



Human Becoming – Becoming Human

Heinz von Foerster Festschrift

Invitation to Dance

A Conversation with Heinz von Foerster

Meeting with Heinz von Foerster last month at his home nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains, it was my hope that he discuss some of the premisses that have underwritten not just his professional life as a cybernetician, but his personal life extending from youth in Vienna to a variety of entrepreneurial adventures in this country. Seated with the 88-year-old physicist - his frail body somehow persistent, eyes flashing with intellectual vigor - what emerged was a clear commitment to a set of guiding principles. Famed as a robust raconteur, von Foerster explicated his dedication to the path that has led him, with characteristic dignity, to these penultimate days he enjoys at Rattlesnake Hill in coastal California.

Q: Do you think that in the end, from where you are right now, that you've been an inventor or a discoverer?

A: Always an inventor. A discovery means, you see, this is to uncover, to take a blanket away. Discover means you undo a cover from a thing which is already there. Take a cover *off*. The inventor is doing something which is new, which is not already there.

And my position is, we create all the time, when we're sitting down and talking with each other. It's always something absolutely new, which was never there before.

The discoverer position, which people are very fond to maintain, is in a sense being *not* responsible for that which you are talking about. Because if you are only taking a cover away from something which is already there, then you are only telling how it is. With this, you avoid all the responsibility. This was brought home to me at a class I had at Stanford University Journalism School. There was a banner that said "Tell it Like It is"-so I walk into that class and tell them, "my God gentlemen, do you want to get rid of the responsibility of being a writer by telling it like it *is*?" Nobody knows how it *is*. It *is* how you tell it.

That is very important. Because now you see you create the reality which all the people take as it is.

It *is* as you tell it. This point is so important yet most people don't recognize it.

Q: Do you feel that you've helped to create reality by doing the cybernetics you've engaged in?

A: I have no idea whether I have. I'm just saying what I hope somebody will listen to.

Q: Who is doing the real inventing today?

A: Everybody is, only they want not to recognize that. Everybody who opens his mouth says something, invents something that has never been said before - because we are not machines. You say a new thing, even if it's simply a question that is clumsy, or as silly or as funny as you wish. There are no

stupid questions-there are only stupid answers. *Ja?*

Q: Why do we not want to accept responsibility?

A: Because the most horrible thing is to be responsible for something. We have invented every trick to avoid responsibility. One way is to invent a hierarchy if you're an institutional organization. In a hierarchy everybody can say, 'I didn't want to do it, I was told to do it.' That gets rid of responsibility.

Or there are the famous statements from politicians-"I had no choice.;" And the moment somebody says that, they are really saying 'I refuse the responsibility for what I'm doing.' They always have all the choices, *Ja?*

Q: So it's hard to accept responsibility.

A: Yes-that's why we invent things like hierarchy - and objectivity. Objectivity is one of the great tricks to get rid of responsibility.

You know what objectivity is all about-it says that the properties of the observer shall not enter a description of his observation. Now if that's so, what remains? No description, no observation. Because these are all properties of the observer.

Q: Don't you think that language, however, traps us into a subject-object orientation?

A: Oh yes, it does that all the time.

Q: How then can we make sense, speak meaningfully to each other, and yet still avoid reference to objectivity? Don't we almost have to reinvent language?

A: No. We can use language as a dance. Language for me is an invitation to dance. When we are dancing we are using language to suggest to each other what steps we would like to do.

Two partners are dancing out on a big floor-and nobody leads. Both lead. Both help the other to make the swing to the right, to the left, etc. These steps are not prescribed. Steps are only there as a reference to be able to use them. When we do a waltz we know how to do a waltz, but whether we do it to the left or the right, forward, backward, is a choice of the couple. And not the choice of he or she.

So when we are talking with each other, we are in dialogue and invent what we both wish the other would invent *with me*. Togetherness is the point in a dialogue. And language is an invitation to dialogue and not an invitation to monologue.

Q: How can someone in the everyday world see this most easily, this dance metaphor? In poetry?

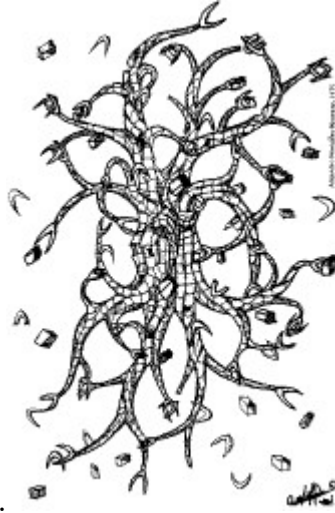
A: I think it is played out in every way that anybody talks to each other. If I buy a ticket for the movie, I have a conversation with the lady behind the window. And I smile, and she smiles back. And we have become friends for two seconds. And we have contacted another human being. And this is probably what makes some people a little bit queasy about me. This is my personal fun which I have in life, to contact other people in such a way that the other is taking notice of me.

You know my funny statement - the hearer and not the speaker determines the meaning of an utterance. And if you know that, then you need to determine how you must speak so that the hearer is dancing with you.

Q: So it makes sense that someone who is a performer-you-would use some of that body language to

help that dance take place.

A: Yes. But I don't play the tricks. What I do is, I aim that way. If I step up to the ticket counter, I know



I'm speaking to a human being.

[He conveys an incident in which he was trying on shoes and he sensed immediately that something was wrong with the salesperson.] I said, 'what is wrong?' She said she had destroyed her car today, and she began crying. And you see, this is what happens. I aim at the human being.[He relates another story about a huge international conference in Hamburg in one of the largest conference centers in the world.]

So I came to this huge psychiatric conference with all the most important, great professors of the field. I was there 2 minutes before starting time. I went to a room where I could get a cup of coffee. And here were these *giants* of social psychiatry, and I started introducing myself and then began to look for the coffee. It was on a far table and next to it was a big leather couch. There was a woman sitting on the couch who was clearly in distress. I went over to her and asked if I can help her. No, I have an extraordinary miserable earache, she tells me. I can't even think, I can't even see. I offer her my Tylenol. I call someone over to ask whether there's a doctor who can help, and ask if he can take the lady to the doctor. As she went out to see the doctor she thanked me.

I thought this was interesting. You need a physicist from California for the international conference of social psychiatrists to find out that the wife of one has earaches and can't think.

The point is, it was so obvious to me. In a tenth of a second, I could see this. And here the great *professores* could not even tell that one of them was in distress.

Q: You have very strong diagnostic skills.

A: No I'm just feeling my way around. I always ask, Who is the other? I always think about the other. The other is the one who interprets my experience.

Q: Yes, and that I think is why you tell stories. You tell a great many stories - but it's never just to talk about yourself. You are engaging your listener. You have always told stories have you not?

A: Yes-of course. Our family was a story-telling family. My grandmother was telling stories, my uncle was telling stories, we were all always telling stories. Perhaps it's a Viennese habit-it could be a cultural hang-up. [He laughs.]

Q: It could explain why conversation became so important to you.

A: My uncle was in Siberia, my father was in Serbia. One of my uncle's co-prisoners escaped, my uncle told him to contact my mother and tell her that he was still alive. So he left. Six months later, he had walked from Siberia and popped up in Vienna. Which was possible in the year 1916, because it was before the collapse of the Russian Empire. So he came to my grandmother and said I have a letter from your son Ervin in Siberia. She invited him in for a coffee and asked how he had made it, how he had succeeded in walking for six months from Siberia to Vienna. And he says, yes it was tough. And that was the story. That was an example in our family of good story telling.

Very quick and to the point. He laughs.

Q: Why didn't cybernetics become a mainstream endeavor? Why don't people all over the United States know what cybernetics is?

A: But look! It is. Cybernetics is in every second word. If you open the newspaper there is cyber space, cyber sex, cyber this and cyber that. Everything is cyberized.

Q: That's not cybernetics, [we're both laughing]

A: No, but "cyber" is there. Look at terms like "feedback. " Everybody knows what feedback is. Cybernetics did that. Things of that sort. I think cybernetics connects underneath. It's implicit. Underneath, it's completely alive. But not explicit.

In some cases I find it more important that something is acting implicitly, than explicitly. Because the implicit has much more power.

Q: So you think that in a way it has infiltrated the intellectual mainstream?

A: Absolutely!. Nobody can talk without at least the presence of cybernetics being operational. The presence of these notions is absolutely alive, only not explicitly referred to.

I find it very powerful that it's underground. Because people are unaware of it - and therefore don't reject it.

[We laugh.]

Q: It's gone underground and we in fact use it whether we know it or not.

A: *Ja*, exactly.

Q: Who is furthering cybernetics today?

A: All the internet people, all computer people today. They are all cyberneticians whether they like it or not.

Q: In what sense, Heinz?

A: Because they initiate dialogues. Internet dialogues are initiated and then they expand over and over. You expand the network's interaction.

Q: So initiating conversations is critical. Why are conversations so important?

A: It's the humanness which is expressed in the conversation that is so important.

Q: And so conversations multiply the ways in which humanness is expressed?

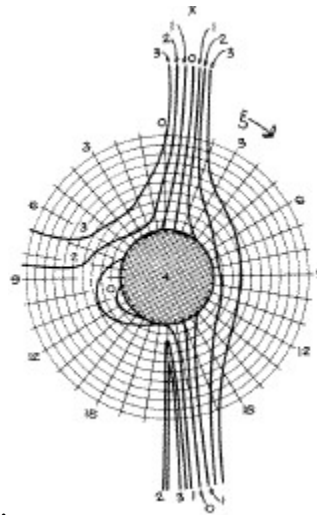
A: Exactly-and so you find your own. Because in the reflection, in the eyes of the other, your own humanity begins to develop. Which you cannot do in a monologue.

You have to dance with somebody else to recognize who you are.

Q: So you are a humanist?

A: I don't know that I'm a humanist-I'm entertaining myself. I enjoy myself-dancing together with somebody else.

Q: Has this been a goal in your life, this dancing with somebody else?



A: I don't know-that I have to leave to my observers.

The wonderful thing is that it crept by itself into the underground-because of its interesting usefulness. Look for instance how and understanding of systems, like teamwork, is used in corporations, teamwork in building a motor car-having teams who make the whole car. Twenty people build a car and they cooperate with each other and they feel very creative and not this passive trivial, mechanical labor. They can go home at the end of the day and say, "We built twenty cars. *We* did it."

Q: And this is the implicit conversation at work.

A: Absolutely-what they do is converse. Everybody gives the other something-to hold, or to put together. So it is a cooperative dance.

Q: Would that apply to making a movie? Or fighting a war?

A: Of course.

Q: Has your life itself evolved utilizing feedback? Have you learned, recursively, from the various conversations and, even mistakes that you made?

A: [He nods his head vigorously] Without them there wouldn't be any life at all. The whole thing is based on interaction. A living organism interacts with the universe-with every other thing. They are constantly rolling along and changing each other. And this is how life can function, because life is indeed a non-trivial system, *Ja*? Any action changes itself and changes all the rest.

There are two fundamental positions which one can take when talking about anything. The one is the

position that I can say, I'm sitting here and looking at the world as through a peephole at what's going on in this universe.

The other position is, I'm a part of the world. I am a member of it, not separated from the world. And whatever I do I change not only myself, I change the world as well.

But as far as looking back at my own life, funnily enough, I'm not reflecting about my life. I'm doing it.

Q: Is self-reflection something you've never done?

A: I'm always surprised that I've never done that. I don't reflect about my life. I can tell you lots of lovely stories about my life, but that is not reflecting about my life.

It's probably a cultural affair. We in my family, and the climate in Vienna - it was a story-telling climate.

I just don't reflect upon myself. I don't even reflect about whether I reflect or not. It's not my habit.

Q: Would you say that to be within the dance is better?

A: I'd say that it's a good thing. I would never say that anything's better. Better for whom? No, I don't see universal values-I don't like to play that game. Lots of people like to-I don't. I avoid universal judgments. I'd like to undermine them as much as possible, wherever I hear them. I was always like that. Yes, as a boy. I was always the worst student in class. I always understand that it's *me* who sees something a certain way. And that it's me who has a responsibility for saying that. I do not want to drop it and shift to other people. I want to say my thing and it is my thing.

But I would not make judgments for others. The point is-and this is a distinction I love to make-in morals you always tell the other how he has to act - "Thou shalt not." It's always told by someone who's outside the moral arena, telling someone else how to behave.

But ethics is when you say, "I shall" or "I shall not," when you make a decision how you want to be. We always have the freedom to decide what we want to become.

We are all free-we are damned to be free, as Ortega y Gasset said. I always thought this existential insight was great. Other people might think it's horrifying to be free. They would like to be told what to do.

I had several fascinating experiences as a child along with my cousin Martin - we were always playing together. We both became very interested in magic. And we got a gift package bought in one of those fun stores with lots of wonderful magic tricks for children. So we opened it and wanted to perform these things, and found that they were utterly silly. They had nothing to do with magic - it was just stupidity. So we thought-let's do some *real* magic. We were about 13 or 14-we observed that magic is exactly the same thing-the hearer, in this case the audience, - interprets or makes the meaning of what is being shown or talked about. So we have to think about what the others are experiencing when we do magic.

The question is: How do you tell a story so that it transforms? First to see an elephant on the stage and then suddenly it's gone. Of course it's not gone-they just don't see it. How do you persuade them that they don't see the elephant which is on the stage? That is the problem for the magician. [He grins.]

What it is of course is pure magic. You can't explain it-but you do it.

Magic can't be explained-it can just be done.

And much of my thinking comes from this period. Then later on slipping into the Vienna Circle of philosophers, particularly with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein whose *Tractatus* I knew by heart.

He would even talk to his family in terms of specific propositions in this work. But fortunately a nephew of Ludwig Wittgenstein was also enamored of this work and we would test each other about the propositions. So we knew uncle Ludwig very well.

This influences me very much-magic, Uncle Ludwig, and of course the idealistic school of philosophy, Schopenhauer, Kant, to some extent Nietzsche. The *apriori*, what is that except a trick to avoid responsibility.

He admits that he's still influenced by Wittgenstein and the rejection of a priori knowledge.

You cannot explain anything, you can only invite to dance. You don't reflect, you just do it.

Q: Is that why you have never written a book?

A: I don't have the breath for writing a book-I can write short stories, or little articles, this idea or that idea is illuminated by me, but I don't have the gigantic, taking a big breath and exhaling five hundred pages. I can exhale about 20.

Two difficulties which stop me from writing a book-the one was the first motto which Wittgenstein uses in his *Tractatus*. Everything which you understand you can say in three words. And the last words of the *Tractatus*: "Of which you cannot speak, you must pass over in silence."

Q: What do you think of people who do write books? Who go on and on and on?

A: They have never read Wittgenstein. [He laughs.] They are not ashamed to write a sentence which is four words long.

Q: You've said act so as to always increase choice. You've also said that the purpose of the brain is to compute a stable reality.

A: Yes, It is the function of the brain. The brain keeps us from exploding-actually I should have long ago exploded.

Q: How do those two statements work together?

A: The one is choice-the other is about reality. They don't conflict.

I have many choices of things even within just this discussion. And every question you ask me is an invitation to increase my number of choices, because I could tell you this, or that, etc. etc.

And what you do in your interview, is keeping me alive, to maintain the free choice of many other branches of the stories I'm going to tell you. While we are sitting here and I'm telling you this story, this reality is absolutely stable because you invited me to give you the story and here comes the stories. The point is to consider what kind of a cognitive network there must be in order that this stability which we experience is maintained.

That is the interesting question.

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