

# The practice of action inquiry

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# Handbook of Action Research

## Participative Inquiry and Practice

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# The Practice of Action Inquiry

WILLIAM R. TORBERT

Action inquiry is a research practice inspired by the primitive sense that all our actions, including those we are most certain about and are most committed to, are in fact also inquiries. Conversely, action inquiry is also inspired by the primitive sense that all our inquiries, including those we most painstakingly construct to detach ourselves as researchers, in so far as possible from biasing interests, are in fact also actions.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not we imagine ourselves as inquirers at the outset of some semi-conscious action, even our most innocent and well-meant act sometimes elicits unexpected responses (e.g., ‘You’re fired!’, ‘If that’s how you’re going to be, I want a divorce’). Thus, when we act, we are also in part inquiring into an at least semi-intelligent cosmos (our fellow human beings are its nearest envoys to us). And, the main result of our action may be, not the consequence we had explicitly strategized, but rather the future amendment of our tactics (single-loop learning), or a broader (double-loop) reconstruction of life strategies (‘I’m never going to be a victim again!’).

Or, 30 years into some version of the vocation/practice of self-observation in action with others in the natural/social/spiritual environment – after millions of such self-observational moments and thousands of elongations of such moments with other inquirers – we may begin experiencing triple-loop learning. Triple-loop learning transforms not just our tactics and strategies but our very visioning, our very attention. This can be experienced as an epiphany, or as occasional epiphanies, or as a semi-continual *frison* of analogies among moments of self-observation-in-action. My old friend interrupts me in one of my rare moments of loquacious enthusiasm, and with an unusually sharp tone that I instantly know is meant to ‘raise’ my attention, not make me defensive, says, ‘Why must you so often reduce present pleasure by imagining a future programme of doing the same?’

If all our action and all our inquiry is, even if only subconsciously, action inquiry, how may we intentionally enhance the effectiveness of our actions and the destructiveness of our inquiry (destroying illusory assumptions, dangerous strategies and self-

defeating tactics)? How may we do so individually, in our face-to-face groups and in the larger organizations and collectivities to which we belong? How may we do so in the very midst of the real-time actions of our everyday lives – here and now? To what degree need such inquiry be explicit to ourselves and to others at each moment?

If, to begin with, we try to bring just the first and simplest formulation of this question (‘How may we inquire in the midst of the real-time actions of our daily lives?’) into our daily lives, we immediately discover a fundamental difficulty. *We rarely remember to do so.* Moreover, we don’t really know what to do when we do remember. We rarely experience ourselves as present in a wondering, inquiring, ‘mindful’ way to our own action. (If you try this apparently simple exercise for the rest of today or tomorrow, I believe you will see how rarely you ‘see’ yourself in action – especially if you make a mark in your calendar for the day after tomorrow, so that you remember to review the previous two days.)

Right now, for example, have you been present to the way you are reading – perhaps with a sharp question in mind, perhaps dully because this is just an assignment, perhaps flipping back and forth among the pages to get a sense of where this chapter is going? Is there a silent quality of seeing yourself seeing the page and seeing your thoughts absorbing, rejecting or conversing with these ideas, as well as listening to your breathing, tasting your tasting, and touching what you are touching? Is there a sense of presence to your sensing and to your reading? A common sensing? Was there prior to these questions? Will there be a page from now?

As much as we may like the idea of action inquiry, we rarely actively wish to engage subjectively in *first-person research/practice* in the present. At least, that’s what I’ve found. When I first began to learn about the possibility of self-observation-among-others in Quaker meetings, civil rights demonstrations, Sufi dancing, Tavistock conferences, Buddhist retreats, *coitus interruptus*, etc., I was very excited by the idea and by the special experiences when practising with others under direction. But I could go days at a time in my everyday life without

a single moment of intentional self-observation. Among all my teachers, as well as among all the members of my immediate circle of lifetime friends, I have known of none for whom it seemed easy to fashion her or his version of making-love-as-a-lifetime-act on a moment-to-moment basis. Geniuses have their special arts into which they pour their love – see the man who loved only numbers (Hoffman, 1998) – and they typically have equally strong shadows, arenas of daily life in which they are inattentive, unloving, ineffective. What does it take to wish to see and participate in every one of our moments, both the attractive and the unattractive, dispassionately, compassionately and passionately (Bennett, 1997; Raine, 1998; Marshall, Chapter 44)?

Not only are we individuals unpractised and unpolished in the domain of inquiry in the midst of our daily lives, but so also are our intimate relationships, our organizations, and social science itself. As practised during the past five centuries, the natural and social sciences do not provide research methodologies for generating mutually interpenetrating first-, second- and third-person action inquiries in the present – for studying the interplay among subjectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity – except at frontiers that are being explored through books like this one. Rather, the natural and social sciences of the modern era are methodologies for conducting third-person inquiries about other things or people treated as ‘outside’ the researcher (Reason and Torbert, 1999; Sherman and Torbert, 2000; Torbert, 1991, 2000a). They study the preconstituted, externalized universe at the time of the study (including the preconstituted attitudes, beliefs or observations that are recorded during such a study).

Action inquiry also studies the preconstituted, externalized universe, sometimes in just the ways the social and natural sciences today do. But, in addition, action inquiry studies the internalizing and externalizing universe in the present, both as it resonates with and departs from the past, and as it resonates with and potentiates the future. Action inquiry studies three other ‘territories of experience’ in addition to the outside world, and it studies how all four interact. If one wishes to conceptualize and exercise across the ‘four territory’ way of differentiating the aesthetic continuum (Northrop, 1947), one can begin with the following words and numbers as pointers:

- 0 *Visioning* – The attentional/spiritual territory of inquiry-towards-the-origin/purpose/mission/undifferentiated-aesthetic-continuum, from which we may witness the present interplay among the other three territories.
- 1 or 2 *Strategizing* – The mental/emotional territory of theory, dreams and passions, where the essential dualism of communicating between origins and outcomes requires integration (the development of focus, soul, character, integrity, one-ness,  $2^0=1$ ).

- 3 *Performing* – The sensual/emodied territory of practical, aesthetic, dialectically transforming performance (characterized by three primitive qualities – (i) energy, (ii) resistance (bodily limits, objects), (iii) intelligence (timely, enlightening action).
- 4 *Assessing* – The outside world territory wherein performance, its effects, and all things are observed, measured, evaluated.

The body of this chapter illustrates some specific first-person, second-person and third-person research/practices that characterize a present-centred, timeliness-seeking participatory action inquiry. Other recent publications further explicate the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this approach (Torbert, 1999, 2000a). Because it is early in the history of this new kind of science, the following illustrations are offered without detailed analysis and will generate many questions (I hope). The illustrations are meant to point towards wide fields of study, not to define specific propositions precisely. More precisely, the different illustrations are meant to generate a *frison* of analogies for attentive readers that calls them to join in a personal and collective re-visioning of both social science and social action during the next quarter-century and more.

### First-person Research/Practice

In order for each of us to discover our own capacity for an attention supple enough to catch, at any moment, glimpses of its own fickleness, we must each exercise our attention. We may begin our first-person action inquiry from concerns to perform more effectively at work, or from a desire to transform some cycle of attributions, emotions and actions that is costing us happiness in love. But, as it evolves, our first-person action inquiry will either become increasingly energized by a concern for the quality of our moment-to-moment experience of ourselves (for myself as only I – or other disembodied presences within me – experience myself; for the quality of my aloneness), or it will cease to evolve.

At the outset, I cannot emphasize strongly enough how unknown such exercise is generally, nor how reliant we must therefore be on personal guidance by longtime practitioners of attention exercise in ongoing traditions of attentional inquiry. Reading about it does not generate the capacity for doing it. Reading about it does not even necessarily generate a very reliable wish to generate the capacity for doing it. Through Morris Kaplan, Stavros Cademenos, and other members of my sometimes joltingly diverse circle of lifetime friends (each engaged in his or her own versions of living inquiry as a lifetime practice), and through my longtime mentors John Pentland and Chris Argyris, I have found myself returning again and again to the influences of five distinctive

traditions of research/practice. These traditions can be named gay Platonic political theory and practice (Butler, 1990; Kaplan, 1996), Buddhist practice (Cademenos, 1983; Trungpa, 1970; Wilber, 1998), Gurdjieffian self-study-with-others (Pentland, 1997; Vaysse, 1980), Quaker meetings (Nielsen, 1996), and Argyrisian confrontation (Argyris, 1965, Argyris and Schön, 1974). I have also sought out action/inquiry roles (as entrepreneur, consultant, researcher, teacher, spiritual aspirant, dean and Board member) in organizations that aspire not only to effective performance in conventional terms, but also to participate in transformational learning for their members and transformational change for their industry, science and/or social class (Fisher and Torbert, 1995; Rooke and Torbert, 1998; Torbert, 1976a, 1991).

All this effort can sound daunting (and my mentioning it can sound pretentious), but it is actually nothing more than what is motivated by my deepening questions. Moreover, any discerning observer will note how meandering, habit-ridden and forgetful I am. (Even I notice it sometimes!) So, I cannot imagine how anyone can generate awareness, mutuality and competence-expansion without: (a) eventually seeking direct tuition in some sort of meditative inner work; (b) seeking 'seeking friends'; and (c) framing one's own organizational roles as action inquiry opportunities. In this direction, one's whole life with others aspires towards a continual living inquiry.

The following journal entries offer some more situated illustrations of what ongoing (and offgoing) self-study-in-the-midst-of-action feels like to me after some thirty years' practice of specific disciplines. I offer episodes of leisure rather than episodes of work because I have mostly used work illustrations in previous writing and because first-person research/practice must first and foremost be a voluntary, leisurely pursuit if it is to go far.

6/28/97

My body stiffens in the chair. My heart is faint. My mind is confused and invaded by anxiety. My breath labors. As I notice this, I enter into my breath and it deepens. The pleasurable of breathing out again, and then of following the cycle of in-and-out-breathing, begins to take over. My lower back softens, my shoulders round, my neck becomes my throat, liquefying.

My mind is emptying, increasingly engaged in a listening that welcomes the full synaesthesia of the traffic sounds outside, the computer's sounds as I tap, the smell of a Chinese dinner cooking downstairs, the caress of strands of memory, and I could go on . . .

But the phone is ringing and it may be one of my three sons . . .

. . . It was. (And I wrote more about that, but delete it here . . .)

6/29/97

This morning my story continues when I rise and read, in the 'Living' section of the *Boston Globe*, Donald Murray's column 'Write what you don't yet know,' which starts:

Each year I live more lives. The hourly/daily experience becomes more complex, more deeply textured, more joyful, and more painful at the same time.

There are no simple moments. I watch my granddaughter banging a block and she turns to me, smiling to share her delight in the drumbeat, and I see my daughter in her smile. Turning to her mother, my daughter, we smile and I see my mother in her smile – and in my mother's remembered smile, my grandmother with whom we lived. Four generations visited in a millisecond. (Quoted with the author's permission.)

Twenty-one years after beginning my own journal, I hear a resonance from Don Murray with the way my own experiencing increasingly functions. I want to share my journey in this world with you, Dear Reader, not because I want to create a model for others to follow, but because I want to model following an idiosyncratic path that leads each of us more and more often into the inclusive present.

That's what I hear Don Murray so clearly doing in his ongoing construction and reconstruction of his living. He is documenting moments of presence – as in this case of experience of intergenerational smiles – smiles of joy and love – that, when perceived in relationship to one another, intensify one another toward a moment of purely sublimated ecstasy.

Or, to put the matter of modeling an idiosyncratic path in the even more paradoxical terms that it deserves, let me paraphrase Ursula LeGuin's translation of the beginning of the Tao Te Ching. 'Taoing,' she writes, begins with the realization that:

The path you can follow  
Is not the real path.

7/1/97

This morning I was determined to treat myself better from the start.

Yesterday became a difficult day. I could not maintain my presence in a full and balanced way as I ventured forth to my office and appointed duties, and I suffered the loss. I felt anxious, feeling irrelevant and incompetently vulnerable. I was feeling allergic to all humankind up close, but was enough aware of my own sense of frustration not to become irritated with Reichi, who cooperated marvelously by moving mostly in her own orbit and accepting my slight gestures of gratitude and affection.

My best moment late in the day was a five minute period of pleasurable-paced pulling of weeds from our garden.

I had hoped Virginia's visit for dinner would resuscitate my sociability, but in the main it did not. I enjoyed her conversations with Reichi more than my own with her. And I felt cowed by the aspects of her that I most dislike – her tendency to overdo probing talk, and then when the other shies away, probing still further. She probes til I for one feel trapped (and her stories make me think others do as well). I become unwilling, as I became last night, to be coerced into further talk about being trapped.

Perhaps sucked out by my silence, Virginia roleplayed her version of my interior monologue as she left. As I was escorting her to her car, she had me making some blaming-annihilating comments about her. Her conversational move felt to me like a strong, semi-intentional bid to trick me into denying her attribution, thus getting into the conversation she wanted to continue (and I did not).

I was enough at-One with myself at this point not to 'meet her and raise' . . . but remaining quiet was hard and unrewarding work. She was suffering, and so was I. Why I, without question, preferred us to suffer separately than to join is beyond me.

So went yesterday's living inquiry into maintaining my presence in a full and balanced way – into remembering the **One** good I can always be doing – intentional listening – and, once doing that intentional listening, dividing it in **Two**.

I had already told myself to treat today more like vacation, before heading out this morning along the wooded path circling Cold Spring Park for my daily slow, twirling, running, swinging-on-the-rings, and balancing-on-the-beam ritual. But it was not until I passed the lake on the way back from the park that I realized that I could, and should – and even deserved to – truly name today as my first vacation day.

After all, as a professor, I'm not paid for July and August. And today is the first day of July. Certainly this is the day, if ever there be one, to shake off the cobwebs of petty professional functionalism and to discover whether there are any pure pleasures and inspirations left in this old rag by going swimming in the morning. My career was meant to make all my time my own, to be lived at whatever variable pace my sense of leisure chose, yet how hard to seize time is, moment by moment and day by day.

Daily rituals can serve as reminders in first-person research/practice. One kind of reminder is a set time for meditative exercises. Regular journalizing (three to four times a week) is another good early discipline for feeding a sense of identity in which inquiry in everyday life plays as big a part as any outwardly directed actions. Joseph Campbell (author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) spoke of swimming in the morning and Scotch in the evening as his daily meditative rituals.

Here are a few further comments on how the foregoing journal excerpts illustrate first-person action inquiry. First-person research/practice witnesses and

suffers gaps, such as the sudden phone call from my son interrupting my activity of journalizing. Each interruption can provoke an inquiry: to attend or not? If so, how to reorder my priorities while continuing to remain alert for interruptions that may be opportunities? Over time, how to transform incongruities among emergencies, short-term goals and routines, longer-term strategies, and lifetime character, vocation or mission?

Again, I witness and suffer the sense of difference with Virginia without conclusive interpretation (I later showed her the passage and we explored the matter further). Such participant-witnessed gaps or incongruities are a special kind of difference, invisible to conventional empirical science. The practice of action inquiry recognizes and deals with differences of identity across persons or groups (e.g., differences of race, gender, class, nation or religion). But the practice of action inquiry only really begins when one treats differences *within* one's own self, family, or a wider social system in which one participates (incongruities among vision, strategy, performance and outcome) as of greater concern than difference *from* others. Honig calls this kind of difference 'a difference that troubles identity from within its would-be economy of the same' (1996: 258). But sameness is not preferred to difference within identity action-logics that increasingly welcome inquiry and mutuality (Alexander and Langer, 1990; Cook-Greuter, 1999; Fisher and Torbert, 1995; Kegan, 1994; Overton, 1997; Torbert, 1991; Torbert and Fisher, 1992; Wilber, 1995).

## Second-person Research/Practice

Since many of us spend repeated periods of our days in verbal exchanges, brief or prolonged, with others, a useful second-person research/practice is to adopt liberating speaking disciplines nested within the liberating listening disciplines illustrated in the previous section. Indeed, as listening through oneself both ways (towards origin and outcome) is the quintessential first-person research/practice, so speaking-and-listening-with-others (Heron, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Senge et al., 1999) is the quintessential second-person research/practice.

Language itself cannot finally be understood as purely cognitive content, but rather always is written, uttered, heard, and (mis)interpreted as action within wider action contexts – a proposition that is beautifully argued in Pitkin (1972) and also explored in Torbert (1976a). If our intended meaning is incongruent with the content of what we say (if we do not mean what we say), if the content of what we say is incongruent with the pattern of what we actually do (if we do not do as we promise), or if what we actually do is incongruent with our effect on others (if we offer charity, but generate corruption), what we say means something very different from what it means when

our intent, content, conduct and effect are mutually congruent. We generally seek congruity between intent and effect, though we sometimes believe that we can best do so by the manipulative/exploitative strategy of camouflaging our intent in what we say and how we perform (e.g., making promises we have no intention of keeping). However, language ceases to mean anything if its relation to intent, performance and outcome become random, and people lose trust in us if they interpret us as generating systematic incongruities that we are not willing to explore. Indeed, the meaning of language is based on the trusting premise of truth-telling (and one particularly depends on the premise of truth-telling when one lies). Thus, both second-person trust and truth-telling require a growing commitment to analogical harmony both down and up the ladder of abstraction. We can (but rarely do) publicly test with others whether they experience our actions from intent, through content and conduct, and into effect as harmonious. We can also publicly test (but rarely do) whether we have heard another's words and whether our inferences and assumptions about what they mean align with their intent (see Rudolph, Taylor and Foldy, Chapter 41).

Listening into the four territories of experience, we can gradually generate increasing plausibility, balance and analogical harmony in our use of four different 'parts of speech', emanating from the four different experiential territories named earlier. The four parts of speech can be named:

- 1 *Framing* – declaring or amending a possible shared sense of vision/intent for the occasion as a whole or for some fractal of the larger occasion;
- 2 *Advocating* – setting a goal, recommending a strategy, or making some other abstract claim (e.g., 'you're beautiful');
- 3 *Illustrating* – offering a concrete, visual picture/story based on observed performance; and/or
- 4 *Inquiring* – inviting any contribution or feedback from others about their response to one's speaking and associated conduct (Fisher and Torbert, 1995).

The very naming of these four parts of speech suggests how speaking is action and how, as speaking becomes more effective, it tends increasingly to move away from an exploitative/manipulative mode and towards mutually transforming action inquiry.

As observant participants in ongoing conversations with others, we may seek to balance the four types of speech in our own performances and seek to listen for and evoke the four types of speech from other conversants. Behind merely exercising and balancing these four complementary types of speech action lies the eternal question and lifetime practice of discovering what articulation congruently translates my (your) current personal, interpersonal and organizational experiencing into the frame/advocacy/illustration/inquiry that is most timely (across how

many time horizons?) now. Such a practice can gradually transform an increasing proportion of our conversations from habitual, repetitive rituals into the transformational dances between the known and the unknown that true dialogue can be. The assessments generated by effective inquiry can either confirm the efficacy of the overall direction of the current action, or can generate slight changes in performance (single-loop feedback), a change in topic, timing or strategy (double-loop feedback), or a change in the framing assumptions of the occasion (triple-loop feedback) (Bradbury, 1998; Fisher, Rooke and Torbert, 2000; Torbert, 2000b). Whatever our original motivations for engaging in second-person research/practice, it either evolves into an increasingly mutual, loving listening, disclosing and confronting – for example Sedgwick's (1999) study of her therapy experience – or it devolves back towards habitual, unilateral behaviour.

*Coitus interruptus* is a second-person research/practice that exemplifies mutual, loving listening. *Coitus interruptus* is a Hindu, Tantric, spiritual practice, as well as a Tibetan Buddhist, Vajrayana spiritual practice. Most people who see the phrase *coitus interruptus* are, of course, unfamiliar with such practices and their purposes, and imagine instead that the phrase refers to some embarrassingly involuntary dysfunction amidst sexual engagement. But in spiritual practice that transforms erotic energy into something finer than just its physical, sexual expression, the intentional pause of *coitus interruptus* is a symbol (as all properly sublimated visible actions are) as well as a factual act. *Coitus interruptus* is a symbol of two (or even three or four) persons' ability to interrupt any pleasurable perspective and action for the higher and more generous pleasure of a more inclusive and more mutual awareness and interaction. Interweaving attentional, conversational and sexual intercourse (as Donne's love poems suggest) is an advanced form of second-person research/practice (see Torbert, 1991, 1993b, for further detail).

The daily newspaper shows us in how many ways our global civilization falls short of practising such increasing mutuality in relations among sects, tribes, nations, companies or genders. Such stories of unilateral violence – especially of the numbingly commonplace horror of rape – can touch each of us deeply, if we pause long enough to allow them to do so.

They touch the essence of our uncertain sexuality. And each of us is essentially uncertain sexually, in so far as we are truly sexual – truly erotic – at all. For the truly erotic impulse is spontaneous and relational, not pre-meditated and unilateral. The truly erotic impulse cannot know its proper form or enactment until it engages relationally. Truly relational engagement brings recognition of actual differences of power, status, development, etc. that influence the parties' actual mutuality at a given time. Truly relational engagement also allows the fullest

realizable spontaneity among the players in mutually creating the pattern of this particular dance.

What, then, is going on when men abuse children or women? We are told by studies (Koss and Harvey, 1991; Raine, 1998) that the men more likely to rape have experienced more violence in their families of origin, view males as properly dominant, treat sex as a sport, the objective of which is to see how far you can go, and don't believe women mean 'No' when they say 'No.' This framing is the logical antithesis of second-person research/practice because it does not even invite single-loop feedback and learning, let alone double- or triple-loop feedback. In short, these men are not acting in truly inquiring, truly relational, truly erotic ways.

But it is not my intent to bash my fellow men. Instead, I would like to offer some positive images that point to the rewards of exercising mutual, non-violent power and inquiry rather than unilateral force (Heron, 1996; Senge et al., 1999). Perhaps the positive imagery of an unfamiliar sport can help us at the start to begin to envision sport, conversation and sexual engagement as predominantly collaborative inquiries rather than as predominantly competitions with winners and losers.

My Greek friend Stavros brought with him to this country two rather large and heavy wooden rackets. With the help of an old tennis ball, he has been teaching me 'palette' over the past 22 years. (Today, one sometimes sees two persons with similar, but much smaller, rackets and little rubber balls on beaches.) The objective in palette is for the two (or more) players to enter a mutual rhythm, so attuned to one another's skills as never to overtax them, so spontaneous and ever-changing as always to heighten one another's awareness, and so challenging as to stretch one another's capacities. One applauds the other's reach and challenge, appreciates the restful lobs, apologizes to the other and the god of the game for one's own miscreant shots, and marvels at how much such mutual games improve with age. Over the years, Stavros and I have played memorable games on pitch dark nights, over and around patchworks of tree branches, and amidst the ocean waves. Of course, we have never fully realized the objective, but we have become true peers and lifetime friends.

Stavros has been teaching his wife, Anne, palette as well, over these many years, with the same effect. In the meantime, she and I – she much more than I – have been helping Stavros shape up his conversational game, for true conversation requires and generates this same mutuality, this same predominance of collaborative inquiry over competitiveness (Evered and Tannenbaum, 1992; Grudin, 1996; Sedgwick, 1999; Torbert, 2000b). Certainly, no conversation is occurring if any of the partners interprets what others' say and acts on that interpretation without testing his or her interpretation publicly with the original speaker(s). (Look at that sentence carefully: few business or family conversations meet

its test, and that explains a great deal of human misunderstanding, sense of betrayal and suffering.) For example, to suggest that one has some kind of private insight or right to interpret – unilaterally, without public testing – that another means the *reverse* of what she or he says ('Women don't mean "No" when they say "No"') is to undermine the very possibility of mutuality, the very possibility of conversation, the very possibility of human sociability. Whereas the statement 'Women don't mean "No" when they say "No"' treats women with utter contempt, it is the statement itself that deserves our deepest contempt, while whoever utters it warrants our most concerned confrontation.

Now, someone is sure to respond that he can document a particular case and provide witnesses to prove that someone once said (or that many people have often said) the reverse of what was meant. Good. Thank you. You have just publicly tested whether you have understood what I just wrote (although, had you been more aware that you were making an inference, you might have addressed me more inquiringly). This gives me the opportunity to try again to convey my meaning, for this response shows that I did not convey it the first time.

I did not say that no one ever says the reverse of what they mean. I believe that sometimes happens, for we are complex, uncertain creatures with only the most occasional and tenuous contact with what we ourselves truly wish. Hence, another may see evidence before we do that we are not doing as we truly wish, or are not saying what we truly mean. But this evidence may or may not be valid. Hence, it deserves public testing.

A wonderful conversational game of palette is being played when a partner recognizes and acknowledges in an uncoerced fashion that he or she in fact means the reverse of what he or she originally said. (And such an acknowledgement properly represents anything but the end of the game.) But public testing of our interpretations rarely occurs in conversations for two reasons: first, because we rarely even realize that we are adding a questionable judgement to what we are seeing; and secondly, because we implicitly believe that public testing may be embarrassing and may reduce our control of the situation. These are in fact genuine risks (so long as our self-images are strongly tied to being right to begin with and to exercising unilateral, rather than mutual, control). It *does* require courage each time and oft-repeated practice to conduct public testing in a mutually liberating way. But when we do undertake this second-person research/practice, we begin to realize how much error, conflict and harm are generated by not doing so, and how much mutuality, trust and good will can be generated by public testing.

Ironically, anyone inclined to interpret that others mean the reverse of what they say should especially practice such interpretation and such public testing in sexual situations when the other says 'Yes'. For,

there is much evidence to suggest that both men and women are more likely to say 'Yes' in sexual situations when at a deeper level they feel 'No' than vice versa.

This advice will no doubt sound ludicrous and unrealistic to those who treat sex as an exploitative sport, the objective of which is to see how far they can go. But even those who would like to believe that sex can be 'played' as a different kind of 'game', as a kind of mutual, conversational, sexual palette – even those of us who would like to believe that sex can be an expression of collaborative inquiry and even of love – will feel intuitively how difficult meeting the demand for public testing of interpretations during sexual play is.

Certainly, listening for and testing interpretations publicly in the midst of sexual play, political action or a business negotiation is no simple, all-or-nothing process, with a pre-determined gambit to begin the game and a definitive sign that the game is over. Instead, it is a game that opens in many possible directions at every step in the play (Carse, 1986), requiring all our powers of judgement, intuition and care just when these are most likely to be dimmed by sexual desire, political conviction or the urgency of a business goal.

To play this kind of game – to do this listening – invites us and requires us to be more civilized than we ordinarily are – to wed the biological, the social and the spiritual in ourselves in a marriage that few of us ever achieve momentarily, let alone permanently. To play this game requires the actual and symbolic practice of *coitus interruptus*. More prosaically, this game is an advanced form of second-person research/practice.

### Third-person Research/Practice

As the previous section illustrates, second-person research/practice presupposes and works to co-generate first-person research/practice. Similarly, one of the key characteristics of successful third-person research/practice is that it is an action inquiry leadership practice that presupposes first- and second-person research/practice capacity on the part of leadership. This leadership (which is not necessarily synonymous with the top executives of an organization) in turn creates organizational conditions where more and more of the members voluntarily adopt first- and second-person research/ practices and join in the third-person research/practice of distributed leadership (Fisher and Torbert, 1995; Reason and Torbert, 1999; Rooke and Torbert, 1998; Torbert, 2000c). First-, second- and third-person research/practice mutually generate, require and reinforce one another because each is the preparation to welcome rather than resist timely transformation, at the personal, relational and organizational scale, respectively. These organizational conditions result

from a kind of organizational design called 'Liberating Disciplines', wherein the leadership as well as other members are vulnerable to transformation (Torbert, 1991).

If the leadership is to lead in this direction, it must lead in learning and in modelling how to weave unilateral and mutual forms of power together so that the collective as a whole can rely less and less on unilateral forms of power and increasingly manifest mutuality. Both developmental theory and statistically significant empirical results in ten, multi-year organizational transformational efforts support the proposition that one must be willing to be vulnerable to self-transformation if one wishes to encourage ongoing, episodic transformation in others and in whole structures of activity (Rooke and Torbert, 1998). Whereas traditional forms of power (e.g., coercion, diplomacy, logistics, charisma) can be exercised unilaterally, transformational power can only be successfully exercised under conditions of mutual vulnerability.

But, virtually all third-person organizations and states today are dominated by relatively non-voluntary, non-mutual, unilateral power relations, even though there may be pockets and occasional democratic occasions of more mutual organizing. Hence, among the many skills, methods and theories relevant to third-person research/practice, perhaps the most important are those that concern the question of how to engage, motivate and gradually transform concentrations of unilateral power (Benhabib, 1996; Honig, 1996; Mansbridge, 1996; Torbert, 1991; Young, 1996). Over the past 50 years, however, most action research communities have been virtually allergic to 'power', assuming that exercises of power are inherently unilateral and therefore contrary to visions of voluntary, mutual decision-making. This 'allergy' to power has been sustainable only because action researchers have typically worked outside organizations (but this position has also severely reduced the potential influence of action research). In terms of gender stereotypes, men prefer their power unilateral, women prefer to ignore it. Traditionally, few have been eager to envision the long, voluntary, lifetime journey, with repeated backward somersaults through hidden trapdoors of transformation, that is required of persons, relationships and organized collectivities that aspire to full mutuality. The one action research school that does address issues of power directly is the 'Southern' participatory action research tradition inspired by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) (see Gaventa and Cornwall, Chapter 6; Hall, Chapter 15). But this tradition offers a rather blunt, bivariate theory of oppressive, top-down, unilateral, institutional power versus emancipating, bottom-up, mutual, people power, offering little insight into how to transform power itself.

There are many approaches to third-person research/practice currently being invented, and some

are described by Gustavsen in Chapter 1 and Martin in Chapter 18 (see also, Reason and Torbert, 1999; Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996). In addition, new forms of assessment, such as the Learning History, are being specifically invented to support individual, organizational, and distance learning simultaneously (Bradbury, 1999; see also Bradbury, 1998; Senge et al., 1994).

I will use another third-person research/practice method invented during the past quarter-century, a future scenario (Hawken, Ogilvy and Schwartz, 1982; Kleiner, 1996), as my primary illustration in concluding this chapter. The future scenario method, or research/practice, focuses primarily on the exercise of mutual power to co-construct the future, rather than on, say, the unilateral power of a positivist laboratory experiment for reflecting the past. This shift of perspective from using *data to pin down the past with a known degree of certainty* to using *data-driven stories hazily to floodlight a possible future* illustrates how fundamental the changes can be when research participates in generating mutually transforming power.

The particular future scenario presented below is chosen in part for its content, for it envisions one way in which the interweaving of third-, second- and first-person research/practices may begin to evolve into a globally influential process. This scenario was generated during a Board and senior management exercise in re-visioning the mission and long-term strategy of one of the largest and top-ranked health management organizations (HMOs) in the USA during the late 1990s. Guided by Collins's and Porras's *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (1994), the Board and senior management of this HMO developed a 100-year mission statement, a 25-year vision (summarized as becoming 'the most trusted and respected name in health care'), a five-year strategy, and an annual business plan with specific priority projects to be completed that year. The following 25-year vision was not created as a target, but rather as a *provocateur* of dialogue within the organization about fundamental issues in healthcare that invite creative responses.

### Philadelphia Quaker Health in 2025

In 2025, Philadelphia Quaker Health is the most trusted and respected name in health care. It is one of the Nine Majors – the nine largest Not-for-Prophets (NFPs) in the world. (Of course, just as many for-profit entrepreneurial ventures fail, many organizations have failed in the attempt to create liberating developmental disciplines analogous to those of successful NFPs.)

Philadelphia Quaker Health has close to one billion members, and, of these, nearly 100 million are fully vested. (Once fully vested, members' income and life care through death is guaranteed and at least half of their economic assets become fully integrated into PQH's Intergenerational Trust.)

Together, NFPs now account for approximately one-third of global annual revenues. Unlike for-profit corporations and government agencies, Not-for-Prophets have become global, multi-sector organizations by accepting the challenge of cultivating, not just the negative freedoms so well managed by the U.S. Constitution (under which all of the top 500 NFPs are incorporated), but also and in particular:

*development of members and clients*

*the balanced adult*

*– eco-spiritual, social, physical, and financial –*

Philadelphia Quaker offers personal budgetary options in regard to elective care for members who successfully maintain their health (and more than 80% of the membership in every age group of the octave does). Currently, the *Mass-age Mess-age* unit receives the largest proportion of the elective budget.

'Friendly Quakers' – as we playfully call ourselves, whether we are doctors, business associates, member beneficiaries, or even mere clients of the enterprise – are all committed to personal, family, and organizational initiatives to increase good health and prevent disease. For example, every Friendly Quaker belongs to an 'Active Health Triangle.' The Triangles meet at least once every three weeks for exercise and conversation, to address each member's spiritual, organizational, and physical health dilemmas. In these Triangles members typically discuss their most perplexing and troubling issues and share suggestions, via the Web and the Intranet, about alternative resources they can access from other PQH services.

The opportunity to join a different Triangle each year is what initially attracts most clients to become members of PQH. As everyone is well aware, the Triangles shift membership each year based on the stated partner-preferences of each member. ('Free love,' new PQH members fondly imagine. As another of the Nine Majors advertises: '*Dreams do come true . . . Dis-illusion-ingly . . . Transform-ingly . . . !!!*')

Like the others of the Nine Majors in relation to their original sectors, Philadelphia Quaker Health is far and away the largest and most respected player in the health care industry globally. It is also a Liberating Discipline that generates enormous trust and longevity among its doctors, business associates, member beneficiaries, and clients. Indeed, the organization is more likely to choose to discontinue its relationship with members prior to their final, full vesting (after as many as 21 years) than the members are to discontinue their relationship with PQH.

In the wider global market and in the US political process, there is great controversy about the adult development orientation that all the successful Not-for-Prophets share. Spiritual, scientific, political, and economic fundamentalists – those who wish to preserve traditional forms of religious authority, empirical validity, individual rights, and property rights – tend to regard the Nine Majors as emanations of the Great Satan (the more so, as members of their own families join an NFP and their family inheritance is threatened).

Why do the Not-for-Prophets generate such constestation and consternation? Because the NFPs' 21-year vesting process for adults tests whether members will voluntarily undergo more than one developmental transformation, and these transformations challenge a person's inherited, fundamental, taken-for-granted beliefs and practices. For example, most of the Nine Majors put primary emphasis on Triangles and Quartets rather than Couples. Also, they divert wealth by inheritance from the blood family to the NFP community. Moreover – and worst of all from the perspective of the three dwindling monotheisms – they encourage 'Fast Forwarding' (a fasting and communal celebration process through which Senior Peers choose their time of death).

Religious and individual rights fundamentalists decry such transformational initiatives, arguing they are often cult-inspired or cult-manipulated (most people, though, think that's like the pot calling the fairy godmother black). In any event, the Nine Majors and the next 491 of the 'Good Life 500' have continued to gain market share by comparison to the Fortune 500, the global governmental sector, and the traditional religious and educational not-for-profits during the past twenty years.

The scenario envisions various institutions within Philadelphia Quaker Health that help its employees and other members to interweave first-, second- and third-person research/practice over their lifetimes. The scenario imagines that such Not-for-Prophet institutions help adults transform several times, from hardly seeking out single-loop learning to developing a taste for single-, double- and triple-loop learning. The institutions themselves are primarily guided, neither by the single-loop feedback of economic results (though positive results are necessary for the ongoing sustainability of the institutions), nor by the potentially double-loop feedback of members' political preferences (though each Not-for-Prophet will dwindle if its structure is not agreeable to its members). These Not-for-Prophet institutions are guided by their capacity (through many different Liberating Disciplines) for helping members develop to the point where they function as part of the increasingly widely distributed leadership that exercises single-, double- and triple-loop action inquiry in its first-, second- and third-person forms.

### Conclusion

The foregoing 2025 scenario contemplates a social world in which a very large and increasing proportion of adults around the globe are engaging in a new kind of research/practice in their personal, relational and organizational lives. This 'living inquiry' seeks to integrate subjectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity in moment-to-moment and lifelong actions that are timely and potentially transformational.

For millennia, we have had first-person meditative, devotional and martial arts research/practices

to which only very small minorities of the world's population have committed (sometimes because these practices have been offered in the context of authoritarian institutions that have in practice demanded conformity more than inquiry and mutuality). During the twentieth century, there has been an explosion of types of more or less disciplined and imaginative second-person research/practice dialogue (psychotherapy, 12-step meetings, sensitivity training, co-operative inquiry, etc.). At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the biggest missing link between now and the vision of large, decentralized 'Not-for-Prophets' in 2025 is a population of well-developed third-person research/practices, based on mutually transforming power, that make adult development through first- and second-person research/practices as common as child development today is.

This chapter attempts to reframe and re-vision the ends and the means of human action and human inquiry, indeed of human civilization. At best, its illustrations may generate questions that confront or confirm your assumptions about, and visions of, desirable personal, interpersonal, organizational and scientific conduct.

### Note

1 A third inspiration for action inquiry accounts for the third word with which I usually characterize this approach nowadays – 'developmental action inquiry'. This primitive sense or intuition, which remains implicit throughout this chapter, is that the ultimate essence of efficient, effective, transformational, inquiring action is its unique, myth-making timeliness, where 'timeliness' is understood to refer not just to an immediate effect or short-term consequence, but to a widening and deepening and transforming effect across ages of history (e.g., Socrates drinking the hemlock, or John Hancock signing the American Declaration of Independence). I begin to address the mysteries of six-dimensional time/space in Torbert, 1983a, 1991 (Chapter 15), 1993a (Lecture 5) and 1999.

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