

# Group Dialogue – Promise and Peril of the Past and the Future

By Abigail Lynam, PhD, Cascadia College

## Introduction:

This 1 to 1.5 hour group dialogue offers an opportunity to explore the different ways we respond to learning about climate change and other complex challenges that we face. It is an inquiry into the polarities of the promise and peril of the past and the future. It guides reflection on participants' thoughts and feelings (hope and despair) related to learning about climate change and how they are viewing the current moment in relation to the challenges we face.

At one level, this exercise is a simple structure for reflection, inquiry and learning from others. At another level, it supports taking a more holistic and integrative view of a complex challenge by giving participants an opportunity to explore 4 different perspectives on the challenges we face. Doing so supports us to consider how each perspective has something important to contribute, as well as that any one taken to the exclusion of the others limits our understanding and therefore limits our insights for how to address the challenges and the potential solutions that might be generated.

## About polarities:

When we are polarized, we tend to argue for our position and against another, taking a black or white perspective on the issue. If we can expand our perspective taking to include the opposing perspective, this supports a deeper understanding, an empathy for others, as well as a more integrative understanding of the issue. This is what we call a both/and perspective-taking capacity. Taken to another level, we can discover that each perspective is interdependent – that you can't have light without the dark, activity without rest and so forth. Each perspective is complimentary with and dependent on the other.

Polarity Management author Barry Johnson describes polarities in the following: "Polarities are interdependent pairs that support a common purpose and one another. They are energy systems within which we live and work." Polarities are everywhere, they go disguised as problems, they can help us to reinterpret conflict and are themselves dynamic energy systems. Polarities are problems that can be fixed. They are dynamic systems that need to be managed. For instance, if in a class you have students that want more structure and others that want more freedom. This could be the source of conflict and disagreement. It is the role of the teacher to help the class navigate this dynamic so that there is both structure to guide the learning, and the freedom for students to choose the topics of their papers or projects for instance. All of one or the other would not serve the class as a whole.

## The Stages of Moving Through a Polarity

- No-choice
- Either/Or - Choice
- Polarity - Both/And
- Paradox - One within the other
- Unity – Still Point

## Examples of Polarities

- Expansion/Contraction
- Change/Stability
- Liberal/Conservative
- Agency/Communion
- Activity/Rest

In this reflective dialogue, participants are guided to explore the 4 perspectives of the promise and peril of the past and the future. The 4 perspectives are:

1. The promising or positive future
2. The perilous or negative future
3. The promising or positive past
4. The perilous or negative past

These are 4 common ways of interpreting an issue such as climate change. Each has value to contribute to making sense of the current moment, but over expressed, each can limit our ability to understand the issues, what we need to address to solve them and what the future could look like. We need the insights of all four, however it is more likely that the 4 perspectives argue for the primacy of their view, rather than recognizing how complimentary and interdependent each is. For instance, do I take the perspective that we have a positive future ahead of us and am focused on what that looks like and what the solutions are that will get us there? Or do I tend to focus on how bright and promising the past was and that we need to return to the way things were or mourn that we will never recover? Or do I focus on remembering the injustices of the past perhaps in an effort to ensure they never happen again? Or I might focus on the perilous future that we need to avoid at all costs. Or conversely, we can get caught in one view and lose sight of the others – so focused on the bright future, we lose sight of the gravity of the challenges. Or focusing on the problems and injustices of the past, we can't imagine that change is possible.

## **Reflective Inquiry:**

Together, we will explore the way we tend to view the issues we are focusing on (climate change etc.), as well as what we can learn from others who take a different view. This is an opportunity to reflect on your learning, to consider how you view the issues, as well as to integrate and learn from others' perspectives.

Climate change – is a complex and adaptive challenge – one that we can't fix with simple solutions. We need to let climate change solve us, to transform us to become who we need to be to address these challenges. As Naomi Klein titled her book, "This Changes Everything".

We will be exploring what is called from each of us during these times. Who are we in the face of a changing climate? How do we view the issues and the opportunities for change? How are we making sense of what we are learning? Do you feel a sense of promise for the future or are you afraid of what is to come? When you think about our past, are you concerned about the injustices, or do you think about how good things used to be? Each of the four spaces gives us a chance to reflect on our

own relationship to this area – to explore our thoughts and feelings in relation to this view of climate change; where we have come from and where we might be headed.

### **Room Setup:**

Write Past, Future, Promise, Peril on four sheets of paper in bold marker. Tape the paper on opposite walls of the room. Promise and peril on opposite walls, and past and future on opposite walls. Using masking tape on the floor, draw a line between each of the papers so that you have a 4 quadrant cross on the floor, clearly delineating 4 spaces (promise of the future, peril of the future, promise of the past, peril of the past). Clear tables and chairs so that students can move easily through the 4 spaces. Make sure there is enough room in each space for a group to gather.

### **Directions:**

To do a shorter and simpler version of this activity, only use steps 1-4. This takes about an hour. The full exercise takes about 1.5 hours to complete. This is ideal for groups of 10 or more participants.

Instruct students to wander around the 4 spaces considering what they think and feel about the challenges we face with regards to climate change. It is an opportunity to explore hope and despair as well as our view of the past and the future regarding human/nature relationships. Choose one of the 4 spaces.

1. Experiencing the polarity of past/future – promise (light) /perilous (dark) (3-4 mins)
  - a. Wander around the room (no talking), explore what the space feels like. What do you think or feel in these different areas?
  - b. Find your spot – or let it find you
2. Written Reflection (silent) (5 mins)
  - a. What brought you to this space? What thoughts/feelings arise?
  - b. In what ways is this spot familiar, new or perhaps there is a way in which it shapes or defines you?
3. Forms groups (20 mins) (no larger than 5. There can be more than 1 group in each quadrant)
  - a. What is it like to be in this space? Why are you where you are?
  - b. What are you thinking and feeling about climate change and our past or future?
  - c. What are the gifts and possible challenges of this space – way of being and seeing?
4. Groups share what they talked about – just the highlights...give examples – just a few minutes each (10 mins)
5. Groups share how they see the other groups? They might have questions for the other groups, as well as appreciations but also judgements... (10 mins)
  - a. Share / Discuss
  - b. How do we need each other?
6. One within the other (10 mins)
  - a. You might be shaped or defined by this, but how is it that all the other points are equally valid and valuable?

- b. If you can take within you the other's view of climate change and our current challenges— can you find compassion for them? Can you be equally responsible for their position?
  - c. How do each of these polarities define each other, require each other?
7. Step back into the full circle –
- a. Feel how you have all of these points and perspectives within you— ways of being with what is happening within you – feel the fullness of that
  - b. Let it all go – in a way these are simply perspectives we take on all of this, stories that we are telling – let yourself simply come into contact with what is, find some stillness and rest in that.

**Life of a polarity** - Moving from black/white, either/or to both/and to one within the other

### **Unconditional**

Willing to experience aloneness,  
 I discover connection everywhere;  
 Turning to face my fear,  
 I meet the warrior who lives within;  
 Opening to my loss,  
 I gain the embrace of the universe;  
 Surrendering into emptiness,  
 I find fullness without end.  
 Each condition I flee from pursues me,  
 Each condition I welcome transforms me  
 And becomes itself transformed

Into its radiant jewel-like essence.  
 I bow to the one who has made it so,  
 Who has crafted this Master Game.  
 To play in its purest delight;  
 To honor its form--true devotion.

- Jennifer Welwood

### **Both/And - Bringing the Polarity Inside**

- You have both poles in you (or within your group)
- Notice feelings, thoughts, projections you have about each part of the polarity map
- Inquire as a group, inquire as to how might you be fixating on different parts of the map or what unexamined expectations you have of yourselves or each other
- In committing to taking on the health of the whole polarity, commit to an ongoing reflection.

## **Paradox**

- Explore how one side of the pole arises from and with the other
- How does one side require the other for its existence?
- How is one of benefit to the other?
- How in some sense are both true and opposite simultaneously?

## **Unity / Co-existence**

- Hold both within yourself with your breath
- From a place of quiet, feel the still point that holds both poles
- Let go of the energy of difference and the minds need to resolve the poles
- Does the still point have a quality?

## **EVERYTHING HAS A DEEP DREAM**

I've spent many years learning how to fix life, only to discover at the end of the day that life is not broken. There is a hidden seed of greater wholeness in everyone and everything. We serve life best when we water it and befriend it. When we listen before we act. In befriending life, we do not make things happen according to our own design. We uncover something that is already happening in us and around us and create conditions that enable it. Everything is moving towards its place of wholeness always struggling against the odds. Everything has a deep dream of itself and its fulfillment.

by Rachel Naomi Remen

### **Additional Resources:**

- Institute for Cultural Evolution's Depolarizing the American Mind <http://www.culturalevolution.org>
- Barry Johnson's Polarity Management <http://www.polaritypartnerships.com>