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The Language of Power and the Language of Love: Solving Tough Problems in Practice

Adam Kahane



Adam Kahane

Adam Kahane's first book, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005) was excerpted here in *Reflections* in Vol. 6, No. 6. In this article, adapted from a speech he delivered at ExpoGestion in Bogota in September, 2007, he shares the lessons he has learned over the last few years about solving tough problems in practice. Relating stories of both successful and unsuccessful projects has led him to ask, "How can we avoid the twin traps of power without love, and love without power?" The five principles that begin to answer that question became clearer through his most recent work with the Sustainable Food Laboratory, a global initiative he helped found four years ago. This integral approach offers new hope in learning to solve our most complex problems peacefully.

For the past 15 years my attention has been focused on one question: How can we work together to solve our toughest problems peacefully? It is easy for us to try to solve our problems violently – to use our power or authority or money to make things the way we want them to be. And it is easy for us to be peaceful and leave things just the way they are. But how can we create real change in our social systems, not in a way that crushes people, but rather in a way that lifts them up? How can we together create new realities?

After 15 years, I think that I can now see the outline of an unexpected answer to this question. In order to solve our toughest problems peacefully, in order to address our most complex social problem situations, we have to learn to be bilingual. We have to learn to speak fluently two paradoxically different languages: the language of power and the language of love. By power I mean the drive to act, to achieve purpose, to effect real change in the real world. And by love I mean the drive to re-connect, with each other and with our world and what it needs of us. What I have learned from my experiences is that until we are able to exercise power and love together – to exercise power with love – we will never be able together to create new realities.

For the past 15 years I have been facilitating teams of leaders who have come together from across different sectors, organizations and communities to work on complex social problems that they all care about, and that none of them can successfully address alone. I have worked with teams made up of businesspeople and politicians, generals and guerrillas, civil servants and trade unionists, community activists and United Nations officials, clergy and artists. With such teams, I have worked on, among other subjects, the transition away from apartheid in South Africa, the post-war rebuilding in Guatemala, the contested elections in the Philippines, civic rejuvenation in the United States, judicial reform in Argentina, child malnutrition in India, the health of aboriginal communities in Canada, and global climate change. I have participated in some very successful efforts and some not very successful efforts.

From these hard-won experiences, I have learned some lessons about how to solve tough problems. I am going to share these lessons by telling you five stories from five continents. From these stories I will suggest to you five bilingual practices that I think can be useful to you in addressing your own toughest problems.

Power in South Africa

I got into the work that I am doing now quite unexpectedly. I grew up in Montreal and studied theoretical physics at McGill and then energy economics at Berkeley. In 1988 I moved to London to take a job as head of global social-political-economic scenarios for Royal Dutch Shell, the multinational energy company.

I loved working at Shell because I loved the power. I loved being part of this huge machine that could deploy ideas and people and money around the world to achieve its purpose. I loved the company's practical capacity to create new realities.

One day, after I had been at Shell for three years, we received an unexpected phone call to our offices in London. A group of left-wing activists associated with South Africa's African National Congress, Nelson Mandela's party, wanted to use the Shell scenario methodology to develop strategies for the transition away from apartheid, and they wanted Shell to send someone to give them methodological advice. This is how, in September 1991, I came to travel from London to Cape Town, and from a life of observation to one of engagement.

South Africa has a long and painful history of a colonial white minority achieving their purpose through denying the black majority the right to achieve their purpose. By the end of the 1980s, it has become clear that the white government could no longer keep this apartheid system going, but neither could the opposition overthrow the government. So in 1990, the government released Mandela from prison and South Africans began, for the first time, to meet and talk and negotiate how to change their system: in essence, how to shift who exercised which kind of power to achieve what purpose.

When I showed up at the Mont Fleur Conference Centre outside of Cape Town, the first thing I noticed was that the scenario team was not composed as I had expected. The 28 members of the team included not only officials of the African National Congress, but also members of competing opposition parties, trade unionists, community workers, and academics, and also businessmen and other leaders of the then-white establishment. I was impressed with this team because they really wanted to use their various sources of power to create a new reality in South Africa.

This team met together four times over the year that followed and arrived at a set of understandings about how to handle the shift of power, especially the shift of economic power. These understandings ended up playing a role in the success of the transition in South Africa and especially in the unexpected success of the economic transition.

There was a joke that people used to tell in South Africa at that time, that faced with our extraordinarily tough problems, we have two options: a practical option and a miraculous option. The practical option is that we get out of our chairs and down on our knees and pray for a band of angels to solve this problem for us. The miraculous option is that we stay in our chairs, talk with one another, and solve this problem ourselves. In the event, South Africans chose and succeeded in implementing the miraculous option.

When I reflected on what I had seen at Mont Fleur, I realized that this project had not simply contributed to South Africa's miraculous transition, but had exemplified it. What I had seen at Mont Fleur is that it is possible for people who had been using their power to



achieve their separate purposes – in opposition, even in violent opposition to one another – to come together to use their collective power to achieve a collective purpose. South Africans succeeded in bringing together those people who needed to come together, in order to solve their tough problem peacefully. As one of the members of the Mont Fleur team said: “We outlined the way forward for those of us who were committed to finding a way forward.” They succeeded in effecting concrete, practical change in their social system in a way that, rather than crushing people, lifted them up.

I was bowled over by what I had witnessed in South Africa. I fell in love with this way of working on tough problems, which I hadn’t even known existed before. I fell in love with that beautiful country at its moment of liberation. And I fell in love with the woman who was the coordinator of the Mont Fleur project. By the end of the project, I had resigned from Shell, emigrated from London to Cape Town, and married the project coordinator.

Power Without Love in Canada

In 1993 I moved to South Africa and with Joseph Jaworski and Bill O’Brien started the international global consulting firm that has grown into, along with other entities, Generon Reos LLC. We started to develop this “Mont Fleur” approach of bringing together key leaders of all of the parts of a system to use their heads, hearts, and hands to change that system. We worked on this in Africa, Europe, and Asia, and in North, Central and South America. It was challenging, exciting, pioneering work. The approach often worked very well. But sometimes it didn’t work well at all.

My second story is of a time that this approach of employing collective power to achieve collective purpose didn’t work well. And it took place in Canada, my native country.

When I started working in different parts of the world after Mont Fleur, I always carried with me the confidence that I came from a country that had been successful in solving its

own tough problems. So I experienced an existential shock when I found myself in a meeting in Ottawa, where people were talking about the situation of Canada's aboriginal or native people. I hadn't grasped just how appalling this situation is, with rates of poverty, illness, and violence many times the national average: Third World conditions in a First World country.

System thinker Louis van der Merwe taught me that "a system is perfectly designed to produce the results it is now producing." So the Canadian system, of which I was part, is in a sense "perfectly designed" to produce these terrible results. One fundamental aspect of this system is the mental model that aboriginal people are viewed as irresponsible savages. This thinking was institutionalized in, among other practices, a residential schooling system that took children away from their parents to be educated by the church or the state. The founder of the residential school system characterized his approach as "kill the Indian and save the man." The last residential school in Canada was closed only in 1998 – and so this power relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians has been replicated for generation after generation.

After this meeting in Ottawa, I began working with a small team of government and aboriginal and other leaders to organize a process for unsticking this stuck situation. After four years of on-and-off efforts, we had hardly made any progress. What I noticed over these four years is that even within our little group, we managed to recreate the same stuck dance that we were trying to change. The government leaders wanted to remain in control and to fix the aboriginal problem. The aboriginal leaders didn't want to be controlled or fixed by anyone. And my colleagues and I from benevolent foundations, NGOs, and consultancies "just wanted to help." We all had our own different roles and models and purposes that never really moved and never really met.

So unlike the experience of the group in South Africa, we Canadians were in this instance not successful in solving our tough problem. We were not successful in exercising our collective power to achieve a collective purpose. On the contrary, we each used our own power to promote and defend our own purposes and to oppose and block the purposes of others.

I once heard Rabbi Moshe Waldocks of Boston give a sermon about the biblical story of Noah and the great flood. In the Jewish calendar, the story of Noah is always read one week after the story of Adam and Eve. Waldocks asked, "What are we to understand from the fact that last week we read that God created the world and this week we read that he destroyed it? We are to understand that man is made in God's image and that man also has within himself both the capacity to create and the capacity to destroy."

This is what I saw in Canada. I saw that power has two faces. It has a generative face, the power to create. And it has a degenerative face, the power to destroy. But what is it that determines whether our power is generative or degenerative?

Love in Guatemala

During this whole period during which I was becoming fluent in the language of power, I was starting to notice in the teams I was working with another, entirely different language also being spoken. This is the subject of my third story, which took place in Guatemala.

Guatemala has the dubious distinction of having had the longest-running and most brutal civil war in the Americas. It lasted from 1960 to 1996: 200,000 people were killed, mostly at the hands of the state, and 1 million were displaced, out of total population of only 7 million. Someone once told me that the Argentine torture instructors who had been hired by the

Guatemalan army were appalled by what they saw there. The social fabric of Guatemala was completely torn apart.

After the signing of the peace treaty in 1996, a group of Guatemalan leaders who had heard of the Mont Fleur process organized a similar project there. This Visión Guatemala team was at a higher level and more diverse than the one in South Africa; it included Cabinet Ministers, former guerillas, businessmen, journalists, young people, and aboriginal leaders – Guatemala is the country in the Americas with the highest proportion of aboriginal people, more than 50%. This team worked together over two years, and contributed to a remarkable stream of changes in the Guatemalan reality, including in the platforms of four of the main political parties, in the implementation of the peace accords, in fiscal agreements, in anti-poverty strategy, in academic curricula, and in local development policy. Visión Guatemala also made a major contribution to shifting the Guatemala's way of solving problems – and it's a country with serious problems – away from exclusive authoritarianism towards inclusive dialogue.

I was impressed with way the Visión Guatemala team had succeeded in exercising collective generative power and I wondered what the root was of their accomplishment. Several of my research partners from MIT and SoL, under the leadership of Katrin Kaeufer, interviewed members of the team some years after the project had ended, and many of the team answered this question by pointing to one five-minute incident that had occurred during their very first meeting together.

One evening after dinner, the team had gathered to tell stories about their personal experiences of the Guatemalan reality. A man named Ronalth Ochaeta, a human rights worker for the Catholic Church, told the story of a time he had gone to a Mayan village to witness the exhumation of a mass grave 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 had never experienced a silence like this, and I was struck dumb. The silence lasted a long time, perhaps five minutes. Then it ended and we continued with our work.

This episode made a deep impact on the group, and many of them said that the strength of the team, which enabled them to do the hard work they went on to do, could be traced to those five minutes of silence. One of them said to the researchers:

“In giving his testimony, Ochaeta was sincere, calm and serene, without a trace of hate in his voice. This gave way to the moment of silence that, I would say, lasted at least one minute. It was horrible! A very moving experience for all...If you ask any of us, we would say that this moment was like a large communion.”

Another said:

“In the end, and particularly after listening to Ochaeta's story, I understood and felt in my heart all that had happened. And there was a feeling that we must struggle to prevent this from happening again.”

What I hear in these words is the language of love. By love I mean the drive to re-unify that which was once united and that was then separated or torn apart. When this team, in Catholic Guatemala, said that this was a moment of “communion,” they were using the technical meaning: being one body in Christ. And when they spoke of “a feeling that we must struggle to prevent this from happening again,” they were speaking of a deep knowing

of what was going on in the system of which they were a part, and of what they had to do about it – what they could not do.

Towards the end of Visión Guatemala, Elena Diez Pinto, the project's organizer mentioned to me that the sacred book of the Mayan Q'iche people, called the Popol Vuh, contains the following text: "We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together. And we agreed, and then we decided." Love is how we know collective purpose. Love makes power generative.

Love Without Power in India

After Guatemala, my colleagues and I focused our attention on working in this way to create new realities through acting from this place of re-connection and love. Bill O'Brien, who had been president of Hanover Insurance Company and one of the exemplars in Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline*, taught us that in a corporate context a generative leader is one who lifts another up, and that love in this context means helping others complete themselves.²

This approach often worked very well. But sometimes it didn't work well at all.

My fourth story is of a time that this approach of focusing on re-connecting didn't work well. This was an ambitious project we were involved in in India. India has one of the highest rates of child malnutrition in the world, higher than in Sub-Saharan Africa: 50% of Indian children under five years old are moderately or severely malnourished, and 40% of all the malnourished children in the world are in India. When we organized a collective problem-solving process to address this situation, we encountered a loving response – "we cannot not act to help these children" – from almost everyone we invited to participate. We put together a team of 40 people from Indian government departments, corporations, and NGOs and community groups, and this team worked together full time for three months. We made an intense effort to connect these leaders from across the system to one another, to leading practitioners in this field, and to communities and children suffering from malnutrition. Through this approach we created a set of bold and innovative solutions.

But we made one mistake: we ignored power. This was a system with enormous power differences and power dynamics and power struggles. The basic structure of our project contained what must be one of the biggest power differences in the world: between well-nourished middle class professionals on the team, and the malnourished, impoverished children our work was intended to benefit. And then there were the differences, in this status-conscious culture, between government and NGOs, between experts and novices, between funders and recipients, between bosses and staff, between men and women, and between foreign consultants and the Indians. But we made these differences were undiscussable and therefore unaddressable. One day we were having a big conflict in the team, circling these difficult issues, when the most senior government official on the team declared: "There is no conflict here!" – and that was it, the issue had officially disappeared. So as a team we were able to speak the language of love but we were not able to speak the language of power. But ignoring power doesn't make it go away; it just sends it underground, where it becomes more degenerative and destructive.

At the end of these intense three months of work, we proposed the solutions that we thought were bold and innovative to the board of the project, who were the bosses of the team members: the representatives of the Indian "powers that be." They rejected our proposals almost entirely. Our solutions were too different from the usual way things were done and

had too little local ownership, and were therefore too difficult to implement. So the team was disbanded and much of our work was abandoned.

This experience in India left me depressed and confused. I had seen the generative face of power, the capacity to achieve purpose, and also its other, degenerative face. I had seen the potent face of love, of re-connection, and also its other, impotent face. And more disturbingly, I had seen all of these faces – generative, degenerative, potent, impotent – within myself. So what to do?

In the midst of my discouragement, I came across a speech that had been given by Martin Luther King Jr., the great American civil rights leader, in 1967, just six months before he was assassinated. I was stunned to see that in this speech King had articulated precisely the tension that I was wrestling with. He said:

“Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change....And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites – polar opposites – so that love is identified with the resignation of power, and power with the denial of love. Now we’ve got to get this thing right. What [we need to realize is] that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.... It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time.”³

This speech rang precisely true for me because I had seen in Canada how power without love is reckless and abusive and degenerative. I had seen in India how love without power is sentimental and anemic and impotent. And I had seen myself be reckless and abusive on odd-numbered days and sentimental and anemic on even-numbered ones. So how can we address this major crisis of our time? How can we avoid these twin traps of power without love, and love without power? How can we exercise power with love? How can we in practice solve our toughest problems peacefully?

Power With Love in Global Food Systems

My fifth and final story summarizes my current answer to these questions. My answer consists of five principles that I think represent part of the code, the DNA, of a promising integral approach to solving tough problems peacefully. These five principles correspond to the five movements in Otto Scharmer’s Theory U.⁴

This fifth story started four years ago, when Hal Hamilton and some colleagues and I launched a global initiative that we called the Sustainable Food Laboratory.⁵ The problem situation that we set out to work on is the following: our present food system produces lots of food; the food is inexpensive for rich people but expensive for poor people; much of it is not healthy for the people who eat it; it doesn’t provide a decent livelihood for most farmers or farm workers; it’s not good for the soil or the water or the atmosphere...but other than that the system works fine! If the food system is perfectly designed to produce these results that it is now producing, the Food Lab asked, how can we change this system to produce more economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable results?

We started off our initiative by looking for leaders of different parts of this system who understood and cared about this situation as a whole. We ended up recruiting leaders from food processors, retailers, financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, govern-



ments, and citizen and worker movements. Eventually we had a team of 45 committed, influential people from Europe, the United States, and Latin America who together made up a miniature version of the global social system that we were all committed to changing. So the first principle is: “Convene a Microcosm of the System’s Leadership.” This is a bilingual principle because in the language of power, this principle tells us to recruit leaders who have real capacity to change the system. And in the language of love, this principle tells us to recruit leaders who are committed to the health of the system as a whole.

One consequence of having a team that constitutes a microcosm of the system they are trying to change is that, if they can talk with one another openly and honestly, then they can all see the whole system, from multiple perspectives, in all its complexity and contradictions. Furthermore, the dynamics of the whole system – including the power dynamics – get replicated within the team’s meeting room, where they are available for everyone to see and to work on. The Food Lab team did this, and also got out of the meeting room and into a series of “learning journeys” around Brazil, where the whole system – rural and urban, primitive and modern, sustainable and unsustainable – was visible on the ground. In this way, they built up a shared picture of the food system and how it worked and why it was producing the results that it was producing. So the second principle is: “Immerse in the Complexity of the System.” In the language of power, this principle tells us to focus on understanding how things really work and what it really takes to change them in practice. And in the language of love, this principle tells us to focus on building connections and relationships across the system as a whole.

Now as a committed, influential, microcosmic team immerses itself more and more deeply in the reality of the system it is trying to understand and change, they begin to notice their own role in things being the way that they are. There was a slogan in the 1960s that said that “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” But, as Bill Torbert once pointed out to me, actually that slogan misses the most important point about effecting change, which is that “If you’re not part of the problem, you can’t be part of the solution.”

If we cannot see how what we are doing or not doing is contributing to things being the way that they are, to the system producing the results it is now producing, then it follows that we have no basis at all for changing these results – except from outside the system, violently. But if the leaders of a system can step back, can retreat, from the complexity of the system they are part of, and reflect on what is going on and their role in it, then they will know what they have to do. The Food Lab team, after they had been working together for six months, went on a retreat that included 72 hours alone, in silence, in the desert of Arizona. And when they came back from the desert, they knew what they had to do – just as the Guatemalans had known after Ochaeta’s story. So the third principle is: “Retreat to the Source of Insight and Commitment.” In the language of power, this principle tells us to connect with our own deepest purpose and will. And in the language of love, this principle tells us to connect, not with what we need of the system, but with what the system needs of us.

When a team connects to this source of insight and commitment, within and between and around themselves, they can move mountains. Within only a few hours of coming back from the desert, the Food Lab team agreed on a set of six ambitious initiatives for creating more sustainable mainstream food supply chains, which they have continued to work on together during the past three years. These initiatives include connecting retailers in Europe and the United States to small fishermen and farmers in Africa and Latin America; connecting hospitals, schools and other public institutions to local producers of healthy food; and connecting buyers of food and bio-fuel commodities with sustainably-managed growers. It’s not that the Food Lab team’s work, having connected to their source of insight and commitment, has since then always been easy or successful. It is just that they have had the courage and strength to get out into the world and just do it: to try and fail and learn and try again, over and over. So the fourth principle is: “Try Out Systemic Innovations.” In the language of power, this principle tells us to learn, not by theorizing or planning or recommending what other people ought to do, but rather by acting, by doing, by using our hands. And in the language of love, this principle tells us to undertake this action in partnership with other stakeholders from across the system.

This is how to solve tough problems peacefully. This is how to grow practical, profound, sustainable innovation and change. This is how to build better social systems. The Food Lab team, after these three years of trial and error, is gradually and organically building up an entirely new body of relationships and alliances and standards for mainstream sustainable food supply chains that is spreading within their own institutions and also across their suppliers and customers and competitors and allies. A web of ambitious, cutting edge, cross-institutional initiatives is spreading across Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The Food Lab has become an influential space for learning and for institutionalizing these learnings into living examples of best practice. So the fifth and final principle is: “Grow Ecosystems of New Practices.” In the language of power, this principle tells us to keep our eyes on the prize of creating new and better realities, not in theory but in practice. And in the language of love, this principle tells us to keep our eye on the prize of creating these new realities, not violently but peacefully.

Conclusion

The Food Lab is making progress on its objective of creating living examples of mainstream sustainable food supply chains and so is itself becoming an important living example of this

way of solving tough problems peacefully. Peter Senge says that the Food Lab is “the largest systemic change project I have seen.” Through trial and error we are gradually learning how together to create new realities.

That said, the approach to solving tough problems that I have outlined here is only about 15 years old and is still very much in its difficult teenage years. We have a long way to go before we can employ or replicate this approach to effecting change in complex social systems reliably. It is not easy to solve tough problems peacefully. It is not easy to employ power with love. The Jungian psychologist Robert Johnson wrote that “Probably the most troublesome pair of opposites [that we can try] to reconcile is love and power. Our modern world is torn to shreds by this dichotomy and one finds many more failures than successes in the attempt to reconcile them.”⁶

In this work, there are no easy recipes or sure successes or straight roads. As the philosopher Immanuel Kant said: “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.”⁷ But I believe that there is a prize here that is worth the struggle up this steep and winding road: the prize of a better way to create a better world. This is a struggle to which I am committed. This is a struggle that I look forward to continuing to engage in together with you.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Elena Diez Pinto, “Visión Guatemala, 1998-2000: Building Bridges of Trust.” In *Civic Scenario/Civic Dialogue Workshop*, edited by Bettye Pruitt. (New York: United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean: 2000).
- 2 See Bill O’Brien, *Character and the Corporation* (Cambridge: Society for Organizational Learning, 2002).
- 3 Martin Luther King Jr., “Where Do We Go From Here?” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
- 4 Scharmer’s five movements are Initiating, Sensing, Presencing, Creating, and Evolving. See Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* (Cambridge: Society for Organizational Learning, 2007).
- 5 See www.sustainablefoodlab.org
- 6 Robert Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
- 7 Quoted in Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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