

## Changing the World by Changing How We Talk and Listen

by Adam Kahane

I have spent the last twenty years trying to understand how to change the world. For most of that time, I have worked in the world of business. Established companies, for the most part, try to anticipate how the world will change so they can then prepare themselves to meet those changes.

I have also made many excursions into the world of politicians and guerillas, civil servants and community leaders, trade unionists and clergy, working in countries with histories of deep conflict: Guatemala, South Africa, Colombia, Israel, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere. When people from countries in conflict come together to work for change, they are trying to change their futures—change the world—not simply anticipate change and prepare for it. From my observations, the quality of the conversations people have is the most important indicator of whether they will succeed in effecting deep change.

A lot of what I know about changing the world I have learned in Guatemala. Guatemala is evidence of the horrifying worst of humanity. Guatemala is also evidence of the inspiring best of humanity. This country has the dubious distinction of having had, from 1962 to 1996, one of the longest-running and most brutal civil wars in Latin America. Even the torture instructors the Guatemalan government hired from Argentina were appalled by what they witnessed there. More than 200,000 people were killed or “disappeared”—the rare transitive use of this verb, as in “to disappear someone,” was introduced into everyday vocabulary in Guatemala—and more than 1 million were forcibly displaced, out of a total population of only 8 million.

In 1996, after 10 years of negotiating, the government and the guerillas signed a set of Peace Accords. Guatemalans started to sweep up the broken pieces and rebuild their lives and their country. With great energy, creativity, and courage, they launched large and small initiatives to repair and recreate the shattered society and shredded social fabric. Amidst the devastation, they are seeding and growing a new and hopeful future.

### The Vision Guatemala project

One of these initiatives was the 1997-2001 Visión Guatemala project. Backed by the United Nations and positioned in support of the implementation of the Peace Accords, its purpose was to imagine and promote a new vision for the country. The project team consisted of a group of forty-four leaders: academics, business and community leaders, former guerillas and military officers, government officials, human rights activists, journalists, indigenous people, national and local politicians, clergy, trade unionists, and young people.

I led the project design and facilitation, using a methodology based on the scenario process I had learned at Royal Dutch/Shell. First the team built up a shared understanding of what was happening (current reality), might happen (alternative scenarios), and should happen (their vision) in the country. Then they acted to bring forward that vision.

The team synthesized their overall understanding of the emerging Guatemalan reality in three scenarios. The first story, *The Illusion of the Moth*, warned of a possible return to authoritarianism. The second, *The Zigzag of the Beetle*, pointed out the inadequacy of erratic half-measures for addressing the country’s deep problems. The third story, *The Flight of the Fireflies*, was the team’s vision of a peaceful, self-respecting nation. They then published and distributed

the scenarios and ran one hundred or so scenario seminars and workshops for key leadership groups.

What happened next had not been planned. First, the team discovered that the country had limited appetite for being spoon-fed the team's "elite" vision for the future. The team's process—a deep dialogue among people who had previously not spoken with each other—turned out to be of greater interest than the team's product. Guatemala's history of oppression and war had produced a hunger for inter-group conversation at all levels. The Vision Guatemala group ended up enrolling 60 "multipliers"—grass roots leaders—who worked with them, not to disseminate the scenarios but to replicate the dialogue process in local initiatives.

This process of dialogue was instrumental in producing results. First, it propelled the Visión Guatemala team's profound re-knitting and re-visioning experiences from their own microcosm into the larger society. Second, the relationships and shared understandings built up amongst the members of Visión Guatemala fueled many other, independent initiatives. Lars Franklin, the former United Nations representative in Guatemala, said that the impact of Visión Guatemala is best understood by looking not at the scenarios or the activities of the project itself, but at the many seeds the project planted and nurtured. These seeds include: the emergence of two presidential candidates from among the team; influence on four national election campaigns, including the first-time inclusion of multiculturalism on the platform of the then-governing party; participation in the vital commissions on Historical Clarification, the monitoring of the Peace Accords, and a new Fiscal Pact; and contribution to a constitutional amendment campaign, a national anti-poverty program, several municipal development strategies, and to the reform of the core curriculum of the country's second-largest university.

In 2001, building on these initial accomplishments, three new inter-sectoral dialogue groups have been launched to try to address afresh the country's situation. All of them are led by members of Visión Guatemala. Over its four year life, the project branched out in many directions that were not foreseen when it was launched. It became an emergent, generative, learning process: the team did what was needed of it.

The mystery at the core of Visión Guatemala is this: How did one small team find out what it needed to do, and in enacting this purpose have such a broad impact on the country? The answer lies in how people talked and listened to one another.

#### Four Ways of Talking and Listening

The Visión Guatemala team, drawn as they were from leadership positions in all sectors of Guatemalan society, was uniquely placed to do this future-changing work. But they had a history of being at war, not of working cooperatively together. The first workshop, not surprisingly, started off hesitantly. One team member later recalled:

"When I arrived at the hotel for the initial meeting, the first thing I noticed was that the indigenous people were sitting together. The military guys were sitting together. The human rights group was sitting together. I thought, "They are not going to speak to each other". In Guatemala, we have learned to be very polite to each other. We are so polite we say, "Yes", but think, "No". I was worried that we would be so polite that the real issues would never emerge."

There are many lenses—political, historical, psychological—through which we could describe and understand Visión Guatemala and its remarkable results. What struck me most was how the team talked with and listened to one another. What I noticed there, and can now see as a pattern across all of my experiences of change, was four distinct conversational modes, which (building

on the work of Otto Scharmer of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) I call *Downloading*, *Debating*, *Reflective Dialogue*, and *Generative Dialogue*. If we want to change the world, we have to develop our capacity to recognize and navigate through all four of these modes. I say this because I have observed that the type and quality of the conversations people have is the most important indicator of whether or not their change initiative will be successful.

*Downloading*, by far the most common, maintains the status quo. It maintains the (artificial) wholeness of the system and re-enacts the patterns of the past. *Debating* mode, common in organizations with an analytical or intellectual bent, involves vigorous debate and reasoned decision-making. In *Debating*, we see more of what is there, but create nothing new. *Reflective Dialogue* calls on us to be empathetic—to see the world through the eyes of others—and self-reflective—to understand how we influence the world around us. This mode is rare in organizational life but it is essential for deep change. Unlike *Downloading* and *Debating*, *Reflective Dialogue* allows us to participate in the future that is emerging. *Generative Dialogue* is the least common and most precious for it is this mode of conversation that allows a group to discover its larger and deeper shared purpose. *Generative Dialogue* is especially memorable when the participants are from very different backgrounds and have scant hope that they can work together successfully. *Generative Dialogue* is vital for the success of deep change initiatives. In *Generative Dialogue*, we are tuned into the potential of the system and what is being born amidst and through us.

### Downloading

In Downloading, we talk politely, saying what we are expected to say (“How are you?” “I am fine”). We repeat what we already know, not noticing anything different or new. We download (like from a computer file) or project (like a slide projector) our thoughts and feelings onto the world. The Visión Guatemala team started off in Downloading: when the first meeting started, they sat next to the people they always sat next to and said what they always said. By definition Downloading, which upholds existing rules, conventions and behavioral norms, could not get the Visión Guatemala team where it wanted to go: to create a new national reality.

The strength of Downloading is that, when the rules fit the context, it is predictable and efficient and supplies the right answer without hesitation or uncertainty. Its weakness is that this functional confidence slips easily into dysfunctional overconfidence. The problem with thinking we are right all the time—with projecting our truth onto the world—is that we won’t notice we are wrong until we are horribly wrong. When the context changes and the rules don’t work anymore, Downloading is rigid and brittle. If the rules can’t be challenged or changed—if the system, constrained by politics or politeness, cannot get out of Downloading—then oppression or collapse are inevitable. The risk of Downloading is getting stuck there. If the Vision Guatemala team had stayed in Downloading—continued to be “so polite”—they never would have been able to do even the work necessary to create the three scenarios, let alone the more difficult work necessary to put forth and act on their vision for their country.

### Debating

We spent the first Vision Guatemala meeting in various conversations aimed at “uncovering” the reality of Guatemala from the team members’ very varied perspectives. Given Guatemala’s history of extreme national fragmentation, they had a lot to learn from each other. Even a simple listening exercise—“after lunch, go for a one hour walk outside with someone you haven’t spoken with yet”—produced excitement and revelation. Gradually the team became more open and direct:

“The first round in the first session was extremely negative because we were all looking back to the events of recent years, which had left a deep imprint on us. Thus, a first moment full of pessimism was generated. Suddenly, a young man stood up and questioned our pessimism in a very direct manner. This moment marked the beginning of a very important change, and we continually referred to it afterwards. That a young man would suddenly call us “old pessimists” was a very important contribution.”

For their second meeting, the team invited several prominent academics to make presentations. The group wanted to learn more about economic development, Guatemalan history, and indigenous Mayan cosmology and culture (Guatemala is the country in the Americas with one of the highest proportions of indigenous people, more than fifty percent). They also organized a day-long “learning journey” to a sophisticated and successful Mayan cooperative organization of 20,000 people engaged in craft, health, agricultural, and other projects. This trip made an impact on the team because it gave them first-hand experience—not just the facts about the cooperative, but also its energy, feeling, spirit, smell, and so on.

The Visión Guatemala team moved from Downloading to Debating when they stopped saying what they thought they had to say, and started to say what they were really thinking, as when the young man confronted the pessimism of the group. In Debating, we say what we think. We speak our minds openly, even at the risk of fragmenting the system (“How are you?” “I am terrible.”). We debate and make judgments, like in a courtroom. We observe the outside world and other people. They were in Debating when they sought out unfamiliar perspectives, from each other, from academics, and in their learning journey.

Moving from Downloading to Debating is a momentous step outwards towards an active search for alternative facts, perspectives, and options, and towards the embrace of free speech, robust challenge, and open argument.

### Reflective Dialogue

At one meeting, there was an intense dialogue about the then-ongoing Commission for Historical Clarification. Julio Balconi, a retired army general, was struggling to get others to understand his experience of the war. Raquel Zelaya, then the Cabinet Secretary of Peace, charged with overseeing the implementation of the Peace Accords, said to him: “I know that nobody enrolls in the military academy in order to learn how to massacre women and children.” Such deep empathy across a horrible divide allows people—even old enemies—to work together to build a new future.

In Reflective Dialogue, we move outside of ourselves. We regard others as “Thou” rather than “It,” standing in their shoes, seeing through their eyes. We also listen self-reflectively to ourselves, and hear ourselves through the ears of others. We inquire into how things came to be as they are and envision how they might be. The Visión Guatemala team was in Reflective Dialogue when they were able to listen empathetically to one another, as Zelaya did to Balconi.

### Generative Dialogue

One evening, the team gathered after dinner to tell stories about their individual experiences. Our intention was to supplement the day’s analytical sessions about the Guatemalan reality with one that looked at the same reality through the personal windows of their own lives.

Ronalth Ochaeta, a human rights activist, told the story of a time he had gone to a Mayan village to witness the exhumation of a mass grave (one of many) from a massacre. When the earth had been removed, he noticed a number of small bones, and he asked the forensics team if people had

had their bones broken during the massacre. They replied that, no, the grave contained the corpses of pregnant women, and the small bones were of their fetuses.

When Ochaeta finished telling his story, the team was completely silent. I was leading this session and had never experienced a silence like this; I was dumbstruck and had no idea what to say or do, so I did nothing. The silence lasted a long time, perhaps five minutes. When it ended, we took a break, and then continued with the workshop.

This silence had an enormous impact on the group and on me. Later one team member said:

“As to the history that he recounted, the one that caused such a great impact, a lot had to do with the fact that he witnessed an exhumation ... That is the story. That is one story, and there must be a thousand like it... What happened in this country was brutal... But we were aware of it! I was! I was a politician for a long time and this was one of the areas that I worked in. I was even threatened by military commissioners on account of my political work. We suffered, but as opponents, as enemies, always from our particular point of view. As far as I am concerned, the workshops helped me understand this in its true human dimension. A tremendous brutality! I was aware of it but had not experienced it. It is one thing to know about something and keep it as statistical data, and another to actually feel it... I think that, after understanding this, everyone is committed to preventing it from happening again.”

At the end of that session, I made an uncharacteristic observation: “I felt that there was spirit in the room.” Afterwards, a young Mayan man came up to me: “Why were you surprised that there was a spirit in the room? Don’t you know that today is the Day of the Spirits?”

In Generative Dialogue, we are fully present to what is emerging in the whole system. The five minutes that followed Ochaeta’s story, was in Generative Dialogue. One person spoke after another but at times it was as if they were completing each other’s thoughts. The normal sense of separation between people seemed lessened; two participants referred to the experience as one of “communion.” They moved from appreciating each other’s different perspectives (as in Reflective Dialogue) to being, for a while, a whole collective “I.”

The feeling associated with listening to Ochaeta’s story was not Reflective Dialogue empathy towards him. The story was not about him and he told it with little emotion; several other people in the room could have told similar stories from their own experiences. Instead, Ochaeta was a vehicle for that critically important story to enter the room and be heard by the whole team. In Reflective Dialogue, each story is a piece of a puzzle, and empathetic inquiry in a diverse group allows the whole picture to become visible. But in Generative Dialogue, each story is a hologram that contains the whole picture. In Ochaeta’s story the team glimpsed the essential whole of the Guatemalan reality: the mystery to which they needed to be connected, in order to do what they had to do. In a Generative Dialogue, it is as if meaning emerges not from any one person but from the center of the circle.

The significance of this session within the Visión Guatemala project is that it revealed to the team the source of its own shared commitment: what it could not *not* do. In varying degrees, all of them had signaled their general commitment to the project by coming to that first workshop. But their precise purpose—to work together to help ensure that Guatemala’s terrible history did not repeat itself—and the commitment and will every one of them had for that purpose, became clear to them during the five minutes of silence. This session occurred during the first meeting of the team, not after months of working together; it is as if this purpose was already present, waiting for them to discover it.

The sacred book of the Mayan Q'iche people is called the Popol Vuh. It contains the following text: "We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together. And we agreed, and then we decided." In Generative Dialogue, the Visión Guatemala team achieved this deeper unity of purpose.

#### Leading Through Talking and Listening

This, then, is what I have learned about how to change the world. As leaders, we have ultimately only one instrument: how we talk and listen. Each of the four modes of conversation is legitimate and useful, but if we want to create new social realities, our conversational repertoire must include Reflective Dialogue and Generative Dialogue.

Why do we find it so difficult to change the world? Because most of us spend most of our time in Downloading: being polite, not listening, saying what we already know, following the rules. We spend some of our time in Debating: paying attention to what is different and arguing about it. But most of us—and certainly most institutions—have limited capacity for Reflective Dialogue and Generative Dialogue, and therefore have limited capacity for effecting deep change.

Many of the Visión Guatemala offshoots did not succeed, and the current picture in Guatemala is by no means rosy. Guatemala is still struggling with political violence and repression. Most team members would say that the country is hovering between the messianic *Illusion of the Moth* and the erratic *Zigzag of the Beetle*. Still, against this dark backdrop, Visión Guatemala and other dialogue processes are hope-generating sources of light: fireflies. One member said: "It is true that things are not going well now. But without dialogues like Visión Guatemala, we would have already had a military coup." Another said: "Visión Guatemala is, in a certain way, a parable of the best that can happen in this country."