

Introduction to Part I

It was a cold winter day in Waterloo, Ontario, where I live. There was talk of a snowstorm that would close the city down. In spite of this warning, forty people sat in a large, windowless room in a library basement talking about the harsh reality of poverty. Outside the room, eager to capture the story that was unfolding, a reporter and camera crew were waiting for the group to break.

The conversation started slowly, but like the storm outside soon enough began to escalate. The event was so engaging that the regional chair (the city's mayor) returned to the meeting after two hours away to deal with a storm-induced state of emergency. Even though the city was battering down in the face of the storm, he and thirty-nine others did not want to miss the opportunity before them.

For more than two days, these people — ten each from business, government, community agencies, and people living in poverty — embarked on a journey of dialogue.

I had held hundreds — no, thousands — of meetings in my life. I was a trained facilitator and an experienced meeting chair. When planning this gathering, I thought, “Let’s just bring them together and let them talk.” We engaged Doug Bowie, a former oil executive who is known for his great skill in a dialogue technique called Future Search, to help us.

In the months before this intense conversation began, Doug and I had our own ongoing conversation. “Why do you want to bring these people together?” he asked me. “What will they talk about? Who will you bring together? Will the group be able to answer the questions you’re asking? What will they talk about that will keep their attention for two days?”

After I rattled off my standard answers to his many questions, he continued with a few more: “What do you think will change after holding this conversation? What do you think will compel people to change?”

“Good questions,” I thought, remaining silent.

Doug taught me a lot as we prepared for this conversation. He taught me to be deliberate about the intended purpose of the conversation. We spent days just getting the question right, and several weeks planning the invitation list. Doug repeatedly asked, “Are these the people who, once they agree on a path forward, will have the ability to influence the system to change the way we need it to change?” We agonized over every detail.

When we shared what we had planned with the community, our idea received immediate attention from the media. They realized that

this was more than just a bunch of people talking: It was a unique mix of people embarking on a structured journey. They understood that, if this group agreed on a path forward, things would change.

As the storm raged outside over the next two days, we deconstructed the history of poverty in the community, analyzed the current reality, and then created a new vision and path forward for what was possible. Doug was attentive to the energy in the room, the success of every exercise, and all the details — even of every break.

“He’s an oil company executive?” I thought. “He should be a wedding planner!”

The media continued to be fascinated by the event. The local paper published stories daily, and the local television station aired live at every break and ran feature stories over three consecutive days on the six o’clock news. Recognizing the community’s interest in the topic and the group’s approach, print and electronic media alike featured the ramifications of the dialogue for a whole month, including through a three-part documentary on poverty and ten feature stories in the local paper.

This was no ordinary conversation. As Doug is fond of saying, “There are conversations and there are *conversations*.”