

Orienting: John Shotter's Relational Being

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John Shotter distinguishes “difficulties of intellect” – by which he is referring to problems that can be solved through what we call “rationale thought based on theory” – and “difficulties of orientation” which refer to the way in which we relate to events around us. John has been concerned with the latter his entire life. We know that he does not think of himself as a theorist or a conceptual person. He thinks of himself as a *doing* person. And his doing requires connection with, and attention to, his surroundings.

Elsewhere (McNamee, 2016) I have used several of John's phrases – what I call “Shotterisms” – to guide me through a discussion of John's relational ethic. In this short piece, I want to expand on that argument; I want to describe how John, as friend and colleague, has made a difference in my life.

From Systems to Relations

When John talks about difficulties of orientation, he is showing us that our daily lives are so much more than complex systems of patterned interaction. Yes, they are that. But more important is *how* our patterns of interaction are always guided (both constrained and potentiated) by our relations with others, with our environment, with our histories, our cultures, and our traditions. This is orientation. To be oriented is to be in relation.

There is a sense – a feeling – I have when I'm with John and that sense is that listening to his words is less important than capturing the spirit of John's performance. And I know that others have the same experience. I often think that if I try too hard to parse John's words, I lose the point of what he is sharing. To be in conversation with John (whether through his writing or in actual conversation) is like being swept up in the middle of a poem or a dance. Certainly, his words are important. But it is in the poetry of them that the dance begins. Phrases such as, “witness thinking,” “arresting moments,” and “relationally responsive” are good examples. What these words suggest is how simple it could be to live together in this complex world if we could only attend to the flow and not the atomized pieces.

A little over a year ago, John and I were both at an international conference together. Upon my arrival, I could see that John was tired. We talked about his fatigue and some of the annoying daily problems he faced. I worried about him. However, as the conversations initiated throughout the conference began to unfold, John's energy flowed. He was like a sunflower turning toward the sun; the sun being his connection with others and our important conversations about humanizing practices.

This is only one small illustration of how John's way of talking and way of being are coherent and focused on his orientation to his surroundings.

John as Friend

I have known John for over 35 years and have lived through much with him: departmental politics, academic joys and sorrows, family gatherings, sailing, skiing, swimming, dining, walking, and just sitting and talking. I feel privileged to have such an expansive repertoire with John and there are simply too many stories to be told. But as a friend, John is always oriented. We have enjoyed long walks on Hampstead Heath in London, up Blue Job Mountain in New Hampshire, and through the cornfield adjacent to my home. One Thanksgiving, after an abundant meal, our gathering of 10 or more people set out – through the snow – for a walk. We walked through our cornfield and down to the river, dividing ourselves up spontaneously in conversational duos and trios. We took another path home and, when we were settled back in to our warm living room, in front of the fire, we noticed John was missing and so was Carla Guanaes Lorenzi, a PhD student at the time who was spending a semester with us in New Hampshire. We worried but felt secure that John was “oriented” to our environment, having spent much time at our home.

After quite some time, the phone rang. It was John. He was at a home of an unknown neighbor, lost! Characteristically, he and Carla had become so engrossed in their conversation – so co-oriented to one another – that they completely lost sight of our troupe. But, relying on John’s sensitivity to his environment, they made it safely home. This remains a canonical story, not only inviting a certain understanding of John’s way of being, but also of the formation of Carla’s strong connection with John (see this issue) and his orientation.

John as Colleague

I’ve described elsewhere (McNamee, 2016), John brought a vibrant and engaging atmosphere to our academic department during the thirteen years he was in New Hampshire. One of the most enlivening things we did together was to host informal gatherings of colleagues for a day of conversation, along with my husband and colleague, John Lannamann. Living in New England (the Northeast of the US), where people are within a one to two hour drive of each other, facilitates spontaneous gatherings. We would invite practitioners and scholars from New York to Maine, asking them to join us for a day of conversation. At the start of our day together, we would each identify a topic we’d like to discuss. With all topics announced, together we would collectively build an “agenda” to move us through the day. The conversation was rich and new partnerships were formed. We would always end the day with a festive meal at our home.

This is just one small illustration of many, many ways of being both academic and practitioner that broke from our typical rigid and judgmental traditions and, instead, opened space for being together and making something significant out of our conversations.

Gratitude

John has always been a very generous colleague (as he is a very generous friend). He pays attention to your work, to your questions, to your concerns. He offers himself as a conversational partner and he always, always returns with evermore resources. I offer a virtual toast to a loving

friend, colleague and family member who has shared so much with us all! In so doing, John has made the world a better place to live!

References

McNamee, S. (2016). The ethics of relational process: John Shotter's radical presence. In T. Corcoran, & J. Cromby (Eds.), *Joint action: Essays in honour of John Shotter* (pp. 89-101). New York: Routledge.

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