical meaning, all belief in what is real, and aim at evoking concreteness or living meaning.

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<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, Martin – Being and time p58

- Bracket all established investigative methods or techniques and seek or invent an approach that seems to fit most appropriately the phenomenological topic under study.
- Aim to awaken a profound sense of wonder about the phenomenon in which one is interested and look for the new.
- Explore what recommendations for human action or social policy may be suggested.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, David Bohm, Donald Factor and Peter Garrett used the idea of bracketing in their paper, "Dialogue - A Proposal." They use the term "suspension" to describe this activity.

'What is essential here is the presence of the spirit of dialogue, which is, in short, the ability to hold many points of view in suspension, along with a primary interest in the creation of common meaning'<sup>26</sup>

Assumptions, judgments, theories, presuppositions, beliefs, ready-made, pre-fabricated interpretations and solutions are all set aside in order to focus on the object of the inquiry itself without interference. The methodology derived from Bohm's work is often called "Open Dialogue."

This suspension involves attention, listening and looking and is essential to exploration. Suspension involves exposing your reactions, impulses, feelings and opinions in such a way that they can be seen and examined in relation to the topic. This suspension, then, allows a re-examination of perceptions.

If bracketing is suspending our existing ways of seeing reality, the reduction proper that Husserl talks about is truly seeing what we call our world as a mental construct, something that we have created or accepted as given. This reduction involves a kind of profound unknowing in which we release our grasp on the known. Metaphorically, we temporarily step out of the world in order to understand it. When we do, the world is open to us in ways that are fresh and unhindered by our mental models. As we are able to see the world as our construction of it, we are able to generate new ideas, thereby renewing and refreshing the way we understand the world around us. As Sartre might put it, we must nihilate 'being-in-itself' and enter into 'being-for-itself'. It is what he talked about as entering into nothingness.

Bracketing is one of the key conditions for an open inquiry. Without it, it would be a closed inquiry, susceptible to leading us to believe a certain predetermined thing, live our lives in a way that is already defined or make choices that were articulated, even tacitly, prior to the conversation. It would be like beginning a problem-solving session with an answer rather than a question. The danger is that without this phenomenological reduction, we fall prey to ideological doctrinarism and misuse of the method as a sneaky form of persuasion. This is especially an enticing approach in facilitated learning and spiritual formation situations. Having thought through a topic, we naturally make our own conclusions and it is very tempting to us to weave a conversation in such a way that participants come up with what we have already determined to be the "right" answers.

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<sup>25</sup> Based on an essay by Max van Manen PhD, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta – 2002. I include this because it gives depth and texture to the idea of bracketing. The word, bracketing, has been used to describe putting conversations and decisions off until later. While bracketing can include delaying, the primary meaning within the discipline of phenomenological inquiry has more to do with suspending assumptions, understandings and conclusions.

<sup>26</sup> Bohm, D., and Peat, D. (1987) *Science, order, and creativity*, New York: Bantam. The work of Bohm and his colleagues has done a great deal to "popularize" the formation of the phenomenological attitude.

## Transparence

There's another puzzle in Kierkegaard's formula that often slips by without notice that is worth discussing at this point, because it speaks to the attitude we take in entering an inquiry. It's that word, "transparently."<sup>27</sup> What does it mean to be grounded transparently?

Let's just take the word for what it is. It means something that light can pass through or something we can see through. Something is present, but it does not prevent observation through it. There is nothing in the way. It also refers to something that is easily discernable or obvious. We can see through the foreground and details of our experience to the universal. We see beyond what is immediately apparent into something more profound.

Kierkegaard used it to give definition to 'grounding.' In transparency, nothing shades, obscures or prevents this grounding. No history. No goodness or badness. No achievements or lack of them. No dogma or belief. I don't have to be like anything in particular to be a self that is grounded in the reality that places me as a self-conscious being in this life on this planet at this moment in these circumstances.

Nothing is required of me beyond the activity of relating my self to my self and willing myself to be myself. I do not have to confess or subscribe to any particular belief. Perhaps I do, but it seems Kierkegaard is saying that my history, achievements and beliefs are not relevant. Inasmuch as I engage in this activity of consciousness of consciousness, Kierkegaard says the self emerges grounded in the reality that places me in this very real situation. What matters is taking an authentic relationship to my given situation. He speaks from a Christian, faith based perspective and when he speaks of the power that posits the self, he is talking about the God he knows as a Christian. He stands on that specific foundation and, by referring to the power that posits us in our situation, he opens the door to a universal humanness. To be sure, throughout his work he insists that naming the name of God is the final step of transcendence, but what is important is that, inasmuch as we will to be ourselves, we can be fully realized selves.

The methodology was formed in the midst of its use in a long process we now refer to as "action learning. The initial use and function of this method was primarily focused on theological learning and spiritual formation in an explicitly Christian theological context, simply because they were working within the Christian church. It is a very effective tool for that purpose, because, as we have seen, it enables genuine "self-transcendence."

This method was referred to for many years as the "art form method", because one of the earliest applications was a conversation in which a work of art provided the concrete, tangible beginning point. Narrative literature, poetry, painting, sculpture and film were used as beginning points for conversations enabling people to reflect on their lives, gain transcendence and make new choices about how to be in the world. This is what Mannheim referred to as substantial thought.

Our collective experience indicated to us that this method can also be used to enable people to take an authentic relationship to their given situation by building consensus, solving problems, making plans and a myriad of other uses that are more in the realm of functional thought. This approach is also appropriate for groups. A group can have being beyond the collected beings of the individuals. The cliché, "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts", is applicable in this instance.

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<sup>27</sup> We have used the term transparentization to describe the process one goes through to create the condition of transparence. Doris Hahn remembers Joe Mathews making a strong point that the word used should be transparenization. Transparence means the condition of being transparent or something that can be seen through. The difference in terminology is very subtle and may not be significant in the long run. It gives us an indication of Joe's rigor in using language and points to his interest in states of being.

A group can form common understanding and give shape to a common will. This is what we mean when we speak of consensus. It is often described in a reduced form, laden with political terminology, which usually produces rather petty squabbling and is far removed from anything approaching authentic consensus. Consensus is an expression of the being of the group. The group activates “being-for-itself” and becomes a single entity in its quest to move forward together as one.

In the early 70's, we began packaging this methodology in the form of a new course. We called it LENS – Living Effectively in the New Society. In addition to some important contextual material, the focus of the course was what we now know as Participatory Strategic Planning. Indeed, it was the precursor to our much of our facilitation and consulting work as well as our facilitator training courses.

Joe Mathews said,

“I believe that the new course (LENS) that many of you have been directly constructing for the past three years and indirectly for many years before that is perhaps going to serve the fundamental task of awakening relative to the masses. It is going to put sociological form on the kind of love that will fill space in our time.”<sup>28</sup>

When he spoke of awakening, he was talking about the activation of what Sartre called the “being-for-itself” dynamic of the self and in organizations. He was talking about enabling people to become self-reflective, self-conscious beings acting out of profound integrity and compassion to effect positive change in their world. He predicted this course and the methodology it used would play the role of enabling people, groups and organizations to make their decisions in a fuller, more humanizing context. Indeed, it has done just that in some rather remarkable ways.

As it is no doubt clear, this is another dimension of bracketing. As Sartre might put it, we step into the realm of nothingness in order to see new ways of being-in-the-world. We look through and beyond our assumptions – all of them, bar none - in order to see the universal truth beyond it. That does not mean they are not there or that we negate either their existence or importance. It does mean that we set them aside. Sartre consistently uses the word nihilate, a term used to indicate a stepping away from or stepping aside from our current understandings – all of them. Husserl, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and contemporary writer John Ralston Saul both say if we are to see truth, we must embrace doubt. It means we look through our current grasp of reality and beyond it to see a larger world. Being-for-itself is activated in order to clearly see being-in-itself.

ToP facilitation intends to set the conditions and provide the process through which this act of group self-consciousness can take place. Obviously, only the participants can make it take place. It is the task of the facilitator to enable group members to step beyond themselves to look more deeply at their situation. The facilitator is not only charged with occasioning dialogue, but must also model a stance of transparency. Having set aside one's own feelings and beliefs, the facilitator can play the role of guiding an open discussion.

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<sup>28</sup> Bending History – Talks of Joseph Wesley Mathews – John Epps, General Editor – Resurgence Publishing - 2005



## The Thing Itself – Intentional Focus

Husserl said consciousness is always “intentional.”

“Under intentionality we understand the own peculiarity of mental processes to be consciousness of something. We first of all encounter this marvelous ownness, back to which all rational-theoretical and metaphysical enigmas lead, in the explicit cogito: a perceiving is a perceiving of something,<sup>29</sup>

In this usage, the word intentional means our consciousness is always directed toward something or is intended toward something. It is not unfocused and inattentive. It is directed toward something, whether it is as simple and direct as a traffic light or as ephemeral as an experience, a feeling or a memory. It may be an association between or among things. It may be a question or an idea, but consciousness is always focused on something. As we’ve seen, Bultman and Heidegger call them “cares.”

“The thing itself” is the ground and focus of an inquiry. Our attention and consciousness are brought to bear on a very real something, for example, the experience of a specific difficult meeting. We describe that experience and the specifics become our reference point for further examination of what would improve meetings. If an inquiry is to reveal something of significance, it begins with something concrete. We seek to gather what information we can about it as it is.

Husserl uses the example of discussing chairs. If we want to design a great chair, we begin by describing this specific chair and that chair and another chair. It begins with something that is actually present to us rather than beginning with an idea like “chairness. We go from there through a process he calls eidetic reduction, to describe the qualities and properties of a really good chair and, in the end we make design choices and come up with a new chair.

### Eidetic Reduction – the roots of process

Eidetic reduction, as named by Husserl, is a technique used to identify the essential components that make up the “eidos” or “what is seen” or “essence” in looking at the form of a given phenomenon or experience. *Eidos* and *idea* come from the Indo-European root word “*weid*”, which means to see. It is also related to “*shape*”, “*form*” and “*appearance*.” Phenomena, therefore, refers to what is seen or perceived. It is used to mean the description of an experience based on information coming to our consciousness from the senses. Reduction, as used by Husserl, means the process of the inquiry itself to “reduce” something to its critical core. It usually takes place in a series of steps.

Eidetic reduction, therefore, is a methodology that provides us with insight into a given phenomena by beginning with what is seen or perceived. None of the phenomenologists provide single, universal set of steps to go through in performing an eidetic reduction. It would be antithetical to the nature of the discipline. The specific steps or questions are only found in relation to the nature of the inquiry itself and the characteristics of the focus of the inquiry. That insight, in itself, provides a great deal of flexibility and offers the possibility of specific focus in creating each inquiry. This concept is one of the critical keys to the design of ToP events. Each one must be seen in its uniqueness and each event must enable the group to examine their situation and take a relationship to it. Within that context, there are patterns that guide our thinking processes from perception through understanding to choices. Those patterns form the backbone of any inquiry.

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<sup>29</sup> Edmund Husserl - Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a phenomenological Philosophy – Originally published 1913

Joe Mathews and our early colleagues took this insight and, in their desire to construct something usable by ordinary people, developed it, through several transformations over many years of action research, into the four-stage process we use today. Its initial use and function was primarily focused on learning and spiritual formation and spread to planning for the future. All of this study, experimentation and reflection created a completely unique approach to phenomenology. Within this general framework of methodology, it is possible to construct a variety of ways to conduct an inquiry, depending on the specific circumstances.

## **ToP Phenomenology**

### **Method and Application**

This phenomenological methodology can be applied to situations involving what Mannheim calls substantial thought, the formation of understanding, insight and meaning as well as functional thought which has to do with problem solving, organizing and planning. The scope of issues, concerns and situations this methodology can address is, therefore rather vast.

ToP methodology does not have a content message. It follows Marshal McLuan's insight in *Understanding Media* that the medium is the message and the content is the audience. In this case, the methodology itself, as medium, is the message. "Your ideas are relevant and valuable." "The group needs the best wisdom available to make the wisest decisions." "You can shape your situation and your world." These are not so much things a facilitator communicates to the group by telling. These foundational ideas are integrated into ToP facilitation through a complex of values, practices and application of methodology.

ToP methodology provides a process through which an individual or a group can pursue, in principle, any inquiry. It enables groups to examine their own images in relationship to a topic. Each participant contributes, from their own perspective, thoughts relevant to the question at hand. As the group reflects on the compilation of ideas, their picture of the situation grows, develops and changes.

There is a very real and relevant distinction between method and application. The core methodology is the foundational process itself. It uses distinct ways of information processing that enable people to begin exploration of a topic at the visible, surface level, move through deeper levels and reach an appropriate resolution of the inquiry. It is methodology, a way of enabling the full processing of information and a truly unique approach to phenomenology.

While today there are corresponding processes to be found, especially in the literature related to organizational development, they are parallel examples of the methodology, which have been developed after this methodology was firmly in use.

There are many, many applications of this methodological approach. The most prominently used applications are currently called the Focused Conversation Method and the Consensus Workshop Method. Indeed, those applications have been combined to provide us with other applications such as the ToP Strategic Planning Method.

The term "method" has been used to identify the core method itself as well as the specific applications of it. This inconsistency has not been a big problem for ToP practitioners, but it is, I believe, a useful clarification, because it provides a way to ensure methodological consistency in the application of ToP phenomenology. The method itself provides a solid foundation for the continued development and use of the specific applications. This distinction provides a relatively stable reference point for use and modification of ToP applications and opportunities for ongoing development of new applications.

### **Purposeful Use**

Phenomenological inquiry begins with the thing itself. An inquiry needs a concrete beginning point like an essay, a picture, a report or a well contexted question. Once we have identified the object of our inquiry, we can begin to describe it and explore it.

Woven into this methodology for eidetic reduction were the two “acts” of self-consciousness described by Kierkegaard – relating the self to itself and willing the self to be itself. Let’s look at it that way. How do I relate myself to myself? How do I will myself to be myself? Sartre’s distinction of being-in-itself and being-for-itself is useful here. In this process we are activating the “for-itself” in order to look at the “in-itself.”

The major guides we have used in designing facilitated events have been the “rational aim and the “existential/experiential aim. In addition to identifying the focus, these are critical steps in the discipline.

The Rational Aim is the practical goal of the event, an articulation of the desired result. It may be a identifying the key elements of a group’s shared vision. It may be a decision about which photocopier to buy. It may be gaining an understanding of a concept like collaborative work and its implication for the organizational structure. It may be determining my attitude or posture in relation to a social concern. It will be a clear, concrete and tangible response to a focused question. Using Sartre’s terminology, this is the “en-soi – being-in-itself” dimension of intentional use of the method. The inquiry is directed toward something definable. Without articulated intention, a conversation becomes aimless wandering and a game of chance in which the intended results may or may not be realized. The White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland says if you don’t know where you want to go, any direction will do. The obvious correlate is that if you do know where you want to go, it is possible to find a way to get there. ToP processes are designed to address these questions.

The existential / experiential aim has proven to a slippery concept at its best. It is focused on enabling the group to make self conscious choices about how they relate to their given topic. It is about how they “be” at the end of the session. It is about their image of themselves in relation to their situation that matters. It is about the way the event addresses the group and the way they relate to that address. If the rational aim is seen as the external, product oriented aspect of the session, the existential / experiential aim is more focused on the more personal, relational aspect. It is the “pour-soi – being-for-itself” dynamic. It is what guides the way the critical existential questions are addressed.

Every individual and every group lives with an undercurrent of deep, persistent questions related to identity, character, meaning, purpose, impact and contingency. We have called these the “existential questions” we face. They are perpetually before us at some level. Some people rarely surface them and run fast in another direction when they do surface, but, nevertheless, they remain in the background, niggling at us. If this methodology is to enable people to become highly self-conscious and become fully realized, our work will enable people to address these deeper realities in their individual and collective lives.

We often use the phrase, “How does the group need to be different at the close of the session?” It’s obviously about far more than the experience of the event itself. It is not very much about how participants experienced the session or liked the discussion or loved the facilitator or whether they had fun and felt good about each other. A good experience is nice, but the group may need to pass through some genuinely unpleasant struggles in order to adequately address their deepest questions. The existential / experiential aim provides a guide for the facilitator in enabling the group to give real shape and texture to their relationship to the situation and the topic.

The group’s actual lived experience is critical in determining the existential questions they face. Looking at their history in terms of accomplishments and setbacks provides an objective foundation for this search. In the midst of their ongoing life, they will have faced some key crises and some powerful opportunities. Sifted through, refined and distilled, these elements will reveal the key existential questions the group must face if they are to fully realize their purpose. Seen in relationship to the “rational aim” of the event, they provide clues to articulating the existential/experiential aim for a given event.

## **The Stages of Eidetic Reduction within ToP methodology**

The stages have been called levels upon which a particular type of information processing is dominant. Here, I am talking about pure method. These elements of methodology have been applied in many, many ways. We use the same terminology directly in the Focused Conversation. We use it in other applications as well, but we use different terminology to describe the specific steps.

### **The Objective Level**

We find the reality of life in the real, palpable, observable, sensory world. We find ourselves in the midst of a multitude of interacting forces. This is the situation we are given. Consciousness begins with attention to external and internal events that drive us into life and make us aware of our limits.

We begin with "what is" and create a common foundation of reality for discussions and collaborative work. Each inquiry starts with a concrete beginning point. It may be the movie we just viewed or last month's activity report. It may also begin with a focus question, like "What are the elements we want to include in this new program?" This step enables all participants to bring their attention together on the most basic information necessary for the discussion. It also allows everyone to participate in the conversation based on the same information.

The point at this stage in the process is to observe and articulate the most basic information about the topic under consideration. At the foundational level, this is about perceiving what is before us. If it is reflecting on a movie, for example, we look for the characters, the objects, the scenes and lines of dialogue in order to bring to consciousness what is actually present. If it's a discussion about a report, the questions enable the group to bring to their attention what is actually said. Beginning at this level grounds the discussion in reality.

Brainstorming is a way to generate ideas in relation to a question. Alex Osborn popularized it in a 1953 book called *Applied Imagination*. To put it in Husserl's terminology, it would be the first step in an eidetic reduction. ToP methodology often uses brainstorming as the initial step in an inquiry.

This is the "objective" level. It asks us to examine what is before us in an objective manner. We become lucid about what is present to us and we create a foundation for further inquiry.

### **The Reflective Level**

Along with making comparisons, we make associations and connections among ideas automatically. It's unavoidable. Feelings are triggered by our experiences and perceptions. We remember things. We see connections with other things. These associations and feelings are as substantial as the externally observable data, and must be considered seriously in making decisions. While they may seem fleeting and less substantial than an observation or a well-honed idea, they play a major role in the ways we approach reality. It's not hard to see that Husserl's thoughts about comparing related phenomena led us to see that there is another area to be examined. This was the breakthrough made by Kierkegaard, Brentano and Husserl. Subjective information must be included if we are to be inclusive in our inquiries.

Our images, memories and feelings reveal valuable information. They open us to the world of intuition, memory, emotion and imagination. Examining our experience makes us conscious, enriches our dialogue and makes it real. It helps us "experience our experience." We are able to articulate the associations, memories and feelings; so we are able to relate to the material at the objective level and move beyond it to a deeper, more personal exploration of the topic. Without conscious effort at this level, people may get stuck in reliving what happened and will be unable to move beyond emotion. In conversations, this takes the form of questions that explore this inner world.

ToP calls this the "reflective" level, because it asks us to step back, identify, acknowledge and reflect on our initial perceptions. We bring our associations, memories, feelings and intuitions about something to consciousness. They become real and have a life beyond the moment. Identifying and owning our initial responses enables our reflections to inform the relationship we chose to take to our given situation.

### **The Interpretive Level**

Once we get this far in an inquiry, where do we go next? The phenomenologists say we're looking for "patterns of meaning." It seems quite natural to ask those questions next. Insight arises out of reflection on real experience. The objective and reflective levels prepare us to look deeper into the topic and move closer to answers to the larger question guiding our inquiry.

Meaning is created out of the mundane encounters in the midst of life. Meaning is something we all have to work at constantly, by thoughtfully reflecting on the actual life we have on our hands. We work through the layers of meaning, purpose, significance, implications, "story" and values to get to the core. We consider alternatives and options open to us. A group can develop insight and understandings and they can move forward together. Obviously, each inquiry will be shaped by the specific question that gives it focus. It is to this reference point that this level seeks to relate.

ToP calls this the "interpretive" level, because it is at this level that we analyze, gain understanding and determine what is significant. When we create genuinely shared understanding, we are more able to make insightful choices that are the will of the group.

### **Three steps in one process**

Let us step aside for a moment to discuss an approach that has become integral to ToP methodology as a way of processing objective, reflective and interpretive information. We have used the term "gestalt" to identify the process of relating ideas that respond to a focus question in similar ways. Max Wertheimer, one of the founders of the Gestalt approach, says gestalt is:

"A physical, biological, psychological, or symbolic configuration or pattern of elements so unified as a whole that its properties can not be derived from a simple summation of its parts".

". . . the essence or shape of an entity's complete form"

The focal point of Gestalt theory is the idea of relating specific elements to see a pattern of thought. The "whole" we see is something more structured and cohesive than a group of separate particles. Wertheimer, says,

"There are wholes, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the whole."

"When a group of people work together it rarely occurs, and then only under very special conditions, that they constitute a mere-sum of independent Egos. Instead the common enterprise often becomes their mutual concern and each works as a meaningfully functioning part of the whole."<sup>30</sup>

Michael Polanyi addresses this in his book, *The Tacit Dimension*. Polanyi identifies two terms of tacit knowing: proximal and distal. The proximal or the term nearest to us is the particulars of a situation. The distal term, furthest from us, is the whole. The relationship between the proximal and distal terms of tacit knowing has three aspects, functional, phenomenal, and semantic.

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<sup>30</sup> Max Wertheimer - Hayes Barton Press - An address before the Kant Society, Berlin, 7 December 1924

In the functional aspect of tacit knowing we move from the specifics to the whole. In the phenomenal aspect we are aware of the specifics as we look at the larger question. The 'distal' term is the larger topic and the big picture questions that elicit specific responses. The semantic aspect comes into play when certain relationships specifics are perceived and an overall image is formed. This is the intuitive nature of gestalt. We see the larger picture as we see patterns in the specifics. The phrase "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts" is often used when explaining gestalt. Indeed, this phrase is often used as one of the foundational assumptions underlying ToP methodology as it is used with groups.

It is about seeing 'patterns of meaning' in a whole set of ideas given in relation to a specific question. The individual responses to the focus question will, hopefully, be comprehensive in addressing the question. The task is to discern the major themes of thought or distinct answers to the given question. There may be many connections and associations among the ideas. There may be causes and effects. There may be words that are similar or seem to have similar meanings. The key factor, if useful meaning is to be distilled from this process, is the question used as the guide, the focus question. It focuses the generation of ideas and it is the question that guides discernment of the thought patterns of the responses. The question becomes the fundamental reference point for a whole inquiry and all of its parts. The patterns are named as the group's response to the focus question.

It must be understood that this is a process of synthesis rather than analysis. One of the easy temptations in performing this kind of process is the tendency to sort elements into categories that are already integrated into our understanding even if they are not identified consciously. It is, without question, much easier to do both from the perspective of the participant and the facilitator. There are methodologies that do that kind of analysis and they play their own role in processing ideas. They are useful and necessary for operational situations in which an overall framework is already firmly in place.

Consistent with the nature of phenomenological inquiry, a true gestalt does not make any assumptions about the relationships among data. Those assumptions are intentionally and methodologically bracketed. There are no categories until they are identified and named. Gestalt and all phenomenological inquiry are oriented toward forming new understanding. If the process is merely categorizing elements using typologies of information, a true "gestalt" has not happened. A gestalt creates a new picture and a new understanding of a given reality.

Performing a gestalt must be seen as a three-step process. The first step is the question posed to a group. That question becomes the focus and reference point for the whole process. The group responds and the ideas are recorded graphically. In the ToP lexicon, this is the objective level of processing ideas.

It is then that the gestalt process begins more formally. The second step is identifying the themes or patterns within the responses in relationship to the question itself. It is, necessarily an iterative process which enables a group to formulate meaningful clusters of similar responses to a question

The third step is to articulate the nature of each identified thought pattern and the relationships among them. It reveals the group's major answers to the question. When this is complete and all of the themes are named, the group has created a new image of their response to the question.

For many, this is an almost magical event. This step moves the information from individuals' ideas to the ideas of the group. In a very real way, the individual give their ideas to the group and they become, to use an economic metaphor, the property of the whole. It is a gifting or a kind of surrender. From a long list of ideas that respond to the question in different ways, the group creates a meaningful understanding of its response to the question. They have discovered their commonality of thought and within it, the major elements.

## The Decisional Level

Insight is a fine thing. Ideas move us forward. If processing insight about life is to be complete, grounded and genuinely meaningful, it must move from abstract insight to something more tangible, it involves projecting that insight out into the future. Whether that insight is practical or transcendent, it must have an impact on our lived lives.

As we decide future implications for action, our reflection connects us to the world in ways that are real. We assume active responsibility for our situation. We make choices and commitments that shape our way of interacting with our situation. In groups, we make decisions and build consensus; so we can move forward together. In some cases, this means making decisions and choices. In some it means placing actions on a “timeline” or action agenda. Doing so concretizes the resolve.

We call this the “decisional” level. It enables us to develop an appropriate conclusion to a given inquiry. When we make choices, we commit ourselves to a way forward. It gives collaborative decision-making real power. In situations where the focus is “functional thought” the term “decisional” captures the intent of this step in the process.

When the methodology was primarily used in situations of “substantial thought” the generation of transcendent insight and the activity of self-consciously forming one’s life posture, this level has been referred to as ‘theological’ and the ‘symbolic’ and, based on the work of Kierkegaard, it has been called the ‘relational’ level and the ‘existential’ level. In a similar vein, John Kloepfer has called this level “maieutic.”<sup>31</sup> Derived from the Greek for midwife, maieutic questions bring forth latent knowledge, depth understanding and transcendence. In this usage and the specific applications derived from it, people are provided with ways to take their insight and move beyond the material, physical plane of this world and connect themselves with transcendent reality. While the term, ‘decisional’ is likely to survive as the commonly used term to describe this activity within the framework of ToP facilitation, the other terms are useful in describing this level as well.

There are many ToP applications of this core methodology. Over the years, this methodology has been used in many ways to fulfill a variety of purposes. Currently the ToP community has identified several applications that are considered the core of our facilitation practice.

- The **Focused Conversation** uses the method in the form of a guided discussion.
- The **Consensus Workshop** uses it to solve problems, build models and think through major questions.
- The **Action Planning** method uses the method to create practical plans that can be implemented.
- The “**Wall of Wonder**” or “Historical Scan” is used to enable a group to look at its situation and, appreciatively, use it as a stepping-stone to the future.
- The **ToP Strategic Planning** process uses the above applications to enable a group to develop strategy.

All of them are applications of ToP phenomenology. Each of them begins with a focus on a specific object, experience or question and proceeds through a phenomenological inquiry process to an appropriate resolution. Each has its own results or “product” and those involved in it are enabled to relate to themselves and their situation in a new way.

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<sup>31</sup> The Art of Formative Questioning: A Way to Foster Self-Disclosure – Dr John Kloepfer – UMI Dissertation Services - 1990



## Conclusion

We must return to the beginning. It can be said that the objective and reflective levels of this method play the primary role in enabling us to "relate ourselves to ourselves", as Kierkegaard put it, and the interpretive and decisional levels primarily enable us to will ourselves to be ourselves.

As we "experience our experience", we articulate what actually happened or what we see as well as our initial responses, reactions, associations, memories, feelings and intuitions. When we name them, they become part of our conscious world. We are no longer trapped in simply saying, "It happened, it happened it happened." We begin to relate ourselves to ourselves and become more aware of who we are in this situation – more self-conscious and able to move on.

We are not stuck in a world of pre-rational feeling about ourselves in our situation. We can begin to identify that which is of substance and meaning for us. We, in the end, make choices. Inasmuch as those choices are made with authenticity and integrity, we will ourselves to be ourselves by integrating our insight into our real lives.

As we move through each level, the information surfaced becomes the foundation for the next steps. It becomes the 'en-soi' or 'being-in-itself' as Sartre used the term. Objectifying the basic information brings it into awareness. Reflecting on that basic information brings our responses to full consciousness and our reflection becomes the ground we stand upon to enter into interpretation. Our insight, then, becomes the platform upon which we make decisions and articulate transcendent significance. In the end, we have a new situation – an entirely new being-in-itself. We recreate ourselves at every turn.

Wayne Nelson

## **Next Sections**

### **Core ToP Applications - - -**

- Focused Conversation
- Consensus Workshop
- Action Planning
- Wall of Wonder
- ToP Strategic Planning

### **Structural Outline**

- Nutshell description
- Phenomenology – Design Patterns and Variations
- Purpose – uses
- Ensuring participation
- Eliciting high quality results
- Forming consensus
- Results
- Impact

### **Designing ToP Processes**

- The ToP Design Eye
- Process architecture
- ToP Design Patterns – using pattern languages
- Related Methodologies

### **Best Practices**

- Common Practices - Imaginal Education
- Keys to Excellence in ToP Use
- Core Values
- Disciplines
- Current Concerns and emerging issues
- ToP developing edges