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Invitation to Dance — A Conversation with Heinz von Foerster

by Christina Waters¹

I met with Heinz von Foerster, Chairperson of the ASC Board of Trustees, last month at his home nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Seated with the 88-year-old physicist — his frail body somehow persistent, eyes flashing with intellectual vigor — what emerged was a clear commitment to a set of guiding principles. Famed as a robust raconteur, von Foerster explicated his dedication to the path that has led him, with characteristic dignity, to these penultimate days he enjoys at Rattlesnake Hill in coastal California.

CW: Can you tell me why cybernetics didn't become a mainstream endeavor? Why don't people all over the United States know what cybernetics is?

HvF: But look! It is. Cybernetics is in every second word. If you open the newspaper there is cyber space, cyber sex, cyber this and cyber that. Everything is cyberized.

CW: That's not cybernetics!

HvF: No, but "cyber" is there. Look at terms like "feedback." Everybody knows what feedback is. Cybernetics did that. Things of that sort. I think cybernetics connects underneath. It's implicit. Underneath, it's completely alive. But not explicit. In some cases I find it more important that something is acting implicitly, than explicitly. Because the implicit has much more power.

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CW: So you think that in a way it has infiltrated the intellectual mainstream?

HvF: Absolutely! Nobody can talk without at least the presence of cybernetics being operational. The presence of these notions is absolutely alive, only not explicitly referred to. I find it very powerful that it's underground. Because people are unaware of it — and therefore don't reject it.

CW: Who is furthering cybernetics today?

HvF: All the internet people, all computer people today. They are all cyberneticians whether they like it or not.

CW: In what sense, Heinz?

HvF: Because they initiate dialogues. Internet dialogues are initiated and then they expand over and over. You expand the network's interaction.

CW: So initiating conversations is critical. Why are conversations so important?

HvF: It's the humanness which is expressed in the conversation that is so important.

CW: And so conversations multiply the ways in which humanness is expressed?

HvF: Exactly — and so you find your own. Because in the reflection, in the eyes of the other, your own humanity begins to develop. Which you cannot do in a monologue. You have to dance with somebody else to recognize who you are.

CW: Another question: do you think that you've been an inventor or a discoverer?

HvF: Always an inventor. A discovery means to uncover, to take a blanket away from a thing which is already there. The inventor is doing something which is new, which is not already there. My position is, that we create all the time. It's always something absolutely new, which was never there before.

The discoverer position, which people are very fond to maintain, is in a sense being not responsible for that which you are talking about. Because if you are only taking a cover away from something which is already there, then you are only telling how it is. With this, you avoid all the responsibility.

CW: Why do we not want to accept responsibility?

HvF: Because the most horrible thing is to be responsible for something. We have invented every trick to avoid responsibility. One way is to invent a hierarchy if you're an institutional organization. In a hierarchy everybody can say, 'I didn't want to do it, I was told to do it.' That gets rid of responsibility.

Or there are the famous statements from politicians — “I had no choice.!” And the moment somebody says that, they are really saying ‘I refuse the responsibility for what I’m doing.’ They always have all the choices, Ja?

Objectivity is another of the great tricks to get rid of responsibility. You know what objectivity is all about — it says that the properties of the observer shall not enter a description of his observation. Now if that’s so, what remains? No description, no observation. Because these are all properties of the observer.

CW: Don’t you think that language, however, traps us into a subject-object orientation?

HvF: Oh yes, it does that all the time.

CW: How then can we make sense, speak meaningfully to each other, and yet still avoid reference to objectivity? Don’t we almost have to reinvent language?

HvF: No. We can use language as a dance. Language for me is an invitation to dance. When we are dancing we are using language to suggest to each other what steps we would like to do. So when we are talking with each other, we are in dialogue and invent what we both wish the other would invent with me. Togetherness is the point in a dialogue. And language is an invitation to dialogue and not an invitation to monologue. You know my funny statement — the hearer and not the speaker determines the meaning of an utterance. And if you know that, then you need to determine how you must speak so that the hearer is dancing with you.

CW: I think that is why you tell stories. You tell a great many stories — but it’s never just to talk about yourself. You are engaging your listener in a dance.

HvF: [He nods his head vigorously] The whole thing is based on interaction. A living organism interacts with the universe — with every other thing. They are constantly rolling along and changing each other. And this is how life can function, because life is indeed a non-trivial system, Ja? Any action changes itself and changes all the rest.

There are two fundamental positions which one can take when talking about anything. The one is the position that I can say, I’m sitting here and looking at the world as through a peephole at what’s going on in this universe.

The other position is, I’m a part of the world. I am a member of it, not separated from the world. And whatever I do I change not only myself, I change the world as well.

CW: Would you say that to be within the dance is better?

HvF: I'd say that it's a good thing. I would never say that anything's better. Better for whom? No, I don't see universal values — I don't like to play that game. Lots of people like to — I don't. I avoid universal judgments. I'd like to undermine them as much as possible, wherever I hear them. I was always like that. I always understand that it's me who sees something a certain way. And that it's me who has a responsibility for saying that.

But I would not make judgments for others. The point is — and this is a distinction I love to make — in morals you always tell the other how he has to act — “Thou shalt not.” It's always told by someone who's outside the moral arena, telling someone else how to behave. But ethics is when you say, “I shall” or “I shall not,” when you make a decision how you want to be. We always have the freedom to decide what we want to become. We are all free — we are damned to be free, as Ortega y Gasset said. I always thought this existential insight was great. Other people might think it's horrifying to be free. They would like to be told what to do.

CW: You've said act so as to always increase choice. You've also said that the purpose of the brain is to compute a stable reality.

HvF: Yes, It is the function of the brain. The brain keeps us from exploding — actually I should have long ago exploded.

CW: How do those two statements work together?

HvF: The one is choice — the other is about reality. They don't conflict. I have many choices of things even within just this discussion. And every question you ask me is an invitation to increase my number of choices, because I could tell you this, or that, etc. etc.

And what you do in your interview, is keeping me alive, to maintain the free choice of many other branches of the stories I'm going to tell you. While we are sitting here and I'm telling you this story, this reality is absolutely stable because you invited me to give you the story and here comes the stories. The point is to consider what kind of a cognitive network there must be in order that this stability which we experience is maintained.

That is the interesting question.