

## WAYS OF KNOWING: CLEARING THE GROUND FOR CONVERSATION

Michael Whelan SM<sup>1</sup>

---

*“We are here to counsel with each other. We must build spiritual and scientific bridges linking the nations of the world.”*

Albert Einstein, 1947.

*“The capacity for ‘dialogue’ is rooted in the nature of the person and human dignity. Dialogue is an indispensable step along the path toward human self-realization, the self-realization both of each individual and of every human community.”*

Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995) 28.

---

Conversation became explicitly and definitely part of my consciousness, as a potentially important way to promote and maintain good relationships in 1994. In July of that year, a group of twelve met in Balmain to discuss ways we might promote renewal within the Catholic Church. From the start there were two principles that we were clear on:

- We wanted to remain within the Church structure, to work for renewal within the system;
- We wanted to be non-confrontationist, though this did not preclude addressing issues, where necessary, that some might find confrontational.

That group had several meetings before the end of 1994, when we decided that we would seek to develop forums of conversation for the sake of promoting renewal within the Catholic Church and beyond. We agreed on name for ourselves – Catalyst for Renewal – and a mission statement:

We are believers who are attempting to establish a forum for conversation within the Catholic Church of Australia. Our aim is to prompt open exchanges among the community of believers, mindful of the diversity of expression of faith in contemporary Australia. This springs explicitly from the spirit of pope John XXIII and Vatican II: "Let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is unsettled, and charity in any case". (*Gaudium et Spes*, (Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World"), 92)

About the time this process was unfolding, I went with a Josephite friend of mine, Sr Marie Biddle, to a session of Politics in the Pub at the old Harold Park Hotel. We talked afterwards about the possibility of having Religion on the Pub. On more mature thought, we could see that the acronym – RIP – was not auspicious. With the advice of Win Childs – the chief organizer of Politics in the Pub – the name Spirituality in the Pub was chosen. This became the first forum of conversation for Catalyst for Renewal. It was held at the Bellevue Hotel in Paddington. At the time of writing there are more than thirty venues of Spirituality in the Pub currently functioning throughout Australia.

It is my conviction – at the risk of sounding a little grand or simply melodramatic – that our future depends on our ability to engage each other in conversation. If we can do that, we just might come up with some constructive and creative ways to deal with the great issues that confront us at this time. If we cannot do that, I fear for our future. The great issues are not the kind that can be solved by a lonely researcher or group of researchers beavering away in a laboratory. They are primarily issues of human relationships and human meaning. The Dalai Lama sums it up nicely:

In human societies there will always be differences of views and interests. But the reality today is that we are all interdependent and have to coexist on this small planet. Therefore, the only sensible and intelligent way of resolving differences and clashes of interests, whether between individuals or nations, is through dialogue. The promotion of a culture of dialogue and nonviolence for the future of mankind is thus an important task of the international community.<sup>2</sup>

If we are to promote conversation about the big issues, we must engage in at least one prior conversation. That prior conversation must address the way we think, particularly in the West. This is immensely important to the business of conversation and, therefore, the business of our survival.

### 1. Two Movements of Conversation

I am using the word “conversation” with a quite specific meaning here. That meaning is derived from the word’s etymology, which it shares with two Latin words, *conversari*, meaning “to dwell,” “to keep company with” or “to abide,” and *convertere*, meaning “to change,” “to convert,” “to alter,” “to refresh” or “to turn.” The first of these two movements – the *conversari* – is a movement towards the other. I, as a given subject take the initiative and make a choice to be with you in some positive and creative way. The second – *convertere* – is a movement towards myself. I, as a given subject, open myself to discovery and change in and through this encounter.<sup>3</sup>

In going out and meeting the other precisely as other, I am enabled to return to myself more truthfully and more deeply. This is something akin to leaping into the hermeneutic circle that the late Paul Ricoeur spoke of. Engaging in conversation is submitting oneself and one’s worldview to interpretation and reinterpretation. I participate in an exploration and discovery process that is at once about the world and about me.

Conversation is built on the assumption that life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved. There are of course many problems in life that need solutions, but life itself is not a problem. There is no solution to life. The word “mystery,” as used here, describes *inexhaustible intelligibility*. Mystery says that both questions and answers are steps along the way as we move more and more deeply into an intelligible reality whose intelligibility we will never exhaust. A sense of mystery reminds us that, as we endeavour to move ever deeper into truth, we should be constantly looking for the questions embedded in every answer and the truth that is beginning to emerge just offstage. It should also remind us that we are not alone in our pursuit of truth, that this is an affair of the community.

## 2. Critical Moments<sup>4</sup>

Our individual lives do not travel in straight lines. Each of us here today could name at least one change of direction in his or her life. You might have had your expectations of the way things should be, but circumstances – for want of a better word – forced you to adapt and change. Something happened to you and you are a different person today because of it. We have a word for such experiences: Crises. The Greek root word is *krineo*, meaning “a parting of the ways.” The Chinese have a much more colourful way of depicting it. The Chinese character has a man on a mountain, implying both danger – he may fall – and opportunity – new horizons open up before him.<sup>5</sup>

Whenever we attempt to describe such critical moments, and particularly when we try to name the pivotal moment or moments when the new horizons actually started to beckon us in some positive way, we often use the passive voice. There is always an element of giftedness about the process. We say things like, “Suddenly it dawned on me!” or “I just knew I would be okay” or “I felt this sense of relief and release.” Living through times of crisis is not just a matter of will power. There is a lot of waiting, yielding, struggling and accepting. This is, in fact, where we win or lose the battle to be human. Show me a deeply human person, someone of obvious wisdom and qualities such as compassion, and I will show you someone who has generously lived through the cycle of death and rebirth many times in his or her life. On the other hand, show me someone who is mean spirited, selfish, shallow and generally lacking those qualities such as wisdom and compassion, and will show you someone who has refused the call of life to enter the cycle of death and rebirth.

I wish to emphasize that there is an uncontrolled and uncontrollable element in living, and this, in the end, demands acceptance of us, and there is an uncomprehended and incomprehensible element too, and this demands humility of us. I am not saying that we are hapless victims of fate, unwitting pawns in a chess game played by something or someone else. We are free and accountable. In the end, life is not what happens to us, it is what we do with what happens to us. Life itself is a conversation.

This same process of change and adaptation occurs on a bigger scale, in the totality of the human family. There are uncontrolled and uncontrollable, uncomprehended and incomprehensible forces at work. From time to time they emerge with great strength and significance and demand that we change and adapt. And it can happen almost suddenly. For example, those of us who were born within close memory of the Second World War, will remember the 1960s. Overnight, the social construction of reality that we brought to that point, did not work anymore. And so we changed, or at least, we began to change. Members of Gen X or Y or Z will tell you all about those changes if you take the time to listen to them.

And just as the critical moment in the individual journey can send ripples of change right throughout the life of that individual – in terms of thinking, feeling, relationships, work, politics, culture, religion, priorities, and so on – so it happens in the human family at large. These critical moments can affect, to the roots, the way we deal with our place in the world. Life asks for a creative response from us.

## 3. Early Signs of Things to Come

I am going to single out one specific critical moment for the human family. In doing this, I am not suggesting this moment is absolutely the most important moment in known history. I am, however, saying that this moment has had a significant impact on the way we think and know today. We will have large segments of our world unable – perhaps even unwilling – to join in conversation with other large segments of our world if we do not recognise and deal with this particular moment and its implications for us all.

I am speaking of the Enlightenment. Before we discuss the Enlightenment and its relevance to conversation, I would like to say something about an earlier moment that probably began around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Consider, for example, the following diverse places, names and dates:

- in China we find Confucius (551-479 BCE) and Lao Tzu (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE),
- in India we find the Buddha (560 – 470 BCE),
- in Greece we find Thales (640- 546 BCE), Pythagoras (570 – 500 BCE), Socrates (470 – 400 BCE), Plato (428 – 348 BCE) and Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE), and
- in Israel we find the prophets Isaiah (latter part of 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE), Jeremiah (latter part of 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE and early part of 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE), Amos and Hosea (mid-8<sup>th</sup> century BCE), Micah (latter part of 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE), Zephaniah (latter part of 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE), Nahum and Habakkuk (latter part of 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE and early part of 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE), Obadiah (mid-6<sup>th</sup> century BCE), Haggai, Zechariah and Joel (latter part of 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE), Malachi (early 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and Jonah (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE).<sup>6</sup>

It was in this moment or era – leading up to and away from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE – that rationality began to make its impact on our thinking. Self-reflective thinking began to emerge and with it a changing sense of self, individual responsibility and accountability. Implicit in this are the seeds of thinking in terms of personal identity and freedom.<sup>7</sup> I believe we actually find the intimations of the Enlightenment here.

#### 4. The Enlightenment

That period of European history that is called the Enlightenment occurred in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a seminal experience of the human family, it was largely a phenomenon of England, France and Germany. A summary description of the Enlightenment is given by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804):

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* "Have courage to use your own reason!" – that is the motto of the enlightenment.<sup>8</sup>

At the heart of this critical moment in history, and in so many ways the driving force of it, was scientific discovery. The discoveries themselves were significant enough. But the growing influence of the development of the sciences has its relevance for us mainly in the new style of thinking that was both one of its major causes and one of

its major effects. We will consider briefly, three men in this regard. Although, strictly speaking, they in fact pre-date the Enlightenment, they each contributed mightily to it.

The first is Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543). He was a man of the Renaissance and he probably did more than any other of his time to pave the way for the Enlightenment: He was a Polish astronomer who introduced heliocentrism (sun-as-centre). In doing that, he has forever radically altered the way we think of the universe and our place in it. The focus of thinking had to shift from “the earth-as-centre” – ie *we* are centre ... often leading to simplistic social, political, religious and cultural constructions – to “the sun-as-centre,” re-situating the human family within a much bigger universe – or, more precisely, *universes* – and thus demanding a restructuring of self-awareness and opening up significant new possibilities for being in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Copernicus was followed closely by Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Galileo was an Italian astronomer and natural philosopher. He asked some of the people at the Vatican to look through his telescope and they refused. He was censured by the Holy Office for his adherence to the new astronomy. Cardinal Barberini – later to become Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644) – was one of a number of Church officials who congratulated Galileo. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine – Jesuit scholar, senior theologian in the Curia and later canonised – opposed Galileo, albeit gently and moderately, arguing that what he was presenting was only hypothetical and that one was not allowed to interpret the Scriptures in ways that contradicted the Fathers.<sup>10</sup>

This new thinking, underlying scientific discoveries and given further impetus by those same discoveries, was not well received by the religious authorities of the time. Cardinal Bellarmine – and those Church authorities who subsequently condemned Galileo in 1616 and 1633, and forbade him to teach the Copernican “theory”<sup>11</sup> – overlooked an important teaching, espoused by both Augustine and Aquinas: The Bible was never intended to teach science as such and therefore its authority must never be invoked to settle disputes in that field.

Aquinas and the early Scholastics gave a distinct place to the use of reason and they sought to maintain a constructive tension between faith and reason. That, sadly, was largely abandoned by later Scholasticism, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We see in this dispute between some Church officials and the scientist Galileo, the beginnings of an unfortunate and entirely unnecessary reaction that pitted science and reason over against faith.

A contemporary of Galileo was an Englishman by the name of Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Because he, as a philosopher, articulated so clearly and convincingly a whole new way of thinking that supported the emerging sciences, Bacon may in fact be the most influential thinker of this moment in history. He was a philosopher, legalist and political figure. He argued that “human knowledge and human power meet in one,” that we can use reason to discover the principles that govern nature and thus we can exert power over nature to the benefit of society.<sup>12</sup> Bacon said we should “put nature to the rack,” thus restoring the control lost at the Fall.<sup>13</sup> Bacon saw human beings using science for our welfare and God’s glory. Bacon had a utopian vision of a humanity progressing towards a new civilization based on science.

Whereas thinking, from the Greeks through the Scholastics, had been ultimately oriented towards finding humanity's proper place within the cosmos under the Divine and practically oriented towards the development of a life of virtue, thinking, under the impetus of Bacon and the scientific movement, became more oriented towards external, practical, useful, concrete processes.

These thinkers – and many others at the time – promoted a strong emphasis on empirically-based reason and the human ability to discover and utilize the principles/forces of nature. In France the seventeen-volume *Encyclopédie* is one of the great symbols of the era.<sup>14</sup> Mozart's operas also epitomize the time. *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), highlights individualism, lauds self-made assertive people who achieve their place in the social order through hard work, skill and talent, as opposed to aristocrats who are simply born to privilege. *The Magic Flute* (1791), features secular priests presiding over temples of Wisdom, Reason and Nature, claims the triumph of light over darkness, and reason, tolerance and love over passion, hate and revenge.

It is not difficult to see how such a climate of thinking gave birth to the hard sciences and the extraordinary technological progress that have exploded in a stunning array of inventions in our own times. Not surprisingly, this process forced radical changes in the religious, social, political and economic orders. The world would never be the same again, for better or worse, because human beings had begun to think differently.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. A Two-Edged Sword

The Enlightenment gave birth to a growing emphasis on the rational, the concrete and the useful. This emphasis has given us the immediate rewards of the technological and scientific advances. However, we have paid a price – too often overlooked or misunderstood – for the wonderful advances of the Enlightenment. Not all the developments have been beneficial to us. I suggest some of the negative consequences of the dominance of the rational and the concrete and the useful include:

- A way of thinking that assumes that the necessary basis for any truth claim is either empirical verifiability or rational proof. This new way of thinking therefore becomes exclusive of any other way of thinking. For want of a better term, we might call it “technological thinking.” It is also sometimes simply called rationalism.
- A loss of our ability to appreciate story-telling. Stories and myths and legends, as ways of engaging the world and seeking and expressing truth, die under the harsh and unforgiving searchlight of this technological thinking/rationalism.
- A corollary of the loss of the ability to appreciate story-telling is the loss of a sense of being part of any bigger story than the individual one that I write from moment to moment. There is no meta-narrative to give our personal narrative context and meaning.
- A further corollary is the tendency to dismiss faith as a legitimate way of knowing truth. Faith is our relationship within the meta-narrative, it positions

us vis-à-vis the Absolute. Take away the Absolute and you are just vis-à-vis the concrete here and now.

- A loss of a sense of being. The modern Western mind now has no philosophy of being, no metaphysics or ontology to ground it. In practical terms, we can see one manifestation of this in our lived focus – obsession? – on “doing” and “having,” to the exclusion of “being.” The primary – and often only – questions we ask are questions like, “Can it be done?” and “Will it work?” Questions of “being” seem irrelevant.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Examples Of The Challenges We Face

Remember, it is conversation that we are seeking to promote. We are not seeking to win an argument or score points or simply waste away the time. Excess of the kind of thinking that began to emerge in the Enlightenment and today dominates our thinking in the West, makes conversation difficult if not impossible. I share with you a few comments from contemporary thinkers that exemplify this point.

The first comment is by the Nobel Laureate cosmologist, Steven Weinberg, as cited by Charles Taylor in his recent acceptance speech on winning the Templeton Prize:

There are good people who do good things, and bad people who do bad things, but for good people to do bad things, it takes religion.<sup>17</sup>

The second is a statement by Robert Pirzig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, quoted approvingly by Richard Dawkins in his recent book, *The God Delusion*:

When one person suffers from a delusion it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion.<sup>18</sup>

The third is a series of citations given by Frank Brennan in his recent review of Christopher Hitchens’ *God is Not Great* and Michel Onfray’s *The Atheist Manifesto*.<sup>19</sup> Brennan gives some quotations from Onfray’s book:<sup>20</sup>

“all three monotheisms have a negative attitude toward the joy of life and even toward some of the basic human drives”; “monotheism loathes intelligence”; “in science, the church has always been wrong about everything: faced with epistemological truth it automatically persecutes the discoverer”; “monotheisms have no love for intelligence, books, knowledge, science”.

The Catholic Church “excels in the destruction of civilisations. It invented ethnocide”; and “monotheism is fatally fixated on death”.

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of Onfray’s writing is his blunt and explicit dismissal of the believer as a worthy partner in conversation. Brennan quotes:

“Equality between the believing Jew and the philosopher who proceeds according to the hypothetico-deductive model? Equality between the believer and the thinker who deconstructs the manufacture of belief, the building of a myth, the creation of a fable? Equality between the Muslim and the scrupulous analyst? If we say yes to these questions, then let’s stop thinking.” .... “Thanks to the telescope and microscope, (religion) no longer offers an explanation of anything important ... It can now only impede or retard”

What is at stake here is not honest, reason-based disagreement, but an unwillingness to engage in reasonable conversation. I believe I am a reasonable person, a person willing and able to join with other people of good will in the search for what is true and good for us all. But as a person of faith, I am dismissed. I am publicly mocked and made fun of. This is not responsible behaviour, especially when you consider that so many of our current world conflicts include people of faith in one form or another. If we cannot engage in conversation, what are we to do? Men and women of faith will be factors in the peace equation or there will be no peace.

## 7. A Question of Sanity

The American short story writer, Flannery O'Connor, observed in one of her public lectures about fifty years ago:

St Cyril of Jerusalem, in instructing catechumens, wrote: 'The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware, lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.' No matter what form the dragon may take, it is of this mysterious passage past him, or into his jaws, that stories of any depth will be concerned to tell, and this being the case, it requires considerable courage at any time, in any country, not to turn away from the storyteller.<sup>21</sup>

The psychiatrist, Rollo May, writing in much the same vein, argued that there was a link between our ability to incorporate the mythic and the symbolic and our ability to maintain our sanity as a society:<sup>22</sup>

I began my study of the relation between myth and culture some years ago when, as a young man, I lived and taught in Greece. What particularly intrigued me was the way the ancient Greeks seemed to handle their anxiety and other psychological problems. In the classical phase of Greek culture, anxiety in our modern sense did not seem to emerge as an overt problem.

I could not escape the implication that in certain historic periods, the culture provides the help which the individual needs to face the crises of life – birth, adolescence, marriage, procreation, death – so that he does not experience the profound insecurity, self-doubt and inner conflict which we associate with anxiety.

But scarcely do we propose a discussion of myth and culture when we are confronted by an almost insurmountable obstacle – that is, the myth that we live a 'mythless existence'. Myths and symbols are scorned and rejected or, at best, taken as unreal, imaginary, and, at worst, become synonyms for 'falsehood'. The wide prevalence of anxiety and alienation in our society is, I believe, bound up with our rejection of the language of myth. Jerome Bruner put it well: 'When the myths of society are no longer adequate to man's plight, the individual first takes refuge in mythoclasm and then he undertakes the lonely search for inner identity'.

At the outset I shall state the hypothesis which then took shape in my mind: Psychotherapy, and the problems which lead people to come in numbers for psychological help, emerge at a particular point in the historic development of a culture – that is the point where the myths and symbols of the culture disintegrate. The values of the culture are mediated by these myths and symbols, and with their breakdown comes the inner conflict which sends people to psychotherapy."<sup>23</sup>



May sums up in another of his works:

We forget at our peril that man is a symbol-making creature; and if the symbols (or myths, which are a pattern of symbols) seem arid and dead, they are to be mourned rather than denied. The bankruptcy of symbols should be seen for what it is, a way station on the path of despair.<sup>24</sup>

It seems to me that conversation about the things that matter most, sooner or later, opens out into the mythic and the symbolic. If we are unwilling or unable to go there, the conversation will be, at best, truncated and at worst the conversation will not even begin. Was there ever a time in history when conversation was more necessary? Is it possible to consider a future without conversation?

#### 8. A Contemporary Story-Teller

Some fifteen years ago – in 1992 – the Emmy Award-winning American TV writer/producer, Norman Lear, facilitated a Joint Faculty Seminar of the Harvard Divinity School and the Harvard Business School.<sup>25</sup> His words are perhaps even more insightful today, fifteen years on, and probably apply as much to the rest of the Western world as they do to the United States. Lear put the opinion that the traditional institutional sources of values in our society – the church, family, education and civil authority – have waned.<sup>26</sup> Lear begins his presentation:

Let me start by recognising something that unites both of the communities in this room, and, for that matter, all of humankind. I'm talking about the mysterious inner life, the fertile invisible realm that is the wellspring for our species' creativity and morality. It is that portion of ourselves that impels us to create art and literature, and study ethics, philosophy, and history. It is that portion of our being that gives rise to our sense of awe and wonder and longing for truth, beauty, and a higher order of meaning. For want of a better term, one could call it the spirit-led or spiritual life of our species. Whatever we call it, we have long recognised its presence and accepted that it sets us apart. And yet, as a student of the American psyche, at no time in my life can I remember our culture being so estranged from this essential part of itself. One can see it in the loss of faith in leaders and institutions – the cynicism, selfishness, and erosion of civility – and the hunger for connectedness that stalks our nation today. How bizarre that there is such an unhealthy reticence in our culture generally, and in business and education and public life in particular, to discuss what may be the most distinctive trait of this remarkable creature, the human being.<sup>27</sup>

There will of course be individuals who are incapable of conversation. Even with the best will in the world, there will probably be moments when each of us will be incapable of conversation. Indeed, there are some subjects we would be better to remain silent on, being ignorant of the matters to be examined. And even when we are capable of it and willing to engage in conversation with others who are also capable and willing, we may stumble and fumble and apparently achieve little. That is not the point. The point is to have an ongoing and practical commitment to conversation, to be willing to engage anyone of good will at any time in the spirit of *conversari* and *convertere*.

#### 9. Concluding Remarks

I feel just a little sheepish talking to you about conversation. We Catholics do not have a very good record in this regard. I am afraid ours is more a culture of telling than a culture of conversation. In my days in the seminary, when we engaged in what we might have called conversation, it was more akin to in-house maintenance talk. Neither *conversari* – at least not with our adversaries, and they were many – nor *convertere*, were part of the agenda in those interactions. The French Catholic scholar, Louis Bouyer, makes an insightful comment on the 2<sup>nd</sup> century polemicist Tertullian and his influence:

Where Tertullian's influence has proved most harmful is, perhaps, in the kind of polemics he succeeded only too well in acclimating in ecclesiastic circles: combining an abstract and completely *a priori* logic with the supposition (candid or implied) that the adversary must be a fool or else dishonest.<sup>28</sup>

The manner of my Archbishop's recent press conference in Sydney, in which he spoke publicly to our parliamentarians concerning the stem cell research bill, suggests we still have a long way to go as an institution.

However, I take my lead from Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. They charted a different course for the Catholic Church. At the heart of that new course, both as cause and effect, is conversation.<sup>29</sup> I also take my lead from Pope Paul VI, whose first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*,<sup>30</sup> is dedicated to this theme of conversation.

I believe human life is, at its core, about relationships – with the Great Mystery, however you wish to name that, with yourself, with other people and with the events and things of the world in which you find yourself. The quality and depth of your humanity can be measured by the quality and depth of your relationships. The moral vision that best manifests this understanding of human nature is summarized in the injunction to love. All the great religious traditions recognise that.

At its best, conversation is an act of love.<sup>31</sup> And as St Paul reminds us,

love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes. (1Corinthians 13:4-7)

Conversation leads to and protects community. And this does not require us to agree on the content that is part of the conversation. We can be together in a relationship of genuine care and concern, of deep respect and honesty, and disagree strongly with each other.<sup>32</sup>

The sorts of things that stand in the way of conversation are the sorts of things that stand in the way of love. And vice versa, the sorts of things that facilitate conversation are the sorts of things that facilitate love. Primary among these must surely be the willingness and ability to face oneself. The pain that you and I carry within will seep into our words and our interactions with others if we are not facing it and submitting to the truth that it bears. The most important and most practical

question I can ask myself at any moment is, “What’s happening?” In the facing and submitting to the truth that emerges in this inner conversation, there is transformation. This is, in a basic human way, the *convertere* of the inner conversation.<sup>33</sup> I suggest we must all pursue that inner conversation with persistent and compassionate honesty. If you do not transform your pain you will transmit it.<sup>34</sup>

If I am to engage you in a conversation, I must leave my ego fortress, let go of any arrogant sense of superiority, be done with the urge to triumph over you, and go out and meet you in the unoccupied zone between us. It is that “in between” that we need to nourish. I will give the last word to a philosopher, rather than a story-teller, because this philosopher tells the story of conversation so succinctly and rationally:

We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was ill fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it – ie that it allows something to ‘emerge’ which henceforth exists.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the International Philosophy, Science and Theology Festival held in Grafton, NSW, Thursday June 21, 2007. I acknowledge my debt to Sr Marie Biddle RSJ whose conversations with me have been most enlightening. I also acknowledge my colleagues in Catalyst for Renewal whose commitment to promoting conversation has been an inspiration. For more information on Catalyst for Renewal, see [www.catalyst-for-renewal.com.au](http://www.catalyst-for-renewal.com.au). Throughout this paper I will use the words “conversation” and “dialogue” interchangeably. However, I favour the word “conversation” because its etymology is so revealing. I also believe the word “dialogue” is a bit abstract, maybe more likely to be heard in the halls of academe than in the market place. The word “conversation” has a homely feel to it.

<sup>2</sup> Dalai Lama, Speech to the "Forum 2000" Conference, Prague, 4 September 4 1997.

<sup>3</sup> This is definitely not about me converting you or you converting me, whatever either of those might mean. It is rather about something that happens to me in my openness to the other. Neither of us controls that. I must, however, facilitate it by the way I approach and participate in the encounter.

<sup>4</sup> I use the word moment in a descriptive way, to indicate a period of time.

<sup>5</sup> The man under whom I studied at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh offers a useful description of life crises. See Adrian van Kaam, “Existential Crisis and Human Development,” originally published in the *The South African Journal of Pedagogy*, 1969, 3, 1, pp.63-74. Later published in Adrian van Kaam’s *Foundations for Personality Study*, Dimension Books, 1982, pp.357-371. Van Kaam says there is a pattern in every life crisis: Death, Decision and Rebirth. In fact, this pattern, which is writ large in our major crises, is present in each moment of our lives, like a genetic code.

<sup>6</sup> The exact dates of the prophets are debated by scholars. The argument holds however, that there was a prophetic movement that arise in these centuries in Israel.

<sup>7</sup> For a good summary statement of how various scholars view this era of history, see William M Thompson, *Christ and Consciousness: Exploring Christ’s Contribution to Human Consciousness*, Paulist Press, 1977, 19-47. Eric Voegelin offers a useful *caveat*. History, he says, does not move

---

simply forward, with one age growing on top of the previous one. There is a certain rising and falling, a moving forward and a falling back. Forgetfulness is also part of history.

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” in Isaac Kramnick, *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, Penguin Books, 1995, 1.

<sup>9</sup> The Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) or “re-birth” is so-called because it was seen as a recovery of art and humanistic thinking along the lines of the classical world of Greece and Rome. Richard Tarnas makes a useful summary comment about the Renaissance: “The phenomenon of the Renaissance lay as much in the sheer diversity of its expressions as in their unprecedented quality. Within the span of a single generation, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael produced their masterworks, Columbus discovered the New World, Luther rebelled against the Catholic Church and began the Reformation, and Copernicus hypothesized a heliocentric universe and commenced the Scientific Revolution.” (Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our World View*, Ballantine Books, 1991, 224.)

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting also, that the opposition to Galileo’s teaching was not only based on a simplistic interpretation of Scripture, but also strongly influenced by the philosophy of Aristotle, which espoused an earth-centred view of the universe.

<sup>11</sup> Galileo was never condemned by Pope Urban VIII, nor was he ever imprisoned. He was placed under house arrest and forced to reject the Copernican astronomy.

<sup>12</sup> Hitherto, the role of thinking and knowing was shaped by the Socratic idea that knowledge was about living well – ie virtue. Christian thinkers had followed that same line, situating it within the specific belief in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ.

<sup>13</sup> I do not wish to suggest here that Francis Bacon in some way foresaw and approved the tragic destruction of nature at the hands of science over the years since. Bacon was speaking in the context of the Greek myth of Proteus. Proteus arises from the sea each day at noon and sits on a rock. He has no choice but to share his wisdom. However, he is a difficult character, taking on threatening forms and prompting most people to let him go rather than receive his wisdom. Bacon seems to be suggesting, in his statement that we should “put nature to the rack,” that we should not be frightened by the various ways that nature may threaten us but wrestle with her to learn from her and produce goods for humanity because of her. That said, we cannot help but see, as we contemplate our world, a terribly appropriateness of the metaphor of the rack. Whatever Bacon might have intended in using that metaphor, we have certainly put nature to the rack.

<sup>14</sup> The French authors dedicated this work to Francis Bacon, John Locke and Isaac Newton. Thomas Jefferson, profoundly influenced by John Locke and the Enlightenment thinking said of these three Englishmen: “The three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception.”

<sup>15</sup> For a relevant discussion of the influence of this new awakening on religion, see Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1975/1995.

<sup>16</sup> The Polish philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski, suggests the link between what I have called “technological thinking” and the absence of metaphysics: “Metaphysical questions and beliefs are technologically barren and are therefore neither part of the analytical effort nor an element of science. As an organ of culture they are an extension of the mythical core. They are concerned with the absolutely primal conditions of the real of experience; they concern the quality of Being as a whole (as distinct from the object); they concern the necessity of events. They aim at revealing the relativity of the world of experience and attempt to reveal an unconditioned reality, thanks to which the conditioned reality becomes intelligible. Metaphysical questions and beliefs reveal an aspect of human existence not revealed by scientific questions and beliefs, namely, that aspect that refers intentionally to non-empirical, unconditioned reality. The presence of this intention does not guarantee the existence of the referents. It is only evidence of a need, alive in culture, that that to which the intention refers should be present. But this presence cannot in principle be the object of proof, because the proof-making ability is the power of the analytical mind, technologically oriented, which does not extend beyond its tasks. The idea of proof, introduced into metaphysics, arises from a confusion of two different sources of

---

energy active in man's conscious relation to the world: the technological and the mythical." (Leszek Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, translated by Adam Czeriawski, The University of Chicago Press, 1988/1966, 1.).

<sup>17</sup> Taken off the internet.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Banatm Press, 2006, 5.

<sup>19</sup> *The Weekend Australian*, June 2-3, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> See also Andrew Hamilton SJ, "Power of Polemic is Self-Perpetuating but Not Persuasive," in the latest issue of *Eureka Street* (Online), Volume 17:11. Hamilton offers a good critique of the polemical style as such. For example he writes: "Polemic characteristically avoids entering enquiringly your opponents' inner world, preferring to present their ideas masterfully in the worst possible light." The much commented-on recent books by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have reintroduced a broad brush anti-religious polemic. It has much in common with religious polemic against the secular world. Christian polemic is more often conducted through sermons, speeches and essays on particular topics than through comprehensive books. But as in the extended works of Dawkins and Hitchens, it characteristically contains two elements: an argument made in very broad terms showing the wrongness and inferiority of the ideas that the writer opposes, and some anecdotes which demonstrate the truth of this large argument."

<sup>21</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners*, Occasional Prose selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993/1969, 35.

<sup>22</sup> The nature of myth like the nature of culture is something we can acknowledge but not adequately define. The following description seems to me to be a useful one: "Myths are serious stories that reflect a society's spiritual foundations. They are symbols of human experience that each culture values and preserves because they embody the worldview or important beliefs of that culture. Myths may explain origins, natural phenomena, and death; they may describe the nature and function of divinities; or they may provide models of virtuous and heroic behavior by relating the adventures of heroes. They may include legends as well as folklore. They impart a feeling of awe for whatever is mysterious and marvellous in life, depicting a universe in which human beings take their place in a much larger scheme." (D. Rosenberg, *World Mythology: An Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics*, Harrap, 1986, xiv.)

<sup>23</sup> Rollo May, "Myths and Culture: Their Death and Transformation", *Cross Currents*, XXXIII, 1 (Spring 1983), 1 (1-16.)

<sup>24</sup> Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*, Fontana Books, 1976, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Norman Lear, "The Cathedral of Business: The Fountainhead of Values in America Today" in *The New Oxford Review*, April 1993, 6 (6-13).

<sup>26</sup> Ask yourself a question: Who do I trust? The clergy, politicians, social and scientific researchers, people in the media? Do you think we, as a society, trust one another more or less than people did in Australia, say fifty years ago? What is happening? How important is trust to the well being of a society?

<sup>27</sup> Norman Lear, Op. cit., p.7.

<sup>28</sup> Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, Burns and Oates, 1963/1960, 454.

<sup>29</sup> The Latin word used in Catholic Church documents is *colloquium*. It is translated as either conversation or dialogue.

<sup>30</sup> August 1964. Pope John XXIII had died on the evening of the Monday after Pentecost, June 3, 1963. The First Session of the Second Vatican Council had been completed some six months prior to this. There was speculation as to whether the new Pope would allow the Council to continue and if he did,

---

what sort of Council would it be. On June 21, Cardinal Montini from Milan was elected Pope and chose the name Paul VI. On June 22 Pope Paul VI declared that his whole pontificate would be dedicated to the Council. For a good, succinct introduction to the Second Vatican Council, I recommend John O'Malley SJ, "Did Anything Happen at Vatican II?" in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 67, 2006. O'Malley says in that essay: "There is scarcely a page in the council documents on which 'dialogue' or its equivalent does not occur. 'Dialogue' manifests a radical shift from the prophetic I-say-unto-you style that earlier prevailed and indicates something other than unilateral decision-making." John O'Malley also writes the Foreword to Giuseppe Alberigo's *A Brief History of Vatican II*, translated by Matthew Sherry (Orbis Books, 2006). This very useful little book is a summary of the five volume series on the Council, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo.

<sup>31</sup> "Communication is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion. At its most profound level it is the giving of self in love." (Roman Pastoral Instruction, "Communio et Progressio" (1971) 11). Paulo Freire has developed this theme well. See, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, The Seabury Press, 1968, 77-81. For example: "Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and recreation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. It is thus necessarily the task of responsible Subjects and cannot exist in a relation of domination. Domination reveals the pathology of love: sadism in the dominator and masochism in the dominated." (77).

<sup>32</sup> A good example of this is found in the current public conversation between Pope Benedict XVI and Rabbi Jacob Neusner over the identity of Jesus. They disagree with each other. Neusner writes: "We are able to meet each other in a forthright exercise of reason and criticism. The challenges of Sinai bring us together for the renewal of a 2000 year old tradition of religious debate in the service of God's truth." Rabbi Neusner's piece, published in *The Jerusalem Post*, may be found on the internet at <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=147421&eng=y> Another example may be found in Eco, Umberto & Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, *Belief or Unbelief? A Confrontation*, Translated by Minna Proctor, Arcade Publishing, 2000. A journalist in the *Sydney Morning Herald* reflected on the conversations the Rev Tim Costello had had with his brother, Peter Costello, the Treasurer: "(Tim Costello) used ('the politics of grace') to describe the relationship with his brother, whereby the two men disagree on many issues but maintain a dialogue. He used it to describe his conversion to the merits of at least some aspects of a goods and services tax. Costello asks: 'Can the politics of tribe yield to the politics of grace – politics in which people are free to speak their convictions, and at times to be strongly disagreed with, but without fear of intimidation. Tribal politics demand that you are either for us or against us. If you're not one of us then we'll cut you off. It's epitomised in the way Hansonism demarks the white tribe off from Aborigines, newly-arrived immigrants and single mothers. The politics of grace includes the belief that we can be a diverse but inclusive family, that while we may often disagree, we will always keep the conversation going.'" (Tony Stephens, "Reconciliation Revisited", *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 16, 1999, 34)

<sup>33</sup> As a Christian, I would say that this is the human ground within which Grace works for *metanoia* in the Gospel sense of that term.

<sup>34</sup> I have found one particular book of particular practical use in this regard: Eugene Gendlin's *Focusing* (Bantam Books, 1982). True self-awareness is much more than a rational knowledge of details and facts. The self-knowledge that is so central to human maturity is an experiential knowledge that is far deeper and far more wise than any knowledge that is the result of merely rational endeavour.

<sup>35</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method (Second Revised Edition)*, translated and revised by Joel Weisheimer and Donald G Marshall, Crossroad, 1989, 383.

---

**BIO:** Rev Dr Michael Whelan is a Marist priest and currently the Director of Aquinas Academy adult education centre in Sydney. He is co-founder of the Spirituality in the Pub movement which operates in more than 30 venues throughout Australia at this time. Michael writes a regular piece on the Aquinas Academy web site – [www.aquinas-academy.com](http://www.aquinas-academy.com) and go to "Reflections."