

FROM CONFLICT TO CO-CREATION: THREE POWERFUL STORIES OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

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I. INTRODUCTION

In our communities today, too often, the end goal of dialogue is to develop methods that allow people to coexist, but this is not enough. If left at that, our society will increasingly become more segmented and stratified, where groups of people are able to reside in the same vicinity but only interact when absolutely necessary or safe. This is no way to live, and, in fact, it is a recipe for polarization and the eventual death of dialogue.

If coexistence is not the primary goal of dialogue, then what must be the goal? Our dialogue should not only allow us to coexist but to co-create. This form of dialogue challenges individuals from diverse perspectives and backgrounds to collectively develop something that can only be formed with the gathering of people in the room—an endeavor that can be achieved through cultivating understanding and mutual respect, and by establishing a common goal. The authors of this Article have personally seen dialogue intervene in a tremendous way to produce solutions that were previously unimaginable in the areas of political gridlock, policing, and grassroots organizing. We offer these vignettes as a glimmer of

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hope, and perhaps as a way to illuminate a path forward to the reemergence of dialogue.

II. THE PANEL

With the convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the highly controversial presidential election, 2020 was saturated with feelings of anxiety, division, and deep uncertainty as to the state of the U.S. and its citizens. Moreover, allegations of voter fraud and intentions to steal the election fanned the flames of tension that seemed to burn the bridges of national unity.

In the midst of the division, a unique group of citizens was brought together and did what many thought was impossible. Thirty people from wide-ranging backgrounds across the state of Michigan were assembled into a panel (“Citizens’ Panel” or “Panel”) that was tasked with developing a set of policy recommendations to determine how Michigan should navigate the growing concerns presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

After meeting for over two hours a day for four days a week over six weeks, this group of diverse individuals developed twelve policy recommendations, with each proposal receiving between 70% and 93% support from the Panel.² The final report contained recommendations to the state in the areas of economics, vaccinations, masking, and more.³ The report was released to the press, every county health official, and leaders of major institutions throughout Michigan, including the governor.⁴ The Panel members met the challenge at a pivotal moment in American history and prevailed.

Aristotle posited that the true purpose of politics is to make good citizens and prepare them to perform noble actions in daily life.⁵ This statement is exemplified by the Citizens’ Panel. However, there were factors that contributed to the success of the Panel that also implicate the failures of our current political structures.

¹ THE CITIZENS’ PANEL ON COVID-19, FINAL REPORT OF THE CITIZENS’ PANEL ON COVID-19 1 (*of by for* ed., Nov. 2020), <https://joinofbyfor.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Final-Report-of-the-Citizens-Panel-on-COVID-19.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/M2H9-BDVC>].

² *Id.* at 6.

³ *Id.* at 3.

⁴ See generally THE CITIZENS’ PANEL ON COVID-19, *supra* note 1.

⁵ Edward Clayton, *Aristotle: Politics*, INTERNET ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL., <https://iep.utm.edu/aris-pol/> [<https://perma.cc/MF3K-3MKA>] (last visited Apr. 12, 2022).

Adam Conkright, co-coordinator of the organization *of by for*⁶—which helped organize the Citizens’ Panel—stated that within the Panel, “there were serious disagreements, but they were sincere disagreements. They didn’t attack each other or hijack the issues to score political points because they didn’t owe their position to any party or special interests. They were simply representing themselves and their fellow citizens in the state of Michigan.”⁷ This freedom from outside influences provided citizens the latitude necessary to authentically listen, share, and reach agreements that do not fit neatly within party lines. This was a significant key to the Panel’s success.

Another crucial factor to the success of the Panel was that the members were selected in a way that ensured they represented the whole state. The process was led by the independent organization, *of by for*.⁸ *Of by for* sent an invitation letter to 10,000 Michigan households.⁹ Michigan was selected because “it is one of the states that most reflects [the] country’s makeup and deep divide.”¹⁰ From those who accepted the invitation, the organization Panelot, which is comprised of scientists from Carnegie Melon and Harvard, used an open-source algorithm to generate a set of over 1,000 possible panels, each consisting of thirty individuals that matched the state’s demographic and political makeup.¹¹ Finally, one of those variations was selected through a lottery process.¹² This group of perfect strangers was carefully curated to almost precisely mirror the state’s demographics of gender, education, region, socio-economic status, and race, and even its citizens’ political leanings and views on the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³

The next factor that contributed to the Panel’s success was the moderation team that assisted in facilitating the process. The moderators’ primary task was to capture the notes and ask questions that encouraged panelists to explore the nuances of their stories and priorities as members on this Panel.¹⁴ Though moderators pro-

⁶ *Of by for* is a non-profit working to promote a government that truly represents and serves its people. The organization is focused on advancing the selection of representatives through democratic lotteries, instead of partisan elections.

⁷ Telephone Interview with Adam Conkright, Co-Coordinator for *of by for* (Mar. 4, 2022).

⁸ THE CITIZENS’ PANEL ON COVID-19, *supra* note 1, at 1.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Telephone Interview with Adam Conkright, *supra* note 7.

¹² THE CITIZENS’ PANEL ON COVID-19, *supra* note 1, at 2.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

vided space for more depth, the entire process was guided by two central questions: “What have we learned, and what do we need to move forward?”¹⁵ These guiding questions led to the first stage of the process, which centered around story sharing. After being placed into small groups, some panelists reflected on their experience of losing multiple family members to COVID-19; conversely, others shared their antagonism toward wearing masks because they still had not seen any evidence of the virus near them.¹⁶ Moreover, some panelists disclosed that they did not feel safe returning to work, while some small business owners lamented about how difficult it was to get their employees to return.¹⁷ However, through the diversity of stories expressed, one panelist remarked,

We discovered that we were all affected in one way or another. Through heartfelt dialogue, we learned that we were all looking for answers and better information on COVID-19. We found that we were united in our desire to help with the challenges that were affecting the citizens of Michigan. We developed a deep empathy for what others have gone through.¹⁸

This empathy laid the foundation for the policy discussions to come; next, the Panel would be challenged to leverage that connection into legislation.

In the second stage of the process, the Panel began to do its own research. During this research phase, the Panel summoned outside experts to testify in the areas of unemployment, vaccination, and masking protocols.¹⁹ After hearing from the experts, the panelists then considered the information and were forced to weigh their personal convictions with those of their fellow panelists. This was perhaps the most contentious portion of the Panel meetings, as individuals deliberated and struggled to find ways to reconcile their own personal beliefs with those of others while acknowledging and collaborating with each panelist to develop policies by which they could stand.

Perhaps more incredible than the policies that were transcribed on paper were the transformations in the hearts of participants. At the conclusion of the process, one panelist reflected upon their time and stated, “Being part of the Panel has been an

¹⁵ *Id.* at 4.

¹⁶ Citizens’ Panel on COVID-19 in Michigan (Sept 30, 2020). The author [Payton Silket] moderated this session and is speaking about this panel based on his personal experience.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ THE CITIZENS’ PANEL ON COVID-19, *supra* note 1, at 5.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 4.

empowering experience for us. It has taught us that we can come together to tackle major issues regardless of our differences.”²⁰ Members described the best aspects of serving on the Citizens’ Panel as “working with people of all ages, races, political views, and preferences to come to a common agreeable recommendation to solve issues affecting Michigan citizens about COVID-19,”²¹ and “working constructively with people you don’t know, the discussions, and coming up with an intelligent, finished product in the end.”²² This Panel demonstrates the true power that citizens have when they gather under the proper conditions and with the right resources. The division around these individuals did not deter them; in fact, the panelists noted that, far from being an obstacle, working in a diverse environment was actually a necessity towards achieving their success.²³ The Citizens’ Panel invites us to imagine the possibilities when operating in a diverse society is no longer a challenge, but when it instead becomes the key to generating the change that so many are seeking today.

III. BMW (BLACK MAN WALKING)

A young African American father in his mid-20s was walking home from a 7-Eleven convenience store at about midnight with his six-year-old, bi-racial daughter.²⁴ It was a sweltering evening, and he was treating his daughter to ice cream.²⁵ Suddenly, he was stopped on foot by two Los Angeles Police Department (“LAPD”) officers—one male and one female, both of whom were Hispanic—in a patrol vehicle.²⁶ The officers immediately separated him from his daughter and began to question the two individually.²⁷ The father learned that a woman had called 9-1-1 more than once, reporting that a suspicious Black man was walking with a little white girl late at night and that she feared that the little girl was in danger.²⁸

²⁰ *Id.* at 7.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.* at 9.

²⁴ Mediation with father and two LAPD police officers (2021). The author [Cheryl Epps] conducted this session, and is speaking about this case based on her personal experience.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

The father became furious, asking the officers why they separated him from his daughter and asserting that he did not do anything wrong.²⁹ He explained why he was out so late with his daughter and that he was very upset with the questions the officers were asking her.³⁰ The father finally explained that he obtained custody of his daughter a few years ago because of substantiated child abuse by the biological mother.³¹ The officers eventually let the father go without incident, but he remained extremely upset.³² He decided to file a complaint against the two officers for racial bias/profiling, stating that he was stopped on foot for no reason and that his daughter was traumatized because of the incident.³³

This case was mediated by the Los Angeles City Attorney's Community-Police Unification Program ("CPUP").³⁴ During this session, a mediator met with both the father and the two officers to guide a dialogue about how all parties experienced each other on the date of the incident.³⁵ At one point, the male officer said to the father, "If you were in my position, under the same circumstances, wouldn't you do the same thing?"³⁶ This comment made the father even angrier because he believed it further underscored possible racial bias, as he was clearly a Black man and his daughter was very fair-skinned.³⁷ The father stated that he was afraid and kept thinking that he was going to be shot, injured, or killed in front of his six-year-old daughter, who was also terrified.³⁸ When the father shared his perspective, the female officer became tearful and emotional.³⁹ She stated that she was a single mother and felt very badly that the father and his daughter were afraid of being harmed by the police.⁴⁰ She added that after receiving multiple calls from the same caller—who was later identified as a white woman, in her car, who was following the father and his daughter as they walked toward their apartment—the officers felt it was necessary to approach the two of them and question them because it was reported

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ Mediation with father and two LAPD police officers, *supra* note 24.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ Mediation with father and two LAPD police officers, *supra* note 24.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

that the six-year-old was in danger.⁴¹ The male officer admitted that when the father became agitated after being stopped, the officer also felt himself becoming more forceful because it seemed like the father did not want to cooperate.⁴² The male officer added that it was a good idea to allow his female partner to engage the father, as she was able to calm him down.⁴³ Both officers explained their points of view and later apologized to the little girl, who joined the session for a few minutes to share her feelings.⁴⁴ At the close of the session, the officers offered an apology and the father thanked them for their service, adding that he realized that they had a difficult job.⁴⁵ The father was still upset by the encounter but was glad that he had a chance to meet with the officers in a mediation forum and share how the experience affected him.⁴⁶ Both officers said that although they followed protocol, they would make more of an effort in the future to gather as much information as possible and engage people more respectfully.⁴⁷

Without this dialogue, the father likely would have remained angry and frustrated at the way he was treated, and the officers would likely not have known how terrifying the experience was for this young father and his daughter. All of the parties were able to have a guided dialogue about how each experienced the other and were eventually able to see the humanity in each other. The mediation not only offered an opportunity to address the community member's complaint, but it also offered an opening to build trust and relationships between the LAPD and the community it serves. Both parties decided to lean into the conflict and were able to experience the benefits of conflict resolution, dialogue, and restoration.

The CPUP is a free service offered through the Los Angeles City Attorney's Dispute Resolution Program ("DRP"), in collaboration with the LAPD.⁴⁸ It serves as a forum for a community member ("CM") and an LAPD officer to have a guided conversation whenever a community member has filed a complaint.⁴⁹ The

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² Mediation with father and two LAPD police officers, *supra* note 24.

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Dispute Resolution / Mediation*, MIKE FEUER: L.A. CITY ATT'Y, <https://www.lacityattorney.org/mediation> [<https://perma.cc/R83Q-S7RN>] (last visited Apr. 30, 2022).

⁴⁹ *Id.*

sessions are conducted by a certified, specially trained mediator, and each session can last anywhere from one hour to several hours, depending on the nature of the complaint.⁵⁰

The purpose of the CPUP session is to allow an opportunity for the CM and the officer to connect and share their perspectives about how they encountered each other on the date of the incident.⁵¹ The CM and the officer can explain their actions, clarify any points of confusion, and hear the heart of the issue.⁵² Both the CM and the officer can pose questions and/or explain what may not have been clear on the date of the encounter. The goal is for both sides to gain an understanding, even if they still disagree on the specifics of the encounter.⁵³

When a person has an unpleasant experience with a police officer, they may be left with bad feelings, resentment, anger, and/or frustration. If the experience left a significant negative impression, the person might decide to file a complaint.⁵⁴ Once their complaint is filed, the CM may or may not ever hear anything about the outcome of their complaint, including whether the named officer was addressed or what, if any, future action may be taken.⁵⁵ Often, the complaint may languish on a desk for as long as six months before it is even reviewed or assigned, if it is even assigned at all. This contributes to the disconnection between the police and the community. It breeds distrust and hopelessness, and contributes to the contentious relationship between the police and the communities they serve.

Common complaints from the community regarding CM encounters with the police include there being a lack of empathy, trust, and/or transparency.⁵⁶ Police officers are trained to carry out their duties, assert their authority, and operate under strict policies and procedures to ensure the safety and protection of the communities they serve. And while the officers carry out those duties with

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ This information is from the Los Angeles Police Department, and cases are referred by the Internal Affairs Division.

⁵⁵ This information is based on the author's [Cheryl Epp's] personal experience, after receiving intake calls from community members who are considering the mediation process in Los Angeles, California.

⁵⁶ See *supra* note 55 and accompanying information.

technical training and skill, they reportedly can, at times, present as mechanical by displaying a lack of compassion and regard.⁵⁷

The CPUP mediation is not a magical process. Participation is voluntary, and the process neither guarantees agreement nor reconciliation. In fact, it is possible that the officer and the CM may still land on opposite sides of the dispute.⁵⁸ Unlike other types of mediation—such as landlord/tenant, neighbor/neighbor, and business/consumer—which seek resolution to a dispute,⁵⁹ the goal of CPUP mediation is for each party to gain an understanding of the other’s perspective.⁶⁰ The CM has an opportunity to be seen, valued, and heard, and the officer has the opportunity to view the incident from a different point of view—the parties are presented with the opportunity to relate as two human beings. This is even possible when both parties are still rooted in their original positions and, consequently, disagree. The CPUP serves to build or rebuild public trust within the community, improve the relationship between community members and the police, and lead to better police-community interactions.⁶¹ The community members, in particular, feel closure after using this process, and the officers obtain additional tools for future community engagement.⁶² It is through this experience that mediation and dialogue facilitate connection, relationships, and human interaction, which all have been proven as necessary for officers to adequately serve their community members.⁶³

IV. FROM BELONGING TO BECOMING

“How[,] in six weeks[,] a group of complete strangers created a community through a Belong Circle⁶⁴ and then began organizing

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ Dispute Resolution / Mediation, *supra* note 48.

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² This information was gathered through CPUP post-mediation surveys, which were submitted anonymously by participating community members/police officers in Los Angeles, California.

⁶³ See *supra* note 62 and accompanying information.

⁶⁴ A Belong Circle is an intentional gathering of ten people from diverse community backgrounds that meet regularly to build deep relationships and work to change social injustices within their communities. Led by a facilitator, the participants examine tenets from the Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley and implement the teachings at a grassroots level. BELONG, BELONG CIRCLE LEADER GUIDE 2 (on file with author).

on behalf of the unhoused community of Rydin Road.”⁶⁵ This was the tagline for the article that covered the story of how dialogue transformed a group of complete strangers into a diverse coalition of community advocates on the vanguard of housing justice in the city of Richmond, California. What began as a small circle that was meant to invite diverse people into deep relationships evolved into a group that has bonafide political power. This circle has now expanded to include the unhoused residents at Rydin Road, and members began attending countless city council meetings to advocate for justice for the encampment.⁶⁶ Their joint advocacy has led to many victories, perhaps most notably, the redirection of city funding to the non-profit of a circle member that services the encampment and places money directly in their hands. In short, what began as deep listening has developed into a grassroots movement towards justice, and this is not the only Belong Circle that has followed that trend.

In 2019, a landmark organization known as Faith in Action East Bay launched the Belong Campaign in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is a campaign dedicated to building diverse coalitions of people across race, faith, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation to forge meaningful relationships with community members that have historically been isolated from one another.⁶⁷ However, the end goal is not relationship building. The ultimate goal of these circles is to propel this diverse group of people into a position where they not only understand their neighbors more intimately, but are also poised to take action on each other’s behalf.⁶⁸ The curriculum in the circle compels each member to expand their “circle of human concern,”⁶⁹ who they care most about, in order to encompass a richer variety of humanity than ever before.

The formation of these relationships comes through a unique combination of personal story sharing and self-examination. Both are essential to promote any sort of transformative process that compels people to forge cohesive bonds that are more than just tangential connections. These small groups often work through a curriculum that incorporates concepts from the Othering and Be-

⁶⁵ FIAEB, *Truly Loving Our Neighbors: A Belong Circle Expands to Include Rydin Road*, FAITH IN ACTION EAST BAY (Jan. 27, 2022), <https://fiaeastbay.org/truly-loving-our-neighbors-a-belong-circle-expands-to-include-rydin-road/> [<https://perma.cc/H2AG-AW4X>].

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Homepage*, PICO CAL., <http://www.picocalifornia.org/> [<https://perma.cc/V9T4-BRKU>] (last visited Apr. 30, 2020).

⁶⁸ BELONG, *supra* note 64, at 4.

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 12.

longing institute,⁷⁰ seated at UC Berkeley, and frames the conversation around four main topic areas: (1) Who are we as individuals?; (2) Why have we been divided in the past?; (3) What would a society look like that we could envision together?; and (4) What are the actual steps that can be made in order to accomplish the goals in our own local communities?⁷¹ Additionally, the curriculum introduces concepts such as bridging—where a person embraces differences and reaches collective solutions—and breaking—where an individual opts for a solution that solely addresses their own concerns with regard to the impact of others.⁷² When people choose to bridge, they are able to reach outside of themselves and their traditional spheres; but when these people choose to break, they can become dogmatic and reactive, often making collaboration impossible. These circles provide people with the proper environment and tools to successfully bridge and work through the instinct to break.

The combined effort of authentic story sharing coupled with self-examination promotes an atmosphere where people choose to remain together and effect change; this was the case with the Rydin Road Belong Circle. As the participants contemplated the societal ills that impacted them, their own connections to the issues in their neighborhood were revealed and this inspired them towards making changes.⁷³ One of the circle's members ran a small non-profit dedicated to servicing the unhoused, and another participant opened up about her own experiences with being homeless.⁷⁴ After these reflections, it became much easier to mobilize the circle members toward this cause, because they—or people they cared about—were directly affected by the issue. Allowing this group to develop close relationships, and presenting the participants with an opportunity to act, ignited the spark necessary to provoke them to organize for change. The experience of this circle, and the others like it, illuminates an opportunity to develop coalitions poised for

⁷⁰ The Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley is a vibrant hub of scholars, researchers, organizers, strategic communicators, policymakers, and community partners who are working to find new ways to identify and eliminate the barriers to an inclusive, just, and sustainable world. *A Vision of an Inclusive Future*, OTHERING & BELONGING INST., <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/> [<https://perma.cc/YW8Q-E8DH>] (last visited Apr. 30, 2022).

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² *Glossary of Terms*, OTHERING & BELONGING INST., <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/redefining-who-belongs/glossary> [<https://perma.cc/89HZ-SQAN>] (last visited May 1, 2022).

⁷³ Rydin Road Belong Circle in Richmond, CA (Nov. 29, 2021). The author [Payton Silket] moderated this session and is speaking about this circle based on his personal experience.

⁷⁴ *Id.*

radical social impact when the foundation for dialogue is laid and our experiences are placed at the center.

V. THE LESSONS

Each of these vignettes provides deep insight into areas where dialogue has opened opportunities, when there seemed to be no opportunity at all. Though each example is unique, there are a few commonalities that ring true from scenario to scenario. These commonalities include: (1) breaking the binary, (2) power dynamics, and (3) a true understanding.

A. *Breaking the Binary*

In many dialogues observed in our families, schools, and places of worship, charged identities can interfere and often take on a life of their own, which makes it challenging to parse out the toxins associated with those perspectives. In her latest book, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped, and How We Get Out*, Amanda Ripley describes the dangers of over-categorizing people.⁷⁵ As a seasoned journalist, Ripley articulates the dangers of labels, stating, “People were starting to believe that they could know one another’s moral core without actually knowing one another at all.”⁷⁶ These labels provide shortcuts that allow for prejudgments to develop, which largely inhibit conversation before it has a chance to begin.⁷⁷ Therefore, it becomes clear that conversations need to take place where people are able to attribute core values to life experiences—conversations that do not resort to any partisan talking points. In other words, any successful dialogue must consider the binaries that may be present and create ways to break these binaries apart. Therefore, to create an environment where binaries can be broken, the setting must be conducive towards presenting people as multi-dimensional from the outset. Whether working with differences in identity such as, for example, Republican/Democrat, police officer/protester, or Christian/Muslim, within these identities are multi-faceted people with robust personalities and

⁷⁵ AMANDA RIPLEY, *HIGH CONFLICT: WHY WE GET TRAPPED AND HOW WE GET OUT* (2021).

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 55.

⁷⁷ *Id.*

experiences that constitute to totality of each individual. Simply viewing a person through a specific lens paints the person as flat and ascribes to them all the perceived attributes that come with these titles. However, every individual is made up of more than a singular identity—though the individual may affiliate with a certain party or practice a specific faith, they may disagree with certain tenants of that party, or have other passions that contribute to their being. When we can recognize someone by the sum total of their being, there is more material to lay a relational foundation to navigate the challenging dialogue ahead.

Beginning with stories provides a rich opportunity to accomplish two things: (1) building empathy, and (2) creating depth and understanding about a person's life experiences that inform the opinions that they are bringing into the room. This breaks through any of the perceived biases that we may have about the other person when entering the conversation. Telling stories makes adversaries multi-faceted, and perhaps even relatable, when experiences that are held in common are shared. While this may not completely mitigate the urge to otherize,⁷⁸ it does make a difference and it allows room for a person's humanness to be fully present in the shared space. This is why the Citizens' Panel was able to succeed with a conversation that was, in contrast, tearing the rest of the country apart.

B. *Power Dynamics*

Dialogue serves to level the playing field when policy, procedure and authority, and biases result in an impasse. Any unequal power dynamic that may be present—those based on race, class, gender, or other identities—must be mitigated. Mediators are charged with cultivating environments where there is a relatively equal balance of power and influence. Community and police mediation spotlights how the community members and officers meet in a neutral environment—anchored by their mutual desire to live peacefully—while focusing on the collective pursuit of raising awareness and gaining understanding. The Michigan COVID-19

⁷⁸ A set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities. In opposition to belonging, othering is a frame that captures the many forms of prejudice and persistent marginality such as race, gender, sexuality, religion, income, and disability. See *supra* note 73 and accompanying information.

Citizens' Panel addressed the importance of recognizing and celebrating similarities while acknowledging and supporting each other's differences. The Belong Circles explored the effects that dialogue can have on groups of people who enter a space with a heart for appreciating how they are connected, rather than what may drive them apart. A dispute usually arises when one of the parties perceives that the balance is no longer symmetrical—that the other party is attempting to assert more power or influence over them. When this occurs, dialogue is effective in showing both parties how coerced power and influence can be mitigated between them. This ensures that everyone has an equal voice and the capacity to contribute. If one person feels limited in their ability to be a part of the conversation, it may not allow for the amount of vulnerability necessary to break through some of the difficult stalemates. Likewise, if the person feels like they are entering into a conversation with someone who is intentionally destructive and disruptive, why would the person waste their time by participating? Furthermore, this attitude may inhibit the possibility of producing any concessions, understanding, or potential agreements. Through dialogue comes the understanding, reflection, and expansion of otherwise limited perspectives that is necessary to create inclusive solutions.

C. True Understanding

Howard Thurman, a renowned theologian widely known for opening the first integrated interfaith church in America, wrote,

It is a grievous blunder to assume that understanding is always sympathetic. Very often, we use the phrase [‘I understand[’] to mean something kindly, warm and gracious. But there is an understanding that it is hard, cold, minute, and deadly. It is the kind of understanding that one gives to an enemy or that is derived from an accurate knowledge of another’s power to injure. There is an understanding of another’s weakness, which may be used as a weapon of offense or defense.⁷⁹

While cultivating understanding is an essential element to these dialogues, it also must be a true understanding, one that is rooted in good intent. There are some dialogues that are destined to fail or fall short of their transformational potential because individuals are participating with some form of malicious intent. Malicious in-

⁷⁹ HOWARD THURMAN, *JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED* 67 (1996).

tent is not always the intention to harm but can also be the lack of willingness to hear the other person out, or the refusal to see the other person as three-dimensional. It is the kind of posture we often see displayed in our political arenas and national news networks, where, no matter what is said, the other party is expected to double down. This kind of understanding that is “cold and hard”⁸⁰ will unfortunately never be transformed, because, at its core, it does not want to be transformed.

Nothing underscores the relevance and need for dialogue more than the events of 2020 and 2021. The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the controversial 2020 presidential election propelled us nationally and internationally into a critical state of both independence and interdependence. Our nation and our international neighbors all felt the thirst for contact, connectedness, and relationship—even if it meant an individual standing on their private balcony for a chance to communicate with someone—as well as a chance to be seen, heard, and valued. While living through mandated stay-at-home orders, people found ways to gather to lend support, share their hearts, and exchange views and opinions—all through dialogue. Individuals and groups of people, whose paths may have never previously crossed, were suddenly sharing spaces and expressing their different or aligned opinions about political views, race, and the worldwide pandemic. Meeting platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and others became the common vehicle for staying connected. Dialogue about these important issues taught us that when we had nothing else, we had our voice, our will, and our hard-wired desire to engage each other. It did not matter whether there was agreement. There was an opportunity to relate and share—an opportunity for dialogue. Can we continue down this path and emerge stronger together? Can we remaster the art of dialogue, and through it, construct a shared vision of the future where policy is created, systems of oppression are dismantled, and communities that are siloed become one?

VI. CONCLUSION

By embracing each other’s humanity, mitigating power dynamics, and supporting outside interests, citizens can accomplish

⁸⁰ *Id.*

the impossible. As facilitators, mediators, or those invested in making the world a better place, we must be the guardians of this fading art and once again reveal the power that dialogue has to bring us into what we all know we deeply need to thrive—*relationship* and *connection*.