12

Communication Ethics Literacy and Difference

Dialogic Learning

❖   ❖   ❖

> For Levinas, the Other comes from up high—the Other is teacher before partner. There is no symmetry in being responsible, that is, in being answerable and addressable. Since responsibility as response-ability is the very beginning of subjectivity, I am always already answerable to the Other's call, always already approachable, open, predisposed toward the Other. (Pinchevski, 2005, p. 75)

Communication ethics in an era defined by difference, disagreement, and lack of concurrence requires two pragmatic moves. First, cease using ethics as a weapon; disagreement should not immediately move us into referring to an opponent as unethical. Second, embrace the necessity of learning as we meet diverse ethical positions contrary to our own with the assumption that learning does not necessarily suggest agreement. We will not and we should not agree with all ethical positions that we encounter. The first step in an age of difference is to *learn* about the alien, the different, that which we do not know. The second step begins with *discernment* about the interplay of our own

position and that which we learn. *Learning* and *discernment* put in place a natural dialectic, reminding us to check our own position with new insights and to permit our own ideas to function as a check against unreflective acceptance of that which is new. This chapter centers communication ethics on the good of learning as the constructive pragmatic response to an era defined by difference.

❖   INTRODUCTION

This chapter connects the study and practice of communication ethics to the following three metaphors of communication ethics praxis:

1. **Pragmatic**—the need for practical engagement of ideas responsive to a particular historical moment.

2. **Crisis communication**—an increasingly relevant metaphor for today's postmodern moment of virtue contention; the unexpected emerges and requires discernment and action as we encounter differing particular "goods" in the public domain.

3. **Communication ethics literacy**—identifies the good in the interplay of self and Other and the particular historical moment, attending to what is protected and promoted.

Student Application: Understanding the Other

When students come to the end of a course, they typically sit for a final exam or prepare an extensive course paper. In either case, they are required to master a great deal of material, doing the work of learning that takes them away from friends and recreational activities. This learning, however, is essential for content literacy in the course. Without knowledge of the content, one cannot move ideas into **pragmatic** application. Likewise, learning about difference in today's world presents similar challenges. To work with others in community, marketplace, public, and personal contexts requires engaging multiple viewpoints and, at the same time, taking a stance on a variety of issues related to our life together. For example, on a college or university campus there are

many options for dorm life. Some residence halls are designed to be smoke free and alcohol free; the good of substance-free living is protected and promoted in such spaces. Others may reside within dorms that protect and promote academic excellence by enforcing extended quiet hours. The existence of "dedicated" residence halls is one result of negotiating competing goods. The clashing of multiple goods calls forth an understanding of **crisis communication**, where one finds the need to respond with care and discernment in order to address the unexpected that emerges between and among persons of difference. This type of engagement points to the heart of **communication ethics literacy**: working from one's own position, learning from that of the Other, and interpreting that material for the task of the moment in pragmatic engagement with the Other.

❖ PRAGMATIC

The pragmatics of dialogue unites *learning, discernment,* and *difference,* requiring one to learn from the Other and, additionally, from one's own ground, with each checking and texturing the other. This unity of learning, discernment, and difference affirms multiple views of the good, neither ignoring nor concurring unreflectively with the new. Unlike in modernity, in postmodernity, there is no advantage given to the new; the advantage rests only in the dialectic of learning and discernment about both the new and the time-tested.

Postmodernity finds definition in difference and incommensurability of views of the good. Keeping the conversation going in such an era begins with meeting what we do not know, which permits learning and, ironically, sheds more clarity on the ground or position upon which we stand. In essence, communication ethics takes on pragmatic currency; we must learn about other views of the good with recognition that, like it or not, multiple views of the good exist and contend for attention in the ongoing postmodern marketplace of ideas.

We are forewarned of the demand for learning differing views of the good and of communication ethics among cultures, nations, and religions by numerous mundane decisions such as holiday travel, the transporting of children from one parent to another, and the seemingly now common response, "Can you believe he did that?" "Can you

believe she said that?" The banality of this historical moment finds definition in difference as the normative characterization of our lives together. Each of the previous chapters in this book has addressed a particular communicative context that calls for recognition of and learning about multiple goods in a time of difference.

In this concluding chapter, we move communication ethics to the forefront of discussion with its companion application of crisis communication. This work assumes that the presence of differing views of the good requires the study and practice of crisis communication; this communication area is a central issue in every curricular reform in our discipline that engages the question of competing goods in our communicative work with one another. The major root of difference is differing views of the good. This contention over the notion of the good is at the heart of crisis communication, which reminds us not to assume that the Other will think as we do or value what we hold dear. The pragmatic demand is to learn and investigate ways of negotiating contending goods, which leads to the ongoing rise of crisis communication studies in this historical moment.

❖ CRISIS COMMUNICATION

The person many consider to be the founder of crisis communication is Ian Mitroff, who has authored numerous books and articles on crisis communication since the turn of the 21st century. Thirty years ago, he foreshadowed the reason for crisis communication emergence in an era of difference. He first examined the work of Carl Jung and reminded us that people have diverse means of engaging data and new ideas. Some work from sensation and others from intuition; some make decisions from thinking and others from feeling (Mitroff, 1978). A combination of these approaches defines the matrix from which the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® personality inventory finds theoretical support. Jung, along with Adler and Freud, brought conversation about psychological difference to the foreground. The early work of Mitroff recognized and highlighted the importance of diversity of persons' responses to given events.

Mitroff's next step was diversity of methodological approaches to gathering and understanding data (Mitroff, 1978), which was an outgrowth of the diversity of ways in which persons meet and understand data or events before them. He stated that bias of person and methodology colors what we see and understand, discussing the differences

among the "analytic scientist" wanting to understand causal connec-
tions, the "conceptual theorist" seeking to understand multiplicity of
positions, the "conceptual humanist" asking how these differences
affect others, and the "particular humanist" proclaiming the power of
the particular and the normality of difference. Mitroff laid the ground-
work for understanding crisis communication and the meeting of dif-
ference that has personal and methodological origins; today, scholars
add differences of gender, class, religion, culture, ethnicity, and nation-
ality to the mix. Pragmatically, ever-increasing differences invite crisis
in contention over the good. It is our position that increasing common-
ality of ongoing crises generated by competing views of the good
makes communication ethics literacy a pragmatic necessity.

Mitroff (1978) quotes both Dewey and James in the pragmatic
admission of position taking, another way to stress the importance of
learning from difference. In our terms, to ignore the diversity of goods
is to miss the communication challenges and opportunities before us.
Pragmatically, learning begins with difference. Mitroff draws upon
John Dewey, who, in *Explanation of Social Behavior,* responds to charges
of subjectivism as follows:

> Because Mr. William James recognizes that the personal element enters
> into judgments . . . he is charged with extreme subjectivism, with encour-
> aging the element of personal preference to run roughshod over all objec-
> tive controls. . . . The question raised . . . is primarily one of fact, not of
> doctrine. Is or is not a personal factor found in truth evaluations? . . . The
> moment complicity of the personal factor is recognized fully, frankly, and
> generally, that moment a new era in philosophy will begin. We shall have
> to discover the personal factors that now influence us unconsciously, and
> begin to accept a new and moral responsibility for them, a responsibility
> for judging and testing them by their consequences. So long as we ignore
> this factor, its deeds will be largely evil, not because *it* is evil, but because,
> flourishing in the dark, it is without responsibility and without check. The
> only way to control it is by recognizing it. (p. 8)

Communication ethics is the call to learn about differing views of the
good assumed by differing positions. Communication ethics begins
with literacy, learning tied attentively to the question, "What good is
protected and promoted in a given communicative act?"

Crisis communication begins with the contention of goods that
disrupts the public sphere. Our discipline, following the lead of Mitroff
and others, has taken up the charge to understand and engage crisis
communication, exemplified by the work of Matthew W. Seeger,

Timothy L. Sellnow, and Robert R. Ulmer (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2007; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). The rise of crisis communication is not only a way of assisting needed negotiation between contending views of the good—it is an indicator of the defining shape of this historical moment as marked by a contentious understanding of the good.

A Historical Moment of Contending Goods

A historical moment finds definition in questions that shape the horizon of possibilities before us. One of the major questions of this era is, "How do we live constructively within an era of so many differing views of the good, a time of acknowledged different goods?" The importance of this moment finds shape and clarity in the desire to understand (learn and discern) "communication ethics" rather than to prescribe "the" communication ethic. Just as there is no longer an expectation of finding one good that will unite us, there should be no expectation that one communication ethic can and should govern all communicative life.

In short, there is one major point of agreement in this historical moment: Do not expect the Other necessarily to endorse your understanding of the good. It is possible to ask another to seek to understand our position as we seek to understand another's position, but agreement and endorsement are no longer a sure bet. Difference is what fuels the dialogic call of this historical moment. Learning and discernment, on one hand, need to guide; the reality of crisis communication, on the other hand, continues to warn us that we cannot assume that the Other will necessarily think or act as we deem correct.

This historical moment of contending goods plays its way out in daily communicative interaction. At one university, a faculty member wrote the president to ask for help, making a plea that the stairwells be cleaned on a regular basis. The note referred to the stairwells as "filthy." The president, a published philosopher, decided to walk over to the building to see for himself. The president wanted to see what definition of "filthy" might guide a faculty member sending such a memo. In the words of the president, "I did not want to forward an email on behalf of a person with undue standards for institutional tidiness." After the president's investigation, he forwarded the e-mail securing attention to the need for more cleanliness.

The person doing the cleaning was not pleased. There are many senses of the good in relation to cleanliness—not just whether something is clean, but what is most important to keep clean. With limited time and personnel, if the stairwells are cleaned regularly, what gets

less attention? Are the stairwells more important than the classrooms? The president's action revealed that we cannot assume the same good about cleanliness standards, and the worker's response displayed the power of differing goods in decision making—offices, classrooms, and stairwells were, for him, in competition for attention and energy. The clashing of goods is an ongoing part of contemporary life, even in the cleaning of stairwells.

Such innocent differing views of the good give way to larger questions that will shape the remainder of the 21st century. For instance, consider the example of what Michael Hyde (2004) calls the "posthuman." The clashing of goods related to whether and how to assist longevity and whether and when to end life are just beginning. Early in 2007, for instance, we witnessed an example of such a clashing of goods when "Ashley X," whose case, reported in a medical journal (Gunther & Diekema, 2006), made national headlines. At the age of 9, she underwent an operation to halt her physical growth. The rationale was twofold: to keep her physical size in agreement with her mental aptitude, giving the parents a greater chance of caring for her with her disabilities, and to prevent discomfort to her that would have resulted from puberty and its associated physical changes. The controversy about such an act was and is loud on both sides of the question. Some say that growing in size is part of the human experience, regardless of one's mental abilities, with others understanding the difficulty before the parents and the reason for the choice. One of the emerging questions before us in this historical moment, like it or not, is, "What is the posthuman?" What happens when we can and do engage in serious manipulation of what has historically constituted a "normal" human being?

Communication ethics takes on both philosophical and practical challenges when met with increasing diversity of competing views of the good; the narrative within which we situate ourselves as communicators takes on increasing power and significance. Arguably, one of the most important philosophical and pragmatic contributions to communication in our lifetime has been the work of Walter Fisher (1987), who brought narrative theory into conversation in the discipline. Narrative theory gives us a way of explaining the notion of ground under one's feet that is idea based and not simply the soil of unexamined tradition. For example, it is possible to engage a tradition thoughtfully, as a narrative or story based on reflective content. That same tradition can also be followed unthinkingly, without consideration of its content or coherence. Narrative theory encourages us to be reflective about the traditions that embed us and the goods that those traditions carry. Both dialogue and communication ethics owe much

to the work of Walter Fisher, who reminds us of the importance of narrative ground under our feet, even in an age of increasing difference. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1981) suggests, taking the narrative ground from another is an immoral act. Many live in a time of "existential homelessness" (Arnett, 1994), and Fisher was insightful enough to follow the work of MacIntyre, Hauerwas, and Arendt, who called forth discussion of narrative ground. The loss of a metanarrative—one universally acknowledged position—makes discussion of multiple narratives essential.

Fisher and others suggest that the question of difference and competing goods has a narrative answer, which Ana Smith Iltis (2003) provides for us in her overview of *Institutional Integrity in Health Care.* She suggests that there are so many understandings of the good that the word "integrity" has more pragmatic utility in this moment than before. Integrity suggests that an organization do what Fisher called for in narrative discourse: Work at telling a story that can be backed up by practices. As Iltis elaborates,

> The importance of institutional integrity is underscored by the fact that we face the task of morally evaluating health care organizations in a society in which we lack a single, thick understanding of morality. The circumstance of moral pluralism complicates efforts to evaluate or assess health care organizations because we do not have a shared, robust concept of the right and the good that can guide our evaluations. It is because of this post-modern reality that we must turn to the concept of integrity. Integrity makes it possible to evaluate the extent to which health care organizations live up to their obligations regardless of what those obligations are. There are, in fact, two different kinds of obligations under consideration in this volume. Some obligations, it is argued, are borne by all health care organizations regardless of their moral commitments or identities. Because they are health care organizations, they are obligated in particular ways. Other obligations, however, may not be justifiably attributed to all health care organizations. These are the obligations grounded in an institution's moral commitments, and the ramifications of this are especially poignant in discussions of religious health care institutions. (p. 2)

Questions of integrity will follow a narrative supported by practices that protect health and attend to issues such as death by infection contracted at the hospital; integrity will depend upon an institution's ability to align its story about health with the assurance and practice of health in the hospital itself.

In such a moment of difference, we must look for one way after another to unite the philosophical and practical, the story with the communicative practices. Fisher's view of narrative and that of many other scholars point us to a rationality situated within a given narrative view of the world, not a universal presupposition of the good or right for all time. When we cannot expect the universal to guide us, we cannot expect our own position to meet with agreement from all. Confidence must rest in the public disclosure of communication ethics with a public recording of the congruence between the story and daily communicative practices. Communication ethics theory becomes a form of spectacles that provides a particular view of the world; the key is not just in the theory, but also in the telling about the particular way of looking—a public display of the spectacles that govern our insights.

In Need of Glasses

Communication ethics theory is a form of optical lenses necessary for engaging and understanding the complexity of issues involved in dis-cerning the good. To wear glasses is to understand the power and importance of peripheral vision and how glasses do not lend them-selves to such peripheral looking and seeing. Additionally, it is impor-tant to understand that not just any pair of glasses will assist one's looking and seeing. One must obtain the right prescription in order to assist one's vision; otherwise, one will actually see less clearly.

Literacy requires having the proper lenses with which to read, whether they are part of one's physical makeup at birth or obtained through an optometrist's prescription. One engages the seeing with either natural ability or with assistance that has constructed limita-tions. Our vision has limits, and whatever we use to aid us has limits as well. Another way of understanding this limitation of vision is to think of wrapping presents with children in the house. The long tubes that hold the wrapping paper become great telescopes. When one looks down the tube all is clear within that limited scope, but one misses the periphery completely.

The introduction to theory in communication ethics requires a stress upon the good that finds protection and promotion in a given commu-nicative environment. This book has examined theories that act as "eye-glasses": democratic; universal-humanitarian; codes, procedures, and standards; contextual; narrative; and dialogic communication ethics. The differences in the good protected and promoted finds definition through the looking or the theory engaged. We privilege a dialogic

communication ethic for this historical moment—an appropriate pre-scription for seeing in a postmodern age of difference and multiplicity. The goal is to learn from alterity, from that which is outside us, outside what we expect to understand within conventional expectations.

Dialogic theory based upon standpoint, the ground or narrative from which the communicators stand and meet the world, moves ethics from the private to the public domain, permitting debate over which theory is used and how it is used and what emerges from the looking. Arnett, Arneson, and Bell (2006) suggested that Fisher's notion of narrative permitted dialogue to mature philosophically. A continental view of dialogue, particularly that of a Buber or a Bonhoeffer, begins before the conversation begins. The narrative or ground of meaning upon which a person stands is a gestalt collection of voices before "I" and "we" enter "this" conversation. Habermas (1984) is correct in suggesting that the most important element of the Enlightenment was making public a given way of looking. Without theory, we succumb to the whim of the looker and to our use of junior high vocabulary: "You are wrong, and I am right." The use of theory takes us into a public arena of examination and testing. Theory does not stop conflict, but permits the looking and the examination to take on a public dimension that lessens our tendency to look only to find what we want or demand to see.

The use of theory counters the impulse of "individualism," the thought that one can stand above history and render an accurate assessment. Theory moves one into the public, away from undue con-fidence in one's private looking. Ian Watt (2002), in *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe,* reminds us of the limits of individualism as he examines these stories. Selling one's soul for knowledge, ignoring change because it does not fit one's demands or hopes, exploiting others, and taking for granted the person who assists you all have one common feature—a looking and seeing of what is good that begins and ends with oneself, forgetting the other-ness of work and limits, changing historical circumstances, the feelings of others, and the importance of others.

We live in a time of general approval of individualism in which concern for one's own view or looking takes precedence over a tradi-tion that embeds a particular human being. Theory is a form of embed-ded looking and seeing, making public the limits of what one can see. Theory fights against the silo of myopic individualistic insight, a near-sightedness that makes what is close appear clear and blurs what is far away. Watt (2002) comments on the rise of individualism: "Our four myths, then, were historically new; and in this they reflected their

period's new emphasis on the social and political primacy of the indi-
vidual" (p. 242). Theory brings us into the public domain, providing an
alternative to individual looking, providing temporal ground for
common sense in a postmodern culture. In this historical moment, we
begin with the assumption that common sense is not common, making
individualistic efforts even more reckless in this historical moment as
we live without an agreed-upon set of commonsense restraints.

Communication Ethics and the Public Domain

In addition to the pioneering insights of Hannah Arendt, two major
voices keep before us the importance of the public domain in this his-
torical moment: Seyla Benhabib (1992) and Jürgen Habermas (1996).
A robust public domain requires attentiveness to some organizing
communicative agreement that offers a minimal sense of the common.
For Arendt (1958/1998), the minimum was the necessity of honoring
the natural dialectic of public and private; for Benhabib and
Habermas, it is a commitment to discourse ethics. These minimal
agreements work to counter unreflective acceptance of individualism
with little commitment to public engagement as the norm. The impor-
tance of public engagement meets us daily in issues ranging from
school safety to air travel.

   Take, for instance, the danger of guns in high schools across the
country. Twenty years ago, who would have expected the routine need
for devices to check for guns before going to a party or, in some cases,
before going into the school itself? Shootings in high schools continue
to happen much too regularly (Edelman, 2006). Additionally, who
would have expected the extensive security measures that are now part
of daily life at the airport?

   One can turn to less catastrophic events by asking the question,
"Can you depend on your friends to have public agreement on what is
ethical in their dealings with you?" For instance, if you need time to do
work, is such time possible with these particular friendships? If you are
going to the airport and need a ride, does someone offer to assist? If
you are sad and fighting melancholy, does someone "hang close" dur-
ing such moments? Or are your friends friendly to you as long as you
make their days better and more entertaining? The definition of friend-
ship and what constitutes assisting the Other without constant regard
for oneself are not governed by collective public norms.

   The insight about the diversity of this historical moment with
the loss of public agreement is central to Habermas's (2003) *The Future
of Human Nature.* This work is a series of reflections begun while

receiving major awards, including the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade on October 15, 2001. Habermas makes his case simply with an emphasis on the focus on the "me" of our historical moment. Pragmatically, we cannot escape the moment before us:

> What ought I, or what ought we, to do? But the "ought" has a different sense once we are no longer asking about rights and duties that everyone ascribes to one another from an inclusive we-perspective, but instead are concerned with our own life from the first-person perspective and ask what is best "for me" or "for us" in the long run and all things considered. Such ethical questions regarding our own weal and woe arise in the context of a *particular* life history or a *unique* form of life. They are wedded to questions of identity: how we should understand ourselves, who we are and want to be. Obviously there is no answer to such questions that would be independent of the given context and thus would bind all persons in the same way. (p. 3)

Habermas reminds us of a communication ethics reality—much has been lost and exhausted in the public domain. The move to "me" is one of the pragmatic alternatives of our time, and this move eclipses the natural complexity of human insight, missing the natural dialectic of public and private life.

Habermas suggests that the public domain rests within a commitment to discourse ethics. Consistent with Habermas's contention, we add literacy to communication ethics; communication ethics literacy assumes the necessity of "reading" the protected and promoted good of a given communicative event. With such an understanding of communication ethics, it is necessary to discern both individual and collective actions in the reading of a given good that is protected and promoted. The diversity and difference before us takes us to a public sphere of required communication ethics literacy as we seek to read and understand a good protected and promoted by a group or an individual person.

❖ COMMUNICATION ETHICS LITERACY

Questions about religion, race, gender, and ethnicity now join questions about the environment, crisis communication, and issues of language and science literacy. We are no longer in a time of information increase alone, but in an era of responsibility increase as well, a time to learn and engage information that we do not know and would not

even care to know. The banality of our time resides in new information. The ethical edge rests with a communication ethics *responsibility to learn and discern.* Communication ethics does not rest comfortably in passive listening to a teacher who tells, but instead walks in agitated demand, calling out both teacher and student to learn.

Communication ethics committed to learning suggests that the defining characteristics of unethical communicative acts are twofold: assuming that you know everything, and assuming that what the other knows is not worth knowing. The joy of learning is the communication ethics burden of this moment. Learning and discernment, attending to the reading of the good, lead to communication ethics. Sandra Harding (1991) outlined the importance of standpoint of position; in communication ethics, one must ask, "What is the good protected and promoted by a given communicative action and position?" In this historical moment, communication ethics becomes the pragmatic unity of *learning* and *discerning* differing views of the good, standpoints that carry value-laden implications.

One of the authors sits on a civility committee for the entire campus. He was asked, "Do you think the campus could agree about the importance of a campaign about civility?" The answer was not what the person wanted to hear: "I am confident we can agree upon one major issue—there will be no agreement on what civility is and what constitutes civility in all settings." In this historical moment, we suggest, one must define civility with the beginning assumption that we live in a time of normative disagreement. Later in the meeting, when asked if we should have a moratorium on cursing, the answer continued in similar spirit. "Of course, and do not expect all to consider this a good idea. In this historical moment, it is important for those who do not want a moratorium to recognize that some are so committed to such a moratorium that they are willing to endure comments from those that consider such an action short sighted and culturally chauvinistic."

The work of Haiman (1967) in "The Rhetoric of the Streets" continues to warn us of such cultural dangers after its publication more than 40 years ago. Additionally, one review of *Dialogic Civility* (Arnett & Arneson, 1999) made a similar case, arguing that the term *civility* is more oppressive than liberating. The reviewer was both correct and incorrect, in that those calling for civility and those questioning civility are both right—to displace telling makes space for learning that looks not to one idea but to ideas held in dialectical tension. This insight guides the crisis communication work of Mitroff, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Additionally, the importance of dialectical tension defines the central insights of Arendt in her commitment to both public and private

domains of communicative life. The "existential" legacy of Heidegger, Arendt, Bonhoeffer, Jaspers, and Buber was the connection of dialectic to everyday life, taking it out of the realm of idealism into the arena of identity. Simply put, it is only through darkness that light offers meaning, and vice versa—the dialectic is a defining sense of identity for all existence.

This historical moment asks us to take a modernist understanding of truth off the table. We sit between the hope of learning and the demand of imposition. We contend that the greatest danger rests in a telling/imposition with conviction that takes the Other off the conceptual map of influence. Learning does not presuppose agreement or commonality; neither does it discount another's standing or register automatic disdain for the unfamiliar or for a good or goods we do not accept or find attractive.

With differences on issues such as civility, one must fall to one side of the conversation more than to the other—otherwise, the notion of dialectic morphs into relativism, the view that anything goes or that all goods are equally valuable in human life, losing the necessity of conviction in a postmodern age of narrative and virtue contention. This book falls to the side of pragmatic necessity for learning that begins with a willingness to respect the Other enough to learn about what is important to the Other. Richard Bernstein (1989, 1992) refers to a form of "engaged fallibilistic pluralism" that seeks to meet our fragmented moment with respect and full knowledge of the fragility of the learners and the world before us:

> But the question becomes how we are to *respond* to this pluralism. There are powerful centrifugal tendencies toward fragmentation. But there are also counter-tendencies—not toward convergence, consensus, and harmony—but toward breaking down of boundaries, "a loosening of old landmarks" and dialogical encounters where we reasonably explore our differences and conflicts. In this situation, the pragmatic legacy is especially relevant, in particular the call to nurture the type of community and solidarity where there is an engaged fallibilistic pluralism—one that is based upon mutual respect, where we are willing to risk our own prejudgments, are open to listening and learning from others, and we respond to others with responsiveness and responsibility. I conclude with a citation from John Courtney Murray, who eloquently expressed the *ethos* of an engaged fallibilistic pluralism. "Barbarism . . . threatens when men cease to talk together according to reasonable laws. There are laws of arguments, the observance of which is imperative if disclosure is to be civilized. Argument ceases to be civil when it is dominated by passion and prejudice; when its vocabulary becomes solipsist, premised on the theory

that my insight is mine alone and cannot be shared; when dialogue gives way to a series of monologues; when the parties to the conversation cease to listen to one another, or hear only what they want to hear, or see the other's argument only through the screen of their own categories. . . . When things like this happen, men cannot be locked together in argument. Conversation becomes merely quarrelsome or querulous. Civility dies with the death of dialogue." (Bernstein, 1992, pp. 338–339)

Communication ethics learning is situated within the same pragmatic spirit; our moment offers many dangers, but there is one sure guarantee of danger—an unwillingness to meet and learn from the unknown. Just as Bernstein makes the pragmatic move to dialogue, so does this work on communication ethics in an age in which difference is our defining common center in the public arena.

The Pragmatics of Dialogic Ethics

The pragmatic move to dialogue emerges first and foremost from a content view of communication ethics. Dialogue requires that one know the ground from which one speaks, meet the Other with a willingness to learn, and learn about the ground from which the Other's discourse emerges. This view of dialogue begins with the importance of content—privileging content over style. The task of dialogic ethics is to meet whatever is before us—the good, the bad, and the ugly. The banal impulse of our time is to reject another's ideas because that person does not "do" dialogue as we demand. The move to demand transfers the communication from the possibility of dialogue to monologue in its most negative sense.

During a conference, a young scholar presented an essay on his faith position related to communication. The presentation was clear (some might go so far as to suggest the word *dogmatic*) in reference to the delivery and the perceived truth of the discourse. A thoughtful scholar of dialogue had the courage to raise the question, "How does the firmness of your belief open any space for dialogue?" The question needed attention, and the young scholar was unsure of an appropriate response. One of the authors of this work sat in the audience and thought, "I would not know how to answer that question, either." The question got at the heart of what might be the central dialogic question of an era of difference: "How is dialogue possible when one speaks from a position of confidence and conviction?" Only after more thought—as usual, days later, and long after the chance to assist the conversation—did the following insight emerge. It is not the space for

dialogue that begins the conversation; it is our willingness to engage
our own ground and meet that of another, no matter how much we
contend with a given stance. If we are to address the authentic differ-
ences between persons in this age of recognized difference, we must
begin with what Buber recommended a half-century ago, the ground
upon which we stand. Such is the reason that Bonhoeffer considered it
immoral to expect another to refute or forsake a given ground of mean-
ing in order to enter a conversation. Writing from prison, Bonhoeffer
(1981) highlights the significance of ground:

HEINRICH: And if, then, death sits in your breast in the shape
of a piece of shrapnel, grinning at you every day—
and you don't know for what purpose you are alive
and for what purpose you are dying—yes, then it's
a miracle if you don't go mad with the urge to live
and with despair, with hatred of all that lives, and
with craving for wild pleasure. Give me ground
under my feet, give me the Archimedean point to
stand on—and all would be different.

CHRISTOPHER: Ground under your feet—I have never understood
it like that. I believe you are right. I understand—
ground under your feet, to be able to live and to die.
(pp. 46–47)

Dialogue hides when we demand that another vacate the ground
that offers meaning and vision for a given standpoint. However, when
the request is more modest, dialogue has a chance to emerge. Perhaps
a question of dialogic invitation begins with this question: "How and
what can I learn from and about the Other's position when I am in dis-
agreement, and how does this insight add texture to my own stand-
point?" The difference in the two interpretive entrances into dialogue
is that the conventional position begins with communication process
and the latter question begins with content/ground and our responsi-
bility to learn that content. Dialogic ethics begins with a content ques-
tion and a responsibility to learn.

We cannot control dialogue, and our demand for it actually
removes from us the likelihood of its emergence. Working from the
ground or content of given positions is the first ethical mandate,
which opens the door to the potential for new insights to emerge
between oneself and the alterity or difference that meets one in
a given moment. Such a view of dialogue is akin to practicing the
"content" of a musical instrument; one cannot force oneself to be a

good musician, but if one continues to play and learn content, every now and then emerges a moment between the player and the content that takes the music to a place not known before. One cannot demand such revelation, but without the hard work and practice on the content, no revelation will happen.

A "content beginning" of dialogic ethics rejects what Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1955) called "cheap grace." In the book *Dialogic Confession: Bonhoeffer's Rhetoric of Responsibility* (Arnett, 2005), the task was to learn how one could meet and learn from a position that is different from one's own. Dialogic confession uses content as a central pragmatic metaphor; one begins with confession of the ground upon which one stands, a statement about content that one takes ever so seriously, and then attends to the Other as the Other does the same. Such a view of communication ethics privileges content, learning, and discernment for self and Other. As Arnett states,

> Bonhoeffer's interpersonal ethic of dialogic confession reaches out to others while firmly surrounded by a story that connects one to others through the "bridges" of service and awareness of other perspectives. His interpersonal ethic is neither an absolute unleashing of individual liberty nor a desperate clinging to an old moral system, but an interpersonal life guided by a center that reaches out to others, supported by conviction and extended by the cautionary act of lowering "bridges." This "unity of contraries" approach that guides his interpersonal ethic requires the strength and courage to know where one stands and to reach out to others, offering "bridges" where persons of difference can meet for conversation and work together. In a postmodern age, Bonhoeffer offers the following confession: begin with a position, walls that sustain ground for narrative life, and then reach out to the Other in this historical moment of diversity, of a "world come of age." Bonhoeffer offers insight into the "how" of taking walls into a world of diversity only to discover the pragmatic necessity of learning, which offers the bridge for the twenty-first century. (p. 219)

The work understands dialogic ethics as a communicative bridge pragmatically necessary for the 21st century.

An era of difference brings forth a view of dialogue situated in content and learning as the companions to a dialogic ethics first principle. We listen without demand, attending to what is before us—appreciated or not. Such attentiveness permits us to meet the historical moment before us, not that which we demand. Attending to the ground/content of self and Other calls forth a natural act of dialogic negotiation, necessitating a dialogic ethical competence that requires us to walk with knowledge of temporality and inaccuracy, requiring us to privilege learning over telling propelled by conviction.

Dialogic ethics listens and meets what is before us, attending to the historical moment and seeking to negotiate new possibilities through attention to content via listening, attentiveness, and negotiation of difference, inviting new insight through the "between" of persons and historical moment, ever protecting and promoting the goods of interpersonal relationship, dwelling places, a sense of welcome and home in organizational life. Dialogic ethics works with the dual importance of public and private communicative spheres in order to maintain the natural dialectic that makes questioning and critical engagement possible; culture as a primary carrier of standpoint, which lends itself to learning from difference; and the unity of direction and change. Dialogic ethics works with responsiveness to health of self and Other, recognizing the frailty of human life and the hope of the possible. Dialogic ethics that begins with content and learning finds goods that others find worthy of protecting and promoting. Learning is the needed response to what Benhabib (1991) has called the communication ethics controversy of our time.

The controversy that this book has addressed is lack of agreement about the good. Turning to narrative, communicative practices, learning, difference, and negotiation in the dialogic meeting of this moment as alternatives to prescriptive telling is key to a postmodern world of difference. We may not be able to agree upon the good, but perhaps it is this fact that carries with it a pragmatic sense of hope. Look at all the problems around us. We have few answers to increasingly troubling questions. Honesty registers the reality of confusion. Learning and discernment, avoiding the danger of telling with a conviction that disregards the Other, is not a communicative "morsel" but a communicative "feast." We live not in a moment of fear or loss, but in a time of responsibility to learn, in a time of meeting ideas that we might want to dismiss but cannot.

We live in a time that calls us to negotiate temporal agreement, in a time of competing views of the good that presents a sumptuous spread, a proverbial *Babette's Feast* (Axel, 1988) before us. *Babette's Feast,* set in the 19th century, tells the story of a Parisian chef, Babette, who flees France to seek refuge in Denmark. She lives with two elderly sisters, cooking for them and eventually running their household with grace and efficiency, retaining from her past life only a lottery ticket that a friend in Paris renews for her annually. One day, news comes that she has won the lottery. In a response of gratitude, Babette spends the entire sum on a lavish, extravagant meal that she prepares and serves to the small church congregation to which the elderly sisters belong.

In our historical moment, contending views of the good offer a banquet of possibilities, and within that lavish extravagance, there is hope in moments of celebration from the learning, the meeting, and the

negotiating of difference. Dialogic ethics ultimately views this moment as a "Babette's Feast," not a moment of despair and loss, but an urging of responsibility that rests in the hope of a human condition in which the first communicative act is to learn, followed by a willingness to take a stand without losing our sense of "maybe" and pragmatic caution—dialogic ethics lives within the pragmatic hope of learning and discernment ever negotiated anew among self, Other, and the demands of the historical moment before us. This moment is not a moral crisis, but a historical demand for us to step up to the responsibility of meeting, learning, and negotiating differing views of the good. A dialogic rendering of communication ethics begins with meeting the world as it is before us—whether we concur or not, whether in agreement with us or not—whether deemed by us as good, bad, or ugly. Now, we can learn and work our way to temporal agreements engaged in a dialogue that begins and ends not in despair, but in celebration of a moment of lavish extravagance for all who want to learn. Communication ethics in this era is an open table, calling us to gather at "Babette's Feast." As students, as participants in the marketplace of an ever-increasing difference of ideas, as members of communities and families, all of us are called to invite others to this table of learning, of difference, of conversation that, in turn, invites unexpected dialogic meeting as we engage this historical moment together.

Communication ethics, as understood in this book, reminds us to learn from difference. As stated by Lisbeth Lipari (2004),

> In my dialogic encounter with you, I will not only listen for your radical alterity but I will open and make a place for it. It means that I do not resort only to what is easy—what I already know, or what we have in common. It means that I listen for and make space for the difficult, the different, the radically strange. (p. 138)

Of course, we must choose upon which side to land in an argument. This communicative gesture defines the fallibility and the necessity of what it means to be human. We learn, then we do our best, and perhaps, in the model of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we take temporal conviction into human life with its restless companion, doubt. A commitment to learning never permits the smugness of assurance to eclipse the necessity of learning and the possibility of new insight to offer a corrective. Such commitment reminds us of a basic communication ethics conviction in an age of narrative and virtue contention—learn from difference, and, as one chooses, do not lose the pragmatic necessity of doubt and "maybe" in a time of change and recognized difference.

❖   COMMUNICATION ETHICS: REFLECTION AND ACTION

1. What issues require you to think carefully and take action with a pragmatic understanding of communication ethics? For example, what issues emerge regularly in relationships with friends, parents, and significant others that require discernment and reflection in order to take constructive action?

2. Locate three significant current issues that have emerged in the past months on your campus that required crisis communication—for instance, what unexpected events have emerged that called for your educational institution's reflection upon and articulation of the good it protects and promotes in order to address those events in a manner consistent with the mission of the institution?

3. What steps can you take to increase your communication ethics literacy as you take your education into the marketplace, community settings, and family contexts and personal life?

❖   ENGAGING COMMUNICATION ETHICS
       THROUGH LITERATURE: *LES MISÉRABLES*

In *Les Misérables,* Jean Valjean works with pragmatic action to protect and promote the goods of the lives and happiness of many throughout the story. In each situation, he engages crisis communication to protect and promote those goods. A number of days after his meeting with the bishop, he springs into quick action, entering a burning house to save the life of a child. While serving as mayor of Montreuil-sur-mer, he moves quickly, risking recognition of his true identity due to his prodigious strength, to save the life of Fauchelevant. When pursued by Javert, Valjean acts rapidly to scale the wall of the Convent of the Petite Picpus, moving Cosette to safety. Finally, Valjean responds to the crisis of revolution by saving the lives of his two worst enemies: Javert, the law officer who seeks to take his freedom, and Marius, who seeks to take from him his only joy in life, Cosette. As each unexpected crisis emerges, Valjean engages communication ethics literacy, honoring the good of the Other with whom he is in disagreement.

He works from his own ground of hope and conviction, learns from the ground of the Other, and listens to the historical moment in each instance. This pragmatic engagement of communication ethics literacy moves him to engage his final moment of life with a reflective response to the inevitable, the meeting of death, offering a legacy of hope to those he leaves behind.

Valjean offers a dialogic ethic that begins with a pragmatic meeting and learning of what is before him, wanted or not, while doing the best he can to connect communicative action to a narrative structure that infused his life at the hands of Bishop Bienvenu, the "Bishop of Welcome." When the authorities caught Valjean with the silverware and brought him back, the bishop uttered a statement that acted as an ethical guiding echo for the remainder of Valjean's life—"Oh, thank you for bringing him back—he forgot the candlesticks." Sometimes, narrative ground comes when least expected, and one's communication ethic becomes informed first by engaging the face of another who has us meet the world otherwise, inviting change through learning and later tests through additional learning that no one would voluntarily accept. Hope comes in the strangest forms, sometimes in a gesture that changes lives—"Oh, thank you for bringing him back—he forgot the candlesticks." As Emmanuel Levinas reminds us over and over again, ultimately, it is not theory that calls us to responsibility for another, but a human face. The face of the Other offers the "why" to bear any "how," offering meaning through an inescapable burden—communication ethics literacy that seeks to learn about competing goods, never forgetting the "why" for such learning, our responsibility to and for the Other.