

## **Participatory Public Policy Microcosms:**

### **Diversity and Empathy as Generators of Creative Wholeness**

**by Rosa Zubizarreta**

#### **Abstract**

One limitation of the "majority wins" approach to democracy is its "argument-as-battle" mode of discourse, based on the underlying epistemological assumption that finding truth is best served by playing "king-of-the-hill". This dominator mode of discourse is embedded in our larger culture, yet alternatives are beginning to emerge. Within the realm of politics, the evolutionary impulse to work creatively with differences is currently manifesting significant democratic experiments whose underlying dynamics could be described metaphorically with the following equations: (microcosm of larger society) • (supportive facilitation) = holotropic outcome; (holotropic outcome) • (widespread storysharing) = societal learning. Two instances are explored briefly, MacLean's "Canadian experiment" and South Africa's Mont Fleur scenarios. A third is explored more fully: Vorarlberg, an Austrian state, has hosted more than 35 ad-hoc Civic Councils for generating high-quality participatory public policy inputs. These randomly-selected microcosms have repeatedly evoked collective wisdom, systemic insights, and powerful convergences. This work is coordinated by Vorarlberg's State Office for Future-Related Issues using Dynamic Facilitation, a non-linear, empathy-based methodology for the Civic Councils, and World Café for the subsequent public Civic Cafés. Given the role of local municipalities and regions in sponsoring these Councils, institutional good faith / responsiveness has been found as key for positive outcomes, modifying slightly the above equations. The wide-spread societal learning from these various collective experiments can be understood as generating shifts in our shared appreciative systems, as delineated by Vickers; also as steps toward high-leverage shifts in our shared paradigms, as described by Meadows.

## Participatory Public Policy Microcosms:

### Diversity and Empathy as Generators of Creative Wholeness

"We have an instinct for democracy because we have an instinct for wholeness; we get wholeness only through reciprocal relations, through infinitely expanding reciprocal relations. Democracy is really neither extending nor including merely, but creating wholes." Mary P. Follett<sup>1</sup>

"Only when we are thoroughly aware of the limited scope of every point of view are we on the road to the sought-for comprehension of the whole." Karl Mannheim<sup>2</sup>

*How might we be creative, together? How might we elicit greater collective wisdom, in support of our collective transition to a sustainable future?* From a hyper-individualistic perspective, such questions might not even make sense. Just as the "invisible hand" of the market place is supposed to aggregate millions of individual transactions to generate the best outcome for all, so, too, we might posit that the sum aggregate of our individual votes is the best that democracy might accomplish. We might even assume that "self-organization", the new "invisible hand", will weave together all of our individual actions for transformation into something more cohesive, without the need for any more explicit collective effort.

Yet I am working here from a different set of assumptions – that consciousness does not become more conscious, unconsciously; that the self-organization of living systems, depends on the presence of a supportive context; and that as humans, we have a deep well of resources that we can draw upon from our evolutionary past, as we move into creating our shared future. I will begin by expanding a bit on this last one.

From an indigenous perspective, our inheritance as human beings includes hundreds of thousands of years of valuable evolutionary experience. Before the emergence of "civilization" and its hierarchical forms of organization, we as humans lived in primarily hunter-gatherer cultures, where we developed not only a vast body of

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<sup>1</sup> Follett 1918, *The New State*, 157.

<sup>2</sup> Mannheim 1936, *Ideology and Utopia*, 105.

knowledge about our local ecosystems, but also the skills and practices of creating sustainable communities with one another. We need not look far to see the potential value of this kind of knowledge for our world today; as I write this essay, the blogosphere is buzzing about *indaba*, a South African form of consensus building that was influential during the Climate Talks in Paris.

These powerful indigenous formats for conflict transformation and group alignment often involve small, face-to-face groups. Despite Margaret Mead's oft-quoted words, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has" it may not be immediately obvious how the work of small groups, without any formal authority or great wealth, could serve to influence the larger systems in which we live. Thus, this is one of the questions I will be exploring here: *What might be the potential of certain kinds of small-group experience, to influence our huge complex societies?*

After exploring the potential of small groups to influence large systems, we will also be looking at, *What is possible within a small, highly diverse group? And how might our sense of what is possible, be influenced, by the assumptions that we bring to our work?* To illustrate these explorations, I will be referring to some actual experiments, focusing particularly on work that has taken place within the last ten years in the state of Vorarlberg, Austria. Using an innovative approach to participatory public policy making, their Office of Future-Related Issues (OFRI) has been working with an empathy-based small group process, to generate useful public policy inputs from microcosm groups that are intentionally diverse<sup>3</sup>.

Initial reports indicate that this process has repeatedly resulted in powerful experiences of collective insight for participants, as well as useful input for the sponsoring public agencies<sup>4</sup>. Yet at the same time, these experiences have also led observers to puzzle about "how this approach works"<sup>5</sup>. That puzzlement, in turn, has led

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<sup>3</sup> Trattig & Haderlap 2014, *Dynamic Facilitation – A Method for Culture Change*.

<sup>4</sup> Hellrigl & Lederer 2014, *Wisdom Councils in the Public Sector*.

<sup>5</sup> personal conversation with Manfred Hellrigl.

to the realization that a larger context needs to be offered, to support a broader understanding of this work.

And thus I will be starting with our understanding of the dialectic itself. This entails a third set of questions: *What are our underlying theories of how we arrive at knowledge? What are the underlying epistemological approaches through which we view the world, including our political life along with specific instances public participation? And how do these underlying assumptions structure our experience, making some things possible while precluding others?*

### From Argument as Battle to Collaborative Co-Creation

One of the limitations of current approaches to democracy consists in its basic mode of discourse, which we might characterize as organized by the metaphor of "argument-as-battle"<sup>6</sup>. While the political realm might present an extreme case, this dominator mode of discourse is embedded within our larger culture, including many of our societal knowledge generating systems; it is also embedded within all of us who have been socialized, to one degree or another, by these systems. Thus, all of us who seek to create new forms of relationship and a society based on partnership<sup>7</sup>, would do well to question the underlying epistemological assumptions of dominator forms of discourse – in particular, the assumption that finding truth is best served by engaging in grown-up versions of "king-of-the-hill", the childhood game whose objective is to knock others down in a race to the top.

Unfortunately, our unexamined assumptions end up shaping our behavior, which in turn ends up influencing the "facts" we encounter. On a practical level, research in brain psychology shows how the possibility of creative and complex thinking are shut down when humans are triggered into fight-flight-freeze mode, and how easily that shift can happen in a social context, especially as a result of threats to status such as potential

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<sup>6</sup> Lakoff & Johnson 1980, *Metaphors We Live By*.

<sup>7</sup> Eisler 1987, *The Chalice and the Blade*.

loss of face<sup>8</sup>. Thus, discourses structured in a win-lose format tend to draw out defensive kinds of human behaviors, and so confirm pessimistic appraisals of human nature.

Yet in different contexts, different experiences are possible. A recent gem in this area is Briskin, Erickson, Ott and Callanan's exploration of collective wisdom, where they reflect on the supportive conditions that allow small groups of highly diverse humans are to engage with their differences in a creative manner<sup>9</sup>. Some of us have been discovering that this can take place in ways that are much more effective than previously thought possible. In earlier writings, I have often used the phrase "maximizing creative tension while minimizing interpersonal anxiety" as a way to summarize a detailed overview of how empathy-based group facilitation can support this kind of collaborative sense-making process<sup>10</sup>. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it is possible for critical thinking and creative thinking to co-exist, and for the individual and the collective to not be locked in a zero-sum game. More on that will follow in a later section. But first, *what is the relevance of this? Even if a small group is able to engage their differences both openly and creatively, how might this effectively influence larger systems?*

### Microcosms Influencing Macrocosms

Within the realm of politics, the evolutionary impulse to work creatively with differences is currently manifesting in the form of significant democratic experiments. Some of these experiments involve small "microcosm" groups that reflect the broader diversity present within the larger whole. Two relatively well-known instances are Maclean's "Canadian experiment"<sup>11</sup> and South Africa's Mont Fleur scenarios<sup>12</sup>. In both situations, a pending social crisis inspired a particular kind of social experiment. In each case, a microcosm of the larger society was brought together for a brief period of time, and supported with high-quality facilitation -- highly-skilled negotiation in the former, and scenario-planning in the latter.

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<sup>8</sup> Rock 2008, *SCARF: A brain-based model*

<sup>9</sup> Briskin, Erickson, Ott, & Callanan, 2009, *The Power of Collective Wisdom*.

<sup>10</sup> Zubizarreta 2014, *From Conflict to Creative Collaboration*: 19.

<sup>11</sup> Atlee 2003, *The Tao of Democracy*: 130-143.

<sup>12</sup> Kahane n.d., *Mont Fleur Scenarios*: 1-5.

In both cases, the group arrived at an outcome that was holotropic, in the sense that it was oriented toward the well-being of the larger whole. In the Maclean's case, the group outcome pointed toward the potential of mutual respect, appreciation, and understanding among Anglophones and Francophones<sup>13</sup>; in the Mont Fleur scenarios, the group agreed on a set of four possible scenarios for the future of their country, along with a shared understanding of the risks involved in the three less-preferred scenarios<sup>14</sup>.

Also in each case, the outcomes of the work of the highly diverse small group was publicized widely via popular media, thus influencing public consciousness. Also, in each case it turned out that a looming social crisis was averted, undoubtedly as a result of multiple factors. It is unlikely that we could determine the degree of causality involved in either instance, since we are looking at the realms of appreciation and influence rather than of control<sup>15</sup>. Still, both experiments are iconic examples of how the work of a small, diverse group can help shift the zeitgeist of the larger social milieu.

These two instances are also illustrations of new form of leadership, conversational leadership<sup>16</sup>. In both cases, the designers of the process were helping to shift the context, the field in which innumerable conversations are taking place, by creating conditions for collective intelligence to emerge<sup>17</sup>.

I have created the following equations as a metaphorical description of the underlying dynamics of these two experiments:

(microcosm of larger society) • (supportive facilitation) = holotropic outcome;

(holotropic outcome) • (widespread storysharing) = societal learning

While both of the Canadian and South African instances merit further study, what I will be turning to now is a series of participatory public policy efforts in Vorarlberg, an

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<sup>13</sup> Atlee n.d., *Canadian Adversaries Take a Break to Dream*

<sup>14</sup> Kahane n.d., *Mont Fleur Scenarios*

<sup>15</sup> Smith 2009, *The Creative Power*

<sup>16</sup> Hurley & Brown 2009, *Conversational Leadership*

<sup>17</sup> Atlee 2012, *Empowering Public Wisdom*

Austrian state which has hosted 35+ ad-hoc Civic Councils date. Each of these experiments also involves a diverse and well-facilitated microcosm, whose outcomes have then shared been more broadly with a larger public<sup>18</sup>. Yet instead of being used on a one-time basis to address a looming crisis, this model is being used in Austria in an ongoing manner, to generate high-quality input to a participatory public policy process.

## The Vorarlberg model

### Overview

Supported by Vorarlberg's Office for Future-Related Issues (OFRI), each time a Civic Council is convened to address a particular policy issue, a different group of randomly-selected citizens is chosen. Both anecdotal reports as well as an initial evaluation indicate that these different randomly-selected microcosms repeatedly elicit systemic insights and collective wisdom from participants, in addition to arriving at strong convergences on their public policy recommendations<sup>19</sup>. Another outcome often reported, is the positive impact on the relationship between citizens and public administrators / public officials<sup>20</sup>.

The facilitation format used in the Vorarlberg model is not based on negotiation expertise, as in the Canadian Experiment, nor scenario-planning methodologies, as in the Mont Fleur dialogues. Instead, the Civic Councils are supported with Dynamic Facilitation, a non-linear, empathy-based methodology created by U.S. consultant Jim Rough, originally designed to "evoke creativity of both head and heart"<sup>21</sup>. In a later section, I will be quoting extensively from an article by two Council facilitators,

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<sup>18</sup> The parallel between the Mont Fleur Dialogues described above, and the Wisdom Council / Civic Council model to be described next, was first pointed out by Matthias zur Bosen.

<sup>19</sup> Hellrigl & Lederer 2014, *Wisdom Councils in the Public Sector*; see also Strele, Lüdeman, & Nanz 2012, *Wisdom Councils in Austria*

<sup>20</sup> Trattinig & Haderlap 2014, *Dynamic Facilitation*

<sup>21</sup> Rough 2002, *Society's Breakthrough*: 131-132.

describing the flavor of the work they do as well as the experiences reported by participants.

After the initial work of the Council is completed, subsequent Civic Cafés are hosted as public forums where the Civic Council shares the story of how it arrived at its outcomes. These Civic Cafés are structured using World Café methodology, to support a wider public conversation with regard to the ad-hoc Council's outcomes.<sup>22</sup> This conversational format excels at supporting a large group to explore common concerns and issues, via numerous small group conversations<sup>23</sup>; in this particular application, it has shown itself to be very useful for helping a group digest, metabolize, and respond in a creative manner, to a set of creative inputs.

Also during the Civic Café, the third step in the Vorarlberg model is initiated. This consists a Responder Group, comprised of a mixture of government administrators, one or two former members of the just-concluded Civic Council, and a few citizen volunteers from the larger Civic Café. This group is tasked with meeting monthly, in order to track the input from the Civic Council and the Civic Café, as it makes its way through the bureaucracy of the local government. The Responder Group gathers information about the administrative response to this input, including what new initiatives are being created in response to the Civic Council's recommendations, and then reports back to the larger community within six months' time<sup>24</sup>.

### Systemic Learnings

Given the role of local municipalities, regions, and state offices in sponsoring these Councils, the presence of institutional good faith / responsiveness has been found to be key for positive outcomes. One difficulty encountered thus far could be regarded as a side-effect of any model that has experienced some success: others may hear about this and seek to replicate the model, without necessarily being willing to make all of the

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<sup>22</sup> Hellrigl & Lederer 2014, *Wisdom Councils in the Public Sector*

<sup>23</sup> Brown & Isaacs 2005, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures*

<sup>24</sup> Hellrigl & Lederer 2014, *Wisdom Councils in the Public Sector*

necessary investments. In this case, a key part of the investment includes a commitment to implement at least some of the Council's recommendations.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, there is no requirement that a governing body agree to implementing any or all of the Council's recommendations; that would be like signing a blank check. However, it *is* necessary for the sponsoring public agency to make a good-faith effort to implement at least some of the Council's recommendations, as well as to communicate their reasoning for those recommendations they are choosing to decline, in order for the project to generate greater societal trust. Otherwise, it is likely to reap negative consequences instead, in the form of further cynicism and disillusionment with government.

Another challenge has been the difficulty some potential sponsors encounter, while contemplating the possibility of engaging in this methodology. Most officials need to stay on the safe side, and the stakes of engaging in an experimental process can be high; engaging in something that is perceived as a mistake or a failure could be damaging politically. All of this makes it more challenging for potential sponsors, to agree to engage in an open-ended process.<sup>26</sup> Thus, some of OFRI's learnings include the need for building relationships with applicants and offering them small-scale experiences of the process first, as well as for vetting applicants carefully and being highly selective about the invitations they choose to accept.<sup>27</sup>

From all of this, it becomes clear that with the Vorarlberg instance, our earlier equations are insufficient:

(microcosm of larger society) • (supportive facilitation) = holotropic outcome;

(holotropic outcome) • (widespread storysharing) = societal learning

Instead, given that these experiments have been sponsored by a various municipalities, regional districts, and state offices, there has been an implicit expectation

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<sup>25</sup> Hellrigl & Lederer 2014, *Wisdom Councils in the Public Sector*

<sup>26</sup> personal communication with Martin Rausch

<sup>27</sup> personal communication with Martin Rausch and Michael Lederer

created that the sponsoring entity would respond in some way, to the outcomes of the Civic Council. Thus, a new, modified set of equations could be written as follows:

(microcosm of larger society) • (supportive facilitation) = holotropic outcome;

(holotropic outcome) • (widespread storysharing) • (responsiveness of sponsoring agency) = societal learning + stronger trust between citizens and government

Thus, we can see that if the responsiveness of the sponsoring agency cannot be metaphorically represented by a positive number, the initial holotropic outcome of the small group will not, by itself, result in a positive societal outcome – no matter how positive it may have been.

However, in the majority of cases throughout Vorarlberg and its neighboring regions, it seems that the sponsoring bodies have generally been responsive, and thus strongly positive outcomes have come about. We have anecdotal evidence of notable examples include a recent award-winning Civic Council on the refugee crisis<sup>28</sup>, as well as a set of Councils regarding the repurposing of the site of a former concentration camp<sup>29</sup>. An evaluation conducted before these two more recent examples showed positive findings as well<sup>30</sup>. Still, it would be helpful to have more research on the outcomes this innovative process, as well as on the systemic conditions that permit a powerful small-group process to exert a positive influence upon the larger social system.

### Shifting assumptions about group dynamics

As we have seen in the previous section, having a process that can reliably evoke collective wisdom among a diverse group of citizens is insufficient in and of itself. Additional elements are needed for the outcomes of the small group to have a significant impact on the larger whole. Sometimes, a powerful mechanism for story-sharing may be

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<sup>28</sup> State of Vorarlberg 2015, *Civic Council Report*

<sup>29</sup> Institut für Konfliktforschung 2016, *The Region of Consciousness*; also Ruprechtsberger 2013, *Hope Blossoms Amidst the Nazi Ruins*

<sup>30</sup> Strele, Lüdeman, & Nanz 2012, *Wisdom Councils in Austria*

all that is needed; yet in situations where the process has been sponsored by a governmental agency, the agency's responsiveness to the outcomes is key.

Yet the ability to consistently arrive at high-quality outcomes within a small, diverse group, even though insufficient on its own, is clearly a valuable resource. It is also something that current models of group dynamics do not deem possible within a limited amount of time. In other words, from within a certain paradigm, what we have been experiencing "cannot exist."

What people have experienced regularly in Vorarlberg as part of the Civic Councils (and elsewhere with other models) does not follow Tuckman's cycle of "forming, storming, norming, and performing", a highly popular model that is only infrequently questioned<sup>31</sup>. This leads us to the following inquiry: *how is it possible to consistently arrive at authentic, powerful results within a relatively brief time, within small groups that are intentionally divergent?*

Much of our knowledge about small groups in the behavioral sciences has been derived from T-groups and Tavistock group relations work. From my own experiences in both modalities (not as a facilitator, but as a participant), I can vouch for the valuable personal learning that can ensue from engaging in these formats. Yet the reified nature of both traditions tends to obscure a basic fact: both of these formats have been *intentionally designed to create primary anxiety in a group*, and then have the group wrestle their way, with minimal assistance, through that initial anxiety. In Tavistock groups, that anxiety is generated in part through flat-face affect on the part of facilitators. While T-groups do not use flat-face affect, the intentional refusal on the part of facilitators to offer the group much explicit guidance or structure, has been designed to create a somewhat attenuated yet basically similar effect.

However, such design features are not inevitable. For instance, Juanita Brown has written about how participants' experience in World Café formats does not follow the conventional model of the 'stages of dialogue'. In one way, the explanation for this is

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<sup>31</sup> White, McMillen, & Baker 2001, *Challenging Traditional Models*: 48-49

obvious; these new formats do not assume that initial state of anxiety to be inevitable, and thus were not designed to create it.<sup>32</sup> These days, there are a growing number of different group formats suitable for a variety of different purposes, in which simple yet effective structures offer enough support and create enough stability in the field to allow effective self-organization to emerge with a minimum of initial dysfunction<sup>33</sup>.

In the Dynamic Facilitation process used in Vorarlberg's Civic Councils, participants also do not experience a protracted initial stage marked by conflict. However, this facilitation approach is different than other dialogic models, such as Open Space Technology and World Café, where a strong container is created by the use of a simple yet powerful structure. Instead, in Dynamic Facilitation the strong container is created by a highly active yet non-directive facilitation approach, where empathic reflections allow the facilitator to "take all sides". This creates a temporary "greenhouse" or "creativity incubator" where strong differences can surface, yet where each participant experiences sufficient support to remain in creative learning mode -- rather than being thrown into defensive attitudes resulting from fight/flight/freeze triggers.<sup>34</sup>

This process of active and empathic multipartiality is also a feature of Dialogue Mapping, a computer-assisted process that bears some significant similarities with Dynamic Facilitation<sup>35</sup>. Some authors have described Dialogue Mapping as offering an empathic Winnicotian "holding environment"<sup>36</sup> for participants. This analogy may help us to see that multipartiality is *not at all* the same thing as "impartiality", even though neither of the two are "partial". From my perspective, the mainstream version of "facilitator impartiality" is very well-intentioned, yet it based a limited, transactional view of human communication that does not sufficiently consider the relational needs of human beings.

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<sup>32</sup> Brown 2001, *The World Café – Living Knowledge*: 65-79

<sup>33</sup> Holman, Devine, & Cady 2007, *The Change Handbook*; see also Holman 2010, *Engaging Emergence* for an exploration of principles underlying many of these formats.

<sup>34</sup> Zubizarreta 2013, *Co-Creative Dialogue*

<sup>35</sup> Zubizarreta 2006, *Practical Dialogue*

<sup>36</sup> Culmsee & Awati 2012, *Toward A Holding Environment*

## What active, multipartial facilitation can look like in practice

In the following paragraphs, two Austrian facilitators describe their stance as they engage in their work, as well as the effects that this approach has on group participants:

"Right from the start of a Dynamic Facilitation session, it is necessary to be consciously attending to the creation of an appreciative and open conversational culture. Part of our job as facilitators is to set this tone and to safeguard it. To do this, we need to be listening well to the verbal messages we are hearing, we need to be making those meanings visible on paper, and we need to be preventing other verbal messages from devaluing what has already been said. This requires us to begin with a more 'bilateral' facilitation style: as facilitators, we spend more time than is customary with each person, drawing them out through the use of follow-up questions."

"It is only after we have 'emptied' participants of all of their pre-made opinions, positions, and concerns about others' positions, that it is generally possible to think about something new. (Jim Rough calls this process 'purging'.) During this bilateral conversation with a participant, other participants usually realize very quickly that they themselves will later be receiving the same kind of attention that this person is now receiving. That observation usually increases the attention and mindfulness of all."

"What participants do particularly well within the context of a Dynamic Facilitation session, while hearing the plentiful reflections being offered back to the one who is speaking, is to listen attentively and to take seriously that person and their contributions. Clearly, in our society we feel a great lack of -- or to put it another way, a great longing for -- being perceived as persons with our own thoughts, concerns and proposed solutions."<sup>37</sup>

The above paragraphs describe how facilitators apply their empathic attention to create a kind of 'emotional safety net' that offers participants the freedom to engage in a self-initiated updating of their own conceptual models, as they begin to encounter one another's different perspectives. Many facilitators trained in this approach have remarked on the similarities they see between what happens in the room with

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<sup>37</sup> Trattnig & Haderlap 2014, *Dynamic Facilitation*

Dynamic Facilitation, and the conceptual model of the U-theory<sup>38</sup>, which also describes a kind of "emptying out" that is needed before what is new can begin to emerge.

The next set of paragraphs describe how this process embodies the alternative epistemological approach we mentioned at the beginning of this article, the shift from "argument as battle" to "collaborative co-creation":

"A significant characteristic of Dynamic Facilitation is that we use a structured moderation process to break through entrenched discussion patterns. In this work, participants usually perceive it as beneficial that we foreground a joint, co-creative development process, instead of a battle of wills between one set of arguments against another set of arguments. Dynamic Facilitation thus stands in stark contrast to standard patterns of discussion which are often about winning or losing. By means of active and appreciative listening, along with the invitation to repeatedly empathize with other points of view, we are able to initiate a solution-oriented culture of conversation."

"Innovation-hampering phrases such as 'That will never work,' or 'We've never done it that way before,' are welcome in the Dynamic Facilitation processes as concerns, yet they are never allowed to stand alone without a follow-up prompt ('Can you say more about what it is that you are fearing?') along with a further question (such as, 'Great! So in that case, what would *your* solution be?') The dynamics of a Dynamic Facilitation process could be described using the metaphor of a ping-pong game as follows: in this way of playing, the goal is *not* to force your opponent to make a mistake, by returning the ball with as tricky a spin as possible; instead, the goal is to work together to keep the ball in play."

"Verbal messages are not simply left standing, but are instead either reflected back or summarized, as literally as possible. In response to abstract statements, facilitators offer follow-up questions (e.g. 'What do you mean by ... ?') The additional clarification of rationales or further concretization of what has already been spoken, usually leads to a better mutual understanding among all participants, and thus to a reduction of the kind of resistance that can quickly arise

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<sup>38</sup> Scharmer 2009, *Theory U*

whenever allegations are allowed to stand without further explanation. By means of invitations to expand one's reasoning and the genuineness of the follow-up questions, it soon becomes evident to all that we are shifting away from a conversational pattern of mere assertions or demands, to a more innovative and constructive dimension of conversation."<sup>39</sup>

The above description can be read as an illustration of multipartiality in action. By "taking the side" of each participant, supporting them in explicating their meaning, facilitators draw out each participant's contribution to the larger whole. The last two paragraphs quoted below illustrate some of the creativity-generating aspects of this approach:

"One possibility for achieving more depth on a subject is the so-called 'decision-makers' question'. It goes as follows: 'Suppose you had an important decision-making position (e.g. mayor, school director, president, etc.) and everything were possible; that is to say, you had all the necessary means at your disposal. What would you do in this situation? How would you proceed?' This question offers a participant the opportunity to immediately imagine themselves in a powerful position, which usually triggers an intense process of reflection. At such moments, it is important to offer some 'sacred time' so the participant can sit quietly with this question."

"The answers are often surprising, and in many cases focus on finding a solution to the problem through communication. One example: 'I would sit down immediately with the relevant experts or citizens, so that together we can get a better picture of the situation, and hear their solutions.' Often participants' answers also offer very concrete steps to address the problem. This demonstrates how frequently people have valuable thoughts on issues. Yet without these kind of processes, they would not have the opportunity to share their comments nor contribute their insights. Participants are usually surprised by how much creativity and knowledge is evident in the outcomes they develop."<sup>40</sup>

Now that we have "zoomed in" for a closer look at the creative facilitation process used within Civic Councils, the first stage of the Vorarlberg model, we will close by

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<sup>39</sup> Trattnig & Haderlap 2014, *Dynamic Facilitation*

<sup>40</sup> Trattnig & Haderlap 2014, *Dynamic Facilitation*

"zooming back out" again, to review the larger systemic implications that are made possible by these participatory public policy microcosms.

### Systemic leverage: shifting our appreciative setpoints

In all of the examples described earlier – the "Canadian Experiment", the Mont Fleur Dialogues, and OFRI's thirty-five plus instances to date of the "Vorarlberg model" –there is societal learning that ensues from the widespread story-sharing of the work of the microcosm group. We can understand that societal learning as a shift within our shared appreciative systems.

As delineated by Vickers, our 'appreciative systems' include both our prevailing socially-constructed understandings of 'how the world is', as well as our socially-constructed understandings of 'how we want our world to be'. Drawing from cybernetic models, Vickers emphasizes that, at any given point in time, our society's appreciative systems are 'set' at a particular 'setpoint'. He also highlighted the systemic leverage inherent in learning how to consciously and ethically influence these "appreciative setpoints"<sup>41</sup>.

A similar point is made by Meadows, in her comments on the high leverage of being able to shift the mindset or paradigm out of which a present system arises<sup>42</sup>. While neither Vickers nor Meadows were optimistic about finding ethical and effective ways to shift societal mindsets, both of them pointed toward this as a necessary direction to explore, in order to meet the social challenges we are facing.

In her description of the high leverage of shifting paradigms, Meadows makes a telling comment that, "Systems folks would say you change paradigms by modeling a system on a computer, which takes you outside the system and forces you to see it whole. We say that because our own paradigms have been changed that way."<sup>43</sup> Yet what if computer modeling is not the only, and in some cases not even the best, way to help

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<sup>41</sup> Vickers 1968, *Value Systems and Social Process*: 164-168.

<sup>42</sup> Meadows 1999, *Leverage Points*: 17-18

<sup>43</sup> Meadows 1999, *Leverage Points*: 18

people change their paradigms? We have heard again and again, how bringing together a diverse group of people, in a context where they are able to listen deeply to one another's perspectives, help them all to begin to have a deeper sense of the larger whole to which they belong. What if, by sharing the story of this small group's discoveries with a larger whole, we can in turn, help that whole begin to shift its own perspectives?

Now, to take it to another level: what if the most high-leverage shift we might make, is a meta-shift? That is, beyond any particular shift in perspectives, a shift in our "know-how" that allowed us to shift our collective perspectives in a constructive way, in an on-going and iterative manner. Mary Catherine Bateson seems to be pointing us in this direction, in her evocative book describing the epic small-group gathering convened by her father, Gregory Bateson, to explore the challenge of humanity's apparent inability to "see systems". In her afterword to the 1991 edition, she writes:

"Over and over again at Burg Wartenstein we implied the need for a unified and widely shared vision, a vision that would be persuasive both intellectually and emotionally, to provide the context for action. But today I wonder whether such an epistemological unification could come about and whether it would not be a denial of the adaptive value of diversity. It was not clear whether new patterns of thought would look more like science or more like religion, or, as I increasingly believe, like a new pattern of inherently diverse information exchange and decision making, a new mode of conversations toward we were feeling our way when we met."<sup>44</sup>

### Summary and Closing Thoughts

Whether we are looking at the ongoing work of the Vorarlberg model, or at one-time instances such as the "Canadian Experiment" and the Mont Fleur dialogues, there is a basic assumption at work. In an earlier work, I have described that assumption as follows:

"[...] all of these various processes share the same radical assumption: *With some support, a diverse group of ordinary people can work together to engage constructively with their differences, in the service of the larger common*

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<sup>44</sup> Bateson 1991, *Our Own Metaphor*: 314

*good*. We know that a well-designed, randomly-selected poll can provide us with useful information about the current state of opinion of the larger whole. In a similar manner, a well-designed, randomly-selected council [or a microcosm that is intentionally created to reflect the diversity of the larger system] can provide us with useful information about the common ground we might discover, if we all had the opportunity to engage with one another in depth as part of the larger whole<sup>45</sup>."

My intention here has been to illustrate how, once this collective wisdom is generated among a microcosm group, it can be leveraged through large-scale story-sharing to influence the "appreciative set-point" of a larger system. Alternatively, the work of the small group can influence a local region by serving as a useful input into a wider participatory public policy process; in this way, it influences the local appreciative set-point, while also potentially resulting in some concrete policy objectives.

I have also explored how different assumptions about small group dynamics lead to different small group designs, and thus to different outcomes. Given the potential we have seen for small groups to influence larger systems, it would seem that advances in small group work could be relevant for practical large-scale systems change. This may be especially true of formats that help small, diverse groups access both creative and critical thinking, while remaining in an open-minded learning mode.<sup>46</sup>

In closing, we might consider that while all forms of creativity are valuable, these creative microcosms with larger systemic implications, could be particularly useful for the challenges we are facing today. These kinds of transformational small group dynamics could have a significant role to play in our Great Turning<sup>47</sup> toward a sustainable and thriving planetary culture.

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<sup>45</sup> Zubizarreta 2003, *Deepening Democracy*.

<sup>46</sup> While we have been focusing here on the participatory public policy realm, there are other examples of this same format being utilized to "help a whole system learn" within organizational settings, that point to the robustness and flexibility of this approach. See zur Bonsen 2014, *Wisdom Council*.

<sup>47</sup> Macy 2014, *The Great Turning*.

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