

Remembering Humanity & Connectedness with Harlene Anderson PhD., The Taos Institute, Houston Galveston Institute, and Stephanie Gabel Zepeda, Ph.D., LMFT-S, Our Lady of the Lake University-Houston



This is a conversation between Drs. Harlene Anderson and Stephanie Zepeda about their experience of the pandemic thus far. Recorded on 4/1/2020. Dr. Harlene Anderson is a philosopher, therapist, author, and is known internationally as the leading edge of postmodern-social construction informed collaborative-dialogic practice. We hope you enjoy our thoughts about this current time in the world.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2971MUAr04&feature=youtu.be>

Harlene: Hi Stephanie thanks for inviting me to chat with you, and I'm very curious to hear what you would like to chat about.

Stephanie: Thank you so much for being here with me, for reaching up I think when I originally emailed you it was about some articles for students.

That was before this all got so grim, and I really started being a little curious about what must this experience be for you then I started thinking, I wonder if other people will find it hopeful to know what this has been for you because I know that people look to you as a philosopher, a thinker, a friend, a leader, and so that's when my mind started floating how's Harlene thinking about these events?

Harlene: I am thinking what a predicament, a catastrophic predicament we are all in and, I say all in because I think Worldwide, not only locally and nationally, but globally people are affected by this virus inundating into our lives, affecting us professionally work-wise, personally, our families, our friends, our colleagues, I think people are feeling a little helpless and wondering what to do. I guess I could say that I'm too to some extent particularly in terms of the future, because I cannot imagine what the future will hold, and I cannot imagine going back to "normal". I think about going back to a very different world, and it's going to be occupied by very different kinds of things that are released to different extents than we previously have had. But I do think that this virus has a catastrophic significance for all of us.

Stephanie: And you said something that made me think, this idea that we don't know what the future holds. That's always true!

But for some reason, the uncertainty, brought about by this, feels different than the unknowns of before, and I wonder if you have any thoughts about that? Why does it feel so different than not knowing the future?

Harlene: Well I guess first, I think that life is uncertain and there's always a certain amount of uncertainty, and that's unpredictability for each of us, and for the world. I think that it has come on so quickly, and the news changes, if not by the hour, by the minute, and we have sometimes politicians saying one thing, and health experts saying something else, it's like; who do you listen to in terms of what's new? And what's the fake news? It's just, I think, totally out of hand in that way.

Stephanie: Whereas compared to previous life's uncertainty, it's almost as though life was uncertain before this, it was uncertain in a known kind of way, you didn't know what the term I'd hold. I know in Houston I've been chatting with folks, and I feel in Houston we had practice rounds of this sort of thing with hurricanes that we've had, and disasters, so I think we're kind of used to that sort of uncertainty in that way. But the differences with the hurricane or the event, it's that it comes, and then it goes, and then you get to work cleaning up. There's no definite end in sight for this one, I think that makes it existentially distinct as well.

Harlene: I think so too, and I think also, not only with hurricanes, but I think particularly here what I'm thinking about is that there are other kinds of disasters happening simultaneously, like the climate, civil wars in many countries, all the plastic floating around in the oceans. I mean they're just so many different things going on, that makes us really question the future, and make us really question the stability of the present. You talk about the number of people affected, and the number of deaths, that's just mind-boggling, it's really hard for me to wrap my mind around, to think that a hundred to two hundred thousand people, possibly not only be affected by the virus but could die from it.

Stephanie: What you just said about this not being the only [event], this is in addition to the other things happening, I also have this sense of a very privileged position of experiencing this. I look at India and how the quarantine in place for them is, you might die because you run out of food, and how dramatically different that is from here where we're hoarding toilet paper.

It's pointed out how interconnected we all are, and how we cannot link to isolationism helped get through this, and then also in another level of privilege that my career, my livelihood is one that can be moved online. There are so many other people whose life events can't be moved online, they've lost that.

Harlene: And so many people who would not have the savings to even survive their bills for a month, I mean that's huge statistically, I think worldwide, and also in the United States it's amazing.

I think not only the interconnectedness but the importance of feeling connected in more intimate settings of family, friends, and colleagues. It's really highlighting the importance of that, and how alone one can feel when one's home all day.

Stephanie: I guess that's a personal question I wanted to ask, how have you been passing time?

Harlene: I've been trying to catch up on all of my projects and things that I have to do like with the ICCP program, with my writing; I have a new book in progress and working on some of the chapters. So, it's not that I lack anything to do regarding work and sitting here at my computer, but it's all the little things that can distract me that I'd rather be doing.

Like taking a long walk, taking multiple long walks, going out in my yard, cooking something for a change. But I am able to use my time, I have no problem with having things to do, so I got settled in that way.

Stephanie: No cabin fever yet?

Harlene: No cabin fever yet!

Stephanie: I'm wondering about you as a philosopher and your person who's written a lot about relational beings, and interconnectivity and reflective process, and I'm wondering if any of these ideas, not knowing, stand out to you in regards to this particular time, or if you have any words of wisdom to share with people that maybe are having a hard time.

Harlene: First, thanks for this enormous compliment by suggesting I might be a philosopher because I never think about myself that way, that's

something really.

I guess I'm sitting here thinking about not only not-knowing and uncertainty, conversations and relationships but I've started thinking

about *three T's* during these processes: *the importance of togetherness, of being able to talk with others, to being able to talk with yourself, to be physically or electronically together with others -- that you're not feeling alone* and not at the risk of having the same talk or same conversation in your head rolling around over and over and over again. And, for me, I think those two things—talk and togetherness—are connected *to trust*. In this world where I think it's so important to go beyond vested self-interest, I think when we're not connected, when we're not together, at least somewhat on the same page, at least in the same book, if we don't have trust we've fallen to being prisoners of our own self-interest, and become blinded from other things going around us going on around us, and to other people, their feelings, their priorities, and their values. In other words, I think we become *knowing*, and we become certain of our own perspectives, and I think this is what's so unsettling about what's happening now in terms of this whole notion of not knowing, not that we can really ever know, maybe not that we can really ever not know.

I think it is kind of like ends of a spectrum or continuum where the marker goes back and forth. We think we might know but we really don't know, you really don't know what we don't know, so that's why I think of knowing and not and not knowing as both sides of a coin. For me intertwined not only personally but in my work, particularly in my work.

Stephanie: I think that another piece is that things that we know and don't know are shifting as you said in almost minute by minute, and I think in our day to day lives things that we know we don't know, are a little more stable they maybe change week to week, month to month, but they don't change this quickly.

I wanted to share with you something that came up in a Facebook conversation that I had, it pumped out to the Houston Association of Mental Health Professionals and the prompt said: six months from now what conversation you'd be climbing into, what tells about yourself, what would you be telling me that got you through this time? and it was very interesting I made an image of the most common factors that came up for people. And the most common ones were *family, love, flexibility, humor, friends, faith, appreciation, and optimism*. I think it's interesting because those first big ones, those friends, the family, the love, I think those things have not changed, those we have continued to know this time, perhaps even know better this time.

Harlene: I would agree with that, for me those kinds of things are predictable, there's a lot of predictability.

Stephanie: You would hope there would be, and I think about members of even my own family right now, before this they were going through some

hard times with their family, processing divorces or difficult situations with their children, things like that, and it's been difficult this time without that family, that love, that connection, as a marriage Family Therapist emphasized to me the kind of work they do, to help families love each other more, and Families defined however as a family it is, and what love is for them, as a system to have a strong connection. My mind is falling back to those three T's that you were talking about, being able to talk in a trusting way together, it's so important. When we lose that, things don't feel real anymore.

Harlene: I'm thinking about the online, "face to face" conversations that I've had with clients, with colleagues this week, and I wrote down the words that one woman used, she said "I'm so isolated, I'm at home with my daughter. My husband is a physician who is at risk because he's working in a hospital, I have a son who works in an ER room, I have another son who is a nurse, and I have a daughter who has a health problem, I'm not sure why I'm telling you this, I'm not sure what I'm asking for, but I'm really scared about the future" [she was talking about the virus], I think that's been the centerpiece of many of the conversations I've had with people this week, that's what's on people's mind, and again the uncertainty, the not knowing, the unpredictability.

Stephanie: My mind's floating to this notion of hope, how hope is.

In the Our Lady of the lake program that you co-founded with that with *Diana Carlton*, on the practicum evaluations, I don't know if this is something that was around or was from you guys, but I noticed that we literally measure how much a student therapist is able to be hopeful with their clients, and I think about authentic hope versus false hope, that's being a cheerleader, just focus on the positive, giving suggestions, and telling people what to do, but this really, this situation that you just described with your colleague friend, I am not sure who that was them, but the need for socially generated, socially constructed hope, that if you were to tell this friend colleague of yours - oh don't worry it will be fine-, it would perhaps increase fear.

Harlene: In other words, also reassurance doesn't help, and it can increase fear, and talking about your student evaluation process, reminds me that years ago when I was very interested in talking with clients who did not have good experiences with therapy and those who did, and there were two words that came up all the time, one was *freedom* and one was *hope*. What it was is they would say "I didn't leave with a solution, I didn't know what I was going to do, but I had some hope" and that has just stayed with me all this time. Another thing was a word that a couple of people used, but it was a word that I use to translate their words to my language, and it was as if they were no longer prisoners of their problem or their life situation. They felt some, if you want to call it, *freedom, flexibility or maneuverability*, connected--that something would or could be different, they didn't know what it would be when it would happen, what it would look like, but I think *somehow* that sense was very important.

Stephanie: I think what you were just describing I'm connecting it with freedom, we don't know the current state of things, we don't know about the economy, I saw this beautiful meme, I'm not sure who wrote it, but they said: we're talking about rushing back to the economy after this is over, but should we in the same way? we don't know what it's going to look like, and this silly nagging hope in the back of my head that wants an opportunity to maybe go back to things in a different way, rather than in the same way, and I think about the clients, the colleagues, the friends, the family, who have lost their jobs, who don't have the savings, who are sick. I think

I don't have any friends currently who are sick with this, but I'd know friends and colleagues who do have some friends infected with this and are in a medically induced coma trying to survive.

What can we do as therapists, as people, as thinkers, to generate authentic hope, rather than false hope?

Harlene: I'm not sure that I can, I know you're not saying this, purposely generate hope, but *I would hope myself being there with someone, having them have a sense that I am a companion with them on part of their life journey.* It'll be a very short, very difficult one, and that I will be there for them to support them in whatever way that I can. Just having that kind of connection, that kind of support would be helpful and would engender some kind of hope that at least I'm not totally alone in this.

Stephanie: It's emphasizing to me that I'm always training therapists to don't feel like you have to have the answer, don't feel like you tell them what to do, and that can be hard when it's something like how do I get my teenager to stop playing video games, there are all sorts of awesome suggestions and ideas and they want to share them, and it's hard to resist that temptation. With this no one has the answer, it makes our job kind of easy in some ways because we have to just be there, we don't have any other choice, we can't tell them what to do.

In some way that's why I think for me the past couple weeks in working with my clients and my students it's given me great comfort to know that our epistemology, our theoretical lens has been training us for this the whole time in some ways.

Harlene: In a way for life, and whatever it brings to this to be able to face it and handle it in whatever way it can be handled.

Stephanie: Over the years I've had some people say - collaborative practices and narrative therapies, and those postmodern therapies they're lovely, they're very flowery, and they're great for people who are looking for some coaching may be very bright and verbal for some real thinkers, but

it's not good for crisis counseling, for crisis counseling you need to help

people what to do-. But no, I think that this is a real moment of learning for me, and I know I've got major confirmation bias, but this is really something that is being done and can be done very well and in some ways is the most fitting way to approach a situation like this.

Harlene: I'm thinking, Stephanie, what a wonderful exercise for your students, your learners, in terms of to think about how people were trying to help you, what kind of suggestions, what kind of advice were they giving, or what you should do or shouldn't do, and how did you receive that, what were your thoughts? Did you feel understood? Did you know how? but they think I was so stupid I had not XYZ like already thought of this.

Stephanie: E.g. I know to wash my hands, of course, I'm washing my hands.

Another theme that came for me while I was thinking while we were talking was there's a universality in this, that is everyone in the world is being impacted in some way by this, and there's also a particularity is traversing a person and I think something that you said earlier, is changing for life and it's almost like this phenomenon, this pandemic, *this virus is shoving in our face our humanity in a way that can't be ignored in our connectedness*, and my mind just keeps leaping forward for when this is finally done, can we remember that?

Harlene: I think that's an important note to pass on, to capture, maybe to title this, your words now I really think they capture it. It seems like you have summed it up there, that *we are human beings, we're frail, we're fragile, life is as well, and we don't know, we can't have control over everything that life calls for.*

Stephanie: Thank you so much for chatting with me today, I didn't come up with any solution or anything.

Harlene: No, of course, no solutions, we did have a problem to solve, maybe once we each step back, pause and take time to reflect on this conversation, we may have a slightly altered idea about ourselves in the situation, in our present. Thank you for arranging this!