

## Review of the book, *Moments of meeting: Buber, Rogers, and the potential for public dialogue*

By: Christopher Poulos

[Poulos, C.](#) (2003). [Review of the book, *Moments of meeting: Buber, Rogers, and the potential for public dialogue*]. *Southern Communication Journal*, Vol. 68:2, 168-169.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10417940309373258>

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### **Article:**

Kenneth N. Cissna and Rob Anderson, *MOMENTS OF MEETING: BUBER, ROGERS, AND THE POTENTIAL FOR PUBLIC DIALOGUE*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002; pp. 324, \$71.50 hard-cover, ISBN: 0791452832; \$23.95 paper, ISBN: 0791452840.

As I write these words, Tel Aviv has just been bombed (again), the United States stands on the brink of war with Iraq, the United Nations is in a showdown over nuclear weapons with North Korea, and the threat of terrorism lurks at the edge of everyday life. Has there ever been a time in history when we so urgently needed better ways to engage with one another? Can we hope that public dialogue might rise up as a primary pathway for addressing the challenging issues we face in this morning of a new and increasingly dark century?

In *Moments of Meeting: Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Dialogue*, Cissna and Anderson find glimmers of hope. The text's central issue is whether, and under what conditions, dialogic moments can emerge in the public sphere. The authors argue that these transcendent "moments of meeting" (p. 174), if available as *public* moments, might offer new ways of addressing our shared problems—or, at least, for *approaching* the "other" in ways that might bring about a positive change in human connection. Thus, we might develop and extend our collective capacity to address communal challenges.

The authors focus on the April 1957 public dialogue between philosopher-theologian Martin Buber and psychotherapist Carl Rogers, a watershed event in the history of dialogue about dialogue. But this is no simplistic paean to two giants in the field. Cissna and Anderson systematically and realistically confront both the strengths and the shortcomings of the work of these two thinkers, and of their attempt at public dialogue. The authors set the stage by suggesting the possibility of dialogue in public spaces (chapter 1), by offering a rhetorical approach to dialogue (chapter 2), and by closely examining the philosophical theory of Buber (chapter 3) and the therapeutic praxis of Rogers (chapter 4). In chapter 5, they offer a case study of the important meeting between Buber and Rogers, plumbing the various transcripts and recordings of the meeting for evidence of comments about and emergent instances of moments of meeting. (See the authors' companion text, *The Martin Buber-Carl Rogers Dialogue: A New Transcript with Commentary*, Albany, NY: SUNY, 1997.) In chapter 6, they squarely confront critics of Buber and Rogers with precision and care.

The book's final chapters serve as signposts to a hopeful dialogic future by bringing an emerging theory of dialogue (chapter 7) to bear upon the future of dialogue in the public sphere. In chapter 8 and chapter 9, Cissna and Anderson apply the principles learned in their scholarly quest to the open possibility of true engagement in public dialogue. Can we who must coinhabit this increasingly small, interdependent, and strikingly diverse world make a difference by approaching each other differently, with care, in the proper spaces and at the appropriate times?

Cissna and Anderson continue their research into the contours of dialogue by offering an "intensive and microscopic" (p. 264) look at the positions of both Buber and Rogers as they emerged in (and beyond) this particular public dialogue. The authors also address the various scholarly critiques of the dialogue. The Buber-Rogers dialogue has sparked widespread commentary and criticism—most of which has concluded (erroneously, the authors argue) that Buber and Rogers are in fundamental disagreement about the nature and praxis of dialogue. Thus, the patient reader, most appropriately a graduate student or professor engaged in serious study of dialogue, is more than rewarded. They will learn much from this careful, deft, and scholarly look at what Cissna and Anderson come to call, in defiance of a preponderance of critics, the "Buber-Rogers position" (p. 174) on dialogue. That position, to put it perhaps too simply, is that dialogue, if and when it occurs, is at the same time ephemeral and powerful. It occurs in brief moments of meeting that often surprise the participants—as it apparently surprised both Buber and Rogers that fateful night 45 years ago. Dialogue is unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unruly. It is not subject to a specific *techné*, nor is it a product or outcome of right action. Rather, dialogue emerges as a *potential of particular moments*—a potential for participants to achieve a transcendent mutuality that allows for a real and productive meeting of persons. These moments of meeting involve a deep "awakening of other-awareness" (p. 174) that is constitutive of new worlds of meaning.

Setting the appropriate conditions for the praxis of dialogue is perhaps the great quixotic quest of our century. What conditions must be present for a moment of meeting to emerge? The dialogue between Buber and Rogers seems to suggest some beginning points. Careful inquiry and listening, a focus on good process rather than on outcome or product, an openness to the other while holding one's own, a strong sense of equality or mutuality, and active confirmation of the other are the most prominent of these necessary (although not sufficient) conditions for dialogue. Although participants can strive, as Buber and Rogers apparently did, for these conditions, true dialogue can neither be controlled nor legislated.

Cissna and Anderson suggest that Buber and Rogers' combined insights can point us toward a new and bright dialogic future, if we approach the encounter with "strange otherness" and with a "vigorous discipline of recognition" (p. 261). To answer the call of dialogue means to develop a dialogic *approach* that is recognizable in our talk and in our demeanor. Such an approach is open to and acknowledging of the great value that the other brings to our shared life-world. If we embrace this approach, then every human encounter offers the possibility of a wondrous surprise: a true moment of meeting.