



CONVERSATION ACROSS THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIVIDE (DEEP DEMOCRACY IN ACTION)

© Written by Aftab Erfan

Earlier this year I got an invitation to travel to South Africa and experience something called the Conversation across the Socio-Economic Divide. The invitation came from Myrna Lewis, a South African psychologist who has developed an advanced facilitation methodology called Deep Democracy for working with groups. I had met Myrna at the ALIA Institute (Authentic Leadership in Action) in Halifax where she was teaching the methodology. While she was at the Institute in 2008, Myrna was struck by the pervasive talk about the troubling situation in the “third world” and the desire on the part of the Institute’s faculty and participants, predominantly members of the privileged “first world”, to do something to help. She was inspired to host a conversation that would bring the well-intentioned “haves” of the world to Africa and introduce them to the “have-nots”, so that the two groups could meet, explore and be in relationship together, instead of talking about each other from their own corners of the universe.

South Africa, as I would soon find out, is a particularly fascinating setting for a conversation among the haves and the have-nots, as divisions are visible on several different levels. As a third world country, South Africa is identified as a have-not nation on the world stage. But within South Africa there is also a distinct division between a majority that lives “below the bread-line” and a minority that lives in luxury. Historically, the division was closely associated with race, reinforced by the segregation policies under the Apartheid Act, which separated various ethnic groups physically, socially, economically and psychologically. Despite the efforts to build a more egalitarian society over the past 15 years, the gap between the rich of poor continues to widen, characterized by the emergence of a new upper class made up of blacks and people of colour. The Conversation Across the Socio-Economic Divide was as much about the first world meeting the third, as it was about the whites meeting people of colour, and the privileged meeting their under-privileged country men and women, sometimes for the first time.

The Conversation took place on a hot summer day in a simple school gymnasium in the middle of Mitchells Plain, a township on the edge of Cape Town. About 100 people showed up, exceeding expectations and the supply of name -tags at the registration desk. The group was clearly diverse in many ways according to race, age, language, class, ability and gender among other factors. As a Canadian, among the 25 or so over-seas guests, I entered the Conversation space with trepidation. How would I come across? Would I be seen as a spoiled North America university-educated kid by the people who could not afford to send their kids to school with a full belly? Would I be attacked for selfishness, for the failure of my country to even live up to its foreign aid obligations? Would my admiration for the local culture be interpreted as blind romanticization, my attempt to sympathize as false, and my desire to help as patronizing?

It became clear early in the check-in process that I was not alone in my discomfort. Many of us were struggling with our feelings. Some white South Africans talked about what it had took for them to come to the township that day, a place that they had been told all their lives was unsafe for their kind. They talked also about the shame that they carried with them from the Apartheid era and their embarrassment at living exclusively white lives within a “rainbow nation”. The people from the township on the other hand spoke about the anger and helplessness they felt at their situation. Some were noticeably shy, struggling to enter the conversation, finding it strange to be asked to give their opinion or talk about themselves.

Given the depth and variety of feelings and the amount of emotional baggage we all brought into the room, it is rather remarkable what happened next. Using the methodology of Deep Democracy, we were lead first into a conversation on feet (a special technique Myrna calls Soft Shoe Shuffle) and then into a full-blown facilitated argument. Lucky for us, Deep Democracy has been developed specifically for working with emotionally charged situations. It is “democratic” in the sense that it gives as much value to feelings as it does to rational thoughts. It is also democratic in the sense that it creates a safe space for the inclusion of every voice. The methodology allows people to feel themselves part of small groups, as opposed to isolated individuals. It also allows people to experience arguments between positions or points of view, not between individuals. This means that participants feel less embarrassed and less hesitant to say the hard things that really need to be said. As a result sensitive subjects become easy to talk about and groups quickly find themselves in the midst of direct and honest conversations about topics that may seem unapproachable in other situations.

A foundational idea in Deep Democracy is that any position or feeling that exists for one person in a group is also present in every other person in some shape or form. It is through making these positions and feelings fluid, allowing everybody to step in and out of them, that stuck situations begin to shift. A real fluidity of feelings and positions was what we experienced at the Conversation across the Socio-Economic Divide. As we began to talk it became clear that the terms “have” and “have-not” did not mean all that much, as those of us who felt ourselves to be “haves” began to get in touch with those parts of ourselves that are deprived and needy, while those who initially identified as the “have-nots” began to own their own wealth and ability. I remember listening with envy to one woman from the township who declared: “We may not have money but we know how to take care of ourselves. We know about local remedies. We know about ubuntu (an African concept meaning, roughly, interconnectedness). We know how to love.”

Central to the argument that developed in the room was the relationship between those with wealth – whether financial, social, psychological etc. – and those who desire wealth. There was a real human cry from one side of the room that said: Give me the golden key that got you to where you are, so that I too can have what you have. And a second human cry that responded frankly: No, I won’t give you the key - because either I don’t know what key you want, or I don’t trust you with the key, or I am afraid that if I give you the key I will be forever immersed in your problems, or that I run the risk of getting blamed for the key not being all you want it to be, or simply because there is no golden key! – Each position was given time and space to spill out without interruption, while others listened. As the two positions argued with each other - blatantly, passionately, with tears at times and laughter at other times - we all began to understand each other a little bit better.

At the end of the argument there was a noticeable shift in the energy of the room. People who had been perfect strangers hours ago had formed relationships. They had moved from hesitation to bluntness, they had aired out their grievances, they had been exposed to new knowledge, and they had genuinely “met” others. The day ended in the sharing of our new understandings, our “grains of truth”. They included acknowledgement of the sadness about our divisions, the admission that despite our good intentions we often don’t take the time to help each other, the realization that we tend to push people away when they try to help us, the hopeful notion that our “keys” may actually be complimentary to teach other, and that ultimately what changes the world is a person giving another person a break – a small chance for breaking out of the structures that inhibit us.

The Conversation ended with a strong request for continuing to have more of this type of dialogue. The event was seen to be an important part of the healing that needs to happen in South Africa, perhaps continuing in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation but bringing it to the level of the community and individual healing. It remains to be seen what comes from the Conversation. Will an increased level of awareness lead to positive action? Will the connections between people who met that day translate to initiatives that improve lives? Will an increased understanding of “others” help repair the divisions in this small community? Will the foreigners find more effective ways to help? Deep Democracy does not guarantee that any of this will happen; but it does suggest that the grains of truth that were gathered at the end of the Conversation contain the kind of wisdom that is needed in order to effectively address the socio-economic divide. In a sense, this kind of Conversation is not about solving social problems; rather it is about preparing the ground for working together.

Myrna and her colleagues in South Africa have now implemented similar events in Alexandra, a township in Johannesburg. There is an intention to continue, and I can only hope that we foreigners may be invited in again someday.

While I was at the ALIA Institute in 2008, I had a conversation with a colleague who, like me, is learning about various way of convening conversations that matter. He talked about the various methods he was picking up as vehicles for increasing awareness and understanding in groups. “If Deep Democracy was seen as one such vehicle”, he suggested, “it would probably be a jumbo jet!” I find that to be an accurate description of my experience with Deep Democracy. It takes you fast and it takes you deep, and it takes you to places you have never been able to go before as a facilitator or participant in a group. It also requires the rigorous training of a pilot to be able to handle this vehicle.

To be honest, learning to use the tools of Deep Democracy has been difficult. At times I have wanted to give up and I know others have felt the same. Conflict, after all, is so messy and to be in the middle of it as a facilitator is sometimes just too much. And yet there is something so powerful about Deep Democracy’s empowering impact – its ability to create one tiny empowerment at a time- that makes the hard work worthwhile. This was epitomized for me in the words of one 14 year-old girl from the township in Cape Town, who offered this in her check-out: “When I came this morning I felt like a lighty (South African slang for “the young one”). I felt timid because of my age. But then I felt that I was

able to talk and people actually listened to me. For once in my life people actually heard what I had to say. For the first time I felt I was heard.” She sealed the day with that statement, along with a little tear in her eyes.