

## Accidental Dialogue

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### **Abstract:**

This autoethnographic story highlights the eruption of dialogic moments in everyday encounters. It is a story of the spontaneous uprising of dialogic spirit in everyday life. It is a story of the transformation of ordinary time and space into extraordinary, ecstatic “turning points” that redefine relational connections. “Accidental dialogue” is invoked and defined as a special convergence—born of openness to possibility and happenstance—of dialogic imagination, dialogic courage, and narrative conscience.

**Keywords:** Communication Studies | Autoethnography | Dialogue

### **Article:**

Coming together in genuine dialogue is sometimes theorized as a rare and eventful moment in which people somehow manage to share a special connection—a *deeper* moment where meaning and relation merge into some new form of engagement—an I–Thou relation (Buber, 1970) or a “moment of meeting” (Cissna & Anderson, 2002). Much has been written about attempts to set the stage or to orchestrate such moments of connection (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Senge, 1994), and there are vigorous theoretical underpinnings to our current understanding of dialogue (e.g., Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004; Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Schrag, 1986; Stewart, 1996; Stewart & Zediker, 2000). Yet, sometimes, in everyday life, we just stumble into dialogic moments accidentally—moments when it becomes clear that a strong, heartfelt connection is made between humans.

It is these “accidental” moments of dialogue that I want to explore. In this essay, I probe the possibilities of accidental dialogue and theorize that such moments call for the cultivation and active praxis of imagination, courage, and conscience. It is in these accidental moments of

dialogue that we may find new opportunities for transcendence. And thus, we may (e)merge in dialogue and begin dancing in the light of new meaning.

And so, I begin poking about the neighborhood, searching for dialogue. I seek the moment. Where is it? In the phatic greeting? In the hallway talk? In the classroom? In the kitchen?

I look in all the obvious places. I seek it with my neighbors, with my family, with my colleagues, with my students, and with my friends. I seek it at work, at church, and at the grocery store. I look for it in everyday talk, in events orchestrated and accidental, in the moments where it is supposed to occur, and in the less obvious places of daily possibility. I hope for it in moments of affection, in moments of greeting and farewell, and in the little conversations needed to coordinate joint action. I look for it in faculty meetings, in lines, at gatherings and parties, and at special events. I look for it as I wander across campus for a cup of coffee or a visit to the library. As an ethnographer, I work to attune my consciousness, to engage my senses, and to open my active emotional–volitional and communicative sensibilities to the possibility of genuine dialogue.

In the daily spaces of ordinary communication, is there a place for dialogue?

Ancient Jewish mystics saw it as “lighting holy sparks” (Hyde, 2001). Members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) see it as embracing the “light” or “that of God within” each human (Pym, 1999). Buber (1970) theorizes a profound relation, a deep connection between I and Thou. Rogers (1961, 1980) writes of “unconditional positive regard” and places it as an empathic, other-centered praxis. Keller and Brown (1968) propose that we set the stage for it through listening and availability that enhance freedom of engagement and response. Gadamer (1975) would have us “fall into” it, absorbed and dedicated and deeply involved in the flow of spirit present in the moment. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) want us to develop our understanding of the dialectical tensions in the process of relating, whereas Stewart and Zediker (2000) see it as “tensional, ethical practice.” Goodall and Kellett (2004) search for “peak experiences” in which we “get beyond the gray everydayness of relational routines” and approach communication as a mystery to be engaged (p. 161). Cissna and Anderson (2002) observe “moments of meeting.” Arnett and Arneson (1999) locate it in a cultivated, constitutive, respectful “civility.”

Meanwhile, some authors, such as David Bohm, have written of ways of orchestrating or setting the stage or enhancing a climate for it (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Senge, 1994). Others, such as Levinas (1969, 1981), carry us far into the world of readiness, responsibility, and responsiveness, of being hospitable and open to the infinite possibilities that dialogue entails. Bakhtin (1993) believes we are created in and through it, as profoundly answerable beings emerging in the “once-occurrent event of being” (p. 7).

Most agree that dialogue cannot be forced or prescribed, cannot be made to happen. But some, at least, say that we may do well to set conditions for dialogic engagement by attuning to the

possibilities that inhere in the encounter with the other. If we set ourselves to listening to, to acknowledging the value, and to cultivating awareness of the potential or the “unfolding” of the other, while openly and respectfully unfolding ourselves, then engagement of the full dialogic potential of a given encounter may become possible. Levinas, for one, sets great store by simple acts of hospitality. I find myself wanting to add that this enterprise requires *imagination*, *courage*, and *narrative conscience*. I want to say that we may fall into dialogue when we imaginatively open ourselves to possibility, when we take the risk to embrace spirit rising out of heart, and when we cultivate a sense of self–other relations as co-construction of a series of compelling *stories*—stories in which we may find epic and infinite possibilities.

They call it dialogue, derived from the Greek *dia*—meaning “through”—and *logos*, signifying “meaning” or “word” or even “spirit” (Bohm, 1996). Many of these writers appear to consider dialogic moments as involving some sort of special transcendence. Dialogue, it seems, allows us to break out of the bounds of ordinariness into a space imbued with an extraordinary sense of connection—or at least of shared meaning-making.

Most agree that genuine dialogue, when it does occur, is a complex matrix of speech and silence, of giving and receiving, and of listening and expressing. It involves talk, to be sure, but this is talk that reaches beyond mere information transmission, or instruction, or command, or even exchange. It is talk that carries us to new places, talk that constitutes change, and talk that creates and transforms realities. Dialogue is special in its capacity to help us transcend the ordinariness of everyday life (Goodall, 1996). Dialogue is like open, unchoreographed dancing: You may know just some basic moves—or you may, in fact, be well trained and highly skilled. But the creative or transformative energy that is dialogue is, in its essence, unruly, unpredictable, extraordinary, and deeply entwined with both the desires and the actions of the dancers. Once you begin the dance—and really surrender to it—you never really know where on the dance floor you will end up.

So, naturally, being one who wants to escape the everydayness that can descend upon us in this life, I seek the magic of dialogue.

I find myself seeking a glimpse of dialogue wherever I go these days.

And it eludes me. Often.

But then, out of the blue, it comes upon me, often when I am least prepared for it. This is a story of dialogic moments, of moments of transcendence, of spark lighting, dancing breakthroughs where conversation becomes—rather than a list, or an account, or a transaction, or an exchange—a moment of *conversion*, a moment of spirit rising, a moment of ecstasy. It is a moment where the light of truth and co-being and joyous engagement infuses the human spirit. Indeed, sometimes, stumbling upon possibility, we may find ourselves *dancing* in the light of dialogue.

## **Dialogic imagination**

I wake, as I do many mornings in my southern home, to the sound of songbirds outside my window. For a few magical moments, I lie still, just taking it in, tracing the thin threads of sound and breath and the faint glimmer of dawn, holding this moment close, knowing that before I know it, the day will begin and life may drive past me like a fast wind. I pause, and a sound catches my attention, a rhythmic sound, a sound with resonance. And it gradually dawns on me that what I am hearing is the pumping of my heart. This could be a day for the heart.

Then again, once the coffee is in my blood, I am probably doomed. I will transform into a man of action, grading papers, going to meetings, preparing lectures, teaching important “material,” and writing of lofty things. On my way home, I will run necessary errands while I “touch base” on my cell phone. I will “multitask” my way through the day like a tornado, mowing down all the tasks that stand before me with speed and power and efficacy.

I dance the dance of efficiency.

But here, now, in these few moments before I stand, I can just open myself up to possibility and let my imagination fly. I find myself on the cusp of possibility, imagining. I imagine a world of warmth, joy, and connection. I imagine deep and meaningful dialogue in a world of genuine community, where we rejoice in our differences and live out the promise of our commonality. I imagine a world where stories are the center, and the center holds. I imagine.

And then, it is evening. My day has gone by, and moments of respite were few and hard won. I do not remember any moments of dialogue, but perhaps I just was not attentive enough.

Right now, I am sitting on the couch in our den next to my son, Noah, who is 10 years old. We are just sitting, gazing at the fire in the fireplace. This is one of those evenings early in the season, before true winter actually, where the temperature has dropped like a rock and it is just cold enough for the first fire of the season. I am sipping slowly on a cup of coffee; he prefers mint tea. The liquid and the fire warm us from all sides. We sit quietly, reveling in the flames licking the sides of the logs, transforming them into new physical form. Fire is a primal energy of this physical world—an energy that presents destruction and creation—an energy that moves substance to new form, an energy of transformation. No wonder some have seen an analogue between fire and dialogue (Poulos, 2003).

Noah and I spend a lot of time together, often engaged in such activities as fencing and basketball and hiking. Sometimes, we just like to sit together and talk. In times like this, Noah, generally a playful athlete and musician—well, not just an athlete but one who thinks play of all kinds is *fun*; not just a musician but a drummer, one who gets great joy from banging out a rhythm—has a tendency to grow thoughtful, introspective. It is times like this that might put us on the cusp of seriousness, a rare moment for this child who knows—knows in his *bones*—that childhood is a time of “deep play” (Geertz, 2005).

Noah: Matt says he's an atheist, but I don't believe him.

Me: Why do you say that?

Noah: Because you can't just believe in *nothing*.

Me: Why not?

Noah (*an earnest look on his face*): Even nothing is *something*.

Me: Yeah. Hmmm. What do *you* believe?

Noah: Well, I believe in God, you know, but not like he's some guy up on a cloud or something. I think God just *is*.

Me (*eyebrows raised*): Wow. That's pretty cool. God *is*.

Noah (*smiles slightly*): Yeah.

Me: So what's that mean?

Noah: God is here. God's not away. It's *here*.

Me: Really?

Noah: Well, *something* made all this. You know. It's like ... the lake. You just know it's beautiful, and it's a good place to be.

Me: Right. So ... God is in the lake.<sup>1</sup>

Noah: Definitely. God is in the lake.

Me: Man, I love the lake.

Noah: Yeah, me too.

We pause for a few moments, contemplating the lake. Our imaginations are fired as we are filled with visions of long summer days and moments like this by the campfire on the shore.

Me: But what is it? What is God?

Noah: Stuff, you know, energy and stuff.

Me (*surprised*): You mean ... God is like energy, like he's in everything and everywhere?

Noah: Yes.

Me: So God is life.

Noah: Yes.

Me: And nature, and light.

Noah: Uh-huh.

Imagination! This is dialogic imagination!

Me: Like that fire over there. Energy and light. And like this, right now, right here. You and me.

Noah: God is ... with us.

Me: So ... energy. It changes things.

Noah: Yeah. Pretty cool, huh?

Me: Yes.

We pause again to breathe, and I feel the spirit is with us. We are *inspired*. Then, our talk turns to more worldly matters:

Noah: I told Matt he was full of it.

Me: Yeah, he seems a little depressed to me.

Noah: He's depressed, but what's he got to be depressed about? He's only 10. He acts like he's old and dying.

Me: Maybe he needs help.

Noah: Well, I try to be his friend, but he's so negative I don't want to be around him. And he won't listen anyway.

Me: I understand. So, what are you gonna do?

Noah: I don't know. He's mad at me right now. But I didn't give up on him or anything. We're still friends. (*A long pause ...*). I think I'll go do my homework.

Me: Good idea.

A moment of meeting? A space of transcendence? A peak experience? Or just ordinary talk? I don't know. I do know this: There are moments in this life when I feel a special connection to another human. And these moments sometimes occur when I can imagine no direction is needed, when I can imagine the conversation is just an opening, when I can imagine we are going nowhere, that we have arrived at our destination, which was not really an arrival or a destination at all, but a kind of embarking (Goodall, 1996), that we are, really, doing nothing beyond simple

connection—and, yet, we are doing something profound, something that changes us, something that builds worlds (Stewart, 1996).

In these (sometimes brief) connective moments, dialogic imagination (Bakhtin, 1981) may well come alive, and we may find ourselves transported into new worlds, where the darker clouds of our uneasy co-being may be dissipated by the winds of change and possibility. Dialogic imagination opens up in the aimless, uncharted spaces of talk merging into dialogue, of transcendent meaning and connection emerging spontaneously from our co-presence. It is in the dialogic imagination that we find an opening for learning, for growing, for changing, and for constitutive transformation in encounter. Noah and I will walk away from this encounter transformed, if only a little. And we will continue the conversation, perhaps for a lifetime. This is Holy talk, talk where spirit is manifest, which, in this case, I take to be talk both *infused with* and *about* the larger mysteries and powers that live and breathe and move within us and around us and through us. This seems right, whether we are speaking of God or of relationship or even of homework. The dialogue carries us to new spaces for our lives. And in the unfolding dialogue, we may find meaning we could never have approached otherwise. I find myself, as he goes off to do his homework, staring into the fire, contemplating the idea of the Holy (Otto, 1923)—the numinous presence of energy and love and power that animates this world we inhabit—and wondering at the ironic miracle that allows a 10-year-old child to open me to new awareness.

*Out of the mouths of babes ...*

I walk into the office, where he is now doing homework.

Me: Thanks.

Noah: For what?

Me: For talking with me.

Noah: Sure. It was good.

Me: I love you.

Noah: I love you, too, Dad.

And then, we are off to other things, barreling through life, getting things done, and only occasionally stopping to reflect, to wonder, and to take it all in. Sometimes, I imagine a world where all conversations open us to possibility, where both easy conversations by the fire and difficult conversations about touchy matters are embraced as opportunities to learn, to change, and to grow.

**Accidental dialogue: Narrative, action, and meaning**

So how do we stumble into these transcendent moments of conversion I call “accidental dialogue”? What, exactly, is accidental dialogue? As I write these words, I find myself (accidentally?) in some sort of dialogue with the co-editors of this journal issue, Ken Cissna and Rob Anderson, and the anonymous reviewers of this article. What, they ask, do you mean by this idea? Can you offer a “rigorous definition” of accidental dialogue but *show* what you mean rather than *tell*?

I imagine us sitting down at a table, perhaps in our local funky nonfranchise coffee house just on the edge of campus—the one with original art by local artists adorning the walls and jazz music drifting in the background, rich coffee and chocolate-laced air tugging at our noses. The rickety tables and chairs add a hint of both character and risk to the scene. One painting looks a bit like an amateur Picasso, if that is even possible to imagine—a profile of a twisted face, eyes askew, and looking off into somewhere not in this plane of existence. Looking around at the local characters who inhabit this scene, I become aware of the prodigious caffeine of double- and triple-shot espresso and the ennui of routine locked in an epic battle. I imagine us walking in, ordering our various cups, and falling into dialogue:

Reviewer A: I really like what you have done here. I like that idea of dialogue as an extraordinary moment arising accidentally out of ordinary routines.

Me: Well, that idea just sort of fell into my lap, so to speak ... well, I stumbled into it, accidentally ... well ... it happened one night, by the fireplace. It was an idea sparked in an actual encounter.

Ken: Yes, that’s what I’d like to talk about. What do you *mean* by “accidental?”

Rob: Yes, didn’t you *intend* to engage? What was accidental about it? What is it, really, to do “accidental dialogue”?

Reviewer B: Yes, I kept looking for a rigorous definition, but I couldn’t find it.

Me: I know. By “accidental” I mean that it *took* us, it engaged us, rather than us intending it, or orchestrating it, or manipulating the situation. We weren’t really aware that it was happening, until it was too late, so to speak. We were caught up in it. But that doesn’t really define it does it? After all, that’s the rub, isn’t it? I mean, how do you define something ... how do you *contain* something in words and structures and definitions that arises out of mysterious unstructured transcendent moments, and is only in part about words anyway? How do you capture the feeling, the meaning, and the definition of a moment where you just *know* you are “in the zone” in a conversation? How to “eff” the ineffable?

Rob: Let’s give it a shot.



Reviewer A: Maybe it's something to do with the context. I think you write that so well ... giving us the narratives of examples that resonate deeply with experience. The stories *evoke* but do not *define*.

Me: That's what I was hoping to do. Maybe they need to be *more* evocative to really flesh out what I mean.

Reviewer B: Yes, I think so. I think the stories need more detail—more scene, more character, more plot. The devil is in the details here. Can you write the stories in such a way that they *show* us what you mean?

Me: I'm game. Theory blending into praxis, right?

Ken: Okay, but I still think you need to *define* accidental ethnography, and trace the implications of the idea for dialogue theory.

Me: Fair enough. Anyone need a refill?

I walk back to the counter for a refill, mostly to buy some time. On the way, I run into my friend Michael, a thoughtful, quiet sort of guy, a writer. I tell him of our conversation. He just looks at me and says, "Why don't you let your characters define it for you?" I walk back to the table, a faint smile starting to flicker at the corners of my mouth. "Maybe they can," I think. "Maybe they can."

### **Dialogic courage**

One day, about 2 weeks after my dialogue with Noah, the students in my Persuasion in Western Culture course are talking about the connections between race, power, and persuasion. We began this conversation at the start of our semester together by drawing connections between identity, communication, and community. We know a lot about each other because we have spent a good deal of time grounding our conversation in a growing sense of the other, gained through cultivation of a storied sense of each group member's identity. This particular conversation is grounded in our cultural identities as a space from which persuasive talk may flow.

Today's conversation begins as we finish watching Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech on videotape. After a few moments of silent reflection, I say, "King positions himself as a dreamer for a race of people—for all humanity, really—and calls upon us *all* to engage the dream of hope and possibility he outlines, a dream where we are all equal and prosperous and free. Has the dream come true?" The temperature in the room rises almost immediately.

Joe (who identifies himself as "mixed race"): No. No way.

Brent (a "white American"): How can you say that? Look at civil rights. The movement worked.

Joe: But you are all racists. You just don't admit it. You look at me, and you immediately see me as black. And you don't think that's a good thing.

Kelly (a “white American”): I’m not a racist. I have a lot of black friends.

Joe: That’s just it. You call them *black* friends. You are not color-blind.

Some of the African-American students, a third of the class, are quickly and clearly uncomfortable with the direction this encounter is taking. They squirm in their chairs. But as the conversation unfolds, many of them agree that the dream has not been realized, that racism is still rampant, that we do not judge people by the content of their character, and that pigmentation still matters. White students, meanwhile, seem to feel beleaguered; several say they are being blamed for the sins of previous generations.

Finally, what seems like a moment of breakthrough comes upon us in the form of a simple invocation:

Mike (who identifies himself as “black”): Look, y’all are all racists. Joe said it, and I say it again. Why don’t you just admit it?

Daniel (a “white American”): I just don’t know how you can say that. How do you know? You don’t really know me, or us.

Mike (laughs): I don’t just mean you white folks. I mean all of you. Y’all are all racists. Hell, I’m a racist. We still judge—we *notice*—skin color, as if *that’s* what’s different about us. You see me as black and that makes a difference in how you see me; I see you as white and I wonder about you.

Brent: Oh, come on.

Kena (an “African-American” student): I think we all need to listen to what Mike’s saying. I think y’all are all jumping down his throat. You’re *arguing* with him. You need to hear what he’s saying. If we are going to have this conversation, you can’t just keep denying what he’s saying. You have to accept it as his point of view.

Mike: Thanks for taking my back; I appreciate it, I really do. But I have to say that I enter this conversation because I want to come out of it a better person. If I change—or if any of us change—because of talking about this, then it’s a good conversation. If we change because we’re having it, we have succeeded, seriously. The fact that we are having this conversation is big, but we should *do* something with it. We don’t have to agree. Just change. Change *something*.

Jessica (a white student, who identifies herself as “American”): I think we *all* need to go out on a limb. We need to risk ourselves to see a new way to live together.

Me (white American male of Greek and Scottish descent): That’s what I mean when I say we need dialogic courage. It takes some sort of risk, rising up out of the heartfelt sense of possibility that we might connect in some important way, if only we step beyond our comfort, beyond our preconceived ideas, beyond our scripts, beyond our cultural chains.

Kena: Yes. That's it. And first you gotta *listen*.

We pause, pondering that last statement. Have we really been listening? We need time to listen—for possibility, for the deeper meaning of our encounter. So we fall silent, reflecting on the possibilities for a long moment. I find myself pondering the dialogic possibilities of silence in co-presence. I think there is something to be said for communal, reflective silence. There are moments when this kind of silence can carry us to new levels of dialogic engagement (Poulos, 2004a). An opening for *spiritus* (Latin, “breath”)—for the breath of dialogue—to flow through us.

Then, gradually, we begin to talk about how we will carry this conversation out into the world, about how we ourselves will change, and how, by changing, we might change the world. So instead of persuading through logic or power or some sort of “assertive” stance, we will begin with cultivating the space for dialogic actions—through listening. And when words come, they will be words morphing into stories, falling into silences, and reaching into connections. We will begin with *inquiry*, opening ourselves to the story of the other. We will listen for possibility. Then, we will work to offer new stories of identity and change, of difference and dialogue. And we will hope that, together, falling into dialogue, we will begin to transform this world we live in.

Openly. Courageously.

We will open ourselves to the risk of dialogue. We will move into our worlds, infused with the power of the heart, of courage. We know that, often, stepping into genuine dialogue requires dialogic courage. Dialogic courage is the courage to move, *together*, into the transformative possibilities of dialogue, where none will emerge unchanged or even unscathed. This dialogic space is a space where the “I” is transformed. I no longer stand only as an “I” nor do you; I and you are both an other's Thou (Buber, 1970).

So, dialogue is risk, as Levinas (1981) points out so poignantly, because it is transformative and ego-reducing and “dangerous” to long-held structures of identity, ideology, and self-understanding, but it is a “fine risk to be run” (p. 120). According to Levinas, in encounter, we “sacrifice” ourselves to the greater goal of transformative possibility. We surrender to the presence of the other, responding in ways that cannot fail to move us, opening us up to Infinity (Levinas, 1969).

In genuine dialogue, then, we are embarked upon a risky adventure, where our very subjectivity is likely to shift to a new ground, to fall out of entrenchment into engagement. As Paul Tillich (1952) notes, this sort of risk may well entail anxiety. But Tillich also notes that we have access to an equally powerful counterforce: courage. Courage allows us to live on and to act in spite of threats, real or imagined, to our being. “Courage,” he says, “is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of nonbeing” (p. 155).

Courage—the power of heart, of spirit—allows us to step forth into our human worlds with strength and energy, overcoming the risk and the potential anxiety that threatens to overwhelm us. Surging up against the fear that may send us running away from dialogue in “flight” from the “threat” of transformation is the power of heart, of *coeur*-age.

### **Narrative conscience**

As *homo narrans*, the storytelling creatures (Bochner, 2001; Fisher, 1987; Goodall, 1996, 2005), we humans are naturally, deeply, and magnificently oriented toward story-making. Indeed, we arise in—and out of—our stories. We are, as co-narrators, ever in the act of creating new realities, narratively. We are also called, by our very storied being, to be participant–listeners in the stories of those others we encounter.

In the discipline of communication studies, our ethnographers—particularly those who traffic in the “new ethnography” (Goodall, 1996, 2000)—have, in recent years, offered deep insight into the dynamic and mysterious narrative contours of our co-being. Bochner (2001) offers a cogent account of the virtues of a narrative approach to understanding human life. He carefully pushes us to focus upon the deeper meanings of narrative, urging us beyond the critical and theoretical *analysis* of narratives for instrumental academic purposes and toward the crucial *heuristic* insight that narrative truth is at the very core of our human being; we simply must engage our narrative meaning-making faculties if we are to survive as human beings in a human world.

Meanwhile, Pelias (2000, 2004) passionately and evocatively reminds us of the heart’s involvement in these transcendent moments of story-making. And Ellis (2007) tells us that our story-making must, inevitably, involve us in a relational–dialogic ethic of care that brings us together, in dialogue, with the characters who inhabit our lives and our stories—we must embrace this ethic of care, she argues, or our story-making praxis can threaten, even sever, the ties that bind us. Goodall (2005) offers the notion that we all live out a “narrative inheritance” that “provides us with a framework for understanding our identity” through the storied lives of our forbears.

Our ethnographers<sup>2</sup> have explored and expanded our narrative knowing of human social life in deep, enriching, and fascinating detail. This rich, emerging tradition of ethnographic and autoethnographic work reminds me of that storied *center* of our human being. It also reminds me that there are close connections between the narratives we tell, the narrative trajectories we live out, and the dialogic action we might fall into on any given day. All this is grounded in a life of the heart (Pelias, 2004; Poulos, 2004b).

So dialogic courage, wed with dialogic imagination, opens us up to a third possibility I must now invoke: narrative conscience. Together, we weave a story-making praxis that infuses consciousness and thus makes its way into a storied narrative conscience—a conscience upon which we draw to make dialogic praxis possible.

Drawn from the Latin word *conscire*—to “know wrong”—but, reaching deeper, from the root parts *com*, meaning “together,” and *scientia*, meaning “knowing”—that is, “knowing together”—conscience is a primary form of communal learning—knowing praxis. Narrative conscience is a special form of this knowing, grounded in the storytelling and story-listening that infuses everyday life.

To fall into narrative conscience is an act of faith. The dynamics of faith are, as Tillich (1957) points out, the dynamics of “ultimate concern.” And ultimate concern, for most of us, is located in the storied world-building narrative praxis that teaches us where we stand as humans in a human world, as characters in a larger story, and as the children of the *mythos* of human life.

Narrative conscience brings us back, full circle, to the world of dialogic imagination. Narrative conscience is the storied eruption of imaginative possibility that pours forth into our lives as a primary pathway to all forms of knowing together. Narrative praxis is the center and ground of conscience building in all cultures and communities (Campbell, 1948; Fisher, 1987). Narrative conscience, then, is grounded in and emergent from a way of being in the world that foregrounds the vital importance of the story as the center of human praxial life and the storyteller as the weaver of the fabric of shared social existence (Taylor, 1996).

But the building of the narrative is an organic process, arising spontaneously from our co-being. To be sure, stories are a *response* to previous stories; each story is a link in a chain of story utterances that bind us together through the ages (Bakhtin, 1981, 1993). Thus, no story emerges in a vacuum. Still, as often as not, we simply *fall into* story; story is perhaps easier to stumble into than dialogue, as we appear to be “wired” for story (Bruner, 1987; Fisher, 1987; Goodall, 1996, 2005). Stories just emerge, naturally, as a primary way that we relate with each other. On any given occasion, we may find ourselves in a story, standing at the threshold of a new world, which is itself a threshold for joint action or shared possibility or dialogic engagement.

And so, as I turn to you, responding to your presence in our world, I turn to you for a story. I turn to you, opening myself to your narrative capacities, hoping that the tale you weave will be a tale of resonance and import. In turn, I offer you my story. Together, we craft the story of “us”—the story that will guide us along the way on the next phase of our life journey.

On one recent day, I find myself falling into story. I am sitting on the porch with my mom. It is a lovely early spring day. The dogwoods are just beginning to burst forth in that wash of color that always takes me aback. The abundant birds that make their way to Carolina this time of year offer a soft symphony, as background to our gentle conversation.

My mom, now 72, was a world traveler by the time she was 11 years old. She is a natural storyteller with a welcoming face. Sitting with her, I can just listen, watching how she smiles even as she talks, without my attention fading, for as long as she will speak. I am a quieter sort, more introverted, tending to take it all in before responding, but she makes it especially easy to listen.

Then, somehow, we begin speaking of her father, my grandfather. It is just a spontaneous moment in an ordinary conversation. But suddenly we are swept up in some story-trading. How can we not? Grandpa was a most remarkable man, who meant so much to us in this life.

My grandfather, the adventurer, the wild stubborn headstrong impulsive man, the hobo–baker–forester–farmer–professor, the gambler who lived on the edge of danger his whole life, the mercurial man who outlived all his friends and who, in his later years, began to lose it a bit, first with alcoholic binges, then later, after he stopped drinking cold turkey, with moments of lapsed memory or diminishing social inhibitions, who became a bit of a kleptomaniac as he edged toward 94, and who returned to church in his last years of life after an absence of 75 years, who lived life to the fullest, who lived a storied life and who, above all, became the symbol of strength and connection in our family, who lived in a way that we all turned to for guidance, not because he had it all right or because he was smarter or better or more capable than any of us, but simply and honestly because he lived fearlessly, courageously. He never backed down from a challenge, never quailed in the face of overwhelming odds, never let fear defeat him, never wavered in his conviction that the world was his oyster, and thus never lost a battle except for the final battle that we believe he not so much *surrendered* or *lost* as *decided*, decided to exit on his own terms, decided not to let a bad death take him later but rather after 94 years on this planet, decided to go to sleep and say “*adios*” as he so often said in life when he shuffled off to bed, that being his way of saying goodnight from as far back as I remember.

These were stories of darkness and light, of sadness and humor, and of life’s little lessons writ large in the bold hand of this fearless man. Along the way, my mom tells me the following story, a story that offered me an opening to another story:

Mom: When we were in Paraguay, there was a military coup. It happened when we were walking home from school. I think I was 11, and Bud was nine. Buddy and I were walking along the dirt road on the way back to our house, when someone came riding along on horseback, yelling, “Get down! Get down!” People were diving into the ditch beside the road so we did, too. And gunshots broke out. Dad was in the house and he apparently heard the commotion. I looked up just as he opened the front door. He stood on the porch, looking around, and a bullet lodged in the doorpost next to his head. He just looked over at it, then spotted me looking at him. He walked calmly over to Bud and me, grabbed our hands, lifted us to our feet, and guided us inside. I knew I was safe with my dad. I was always safe when he was there. That night we left Paraguay on an airplane, and we were off to our next adventure.

Me: Sounds like Grandpa. I remember one time we were standing in a line at some feed store somewhere, and this big, burly guy who towered over both of us kind of came in and muscled past us, breaking in line. Grandpa just tapped him on the shoulder and said, “We were here first.” The guy just laughed and said, “Oh yeah?” Grandpa looked at him intently, and said, “Oh yeah.” The guy looked him in the eye, kind of flinched, and retreated to the end of the line. Something passed between them there ... a clear message. But Grandpa never flinched. What a guy.

Mom: Yes, that's Daddy. He was a little guy, but very strong. The strongest man I've ever met.

Me (*smiling*): Strong, and bold, and stubborn. And a little crazy.

Mom (*laughing*): Yes. Remember the time he stole the woodpecker statue out of the neighbor's yard.

Me (*now laughing too*): Oh, man.

Mom: You know, he was about 92, and I think he was losing it a little. I asked him why he took it, and he said he figured he wanted it more than that guy. I made him take it back.

We fall silent for a moment, slipping into reverie about this man we loved so dearly. Then:

Me: Say, Mom ... I like how we tell stories about grandpa and family and so on. Do you think we could do this more often? I think it somehow helps me ... be part of this family.

Mom: Sure, that sounds fun.

Me: I like this.

Mom: Me, too.

Me: I think our Grandpa stories really teach us about life. About *us*.

Mom: Yes.

Me: Thanks.

In any given story, if we listen closely, we will hear a tale of conscience. In her story of my grandpa, my mother just *knew* she was safe, as long as her dad was in charge. That is powerful knowledge, reinforced by the narrative reconfiguration of it; this knowledge, passed along through story, draws, of course, on my own storied knowledge and experience of my grandfather's character and, at the same time, writes his qualities—his courage, his strength, and his care—forever into the larger story of a life and thus of lives.

And this story leads me to another story, a story of a life unfolding, a story of courageously embracing the dialogic and narrative possibilities of family and communal life. In the newly unfolding story, I find myself a father, called upon to protect and guide my own children. And so I live the legacy of my grandfather's story. It is my narrative inheritance (Goodall, 2005).

In living out my narrative inheritance, I have found myself in situations that would have, without the storied example of my grandfather, baffled me. I have had to stand with my children when they were hurt—physically, emotionally, and socially—and I have had to help them draw up the *courage to be*—the power to stand fast and strong, in the face of the deep anxiety that can come with pain, with the threat of nonbeing, and with threats of all sorts. I stood and held Eli

when he was less than 2 years old, as the doctor sewed his gashed lip, and I have helped Noah bravely face stitches in a torn foot. I have stood with Eli when his girlfriend dumped him, and I have been with Noah after he was teased at school. I have been with them both when death visited our family. In each of these moments, I was visited by my narrative inheritance of courage. Part of me wanted to run like a squirrel. But I knew that is not what grandpa would do.

And then, one evening, Eli and I are leaving fencing class. It is dark in the parking lot, and my hands are full of athletic bags filled with equipment. As we approach the car, a man leaps out from behind it, runs up very close to me, and starts yelling about something. It looks and feels a bit like I am being mugged. And then, I look over the man's shoulder, and there is Eli, sword in hand, crouched in a full *en garde* position, ready to protect me. So I drop a bag, look at the man, and point over his shoulder. The man looks, sees Eli at the ready, and decides to depart into the shadows.

Narrative inheritance, morphing into narrative conscience, has taken hold, and we are forever changed. This is a story we get a lot of mileage out of—a story, I am sure, that Eli's grandchildren will someday hear. And so the groundwork of narrative conscience is laid.

### **Implications: Dancing in the light of dialogue**

Back in the coffee shop, working on the third cup:

Me: I need your help.

Reviewer A: I've been thinking ... maybe accidental dialogue is that moment where we become conscious of some sort of "spark" that's different from ordinary conversation.

Rob: A spark. Buber (1965) used the metaphor of "leaping fire" (very similar to a "spark") to refer to dialogic relation (p. 107).

Reviewer B: I keep thinking of the word "spirit." Something *between* the words ...

Me: Well, yes, and Goodall (2006) defines communication as "a spirit in transit made manifest in voice." Levinas says it emerges in the *saying*—between and before the words.

Ken: Spirit ... from *spiritus*, Latin for "breath" ... the breath of dialogue ... breathing ...

Me: Into voice. Spirit moving through voice. Does that get us closer?

Rob: Yes, but what is *accidental* about it?

Me: In my experience, my imagination comes upon me, often taking me by surprise, coming seemingly out of nowhere. I see that as spirit moving into my life. Dialogue is sometimes like that. It just *happens*. Like an eruption.



Reviewer A: So, in this “accidental dialogue,” you are saying that some sort of dialogic imagination flares up, seemingly out of nowhere.

Reviewer B: Spontaneously.

Me: Yes. Often when you least expect it ... But maybe it only happens when you are somehow open to it, even if that openness is sometimes accidental.

Ken: And spirit takes hold.

Rob: Or maybe when you are challenged by a conversation moving into new, maybe even risky territory.

Me: Or maybe it’s just new. Fresh. And somehow deeply engaging. A spark ...

Ken: Right. And don’t the stories of these dialogic moments tell us ... something important about ourselves? Doesn’t genuine dialogue require risk?

Me: Right. Levinas would say that communication is transcendent only when dangerous ... I mean, isn’t accidental dialogue a case of dialogic courage rising up and merging with dialogic imagination in those moments of risk? We act out of courage, the *courage to connect* ... and courage knows no structure, no real boundaries. It defies definition. It’s not a fully rational surge of energy. It involves the *heart*. We know it when we see it, and we know it when we experience our own. But when we try to define it, we fumble it.

Reviewer B: Yes, now we’re getting somewhere ... but shouldn’t we add something about conscience here?

Rob: I like how this is going. (*Turning to me*): What do you think?

Me: Well, conscience *calls*. It calls on us and calls us out, forces us to engage.

Rob: Say more.

Me: Well ... I just think what we are talking about here is a moment where, together, we know what to do *from within* the situation, where conscience-infused dialogic spirit grips us, flows into the heart of the moment, and the human heart-spirit rises up and takes over, in spite of the anxiety that may flood our consciousness at the pivotal moment. So courageous conscience—born of our narrative inheritance—takes hold ... and allows us to do things we wouldn’t ordinarily do ... and remarkable things may follow ...

Ken: And isn’t it a case, finally, of the spontaneous arising of a *narrative opening*—an opening to new ways of being in the world, a door or a pathway to extraordinary transformations coming out of ordinary moments?

Me: Right.

Reviewer B: So accidental dialogue ... is dialogue that we stumble into, and that becomes infused with growing spirit, heightened awareness, and budding courage, all shot through with narrative possibility, born of narrative conscience.

Reviewer A: Sounds complicated.

Me: Yes. And no.

Ken: What?

Me: Well, it does seem to involve a lot of random forces—imagination, courage, happenstance, conscience, a sense of story, readiness, openness, awareness ... so it is complex ...

Rob: But?

Me: Well it's also quite simply, really. It's childlike in its simplicity.

Rob: Say more.

Me: Well, it means walking into each day—each moment, really—with an open heart, an active imagination, a desire to connect, a capacity for risk, a passion for story, and a love of possibility ... all the things a child has, naturally.

Reviewer B: Okay. Where are we? Where have the stories taken us?

Me: The narrative line that makes sense to me is this: For a long while, imagination had fallen on hard times, especially in the academy, especially in the social sciences. We looked for linear-causal, rational, rigorous explanations for phenomena. We looked for a *science* of human behavior. And then some of us turned to dialogue, and quickly got caught up in the *techné* of it. We began looking for ways to *orchestrate* dialogue; we wanted scripts or rules or steps to follow. But life is rarely so linear ... it's more random, messier, less predictable than we seem to wish—our lives are full of “accidents” that belie our linear organizing ways of thinking. And along comes this “narrative turn,” and with it, a call to practice the *art* of accidental imagination stumbling into accidental courage on the way to accidental dialogue.

Reviewer B: But ... what about rigor?

Me: Rigor, yes. But not *rigor mortis*. Sure, we want to define, to organize, to contain. So it all makes sense. But I am proposing that the only way to get close to that possibility is to experience the accidental. And the only way to do that, when it comes to dialogic accidents, is to be ready—to listen and to wait ... with an open heart ... for the spirit-breath of dialogue to *happen to us*. And then to fall into it, perhaps dance with it.

Reviewer A: I think the story is starting to make sense. It's a story of *surrender*.

Me: Yes!

Ken: Yes, but what does it all *mean*? I mean, how are we to take these stories of “accidental dialogue” into dialogue with dialogue theory?

Rob: Implications ...

Me: Hints and sparks and implications. And accidents ...

Ken: So ... for dialogue theorists ... to dialogue theorists ... what do you say?

Me: I want to say ... maybe we can add these elements to our theory, and then move forward to the next phase. Maybe dialogue theory is enhanced by our open acknowledgment of the role of accident, along with conscience, the power of courage, the joy of living in a sparkling narrative, the pure, unbridled ecstasy of an active imagination fired by connection. Maybe, in the end, it’s all about improvisation, where awareness and skill and fluidity mesh in a magic moment—a kind of *jamming* (Eisenberg, 1990). Maybe dialogue happens because we are open to its accidental nature; maybe we should just be ready to stumble, and fall ... into it. Maybe it’s just ... time to follow the spark. Maybe we should all just dance ... dance in the light.

And so we find ourselves dancing in the light of dialogue ... after stumbling accidentally into possibility ... falling into conscience ... leaping into imagination. On any given day, I may find myself imagining a world made of dialogic imagination, of courage rising, and of narrative conscience. On any given day, I may fall into encounter, and something new and powerful may emerge in that moment. On any given day, I may find myself stumbling into places I once only dreamed of.

In my dreams, I am often haunted by the shadow realm of secrecy; of loss; of dark, dark grief; of pain and anguish and suffering; of sadness untold, and secrets buried deep. In other dreams, I am teased by visions of unbounded joy, of glimmering hope and laughter and love, of the sunny world of imagination and passion and creativity and warm, warm friendship.

In either case, on any given day, I may find myself waking, and hoping—imagining with all the energy that is in me—that I will stumble into dialogue, feel the surge of rising courage, and fall into a fine story. On any given day, I may well be present, ready for the magic of dialogic imagination, for the upsurge of courage rising into possibility, for the power of narrative conscience to take hold. On any given day, I may find myself dancing in the light ... of a dialogic moment. On any given day, I may find myself grateful for that possibility. On any given day ...

## Notes

1 Flathead Lake, Montana: the crown jewel of the Rocky Mountains. Each summer, our little family—Noah, Eli, Susan, and I, along with our two dogs, Jake and Jessie—take a 3,000-mile road trip to a cabin on this glacier-fed lake, which sits nestled in the spectacular Mission Mountains of northwestern Montana. This is no ordinary body of water; Flathead is the largest

natural freshwater lake west of the Mississippi river—35 miles long, 15 miles wide, and over 350 feet deep in some spots. The water is as clear as the Caribbean, greenish in tint, and briskly cold. It is a lake of many moods and fascinations. Summer days in this north country are long, and we spend much time staring at the “Big Sky” and diving into the deep, cool, refreshing waters. We travel there because we are drawn by the power of the healing, magnificent beauty of one of nature’s great gifts. We travel there because we are drawn to adventure together. We travel there because our dreams take shape there. This is a family tradition now in its fourth generation, and we would not miss our summer pilgrimage for any reason.

2 Alexander (2003), Ashton (2004), Bochner (2001), Clair (1998, 2003), Conquergood (1993), de la Garza (2004), Denton (2004, 2006), Denzin (1996, 2001), Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Ellis (1995, 2007), Goodall (1996, 2005), Holman Jones (1998), Menchaca (2004), Pelias (2000, 2004), Poulos (2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2006a, 2006b), Richardson (2000, 2005), Taylor (1996), Tillmann-Healy (2001), Trujillo (2004), and Warren and Fassett (2004), to name but a few.

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