

# Strategic Questioning Manual

Fran Peavey

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIC QUESTIONS ARE TOOLS OF REBELLION

In these days of constant change, and the need for even more change if we are to live peacefully in a healthy environment, we ask ourselves: "How can our organization weather the tides of constant reorganization and restructuring and still maintain a clear vision of its mission?" "How can I make decisions about my future that will draw from the most interesting alternatives?" "How can we participate in the creation of social change?" "How can a new vision arise in our organizations and societies?"

I have been working on the concept of strategic questioning for some time<sup>1</sup> as a way of facilitating "dynamic" listening. I also call this an experiment in the developing field of communication theory, "communication of the second kind," since it is a special kind of communication. It creates new information and uncovers deep desires of the heart rather than communicating information already known.

Communication of the first kind involves transmission of information in a static and passive voice. It is focused on how reality is now. What is, is. Communication of the second kind, according to Mark Burch<sup>2</sup> who coined the term, refers to the "immersion of the person in a vibrating, tingling, undulating ocean of 'transactions'." Communication of the second kind is focused on what could be, and upon the creation of active participation in present and future transactions. In a social, as well as a personal sense, we are involved in innate, spontaneous imagery, which organically draws us forward to appropriate realities of the future.

Key elements of communication of the second kind which relate to strategic questioning are:

1. New information is synthesized from that which is already known.
2. Ownership of the new information is with the person who is answering the question.
3. Energy for change is generated in the communication process.
4. The answer to a powerful question is not always immediately known but will emerge over time.
5. Emotion sometimes accompanies the answering of a powerful question and this is part of releasing the blocks to new ideas.

---

<sup>1</sup> I didn't invent the words "strategic questioning", although I thought I did. I had been using the term for four years when, a few years ago while doing some research, I came upon a small book about teaching called Strategic Questioning. It was written by Ronald T. Hyman, a close friend of a college professor of mine. So I must have heard the words 25 years ago and the word seeds got planted way back there in my mind; then when I needed them they came blossoming up. Thank you, Ronald T. Hyman.

<sup>2</sup> My friend Mark Burch has helped me see that there are two kinds of communication. Communication of the first kind is about what is. It usually involves the transmission of information in a static or passive way. There is an assumption of inertia in the communication. "Things will stay the same." Communication of the second kind is focused on what reality could be. It creates information rather than communicating information that is already known. Mark Burch describes this as the "immersion of the person in a vibrating, tingling, undulating ocean of 'transactions'...." (Depth Psychology and Sustainable Development, by Mark Burch, a private paper, August 1991.) I see strategic questioning as an important skill in the development of this communication of the second kind.

6. Communication between members of a society in a dynamic and visionary sense releases forces into the human organism as a whole that are complex, consensual and co-creative.

## A STRATEGIC QUESTION IS A SPECIAL TYPE OF QUESTION

Questioning is a basic tool for rebellion. It breaks open the stagnant hardened shells of the present, revealing ambiguity and opening up fresh options to be explored.

Questioning reveals the profound uncertainty that is imbedded in all reality beyond the facades of confidence and sureness. It takes this uncertainty towards growth and new possibilities.

Questioning can change your entire life. It can uncover hidden power and stifled dreams inside of you... things you may have denied for many years.

Questioning can change institutions and entire cultures. It can empower people to create strategies for change.

Asking a question that leads to a strategy for action is a powerful contribution to resolving any problem.

Asking questions that open up more options can lead to many unexpected solutions.

Asking questions that help adversaries shift from stuck positions on an issue can lead to acts of healing and reconciliation.

Asking questions that are unaskable in our culture at the moment can lead to the transformation of our culture and its institutions.

Asking questions and listening for the strategies and ideas embedded in people's own answers can be the greatest service a social change worker can give to a particular issue.

Strategic questioning is the skill of asking the questions that will make a difference. It is a powerful and exciting tool for social and personal change. It is a significant service to any issue because it helps local strategies for change emerge.

Strategic questioning involves a special type of question and a special type of listening. Anyone can use strategic questions in their work, or in their personal lives to liberate friends, coworkers, political allies and adversaries, to create a path for change.

Strategic questioning is a process that may change the listener as well as the person being questioned. When we open ourselves to another point of view, our own ideas will have to shift to take into account new information, new possibilities, and new strategies for resolving problems.

What would our world be like if every time we were listening to a gripe session, someone would ask, "I wonder what we can do to change that situation?" and then listened carefully for the answers to emerge and helped that group to begin to work for change? What would it be like for you to do that in your work, family or social context? Your attention and context might shift from a passive to an active one. You could become a creator, rather than a receiver, of solutions.

This shift in perspective is one of the key things that people need in our world just now. And the skill of asking strategic questions is a powerful contribution to making such a shift. Were you ever taught how to ask questions? Were you ever encouraged to ask questions where the answers are not already known? Have you ever been taught about asking questions that will really make a difference? Most of us who were brought up in traditional families or in a traditional education system were not. Traditional schooling was based on asking questions to which the answers were already known: How many wives did Henry the Eighth have? What color is that car? What is four times five? We learned that questions have finite and "correct" answers, and there is usually one answer for each question. The wrong answer is punished with a bad grade. The landscape of learning was divided into "right" and "wrong" answers to questions. Questions divided into those which made the "authority" comfortable (the ones where he knew the answer) and those not-OK questions (those which exposed the authority's ignorance or culpability).

This may be a convenient way of running schools and testing people's capacity for memory in examinations but it has not been a very empowering learning process for students, or a good preparation for the

questions that will be coming up in life. In some families, children are taught that to ask a question where there is no known answer is to be avoided, because it makes people uncomfortable. Adults or parents who are supposed to be in charge of things seem to hate saying, "I don't know." It may even be true that asking embarrassing questions, or in any way threatening the power of adults, is a punishable offense. The child learns to stop questioning before the unknowns are revealed.

All this is unfortunate to our times, because in the early 2000s - in our personal, professional and public lives - we are surrounded with questions that have no simple answers. We find that we must look at complex situations and create fresh responses. And if you haven't been taught how to work with such situations and ask questions, then this can be intimidating and provoke fear. Learning how to ask strategic questions is a path of transforming passive and fearful inquiry into the world into a dynamic exploration of the information around us and the solutions we need. We can create answers to almost any problem.

Take the traditional school. What would it have been like if when the teacher asked "what is four times five?" and we had said "29" the teacher had not said "wrong!" and left it at that, but she asked us to explain our thought process and how we got 29. We would have learned about ourselves, our thinking process and we might have discovered mathematics in an active way. The teacher might have learned something about increasing the effectiveness of her teaching methods. In families that don't encourage questioning, an adult would rarely follow up an "I don't know" with a "How can we find out?" They are often so absorbed by their embarrassment that they do not show the child how to find out. But it is important for children to grow up knowing that doubt, uncertainty and unknowing exist in the adult world - a world that they will inherit and where they will need to play their part in creating solutions.

There are seven key features to shaping a strategic question:

### **1. A strategic question creates motion.**

Most of the traditional questions that we've been taught to ask are static. Strategic questions ask, "How can we move?" They create movement. They are dynamic rather than allowing a situation to stay stuck. Often the way a conversation is structured creates resistance to movement. The martial art Tai Chi teaches a lot of wisdom about meeting resistance. It says that when you meet an obstacle, you only make it more firm by pushing directly on it. If you meet an object coming at you with resistance, it is not very useful at all. Tai Chi says that if you meet and move with the energy of the obstacle coming at you, taking the energy from the other, then motion in a new direction emerges. Both parties end up in a different place than when they started, and the relationship between them is changed.

It is the same with asking a strategic question. As an example, suppose Sally is working on where she will live, and perhaps she has heard of some good real estate bargains in Sydney, and she's a bit stuck on what she should do next. I could say to her, "Why don't you just move to Sydney?" This question might be provocative, but not very helpful. It is really a suggestion that is pretending to be a question. For my own reasons I think she should move to Sydney. Perhaps I am projecting into the question my own wish to move to Sydney. Whatever my reasons, I'm leading her because I am asking a manipulative question, and it is likely that the more I pressure Sally, the less likely she is to consider the Sydney option.

A more powerful strategic question would be to ask Sally, "What type of place would you like to move to?" or "What places come to mind when you think of living happily?" or "What is the meaning of this move in your life?" Sally is then encouraged to talk about the qualities she wants from her new home, to set new goals. You can then work with her to achieve these goals.

Asking questions that are dynamic can help people explore how they can move on an issue. On my first working trip to India with the Friends of the Ganges project, I asked the local people, "What would you like to do to help clean up the river?" Now, you might ask, "How did I know they wanted to clean up the river?" Well, I wanted to ask a question that assumed motion on this issue. I assumed that people always want to act more appropriately. I further assumed that they wanted to move out of their state of powerlessness regarding what to do about the pollution in the Ganges. Many interesting ideas emerged when I used that question - some of which we have implemented.

When we are stuck on a problem, what keeps us from acting for change is either a lack of information, the fact that we have been wounded in our sense of personal power on an issue, or that there is no system in place that enables us to move the issue forward. In our stuckness, we don't see how to make the motion. When I ask a question like, "What would you like to do to help clean up the river?" I open up a door for the local people to move beyond their grief, guilt and powerlessness to active dreaming and creativity. This is one of the gifts visitors can offer when they travel. Coming from outside may sometimes give the visitor a fresh perspective

from which curiosity and questions can be drawn. But strategic questions may be used by anyone who wishes to bring fresh thinking into a situation.

## **2. A strategic question creates options.**

If I asked Sally, "Why don't you move to Jerome?" I have asked a question that is dynamic only in one direction (Jerome) and it very much limits the options she is challenged to think about.

A more powerful strategic question opens the options up. "Where would you like to live?" or "What are the three or four places that you feel connected to?" These are much more helpful questions to ask her at this time. Sally might have been so busy thinking about the real estate bargains in Jerome, that she has lost a sense of all the other possibilities and her real goals.

A strategic questioner would help Sally look at the many options equally. Supposing Sally says she could move to Buhl or Ketchum. It's not up to me to say to myself, "I think Jerome is the best, and I should encourage her down that path". If you're being ethical about it, then you could best help Sally sort out her own direction by questioning all the options even handedly, with the same enthusiasm and interest in discussing both Sydney and Byron Bay. Not only that, but you could help by asking if there are any more options that occur to her during the questioning time (Twin Falls, Idaho... or New Plymouth, New Zealand). Out of these questions, a new option may emerge.

It is particularly important for a strategic questioner not to focus on only two options. We are so accustomed to binary thinking, either Jerome or Buhl, that Brisbane cannot emerge as a viable alternative. Usually when someone is only considering two options, they simply have not done the creative thinking to look at all the possibilities. People are usually comfortable when they have two options and think they can make a choice at that level. This is part of the delusion of control. And since two alternatives is already more complex than one, people stop thinking. The world is far more varied and exciting than any two options would indicate, but having two options creates the idea of a choice, however limited, is being made.

Community consultation is enjoying popularity even though most organizations do not want real community input into their functioning. For instance, under the guise of consultation a district roads group in New South Wales asked community members to choose between two alternative routes for a new road. In this case there were too few choices for the community to give real input. This was a bogus consultation process; probably there were some members of the community who wanted no new roads or wanted the money to go to public transportation.

## **3. A strategic question avoids "Why".**

When I ask Sally, "Why don't you move to Sydney?" it was a question that focused on why she doesn't do it, rather than creating a more active and forward motion on the issue. Most "Why" questions are like that. They force you to defend an existing decision in terms of the past or rationalize the present. "Why" questions also may have the effect of creating resistance to change. The openness of a particular question is obvious at the gross extremes, but becomes far more subtle and subjective as you deepen your understanding of the skills of strategic questioning. For example, can you feel the difference between asking, "Why don't you work on poverty?" and, "What keeps you from working on poverty?"

Sometimes a "Why" question is very powerful as you focus on values, and meaning. But in general it is a short lever question.

## **4. A strategic question avoids "Yes or No" answers.**

Again, these type of questions ("Have you considered...") don't really encourage people to dig deeper into their issues. A question that is answered with a "Yes" or "No" reply almost always leaves the person being asked in an uncreative and passive state. A strategic questioner rephrases their queries to avoid the dead end of a "Yes" or "No" reply. It can make a huge difference to the communication taking place.

I heard of a student who was very intrigued by the ideas behind strategic questioning. He realized that he hardly ever spoke a question to his wife without getting simply a "Yes" or "No" in reply. A week after the class on strategic questioning, he reported that the technique had completely changed his home life! He had gone home and told his wife about these special types of questions, and they agreed to avoid asking a question that has a "Yes" or "No" answer for a week. He reported they had never talked so much in their lives!

## **5. A strategic question is empowering.**

A strategic question creates the confidence that motion can actually happen, and this is certainly empowering. When I asked people in India, "What would you like to do to clean your river?" I assumed that they have a part in that picture of healing. The question expresses a confidence that the person being questioned has a contribution to make in designing the clean-up process.

One of my favorite questions is "What would it take for you to change on this issue?" This question lets the other person create the path for change. Imagine an environmental protester going to a lumber mill owner and asking, "What would it take for you to stop cutting down the old-growth trees?" This question is an invitation to the mill owner to co-create options for the future of his business with the community. The owner might tell the questioner the obstacles he faces in making changes to his business, and maybe they can work together to satisfy some of their mutual needs so that the old-growth trees can be preserved. The planning that comes out of asking such a strategic question may not exactly resemble what either party wanted in the beginning, but a new reality is born out of the dialogue, and could well work to achieve both the protester's and the mill owner's goals.

Empowerment is the opposite of manipulation. When you use strategic questioning, rather than putting ideas into a person's head, you are actually allowing that person to take what's already in their head and develop it further.

I had a student who worked in the command structure of a large police force. Like many government departments, his department had been restructured and this led to stress and disgruntlement between colleagues. They were not working together as a team. For weeks in their staff meetings, members of the department had been asking themselves, "What is wrong with the way we are working?" My student took the strategic questioning method back to his unit and his department started to approach their difficulties with different, more empowering, questions. They asked, "What will it take for us to function as a team?" "How do we want to work together?" "What does each of us want to do?" "What support do we each need?" They reported that after the strategic questioning session, the low morale started to improve, meetings became creative and a sense of teamwork returned to the unit.

## **6. A strategic question asks the unaskable questions.**

For every individual, group, or society, there are questions, which are taboo. And because those questions are taboo there is tremendous power in them. A strategic question is often one of these "unaskable" questions. And it usually is unaskable because it challenges the values and assumptions that the whole issue rests upon.

I like the fairy story about the emperor who went on a parade without any clothes because he had been tricked by some unscrupulous weavers into thinking he was wearing a magnificent costume. It was a child that asked the unaskable question, "Why doesn't the Emperor have any clothes on?" If that child had been a political activist, she might have asked other unaskable questions, like, "Why do we need an Emperor?" or "How can we get a wiser government?"

After the child asked that question, what are the strategic questions that could have followed which could have made major changes in that society?

- "What was it about us that did not allow us to tell the truth about what we saw--and didn't see?" "What was it that allowed the child to ask the question?"
- "What kept us from telling the emperor that he had no clothes on before he went out like that?"
- "What kind of an information system does he have?"
- "Why does it take a child to see the emperor's nakedness?"
- "How come he's the only one to wear fancy clothes like this? Can we all wear nothing?"
- "Why did he spend all the treasury fund on....? The press will go wild."
- "Do we need an emperor who can't tell if he's got clothes on or not?"
- "How could we organize ourselves to take care of our community business without a king that bankrupts the treasury with his clothing addiction?"
- "What are the values of this society?"

Most of these questions have a dynamic quality to them. In them are the seeds of revolution, of inner change inside the individual, inside the various groups and inside the society. In the interconnectedness of a system, all relationships are questioned. Each group in the society is going to have to ask, "What part did we play in this delusion, in this fraud? We each had a role. What was our role; how can we stop colluding with the

emperor, because we can't afford many more fraudulent clothes schemes." So those are strategic questions that came from the unaskable question.

In the early 1980's, one of the unaskable questions for me was "What shall we do if a nuclear bomb is dropped?" You couldn't answer that without facing our overwhelming capacity for destruction, and the senselessness of it. That question allowed many of us to move beyond terror and denial, and work politically to keep it from happening.

Some other unaskable questions might be: for the seriously ill person, "Do you want to die?" For those involved in sexual politics: "Is gender a myth?" For the workaholic: "What do you do for joy?" For the tree activist: "How should we have building materials?" Or for the politician: "What do you like about the other party's platform?" or "How could both parties work closer together?"

Questioning values is a strategic task of our times. This is because it is the values behind highly politicized issues that have usually got us into the trouble in the first place. We need to look at a value, a habit, an institutional pattern and ask, "Is this value working or not?" "Are these values working for the common good?" "Are these values pro-survival (pro-life) or anti-life?"

If you can ask the unaskable in a non-partisan way, not to embarrass someone but to probe for more suitable answers for the future, then it can be a tremendous service to anyone with a "stuck" issue.

### **7. A strategic question is a simple sentence**

The question enters a mind like a diver slips into water: it should not need a lot of analysis, so answers can be easily formed. The sentence should not be complex. For instance: "What are the tasks that would need to be done in moving and getting a new job." Is really focusing on two things: 1) moving and 2) getting a job. Better to ask the questions separately: "What would need to be done to move?" Wait for an answer, then "What would need to be done to get a new job?"

#### CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

"What would you be willing to do to clean the river Ganga?" I would ask assuming that naturally, a person would want to help clean it. This question is always controversial because people feel that it is possibly inaccurate to assume that people want to do something to clean the river.

If people indicated that they did not care about the river I would not ask the question. In strategic questioning it is important to have an assumption of health and the desire to find health. The opening questions, in which you have checked your assumptions carefully, are the key to strategic questioning in a social situation just like in an interpersonal situation.

We must always check our cynicism and arrogance in asking a question. The questioner must always come to each question session confident that this person or group possesses the answers needed and is more powerful to affect the situation than we (or probably they) know.

When I hear what sounds like uncaring or apathy in questioning periods, I interpret this as fear of caring too much, and dig deeper. I have never been disappointed with this approach in the long run though some people stick with their apathetic position in the short run. The question can then be changed to, "If you cared about the river what would you think what actions are likely to have positive results?"

It is my observation that most people wish there were leadership, or an organization, that would assist them in changing those aspects of their society, which cry out for change. With no structural way to participate in changing the system, they are left with only their ideas and passive desire. Often in order to maintain stability, people bury their ideas and a desire to work for change in a self-protective mechanism. What looks like apathy is actually fear of caring too much, and denial of anger at helplessness. Questions are a good way to penetrate such apathy.

#### RESPECTS THE PERSON

A strategic question respects the person who is being questioned. If you don't respect a person you won't ask them strategic questions because you won't have any confidence that anything useful can come from them. So strategic questioning assumes that there is something that everybody can do. And it assumes equality. More and more I'm thinking about communication of the second kind (of which strategic questioning is one important technique) as a part of the new democracy. It assumes that we have the answers right here at the grass roots. Our basic problem is that our institutions are not organized to move us, to get us involved for things to happen. We do not even know how to talk to each other in order to create new ways.

#### WHEN TO USE STRATEGIC QUESTIONING:

- When your organization is undergoing major change.
- If you are thinking about organizing around resistance or acceptance of proposals, strategic questioning can be useful in thinking about strategy.
- When you as an individual are trying to make a life-changing decision.
- When a city council, administration or board of directors is interested in what the membership or citizenry is thinking about a specific policy, or needs to know what latent ideas are bubbling around.
- When your organization or work unit is being restructured. Strategic Questioning will help the group work through the stages of resistance/acceptance and response to the situation.
- When you are writing a leaflet or creating an ad and you need to know what the logic of the resistance or acceptance is, and what language will be useful.
- When a group or organizer is contemplating a shift in strategy and needs to consider new alternative ideas.
- When you have been working on something for a long time and have run out of ideas.
- When you need to know how your clientele views your agency or what ideas they would like to suggest. Feedback is important for any group.
- When your membership is feeling isolated from the populace, or is cynical that anybody cares about the things they care about.
- When your staff, board or administration is feeling they are somehow very elite and superior to others.
- When you need to understand the life experience, rationale or degree of commitment of the resistance to your campaign.
- When your group is fragmented and conflicted, strategic questioning will help clarify positions and look for new alternatives.
- When a group only sees one or two alternatives and needs to do some creative thinking together.

Change is accompanied by:

1. shock--this can not be happening.
2. denial--this is not happening.
3. grieving for that which is lost.
4. fear--this may be happening. What will happen to me in the process?
5. resistance--I don't want this, I want that.
6. struggle--there is something important about what I want.
7. possibility of integration, adaptation, or new ideas being born.

The process of working through these levels of response with careful questioning and listening may take hours or years depending upon how substantial the change, how much opportunity one has for communication at a deep level and the support one has in the process. Strategic Questioning can be of great assistance in the process of creating a response to a changing situation.

## BUILDING BRIDGES TO OTHER POINTS OF VIEW

In these times of tremendous diversity and conflict we are challenged to find ways of building bridges and co-creating new ways of working together to meet common goals. An important feature of strategic questioning is to put one's own opinions to the side and strive to find new ideas and ways.

When Barbara Walters asked Anwar Sadat what kept him from going to Jerusalem to meet with Menachim Begin, suddenly Sadat was examining the obstacles in the way of this goal in a fresh way. In the way she phrased the question, Walters enabled Sadat to think freshly about the political realities and envision a different reality of his own making. She was identified as a neutral. I believe she was just honestly asking about the obstacles in Sadat's way of change. He found his own way through those obstacles under good questioning.

Strategic questioning is a way of talking with people with whom you have differences without abandoning your own beliefs and yet looking for common ground which may enable both parties to co-create a new path from the present situation. In every heart there is ambiguity; in every ideology there are parts which don't fit. Strategic questioning by someone who is perceived as neutral may help the questionee think beyond old answers. New policies may be envisioned, whistle blowers encouraged. This is one of the most important features of strategic questioning.

A couple of weeks after attending a workshop in Auckland, New Zealand, a woman (I will call her Joan) saw a television show about violence to women. The show did not adequately condemn such violence and it carried a commercial that was also anti-women. The women's community was upset about this show and the commercial. They put out the message that women should call the manager of the station and give him a piece of their minds. Joan decided to see what would happen if she tried strategic questioning. She called the manager but instead of lecturing him about what she thought, she started off with some questions.

- "How does a show get on the air?"
- "What review policies do you have about combining commercials and the content of your shows?"
- "How could the women's community work with the television station to create better programming around this issue?" (Notice here the "How could.." nature of the question. If she had phrased the question "Is there a way we could work together..." she might have received the answer "No, there is no way." Avoid yes/no questions if you want to generate a fresh response.)

Finally the manager said, "Say, you seem to be quite knowledgeable about this matter. Would you like to be on the advisory board that screens each show and commercial and decides what should go on the air?" No one else who had called with an opinion was invited on to this powerful board.

## CHAPTER 2

### USING STRATEGIC QUESTIONING FOR INDIVIDUAL GROWTH

An important task of strategic questioning is to create the environment where people can see the solutions that are within themselves. You listen deep into the heart of the person opposite you and this creates an atmosphere conducive to generative searching for "new" truth.

We all know of many people who are perfectly content to tell you what you should do. They are people who love to dispense "solutions". And we all know of experts who go from one country to another or from one community within a country to another, telling people what to do. I call it the "consultancy disease". Change that happens as a result of the "this is what I think you should do" school of consultancy are often too shallow and too fast to have long lasting effects. It is not empowering for the people who are trapped within the issues at stake. The people involved might look as if they have changed but, because the change strategy has not come from them, they don't own it, they have not invested themselves in the change.

A strategic questioner listens for the latent solutions that are hidden within every problem. And this involves a special type of listening. You are not merely passively listening. You are creating an action path with your attention. An attitude of expectancy helps fresh ideas emerge. This dynamic listening is in itself a special type of communication. It involves immersing yourself within the sea of "transactions" that surround an issue. You are not just listening to this information in a static or passive way. Your attention is focused on the reality of now and also paying attention to the clues of what could be.

It is this dynamic listening that opens doorways within the issues being discussed. Your attention creates space around the speaker - space within which they can explore their own options. For me, dynamic listening is more like looking than listening. Usually when you listen, you hear everything around you in one total "hearing".

But the kind of listening I am talking about is listening in only one direction--your ears are turned only toward the deepest part of the person opposite you. You are listening to their thinking, to their feeling, to their dreams and to their essence. Your ears wander in between their words, their sighs and their questions searching out meaning, resolve and need.

- You look for the obstacles to caring, the blocks to action.
- You look for what is pushing the person, and why they feel compelled to do--no not do-- something about the issue.
- You look for the person's ideas of how they want things to be - how they see that things could or should change.
- You look for how the person thinks about change and how change happens in their lives.
- You look for the path to change that the person sees - however dimly and timidly they see it. Sometimes you explore the path together, asking questions that allow you both to think freshly and creatively.
- You look for the dreams and goals planted deep in the person's heart.
- You look for how to remove the resistance that is found on the path of change.
- You look for what the person feels as they anticipate each possible choice or option in front of them.
- You look for what support the person would need to move on any path of change.

Our minds are often not paying full attention. While we hear another person speaking, our thoughts are full of reactions, distractions, fantasies and judgments. We are concentrating on what we are going to say and so we do not listen.

My friend Karen Hagberg is a musician, and has written eloquently about the importance of dynamic listening. She notes:

"Without careful listening, a pianist cannot understand the various ways a single note can be played. It seems impossible that we do not listen to ourselves, what else is there to do while we are practicing? What else are we doing? There are many things, actually, that I am able to do instead of listening. I can hear an imaginary pianist, Horowitz for example, and imagine his sound as mine. I can feel the music instead of listening to it and move around a lot as I play, imagining that my feelings must be coming out as sound.

Possibly I am daydreaming, half-asleep, not concentrating. Usually, though, I am merely thinking about something. Thinking is not listening, nor is judging the performance as it evolves. Listening is listening."

There are times when we truly listen - usually when we sense ourselves to be in danger. We stop in our tracks, our ears prick up, and we listen as if our lives depend on it. The listening required for strategic questioning is like that; we need to listen as if someone's life depends on it - because it may. Through this dynamic listening to ourselves, to the earth and to our fellowcitizens - even those we might consider our adversaries - we may create the space where people can discover themselves expressing great ideas, or finding the energy and will to make changes happen in their lives.

## LONG AND SHORT LEVER QUESTIONS

Questions differ in their power. There are what I call long lever questions and short lever questions. A long lever question opens up more possibility for motion than a short lever question.

Supposing I have just a short lever question. The question comes straight into a head and, metaphorically speaking, we can only open a crack. But if we have a more dynamic question, or a longer lever, we can open the mind wider can't we? If we think of a powerful question we can let a lot of the inert stuff out

that's trapped inside a person's head, there is new possibility for the creating of a synthesis, and increased motion and zest. Whereas before the person might have not known how to move, now that person has their own ideas of where to go and what to do.

It's not a matter of a question being a strategic question or not a strategic question; a long lever or a short lever question. Each question we ask falls along a continuum, say of one to ten. There are ones and tens but most questions are somewhere in the middle. And in one situation a question might act as a 3 question in its ability to unlock motion and in another situation the same question might act as a 7. It's not a rigid system. There are questions that differ in their power to elicit dynamic responses and energy.

Strategic questioning is the opposite of manipulation. Rather than putting ideas into a person's head, you are actually allowing the person to take what's already in that head and work with it. When you say "Jennifer, you should recycle", you communicate (1) Jennifer probably doesn't know about recycling (2) all she needs is someone telling her what to do and she will do it (3) Jennifer must have been sleeping these past twenty years.

Telling people what they should do, personally or politically, rests on an authoritarian model of humanity-a model I reject. When you ask Jennifer what is her next step in helping the earth survive, Jennifer has a chance to set her own goals. It is a far superior strategy to get all the minds working on what needs to change rather than to convince each person to do what we think is best. As a side note here I would reiterate that "why" questions are not usually very dynamic questions because they ask her to rationalize the present rather than explore her own options.

A question can be more or less dynamic, more or less strategic, more or less action-ing. To adapt de Bono's terms there are "rock" questions, those that assume a hard truth, which focus on hard-edged, permanent, unchanging reality; and there are "water" questions which are those which flow, which work to find a way through, a reality that moves, a focus on "how can" rather than "is". A water question takes the form of the container into which it is poured, but is not a form unto itself.

A man reported that when he took strategic questioning home to practice, he was shocked how many of the questions that he thought of to ask his wife and children were yes/no questions. He had been presenting a dualistic reality where he longed for more liveliness in the family. "My wife reported that I have become more interested in her ideas and suggestions. I always wanted to be more open and interested in her, but I just didn't know how."

## CHAPTER 3

### QUESTION FAMILIES FOR INDIVIDUAL CHANGE

I imagine questions as falling into "families." The question families increase in fluidity, dynamic and strategic power as you go down from family to family. The first group of questions are NOT strategic questions but are necessary in order to have enough information in order to create the strategic questions. In any questioning campaign or session one would start near the top of the family order and work down to the more powerful strategic questions. Let me explain each "question family" and give some key words for that family:

0. FOCUS QUESTIONS identify the situation and the key facts necessary to an understanding of the situation.

"What are you most concerned about in your community?"

1. OBSERVATION QUESTIONS are concerned with what one sees and the information one has heard regarding the situation. Notice: I do not refer to the situation as a "problem" for that would set a field which may work against creative thinking.

"What do you see?" "What do you hear?"

"What have you heard and read about this situation?"

"Which sources do you trust and why?"

"What effects of this situation have you noticed in people, in the earth?"

"What do you know for sure and what are you not certain about?"

KEYWORDS: see, hear, know, find, etc.

2. FEELING QUESTIONS are concerned with body sensations, emotions and health. "What sensations do you have in your body when you think or talk about this situation?"

"How do you feel about the situation?"

"How has the situation affected your own physical or emotional health?"

KEYWORDS: feel, suffer, tired, angry, sad, frustrated, needs, etc.

3. VISIONING QUESTIONS are concerned with identifying one's ideals, dreams, and values.

"How could the situation be changed to be just as you would like it?"

"What about this situation do you care so much about?"

"What is the meaning of this situation in your own life?"

"How would you like it to be?"

KEYWORDS: hope, wish, like, love, better, justice, etc.

### MOVING INTO STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

4. CHANGE QUESTIONS are concerned with how to get from the present situation towards a more ideal situation.

"What will it take to bring the current situation towards the ideal?"

"What exactly needs to change here?"

"Who can make a difference?"

"What are changes you have seen or read about?"

"How did those changes come about?" (Here you are trying to find the individual's change view that will greatly impact the strategies for change she will believe in.)

KEYWORDS: what will it take. . ., how could.

5. CONSIDER THE ALTERNATIVES Try to imagine more than two alternatives (contrary to our cultural training, the world of resistance is not dualistic). Be alert for other alternatives to pop up in other areas of questioning. Do not rule out any alternative.

"What other ways could you imagine meeting your goal of change?"

"Yes, maybe that does sound like a crazy idea, but what is the wisdom in that alternative?"

"What are the consequences of each alternative you see?"

"How might those changes come about? Name as many ways as possible."

KEYWORDS: alternative ways, imagine, and all the ways imaginable

6. PERSONAL INVENTORY AND SUPPORT QUESTIONS are concerned with identifying one's interests, potential contribution and the support necessary to act.

"What would it take for you to participate in the change?"

"What do you like to do that might be useful in bringing about these changes?"

"Tell me what is special about you."

"What aspects of the situation interest you the most?"

"What support would you need to work for this change?"

KEYWORDS: what will it take, part of the change, your part, everyone has a role, etc.

7. PERSONAL ACTION QUESTIONS are those which get down to the specifics of what to do, how and when to do it. The actual plan begins to emerge.

"Who do you need to talk to?"

"How will you get an introduction to them that will establish your credibility?"

"How can you get others together at a meeting to work on this?"

Usually in working on the streets using strategic questioning, one does not get to the lower level of questions like obstacles and resistance. The earlier questions of feeling and thinking (analysis) are important and the visioning and alternative ways of achieving the social goals are very important in street polling.

### For your notes:

AVOID questions that suggest specific alternatives ("Have you considered..."), yes/no questions, and "why" questions.

The openness of a particular question is obvious at the gross extremes, but becomes far more subtle and subjective as one deepens one's understanding of the technique. For example, feel the difference between "Why don't you work on poverty?" and "What keeps you from working on poverty?"

May I repeat: strategic questioning is not manipulative. It's not my job to figure out what a person should do and then somehow get her to do it – we need to stay completely out of the way. My opinions will not

serve. Of course, I have opinions; if I cannot put my opinions sufficiently to one side, I may need to warn the questionee to watch for my leaning toward my own ideas. My opinions will not be empowering to the person being questioned, and will not be useful. Best to put them in my pocket when doing strategic questioning. The questionee needs to figure out where they need to move and the greatest service that I can be is to ask good questions, rephrase back what I hear, and be a channel for the questionee to see her own path. If we're really trying to find out what's appropriate for the questionee the most helpful thing to do is to ask long lever questions, examine what emerges, and value that.

Most people, maybe you, have had the experience of going to a friend for advice and found yourself saying things that surprised you. You were saying things with a wisdom you didn't know you possessed, putting ideas together in a fresh way that seemed clear, coherent and profound. Without giving advice the questioner-friend helped you think freshly and come up with a plan of action that felt clear and uncluttered with all the upset and confusion that beset you before the conversation. Yet the friend was only listening with a quality of attention and questioning that brought forth this wisdom from you. If advice was offered it was probably in an empowering way, "I personally think you might consider.... (an option) but whatever you decide I will love and respect you. I know you will know best what to do."

When using strategic questioning in a campaign or social change situation, one might similarly say, "I think.... But I surely don't see the picture through your eyes. Let us work to find an alternative that meets both of our needs. Even if we differ in our opinions, I respect you and will work with you to find the best way to deal with our common situation." Strategic questioning does not require that the practitioner be codependent and forget about her own opinions. It only means that you carry your opinions in a way that does not interfere with dialogue, respect and co-creation of alternates.

#### LOOKING AT OPTIONS EQUALLY

Another aspect is that ethical strategic questioning looks at the many options equally. Supposing Sally says she could move to place A or B or C. It's not up to me to say to myself "I think place C is the best, and I should encourage her down that path." If you're conscientious about your questioning, you may question even handedly, with the same enthusiasm, interest and time at all options. Not only that but asking if there are any more options that occur while looking at A, B, and C. Out of the questioning a brand new option may emerge.

At this point I would again urge the questioner to watch for questioning that focuses on only two options. We are so accustomed to binary thinking where it's either A or B, that often C or D cannot emerge. Open up, consider all the options. Usually when someone is only considering two options, they simply have not done the creative thinking to look at all the possibilities. They will be sorry down the road for having only considered so few options. A friend whose daughter had run away was trying to decide whether to let her get on the train in a few hours, or to go to the train and insist that she come home. We worked at that level for a while, and then a new option came up--why not run away with the daughter and take the twelve hours on the train to sort things out. Because she was scared and hurt, she had been unable to think of this fine option. It was the kind of option that she would have thought of a month after the event when the feelings had subsided. Then she would have kicked herself for not thinking of it at the time.

People are usually comfortable when they have two options and think they can make a decision at that level. The world is far more complex and exciting than two options would indicate; but having two options creates the idea that a decision, however limited, is being made.

#### SKILLS OF STRATEGIC QUESTIONING

The most important skill in strategic questioning is that of looking for action in static communication. Being able to recognize movement and the intention for movement is key. Then feeding that perception back to the person involved is important.

In social change the key skill in addition to the above is the ability to plan a campaign based upon what the questioners have heard in the field. The necessary skills are creating literature that uses the logic of the people, finding tactics that people are waiting for, providing leadership, and developing activities that use the change strategy already residing in the people.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE USE OF STRATEGIC QUESTIONING IN ORGANIZATIONAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE

## SITUATIONS

Where do new ideas come from? In any social situation, society, organization or department in which change and problems exist, how can we find strategies lying latent for positive change? How can we help create the zest and will within the group to make those changes?

Strategic questioning was originally a social tool but in order to teach it, we have usually had to take a personal situation to practice and learn the skill. But the most important use of strategic questioning is finding within a society or in a group those strategies which will be useful in creating a change.

Initially strategic questioning was invented in order to find what strategies were embedded in the Indian culture that would help us in our campaign to clean the Ganges River at Varanasi. The Ganges is known as Ganga by those who know and love her. I had been asked by a foundation in India to come and help them think strategically but I had few ideas of what would work in that situation. I always try to make any liability an asset so I did not necessarily think that my limited experience helping rivers should discourage me from taking on the job. I know from my education in technological forecasting and innovation theory that the best strategies for change will be found in the precise place where the problem is. So I created a set of questions to ask residents of Varanasi and members of the Sankat Mochan Foundation with whom I was working.

I refined these questions over and over again. These questions were designed to help me understand:

1. The appropriate language and way to talk about the river and the pollution that is respectful.
2. The ideas imbedded in the Indian people that they would like to implement which they believed would change the situation.
3. The logic of the people regarding the pollution of the river.
4. The relationship of the people to this goddess (Ganga) and how it operates to keep the population seemingly uncaring about the situation.

Then I made appointments with all of the Foundation members as well as others they suggested. After each period of questioning, I would look over the questions to see if they still seemed appropriate, and change them. For instance, I learned that it is totally inappropriate to say, "Ganga is polluted." After about the third person reacted in a negative way to the question "what do you think about the pollution of Ganga?" I figured out that I needed to ask the question differently. This question attributes the pollution to Ganga as if the river were somehow at fault. This insults Ganga; whereas in the early days people taught me that the way they talk about the pollution of Ganga is, "we are not caring for the river." It now seems to be the best way of expressing the relationship and responsibility.

The funny thing is that, after hearing this reply, I noticed that I started to personally think less in terms of "pollution" and more in terms of "people not taking care of the river." This was an important change of perspective for me. Pollution is an abstraction that avoids the responsibility of the people who are making the mess - by focusing the attention on the river. It is almost as if the river is to blame for being polluted!

Often a political person comes to a person in denial and preaches a way of thinking that challenges the helplessness. People are rarely convinced to adopt a new position through argument. The social change worker may say they want to "empower" the person, but the best way to empower people is to help them find their own way to the ideas and strategies that reside inside of themselves. Aiming one's discussion directly to the helplessness of an individual "yes, you can clean the river" is only effective in the depth of a real relationship. Better to look at the roots of the helplessness and apathy; start with questions.

Many organizational leaders and social change workers have been taught the process of determining in their own mind or in their group a policy or "idea" which would be a positive change. They set about marketing this idea to the public through speeches, leaflets and meetings. Start with ideology, and then sell. I have been wondering "where do good ideas come from?" and "How can we increase the ideas coming for the common good?" Even if we start having a good idea, how do we understand its relevance to the common person? Many leaders of organizations and community organizers suffer from cynicism and lack of confidence in the intelligence of common citizens. This affects their strategy and creates compromises in the inception of ideas.

An early observation involved the Great American Peace March in the early eighties. I knew many of the marchers so I was invited to Kansas to do a workshop on listening and asking questions. These were the early days of strategic questioning so questions were just coming into focus as powerful tools. We worked in the workshop with the participants on how to ask open questions as a way of opening themselves up to the realities of the people they met.

I visited the march again in Pennsylvania and have kept contact with a number of marchers through the years. They work from an enthusiastic, optimistic point of view for the most part. They know who America is. They reported to me in Pennsylvania when I talked to them about their experience that they felt very changed in their attitude about social change. They had interesting conversations about key social concepts, and know from personal conversation that the common people care very much about nuclear weapons and environmental issues. Their cynicism about this country was gone. They have confidence in the quality of thinking common people have about these issues and their ideas. They knew they were changed because they had listened deeply to people's concerns and ideas.

What we know of life is only where we have decided to rest with our own questioning. We can operate with what we know - and we can be sure of one thing - somewhere someone is not resting at that state of knowing. They are researching and questioning - working on a new discovery.

We approach problems within a constantly changing body of information about the issues at stake. The amount of information that is known by human beings now doubles every five years! Very few people can keep up with the overwhelming avalanche of data that is generated in any field. And changes within any body of information are so substantial and complex, that even computer databases are out of date quickly.

This rapid turnover of knowledge in every field requires a new understanding of information, and the way that questions relate to problems. An out-moded view of information is that it is a static thing, something that can be contained in an encyclopedia. A better metaphor in the 1990's is that information is like a river. In the river of information, ideas and relationships are constantly changing. Dipping into the river one day brings up different perspectives than the next day, because the river has moved on with one more day of experience and thinking. So it is with questioning. Asking the same question today elicits a different answer than yesterday. What we did not know yesterday, we may know today. Whether we have learned new information or have simply created a solution from our own synthesis and analysis, both the question and answer have changed.

Is anything ever fully known? You find one piece of information and from that piece of information new questions arise and you dip into the river again. So it goes on - discovery, new questions, new discovery, and new questions and on and on.

There is power in approaching a problem with the feeling of "I don't know." There is also power in allowing doubt into what you think you already know. It doesn't have to be a threat to one's status or professionalism. Such an attitude allows the questions to emerge, and new discoveries to begin. Such an attitude opens the door to new possibilities and may invite others with fresh resources and perspectives to create new solutions with you. It opens the door to the river of information that flows around the issues at stake and helps us move into a dynamic relationship with this river and with life.

## THE CREATIVE ORGANIZATION

When people work together over a period of time they may come to see their co-workers in a limited way, especially if the nature of the social transaction regularly focuses on negative aspects of each person's or the team's functioning. So often in an organization's efforts to continue to improve its work as well as cope with the limitations of each individual in the group, a fair amount of the agenda may be consumed with criticisms, goal setting, and discussion of other aspects of the group work. Visioning together, dreaming together toward positive goals and appreciation of the members is sometimes overlooked. Strategic questioning is a way of organizing collective dreaming not only about what needs to change but how to get to those changes so that alternative responses are organized and added to the social transaction.

A positive assumption about the nature of workers also helps in creating a more effective and efficient organization, within normal human limits. In general people do want to do good work, value being involved in productive work rather than doing nothing. People like a sense of achievement. So asking questions on the basis of these positive human values allows them to be more creative in changes that have positive benefits both for the organization and the individual.

## A FEW WORDS ABOUT ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Strategic questioning is political because it is a process that encourages people to find their own powerful way through the rapids of change. It is political because it leads to strategies for change. It is political because it can take political debates beyond dogma and ideology into fresh perspectives on common problems. It

is political because it is a way of transforming your attachment to your own goals and opening up options that are common goals.

It is funny how we resist change, resist participating in the changes necessary in our time. I know I do. But when we get involved with change, we can tap into a surprising stream of aliveness and creativity and inner wisdom, which is our contribution to the process of social change. There are many things that keep us from acting on what we know:

- (a) We don't know any alternatives, as we have a lack of good information on the situation.
- (b) We may lack leadership or the confidence to pursue our goals as leaders ourselves.
- (c) We may subscribe to a kind of fatalism that does not encourage thinking about alternatives.

(d) We may have taken in frightening information about the problem in a passive and alienating way. (Television is one of the prime examples of passive information transfer). And we are stuck in inactivity until our feelings about the information are dealt with.

Strategic questioning helps us break through this sort of gridlock. In dynamic dialogue there is a focus on how change can happen and with it comes the potential for new "will" to arise also. In Hindi there is a special word, *sunculp* for this determination. *Sunculp* is the process of tapping into the strength and collective will of the whole. It is a will that is not individual but is part of the will of the entire context. It is a resolve and commitment that we experience for the whole society.

*Sunculp* can be found in any timid person through strategic questioning. Some years ago the prevalent view in social change work was that if we only got the information to the "people" about what was wrong then they would make the changes necessary. Now we realize that information is simply not enough. We actually have to facilitate the motion on the issue and create and sustain the *sunculp* to make the change required by the information. Here are several things to consider when shaping your questions for social change work:

### **Let the ideas emerge from the people affected**

Where will great social change ideas come from? One of the basic assumptions of the strategic questioning process is that knowledge resides and is alive in all people. People see and know intimately the problems that are facing them, and they may well be in the best position to collectively design alternatives for themselves. The point here is to ask questions that allow the ideas and energy to come from the individual or system itself rather than the social change worker.

Again, the person being questioned needs to figure out where they need to move and the greatest service that I can be is simply to dynamically listen, ask good questions, rephrase and reflect what they are saying back to them, and generally help them see their own pathway through the problems. My opinions will not serve. My opinions will not be empowering to the person being questioned, and will not be useful

For years we have had the image of the social change worker standing in front of the crowd "Here's what we have to do." I am not suggesting that we replace leadership, rather that leaders spend a significant amount of time listening to their members, the citizens they are trying to serve, and to their "adversaries" and then distil what has been heard before strategy is determined. Ideas are synthesized from the listening work rather than coming solely from the leader's own mind or from one's own immediate circle. When using strategic questioning in a social change campaign, you might similarly say, "I think... but I surely don't see the picture through your eyes. Let us work to find an alternative that meets both of our needs. Even if we differ in our opinions, I respect you and will work with you to find the best way to deal with our common situation..."

### **A word about identities and opinions**

Often when we think about who we are, we confuse our opinions with our essence as a living being. Our belief structure and our values are very close to the core of who we think ourselves to be. We all know of moments when we lived beyond our identities, where we were of service to life on the earth. In those moments what was best for life was the criteria within which we were able to act. In strategic questioning we're asking for that kind of discipline of the ego. If we genuinely felt that the solutions to the most crucial problems we face today lay with in each individual we question, and that by keeping our opinions and identities out of the way, then we would be able to unleash both the will to change and the ideas appropriate for strengthening life on earth. When listening for strategies keep as little of your own personality from interfering as possible. One person explaining the idea of keeping one's opinions and identities in one's pocket said: "I just imagine myself as

part of the earth that can walk around asking questions. I am not in this moment myself, but one of the Earth's servants doing work for Her."

Strategic questioning does not require that the practitioner forget about his or her own opinions. That would be disrespectful to oneself! It only means that you carry your opinions in a way that does not interfere with the dialogue, the respect and the exploration of alternatives that you are trying to achieve. I always imagine I put them in my pocket before doing strategic questioning.

### **Look for the "change view" of the people affected.**

Individuals and societies have discrete and hidden views of how change happens. The strategic questioner needs to find out how the major players on an issue explain the social changes they have seen. The strategies they are willing to use to create change in their lives, institutions and communities, will predominantly come from their "change view".

For instance, if you ask people in the United States to tell you what changes they have seen in their society, they will give a whole list. One of their frequent observations is that people's smoking habits have changed significantly, and that smoking in public buildings has become minimal. When asked how this change came about people mention: changes in the laws that prohibit smoking in certain places, the lobbying of anti-smoking groups, research showing that even passive smoking was dangerous for health, educational articles promoting anti-smoking, law suits against cigarette companies, etc. All these represent different strategies for making the social change happen.

It is my experience that the people who mentioned educational campaigns are the most likely to put their money and energy into future educational campaigns concerning some other social change issue. Those mentioning lawsuits will support challenges in court or might be lawyers themselves. Writers often credit change as coming from popular articles and so forth. Understanding the "change views" of individuals gives us clues about the strategies which these people will support in future campaigns in their community or society.

Each organization and society has a rather distinctive view of how change can happen within that society. The people of that society are only willing to use those strategies that they have confidence in from their past experience in social change. For instance in India in 1982, I asked people what social changes they had seen in their life. Most people responded that the liberation of India from the British was the primary social change that had happened in their life or in their recent memory of history. It was such a significant social change that nothing could compare.

"How did that social change happen?" I would ask. It was almost as if I could see their minds working as they worked to apply what they had learned from liberation to the problems of cleaning the river. This helped me understand some strategies that were available for our campaign. They recalled specific ideas such as nonviolent marches, hunger strikes, sit down strikes and sacrifices of many kinds made by the Indians. "We made our oppressors look like savages. They beat up on unarmed civilians with all their weapons." People are willing to support those strategies and tactics that they have seen to be successful before.

### **Create a neutral, common ground.**

When a questioner is perceived as committed to an impartial stance, and they enter into a highly charged political problem, then people on all sides of the issue are given a safe space to let off steam and explore alternatives.

A team testing this theory in the early 1980's questioned many people in the Middle East about the conflicts within the region. To the PLO they asked, "Why doesn't the PLO recognize Israel?" To the Israelis they asked, "What is keeping Israel from creating self-rule for Palestine?" The pat answers of course came out first. Everyone knows the answers that are available from the strong ideologies that surround the issues of the Middle East. But with more questioning in a neutral way, we can help each of the parties think freshly in an as-yet-undiscovered place for them.

### **Create respect**

The strategic questioning process is a way of talking with people with whom you have differences without abandoning your own beliefs and yet looking for the common ground between you. This requires a basic sense of respect for the person being questioned. In every heart there is ambiguity; in every ideology there are parts which don't fit. Your job is not to judge the responses to your questions, but to look for the potential for this person to make their own movement on the issue at stake.

Strategic questioning assumes that both I and my "adversary" want to do better than we are presently doing. We start with creating a basic feeling of respect between us. For example, take a developer, such as a sand miner or a timber logger. There is probably a hidden ambivalence in the developer's heart about what they are doing, and at least a part of them wants to be doing better for the earth, better for all its creatures.

Strategic questions assume that the common ground is "findable" by both of us in dialogue. We explore alternatives together - with respect- that is the key. Here, we can discover a real commitment to pluralism of ideas and world-views. And we learn to not only cope with the differences between us, but also how to make it work for us institutionally and socially as well. Within a world being torn apart by seemingly irreconcilable differences, creating such respect is really a key task for these times.

### **Listen to pain**

Listening to suffering is one of the most important things a social change worker can do. The job is not only to listen, but also to let the suffering fully into your heart without denying its reality. This takes both courage and vulnerability on the part of the questioner. You may find yourself confronting your own limitations of heart, your own sense of helplessness surrounding the issues at stake. You may find yourself considering radical alternatives to this suffering as well as the many levels of meaning it may have.

When you ask questions about the important things in life you're going to touch sore spots. People are so scared, so hurt by their own powerlessness that opening up a subject like poverty and homelessness, the threat of nuclear war violence or any other politically hot topic may be overwhelming to the people being questioned.

When faced with the pain of others, it is important to give it your fullest attention, as if someone's life depended on it. There is a temptation here to think that the pain you may be witnessing is only an individual suffering, yet all individual suffering is tied to our collective suffering. And there are institutional and community ways of addressing or ignoring the issue that gives rise to individual pain.

Empathy and nonattachment are the skills of saints. It might take you a bit longer to deal with suffering empathically rather than judgmentally but the effects are profound. Don't expect to be in the presence of pain and not be profoundly affected by it. When we are at the edge of what we feel to be comfortable with, we may feel a kind of vertigo which threatens to pull us into a void and join the pain and the rage that goes with it. Will you go over the edge or stay here? Be patient with yourself and the people you are questioning. Witnessing pain is caring. Ideas for action may occur in the act of listening. Allowing change to ripen is caring. Caring is healing. By bringing strategic questions into a world of suffering, you can become part of that world learning to heal itself, looking for ways that the pain can move.

### **LEARN TO LISTEN TO YOURSELF**

One of the secrets of strategic questioning on a social level is learning to listen to new ideas that arise within oneself while one is functioning as the questioner. In this dynamic environment, we organizers can do some of our best thinking. However, the power of strategic questioning is really appreciated when it is used to help groups find their way through change or to help institutions find new ideas and/or inspiration for social change work in a particular community.

When an organizer or official goes out to the people to listen to their ideas about change they will find, in the dialogue, if they are able to keep themselves quiet enough and listen with awareness, new ideas arising within themselves stimulated by the listening. The openness in the atmosphere seems to affect the questioner as well as the listener.

During a strategic questioning session with members of the city council and community of Lismore, Australia, all members of the class went out to a shopping mall to discuss a controversial proposal to build protection from flooding to protect the business district of the town. Trina went out with everyone to do the questioning. She asked questions of people. She returned to the group quite excited because she came back with several ideas that first occurred to her in the questioning process. "I realized that I had not thought about my own house and neighborhood as being involved in flooding, I had only been thinking about the downtown business district. I need also to think of how to protect my own neighborhood."

Learning to listen to ideas arising in one's self is an important skill. In many societies people are taught to have defensive and combative conversation styles, expressing opinions rather than opening up to the growing edge of what one is coming to know. The consequence of defensive conversations is that while one is listening

to the ideas and opinions of others, one's inner eye is focused on what one will say to rebut the position of the other. It makes it very difficult to really listen. In strategic questioning we encourage people to do strategic questioning with at least two questioners, so that one has more of a chance to listen without focusing exclusively on what the next question should be.

#### QUESTIONS DO NOT NEED TO BE USED IN A SERIES

Strategic questioning can be used in sessions where a series of questions are asked either to individuals or groups or it can be used one question at a time in a step-by-step process strung out over a number of days or months. Stewart Anderson, a student of strategic questioning in Australia came with me to India to see how I use questioning with the group I work with there. He was disappointed because he was expecting me to conduct questioning meetings with the Foundation working to clean the Ganges River. Through years of working with the Foundation, I have developed the habit of asking myself every morning "What is the question of the day?" Sometimes I would plant a question for the entire Foundation in a meeting, or I would have a question for an individual about an issue that we were working on together.

In beginning to learn strategic questioning, we try very hard to quiet the mind of the questioner and to learn simple listening skills. Because our society is so full of manipulative messages and techniques, it is enough of a challenge to simply learn how to ask questions and listen for the answers. This is particularly important when using strategic questioning with individuals. But when we begin to use strategic questioning as a social process, new skills are needed. Here, in addition to listening to the answers to the questions, it is important to learn to listen to one's self and the ideas that arise in one's own mind while being in dialogue with others.

A story will help here: A workshop in Boston, Massachusetts decided to ask questions about racism in several shopping centers. Many people in the workshop had worked on this issue in various forms throughout the community and were quite tired and discouraged about their work. When they went out, they asked questions such as "what are you doing in your own life about the racism in our society?" "If there was leadership in our community, what other ideas would you like to implement?" When the group came back from the questioning they were enthusiastic. They had been surprised how eager people were to talk about this subject. "One woman followed me into the supermarket after I'd stopped questioning her to talk further. It was obviously a topic she wanted to talk more about." Ideas were bubbling up in the entire group after this conversation with ordinary citizens on the street. Enthusiasm was found for their work on racism as well as fresh ideas for the campaign against racism that came from the people questioned or from themselves in the dynamic of listening. It is this non-defensive discussion and listening that allows new answers to arise in the practice of strategic questioning.

Members of a church in Oakland, California began asking themselves "how can we revitalize our membership and take on new tasks that will involve the members in a positive direction?" They made themselves little buttons that they wore to church services and meetings: "Board member willing to listen." They created a list of open-ended questions to give board members to fall back on when no questions came to their minds in the conversations. Many board members noticed how much they wanted to manipulate the conversation in a direction they favored, but with discipline they were able to stay with open-ended questions.

#### CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Another important aspect of strategic questioning is to examine carefully especially when working with a group or on a social issue is the underlying assumptions which are built in to each question. It is important that the assumptions of each question posit a view of human nature and of the individual being questioned that is positive and powerful. Of course, we know that human beings are complex creatures with both positive, caring sides as well as ambivalent, negative and uncaring sides. We are individuals with many different forces vying for dominance in our inner lives. Ambiguity around group issues is very common. There is also an attachment within each person, even the most involved, to powerlessness and naiveté.

During the questions about feelings early in the strategic questioning sessions it is very likely that some of these ambiguous feelings will be voiced. It is important that these ambiguous feelings be acknowledged, be accepted, but not necessarily assumed that these feelings will be the basis of action. For example, questions such as, "What would you like to do to help clean the river?" has an assumption built into it that the individual being questioned naturally wants to help the river they love and that they have ideas (possibly that they have not even acknowledged to themselves) which are important to work into the strategy. Exposing ourselves to the dreams

and visions of others may really awaken our own enthusiasm and determination to keep working. Strategic questions will be most helpful when the assumptions about human nature are positive.

When people are being questioned about a social situation, they may verbalize cynicism, hopelessness or uncaring. The questioner accepts these feelings, does not get involved in "fixing" them. Exploring these attitudes may prove very useful if one is able to avoid being judgmental. Curiosity without judgment can be useful. "What did you see that leads you to feel so hopeless about the situation?" "All of us are complex creatures. Do you have any ambiguous feelings about the situation?" You can acknowledge that you may have feelings that agree with the questioner. We do not try to argue people out of hopelessness but we keep a positive assumption in our questions, "what ideas do you have for how this situation can change?"

## A VISION FOR STRATEGIC QUESTIONING

In Seattle, an social change organization decided to use strategic questioning to help them articulate to their Board of Directors changes in the nature and purpose of that organization. A weekend meeting was called for membership and the board. Each member of the Board of Directors wore a button that said, "Board member willing to listen." The board had drawn up a list of strategic questions. All weekend board members could be seen sitting with one or more members of the organization asking the questions, listening to the answers from the members as well as to the ideas that occurred to them in the dialogue and writing both of these responses down so that they could be collected, organized and presented back to the board.

The questioner circles those ideas which occurred to her during the questioning process and simply writes down those that came from the person being questioned. Let me say again, that two kinds of listening are very important during social strategic questioning:

1. Listening to the individual or group being questioned;
2. Listening to the ideas that arise in the questioner during the dynamic dialog process.

Listening to one's self is as important as listening to the other, but the listener's job is not to convince anyone that the idea that arose is the best idea. One simply notes one's own ideas with a notation to indicate that the idea was yours and write them down as one product of the strategic questioning.

## CHAPTER 5

### QUESTION FAMILIES IN ORGANIZATIONAL/SOCIAL CHANGE

1. Focus Questions gather information that is already known. This is not a strategic question though it is necessary for strategic questioning to work. This part of the dialogue helps create the context for the questioning. **INFORM THE QUESTIONEE WHAT WILL BECOME OF THEIR ANSWERS AND IDEAS**
  - "The board of directors has decided to ask the members (staff, each other) about their thinking about the personnel policies of this organization. What issues in our city (organization, project, etc.) concern you?"
  - "The city council is asking us to gather ideas about what to do about the floods which every few years inundate our city. Would you be willing to talk with us for a few minutes about this matter?" "What are your concerns?"
2. Observation Questions are concerned with what one sees and the information one has heard regarding the situation. Notice: I do not refer to the situation as a problem, for that would set a field, which may work against creative thinking.
  - "What do you see?" "What do you hear?"
  - "What effects of this situation have you noticed in people, in the earth?"
  - "What do you know for sure and what are you not certain about?"
  - "What do you read about this situation?"
  - "What information do you trust?"
  - "When you look at the river, what do you see that concerns you?"
  - "What effects of the floods have you noticed?"

- "What information do you need to gather about this situation?"

### 3. Analysis Questions (thinking questions)

- "What do you think are the causes of....?"
- "What is the relationship of ..to ....."?
- "What are the main economic structures that affect this situation?"
- "What are the main political structures that affect this situation?"
- "What are the main cultural structures that affect this situation?"
- "What are the main social structures that affect this situation?"
- "What is the meaning of this in our community?"

### 4. Feeling Questions

- "How do you feel about ....."?"
- "How has this situation affected you in your body?" "In your feelings? In your dreams?"
- "How has this situation affected your feelings in your family?"
- "How has this situation affected your feelings about your community?"
- "How has this situation affected your feelings about our organization?"

## STRATEGIC QUESTIONS – MOTION INCREASES

### 5. Visioning Questions are concerned with identifying one's ideals, values, and dreams

- "How would you like it to be?"
- "What does your heart long for?"
- "How could our group be more effective in working toward our goal?"
- "If we wanted to build a revolutionary change what would we do?"
- "What of your own attitudes could change in order for to this goal to be met?"
- "What will it take to bring the current situation towards your ideal?"
- "How could the situation be changed so it was just as you would like it?"
- "What about this situation do you care so much about?"
- "What is the meaning of this situation in your own life?"

### 6. Change questions are concerned with how to get from the present to a more ideal situation.

- "How could the situation be changed for it to be as you would like it to be?"
- "What exactly needs to change in our organization?"
- "What changes have you seen in your lifetime that compares with the changes that need to happen here?"
- "How did those changes occur?" (Here you are trying to find the individual's change view, which will greatly impact the strategies for change she will believe in.)

### 7. Considering all the alternatives. Examine each alternative to getting to your vision. Make sure you are considering more than two alternatives and be alert for other alternatives coming up at any time.

- "What are all the ways you can imagine to make the changes you need?"
- "How could you reach that goal? What are other ways?"
- "What would it take for our city, organization to do....?"
- "What would it take for you to work on this project?"

### 8. Consider the consequences for each alternative. Ethical questioning spends as much time and energy on each alternative, not focusing on the alternative favored by the questioner.

- "How would your first alternative affect others in our group (city, etc.)?"
- "What would be the effect on the environment?"
- "How would other sectors in our town respond to each alternative?"
- "What political effect would you anticipate from each alternative?"
- "If we use windmills for generating electricity, what could be the consequences of slowing down the wind?"

### 9. Consider the Obstacles

- "What would need to change in order for alternative "A" to be done?"
- "What forces in our society would push against this goal?"
- "How would the staff, (the KKK, the director) respond to your proposal?"

### 10. Personal Support Questions

- "What support would you need to work for this change?"
- "What groups, unions, religious organizations do you belong to?"

- "What support do you need to do.....?"
- "What would it take for you to participate in the change?"
- "What do you like to do that might be useful in bringing about these changes?"

#### 11. Personal Action Planning

- "Who do you need to talk to about your vision?"
- "What are your first steps?"

#### For your notes:

As we talk about change, see where we want to resist or work on another alternative, we make the path. This is the way we all work ourselves through fear to a more powerful position and action. People will of course speak about suffering when offered the opportunity to do so. Don't be afraid of upset. The person is trying to relieve her own discomfort and figure out what to do. Listening to suffering is one of the most important things a social change worker can do.

Don't only listen, but let the suffering fully into your heart. The temptation is to think that this is only individual suffering. I think all individual suffering is tied to our collective suffering. There are institutional and community ways of addressing each suffering which ameliorates that suffering, or at least gives the suffering meaning.

Confront your own limitations of heart, your own helplessness. When you ask questions about the important things in life you're going to touch sores. In the questioning you may touch some of the wounded places inside of yourself and you may feel uncomfortable. Well, guess what? If we are to change, it is going to feel uncomfortable--which is what changing involves. When you go to the edge of what is and what is yet to become, it is not an easy journey. Sometimes upset is going to come. Be patient with yourself and each other. It's o.k. to feel creepy. It doesn't mean you're a creep. It means you feel creepy. It means you live in a creepy world. When you feel creepy you're part of the world feeling itself. You're part of the world feeling itself into healing and it's all right.

Help each other through it. So don't be afraid of upset. It's only pain moving, nothing more, and nothing less.

#### ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

We have begun to find a way to display and analyze the answers to questions which are the product of strategic questioning. We develop a whole collage of answers that can be analyzed and used by a group to move forward strategically. Without some kind of a computer program to do this we can simply report back the results of strategic questioning exercises, and write them on large pieces of paper or a blackboard. We then look these responses as a group and draw conclusions which move us toward new strategic goal.

When we put such ideas up on the board we frequently code them: we gather all responses which show the logic, the way that people think about our area of interest and put a large LO for logic next to those items. Those items will help us in making leaflets, writing articles explaining our position. We need to understand the logic of the citizens in order to know how to appeal to them regarding our issue. We put a large LA next to items which give us language, which people use in explaining this issue or in attacking it. Next to objections to our position, we put the symbol OB. We must know what the objections are to our position (if we have one) in order to frame our strategy. If the main objection to the idea is the cost, then this objection needs to be taken into account in all leaflets and speeches. ID can mark ideas that come forward to questions such as "what would you like to do to help the river?" We put a CV to indicate change view. A further refinement has been suggested that when an idea or an objection or logic occurs within the questioner, the symbol would simply be circled.

A good example of how strategies can change based upon asking good questions might be seen in some research done in India by an economics professor. He wanted to find out what people would be willing to do to help the river become cleaner. Through asking questions he came to find out something quite unexpected: people would be willing to pay more taxes if the river was clean--only after the river was clean but not before.

In my imagination this is how it happened: He was asking questions of what people would be willing to do, noting them down in his notebook, and possibly one person said "I would not be willing to pay taxes if the government promises to clean the river because I have not had positive experience with the government living up to its promises."

At this point the questioner intuitively asked, "if the river was cleaner would you be willing to pay more taxes?" In his notebook he writes down this idea and notes it with an ID circle indicating that it was his idea. When going back over his notes he remembers this idea and adds it to his research questions along with ideas that other people have had. Where ideas come from is not so important as that they do come. But it is important feedback for the individual who had the idea to remember that a new idea did come and was effective. We need to see ourselves as changing and evolving individuals. It is also helpful to see our common strategy developing through the work and insights of our members.

OBJECTIONS: to your campaign, group or to the nature of the present conditions.

LOGIC: causal relationship; why is something important, what are the motivating forces?

LANGUAGE: what words and phrases do people use to describe their response or their rationale?

STRATEGY OR IDEAS: what options do people favor, what new thinking do you hear?

CHANGE VIEW the strategies and tactics which the person attributes previous successful changes.

#### THE ETHICS OF STRATEGIC QUESTIONING

But what about those in politics who have basically been taught to manipulate people into thinking the way they think? In the old model of power we've been taught to think that we're superior and that we have the point of view which everyone else needs. One of the basic transactions we have been taught as human beings is to feel secure if there is agreement. So I have to manipulate you to agree with me (at least superficially) or I only reveal the parts of myself that you will agree with or approve of. This results in one rarely examining where one feels called to change in conversations with others. Strategic questioning is not useful in proselytizing or fundraising.

I suspect we are never really objective. But we can be ethical about how we question people and what we do with what they say. I believe very deeply that any individual does not consciously know most of the ways we need to change in order to survive into a healthy future. I also believe that together we do know, if only in a passive place in our minds, some if not most of the changes we are going to need to make, but that those ideas are clouded by fear, guilt or passivity. Those change ideas are constricted by an inadequate sense of self, which does not allow us to dream that we are big enough or secure enough to change.

If I use really open questions we may learn a new way together or I may at least witness a human being expressing what she sees as a path. Since each of us is weeding in a different row, I am interested in you finding the weeds in your row as well as in discussing my row and all my weeds. Each person works at a job, cares for a plot of land, nurtures children or parents or friends, has some relationship to transportation and therefore has a unique view on the areas needing change for the future. Questions encourage inventions, whistle-blowing and courage: all aspects we need more of now and in the days to come.

## CHAPTER 6

### STORIES OF STRATEGIC QUESTIONING

#### QUESTIONS THAT ARE CLEANING THE GANGES

I'm from Idaho. I don't know if you know what that means, but it's very hard for a person from Idaho to think of cleaning up the Ganges River. About as far as you can get from cleaning up the Ganges River is Idaho. When a friend from India asked me to help him clean up the river, I knew I had no experience cleaning up rivers. Neither my mother nor grandmothers had ever done anything like this job. I knew nothing about sewage. What I did know about was how to build a strategy for social change. It seemed that was what they needed.

The funny thing is that, after hearing this reply, I noticed that I started to personally think less in terms of "pollution" and more in terms of "people not taking care of the river." This was an important change of perspective for me. Pollution is an abstraction that avoids the responsibility of the people who are making the mess - by focusing the attention on the river. It is almost as if the river is to blame for being polluted!

Very often people also said, "I see the problem, but the others don't." This answer told me a lot about the taboos of the society, and the distance between people. Such a response told me what they can and can not talk about with each other. Often in a situation such as the holy Ganges, the symbolic overload is so great that to talk about what you really think may seem sacrilegious or crazy to others.

I needed to understand their "change view" - how they expected change to happen, what kind of strategies they have confidence in. In India, there is no social change that compares to the liberation of their country from the control of the British ... and this effects their views on how change happens.

When I asked how that change had happened, I got the strategies for change - satyagraha, fasting, direct action, pressuring civic leaders, citizens' assemblies, marches to the capitol - stories of change strategy that are embedded in that culture. These are also the strategies they were willing to use now to clean their holy river. I would then ask, "What would you like to do to clean the river?" and they would take their "change view" and apply it to this specific situation.

For several years the Foundation held a citizens' assembly where officials in charge of the Ganga Action Plan came to a large multicolored tent to discuss the progress of the work and plans with members of the Foundation and the citizens. In this public forum citizens stood up at the microphone and gave their own ideas and asked questions.

One 13-year old young man suggested that he and his friends would like to "get some sticks and go up and down the river and persuade people not to toilet on the river." I did not evaluate this idea but passed it on even-handedly to the Foundation members. They recognized the seeds of a great idea in the one the young man offered.

Thus the idea of the home guard was born, and for 5 years or so this consisted of a team of adults who walked along the river front of the city, or moved on the river in a boat. They had sticks but no guns. Their task was to discourage citizens from acts disrespectful to the river like toileting, washing with soap, and dumping animal carcasses into the river. Before you get too judgmental about this, you need to recognize that most poor people in India do not have private bathrooms in their homes, and it is hard in a city of over a million to find bare land to bury cows, goats and dogs when they die.

People often told me how impossible it was to clean the river. Rather than assuming it was impossible, I started to think that maybe it was going to take quite a long time and I had better start thinking about the next generation in my questioning. I already was questioning young people but I added a question for the adults which said, "How are you preparing your children to clean up the river?".

Everyone in the Foundation was asked that question and to a person they had said something like, "We are doing nothing to prepare the children to clean the river...". Now, their great love of the river, their love for their children, and the void in their answers to that question could not long exist in the same minds. The dissonance was too great.

One afternoon I was taking a shower when someone came running in and said, "Peavey, come right away, we've got a great idea." I thought, "Gosh, you know, I rarely get summoned from the shower with a great idea." So I quickly dressed and combed my hair and went to find them. They were gathered and enthusiastically discussing a plan: "We're going to have a poster painting contest for the children. We'll have all the students in Benares draw posters about what they see regarding the health of the river. And we'll hang the winning posters up at a large musical event. The adults will see what the children see and be embarrassed..."

It was an original idea and clearly the idea was theirs. Everybody in that room had been asked a question about the preparation of their children for river cleaning work. Could that question have had anything to do with the emergence of the idea about the poster contest? I believe it did. I surely didn't come up with that idea and since it was their idea, they had enthusiasm around it.

A powerful question has a life of its own. It started chiselling away. The question created the dissonance, people organically started answering that strategic question, and a new idea came. I think the questioning played a part in the emergence of the poster contest. We have had poster contests almost every year. Five hundred to eight hundred young people have gathered each time on the banks of the Ganges.

People need to come up with their own answers. Questioning catalyses this process. A powerful question has a life of its own as it chisels away at the problem. Don't be disappointed if a great question does not have an answer right away. A very powerful question, a long lever question, may not have an answer at the

moment it is asked. It will sit rattling in the mind for days or weeks as the person works on an answer. If the seed is planted, the answer will grow. Questions are alive!

## QUESTIONING A HYDRO ELECTRIC PLANT

A group in Australia was concerned about a hydroelectric plant that was planned to be built in Ravenshoe, Queensland. In the words of Bryan Law, a member of the organizing group ... "We made our first step into the public community life of Ravenshoe... We decided that step would be humble, and would consist of listening to the opinions, ideas and feelings of local people (rather than preaching our ideas to them). To do this, we constructed a survey questionnaire, which asked thirty open-ended questions about the Ravenshoe community and the potential impact of the Tully Millstream project on that community....

I found two points of great interest in conducting this survey. First, almost everyone who approached our table wanted to know "which side" we were on. It was almost as if public debate had decreed this is an either/or issue. Our group had agreed earlier on a response to this question, which was that while individual members had their own opinion, the group as a whole was impartial. We didn't want to take a side. We wanted to listen to all sides. It was amazing to see how people opened up after this response, and shared what they thought and felt.

I began to see the potential for resolution of this problem. I began to ask myself (and others) the questions: (1) what kind of hydro project could we find consensus support to build in this district? (escaping the yes/no false dichotomy); (2) what positive and co-operative steps could we take on other issues and problems in the district? Second, having said we were impartial, it became so. I found personally I could not repeat the formula without making it true. My mind opened up. I lost my previous certainties, and began to really listen for the first time. I found I didn't have all the answers. This was a bit uncomfortable for a while, but gradually I began to recognize it for the truly empowering process it was.

We feel it is important...to encourage local residents (and everyone else) not to over-simplify the issues and continue the polarization. Instead, to recognize the range of insights, opinions, perspectives, and knowledge within the district, and to see this diversity as a potential source of strength. Conflict can generate much creativity if handled the right way...The attitude of the QEC (Queensland Electric Corporation) is that they have proposed a scheme, and it is the best one possible. If it goes ahead they will begin to meet local responsibilities. If it doesn't, they won't. This attitude looks to be the biggest single impediment to a constructive resolution of conflict....

The group held a public meeting to discuss the electric plant. About 180 people came and about 100 of them clapped loud and long at one man's suggestion that we get out of town. Sitting there with these feelings of apparent hatred washing over us in waves was not an experience any of us is keen to repeat.

However, there were positive aspects of the night. Many of those other eighty people, who witnessed the attacks on us, and who had until then been suspicious or noncommittal, came down off their fence and began to send messages of active support. About thirty people stayed to help us clean up, and asked us not to give up. They said that what we had done was worthwhile. We received promises of financial and other support.

Towards the end of the meeting, a small number of conservative people who are prominent in the community, and who strongly support the dam, were also offering constructive comments on our efforts. I think this represents one of the key dynamics of nonviolence--that when people are attacked for holding principled views, and do not respond in kind but stay constructive, those doing the attacking lose support. Those holding to truth and love gain ..."

(edited) from Bryan Law in *Nonviolence Today* #25 March/April 1992

## QUESTIONING AND WATER

Sue and Col Lennox came to one of my workshops on Strategic Questioning in Sydney, Australia. The following Monday morning they returned to the schools in Manley, Australia, where they teach. The students were in an uproar about a chemical spill in the creek behind their school. All the fish in the lagoon (which is fed by the creek) were dying. Sue thought, "Here is a chance to practice strategic questioning."

She taught the children briefly how to do it by asking:

"What do you see?" " What do you know?"

"How do you feel?"

"How could it be?" " How should it be?"

"What needs to be changed?"

"What should we do?"

The students went out to use these strategic questions to question their neighbors, their fellow students and teachers. They also went to the creek and consulted the creek. They knew that they had to do something. They came back from their consultations with many perceptions and expressions of concern. From their questioning they had uncovered some good ideas of what to do and what others would be willing to do.

The students had to determine which ideas fitted their own talents and time, and which seemed to be the best ideas. For the past three years they have been working on testing the water of that creek, talking to the local city council and community, finding the exact nature of the pollution of the creek, making video tapes and teaching other students all over Australia to do the same. All this was catalyzed by the strategic questioning process.

## THE PARSIFAL STORY

Joanna Macy has long been interested in questions. She recounts the Parsifal story as a mythic interpretation of the early understanding of the power of questions.

In the Legend of the Holy Grail, Parsifal persuades King Arthur to make him a knight, despite his youth and foolish appearance. This took some doing since he was still a teenager, it appears, and he'd come to court in a fool's costume, which his mother had made for him in a vain attempt to keep him with her in the deep forest. Now, with steed and armor, he sets off on a quest, which is what knights do. After a few adventures, Parsifal finds himself riding through a grim and barren land (the first mention in literature of the wasteland). In that bleak, sterile landscape, life, food or lodging is nowhere to be found.

Eventually he asks a figure he sees fishing from a boat in a pond, and is directed to journey on. Amidst the wasteland a castle appears; Parsifal rides up, dismounts, and enters the great hall--to find lying in royal dress on a royal couch the same figure he had seen in the boat.

The Fisher King, though surrounded with luxury and pomp and many courtiers, lies there in torment, for he is wounded in the testicles. He has, like his land, lost the powers of regeneration. And the courtiers, possessed of a strange calm, busy themselves with ritual acts. They seem to be under a spell. Parsifal can break this spell, not by force or might, and not by giving orders, but by asking questions. He watches the courtiers process about the hall with mysterious objects (including something called a grail, which could be a chalice or a stone). Still, though he is baffled by the situation and the intense suffering of the king, he doesn't speak; someone told him once that it is not polite to ask questions. So nothing changes. He's given a fine dinner and chamber for the night. When he wakes in the morning, the castle has disappeared, and eventually he finds his way out of the wasteland as best he can.

But when you fail a test, you usually have to face it again. And Parsifal does. First, however, he faces the wrath of Cundry, a wise, ferocious, and hideous witch. With total contempt, she upbraids him mercilessly for his callousness and witlessness in not asking the questions that could have returned the Fisher King and his land to health. She excoriates him publicly for pretending to be a knight, while lacking the compassion to even inquire. Parsifal's cousin Sigune is another female figure who grieves over his failure to go to the roots of the suffering he encountered in the wasteland. Parsifal humbly listens to them both, and eventually determines to return to the Castle of the Fisher King, at all costs.

Many obstacles and distractions would block Parsifal's return, including not knowing how to find his way back to the wasteland. But finally he makes it, without a map, and sees rising before him the castle of the Fisher King. This time, as he enters the great hall, he walks right up to the king, still lying in pain on his royal couch, and asks him: "Sire, what aileth thee?"

At that simple question (what's the matter? how do you feel?) and the straightforward, compassionate interest it brought, the king rose from the couch, color in his cheeks, vigor in his body. And rejoicing filled the castle and the land, as with that question life returned, consciousness came back.

There was another question too, that Parsifal remembered to ask: "Whom doth it serve?". . .

Could this second question, "Whom doth it serve?," refer to the suffering itself? As in "who profits from your present condition?" or "what's the pay-off?"

To complete the narrative, Parsifal becomes the next guardian of the Grail. Reunited with his cherished wife, Condwiramurs, he discovers that the love she ignited in him is not separate from the power that can cause the wasteland to bloom again.

Sources: Chretien de Troie and Wolfram von Eschenbach, who first wrote down this story in the 12th century...

## QUESTIONING NUCLEAR WAR

The nature of strategic questioning may well uncover upsetting feelings on the part of the person being questioned. Deborah Lubar<sup>3</sup> wrote a moving account of a door-to-door listening exercise she undertook on the issue of nuclear war. Her task was to find out what people were thinking, rather than trying to convince them of anything. Pad in hand she introduced herself, and asked the following questions:

"What do you think the greatest problem facing the world is today?"

"What do you consider the chances of nuclear war to be?"

"What do you think would make our country safe and strong?"

While these are not particularly dynamic questions, they are open and inviting of deep thinking. She came to a house where a man grudgingly let her in ... and then turned quite hostile. When she asked him about nuclear war he barked, "No, no no, I don't have time for these ridiculous questions." She left stunned by his rudeness.

A few minutes later, she was coming out of another house. There the man stood with his arms crossed, waiting for her. "What do you expect me to do about it?" he demanded belligerently. Now she had a problem. She opened up an issue and it was clear that it was difficult for him to deal with his fear and helplessness.

He said, "I'm sorry I threw you out of my house, but what do you expect me to do about it? For God's sake what do you want?" They went for a walk as he pelted her with questions. Finally, he shook her hand and walked away.

The next day, Deborah followed an impulse and went back to the man's house. She felt a bit like a fool. What excuse could she give for returning? Finally she just went to the door. The man answered, surprised but pleased to see her. He told her that he had a horrible night, sweating through nightmares about nuclear war.

He had an emotionally sensitive button, as we all do, that is about control and change. Deborah's questions pushed that button. Immediately he felt his helplessness and his fear of how much he cared. It might sometimes look like apathy, but I think apathy is more accurately interpreted as fear of caring too much.

They talked of many things until the man realized he was late for work. At the door he took her hands and they looked at each other straight in the eye. Deborah later wrote that, "What we learned of one another that morning was profoundly intimate and it had only to do with our common bond as two human beings groping in the dark to confront the difficult times we live in."

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from a story in my book, *Heart Politics*, pp 167-168. The concepts in this paper are not derived from library research. I know that a wide variety of questioning taxonomies and concepts are available in a variety of fields. These ideas come from my reading "the world", as Emerson would say, rather than reading books. Feel free to take what serves you and delete the rest. Purity is not necessary. I would only request that you apply the term "Strategic Questioning" to the use of dynamic questions seeking for new ideas rather than using any question and calling it a strategic question.

## SUBTLETIES OF STRATEGIC QUESTIONING

In a workshop we developed this scenario. It may help to clarify some of the subtler parts of strategic questioning.

Q. I saw my neighbor kill a snake in the garden the other day. How could I have used strategic questioning to convince him to stop doing that?

A. First of all you cannot use strategic questioning to convince anyone of anything. Persuasion techniques would be better used for such a specific task. But there are some questions, which would help you enlist your neighbor's help in protecting life on your land. It might be useful to think less of convincing and more of co-creating a neighborhood system, which meets your needs, your neighbor's needs and the snake's needs.

Suppose the conversation went like this:

STEVE: Hi. I noticed you killing a snake in the garden yesterday. I was wondering why you did that?

NEIGHBOR: I don't like snakes and I am afraid they will hurt my children. STEVE: Was it a poisonous snake?

NEIGHBOR: I don't know.

STEVE: I have a book that shows which snakes are poisonous. Would you like to see it?

NEIGHBOR: Well, thank you, but I really hate snakes--whether they are poisonous or not.

STEVE: Why?

NEIGHBOR: Well I don't know. I just feel creepy and frightened when I see them around here.

Now here some real information may be needed--like how the snakes keep the rat population down etc. How deeply you love snakes and how disturbed you felt all night thinking about the killing of the snake.

STEVE: I surely respect your desire to protect your children from poisonous snakes. Are there other ways to protect your kids without killing snakes? What do you feel when you kill the snake?

NEIGHBOR: I don't feel anything.

STEVE: Are you sure?

NEIGHBOR: Yeah. Actually it took a lot of energy and messed up the yard.

STEVE: It took up time did it?

NEIGHBOR: Yeah.

STEVE: Is there anything else you could do with your time, seeing how it was such an effort? (laughter)

Wait a moment, here. Steve is going for a deeper feeling here. Best to unify with the feeling already given rather than try to manipulate it.

Try: I'm sorry that happened to you. That will encourage more feelings rather than staying with the tiny feelings already mentioned.

STEVE: It must have been a bit of a nuisance for you to go out and kill a snake and I'm sorry about that. Let's hope that there are not many more in the yard that will upset you.

Now Steve is on the same side as the neighbor. They both have a common problem. Now they can work together. Further discussion might ensue. Other questions which might lead you to new dimensions of your promotion of life on your land:

What are other problems you see in living here that we could work on together?

How could we make our block a really great place for life--ours and other species?

What would it take for you to be able to live here without killing the snakes?

What kind of support from me and your other neighbors do you need to achieve your goals around here? What kind of support do you need to protect the snakes?

People know far more things they want to do for their community and for life than they presently know how or have the support to do.

Q. What if I get over to my neighbor's house and I get so interested in making friends that I forget to mention the snakes? What if I lose myself in the transaction?

A. This is a very important point in strategic questioning. It is common among human beings to be addicted to comfort. There are moments when this addiction to comfort is likely to take over. In learning how to live in relationship with our family, our neighbors, other creatures of the earth, those very different from us, we will have to learn to give up this addiction to comfort. We must keep our heart connection strong and clear with those whose life is on the line and for whom we speak. If we work on behalf of other beings, we must stay clear about our feelings for them, and our allegiance to them. Sometimes we must speak and act for rivers or bears or

environments that cannot speak for themselves. In this case it is important to spend time appreciating these environmental friends, letting them speak to our hearts and refreshing our allegiance to them.

The Council of All Beings ritual developed by Joanna Macy and John Seed is particularly helpful in this regard. Environmentalists need to go to the rivers and forests more often to inspire their work and cleanse their hearts. When you come back from the neighbor's house you may need to sit down and imagine yourself accountable to the snakes. What would you say to them? How would you explain your actions with the neighbor in light of what is happening to the snake's family? What would that conversation be like?

STEVE: Hello, friend snake. I went over to talk with the neighbor but he was so big and brusque that I was a little afraid to bring up the killing of your family member.

SNAKE: What kind of a friend are you? Here we are having a holocaust in our species and you get shy about it. How can I count on you? What will it take for you to be a strong ally? (This is an example of some very good strategic questioning on the part of the snake.)

Strategic questioning is all about relationship and openness. How open are we to life on the earth--the neighbor, ourselves and the snake? And how shall we be friends on the same land? How can we open to each other so that our lives can not only survive but also thrive?

Strategic questioning serves these goals and helps us find our way to new and deeper relationships. There is a part of each of us that desires to keep life static. Isn't it peculiar? Don't you wonder why it is that when we're changing we're also the most alive, the juiciest, and the most open? But we fear change the most. It's a puzzlement isn't it? A real puzzlement.

## CHAPTER 7

### PRACTICING STRATEGIC QUESTIONING

You can practice strategic questioning through everyday conversation. I would urge you to learn by practicing in twos and threes, as it is very difficult to think of long lever questions while listening one on one in a conversation. Listening is challenging, thinking of long lever questions is challenging, and living in the world is hard. So I think it is easier to learn to ask strategic questions where you can sit back a bit, observe and get enough distance to examine the unexamined assumptions, and think of the unaskable and long lever questions.

Strategic questioning is witnessing the human family one person at a time, or one group at a time, struggling with the need to find a better way to weed their row and a better relationship to the weeds. Strategic questioning is a way of remembering and a witnessing process. This tool of strategic questioning can be trusted precisely because it is risky. If it is done ethically the questioner does not control the outcome. This is in contrast to regular polling which, by limiting the options, by wording the questions and answers, controls the outcome and influences the direction of the answers. In strategic questioning there is no limit to the things that a question might open up, or to the options that might be explored.

When the questioner reflects upon what she has heard, she may discuss it with her political group. When you deeply understand the change view of a people, when you know what they are waiting for leadership to do, you are prepared to create a strategy, which will have large participation and success. Strategic questioning can be a personal process if used between two people for their own growth and change, or it can be a political process when considering changes for the common good. When working with an individual, the area of questioning will probably be set by the questionee. However, in a political process the area of questioning may be set by the political agenda of the group. If the questions are really open they will allow a wide range of answers to emerge. All the answers are honored and valued unless they are contrary to nonviolence or reasonable laws.

When the questioner returns to her group, she then, in discussion with fellow questioners, talks about what she has heard, what common concerns are in the context with which they are working, and the strategic implications of what they have heard. What results may be a reorientation of a group's/person's political stance and organizational strategy toward more effectiveness, based on a reassessment of the actual reality of the situation and the group's/person's ability to deal with it. Coincidental to that could be better internal morale and structure, better intra-group relations, reinvigorated enthusiasms, etc.

Strategic questioning is deeply personal. Even sex and money pale in contrast to our deep feelings about the dreams and fears we have about the health of the earth and our own society. The current political system is characterized by static and cynical thinking which only barely masks our fears and dreams about our collective lives. I do not see apathy in our citizenry; I see a deep fear of caring too much and a fear of being disappointed. I see a passive people who are being fed information about the world in passive and isolating ways and who are afraid they will lose what they have if they challenge that passivity. I also see a people who are experiencing change and the shock that accompanies this as people try to figure out the implications on their lives and institutions. I see people longing for a way to move to a better relationship with themselves, with their families and with their society.

There are so few ways we can show our caring without risking being ripped off or manipulated into some ego driven sectarian campaign. We have learned to suspect group-think. This has left us unable to acknowledge our longings for political change. If politics is only defined by the existing political alternatives, then we are in real trouble. When a group asks us to participate in the strategies we already believe in, we will be more ready to take risks, to go to the edge of power and touch it for ourselves. So let us start with deep questioning where the alternatives are not limited. Let us find out what our neighbors and co-workers really think. Then when we have heard enough of what people long to do, to be, let us go forward with a strategy which comes from the people.

I encourage you to ask yourself, "What would it take for me to practice strategic questioning?"

## WARNINGS

Strategic questioning is a very powerful medium socially and personally. It may change the listener as well as the person being questioned. When we open ourselves to another point of view, our own ideas will have to shift to take into account new information. If you want to control the outcome, if you are really fundraising and using questioning as a ploy to get a person's trust, if you take satisfaction in conversion, please do not practice strategic questioning. If you are unwilling to enter into a communication with real differences in a non-defensive way, you will have trouble learning how to question.

## REMEMBER:

- ❖ Questioning is a basic tool of rebellion
- ❖ Democracy requires participation at all levels of decision making
- ❖ Each person is worthy of respect. We do not have to agree with their ideas in order to listen, show respect and try to understand them.
- ❖ Keep your own opinions in your pocket.
- ❖ Take brief notes but mostly look at the person squarely in the eye.
- ❖ Listen to what is occurring inside your imagination and creative thinking.
- ❖ When new ideas occur to you, write them down. Do not begin to promote them.
- ❖ Avoid boosterism.
- ❖ Listen, encourage, respect each person. Try to understand where each questionee is coming from, what informs their opinions, and who else shares those opinions.

ALWAYS THANK THE PERSON ANSWERING YOUR QUESTIONS. OUR SOCIAL CARING AND VISIONS ARE OFTEN A VERY PRIVATE AND PERSONAL PART OF OUR CHARACTER.

Remind them what use will be made of their ideas.

The listening exercises in strategic questioning have many uses and consequences in the life of the group or in the life of an individual in the group. The primary result is to minimize the isolation which

organizers experience in their day-to-day lives. Organizers often live in a subculture which does not allow them to dialogue with the ordinary people of their society and therefore they do not understand how those members of the society hold the issue that they are concerned about. Groups have reported an increase in commitment, and a new understanding of how the society does appreciate their point of view and support their work.

There is some evidence that strategic questioning can be useful in times of disaster or socially disruptive events. Students entering the workshop one morning were very concerned about the effects a racially divisive murder the evening before would have upon their community. Everyone was wondering what could be done to avoid the social disruption that might occur. The fear in the group was quite high. We decided to use strategic questioning as a way of moving the group through its own fear, and then bring forth ideas for community action. Since we know that people who talk in an open and accepting atmosphere are able to think better, it seemed likely that in a situation of high social fear, asking strategic questions on the street or in particularly key groups might have the affect of generating more alternative actions.

In institutions where a major change has been announced, using strategic questioning in lunchrooms and around the coffee machines will help people move from a reactive position to the consideration of more alternatives. We studied one such organization using strategic questioning right after a major restructuring had been announced. Everyone was afraid they were going to lose their job, be demoted or in other ways lose what they had gained over the years. In staff meetings they used strategic questioning, and assigned various people to be interviewers to look for fresh responses to the announcement.

Several people reported that after the strategic questioning sessions they felt more in control of what was happening to them; some people reported that their consumption of alcohol, which had increased with the announcement, decreased with the strategic questioning sessions. They felt less anxious and more connected to their coworkers, and more confident that together they could find appropriate responses to the situation.

Clearly, when you have debriefed the strategic questioning sessions, you have material for crafting speakers training, leaflets, and speeches about the subject. You are in a better position to answer objections, use logic, employ clear language and invite people to participate in specific aspects of a campaign in which they would have confidence from their change view. Strategic questioning was used by a city council to test various ideas. A doctoral thesis has been written by Lynn Carson in Lismore, Australia to evaluate the use of strategic questioning in determining public policy. This study reported that strategic questioning was useful but not magical.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **GO FORTH AND QUESTION!**

We can act. We must accept the truth that whatever we do - or don't do - impacts on the ways of life we all share. We are always involved even if we are sitting on the sideline. We are consuming resources, having relationships, working toward goals. There is no way we are not involved in what is happening. The question is, How best can we be involved? We can start with deep and dynamic listening and questioning where the solutions are limited only by our imaginations. Our neighbors and co-workers have important strategic information. So do we. When we listen deep into the heart where courage and intelligence lurk, strategies may be liberated into action.

### **FREEDOM and CHOICE**

Living a dynamic, zestful, and vibrant life is an element of freedom. Seeing ourselves as being able to choose from many options that we create for ourselves about our future helps us break out of boxes and move into a more creative relationship with our life force. Strategic questioning, if it can help in this process, may be a liberating instrument for groups and for individuals. For so long we have been taught to ask questions to which the answers are known, that we may forget to ask those questions which we can create the answers to. The more we are listened to and learn to listen to ourselves, the more dynamic and liberating can be our strategies for change.

Change is not a prison sentence. It is an opportunity to make new and fresh decisions in the moment knowing that in the next moment, a different decision may be called for. Change is not occasional in a dynamic life, but is a constant process. It is part of the real-life forces of which there is always change. Even though I may

resist change, it is my observation that I feel the most alive when adapting to new circumstances in a fresh way. Our lives may be more like the meandering of a river; rarely staying in the same path for very long. While it is true that habits and our security are important to us, we naturally seek a more efficient way of doing something we have done for years, a better response to an old stimuli, and a fresh understanding of old situations.

Strategic questioning can be used in any conversation in any situation. Just remember--stay open to new alternatives, avoid yes/no questions. Always look for more than two options. Even if you're not naturally a very open person, adopting these strategies may help you develop habits of openness and freedom.

Ask yourself questions. Give yourself answers. Get answers from others. We are all wiser than we know. Go for freedom. A final warning: if you submit yourself to strategic questioning be warned that you may uncover hidden power and dreams inside of you which may change your entire life. You may find yourself taking actions you did not expect, acting from a sense of power and commitment that you have denied for many years. Indeed, you may find yourself cleaning a river seven thousand miles from home.

*Thanks to so many people who have helped in bringing these ideas forward and for support in this form: Catherine Alport, Stewart Anderson, Rita Archibald, Bobbie Allen, Andre Carothers, Lyn Carson, Kath Fisher, Bob Fuller, Raewyn Gainsford, Jan Hartsough, Vivian Hutchinson, Barbara Green, Tova Green, Peter Hamilton, Barbara Hazard, Polly Howells, Sue and Colin Lennox, Joanna Macy, Sue Meller, Helena Meyer-Knapp, Sonja Parker, Carol Perry, Catherine Porter, Marian Post, Tom Quinn, Bev Ramsey, Frank Rubinfeld, Colin Russo, Katrina Shields, Cornelia Schultz, Brian Slapp, John and Margo Steiner, Nancy Taylor, Marion Weber, and Stuart White ... and my support group for editing and general support.*

If you have comments or suggestions to make this booklet better I would greatly appreciate hearing from you. Send to **fpeavey@igc.org** or by snail mail: 3181 Mission Street #30, San Francisco, CA 94110. If you want to know about social change work and Crabgrass (the organization I choose to work with) see our web page: **www.crabgrass.org**.

This paper was downloaded from ASHE  
<http://www.humanecology.com.au>  
 It's about a way of being.