

A backgrounder for the theme of the 2023 CFTC 50th Anniversary Conference “Bringing Forth Generativities Within Relational Disquiet”

by Karl Tomm

The title of this Conference emerged from a series of conversations among several CFTC therapists in early 2022. We had been contemplating the upcoming 50th anniversary celebration of founding the Family Therapy Program at the University of Calgary and were searching for a compelling focus for the Conference. We were brainstorming about various possibilities and eventually found ourselves circling around the notion of ‘disquiet.’ Even though the concept remains poorly defined, it implies that something feels ‘wrong.’ This perception seemed like a promising issue to examine. Disquiet could range from a vague ‘Spidey sense’ (that something might be amiss) to extreme overt conflict. A process of attending to disquiet as one component of our learning, had emerged at our Centre a few years ago. It was included in a series of key questions we developed to structure our post-session discussion after a ‘screening interview’ with a reflecting team. Among the questions we found helpful in organizing the discussion were: “What appeared to be the main pathologizing and healing interpersonal interaction patterns in this family system?” “What sparkling therapeutic moments stood out most strongly during the interview?” and “What moments of disquiet emerged for you as you observed the session?” The latter question encouraged us to temporarily ground ourselves emotionally in uncomfortable personal resonances about what had transpired in the therapy room. Deliberately reflecting upon these resonances typically brought them into conscious awareness where they could be articulated. Once articulated, these ‘moments of disquiet’ served to help identify points in the interview where something potentially problematic may have taken place but had not been acknowledged or responded to during the session. The post-session discussion that ensued around these ‘moments of disquiet’ became surprisingly generative for our learning regarding future possibilities in our work with that family, and with other families. Our Conference planning group anticipated further learnings from a more systematic exploration of the ramifications of such disquiet, and Bingo! an engaging focus for our Conference was born.

There are actually three interconnected concepts included in the title of the Conference: 'relational disquiet', 'generativities', and 'bringing forth'. I would like to share my current thoughts about each and in so doing contribute to an exploratory conversation that has already begun, and hopefully will continue into the Conference, and beyond.

Distinguishing a concept for some purpose by carving it out from a background of many possible ideas is to draw a particular distinction. By drawing the specific distinction of 'relational disquiet' we are hoping to open space for the release of informational energy. This is a form of energy that can harness other sources of energy to enable a wide range of changes. You might ask: What is informational energy? Energy in general may be described as "the capacity to do work." Both physical energy and informational energy can do work. However, physical energy and informational energy differ significantly. There are many forms of physical energy, yet there tends to be a quantitative correlation between the amount of physical energy available and the amount of work it can do. For example, mechanical energy moves objects according to the magnitude of its force, and thermal energy heats things proportionally to the amount of energy spent. Informational energy, on the other hand, can move people and heat relationships disproportionately. As Gregory Bateson pointed out, information may be regarded as "a difference that makes a difference".¹ And sometimes the resulting difference can be huge. For instance, if a man pokes a dog lying in the doorway, the dog may move somewhat because of the physical energy in the poke, but the dog will also move based on the information drawn from the poke, by turning to bite the man or running away. The information in the difference, between what the dog expected and the 'meaning' attributed to the man's poke, triggers disproportionately more movement of the dog than the physical force of the poke. It does this by mobilizing the pre-existing metabolic energy of the dog as it springs into action.

We are finding that the information in distinctions surrounding relational disquiet can potentially release such informational energy. Family members already have enormous pre-existing knowledge about relationships and the physical energy required to utilize that

knowledge. These resources for change can often be mobilized by selective distinctions that introduce new information. For example, a series of carefully honed questions about a family's hopes in therapy can help sharpen relational preferences and potentially energize a great deal of relational work for the family.

Disquiet may be experienced as intrapersonal, interpersonal, or both. Intrapersonal or inner disquiet may be described as personal uneasiness, restlessness, anxiety, fear, frustration, or simply being unhappy about something. Interpersonal or outer disquiet is more relational and may be described as unwanted differences about hopes or desires that emerge among us as human beings as we interact with one another. Some degree of relational disquiet is inevitable when human beings share time, space, and resources. This inevitability arises by virtue of our uniquely different biological, psychological, and social histories and our differing 'passions' coming up against each other as our interaction unfolds. However, just how such differences are managed in a relationship can make a huge difference in terms of outcome. Differences can obviously become extremely divisive and problematic when they escalate, but at other times they can be channelled into remarkable creativity. While intrapersonal disquiet and relational disquiet are deeply inter-connected, as systemic therapists we tend to focus our attention on interpersonal disquiet. Indeed, if we track the origins of intrapersonal (inner) disquiet, we usually find its roots in some form of interpersonal (outer) disquiet.

Most of us have a natural aversion for the kind of disquiet that arises when interpersonal differences become polarized and escalate into intense conflict or potential violence. We often learn to cue-in to emerging disquiet early in the interaction, so we can take steps to avoid the conflict. This has come to be known as 'conflict avoidance' and can lead to various problems of its own. Rather than trying to evade the discomfort of disquiet, we hope at this Conference to befriend it so we can find ways to release its informational energy which could activate substantive movements towards relational preferences. We intend to do this by sharing a host of examples of situations where relational disquiet seemed to have been a major driver of creativity or important new developments in those situations. We hope then to be able to

distill a few common principles that could perhaps contribute to therapy guidelines that might help us to more readily foster transformations of disquiet into generativity. The examples could come from a wide variety of human interactions: one-to-one relationships, individual-to-group relationships, group-to-group relationships, community relationships, inter-institutional relationships, etc. The Conference will explore these different kinds and sources of relational disquiet and how systemic family therapy practitioners might facilitate their potential generativity; a generativity that could promote healing and wellness, and support the kinds of collaboration that adds liveliness to life.

This leads me to address what we have in mind with the second concept in the title of the Conference, namely 'generativities.' In the Cambridge Dictionary, generativity is defined as "the quality of being able to produce or create something new." One of the common dynamics in relational disquiet is for the parties involved to drift towards becoming more entrenched in opposing positions. Something entirely new is often called for to escape such polarization and apparent stuckness, and to free up the relationship to move to a better place. Generativity in this context could entail the activity of imagining or co-constructing better relational possibilities and co-creating various means to get there. In our Conference title we chose the plural form of this notion, namely 'generativities,' to suggest that there may be many means and approaches to achieve constructive movements. We do not assume any single 'correct' goal, place, or path to move forward. In keeping with our social constructionist orientation, we embrace multiple possible realities and leave it to clients to take up whatever works for them.

Allow me to give an example of generativity in my own personal journey from before I even started training to become a therapist. During a 1968 medicine-oriented educational trip to China with a group of 15 physicians, a significant episode of 'relational disquiet' emerged within the group. I was caught in the middle of it because my friend, a GP who had organized the trip, became ill and asked me to take on the role of mediating the conflict. One subgroup desperately wanted to see 'the old China' of historical sites with imperial palaces etc. The other subgroup just as desperately wanted to see 'the new China' of communist reforms on the farms

and in the factories etc. As the 'leader' of the overall group, I was caught between these subgroups, who argued passionately about what they wanted to see during the tour and often ended up shouting at each other. I was at a complete loss about what to do. I decided to consult the Chinese guides who were assigned to our tour group, assuming that they may have encountered such problems before. They offered some suggestions that were extremely helpful: "Go speak with one subgroup separately. Begin with a bit of self-criticism (a communist tradition at the time) about your lack of leadership experience and ask for ideas about what might be 'best for the whole group.' Then go to the other subgroup and do the same thing. Keep going back and forth until some good ideas come up." It worked! By the end of the trip the whole group of 15 physicians came together singing songs of appreciation to honor our Chinese guides! Although it was not framed as such at the time, it was one of the best supervision experiences I ever received. 54 years later, I still use the process of seeing the participants in a 'high discrepancy' conflict situation separately when there are major differences between them. When seeing them separately I invite each to reflect on what might be better for the overall situation including others who might be involved (such as children held in common) and encourage them to identify their own possible initiatives that might contribute to 'a collective betterness.' In so doing, I see myself applying some remote generativity (from my past learning) to open space for some possible current generativity to arise among my clients (which of course may or may not emerge).

I would like to mention 2 examples of intense relational disquiet during my professional career that energized generative distinctions that eventually became very helpful generalizations. One had to do with a shocking suicide that led to the realization that a reversal in a pattern of over-adequate/inadequate reciprocity in a couple relationship could have a more pervasive impact on one partner's mental status than a comprehensive series of individual psychiatric treatments. The other had to do with a major ideological difference between 2 organizations, my Department of Psychiatry which was immersed in DSM diagnosing and our Family Therapy Program that was immersed in systems understandings. A need to justify the latter as a legitimate basis for clinical work, spurred the formulation of the IPscope as a systemic

instrument – a tool that has proven to be extremely useful for students. Both disquiets are described in the Introduction to our book on “Patterns in Interpersonal Interactions”.³

Allow me to offer one more clinical example of bringing forth generativity within disquiet. Some years ago, I met with a 5-year-old boy and his parents. The boy was extremely active and energetic, sometimes climbing onto the roofs of houses and running into the street where there was heavy traffic. The parents were terrified that he would be seriously injured. The boy seemed amused, smiled, and even laughed as he threatened to jump off the roof or to run into oncoming traffic as his parents showed their horror. He claimed he was “having fun.” In collaboration with this boy and his parents we co-constructed a sharper awareness of the difference between “teasing” and “torture,” and clarified the difference between ‘intentions and effects’ which I have been using in my clinical work ever since.

This brings me to the third component of the title, namely ‘bringing forth,’ the bridge between disquiet and generativity. Many years ago, I found myself actively searching for a good theory to explain what might be happening in therapy when therapists and clients were co-constructing therapeutic realities. I eventually came across Humberto Maturana’s theory of knowledge.² I found his explanation of how human beings as living organisms ‘come to know what we know’ more coherent and satisfying than anything I had come across before. Heinz von Foerster, a colleague and friend of Humberto, dubbed Maturana’s orientation as “Bringforthism”.⁴ Basically, the theory claims that as complex cognizing living systems we ‘bring forth’ the realities in which we live by drawing distinctions within our unique ecological niche. The specific distinctions we draw depend on a gigantic history of recursive consensual coordination of conduct with other human beings in the social domain. Maturana’s emphasis on recursive coordination implies that as therapists we need to become closely attuned to our clients’ life situation, experiences, and competencies to become sufficiently coordinated with them to generate informational distinctions and novel possibilities that might ‘work’ for them. It also implies that we carry full ethical responsibility for choosing among alternative possible distinctions that could be brought forth in any therapeutic situation. For instance, if we choose

to distinguish the crying of a child as 'weeping' rather than 'whining,' we are taking initiative to set in motion a significantly different direction of coordinated interaction between the child and its caregivers. The informational energy released by the distinction of 'weeping' is more liable to mobilize compassion from the caregivers, while 'whining' is more liable to mobilize discipline. Given that whatever we bring forth in our activity of 'languageing' could have major relational consequences, it is worthwhile to become more and more mindful of the distinctions we draw and eventually bring forth in our doings during the conduct of therapy.

Most, if not all, adult human beings have engaged in activities to bring forth generativity within some of the relational disquiet they have encountered in their lives, whether they realize they have done so or not. And I suspect every therapist has deliberately focussed on trying to bring forth generativity in his or her clinical work. However, most of us have probably not framed our activities along the lines of the concepts in our title. Doing so at this Conference will be an opportunity to share a variety of experiences to enrich our learnings through this intriguing lens and perhaps sharpen our intentionality and initiatives to become better in our efforts to contribute to the wellbeing of our fellow human beings. We certainly hope you will consider joining the Conference and perhaps even present a brief paper to contribute to our collective generativity during this meeting. We hope to see you there!

References

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