



The Conversational Nature of Reality

David Whyte is a poet first and foremost. While he is often asked to speak to various companies or large gatherings of professionals, his focus, or main ‘conversation’ is getting the insights and understandings of good poetry to as many people as possible, from straight literary readings in Oxford or San Francisco to the monastic insights of the theological world to our more familiar work-world of corporations and organizations; he has brought his insights into large and small organizations for over twenty-five years. Whyte looks at poetry as a way of elucidating crucial milestones and thresholds in the life of an individual or an organization, whether they are personal, professional or deeply involved with a sense of meaning. He insists there is a precise phenomenology in the way necessary and courageous conversations unfold between individuals and organizations, or between individuals and the people that surround them—their customers, their industry, and their own future career. “My job,” he says, “is to show everyone that the courageous conversation is just one step away and that with understanding and preparation and the right approach, it is a step rarely regretted.”

“One of the primary uses of poetry is to look at the way that an individual never forges their identity alone,” explains Whyte. “Nor do they do it successfully if they merely try to imitate or become the world that surrounds them. They do it best when they create a living frontier, a living conversation between how they think they are made and how they think the world is made.”

According to Whyte, coaches make for a very creative and attentive audience, being people with a natural hunger for real conversations. “They are individuals primed to meet other people, they have apprenticed themselves to the conversational odyssey and their whole identity is shaped by that apprenticeship.”

“What is lovely about the word conversation is that it cannot be narrowed into one dimensionality. It cannot be made into jargon. It means everything from just a little chatter at the water cooler to a midnight, life-changing exchange at the kitchen table, or an exchange where you exit the room with a promotion and a new life or without a job and yes, still, a new life.” Thus to David Whyte, the word dialogue is: “too narrow, too human-centered and too verbally centered.” Whyte feels that conversation is all about meeting things that are other than you. It could be with people, other organizations, your future horizon, or something quite frightening.

For instance, “The world always changes around an individual or organization so that it no longer supports whatever they were previously doing, or how they were doing it,” explains Whyte. “So

the courageous conversation is the heartfelt conversation with what is actually occurring or not occurring around you. You are coming to ground in the present, no matter how difficult that might be, so that you can step into a future that has integrity and that is based on actual, solid ground.”

“Poetry is a kind of subversive invitation to the part of us that has already identified the patterns that are forming our future; an invitation for that leading frontier inside us to speak out and make itself known. You can’t get a Google or a Facebook or an Apple from an already established identity. Microsoft seems helpless to save itself because of the hardened identity it has forged, but Google, Facebook or Apple also have to keep the conversation alive between themselves and their world so as not to succumb to that same fate. Creativity comes from a frontier identity, a revelatory identity; from a person or a group of people on the edge of discovery. All of these great questions regarding a business or an organization have internal parallels going on inside an individual. The courageous conversation is the one that brings you to ground, to reality. As a leader, I must identify the courageous conversations I’m not having. As a leader I must also be visible and make an invitation from that visibility. How invitational is my identity? Is there any invitation at all to others? There are other parallels: what are the courageous conversations I’m not having with my partner, my family, my son, or my daughter?”

“The reason people won’t have the courageous conversation is because to have that conversation you have to acknowledge what is disappearing as well as what is on the up and up, it is attached to the great confrontation with disappearance and death. Courage means facing up to our temporary and not so temporary disappearances.”

“One of the great conversational conundrums is between a parent and a growing son or daughter, the conversation almost always fails because the parent refuses to admit they are trying to relate to someone who is now no longer there. The child has grown past the person we want them to be. The essential

difficulty is often the heartache of having missed a part of their growing. The refusal to face the heartache is often the refusal to have the conversation.”

According to Whyte, poetry as a medium grants courage and is emboldening and invigorating. He explains that a few lines of poetry can take us great distances that might take years to traverse were you only using your empirical, intellectual mind. He is also careful to say that, at its best; poetry brings together the imagination with the strategic intellect in a very powerful marriage. “You can’t write good poetry without the intellect or you produce nothing but New Age drivel.”

“It doesn’t ask you to abandon your intellect,” explains Whyte. “It actually asks you to magnify it by putting it in the realm of the imagination and the greater field of human belonging.”

So either as a coach or any other business professional, Whyte recommends you taking the time to ask yourself: What is your courageous conversation right now? What is the invitation you are making to others? What is the invitation to which you should respond? What is the essential conversation you hold in life of which your work is just an expression?



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David Whyte, an internationally recognized poet, author, and speaker, and an Associate Fellow of Saïd College at the University of Oxford. Using poetry of his own and the work of others, Whyte illustrates things that bring

out qualities and deeper currents that even someone who has been looking at it didactically for a lifetime might not see.

Whyte will be a Mega Catalyst at ICF Global 2012. He will speak to the state of our current world in which coaching is being employed, and the challenges ICF is experiencing—implicitly asking, “what is your courageous conversation right now? What are the potential wrong turns you might be about to make, have made, or can avert in the future, and what would be a courageous path for you to follow?” Every organization of ICF’s size comes to a point of testing whereby it has to go down the old route that all institutions take—over bureaucratization, the tail wagging the dog and the institutional drive to profit at all costs, all of which can wring the heart, mind and spirit out of existence, when it’s often the heart, mind, spirit that might have brought us to the world of coaching in the first place. [Register for ICF Global 2012 today!](#)