Chapter 6

Transformative Conversations on Campus

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A CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGY OF CHANGE

We began by exploring the nature of integrative education—the kind of education that, as we said in the Introduction, can address "the hungers and needs of our students, the abiding questions of the human adventure, and the social, economic,

and political challenges of our time." We then looked at some of the basic philosophical and pedagogical issues raised by this approach to teaching and learning. Next we took a more detailed look—especially through the lens of the "new sciences"—at some key features of integrative education's philosophical underpinnings.

In this chapter, we turn to "putting wheels" on the idea of transforming the academy through collegial conversations. How might we collaborate with others on our campuses to pursue issues in the philosophy of education, their implications and implementation, in ways that could move higher education closer to the integrative ideal? What kind of on-campus vehicles might be used by faculty, administrators, students, alumni, and others to continue the conversation about integrative education, face-to-face, in real time, with real results?

Anyone who cares about social change can quote Margaret Mead's well-known comment from memory: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." The second half of that statement is clearly not true (some social change comes from the very centers of power that citizens must organize to resist), but the first half is self-evident—if that small group of people has the skill and the will to translate thoughtfulness and commitment into socially transformative action. From a handful of citizens insisting that the school board pay attention to students with special needs, to hundreds of thousands joining hands to end the evils of slavery or apartheid, much of the emending of history has been sparked by small circles of people talking and listening to each other respectfully, reflectively, and intentionally.

In the mid 1970s, I sat in a circle of rocking chairs at the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee.² Twenty years earlier, when it was known as the Highlander Folk School, this organization had hosted a series of conversations between blacks and whites that planted the seeds of the American civil rights movement. Having sat in that circle with knowledge of what flowed from it, I find it impossible to forget a simple fact: significant social change can come from people who share a concern sitting, rocking, and talking with each other—if they are willing to speak honestly and act competently on what they learn about themselves and each other. Among the participants in that original Highlander circle were Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others whose names are not so well-known. As they rocked and talked, exploring personal stories, institutional conditions and the theory and tactics of nonviolent social change, they generated change of historic proportions.

Like most institutions, the academy is notoriously resistant to change, so resistant that academics like to lampoon themselves: "Changing a university is like trying to move a cemetery. You get no help from the inhabitants." Part of the problem is that few universities I know have anything like a circle of Tennessee rocking chairs, hospitable spaces where "the inhabitants" can sit and talk in an open, honest, and intentional way about their concerns as educators. If such conversations can help spark a civil rights movement, why could they not help spark educational reform? The university may be slow to change, but surely it is not as intransigent as American racism.

In Chapter 3, Arthur Zajonc referred to the "divisions that fragment us and our world." Those divisions, rooted in our failure to recognize the reality of interconnectedness, are found not only in the ontology, epistemology, pedagogy, and ethics that form a silent backdrop to university life. They are reflected in the fragmentation of our personal relationships within the academy. Ask a sample of faculty if they have found "the community of scholars" they thought they were joining when they started down this trail, and more than a few will respond with a sigh, a rueful smile, or rolled eyes. When professors are able to name a meaningful experience of "the community of scholars," it is more likely to be among members of their far-flung disciplinary guilds than with colleagues on their campus.

For the past thirty years, I have spoken with faculty across the country about the "privatization of the professoriate" and the "pain of disconnection"—from colleagues, from students, and from their own original passions—underlying conditions of academic life that
faculty do not talk much about, but whose symptoms are common among them. I cannot remember a single time when a professor said to me, “You are wrong about all that.” Fragmentation of this sort is, of course, encouraged by the very structures of the academy. Not only are faculty isolated in silos called disciplines and departments, but the conception of “one’s work” in academia is itself privatized: we close the doors of our offices to do our research and close the doors of our classrooms to do our teaching, out of view of colleagues in both cases.

A classic method of maintaining institutional status quo is to create a system that isolates people from one another, keeping the sparks of change from jumping from one person to the next and preventing a critical mass of change agents from forming. In every case of that sort I can think of, the separation imposed upon people soon gets reinforced by personal choice: people who live under structural isolation eventually internalize the desire for isolation because of the negative stereotypes and mutual fears that come from not knowing one another. That is the kind of isolation that the Highlander conversations were designed to break down, because isolation helped maintain racism’s stranglehold on American culture.

**Conversation as Antidote and Tactic**

In this chapter, I take a cue from the Highlander experience and explore that “meeting of the minds” we call conversation as both an antidote to academic isolation and a tactic for institutional change. My thesis is simple: the conversation of colleagues is a critical element in advancing the cause of integrative education. My recommendation is equally simple: if advancing integrative education is your goal, find people you can talk with about your concerns and visions of possibility. Sit with at least one or two other stakeholders and explore approaches to education that honor diverse ways of knowing, teaching, and learning, approaches that can help students learn how to hold intellectual complexity and prepare them to play multiple and responsible roles in the ecosystem of adult life.

Much of this chapter is aimed at encouraging conversation between faculty colleagues. But the word *stakeholders* is an important reminder that creative change in higher education has, can, and must come in partnership with people other than faculty. Some of these partners are, of course, administrators who support integrative education. (In Appendix C, you will find three stories that show the power of academic leaders to help set integrative processes in motion—and the power of conversation to create the conditions for change. Thomas Coburn, president of Naropa University, engaged the full college community in creating a faculty “Council of Elders” to help him better understand the concerns of the community and build trust between administration and faculty, the kind of trust that can spill over into the challenges of transforming curriculum and pedagogy. President Beverly Tatum and faculty members at Spelman College created President and Faculty Dinners to make a space for open and honest exchange among the faculty and the president, another way of creating spillovers of life-giving energy. Dennis Huffman, program supervisor at Prince George’s Community College, found ways to generate meaningful conversation between his part-time and widely dispersed faculty, many of whom spend little time on campus.)

And why do we so often forget the key stakeholders called alumni and alumnai when it comes to educational reform? They can become significant partners in transformative conversations on campus, as the case of Princeton University’s Project 55 reveals.2 In 1989, alumni from the class of 1955 came together to consider a thirty-fifth reunion gift to their alma mater. Members of this class had spent several decades doing significant work in the world beyond Princeton’s walls; their gratitude for their Princeton education was accompanied by an awareness of how much they had had to unlearn to engage the world’s problems deeply and well.

So, rather than donate a memorial garden or a bell tower, they rented office space adjacent to the campus and hired a small staff to help their alma mater integrate its curriculum more thoroughly with the needs of the world. With administrative approval, these alumni funded and mounted Project 55’s flagship effort, the Princeton Public
Interest Program, which in just a few years created so many service-learning internships and fellowships that it became the largest single source of employment for enrolled Princeton students.

In 1996, Project 55 gathered Princeton alumni from the 1950s through the 1990s around a white paper titled “Princeton University in the 21st Century: Paths to More Effective Undergraduate Education (A Proposal from Affectionate Alumnae and Alumni).”3 “We are proud of our university,” the paper begins, and “we want to make a case for a new approach to undergraduate education at Princeton that takes account of research that ... suggests new curricular and pedagogical approaches” that are responsive to how students learn and to the needs of the world. Today, the influence of Project 55 has gone deeper and wider than its founders could possibly have envisioned.

The moral of this story is simple: as you look around for conversation partners, make sure you are not wearing blinders: think unconventionally. Who has more reason to care about the kind of education an institution offers than alumni who have benefited from the best of it and suffered from the worst of it? So why are alumni so rarely regarded as partners in educational reform? Surely, alumni involvement and resources accelerated the pace of this particular change at Princeton well beyond what faculty and administrators could have done by themselves.

A parallel case can be made for student involvement in transformative conversations. We do not have a self-contained case study to prove the point, but we do have the evidence provided by a critical movement that has changed the face of higher education over the past forty years: without student initiative, service learning might never have taken root across the country. And without student buy-in, service learning would certainly not have spread as far and wide as it has.

A conversational strategy of change requires initiative in taking an action that is against the current of much of academic life: reaching out to each other and actually getting together. In a culture of privatization and overload, this will not be an easy sell. But despite these obstacles, on every campus I have ever visited there is a core group of visionaries who yearn for something better and have the capacity to reach out to the next concentric circle of people, inviting them into a conversation that holds the promise of planting seeds of change. How to hold those conversations in a way that maximizes this promise is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

**Toward Transformative Conversations**

Not every conversation is transformative. In fact, few are, and there is a reason for that. Many encounters that might become transformative are used to put the spotlight on ourselves or persuade others of the rightness of our facts and theories, values and beliefs. We are driven not so much by egomania as by ingrained habits of discourse that make talking with each other far less than it could be, sometimes creating outcomes that drive us apart instead of bringing us together.

Here is a simple example of what I mean. You and I are talking, and you mention a work-related problem you are trying to solve or an issue you are wrestling with. I listen until you finish, and then I either tell you what I would do about your problem or, more likely, tell a parallel story of my own. *Parallel* is exactly the right word for conversations where two people never intersect to illumine and inspire one another but merely run alongside each other for a while until they veer off into isolation again, usually leaving both of them feeling unheard.

We can change that dance, and in a moment I will explore some practical ways to do it. But first I need to address three attitudes that sometimes keep academics who want to see institutional change from doing anything about it: “I am a teacher and scholar, not a reformer”; “Even if I wanted to be a reformer, professors are powerless to create change”; and “I am alone on my campus in my educational values and visions.”

Is “reformer” the job of a teacher and a scholar? The answer depends on whether your vision for higher education requires institutional change that allows you to live into that vision. Some faculty feel at home within the current academic division of labor
while others feel like strangers in a strange land. But until we have more opportunities for "transformative conversations," few will have a chance to explore and perhaps expand their educational vision or find colleagues who might join them in a shared effort to pursue that vision.

The notion that professors are powerless to effect change is ironic at best and a poor excuse for inaction at worst. Powerless in comparison to whom? Faculty have more power than most working people and, once tenured, more security to use their power—certainly more than the folks who gathered in that circle of rocking chairs at the Highlander Folk School. And if a conversational approach to planting the seeds of change has any merit whatsoever, then faculty have special competencies for this version of change agency.

Good scholars understand inquiry as a way of being in the world, and the skills that are key to inquiry are also key to transformative conversations. Good scholars, for example, know how to ask honest, open questions of the phenomena they study—the artifacts of history, sociological statistics, the way a novelist uses language, the data that emerge from a particle accelerator. No scholar worth his or her salt conducts a "parallel conversation" with the phenomena, changing the subject when the phenomena speak rather than listening deeply to what they are trying to say.

Good scholars keep asking honest, open questions of the phenomena they are studying, questions meant to deepen understanding of what that reality is all about. They reach conclusions and think about implications only when the inquiry feels complete, all the while expecting a next round of questions, conclusions and implications. The problem is not that we do not know how to do this kind of thing. The problem is that we do so little of it with each other. If we would do nothing more than come together with a few colleagues and ask them the kinds of questions that we ask of the phenomena we study—questions about their experiences and visions as educators—and then seek points of theoretical and applied convergence between us, we would take a first step toward becoming agents of change.

That is exactly what happened at Highlander in the mid-fifties. The people in that circle sat looking at each other across a racial divide at least as baffling as the divide between the human mind and the world of subatomic physics or preliterate Homo sapiens, a divide far more perilous than the divides between academic disciplines. They began to close that divide as they conducted an honest, open inquiry into each other's experience: "What is it like to be black in mid-twentieth-century America?" "What is it like to be white in this place and time?" As they asked, they listened. As they listened, they understood. And as they understood, they came together in a next round of inquiry about goals and the actions required to move toward those goals together.

Those of us who understand inquiry, for whom it is a way of being in the world, can use our understanding to reach across gaps, ask each other questions that matter, listen with care, and find our way toward personal and communal action. In small groups like the one at Highlander, we can give each other a chance to recall the commitments and passions that brought us into academic life. We can ask how supported we feel in those commitments today and share our hopes for a more supportive academic environment, perhaps finding common cause. We can move beyond bemoaning a generating a community of dialogue and the empowerment that comes with it.

Which brings me to the third attitudinal obstacle I have found among faculty: the conviction that one's values and visions are not shared by colleagues, so there is no one with whom to join in community. Years ago, as my travel schedule frequently took me to campuses to give lectures and lead workshops, I noticed how often someone would say to me privately, "I believe in the kind of change you're advocating, but I'm the only person on this campus who feels that way." And by the time I had finished a two- or three-day visit to a campus, six or eight people had told me exactly the same thing.

So instead of commiserating with them, I began asking, "What have you done to test your notion that you are all alone with your values and visions? I understand that the dominant culture here offers you little support. But what have you done to send off signals
that might allow kindred spirits to spot you so that you could reach out to each other.” Almost always, the answer was, “Nothing.”

I empathize with these people. I have been where they are, wanting to see something change but unable or unwilling to take even small steps in that direction, or simply not knowing how. But the time comes when one needs to take that first step and give up the self-fulfilling conviction of isolation that has helped to create a culture of “veto power” in the academy—a culture where saying no to proposals for change too easily becomes the norm, or where the absence of community and encouragement make it unlikely that visions for change will arise in the first place.

There is another source of stasis in the academy, sometimes called “paralysis by analysis.” The habits of thinking big and thinking critically can serve us well in the world of ideas but may fail us in the world of action, where they can quickly lead to a sense of being overwhelmed by impossible goals. The conversational strategy begins as an exercise in thinking small to take things to a human scale; the telling of small personal stories at the Highlander Folk School helped plant the seeds of a large and complex movement that made American history. Of course, there is no guarantee that starting a small conversation will lead to something larger. But the failure to take any step at all, no matter how small, comes with an ironclad guarantee that we will not be part of helping change happen.

The step required to plant the seeds of change can be as small as one of us reaching out to one other. My conversation partner and co-author Arthur Zajone did exactly that, with remarkable results. Here he describes the beginning of an important collaboration:

Nearly twenty years ago I applied to a foundation and received support for a series of campuswide talks by distinguished visitors that included Saul Bellow, the astronaut Rusty Schweickart, and the cultural historian William Irwin Thompson. The series was entitled Re-imagining the Human in a Technological Age. I felt then, as now, that the image we have of the human being was not rich and deep enough to meet the demands of our technological age.

One faculty member came to all of the talks, someone I did not know. At the final talk I approached him, introduced myself, and asked who he was. His name was Joel Upton, an art historian at Amherst, who said that he had found all of the talks compelling, and each even more so than the one before. In that moment, we began a friendship and series of collaborations that continue to this day.

Our first joint venture was to launch an interdisciplinary class called by the same name: Re-imagining the Human in a Technological Age. Since then, Upton and I have continued with other collaborations. Our current one is the First-Year Seminar Eros and Insight that explores the relationship between love and what we term contemplative knowing.

I have come to see my initial “Re-imagining” lecture series as a way for me, a physicist, to show the range of my interests and questions. It was a way of “running up a flag” to see if anyone else was open to and interested in the things I most cared about.

I will return to the Upton-Zajone collaboration later in this chapter because it demonstrates the power of a transformative conversation to spread ripples far beyond the first stone dropped into the pond. For the moment, I want simply to point out that when people talk meaningfully with each other, the unpredictable can happen, unpredictable even to the person who is about to be transformed.

Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk School, makes this point wonderfully well with a little-known story about the time he introduced Rosa Parks, a participant in the Highlander conversations, to Eleanor Roosevelt:

Mrs. Roosevelt asked . . . “Have you been called a Communist yet, Mrs. Parks?” When Rosa answered yes, Mrs. Roosevelt said, “I suppose Myles told you when you were at Highlander that you’d be called a Communist.” Rosa told her I hadn’t warned her, and Mrs. Roosevelt criticized me for [that]. I said, “If I’d known what she was going to do, I’d have told her. But when she was at Highlander, she said she wasn’t going to do
anything. She said that . . . the white people wouldn't let the
black people do anything, and besides, the black people hadn't
been willing to stick together, so she didn't think she'd do
anything. I didn't see any reason to tell a person who wasn't
going to do anything that she'd be branded as a Communist . . . .
If I'd known she was going to start the civil rights movement,
I'd have told her." And Rosa said, "Yes, he told me later on,
after I got arrested." 4

As Rosa Parks sat in that circle at Highlander, she was being
prepared inwardly and unknowingly to make a crucial decision,
the decision to live "divided no more." On December 1, 1955, in
Montgomery, Alabama, when she refused to yield her seat on the
bus to a white man with "superior rights," she was saying, with
her action, "I will no longer behave on the outside in a way that
contradicts a truth I hold deeply on the inside, the truth that we are
born equal and entitled to equal treatment under the laws of both
man and God."

The decision to live an undivided life—made by people who
know what they truly value—has always been a sparking point of
social change. Higher education can grow into its fullest potentials
if more and more academics will make "the Rosa Parks decision."
The historical record of what happened soon after Rose Parks sat in
that circle of rocking chairs and made her public witness offers hope,
rooted in reality, that under the right conditions—conditions we
can help shape—a conversation that moves one or two people can
move many more, move them to action that transforms institutional
cultures. Later in this chapter, I will explore that possibility in
more detail. But first, I want to look more closely at what makes a
conversation transformative.

Hosting a Transformative Conversation

The outcomes of talking with one another depend as much on
whom we talk with, where we talk with them, and how we talk
to one another as they do on what we talk about. We have focused
heavily in this book on the what question. Here I want to say a
few words about questions of who and where before turning to the
all-important how question in some detail.

As you ask yourself who might share your interest in integrative
education, cast the net wide: consider faculty, administrators,
students, staff, alumni, and anyone else who is a stakeholder in the
nature of education on your campus. Your accuracy in "reading"
people is important as you take this first step. It is distressing to start
a small and vulnerable conversation with a handful of people, only
to find that one of them has a spirit so toxic that the seeds of insight
die before they can germinate.

In the first few rounds of such conversations, the point is not
to convert the resistant but to cultivate the possible by collaborating
with people who hope to bring it into being. Once the group
develops a culture strong enough to support generative dialogue
around significant ideas, some skeptics can and often should be
brought in—partly to test the ideas against their resistance, partly
to offer them something that they might find worthy of their best
energies.

But even with the best possible first-round people, the capacity
of any conversation to take us to the deeper reaches of our lives—to
tap into those values, visions, and energies that might lead us to
become agents of change—depends on whether we experience the
space between us as safe for taking relational risks and reaching for
what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature." Unfortunately,
in professional life at large, we seem most adept at creating spaces
that invite our "lesser angels" to show up.

In academic life, these are the angels that want to blame this
or that on students, colleagues, or the administration; the ones that
want to do little more than argue over parking spaces or credit hours;
the ones that want to engage in intellectual one-upmanship; the ones
that want nothing more than to win the argument. Once we have
been in a few spaces of that sort, conversation loses its luster, feeding
the privatization of academic life that inhibits creative change.

Those of us who want to host conversations that are generative
for ourselves and our institutions must be intentional about creating
spaces that are hospitable to the human spirit as we make ourselves vulnerable to honest exchanges, new ideas, and hopes for change. I do not intend to offer an Emily Post handbook of conversational etiquette, as if you had no idea of what makes for a hospitable space. Good teachers create such spaces all the time, spaces that invite generative discourse in the classroom. The quickest way to find out what “hospitable space” means to you is to ask yourself a simple question: under what conditions do I feel enough trust and freedom to explore some of the “big questions and worthy dreams” that bear on my vocation?5

Here are some of my answers to that question, offered not as a how-to-do-it manual but as a brief tour of the challenges and the potentials of hosting a generative conversation. The first thing that comes to mind when I think about “feeling at home” enough to settle into genuine dialogue is physical ambience. Conference rooms with flickering fluorescent lights, hospital-green walls, and people sitting behind tables as if behind ramparts do not work for me, and colleges and universities have too many such spaces. What works is the “hominess” suggested by that circle of rocking chairs, which is why I invite people into my office or my living room for a cup of tea when I want to talk about something that has personal meaning and importance.

Next, I find that a conversation that begins with ideas is not as easy to relax into as one that begins with personal experiences, which is where the Highlander conversations began. “What do you think about X, Y, or Z?” quickly takes me into my intellect, where defensiveness may arise as I wonder whether I can articulate my thoughts and how my conversation partner will respond. But “Tell me a story about X, Y, or Z” feels safe because it is unlikely that anyone will tell me that my story is mistaken. And the invitation to tell a story immediately calls me toward an integrative way of thinking, since a story must be told in the round, with feelings as well as facts and concepts.

There is an even deeper reason why personal stories are more likely to weave the kinds of relationships forged in that circle of rocking chairs. It is not uncommon for people to work side by side for years without knowing much more about each other at retirement than they did on day one. As a result, many of us bear the wound of invisibility, believing, not without reason, that no matter how hard or how well we work, no one really sees us. When we invite each other to tell our stories, we have a chance to create community in the simple act of saying “I see you.”

Storytelling can create community at an even deeper level: the more one knows about another person’s story, the less one is able to dislike or distrust, let alone despise, that person. This is a good thing in and of itself, but it serves a larger purpose as well by helping us weave a more resourceful and resilient collegiality. At some point down the road, when we need to solve a problem or deal with a difficult conflict, we are more likely to have woven the fabric of relationships required to do it well.

To demonstrate this “secret hidden in plain sight,” we can cite social science data as well as common sense. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, a study of Chicago’s efforts at school reform during the 1990s showed that the most powerful driver of improved educational outcomes for kids is not money, curriculum, technique, or governance.6 It is relational trust between teachers, teachers and administrators, and teachers and parents. So community and the trust-building it requires is not an optional exercise to be dismissed as touchy-feely—not if we care about deepening our institution’s capacity to pursue its mission.

An invitation to talk about ourselves and our journeys can take us out of our emotional comfort zone, especially those of us who were taught to say and write “It is thought…” instead of “I think….” So the host of a transformative conversation must lower the risk level by asking autobiographical questions that are not gratuitously intimate but are clearly related to the larger purpose of this conversation: to pursue a grounded, thoughtful, and practical inquiry into the philosophy and practice of integrative education. Here are some examples of the kind of storytelling prompts I have in mind, each of them intended to begin with personal experience...
but open toward the larger issues involved in “uncovering the heart of higher education”:

- What took you into your academic career? What were some of the inner and outer drivers that moved you in this direction?
- To what extent have your original aspirations for an academic career been fulfilled or thwarted? What have been some of the work-related highs and lows?
- When you set out on your academic career, did you have a vision of higher education and your place in it? What were the sources of that vision? To what extent has that vision been fulfilled?
- Tell a story about a teacher who made a significant impact on you. What made him or her an important person in your development? What do you learn about your own learning style from recalling that teacher’s impact?
- Tell a story that reveals some of the core needs of today’s students as you perceive them. What are some of your long-term hopes for the kind of education you and we might offer them? What kinds of support or resources would help us move in that direction?
- Tell a story about something you’ve done to make your own teaching a more integrative enterprise, such as connecting your subject more closely to your students’ lives, team teaching interdisciplinary courses, building a bridge between your subject and the larger community as in service learning, or collaborating with the student-life staff on learning-related projects.
- Tell a story about something you’ve done to take your own research in a more integrative direction, such as drawing on disciplines other than your own, collaborating with specialists in other fields, or connecting your research to real-time problem-solving.

- Tell a story about models of integrative education you’ve seen elsewhere, in teaching or research or both, that struck you as worthy of emulation.

**Moving from Stories to Ideas**

If the point of these conversations is to explore the philosophy of integrative education and ways of implementing it, why begin the process with personal storytelling instead of cutting to the chase? Because when we start from our own experience, moving from “the heart of an educator” to “the heart of higher education,” the means are congruent with the end: we ground a discussion of integrative education in a place of personal integration, a place where our thinking is integrated with the hurts, hopes, and animating forces of our own vocational journeys. The integrative ideas and programs most likely to get traction are rooted in personal need, from which comes commitment, another truth behind the impact of the Highlander conversations. Service learning, for example, was sparked by students and faculty who knew that something important was lacking in higher education.

So as you begin to guide the conversation more deeply into ideas, try to stay connected with the personal stories that have been told, referring back to them and weaving them in and out of your exploration of theory and practice. Doing so can help people move toward “the Rosa Parks decision,” the decision to live an undivided life, to witness our deepest educational values in ways that plant the seeds of transformation.

For the past five chapters, we have explored a wide range of foundational issues in integrative education. These materials—and, more importantly, the ideas that you and your conversation partners bring to the circle—offer ample grist for your conversational mill. So instead of presenting a list of discussion topics here, I want to focus on some of the methods of exploring the topics that emerge from the stories you have told each other that will give your conversation the best chance to bear fruit.
The methods I advocate are nothing new, and they are certainly not "countercultural." They are rooted in principles of inquiry at the heart of the academic tradition, principles we tend to honor more in the breach than the observance as we relate to each other. If we are to change that dance, the host of a transformative conversations needs to be hospitable and firm, inviting an open conversation and establishing ground rules that help sustain the inquiry and move it toward next steps.

For example, in everyday chitchat (as I noted above), when we hear someone's story we tend to respond with a story of our own. But that kind of "parallel storytelling" can keep us from learning all that might be learned from the first story and leave the speaker feeling unheard. So the host of a transformative conversation must invite people to stay in "inquiry mode" for a while by asking the storyteller honest, open questions about what he or she has said. Such questions have the power, in the words of Nelle Morton, to "hear people into speech," deeper and deeper speech. This not only helps people feel heard but helps them tell their story in greater depth, improving the odds that both the speaker and the listeners will learn something new.

What are the earmarks of an open, honest question? First and foremost, an honest, open question is one you cannot possibly ask while thinking to yourself, "I know the right answer to this and I sure hope you give it to me." For instance, "Have you ever thought about seeing a therapist?" is not an honest, open question! In contrast, these are honest and open questions: "What experience shaped the idea you just told us about?" "You said that your students are resistant to this approach. What are the marks of that resistance, and what do you think causes it?" "You mentioned you find the work of such-and-such a writer helpful. What is that work, and why is it meaningful to you?"

These questions come from genuine curiosity and authentic inquiry, just as good scholarship does. They do not put the speaker on the defensive. They do not attempt to compel the speaker to go in a particular direction. They allow the speaker to define his or her truth for himself or herself. Here are a few more guidelines to help you encourage the discipline of asking honest, open questions:

- Try not to get ahead of the language used by the person you are questioning. "What did you mean when you said X?" is an honest, open question. "Didn't you mean to mention Y?" is not.
- Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than larding them with rationales and background information that allow you to insert your own opinions or advice. But avoid questions with yes-no or right-wrong answers.
- Ask questions that go to the person as well as the problem, questions about the inner realities of the situation as well as the outward facts.
- Ask questions aimed at helping the speaker explore his or her story, concern, or issue rather than satisfying your own curiosity.
- If you have an intuition that a certain question might be useful, even if it seems a bit off-the-wall, trust it — once you are reasonably certain that it is an honest, open question.
- If you aren't sure about a particular question, sit with it for a while and wait for clarity.
- Watch the pacing of the questions. Questions that come too fast may feel aggressive, cutting off the deep reflection that can help focus the person.
- In a group of any size, if you have asked one question and heard an answer, you may feel a need to ask a follow-up question. But if you find yourself about to ask the third question in a row before anyone else has had a chance to ask one, don't.

As the conversation proceeds under a good host's guidance, everyone in turn gets a chance to put his or her thoughts, feelings, and experiences into the circle and to elaborate on them under the
honest, open questioning of other people. We do not criticize each other’s ideas; we probe them for understanding. If my ideas differ from yours, I am free to express them when my turn comes. But I do so as a statement of my truth, not as a rebuttal of yours, and as I articulate my truth, I take care not to phrase it as a rebuttal. If you say “X” and later I say “not-X,” it is condescending to begin my statement by saying, “I think you were wrong about that. Here’s how I see it.” Everyone understands that “not-X” is different from “X,” so there is no need to underscore my difference with you. Prefacing what I have to say by rebutting someone else creates an adversarial atmosphere that chills out vulnerable speaking and leads to ego-driven tensions that rarely take us to worthwhile destinations.

At this point, you may be wondering how a conversation of this sort can take us anywhere at all. How do we drive toward a conclusion or a decision, let alone an action plan, if all we do is listen to each other and ask questions? How can we possibly separate the wheat from the chaff using this sort of “open inquiry” approach? Where is the critique of ideas and proposals that are the stuff of real decision making? And when do we “take the vote” to determine who is right and who is wrong, or at least who wins and who loses?

When a conversation of the sort I am proposing is well-done, the result is remarkable: people start correcting themselves, sorting out what makes sense from what does not, and the group proves to be smarter than the sum of its parts. When we all speak from our own center to the center of the circle and allow ourselves to reflect on what has been put out there, a new kind of thinking sets in. In the reflective calm of that kind of conversation, we may start to see that apparent opposites have something in common, that there are ways to bridge ideas that, held aggressively in debate, get driven further apart. (Such a conversation was held at Wellesley College as one president’s tenure came to an end. The issues were difficult and discouraging, but the way the group process was held by its conveners allowed the conversation to have a generative and regenerative outcome. See the essay in Appendix C by Diana Chapman Walsh and Patricia Byrne.)

The phrase “in the reflective calm of that kind of conversation” deserves its own reflective moment. Throughout this chapter, I have been appealing to one of the ancient and abiding values of academic culture, the value of reflective inquiry. While some degree of reflection is still alive in labs, libraries (bricks-and-mortar and online), and advanced seminars, the academy has largely lost one of its most critical preconditions: the quietude that allows for real reflection on what we have seen and heard, felt, and thought, a quietude that has been overwhelmed by overactivity and frenzy of the same sort found in many workplaces.

Again, one of the academy’s taproots is the monastery, a bastion of quietude established in the fourth century where young men could receive the only sort of formal schooling available at the time. But as the scope of schooling expanded, the quietude declined and disappeared. Our lives are so frenetic, and our models of inquiry so argumentative, aggressive, and even combative, that we do not even know what we have lost. But a brief excursion into etymology will remind us:

School: “place of instruction,” O.E. scol, from L. schola, from Gk. skhole “school, lecture, discussion,” also “leisure, spare time,” originally “a holding back, a keeping clear” . . . The original notion is “leisure,” which passed to “otiose discussion,” then “place for such.”

It is almost inconceivable that the university as a whole will ever reclaim those qualities of leisure, of holding back and keeping clear, of becoming a place for “otiose discussion,” discussion that has no practical goal. But those are among the conditions under which creativity flourishes, and those conditions can be reclaimed in small groups gathered within the university and proceeding by ground rules such as those I propose here.

Abraham Flexner, one of the great twentieth-century reformers of higher and professional education, wrote words we would do well to remember: “Quite clearly . . . the same conditions that
permit idleness, neglect, or perfunctory performance of duty are necessary to the highest exertions of human intelligence."11

From Stories and Ideas to Action

How can a conversation between two or three people go beyond exploring integrative education toward experimenting with and implementing some form of it? The story of Arthur Zajonc and Joel Upton offers one obvious answer, as these two professors, one of physics, the other of fine arts, were drawn by their conversations to create first one and then another team-taught course. Their active response to the ideas that arose from this initiative has drawn significant administrative support and considerable attention on their campus, as noted in a feature article in the Spring 2004 issue of Amherst Magazine, focused on their first-year seminar, Eros and Insight.12

The story of the Zajonc-Upton collaboration does not end there; however; it provides evidence that the outcomes of a transformative conversation between colleagues can travel beyond one campus. Arthur Zajonc has lectured on this collaboration at Brown University, the University of Michigan, Georgetown University, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Dartmouth College, Bryn Mawr College, and Haverford College, as well as at universities in Edinburgh, Paris, and Munich. It has been written about in The Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning, The Journal of College and Character, Teachers College Record, and other media widely read by educators. A general description of one of the Zajonc-Upton courses and its full syllabus can be found in Chickering, Dalton, and Stamms's Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education. It is impossible to calculate how many curricular experiments this collaboration has inspired, given this widespread coverage of a course that arose from a transformative conversation.13

The potential of the conversational approach to institutional and social change does not end with inspiring others. I indicated as much early in this chapter when I recalled the experience I had years ago, sitting in that circle of rocking chairs at Highlander, where Myles Horton had hosted a transformative conversation between blacks and whites that became a wellspring of the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century. Some may be tempted to write off the impact of the Highlander conversations as a happy accident or an artifact of a bygone time when our society was such that simple conversation could help foment widespread change. But that would be a mistake, as we have witnessed something akin to the Highlander phenomenon as recently as November 4, 2008.

That, of course, is the date on which Barack Obama was elected president of the United States—despite the fact that he is a person of color with multicultural roots, a name that reminds small minds of Muslim extremists, ran for office with far less experience and name recognition in national politics than his rival, and belongs to a political party famous for its uncanny ability to shoot itself in the foot. I want to explore one of the taproots of Obama's electoral success: well-structured transformative conversations. I do so not because I have delusions of grandeur about you or me achieving high office. I do so because if such conversations could help Obama get elected against very heavy odds, surely they can help you and me with the much less daunting task of seeding integrative education, even in rocky soil.

As most Americans now know, Barack Obama began his social change career as a community organizer in Chicago. We know this because in the final, critical lap of the campaign, Sarah Palin, then-governor of Alaska and candidate for vice president on the Republican ticket, mocked this aspect of Obama's credentials, saying, in effect, "Clearly, a governor and a senator know much more than a lowly community organizer about practical politics, problem-solving, and advancing a difficult agenda." Palin clearly underestimated the power of community organizing experience, principles, and practices.

After graduate school, I spent five years as a community organizer in the Washington, D.C., area. During that time, it became clear to me that conversations rightly held—the kinds of transformative conversations that are the meat and drink of every community organizer—can help create real change, sometimes massive change, in the real world. Nothing I have seen or heard over the past forty years has given me reason to change my mind.
Much has been said about Obama’s innovative use of technology, which was clearly a major driver of his success. But in both politics and higher education we have become so enamored of technology that we forget about the power of those person-to-person, face-to-face “live encounters” that animate the human spirit in a way nothing else can. High tech can supplement and amplify “high touch,” but it can never replace it.

How did high touch animate the Obama campaign? By means of “Camp Obama,” an organizing tool grounded in transformative conversations. These retreats of two or three days each, held over time in every region of the country, served as gathering places for people who were at various stages of making the Rosa Parks decision to live undivided lives. Heartbroken about the decline of American democracy and the pervasive violence of our society, they came to Camp Obama for the same reason people came to Highlander: seeking a public voice to help renew our political process and reweave the tattered fabric of our common life.

The design for Camp Obama was rooted in the “public narrative” work of Marshall Ganz, lecturer in Public Policy at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, and an ex-community organizer. In a classic model of transformative conversations, participants were first asked to tell “the story of self,” the story of one’s personal hurts and hopes that, as it is told and heard, helps people deepen their commitment to live undivided lives. Next they were asked to tell “the story of us,” the story that connects one’s personal needs and hopes to those of other people, expanding the community of congruence. Then they were asked to tell “the story of now,” of what might be done at this moment to heal the hurts and pursue the hopes revealed by the first two stories.

After exploring these stories and their political implications, participants went out from Camp Obama to spread across the country and involve more and more people in similar groups until they had helped to generate a political campaign nearly unique in American history and successful by every measure: spreading a message, inspiring hope, raising record sums of money from individuals, bringing new diversity into the electoral process, getting out the vote, and winning the election against considerable odds. So the “secret” of Camp Obama—a stone tossed into the political pond that rippled out on November 4, 2008, to the 64 million people who voted Obama into office—is yet another secret hidden in plain sight: telling personal stories that are connected to our hurts and our hopes, done in a well-designed and disciplined community of discourse, can help empower us to act.

As we reflect on that fact we should remember that, prior to the last election, many of us believed that the American political pond had become so frozen over that a small stone like Camp Obama, tossed into it, would simply bounce and then lie there. We should also remember that in the 1950s, many American citizens, white and black, would have said the same thing about the chances of the Highlander conversations having any appreciable impact on achieving equality under the law for all Americans.

More than a few academics hold the same “frozen pond” belief about the structures and culture of higher education. As long as we cling to that notion, it will continue to be a self-fulfilling prophecy: the academic pond will remain frozen in its infamous resistance to change. But transformative conversations—even in relation to goals far more challenging than educational reform—have a proven capacity to help melt the ice.