



Synergos

Toward a New Paradigm For Civil Society Leadership

The Art of Bridging Gaps

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All of us here aspire to a better and more just world; and I would venture to guess that we would not be doing what we are doing if we did not intend to play some role in helping to bring that about. You would also not have been picked to be here if you did not aspire to be or consider yourselves already to be leaders of your respective civil societies.

This week is an opportunity for us to consider together, out of our collective experience and our collective wonderings, what constitutes the kind of leadership that can help bring about the changes to which we aspire, and how we can become more effective in our own settings.

Stepping Back

Since my intervention comes early in the week, I feel it is worth stepping back, before considering the question at hand, to reflect with you for a moment on the larger question of where human beings fit into this planet and on how much latitude we in fact have to change, given our evolutionary history.

This may seem strange to you, and you may feel impatient to get on with the business at hand, so let me explain why I am doing this. This summer, after more than ten years of working at forming and growing my organization, The Synergos Institute, I realized that I was exhausted, burned out.

Several other factors converged with this realization; I was just about to turn fifty, a sobering number that also inspired me to stop and reflect on the meaning of what I had been doing and what I might still achieve; and I had already decided that it was time to begin to digest what I had been so busy learning during my tenure at Synergos, and to try to write a book about a theme that has emerged for me as key to what we are trying to do: bridging the kinds of social, economic, sectoral and ideological gaps that I believe keep us from solving problems effectively.

Taking the time to prepare to write, in the context of feeling tired and turning fifty, perhaps allowed me to be more open to consider a broader range of themes as possibly relevant to the issues I was pondering, even if the connection was not immediately apparent.

So one of the subjects I allowed myself to start thinking about is how human-centered we tend to be. This may be partly cultural, by the way. For several years, colleagues in the Philippine NGO (non-governmental organization) movement have been articulating issues related to justice and human development very much within a larger context of the spiritual meaning of the earth and universe, and of the place that human beings occupy in the eco-system. Those were ideas that sounded vaguely appealing to me at the time, but I was too busy trying to save humanity to really pay attention to the fact that we are not all there is. Even if we manage to save ourselves, in the sense of

creating more justice and equity, there is no guarantee that we will thereby save the planet we occupy. If we do not do that, we will not have saved ourselves.

Then there is the larger question which I will not get into here, although I'd love to discuss it later, about what "saving" ourselves means: how much of this is satisfying external needs and how much is living a fulfilling, spiritually connected life.

How Much Can We Change, Anyway? The Nature of Human Nature

The second theme that I began to listen to this past summer was the question of what is human nature and how much can we change anyway. I had heard Jane Goodall speak some time ago and was impressed with her studies of our closest primate relatives and the apparent parallels between their behavior and ours. But my intention to find a way to enable change to happen had stood in the way of my seriously considering what might be the likely limits to how much we can change, given our evolutionary history and genetic make-up.

Goodall's reflections¹ after thirty years of work observing chimpanzees, with whom we share 99% of genetic make-up, were sobering, in terms of the innate aggressiveness and territoriality she found, alongside the nurturing ability and a spirit of community that were also present. If we consider the parallels in our own species, it is worth at least contemplating how hard it will be to change traits that we have inherited from species that preceded us by millions of years.

Certainly, if we look at human history, it contains as least as many steps in what we would consider the wrong direction, thinking about equity and justice, as in the right one. And that goes for within small communities, larger societies and the world at large. One could argue, I suppose, that more societies are closer to embracing democratic values than has ever been the case before. And that, in this millisecond of humanity's existence on earth, may be true; but how close are we to seeing them truly implemented, and how permanent will they be even if they are acted upon in some settings?

Having engaged, for a while, in some gloomy thinking that appeared to negate, as impossible, everything I had been trying to do for my entire adult life, I began to circle back around to some other ideas that have interested me for some time, that come more from the field of psychology. These include the notion that human behavior is not completely predetermined in one direction or another; rather, different tendencies exist within us simultaneously. It is possible, under certain circumstances, to bring to the fore one tendency over another to meet different kinds of challenges.

Two ways of describing these dialectic tensions that exist within us are the Chinese notion of yin and yang and Jung's concept of anima and animus. More recently, James

¹ Goodall, Jane, Through a Window: My Thirty Years with the Chimpanzees of Gombe, 1990. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York

Hillman² has been using the contrast of soul and spirit to connote a similar set of tensions. While these opposing tendencies are often thought of in gender-related terms (the anima and yin being more characteristic of female approaches and the animus and yang of male orientation), thinking exclusively in those terms can be counter-productive, since both polarities exist within all of us to differing degrees. If we define them in gender terms exclusively, it may become less appealing for people of one gender to seek out and enhance in themselves the qualities that they identify as characterizing the other gender.

The qualities embodied in these two poles are also found, to a large degree, in our primate cousins, suggesting that they are not mere psychological constructs, but that our genetic make-up is more complex and allows for more variation than a single set of behaviors or characteristics. To the extent that that is true, and to the extent that human beings have evolved even minimally over our primate relatives, in terms of our capacity to think and decide, then it ought to be possible to elicit from ourselves behaviors from either pole that are adaptive to the needs of the time.

I will suggest in greater detail in a moment that this period of time calls for approaches of conciliation, harmony with each other and nature and working in partnership across different interest groups. The study of primates shows these tendencies as part of primate behavior and I believe they represent one end of the spectrum of human nature as well.

On the other hand, when we feel that our very survival and well-being are threatened, we are likely to respond in a genetically programmed fright-flight or fright-fight way that represents the antithesis of this other approach. If we are living in Rwanda or Bosnia or many other places in the world where neighbors are planning ethnic cleansing campaigns, it is considerably less likely that we will be in a position to think about building bridges, creating partnerships or any other qualities I am going to advocate as necessary for leadership of modern civil society. It is correspondingly more likely that we will try to find ways to protect those close to us - our kin, our community, our own group - by whatever means it takes, including acting in autocratic ways, following autocratic leaders and preparing ourselves to kill fellow human beings as a way of protecting our own.

It is also less likely that we would seek conciliation and synergy if we are hungry and see others around us having plenty to eat and not sharing it. And that extends to being jobless or lacking access to education, housing or health care - in short, the circumstance of much of the world's low-income people. For in fact, we live in a world of contrasts and contradictions. It is not that all the wealthy live in one isolated region and the poor in another. In most societies, people live under radically different circumstances, often right next to each other. Confronting these contrasts is very likely to make the haves feel self-protective and possessive, not wanting what they have to be taken away, and the have-nots to want and try to get some of what the haves possess.

² Hillman, James, Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account, 1981. Spring Publications, Inc., Woodstock, Connecticut

This particular gap, between the haves and have nots, is probably the most fundamental one that divides us, that drives us human beings back into genetically programmed behavior and deprives us of being able to make use of the extremely fine layer of conscious, conscientious thinking and behavior to which our evolution has tenuously brought us.

But there are other gaps as well: religious and ideological beliefs are among the most rigid and rampant; ethnic and national identification have caused wars and atrocities. It seems that we human beings need to differentiate ourselves from others in order to justify putting ourselves above, conquering and persecuting them. Being different becomes equated with being wrong and bad. Believing differently, being of a different ethnic background or nationality or skin color are all rationalizations we humans have used to hate, to distance ourselves, to wage war.

Of course once the violence starts, then other justifications arise, for each side will surely be wronged in active conflicts. And then the rationale can last for a thousand years, as it has among many neighboring ethnic groups, because new justifications for the hatred and revenge keep appearing.

Let's think for a moment why these might have sprung up in the first place. When we look at studies of so-called primitive human societies, we find examples of groups where war and violence were absent as well as others where it was a part of the normal life of the societies. Does this suggest that we don't have to be one way or the other? That, depending on the external circumstances and the forms of culture and leadership of a given group, societies can evolve differently? If that is true, then we who think about developing and strengthening civil society, of promoting more justice and equity and harmony in the world, might have some shred of hope of working with others to move our own society in a direction where such conflicts, such hatred and such injustice would not have to exist. Yes, we would be working against trends and circumstances which mitigate in the other direction; and that in itself will be extremely hard. But if we can call on the qualities within ourselves and the fellow members of our society that tend to bring people together rather than tear them apart, build bridges of understanding and compassion, then perhaps we can contribute to moving our respective societies in the right direction.

Are we looking at a chicken and egg situation, though? Is it fruitless to say that this can be done if circumstances of peace and equity exist in a society, when that is hardly the case anywhere? I think we have to look at the acuteness of a given conflict in assessing whether a leadership style that promotes bridging gaps can be effective. And we must also consider different forms of bridging gaps. After all, while some wars are fought to the bitter end until a "winner" is determined, others have been resolved by mediators, who are bridge builders of a different sort.

In situations where opposing groups are already at each others' throats, perhaps mediation is needed before other forms of bridge building can be effective. But I don't

mean only mediation by government officials or professional conflict negotiators. A good example comes from Fundación Esquel Ecuador (FEE), a community foundation with which I am familiar and with which I have worked over a number of years. In the recent war between Ecuador and Perú, FEE played a bridging role in the social and economic sphere, even if it would not have defined itself as a mediator, mobilizing citizens' groups in Ecuador, while a counterpart organization, CEPEI (Centro de Estudios Peruanos de la Economía Internacional), did the same on the other side of the border. The idea was to protest both governments' warlike stances and to try to counteract their efforts to mobilize citizens to take aggressive stances (bringing out their fright-fight impulses) against their neighbors.

This is an example of a group calling on that within people that seeks reconciliation and harmony. I would guess some of you have examples from your own settings and organizations where you have played similar mediation roles even though that may not be how you define your primary mandate or skills.

Of course most of us are striving toward equity in fundamentally inequitable societies, so we are already accustomed to working against the apparent tide. We tend to work on the chicken and the egg: to support the kinds of new initiatives that build equity and opportunity into communities and organizations; and, at the same time, to work to change the structures and policies that have created inequities in the first place.

Before leaving the portion of this lecture in which I am inviting you to join me in stepping back from your daily concerns and activities, I want to leave you with one other thought about human nature in the much larger context of the universe. It comes from reflections by Peter Senge, a leading thinker on leadership, in his introduction to a book called *Synchronicity* by Joseph Jaworski, to which I will refer later on. He begins:

...almost all of us carry around a deep sense of resignation. We're resigned to believing we can't have any influence on the world, at least not on a scale that matters. So we focus on the small scale, where we think we can have an influence. We do our best with our kids, or we work on our relationships, or we focus on building a career. But deep down, we're resigned to being absolutely powerless in the larger world. Yet if we have a world of people who all feel powerless, we have a future that is predetermined. So we live in hopelessness and helplessness, a state of great despair. And this despair is actually a product of how we think, a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.³

But Jaworski, commenting on a conversation he had with the physicist, David Bohm, in 1980, felt profoundly more hopeful once he perceived the implications of Bohm's understanding of the universe:

...he described matter as sometimes particles, sometimes waves, sometimes mass, sometimes energy, all interconnected and constantly in motion. Once we see this fundamentally open quality of the universe, it immediately opens us up to the potential for

³ Jaworski, Joseph, *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*, 1996. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco, California. p. 10

change; we see that the future is not fixed, and we shift from resignation to a sense of possibility. We are creating the future every moment.⁴

The implications of this for humans, he continues, are that:

At a level we cannot see, there is an unbroken wholeness, an “implicate order” out of which seemingly discrete events arise. All human beings are part of that unbroken whole which is continually unfolding. One of our responsibilities in life is to be open and learn, thereby becoming more capable of sensing and actualizing new realities.⁵

Senge, commenting on this phenomenon, also takes hope:

...when we go through this shift of mind, we begin to realize that the sense of despair we've been feeling arises out a fundamentally naive view of the world... How could we live in anything but a world of continual possibility.⁶

Jonas Salk, the famed discoverer of the polio vaccine, actually related these principles of physics to thinking on evolution when he said “I have come to recognize evolution not only as an active process that I am experiencing all the time, but as something I can guide by the choices I make...”⁷

So maybe, it occurs to me, if we step outside the intriguing but often fixed worlds of evolutionary sociobiology and psychology, and let our spirits float in that nebulous world of physics, we will, in fact, find possibilities for change that don't seem possible from within the constraints of these other frameworks.

Why Bridging, As A Leadership Style, Is Needed Now

Before delving specifically into the qualities required for a new form of leadership that could tap into these principles, I want to say just a few words about why I feel we especially need a new paradigm at this point in human evolution. If we look at the whole history of humanity until about the 19th century, or age of industrialization, it could be characterized by exploration, expansion, conquest and discovery. Humans were expanding physically into most parts of the earth; where they found other human settlements, there was usually a struggle for dominance. Nation-states were formed; empires were created and destroyed; different groups rose to power and lost it again. The base of knowledge and science were expanding with each new discovery, each invention.

This is not to say that this is all that was going on, although if one reads the history books, which tend to focus on power and governance issues, one might think so. But it is probably safe to say that that moment of our evolution was largely dominated by the animus side of human nature.

⁴ Ibid, p. 183

⁵ Ibid, p. 148

⁶ Ibid, pp. 10-11

⁷ Ibid, p. 204

One could also speculate that now, with human populations filling most of the habitable regions of the globe - and some uninhabitable ones - we have come to the end of our expansionist phase. Yes, we are now exploring space, and some groups are trying to expand into other groups' territory. But in general, an expansionist or conquest-oriented mode is no longer adaptive for humankind or for the planet. If we do not turn our attention more to conserving, reconciling, focusing on quality rather than quantity and learning to work together, our historically expansionist stance is liable to lead us into greater conflicts and to further environmental degradation.

It is for this reason that we need to further articulate a style of leadership that derives from the other end of the spectrum of human tendencies, for those are the qualities that are needed to turn today's world away from the collision course on which it finds itself.

There is another reason for opting for a bridgebuilding approach to leadership: with the complexity and interconnectedness of the current world, it is increasingly difficult for any one group to achieve a goal by itself. This is true at the community level as well as at the national and global levels.

Jean Lipman-Blumen, in The Connective Edge; Leading in an Interdependent World, sees that we have already evolved through two phases of human development. The first is characterized by **physical boundaries**, requiring leadership of physical strength and independence. The second is characterized by **geopolitical boundaries** and ideologies, lending themselves to authoritarian leadership which jealously guarded its own sovereignty. She postulates that we are just now coming into a new era where:

Around the globe, two antithetical forces - interdependence and diversity - are generating tensions that will fundamentally change the conditions under which leaders must lead... As the old geopolitical alliances are dissolving, the *connections* between concepts, people, and the environment are tightening. Technology makes these linkages ever tighter. It is an era of interpenetration, where physical and political boundaries no longer shield us against outsiders or prevent us from moving freely into others' space....Wherever we look, we see loosely structured global networks of organizations and nations tied to multiple subnetworks, living in a clumsy, federated world...⁸

She goes on to say that this new era requires a new form of *connective leadership*, which uses multiple leadership strategies to fit the needs of any particular circumstance. These new, connective leaders, she continues, "intuit and exploit the interconnections among people, institutions and processes everywhere."⁹

Let me stop and summarize for a moment where this argument has taken us thus far:

- first, there are tendencies inside human beings that mitigate against the trends toward equity and justice that we are trying to promote. These originate in our primordial fears of being captured, subjugated or killed by

⁸ Lipman-Blumen, Jean, The Connective Edge; Leading in an Interdependent World. 1996. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco. pp.xi and 8-9

⁹ Ibid, p. 17

- some neighboring group and lead us to be suspicious of others who are different, protective of what is ours and aggressive when we feel threatened.
- secondly, there are dialectic tendencies inside each of us; the more constructive ones for our era in history can be called on under the right circumstances, but may be harder to elicit in situations of adversity.
 - third, because of scarce resources for a growing population, which leads people to compete over them and label their competitors as enemies, it is likely that conflicts will increase, as will inequities. This will make it harder to call on those qualities in the human psyche and in human communities that promote harmony and conciliation, but it is our task to do so.
 - fourth, there are connective forces in the basic elements that comprise the universe, described by some physicists, that imply the possibility of greater unity and commonality.
 - finally, we, as leaders of the civil society - that part of human organizations that addresses itself to meeting the needs of individuals and communities outside the bounds of government or the market - have a fundamental role to play in building the bridges that will enable groups in conflict to find common ground and that will enable the haves and have nots to come to see their mutual self-interest in creating a sustainable livelihood for everyone.

The Case for Bridging As A Style of Civil Society Leadership

Now let us look at how civil society leadership has related to leadership trends in the past. It is my impression that, although we in civil society have generally defined ourselves as different from and sometimes in opposition to the state and the market, including in terms of their leadership styles, our styles have often been skewed toward the same end of the spectrum as theirs - namely, a power politics approach or, what Lipman-Blumen would call Stage 2: The Geopolitical Era¹⁰. This may have resulted from an effort to fight fire with fire, out of the notion that we, the civil society, in some ways the weakest of the three sectors, only have a chance to influence our two stronger counterparts if we play on their terms.

But in fact, the truth is probably exactly the opposite. We will never have the institutional authority of the state or the financial resources of the market. Therefore, if we operate just like they traditionally have, we will always be two steps behind. Our strength lies in the potentially vast human resources and energy we can mobilize. But because our constituencies are so diverse, the only way they will grow to their full potential power is by coming together across all the differences they represent to speak

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 8

with one voice. Were they to do this, their opinion would make a difference, by virtue of their sheer numbers, both at the ballot box and in the marketplace.

How has the stance of civil society leadership toward this paradigm of partnership evolved over time? Twelve years ago, when I began talking to people around the world about the utility of a partnership approach to solving problems, I encountered considerable doubts on the part of many NGO leaders. Yes, they were interested in having access to other sectors and levels of their society and to international groups in order to make their case or get resources; but to actually work together? That seemed to many like a sell-out. And they had some very relevant arguments which we have had to take seriously. For example, the weaker group - usually the civil society counterpart - might end up selling out or caving in to the pressures brought to bear by stronger sectors, rather than being able to enter into a true partnership on an equal footing. One of the strategies that was suggested for avoiding this was for these weaker groups to either band together first, thereby gaining strength in numbers, or to find allies among stronger counterparts in other sectors who could boost their strength.

During the years that I have been working with Synergos, I have seen an increasing receptivity toward partnership approaches in virtually every part of the world to which I have travelled. I have observed this not only among people in civil society, but also among the business community and government representatives. It is as though there were a sea change occurring naturally, perhaps in response to the perception that our former approaches had us programmed on a collision course with disaster. Or perhaps, as Lipman-Blumen suggests, this is because people are beginning to see that the increasing interdependence of the world requires a new leadership approach:

As the leadership paradigm shifts from independence to *interdependence*, from control to *connection*, from competition to *collaboration*, from individual to *group*, and from tightly linked geopolitical alliances to loosely coupled global *networks*, we need to encourage a new breed of leaders who can respond effectively to such conditions.¹¹

But mouthing the words and learning how to behave effectively according to new norms and principles are two different things. I believe we are still far from the point where either formal and informal education helps people to learn how to work effectively across gaps.

For that to happen, we need both well-prepared **bridging individuals** and **bridging institutions**. Let me try to define each of these, using some examples, before ending with a vision for **bridging leaders**.

Bridging Individuals

Bridging individuals seek out and develop connections to groups other than just the one with which they are affiliated. One example would be Joe Madiath of Gram Vikas, a

¹¹ Ibid, p. 226

large NGO in Orissa, India. Joe had received a contract and funding from the national government of India and the Ford Foundation to work with tribal groups in Orissa to construct family bio-gas ovens as a way of generating energy for both cooking fuel and electricity. This was extremely important in an area that was almost totally deforested and where people had depended almost entirely on firewood for fuel. But there was resistance in some parts of the state government to giving an NGO the resources and freedom to implement a relatively large program. Joe was able to overcome this resistance by reconnecting with the state minister in charge, who had been a university classmate of his, thereby using a personal connection to create a bridge between his own organization and the reluctant state government.

If you think about it, we all have connections of one kind or another outside our own immediate circumstances. Since bridging is needed in all different directions (up, down, laterally, across sectors and disciplines and beliefs), any connections to people different from ourselves could potentially be useful.

Sometimes it may take the connections of more than one bridger to span the gap that exists. An example comes to mind from my first job, teaching in an alternative high school for drop-out students. My partner was an older man who had grown up in the community and gone through many of the same difficulties the students were encountering. I had come from the outside and hadn't yet built trust or credibility with the students (which would never be as great as his, given his history), but had experience in writing grant proposals and dealing with government bureaucracies. Both of us perceived a need to augment the kinds of educational opportunities we were offering the students if we were to inspire them to get engaged again; but that necessitated funding from outside sources as well as acceptance, on the part of the students, of the new programs. My partner was well-equipped to gain the students' agreement while I was better suited to writing the proposals. By his and my joining forces like links in a chain, we were able to extend what my friend Gustavo Esteva has called "chains of trust" across a seemingly unbridgeable gap: between these students and the state bureaucracy's capacity to provide funding to meet the need.

So one of the first tasks that we, as bridgers, must undertake is to assess what are the gaps which need to be bridged. Think of analyzing a problem this way:

- What is the problem that needs to be solved?
- Who else needs to be involved in order to solve it?
- What are our bridging assets? Where do our contacts and credibility lie?
- Do we have ties from some other time in our lives with other constituencies with which we could reconnect?
- Do we have family members or old friends who went into government or business with whom we could forge links, in an effort to build bridges to those sectors?
- If we do not have all the necessary contacts to bridge a gap, might one of our existing contacts have a link to a group that could help us do so?

- In essence, can we add one or more links to the chain of trust that will ultimately bring together the actors without which the problem will not get solved?

I have found that there are potential allies in every organization and every sector. It is just a matter of seeking them out and building a relationship of trust and respect with them. Once that is done, to the extent that you have credibility with your own constituency and they do with theirs, the bridging of interests becomes easier. The basis for forging a new link in the chain of trust is laid.

Let me give one more example from these last years of seeking out and working with gap bridgers, because it represents a case where a natural bridger began with very few contacts and, through first articulating the approach for herself, and then allying herself with Synergos, which had some of the connections she needed, and, eventually, with allies she found in other organizations and sectors, she was able to expand her contacts to the point that people were seeking her out.

Wanda Engel, the founder of Roda Viva, a partnership-oriented group in Rio de Janeiro, seeking to create consensus around the rights of children in Brazil and, from that, to develop appropriate services, was at the end of her rope doing things the traditional way. She had been a teacher and high school principal and had worked closely with other activists in the favela (squatter settlement) near which her school was based. But it was not enough. Too many of her former students, whom she thought had been rescued through hers and her colleagues' efforts, were ending up dead or in sordid lives of drug wars, petty crime and poverty.

Realizing she needed to reach beyond her somewhat insular world of state employees and NGO activists to get to the roots of the problem, but feeling she lacked the contacts to do so, she leapt at the suggestion by a mutual friend that we meet at the point when Synergos was just starting. She needed no convincing that a partnership approach was the way to go - the only question was how.

Many of her colleagues were more rooted in their ideological dogmas and couldn't initially accept the need to reach out to other groups, like the business community, which they felt were largely to blame for the circumstances against which they were struggling. Some of those early members of Roda Viva left, rather than change that stance, while others gradually came to accept the necessity of a broader approach, even if some of them could not bring themselves to reach out personally. They had enough confidence in Wanda, who is a natural bridger, to allow her to do that as their leader, while they continued to focus on direct work with teachers and children.

The most difficult aspect of building the partnership - and it is still not completed - was bringing the private sector into the equation. The language and culture were so different that even for some one as outgoing and people-oriented as Wanda, it took some time to feel comfortable in the kinds of cocktail party settings and corporate board rooms where she had to go to drum up support. As is often the case, her break-

thoughts came when she found individuals within that culture who resonated with what she was trying to say and helped her to articulate her points in terminology that was understandable and acceptable to a broader range of business leadership.

Her efforts were also helped by the acute situation in Rio: people were afraid to walk on the streets for fear of being robbed; gunshots could routinely be heard on the neighboring hills at nights as drug wars raged in the favelas; children peopled the streets, begging, stealing and selling things, including themselves. It was a situation that had begun to affect everyone, including the economy of the city, as tourism, a principal source of income, had declined. In some research which Synergos and other groups did on what makes partnership work, one finding was that people do not usually engage in partnership approaches if they believe they have the power or resources to solve a problem by themselves. In other words, partnership traditionally has been a tactic of last resort!

Wanda proved so good at engaging people based on helping them see the gravity of the situation and at crossing sectoral and social boundaries that she was eventually tapped by the Mayor of Rio to head their entire municipal social services sector, where she is implementing a partnership approach much like that she brought to Roda Viva, but from the larger base of government.

Building on the examples I have just mentioned and thinking through many other experiences I have had in this field over the past twelve years, I ask myself what are the qualities that a bridging individual must have? The principles are actually quite down-to-earth and practical:

- One is a **willingness to engage with different kinds of people**. Not everyone finds this enjoyable or has the facility for interacting across considerable differences; but I would venture to say that most people have relations with and a capacity for relating with some group other than their own.
- Another would be an **openness to compromise**, insofar as finding common interests will always entail some measure of giving up part of what one wants. Some one who is so sure they are absolutely right and that the only solution is to “win” the point may have trouble with this; but others who may be equally committed to finding a positive outcome for their constituency may be more open to seeking a “win-win” where neither side gets 100% of their original objective, but where both feel satisfied with the outcome.
- A third is sufficient **credibility with one’s own constituency** such that its members feel comfortable letting you go out and negotiate with what may be thought of as the enemy. If you doesn’t have that trust, then talking with a perceived enemy may give rise to suspicions that you are, in fact, part of that enemy. But going into such a conversation with the agreement of your group can help bring them along in the negotiations.

- And a fourth is an **aptitude for learning to understand and communicate in the different “languages” that different sectors and groups use.** For example, I often found that it was difficult to say what Synergos is or stands for in language that people from the private sector, which is very output - oriented, could understand. Before I could gain any credibility with people in that sector (and this despite having family connections to it), I had to learn how they would articulate the same concepts and translate from the way I would normally talk to a way that they could understand and with which they could resonate.

Bridging Institutions

As important as it is that civil society organizations have within their leadership bridging individuals, it is equally important that there be bridging institutions within the complex panoply of organizations that comprise civil society. The reason for this is that there are limits to how much bridging any one individual can do, just by virtue of the number of contacts it is possible to generate. But an organization is comprised of many individuals, and, if it takes as part of its mandate the bridging of gaps that prevent problems from getting effectively solved, it can consciously try to attract people with connections to different groupings that will need to be brought into the picture.

Let me refer again to Fundación Esquel Ecuador, a group that has consciously sought to integrate people from different sectors, geographic regions and ideological perspectives into their staff and board, in an effort to become a truly national and representative community foundation. There is no question that, at the beginning, the decision to bring in people different from the core group of intellectuals and activists caused considerable anxiety among some of the original members, who wanted to be able to control how the organization evolved by only allowing in those who agreed with them.

One of the most complex aspects of the process to manage was the integration of people from the business community because, again, the cultures are so different and there was an initial communication gap as well as ideological differences. It was hard to get the business members of the board to attend meetings because they were so busy attending to their “real” business. And it was nearly impossible to get them to contribute to the foundation’s work financially because they did not have the habit of either philanthropy or social activism.

Not having been part of those early meetings, I can only deduce how things actually evolved from my conversations with board members and with Cornelio Marchán, the founding President (who, himself, had been formerly both a government minister and in NGO work, so he had at least two different perspectives on development - although not a business one). My impression is that they very much used chains of trust, both to attract the right people and to gradually build a sense of group identity among the

members. Once trust was established among the staff and board, then differences could be aired in ways that people of opposing views could hear and even appreciate.

One of the most productive outcomes of this interaction, from my perspective, was the expansion of the foundation's program from just grantmaking, convening and advocacy work, to include small loans and venture capital investments in small businesses. There is no question that this idea evolved out of an initially problematic dialogue between some of the more community-oriented staff and board, on the one hand, and the business members of the board, on the other. The latter simply could not understand how the staff could spend so much time and energy raising both operational capital and endowment funds, only to turn around and give it away, with no potential return. The staff, on the other hand, had never dealt in anything but grants, so to them, initially, the notion of trying to get their money back was anathema. But over the course of time, they became convinced that some of the groups with which they were working had gotten to a point where they could pay back a loan or handle an investment, and that it would be very useful to have a mechanism for "graduating" grantees to this more sustainable model.

Even more remarkable than the staff of the foundation coming around to this way of thinking was the fact that the business members of the board finally found a real way of getting involved - that met their business criteria as well as their social values. Two of the banks represented are co-sponsoring a venture capital fund for small businesses with the foundation, putting in a considerable amount of their own capital and serving as the managers.

This represents just one example of the type of fruitful outcomes that can result from building trusting working relationships across sectors or points of view. It is easier to do when there is a task at hand and an organization through which to organize the work.

Many different kinds of institutions can play bridging roles of different sorts, if their leadership and organizational structure allows for it. Universities, for example, have long been excellent conveners of different kinds of groups around a variety of issues, although their forte tends to be more in discussion than action. NGOs can also be good bridging institutions, facilitating common agendas and action between community constituencies and other societal actors, such as local government, the business sector or bilateral donor agencies. The span of an NGO's bridging capability may vary, depending on how local, versus national it is, but since gaps exist between nearly every level and sector, each group can assess its own effective sphere of influence and operate within it.

I want to focus for a moment on community foundations, or civil society resource organizations (as we have been calling them, to differentiate them from many Northern foundations, whose roles tend to be narrower), as a type of institution particularly suited to act as a bridge. Much of this is implicit in the example I just gave of Fundación Esquel Ecuador: having a pluralistic board and staff is an important component in expanding reach. But the importance of marshalling and applying financial resources

should not be underestimated as a key factor in attracting the interest of many different sectors (the same way a university's special relationship to knowledge and learning gives it special convening power in that sphere). The capacity to leverage resources from other sources is greatly enhanced if the organization in question can say they will put up the first funds. We are seeing this in Mozambique, where the FDC (Fundação para o Desenvolvimento da Comunidade) is playing an important convening, advocacy, leveraging and financing role; and another foundation under development in the Western Region of Zimbabwe, with the assistance of ORAP and other Zimbabwean NGOs, aspires to the same mix of roles.

Foundations with financial resources that have already gained a reputation for integrity and credibility will, of course, be of interest to community organizations and NGOs, but it is interesting to note how interested governments, the private sector, bilateral donors and the multilaterals also are in these new structures. If one thinks about them from the perspective of, say, The World Bank, which has historically passed resources mainly through government structures, but whose leadership is lately having second thoughts about the efficacy of this being the only approach, such intermediary organizations represent an ideal alternative for certain kinds of resource flows. On the one hand, the foundation is or aspires to be large enough to be able to channel significant chunks of money at one time, which is a prerequisite for the large multilaterals, that cannot administer small loans to individual groups. On the other hand, it has credibility with various sectors within the country, and therefore is not likely to be suspected of only supporting one type of project or group. Financial channeling is, of course, only one type of bridging activity, but it is an important one both to those seeking new sources of capital and to those trying to apply it efficiently.

If we, as bridging individuals, hope to transform our institutions into bridging organizations, we must ensure that they encompass the following qualities:

- diverse composition of staff and board to gain credibility and access to the range of groups and interests with which we aspire to work,
- staff with an orientation to reaching out and seeking to work with diverse groups,
- roles and functions that have relevance and interest to different groups in the society, and
- capacity to convene diverse groups in a safe space around themes of common interest.

Bridging Leaders

I have mentioned the importance of trust, as a key characteristic for bridging, and of chains of trust as essential prerequisites to solving the complex, multi-faceted problems

of our time. Let us, then, look at what some of the theorists of leadership have to say about the kind of leadership that can help create such chains of trust, lead organizations that bridge gaps and help to create the future.

In the course of identifying the skills and characteristics, I will also point out the traps to be avoided and the shifts in thinking we need to undergo in order to get there.

Joan Goldsmith and Warren Bennis, in Learning to Lead; A Workbook on Becoming a Leader, outline four qualities that inspire trust in a leader:

- **competence**, on the part of the leader to address the challenge at hand;
- **integrity** and congruity - what we might call walking the talk or practicing what you preach;
- proven **constancy**, or loyalty to the people with whom the leader works;
- and finally, **empathy** or caring for work colleagues.¹²

It is interesting to note that these four qualities have more to do, as Jaworski points out, with "*being* than *doing*". It is about our orientation of character, our state of inner activity."¹³

Jaworski quotes Francisco Varela, professor of cognitive science and epistemology at the École Polytechnique and the Institute of Neuroscience in Paris, on another quality which leads people to gravitate toward a leader:

When we are in touch with our 'open nature', our emptiness, we exert an enormous attraction to other human beings. There is a great magnetism in that state of being which has been called by Trungpa 'authentic presence'.¹⁴

He goes on to say that all of us could access this quality:

This state is available to us all, and yet it is the greatest of all human treasures.

This state - where we connect deeply with others and doors open - is there waiting for us. It is like an optical illusion. All we have to do is squint and see that it has been there all along, waiting for us.¹⁵

Lipman-Blumen sees the qualities required for leadership in a somewhat more practical fashion, but very much in sync with the thinking of both Jaworski and Bennis and Goldsmith. For her, the style of leadership which will be able to cope with the future

¹² Bennis, Warren and Goldsmith, Joan, Learning to Lead; A Workbook on Becoming a Leader. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading Massachusetts. 1994. pp. 5-6

¹³ Jaworski, p. 185

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 179

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 179-180

“connects leaders to constituents, and leaders to other leaders, forming a community of shared actions, values, and responsibilities.”¹⁶

Connective leaders know how to draw on the most effective leadership styles for particular circumstance. Lipman-Blumen outlines three major styles of leadership, each of which has three subcategories (See chart on next page). Connective leaders, she says, are capable of drawing on all or most of these. People gravitating toward the **direct** style,

like to confront their own tasks individually and directly,... emphasizing mastery, competition and power...People who prefer to work on group tasks or help others to attain their goals emphasize the **relational** set...Finally, individuals who use themselves and others as instruments toward community goals prefer the **instrumental** set.¹⁷
(emphases mine)

She also enumerates the following other qualities which distinguish connective leaders:

- They believe in their own vision, but they are willing to amend it with the insights of others. They welcome diversity as the wellspring of creativity and complex truth...
- [They] solicit diverse view points because they can deal with the ambiguities that Stage 2 leaders usually perceive as threatening...Their search for new interpretations and their rejection of orthodoxy prompt connective leaders to respond more flexibly to rapidly unfolding situations...
- [They] are particularly expert in orchestrating multiple coalitions [and] welcome opportunities to form alliances among multiple organizations, even those that Stage 2 leaders would have viewed as competitors...
- They...transform passive followers into active, responsible constituents, inviting them into the circle of leadership...
- By loosening the bonds of individualism, they use diversity to brace interdependence, to stimulate innovation, and to serve the needs of all.¹⁸

Jaworski would say that such leadership must derive from a profound commitment, but of a different kind:

This kind of commitment begins not with will, but with willingness. We begin to listen to the inner voice that helps guide us as our journey unfolds. The underlying component of this kind of commitment is our trust in the playing out of our destiny. We have the integrity to stand in a “state of surrender”, as Varela puts it, knowing that whatever we need at the moment to meet our destiny will be available to us. It is at this point that we alter our relationship with the future...

Out of this commitment, a certain flow of meaning begins. People gather around you and a larger conversation begins to form. When you are in this state of surrender, this state of wonder, you exert an enormous attractiveness - not because you are special, but because people are attracted to authentic presence and to the unfolding of a future that is full of possibilities.¹⁹

¹⁶ Lipman-Blumen, pp. 234-235

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 24-25

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 335-339. Bullet format mine.

¹⁹ Jaworski, p. 184-5

It is this flow that he refers to as synchronicity: when things begin to fall into place in a way that seems coincidental but is more than that. But in coming to see this through circumstances in his own life, Jaworski encountered a number of traps, regressions to old patterns of thinking and behavior. Although he is careful to say that these were his particular traps, and that others may encounter different ones, I feel it is worth mentioning them, for they certainly resonated with me and I could recognize them as common in others as well.

The first is the trap of **responsibility**, the notion that it is you and the extent of your particular effort that will lead to success or failure. As he says,

I began to feel I was indispensable to the whole process, that I was responsible for all the people involved, and that everyone was depending on *me*. The focus was on me instead of the larger calling.²⁰

The second trap he identifies is that of **dependency** - in a way, the opposite of the first; instead of success or failure revolving around oneself, it appears to depend completely on the people one has brought together to create the team. So you become trapped in a static scenario. As a way of getting out of this, he counsels:

It's critical that you focus on the result and not get attached to any particular process for achieving the result. When we are in the process of creating something, we must have the flexibility of mind to move with what needs to be done. What allows this to happen is precisely the fact that we're not attached to *how* things should be done.²¹

And thirdly, he encountered the trap of **overactivity**, the idea being that the result will be achieved by simply doing more, until you collapse of exhaustion. The way to overcome this, he says, is by

doing the inner, reflective work, individually and collectively necessary to regain our balance. In the heat of the creative process, we end up having so much to do that we lose the necessary orientation to stay in the flow. Unless we have the individual and collective discipline to continually stay anchored, we will eventually lose the flow.

That's why the discipline of dialogue seems to be so important for everyone in such an enterprise. Taking the time to come together on a regular basis in true dialogue gives everyone a chance to maintain a reflective space at the heart of the activity - a space where all people can continue to be re-nurtured *together* by what is wanting to happen, to unfold. It must be a regular discipline and it must continue throughout the life of the undertaking, because the purpose of the enterprise will continue to evolve. The renurturing must take place in the midst of and as a part of that evolution. It is an essential element of the unfolding.²²

In order to get out of these traps, to tap into the flow of synchronicity to which he refers, Jaworski claims that three shifts in the way we think need to occur:

²⁰ Ibid, p. 122

²¹ Ibid, p. 124

²² Ibid, pp. 129-130

First, our mental model of the way the world works must shift from images of a clockwork, machinelike universe that is fixed and determined, to the model of a universe that is open, dynamic, interconnected, and full of living qualities.²³

The second shift he identifies is toward the understanding that for leaders, “relationship is the organizing principle of the universe.”²⁴ It is through relationships, through bridging the gaps that divide us by building relationships, that leaders will help society solve the problems that face us.

And finally, as I mentioned earlier, the third shift is in our understanding of what is commitment, in which we surrender our will and engage our willingness.

When one can avoid those mental traps and undergo the shifts in thinking that free up the flow that connects us to each other, then we will be operating out of a style of leadership that facilitates that flow and other people’s access to it. Peter Senge reflects wisely and clearly on the nature of such leadership:

...leadership is about learning how to shape the future. Leadership exists when people are no longer victims of circumstances but participate in creating new circumstances. When people operate in this domain of generative leadership, day by day, they come to a deepening understanding of, as Joe [Jaworski] says, “how the universe actually works.” That is the real gift of leadership. It’s not about positional power; it’s not about accomplishments; it’s ultimately not even about what we do. Leadership is about creating a domain in which human beings continually deepen their understanding of reality and become more capable of participating in the unfolding of the world. Ultimately, leadership is about creating new realities.²⁵

And Lipman-Blumen, in reflecting how what she calls connective leadership and what I have referred to as bridging leadership moves beyond individualism to a politics of commonality, says;

The connective leader views the world through a much wider-angle lens, raising a host of very different questions. “How can we make room for everyone around the table of human reconciliation? How can we integrate the greatest number of human goals? How can we use our human differences to live together more harmoniously and productively? How can we construct organizations with the least bureaucracy and the most responsibility? How can we bridge the gulf between organizations? How can we bring together overlapping networks of leaders?...

Connective leaders, reaching beyond themselves to institutional and societal goals, offer us the hope of community. Through community, we find the fundamental sense that we belong, that each of our contributions, our histories, and our unique perspectives is valued.

Some observers predict that the world is destined to fragment into oblivion. Connective leaders, by contrast, offer the possibility of binding the very widest range of talents, needs, cultures, and dreams into productive, nurturing community. At every level of

²³ Ibid, p. 183

²⁴ Ibid, p. 184

²⁵ Ibid, p. 3

society and at every organizational rung, connective leaders are needed to meet this transforming challenge.²⁶

How We Can Become Bridging Leaders

So what do all these wonderful sounding principles mean for us, who have to face the every-day realities and difficulties of our respective circumstances? One thing I know, as I begin to try to apply these principles to my own life, is that it is hard. Stepping back to reflect, when there are urgent daily tasks to perform, is simply very difficult. Looking to include, rather than leave aside, those who are making it hard for us to achieve our goals, or with whom we have fundamental disagreements, sometimes feels impossible. Learning to speak the language of those with a different orientation so that they will be able to understand us and we them often feels like a task too difficult to achieve.

I do believe, however, that the kinds of changes in the world that we are all looking for - the reducing of gaps of opportunity and access to information and a decent life - are not going to happen without the kind of paradigm shift about which Jaworski writes. And I also believe that we are not going to get there without opening ourselves up to transcend the boundaries of sector, ethnicity, thinking style or whatever other definitions set us apart from each other.

I would like to end, then, with one challenge to the members of this group, with a proposal for a concrete first step that each of us could take and with a hope for all of us here.

The challenge is a big one, but it is different for the women and the men present. For the men, I challenge you to look at your leadership style - in which of the bridging leadership qualities I have discussed are you strong? In those that you are not, think about how you might complement your existing style with at least some elements of the portfolio of bridging leadership. I toss out this challenge separately to you men because I believe that many of these bridging qualities are more characteristic of the anima, or approaches typically associated with females. Yet the anima exists in all of us. Sometimes it takes more effort to cultivate it in males because it goes against established behavior patterns in some societies - even though, as I have said, these appear to be changing.

For the women in the group, I challenge you to examine whether you are applying any bridging tendencies you may have in the exercise of leadership. I think it is more likely that you have already developed a considerable capacity to bridge - but are there circumstances which are holding you back from exercising that skill in a leadership capacity? I ask you to do this because, until recently, bridging has not been considered a leadership skill and I believe many women possess it but do not apply it as leadership behavior.

²⁶ Lipman-Blumen, pp. 339-340

My parting proposal is a very small one, in relation to the size of the topics raised. But I believe it is one that could lead us, as members, leaders of the civil society, onto the path of connective thinking and toward bridging leadership.

It is this: that we each find a way to reduce one small element of the gap between rich and poor by becoming a bridge between the tools of the market and the communities we represent. We can do this by becoming what have been called “civic entrepreneurs [who]...are a new generation of leaders who forge new, powerfully productive linkages at the intersection of business, government, education, and community.”²⁷ I propose this because too often, NGO leaders have taken a stance against anything that smacks of a business approach. We pride ourselves in our commitment to the community, yet we often do not have the very skills - yes, many of them business skills - that communities need to generate a sustainable livelihood.

What if we were to begin to learn some business skills, not necessarily to enrich ourselves beyond what we need to sustain ourselves and our organizations, but to be able to share these skills with members of our communities that so need them? This would, it seems to me, have several simultaneous beneficial effects: first, in order to learn those skills, we will be learning the language and thinking of another sector which is, after all, the most powerful sector today, and yet the one that is least bringing its resources and capacities to bear on solving the world’s social problems.

Communicating with business people would put us in a better position to dialogue with them and, thereby affect their understanding of and engagement in these issues - the very fact that we in the civil society are engaging in entrepreneurial, income-generating activities will attract more interest on the part of the private sector as well as creating ways for them to bring their skills to bear.

Secondly, those skills could help us think of new ways to generate income to sustain our own organizations without having to compete over very limited donor resources; and this could free us up from our usual preoccupation with daily survival issues to focus on some of the deeper underlying gaps and how to bridge them.

And thirdly, our new skills would be harnessed to helping the communities we serve to generate enough income to be able to live in dignity, something many of us have been ill-equipped to do before.

I know from your introductions yesterday that many of you are already doing this. You are on the forefront of connective leadership and I hope that you will find ways of sharing with the rest of us the methods you have used and the obstacles and triumphs you have confronted. Just as I hope that those who have not yet entered into this realm will dare to use the time we have together to explore how you might begin bridging this or other gaps in your own context.

²⁷ Henton, Douglas, Melville, John, and Walesh, Kimberley, Grassroots Leaders for a New Economy: How Civic Entrepreneurs are Building Prosperous Communities. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco. 1997. p. xv

So I close with the hope that these next several days together turn into a dialogue of the sort that Joseph Jaworski refers to as the essence of collective leadership:

When people sit in dialogue together, they are exercising leadership as a whole. This is nothing less than the unfolding of the generative process. It's the way that thought participates in creating, but it can only be done collectively...In dialogue, you're not building anything, you're allowing the whole that exists to become manifest...In dialogue, the whole shows up and is manifested by individuals later as they take action.²⁸

May we create such a dialogue here.

²⁸ Jaworski, p. 116