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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO "THE COORDINATED MANAGEMENT OF MEANING" ("CMM")

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If it is permissible to personify CMM, its "day job" is that of a communication theory. However, because in that job it requires so many qualifiers ("no, its not THAT kind of theory...") and explanations ("CMM's concept of communication differs from that of other theories..."), the neighbors know that CMM has another, "secret" life... or two. In addition to being a communication theory, CMM works both as a set of tools for practitioners and as a worldview.

SOCIAL WORLDS: CMM AS WORLDVIEW

The best things cannot be told, the second best are misunderstood. After that comes civilized conversation...And so...we come to the problem of communication: the opening, that is to say, of one's own truth and depth to the depth and truth of another in such a way as to establish an authentic community of existence -- Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God: Creative Mythology. Penguin, 1968, p. 84.

CMM's secret life as a worldview -- the way it thinks about humanity, about the social worlds that we create and that create us, and about our place in the universe -- is the most important of its several lives, even though this aspect has been least often articulated in scholarly or professional publications.

CMM's worldview shares something important with Campbell's delightfully enigmatic comment about the "best things" that cannot be said. It recognizes an inherent gap between whatever "is" the case and whatever we can "say" (or think or know) about it. All beings, someone once noted, have an environment; only humans have a world. The "world" is "made." Its "stuff" is that of stories, grammar, metaphors and differences. It is a "social" world or, better, social worlds, and these worlds are diverse, unfinished, and shape changing. No wonder they cannot be "said."

Like all worldviews, this one creates a certain "frame of mind" or "discourse" or "habits of perception and action" for CMM theorists and practitioners that biases our perceptions and prefigures certain forms of thinking and acting while precluding others.

One such bias is to foreground the process by which the events and objects of our social worlds are made rather than to treat too seriously any specific product of that process. As a result, those who use CMM always look at persons, families, or organizations systemically, as having histories, futures, and networks of relationships.

Using CMM, we have to think of social worlds as extending through time in unfinished processes, as multi-layered, fully reflexive, and having the ultimate shape of a self-referential paradox.

Another implication is that those who use CMM always look at what “is” as only one possibility among thousands that could have been the case, and are curious about why this possibility – rather than all of the others – was realized.

Still another implication is CMM’s emphasis on patterns of interactions – what people say and do – as the context for the fateful process in which things are named, stories told, and narratives acted out. These patterns are not the same thing as the names, stories, or narratives with which they are intertwined, and they have properties of their own, such as being highly sensitive to initial conditions, the site of emergent properties, and shaped by “attractors” such as trust and respect.

Finally, those who use CMM see all the events and objects of our social worlds as “local” conditions of a more universal process which we, individually and collectively, both make and in which we are made in patterns of communication.

The diversity of human social worlds was brought home to me by an apparently simple question: How many people are eating dinner around a campfire? An anthropologist and three members of a village that he was studying set out on a journey through the jungle. They made camp for the night, built a fire and prepared a meal. During the meal, the anthropologist became aware that there were several different counts of the number of people eating dinner. He saw himself, the three people with whom he was traveling, and four pygmies who lived in the area and had come to share the meal – a total of 8. The people with whom he was traveling saw the anthropologist, each other, and their ancestors, but not the pygmies, whom their culture denied existence – a total of many more than 8 and with only partial overlap with the 8 that the anthropologist saw. He speculated on the pygmies’ perception of the dinner party but never found out how many diners they perceived around the campfire.

Cultural anthropologists and other social constructionists have documented the many and diverse social worlds in which humans live, and that our ways of being human differ substantially among these social worlds. We have different hopes, dreams, heroes and role-models; our cultures shape different beliefs about what is true, good, and holy; we have different senses of what constitutes a person, a good argument, or a good relationship; and we make sense of our worlds with stories that embody different moralities and aesthetics. A classic Japanese story describes the actions of a group of samurai whose lord has been killed. Among other things, they sell their sisters into prostitution; murder the man who killed their lord, and then commit suicide. The diversity of our social worlds is shown because, in their own moral order, they have acted not only honorably but nobly, while in my social world, this is altogether a terrible story. In a similar way, medieval Crusaders thought that God sanctified their actions, while contemporary international law would judge them to be “crimes against humanity.”

Whatever else we may say about social worlds, we can be sure that they are many. Further, we have no reason to expect that the current array of social worlds exhaust the possibilities. While humanity has a past that extends, depending on how you keep score, hundreds of thousands or a few million years; it only has a history of 10,000 years or so. And if we stipulate that a “generation” is 20 years, then human history is only 500 generations old. Surely we have not reached our full development yet! Given that the rate of technological and social change seems to accelerate, what social worlds will our descendents know? What aesthetics will be shaped by people who are born on planets other than the earth? What moralities will be developed by people who have access to levels of life extending, pain-reducing, and cosmetic medicine that are unknown to us? What forms of interpersonal relationships will be developed by people whose expected life spans are significantly longer than ours?

Thinking about the diversity and historicity of social worlds positions us – as persons, forms of relationships, governments, economic systems, philosophical systems, art forms, etc. – in the middle of a continuing process that we can affect but can neither control nor predict. Drawing on the distinction between “localites” (those who see their own community as the “world”) and “cosmopolites” (those who see their own community as one among many in a diverse world that extends beyond whatever horizons they are able to see) in Communication and the Human Condition (Pearce, 1989), I characterized the form of life as created by the CMM worldview as “cosmopolitan.” This form of life cultivates some things that I find highly desirable, including a generosity of spirit that treats “Others” with respect and tolerance without forcing them to fit into our own sense of who they are and what they are like; an attention to the social worlds that we are co-creating through our actions; and a sensibility about not using others for our own purposes.

THE “COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE”

“I first began ... with a seemingly innocent and obvious question: “What makes a good relationship?” It soon became apparent, at least to me, that this question needed to be reworded to “What makes a good communication process?” Communication is the observable practice of a relationship, and so it was to the actual process of communicating that I had to attend.” – Robyn Penman, Reconstructing Communicating, Mahway, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Press, 2000, p. 1.

In the quotation above, Robyn explicitly takes what I call “the communication perspective.” With good results, she treats relationships as made in the actual, observable process of communication. I propose to do the same to all of the events and objects in our social worlds.

Note that the “communication perspective” is a non-totalizing perspective. It proposes that we see events and objects as textures of communication; it does not make the “nothing-but” argument that events and objects are only patterns of communication.

In my work with this perspective, I've taken three steps. First, I found it useful to see organizations, families, persons, and nations as deeply textured clusters of persons-in-conversation. This step helps me understand and find leverage points for working with these events and entities. For example, a family can be seen as constituted by the conversations that it does not permit -- or the persons that it does not allow to participate in certain conversations -- as much as by those that it does. An effective intervention might be to bring, for example, the children into conversations that they have been excluded from, or to initiate a conversation unlike that those which currently constitute the family. In a striking effective intervention, family therapist Karl Tomm maneuvered a very competitive couple into a situation in which they needed to converse cooperatively, and this experience had important effects in their relationship (Vernon E. Cronen, W. Barnett Pearce, and Karl Tomm, "A Dialectical View of Personal Change," pp 203-224 in Kenneth J. Gergen and Keith E. Davis, eds., The Social Construction of the Person. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1985).

Others who have taken this first step find it useful to see organizations as comprised of clusters of conversations. Among other things, this positions managers and consultants as managing conversations instead of people. Matters of efficiency, morale, productivity, and conflict can be handled by attention to what conversations occur, where, with what participants, and about what topics. Much of the work of the Public Dialogue Consortium consists of bringing people into conversations that would ordinarily not talk to each other at all or, if they did, talk at rather than with each other, and to bring certain qualities of conversation into contexts where they do not ordinarily occur. By focusing on the form of communication with principled disinterest in the topic and neutrality toward "positions" about those topics, we have been able to bring about significant change in the social worlds of participants (Shawn Spano, Public Dialogue and Participatory Democracy: The Cupertino Community Project. Hampton, 2001).

The second step in the communication perspective is the realization that the qualities of communication have fateful implications for the social worlds in which we live. Deborah Tannen (The Argument Culture, Random House, 1998) notes that the culture in my country, the United States of America, has become dominated by a habit "of approaching almost any issue, problem, or public person in an adversarial way." While not denying the value and situational virtue of opposition, she calls into question the habit of "using opposition to accomplish every goal, even those that do not require fighting but might also (or better) be accomplished by other means, such as exploring, expanding, discussing, investigating, and the exchanging of ideas suggested by the word 'dialogue.' I am questioning the assumption that everything is a matter of polarized opposites, the proverbial 'two sides to every question' that we think embodies open-mindedness and expansive thinking" (p. 8). Some consequences of this quality of public discourse include simplifying complex issues (into just two sides); eliminating possibilities for creative solutions not prefigured in the positions initially proposed; creating animosities and enemies who sometimes seek to best each other even more than to implement the best policies; and driving from the public sphere those who do not relish no-holds-barred combat.

Utilizing this step in the communication perspective, I am prepared to argue that the quality of our personal lives and of our social worlds is directly related to the quality of communication in which we engage. I think this claim is more significant (because it directs our attention to patterns of communication) than it is original (it paraphrases and extends Harry Stack Sullivan's definition of personality offered in the 1950s). But from this perspective, I was struck by how the quality of communication was not a part of the thinking of a group doing scenario-building about the future of the world (Allan Hammond, *Which World? Scenarios for the 21st Century*. Washington, D. C.: Island Press, 1998). I believe that if we want to improve the world by addressing racism, economic inequality within and among nations, exploitation of persons and groups by others, protection of the environment, etc., we would be well advised to focus on the quality of the communication processes in which we address these issues.

The third step in the communication perspective is to see each new moment of communicating as a creative act in which we make something that had not existed before and which will be the context for every subsequent creative act. This is so exciting and important that I want to discuss it under the heading of "making social worlds."

MAKING SOCIAL WORLDS

A public dialogue was being held about how a Colombian city could achieve safety and prosperity. One participant made a suggestion that would involve the police. Before this person had finished speaking, another interrupted, shouting angrily, "The police? The police are corrupt!" Another shouted, with equal intensity, "No, they are not corrupt!"

This moment, like all moments, can be seen as a bifurcation point in the continuing process of the creation of our social worlds. What happens next will determine the course of the meeting and perhaps the future of the city. Position yourself as the facilitator of the meeting. Here are a couple of possible things you could do, each of which calls into being different patterns of communication. Read them slowly and feel the direction in which they point and the responses they elicit from the participants.

1. *(Silence. You let the participants continue to argue about police corruption.)*
2. *"Silence, both of you!" you shout. "Let the speaker continue..."*
3. *"That's right! The police are NOT corrupt!" you shout. "Let's continue..."*
4. *"I see that confidence in the police is important. Before we continue with this suggestion, let's talk about it. First, what experiences do you have that lead you to say that the police are corrupt?"*
5. *"If the police were not corrupt, what would be different?"*

In other contexts, I would assess the various interventions that the facilitator of the discussion could have made in terms of the way they serve the purposes of the

meeting. Here, however, I just want to observe that our social worlds are created differently depending on what the facilitator does in this instance...and on how others act in each subsequent moment. One of the challenges of CMM is to take this third step of the communication perspective – that social worlds are made by persons-in-conversation – and develop ways of thinking about it.

One idea is often presented as the “hierarchy model” of multiple, embedded contexts for each of our actions. That is, we act in each moment in the context of stories about who we are (self), what we are doing (episode), with whom (relationships), etc. etc. This is a useful concept, but it is more static than, if you’ll pardon the phrase, real life.

An alternative is to imagine that each moment consists of a field of potentialities constrained by the past but open to the creative force of action in the present moment. This field floats or moves or exists in the magical “now” at the cusp of the past and the future. What we do (whether it is to speak or not to speak; to move toward, away from or against another person; to build or destroy) in each moment “realizes” one (or some) of the nearly infinite possible “presents” and, in so doing, prefigures some of the nearly infinite number of potential futures.

We could analyze the choice made by the facilitator in the situation described at the beginning of this section by inquiring about her stories of self (including her story of being a facilitator), of others (including the police), or the episode (the desired characteristics of public dialogue), etc. This inquiry would give us interesting information to understand the significance of what she did in that context. In addition, we could describe the act itself in terms of the way it “realized” one of the many potential futures for the participants, the meeting, and the city. We might look at the responses it elicited from all of the participants (particularly the person making the proposal and those arguing about the police). Did the response bind them closer to the purposes of the meeting or alienate them from it? Did it lead them to perceive the facilitator as “neutral” or as partisan?

CMM AS A THEORY FOR UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL WORLDS

The language that we use is fateful. It picks out some things for our attention and not others, and that which we pay attention to grows – at least in our own practice and writings. CMM offers three terms as a way of applying the communication perspective to the events and objects of our social worlds: coordination, coherence, and mystery.

Coordination directs our attention to the ways in which our actions mesh together to produce patterns. These patterns comprise the events and objects of the social world in which we live. From an individual perspective, it is important for us to find ways to mesh our actions with those of others at least sufficiently well that we get through the day without too many bruises; from a collective perspective, it is important that we call into being those patterns of coordinated action that permit us to live and prosper.

“Coordination” suggests that all events and objects in our social worlds are co-constructed by the intermeshed activities of multiple persons. A CMM-ish perspective

must be systemic, focusing on patterns and relations rather than on things or individuals in isolation. One implication of this is that nothing we do is ever “finished” when we do it. It is moved-toward-completion by the actions it elicits from others, and how we respond to that, etc.

Because we are necessarily interrelated, no one can do only one thing at once. We are always coordinating with many people and acting into many contexts simultaneously. It is impossible, I believe, to fully articulate the meaning of any action, because it extends both laterally into a nearly infinite number of relationships and contexts, and temporally into a contingent but uncertain future.

Coherence directs our attention to the stories that we tell that make our lives meaningful. Meaning-making is, apparently, an inherent part of what it means to be human, and the “story” is the primary form of this process. With this in mind, CMM suggests that we tell stories about many things, including our own individual and collective identity, the world around us, and the characters and actions we find in that world, including heroes, villains, fools, wise people, etc. CMM also suggests that the stories we “tell” ourselves to achieve coherence are always, necessarily not quite consistent with the stories we “live” as we coordinate our actions with other people, and the tension between the two provides the impetus for much of the richness of our lives.

Human beings are inveterate storytellers, and we can/must make choices about which stories to tell and how to tell them. CMM notes that the differences in language, plot, timing, inclusiveness, reflexivity, etc., of the stories we tell have important implications for our social worlds. Sometimes simply changing from deficit to appreciative language, from a past/problem orientation to a future/possibility orientation, or from an individualist to a social systemic framework can enable persons and groups to move forward together where they were previously blocked. Sometimes enriching the stories that one tells to include previously untold, unheard, or unknown aspects creates openings for conflict resolution or organizational creativity.

Because we are always acting into multiple contexts/relationships simultaneously, we should not expect all of our stories to be logically or narratively consistent. CMM has developed a set of concepts to depict the various ways in which our stories either fit together or get tangled into knots.

There is always a tension between the stories we tell to make the world coherent and the stories we live as we coordinate with other people. By paying attention to this tension, CMM focuses on a powerful dynamic that accounts for the joys, frustrations, surprises, and tragedies of social life.

Mystery directs our attention to the fact that the universe is far bigger and subtler than any possible set of stories by which we can make it coherent. Further, the universe – and our understanding of it -- is affected by our own actions, and since we cannot simultaneously perform all actions, our understanding of the universe is inherently finite (not to mention biased). Since the positivists’ dream of knowing it all as it is with clear

and distinct ideas is not available to us, we have only the options of pretending that what we don't know isn't real or isn't important, or including in our stories some explicit recognition that our understanding is limited. The manner in which we acknowledge mystery exerts a profound effect on our form of life – from repressive Inquisitions to beautiful visions.

The key insight from mystery is that the world is far richer and subtler than any story we have of it, and that it changes because we perceive it, tell stories about it, and act into it. From this perspective, it makes sense to ask of any given pattern of behavior or form of interpersonal relationships, of all the many possibilities, why have these people made this pattern? It makes sense to explore any social institution for fissures, cracks, or fault lines, knowing that no pattern is without them. It makes sense to ask, of any social pattern, “how is it made?” and “how might we remake it differently?”

“WHAT ARE WE MAKING TOGETHER?”

At the beginning of this essay, I alluded to the explanations and qualifications that attend CMM as a theory of communication. To put it baldly, most theories have assumed that communication is (or at least should be) about something else, whether that something else is a description of reality, the exercise of power (e.g., persuasion), or the display of erudition or aesthetics (e.g., the disparaging notion of rhetoric). To the contrary, CMM is one of that cluster of theories that sees communication as doing something. Among these, CMM is distinctive (I do not claim “unique;” I have learned that there are far too many people doing good work for anyone to make such a claim) by its focus on making the events and objects of our social worlds. Rather than “what do you mean?” or “what are you doing?” CMM's perspective is captured in its signature question: “What are we making together?”

Continuing to make some clarifying comparisons, some theories focus on “macro” issues, such as power, gender, race, and oppression, and do so with little attention to the specific persons-in-conversation. From my perspective, these theories have an affinity for the abstract and general that would be enriched by attention to the momentary creative acts in the field of potentialities. Without the concept of communication as making the events and objects of social worlds, for example, such concepts as “power” are treated as monolithic, and the ways of moving forward creatively and productively are limited.

The argument in the preceding paragraph deserves more space than I will give it in this paper, but lurking behind my thinking is Gandhi's opposition to military revolution. “What do you get,” he asked, “if you overthrow their generals with your generals?” His answer, “you get more generals.” In the same way, if a theory starts with the notion that “power” or “oppression” is a fact of life, this may well be a powerful tool for exposing and perhaps even overthrowing structures of domination, but it is a very poor tool for creating a society in which no one is oppressed and power is shared.

On the other hand, CMM's interest in all the events and objects of our social worlds differs from other approaches (e.g., discourse analysis; Conversation Analysis)

that focus on particular conversations. For example, Suzanne Eggins and Diana Slade (Analyzing Casual Conversation. London: Cassell, 1997, p. 7) said:

Sociologists [doing Conversational Analysis] ask, “How do we do conversation?”, and recognize that conversation tells us something about social life. Linguists, on the other hand, ask “How is language structured to *enable* us to do conversation?”, and recognize that conversation tells us something about the nature of language as a *resource* for doing social life.

Joining Eggins and Slade, I would say that CMM asks “What events and objects in our social worlds are we making when we communicate like this?” and “How can we make ‘better’ events and objects in our social worlds?”

That language-in-use is a way of doing things is the basis for discourse analysis as it is in CMM. However, as presented by Linda Wood and Rolf Kroger (Doing Discourse Analysis, Sage, 2000), the focus of attention tends to remain at the level of the production of specific speech acts rather than include the continual creation and recreation of social worlds. Again, joining these authors, I would say that CMM asks in addition to how speakers perform speech acts, “what are we making together?” and include everything that is holy and significant within the vocabulary of the answer to that question.

TOOLS FOR PRACTITIONERS: CMM’S OTHER SECRET LIFE

The perceptive reader will notice that this theoretical question of “what are we making together” is also a practical one. CMM has developed a wide array of distinctive tools for describing, understanding, and – most importantly – guiding persons-in-conversation so that they can make better social worlds.

The tools in CMM include the “hierarchy” model of embedded stories; the “serpentine” model of the unfolding of social episodes; the “daisy” model of the conversational textures of the events and objects of our social realities; “strange” and “charmed” loops among the stories we tell; the distinction between the stories that we tell and those that we live; the “logical force” that we describe when we say that a person like me in a situation like that “had” to act in certain ways regardless of the outcome, etc. A nontechnical description of these tools is found in the document “Using CMM.” I will be happy to send an electronic file copy on request.

Some of these “persons-in-conversations” who have found these tools useful are therapists, consultants, teachers, and managers. I have compiled descriptions of the way they use these tools in their work in “CMM: Reports from Users.” I’ll send an electronic file copy on request.

MAKING BETTER SOCIAL WORLDS

The passion that drives the development of CMM is a commitment to making better social worlds. I am bored with as well as frightened by repetitions of the same old ways of dominating others through force, of resolving conflicts confrontationally, of distributing wealth unequally, of exploiting the resources of our world without assessing

the effects; and of doing politics through lies and secrecy. There is enough of a track record to know that better ways of being a person and of moving forward together are possible, and I believe that one important element in achieving this is an enhanced attention to the quality of the patterns of communication in which we participate. In one sense, I am most interested in the “secret life” of CMM as a set of tools for practitioners. I invite anyone to use any or all of these tools to make better social worlds.