

Reflections on a Conversation: Then and Now

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I wrote these reflections after watching a video from a collaborative therapy workshop I attended in São Paulo, Brazil in August 2018, in which I volunteered for a consultation. A few weeks later, the workshop facilitator asked me to share my thoughts about the conversations we had at the workshop consultation. What follows is my understanding of the transformations I experienced through this dialogue, both on that day and since.

We began our conversation by carefully approaching the very personal subject I wanted to talk about. I felt like the facilitator was being very respectful of me. She began with a question that didn't make me feel awkward: "Where would you like to start?" As I began talking, she never took her eyes off me and never interrupted me. I knew she was with me and respected me, because she was always responding non-verbally with her body. Only when I finished my first thoughts about my situation did she ask me a question, and her curiosity focused on a moment of what I had just shared. Her question invited me to tell more about the situation I was talking about and to share more information to help her better understand. She didn't ask for details or specific information, but rather, she seemed to earnestly want to learn more. It was enlightening for me, as the client and as a therapist, to receive what I understand now was a radical presence in the moment. By not interrupting me, and just listening and responding with her body language, she gave me time to develop my knowledge and my narrative. After the consultation conversation and reflections, the facilitator privately said to me that when I volunteered for the consultation, she sensed it was something important. And, when I said it was something personal, she said, "I knew I needed to be careful and walk with you."

When I finished, the workshop facilitator asked me questions to verify and clarify her understanding of what she heard. This made me feel like I was being listened to and that there were no distractions between us. This was followed by another set of questions, which caused me to consider how I could return to thinking about my experiences and be able to better explain what I felt. Just by probing my own knowledge of my problem, her questions brought me to old stories about my experiences—stories that I hadn't related to my current problem until then. Her next questions invited me to provide more information on the context and about my knowledge and exploration of my problem. She responded to what I was saying to verify and make sure she understood, and her responses helped me learn more about what I was saying and my situation as I was telling her about it.

Then, she asked me a question that touched my feelings: "So help me, if we were to continue this conversation in the direction that is more helpful to you, what direction should we go?" This framing put me firmly in the position of a protagonist. I had to think hard and decide. I understood, then, that I had the power. And as I dove deep into my inner dialogue, she offered me a radical presence: silence. Watching the video, I see that she never took her eyes off me, never looked the other way while waiting for my thoughts. That day, I learned to trust not only my own curiosity as a therapist, but also the expertise of each person I counsel. Each individual knows the direction that is most useful to her or his process. Because of this, I know that I can trust that I'll be able to walk in whatever direction the people I work with select as most important. In other words, I will value each person's expertise on what they are talking about. These moments caused me to reflect—and my reflections brought me to marvelous places. I felt different. It's hard to explain without going into detail about the content of the conversation,

but maybe it would suffice to say that this moment made me feel like I was the expert on my problem, and beyond that, on my growing process.

And then, there was the facilitator's humility, when she said she was sorry for a misunderstanding. I told her that there was nothing to be sorry about and thanked her. That moment was precious. Her actions really touched me and taught me about humility and courage.

After this, something very complex happened. The facilitator asked me a question. I responded, but she kept silent, and her silence invited me to think a little more and engage in my inner dialogue. That was another moment of transformation. I used that silence as opportunity to evaluate and make the best of our time together. I think that having someone show genuine interest in me inspired me to explore, to venture into my knowledge and experience, and to offer intimacy and my process in return so that we could create a good story between us. Not that I wanted to please the facilitator; rather, I wanted us both to feel intensity and partnership in dialogue. Approaching the end of the conversation, our mutual construction of a reflecting team also helped me to feel legitimized as the client. She asked me if I had preferences for how the reflecting team process might be organized and what I expected from the reflectors. This was another moment that highlighted the facilitator's authentic interest in my understanding and ideas.

What I learned in those brief moments reverberates in my heart to this day. When we are collaboratively engaged with people, our participation isn't about teaching. Rather, it is about offering room for learning. The facilitator offered herself as a companion to walk alongside me in my exploration of a personally difficult place. As she asked questions to learn, and as I voiced my feelings and experiences, I too learned, becoming more knowledgeable about myself and my responses in the process. It was an intimate conversation, albeit with over 150 spectators, and it was transformational.

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