

Reclaiming Public Conversation

Ruth Rosenbaum, TC, PhD

The problems created by globalization highlight the necessity of reclaiming public conversation. Public conversation is a space in which experiences, thoughts and ideas can be shared. Its purpose is to develop creative, accountable responses to the entire spectrum of social-economic realities of our world. The area of public conversation is a critical one, for it is in the varied public forums that people who do not ordinarily come in contact with each other can share in the process of creative response.

What is created in a public forum is the product of synergistic process. Synergy reminds us that the whole that we create is greater than the sum of the parts that each of us is able to create by ourselves. It is in both the process of interaction as well as in the final product that the synergistic energy of persons and groups can create what has not been created before.

For such synergy to happen, for creative process and product to occur, for truth to be discovered, many different voices and ideas have to be heard. At the present, looking at the public arena, we have to ask: How has it come to be that the voices of only a few are heard?

In the first place, we have to remind ourselves that in the US the media are owned by corporations, whether the media are the newspapers or magazines, the TV networks or radio stations. Because corporations are involved politically in every country where they operate, the relationship between freedom of the press and the ability to critique corporate and governmental programs, policies and practices is

easily compromised. The writers and reporters no longer have the freedom to raise issues in which the owner corporation might be involved, or that may result in the cancellation of advertising by the corporation being criticized. Also, when the media are owned by corporations interested in making a profit, the money

necessary for extensive news coverage is often not there. The news reports are selectively chosen on the basis of what will raise the program's ratings, thereby increasing both advertising dollars and profits.

Talk show hosts have taken the place of persons with real expertise. Political pundits substitute short catch phrases for skilled analysis of the political and social realities affecting our lives. Public opinion polls replace the careful exploration of causes. These types of shallow commentary must be recognized as a form of control of ideas, and control over any challenging ideas that might develop.

Another stumbling block to public conversation is the "de-constructing" of public institutions in our society whose members formerly were acknowledged as having knowledge, wisdom, experience, etc., to contribute to public understanding. This deconstructing is often done through public mockery. Those mocked or belittled with derogatory labels include educators, scholars, public officials, members of groups not dominant in the society, and religious leaders. The result is a lack of respect for both the content of their words and their ability to engage in public conversation.

A further obstacle to public conversation is one that I have come to call “the politeness factor.” In both formal presentations and in ordinary social settings, when someone is speaking, even if what is being said is incorrect, insensitive, or insulting to other persons, it has come to be considered “impolite” or “rude” to challenge or react publicly to what is said. Disagreement, according to the politeness factor, should be expressed privately. The reality, however, is that a challenge or correction privately expressed rarely brings about a public acknowledgement of the correction. Yet speaking publicly is not about the person speaking, or about saving face. It’s about truth speaking, or rather seeking to illumine the truth, which is eventually more important than who is the person speaking.

Without public conversation, we have public silence,
silence that prevents us from standing in opposition to injustice,
silence that contributes to the domination of falsehood over truth, repression over freedom,
oppression over justice, death over life.

So it is necessary to speak out, and to risk the criticism that may follow.

Then it is necessary to ask each other:

- ◇ How do we create forums where experiences can be shared, ideas can be given voice?
- ◇ How can we bring back to the lens of the public arena the persons, the whole peoples who have been, and continue to be, silenced by the socio-economic system being extended by the globalization of the economy?
- ◇ How do we provide spaces for persons of different backgrounds to come together to find new ways of doing things, to play “what if...?” to dream, and then to work together to figure out how to do it, whatever the “it” is.

It is in such public conversation, that we develop new models, new ways for doing things.

For example, a public campaign a few years ago focused on the GAP and working conditions at the Mandarin International assembly plant in El Salvador. This led to regular communication between representatives of the GAP, representatives of several non-governmental organizations in the United States (including myself) and several non-governmental organizations in El Salvador. The communication resulted in the creation of an independent monitoring group that has since monitored the Mandarin plant. The Salvadoran group is now establishing itself as an official independent monitoring organization.

Benjamin Cuellar, the leader of the Salvadoran monitoring group, has spoken of the importance of the independent monitoring program, not only because it addresses the needs of the workers in the assembly plants, but also because the people of El Salvador were watching to see if peaceful resolution of conflict is possible. In a country such as El Salvador, that has known generations of conflict and violence, to raise the possibility of peaceful resolution of conflict is an awesome thing. Indeed, to be part of such a project is a holy task, well worth the hours of work, the fatigue, the frustration, the struggle to help the model work.

Each of us, in our own way, our own place and our own situation, is called to be part of the struggle for truth and justice.

- ◇ If we are clear about our starting point, about our relationship to power and our connections to sources of power...
- ◇ If we choose to raise the questions, to speak out for accuracy and truth rather than to be silent...
- ◇ If we seek out ways to bring the voices of persons or groups who have been silenced into public conversation...

then we participate in the efforts to illumine the truth, and to create the new models that together will transform our world.

Along with public conversation is what I call "public grieving." Can we learn to grieve publicly for those who have died unnecessarily...for children without adequate food, without the simplest of antibiotics? For the victims of violence on our streets? Can we hold before the public eye the women of Medor who want one meal a day for their children? The workers who work 40 or 50 or 60 hours in shoe factories in Indonesia or T-shirt factories in Port-au-Prince but cannot afford three meals a day for themselves and their families? Can we hold these faces of living, breathing brothers and sisters before the public eye and ask why?

Public grieving asks that we be willing to hold before the public eye the reality that one third of the population of Latin America, approximately 170 million people, are unable to reach a subsistence level of living, are subject to biological poverty, defined in the 3rd world as nearness to death, a death imposed by systematic economic construction which continues to divide the world into rich and poor.

Public grieving, if we choose it, will call us to compassion, for to study a situation, to have knowledge about a place and its people, means to have responsibility for that situation, to be called to respond. The call to compassion will offer us a choice, each of us: we can use the pain we know, we experience, as a form of entitlement, a form of victimization-hood; or we can learn to use it to hear, to be present to the pain and suffering of others, to call one another to a form of healing which allows us to walk in solidarity with those who are suffering.

From the starting point of the Option for the Poor, and our acceptance of the need to publicly grieve the injustice, the horrific poverty, the repression experienced by our sisters and brothers throughout the world, we are then called to Public Conversation.