

Listening for the Beat of My Being

Gary J. Hubbell

An essay contribution to
Conversation 2014

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GHC Conversations

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about the social sector, philanthropy, and leadership. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each GHC Conversation, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek new dimensions of impact.



Participant Bio

Gary J. Hubbell

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Gary Hubbell has served others for more than three decades. Across that wonderful span of time, he's come to listen for the voice of his vocation. As his awareness grows, Gary routinely asks himself: "What animates me? What fosters that total alignment of my gifts and my desires; my contributions and the opportunities I seek; my intention and my attention?"

Hubbell strives to strengthen organizations for inevitable change and greater impact. He gets animated by the passions and energies of individuals and teams (inside and outside organizations) who are trying to change the world. He is energized by people who are on the cusp of big moves—whether they're conscious of it or not—helping others "see" in new ways, illuminating blind spots on the path to great things—not for themselves but for our shared world.

This motivating intention has led to a career arc characterized by: learning to tell a clear story (public relations); discerning interests and attitudes (opinion research); unlocking potential (employing appreciative inquiry and organizational development); setting about on new directions (scenario thinking, planning, facilitation, organizational change initiatives); catalyzing opportunity and unlocking joy (all aspects of philanthropy); and curating meaningful conversations (executive coaching and *GHC Conversations*).

Gary's work is a source of energy and renewal; an opportunity to learn and to teach; an opportunity to immerse himself in the noble pursuits of gifted and impassioned colleagues. He is animated by participating with people who have the courage to walk into their fear and through it, in pursuit of something they can uniquely contribute to making the world a better place.

Listening for the Beat of My Being

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How does one come to grips with the idea of Wise Action In Community? How does one keep from immediately feeling overwhelmed? Where does one start?

These are but a few of the questions that jump to mind as I consider my contribution to *Conversation 2014*. As I navigate the thousand thoughts I have about the topic, I soon realize that whatever next step I take in the direction of Wise Action toward some bigger improvement in society begins with me.

First, I've got to relinquish the ego-driven thought that I might possess within me "the solution" — as if the world (or my country, my region, my community, my organization, my unit, or my family) was something to be "fixed." Second, I quickly acknowledge that I have little hope of making positive impact outside if I have not found some inner gyroscope spinning well and straight. So I find myself returning to the idea of "Right Being," trusting that if I can be in right relation to myself I will be more likely to act with wisdom and, if led by a good heart, contribute In Community in ways that produce good for others.

What is My Work?

Throughout many of my first 50 years on this earth, I thought of my work (my vocation) as the jobs I held, the titles I was given, the activities I pursued, and the accomplishments I made in those roles. I've come now to realize that the last 50 years of my life should be about seeing my "work" quite differently. I now see my work embedded in the theme of *Conversation 2014: Right Being...Wise Action...In Community*. My work is about gaining and sustaining clarity of purpose and intent, which guides my behavior and deeds as I endeavor to act together with others for good. So this inner clarity and harmony becomes the guidance system for all I will do.

Writer, teacher, and activist, Parker Palmer, explores the concept of a divided life. He posits that we fear that our "inner light" will be snuffed out and/or that our "inner darkness" will be exposed for others to see. In so doing, we guard and block, keeping at bay a true relationship with ourselves and, as a result, living without real integrity and separated from our soul. He says "as soon as we succumb to someone else's definition of who we are, we lose our sense of true self and our right relation to the world."¹ So what is the essence of my true self? What is my integrity — my moral code wiring that is unimpaired, undistilled, and genuine? What is the source of my joy? What is my work?

¹Parker J. Palmer (2004). *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 102.

Frederick Buechner defines vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”² There it is; the connection of Right Being...Wise Action...In Community. Therefore, my work is about listening—first inwardly to know my deep gladness and outwardly to recognize the world’s need. This won’t happen automatically and it’s not likely to happen with big loud, neon lights around what I need to hear and learn. I’ve got to be intentional, to practice listening—to myself and to the world—in ways that might be new for me. I’ve got to push through my ego to live with intention. As I do, I am more likely to find alignment of my intention and my attention—the personal integrity Palmer talks about. The better listener I become, the more likely will be good alignment of my Right Being with Wise Action.

Yet, this is not about a destination but a journey, a practice, a life’s work. Despite the alignment of intention and attention, one can’t guarantee the desired results. The beauty of this path is in the trying of it, observing, learning, “leaning into it” in order to gain deeper wisdom to be subsequently applied. None of our lives are pure linear progressions and growth curves. We get distracted, disturbed, deluded, and demoralized. Thus, it must become my work, my practice.

Some may see this path as the epitome of selfishness or self-centeredness. I tend to see this more within the framework Palmer presents. Being whole and good, being in right relation with our inner selves, being undivided so that we are living with soul is all our work. If it is this work that creates the context for all outer work, as I believe it is, then this is exactly where my focus ought to be.

Four questions help me with alignment and tend to foster greater internal wisdom about what is Right Being, leading to Wise Action. They are:

- What is the source of my nutrition?
- What must I learn?
- What disruption or disturbance will I walk into?
- Whether conscious of it or not, what does my organization need most of me?

The Source of My Nutrition

What we believe, we become. That which we feed our subconscious minds becomes our language and behavior. So when I think about being intentional about my work I’ve got to focus on what I’m feeding my soul. What am I reading? With whom do I surround myself? Are my professional endeavors life- and energy-affirming or are they draining me (despite the corresponding monetary reward or public recognition)? These are the questions that I think about a lot. Personally, I draw energy and great personal benefit from my professional life and from developing and hosting GHC Conversations. Relationships are central to my personal satisfaction. Therefore, I seek to engage in my client work and in sustaining Conversation as a key source of what is nutritious to me.

Helpful to me decades ago was my learning about the relationship of the subconscious mind to the conscious. I came to recognize that it is my subconscious mind that is the source of my words and deeds. I became aware of the torrents of poison that I had been feeding my unconscious mind through a variety of self-limiting inner talk, dinged self-esteem, and recurring doubt and worry. While I can’t eliminate all the “chatter,” I found that I can choose what and when to cancel the inputs and replace it with nutritious fare for my

²Buechner is the author of *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, and is quoted in Parker J. Palmer (2000). *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 16.

subconscious mind. Now, nearly 30 years after learning these helpful constructs, I'm now opening myself to meditation, which will become another source of nutrition. "Meditation becomes both a refuge and a training: a refuge into being, and a training into doing."³

What Must I Learn?

"Through learning, we re-create ourselves."⁴ For as long as I can remember, I have subscribed to what is now the commonly accepted concept of life-long learning. I love to learn and I'm learning to learn in new ways. For me, having a mental map for my learning journey is important. In so doing, I become more intentional about what I seek to learn. Reading, writing, presenting, and group discussions have long been my preferred ways to learning. The current "phase" of my learning is comprised of four related elements.

1. **Physical wellness**—while I'm descended from a long line of rail thin family, the full presence of health is only partially connected to the absence of extra body weight. Endurance and physical strength naturally lessen as one ages, so it becomes something for which I must make more time and effort. Married to an avid distance runner, I'm routinely shown a deep appreciation for the physical and mental benefits of getting my heart rate up with my running shoes on. Mirroring the national dialogue on health insurance and affordability, I find myself taking more responsibility for my own wellness and avoiding behaviors that cause illness. We all have these inner conversations, but once the light switch goes on, commitment deepens and the rationalizing and procrastinating stops. Time to get moving!
2. **Systems thinking**—Another learning from transitioning into my 2nd half century of life is that purely technical prowess is not enough if I truly want to understand how to have a greater impact on the world I care about. Many years ago I was introduced to the language of systems thinking but it seemed a distant and obtuse idea until beginning to work more closely with my brother, Ken Hubbell, in 2006. Ken's continuing search for a better understanding of systems has sparked my further study and practice. I have come to accept and appreciate the interconnectedness of all things. Therefore, any of my previous attempts to produce good were unintentionally narrow and limited and, worst yet, possibly creating other problems as a result.

In his book by the same name, Peter Senge defines the fifth discipline—systems thinking—as

...a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static "snapshots." It is a set of general principles — distilled over the course of the twentieth century, spanning fields as diverse as the physical and social sciences, engineering, and management....During the last thirty years, these tools have been applied to understand a wide range of corporate, urban, regional, economic, political, ecological, and even psychological systems. And systems thinking is a sensibility — for the subtle interconnectedness that gives living systems their unique character."⁵

Other great systems thinkers, Margaret Wheatley and Donella Meadows, share equally helpful learnings about systems. Wheatley reminds us that systems are unknowable by

³Martine Batchelor, "A Refuge Into Being." *Tricycle Daily Dharma*, February 8, 2014.

⁴Peter M. Senge (1990, 2006). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Currency-Doubleday, p. 13.

⁵Ibid, pp. 68-69.

themselves; they are irreducible.⁶ Meadows adds,

“Systems can’t be controlled, but they can be designed and redesigned. We can’t surge forward with certainty into a world of no surprises, but we can expect surprises and learn from them and even profit from them. We can’t impose our will upon a system. We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone. We can’t control systems or figure them out, but we can dance with them.”⁷

3. **Bigger questions**—the key to intervening on any situation or system is to know the questions to ask that will produce the most leverage. Bigger questions will be tougher to answer, no doubt, yet they are the ones that more likely get to greater understanding of causality. In many organizational situations where I work, I see many passionate, well-intentioned professionals working feverishly to figure out what to do and how to do it. Too often missing from their perspective is a bone deep understanding of why something is being done. They work tirelessly in a myopic way, often only focused on their stated priorities and targets. This is like pushing rope uphill if their work is not imbued with an awareness and appreciation of the balancing reactions their efforts trigger in their environment (whether elsewhere in their own department, in another unit of the organization, or externally in their constituency). Systems thinking familiarity will help me be better able to advise these clients on how to navigate these situations.
4. **Spiritual journey**—While I will continue to have—and feed—a strong desire for acquiring new knowledge, I recognize a growing desire to develop deeper wisdom, which I equate to being on a spiritual journey. For me, this is a journey of discovery and practice. I am nearing a place where I will be able to articulate my true purpose. Kevin Cashman reminds us that “purpose is spirit seeking expression; awareness of it allows us to see our lives more clearly from the inside-out.”⁸

What Disruption or Disturbance Will I Walk Into?

What I love about this question is that it assumes that surprise, disruption, and disturbance are in my future. While off-putting and destabilizing to some, I am growing to welcome the curve balls as a way of staying alert, energized, and agile. Let me be clear. This is not some blanket chest thumping, “bring it on!” declaration. It does not require me to embrace every disturbance. Rather, it’s a conscious mindset shift to recognize what I can control, what I can influence, and what I must accept. It is a posture for pursuing and accepting those disruptions that may align with my purpose. Finally, the question does not presume that one remains in the disruption and disturbance once entering it. Cashman coaches us to walk into the fear and through it. Therefore, those disruptions that I choose to walk into are themselves learning journeys. Propelled by a sense of Right Being, confident in an openness to Wise Action, and welcoming concerted action, each disruption can become a personal and community catalyst for change and good.

Whether Conscious of It or Not, What Does My Organization Need Most of Me?

Leadership is the hard seat to occupy in an organization. Like any living organism or

⁶Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers (1999), *A Simpler Way*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers: San Francisco, p. 72.

⁷Donnella Meadows (2001). Dancing With Systems. *The Systems Thinker*, Pegasus Communications, Vol. 13, No. 2, March 2002, p. 2

⁸Kevin Cashman (2008). *Leadership From the Inside Out*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers: San Francisco, p. 75.

system, organizations are self-organizing and self-perpetuating. The leaders' role is less to steer or control but more to navigate and inspire, determining what conversations to be part of and how to engage in those conversations in ways that afford the opportunity to model the mindsets you want others to adopt. Mostly it's about positioning oneself to be able to spot moments of authenticity and personal courage, as I believe that most people perform their work with the desire to do well and do the right thing. However, these golden moments of Right Being often go unnoticed. Those moments are not diminished by lack of fanfare and recognition, yet they are like lone fireflies in the sky—bright, interesting, yet fleeting. When recognized (with equal authenticity and personal courage) these singular moments are more often repeated and begin to attract similar action (and attitudes) from others. At those times the collective light is brighter. The resulting collective action—acting In Community—is now felt by more people.

Every one of us in organizations will at some point have difficulty seeing beyond our own view. We seemingly get trapped on a repetitive treadmill of functional competence. While performance can run high for a time, I'll argue that it's not sustainable and it's hollow—divided in Parker Palmer language. Stopping to imagine your organization exhibiting Wise Action In Community produces the question of what your organization needs most of you, whether leaders recognize it or not?

It's tough to express and demonstrate Wise Action regardless of your leadership position (e.g., leadership of a unit, a division, or an entire enterprise). Can you mandate organizational Right Being? Can an "enlightened" leader demand her executive team adopt her mindset, achieve her motivation, and pursue her intentional practice toward Right Being? Seems unlikely. There will be arguments for differences and diversity of views being the source of creativity. Yet, I'm not talking about thinking the same; I'm talking about alignment of intention and attention. I'm suggesting this is more about a way of being in relation to oneself, to one another, to the work, and to the world.

What if repeated attempts to introduce right thinking to others falls flat or has only partial success because some adopt it while others block it? Do you fire the non-adopters? At what point is it counter-productive (for the organization, for the individual, and for you as leader) to continue allowing a non-adopter to distract and diminish the collective efforts of the team? The seemingly easy path is to remove those who don't adopt. However, that action may only mask what the leader herself needs to recognize and learn about herself—say nothing of the legal and ethical ramifications of firing someone for "not being a seeker." Guiding us toward finding true self, Palmer invites us to consider, "we must withdraw the negative projections we make on people and situations—projections that serve mainly to mask our fears about ourselves—and acknowledge and embrace our own liabilities and limits."⁹

Implicitly, what your organization needs of you is to free yourself—and by demonstration, your colleagues—from organizational conceit and being so myopically mission focused that you lose sight of the whole system. Your organization needs you to model the balance of essential ingredients that the whole organization must adopt: open minds, open hearts, open will and resolve.¹⁰ More than technical prowess, this balance is key to fostering the conditions in which the "right team" can grow.

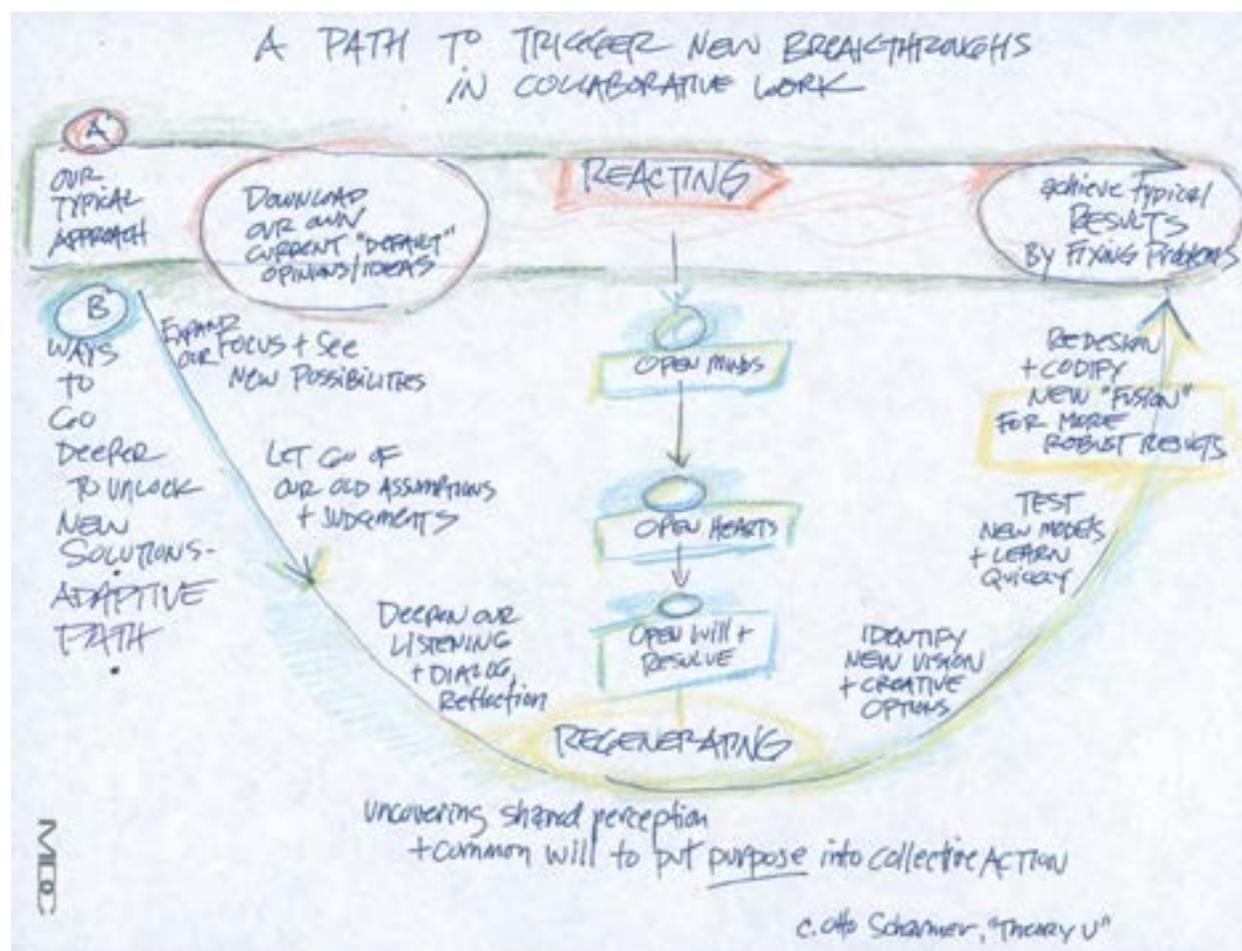
Look at the bottom of the U in the drawing. Only through the discipline to get and stay

⁹Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, p. 29

¹⁰These ingredients, and the graphic that follows [drawn here by Ken Hubbell] is from C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading From the Future As It Emerges*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009).

“open” will you, your teams, and your organizational colleagues uncover a shared perception and a common will to act with Wise Action In Community.

What if the leader’s time and energy were on growing the wisdom of her team more so than pursuing the technical things (e.g., contracts, big deals, and all manner of “means to a desired end”)? Too often this technical dance devolves into a downward spiral of manipulation—unconsciously and without malice, but nevertheless every bit as limiting. The response from some will be: yes, growing the wisdom of my team is ideal but my board demands that I hit certain metrics, my compensation is tied to an achievement ladder, etc. Are these two pursuits contradictory? Can one pursue short term position-specific requirements and do so filled with loving kindness and deep intention? I believe you can and I believe that the most enlightened organizations require this balance.



So the place to start this journey of understanding is with our own personal commitment to Right Being, or self-leadership, or mastering oneself. If there are seven areas of mastering leadership from the inside-out, first among them is Personal Mastery¹¹ (aka, Right Being).

¹¹See Cashman, pp. 55-58.

Kevin Cashman's Eight Points for Personal Mastery

1. Take total responsibility.
 - a. The foundation of genuine leadership is built with self-leadership, self-responsibility, and self-trust
2. Bring beliefs to conscious awareness
 - a. Remind yourself of the Personal Mastery mantra: "As you believe, so shall you lead."
3. Develop awareness of character and coping
 - a. Instead of overinvesting in Coping (reacting to circumstances to elicit an immediate result), commit your energies to leading with Character (the essence of who you are).
4. Practice Personal Mastery with others
 - a. Practicing Personal Mastery requires risk and vulnerability. It means placing ourselves in situations where we may not be accepted or validated by others for who we are or what we think or believe. If we do not take this risk, we too often will be led by the expectations of others. As a result, we might unknowingly compromise our integrity.
5. Listen to feedback
 - a. Rather than spending our energy defending a rigid state of self-awareness, we can think of Personal Mastery as a continuous, lifelong, learning process.
 - b. Personal Mastery involves the delicate paradox of being open to learning from others without allowing ourselves to be unduly created by them.
6. Consider finding a coach
 - a. ...studies have shown that companies now use coaching 75 percent of the time to optimize performance vs. "fixing" problems. Having a coach as your partner during your growth process might be the most "right" thing you ever do.
7. Avoid confusing self-delusion with self-awareness
 - a. Self-assessment can be the least accurate leadership assessment. To remedy this, use grounded, validated assessments with a solid research history to ensure that your growing self-awareness is real.
8. Be agile
 - a. Understand and appreciate your strengths, but also be flexible and adaptable.

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In order to strengthen adaptive organizations for inevitable
change and greater impact

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