A Conversation with Nishida: The Place

"You will wear a track in my floor if you persist in your pacing," warns Nishida. "I do not care so much for the sake of the floor, but for what is wearing on *you*."

"I'm trying to understand something odd that happened," I reply. "People who protest that they have no time to do anything, but undertake projects that they previously rejected. I just don't understand how that happens."

"Ah, yes. Time—" he muses. "Something nobody ever has, yet everyone manages to find. And if finding time they cannot accomplish, then making time they do instead. For all the making and finding, it is yet a surprise that there is little having, but still much passing of it."

"Well this happened in my department," I explain. "May I tell you about it? It might be helpful to get your perspective on it."

"Yes, of course. But only if you are still while you tell. I fear that if you continue your incessant pacing we may both end up in the basement."

I kneel on the cushion in front of Nishida and attempt – mostly in vain – to quiet my mind. It *is* a perplexing problem, and one that I somehow feel holds a critical key to my research. But I'm not quite sure what that key might look like. "Hmmm... Where to start?"

"The beginning is always a good place, unless you are the director of a television or cinema drama—then you may want to start from the middle of the ending."

I grimace, but otherwise ignore the poke. "Alright, the beginning then. Our department appointed a new Chair, someone who was unanimously welcomed by all faculty, staff, and students. I think the major reason everyone agreed on this particular professor was the fractious nature of the department at the time. What we needed was someone who could help create cohesiveness among all the groups so the department could be *a* department—one unified team, albeit with multiple constituencies and two main programs. The new Chair is a specialist in organization development interventions, with a special focus on creating well-functioning, high-performing, cohesive teams."

Nishida nods. "It sounds like a wise choice." Despite the fractious nature, as you describe it, there was the collective insight to recognize what you needed to thrive."

"Yes, very much so. The selection process was not so much *selection* as it was setting the agenda for the next four years. So the new Chair took that agenda and, as she expressed it to me, decided to approach at least the initial part of her term as Chair like a research project—an action research[1] project. She conducted individual interviews with each staff and faculty member, and with groups of students. The student organization also created several focus-group events that contributed data to the effort. Then, with the help of a research assistant, the Chair analyzed the data, and from the collected information, discovered six major themes."

"Well grounded, in theory," chuckled Nishida.

Another grimace. For an ancient man, the master was certainly up on his contemporary, academic references. "Quite," I

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[1] A form of research in which the research is conducted with, and on behalf of, the participants to effect a transformative process. Research findings – often developed with the participants – are provided to the participant community which reflexively incorporates the learning to improve a problematic situation. There may be multiple iterations of inquiry, reflection, and incorporation that comprise a process of social transformation among the community of participants.

reply dryly. "Anyway, the Chair and her research assistant organized an offsite retreat day to develop a vision and strategy for the department, and invited all available staff and faculty, and a selection from among the students. At the end of the day-long session, we ended up with lists of action items – each one a project or new initiative – based on the six original themes. Then the Chair stood up, thanked us for our participation and hard work through the day, and said, 'now I would like each group to appoint a champion that will coordinate the efforts of their group to undertake the items we have identified, together.' Well, *sensei*, I'll tell you—there was almost an open rebellion in the room. People were quite vocal and adamant: there was already enough for everyone to do with teaching, and supervising, and new reporting requirements, and fewer resources because of cutbacks, and there was no way that anyone was going to be signed up for more projects!"

"I imagine the Chair was somewhat bemused by this response?" queried Nishida.

"To say the least! She was quite taken aback. She asked if people thought that the day had been a waste of time. It was quite the opposite, people said. Everyone agreed the day was

exceptionally valuable, that the insights we had discovered about our department were especially useful. It's just that no one was willing to take on a bunch of extra projects. She asked if we should do this again in the future. Oh yes, everyone said. Let's do it again in six month's time. But don't expect any projects!"

"So what happened?" Nishida leans forward, his eyes narrowing.

"Six months later, the research assistant and Chair organized a... conversation café[2]?

Nishida nodded. He understood.

I continue: "Shortly before beginning, the research assistant decided – the idea just flashed into her head, she tells me – to ask people who had attended the first session whether anyone knew if anything from the original lists of projects had actually been accomplished. She figured it would take, maybe, the first five minutes of the session to cover what might have been done. After all, nobody had time to do anything, right? *Forty-five minutes*

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[2] A process of progressive conversations based on one or more simple, direct, but insight-seeking questions. Participants arrange themselves around multiple café-style tables and explore the question, writing or drawing their ideas on a paper table cloth. After an approximately 20-minute round, all but one of the table's participants disperse to other tables. The remaining person acts as the table host for the next round, providing a brief description of the ideas elicited in the previous round. Each round may explore the single thematic question in ever-greater depth, or may have a separate question that builds on the prior one.

later, people were still reporting on all that had been accomplished! And these were not trivial tasks – many of them were major initiatives, like a new communication strategy for the department, a new diploma program, a new collaborative program to be initiated—all sorts of things."

"It sounds like a good thing. In fact, many good things," observes Nishida.

"Many good things indeed. But here's what's odd about it: As I was sitting there listening to all the reports, it dawned on me that had we appointed champions to coordinate activities, *nothing* would have been done. People would have been waiting for meetings to be called and plans to be discussed. But *because nobody was in charge, everybody was in charge.* Each person, individually claiming to have no time, decided that they could pick up some activity in which they had a particular interest and just do it, whether it was with other people or on their own. And mostly, these projects involved multiple people in collaboration. Everyone felt a sense of ownership, not only of their particular project, but of something more. I can't quite put my finger on it."

Nishida stroked his beard, sitting in silence for several minutes. "Very wise, your Chair. Very clever. In one day, she

accomplishes her objective for the entire four-year term. She is resting for the rest of her time, I presume?"

"Hardly," I respond. "But certainly, the department changed, and people were considerably more willing to engage between the programs, and among the multiple constituencies. And, there was an enthusiasm to become more involved in departmental initiatives, to support one another, and celebrate each other's successes. It's easy to say that morale improved, but what happened is more than that. There was clearly a common sense of purpose, but it's even more than that. And it was even more than what is often delivered at typical corporate functions: a rah-rah, feel-good, motivational speaker who practices 'Chinese-food inspiration'—an hour later and you're cynical again."

Now it is Nishida's turn to grimace. I ignore his look of indigestion, and conclude: "I'm trying to figure out precisely what happened here. I think it will help me understand these new types of organizations that I am studying."

Nishida looks at me intently. "It is very simple, yet complex," he begins. "Your Chair created *place*."

"A place? I don't understand," I respond.

"Not *a* place. *Place. Basho* in Japanese," says Nishida, patiently. "*Basho* comes into being as an act of mutual determination through mutual recognition between the self that is to be both negated and determined, and the 'Thou that is recognized as a Thou[3].' *Basho* is an existential 'Big Bang' that creates a universe of common knowledge, common consciousness, and common volition to action out of a space of absolute nothingness."

"Now I *really* don't understand." I shake my head in bewildered confusion. "What does all of this Big Bang existential self with a common consciousness have to do with my department's visioning and strategy day, and everyone taking up projects for which no one claimed to have time?"

"Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything. That is entirely up to you to decide." The master pauses, and stares at me as if with x-ray vision, attempting to peer into my mind to assess its preparedness for what he may wish to introduce. He raises an

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[3] Nishida, 1933/1970, p. 43. For future references to the works of Nishida Kitaro in this chapter, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* (Nishida, 1933/1970), will be abbreviated as FPoP, and *An Inquiry into the Good* (Nishida, 1911/1990), as IitG. As with the prior "Conversations" chapters, footnotes are used for references so as not to disrupt the narrative flow.

eyebrow – a good sign – and asks, "Have I ever introduced you to my master, Nishida Kitaro[4]?"

"No. You studied with him in Japan?"

"In a manner of speaking," replies Nishida. "Nishida-*sensei* was a professor of philosophy at Kyoto University, considered the founder of what we now call the Kyoto School of Philosophy. He was the first to combine the Western philosophical tradition – and especially that of the German philosophers – with Zen. He rejected the dialectical logic of men like Hegel in which thesis and antithesis sum to synthesis. Rather, *basho* – place – is where polar tension is allowed to exist without necessarily resolving, thereby allowing interesting things to emerge in a manner that is very similar to your theories of complexity, emergence, and homeostasis[5]. A very contemporary thinker, considering he passed in 1945 having been on this earth for three-quarters of a century."

"I understand the concept of polar tension—holding two, seemingly paradoxical ideas simultaneously in one's mind without feeling the need to resolve them in favour of one or the other. For example, when there are multiple, apparently

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[4] In keeping with Japanese custom, the names of Japanese sources are cited as surname first.
[5] IitG, Introduction.

conflicting contexts, each of them can contribute to making meaning, thereby creating greater understanding of a situation. But I'm still confused. Where does this *basho* come from in the first place?" I ask.

"Ah yes." Nishida smiles. "It comes not from, but *as*, the first place," he states, cryptically. "This is not as confusing as it first may appear. It all begins with a simple question." He waits, allowing the room to fill with stillness. "How do you know you are *you*?"

The simple questions are always the most complex. There are, of course, simple answers to simple questions, but these, as the master once scolded me, emanate only from the mouths of simple people. There are no truly simple questions, he would say, only simple and naïve answers.

Naïvely, I can see myself in a mirror and know that I exist—at least in my own mind. That, of course demonstrates nothing: 'is it solipsistic in here or is it just me?' is a clever T-shirt slogan among the philosophy geeks. And Descartes is no help, either. 'I think, therefore I am,' renders me legendary only in my own mind, suffering the same existential limitations as my T-

shirt-sporting friends. But, Buber—*I and Thou*[6]. Now there's a

possibility. I only exist in relation to another, to a 'thou,' where

that relation is not predicated on any particular instrumentality or

transaction. I regard and know 'thou,' therefore I am—at least

with respect to the 'thou.'

I look directly into Nishida's eyes. "I know I am me – that

is, I am an 'I' – when I recognize someone else as who they are." I

point my finger towards his chest. "Martin Buber, *Ich und Du*. It is

even the way – in his opinion, the *only* way – to truly know God.

If I interact with another person with an intent to do something,

to accomplish, or to trade, for instance, I transform that person

into an object—a mental conception or the idea of an instrument.

The other person becomes an 'It' which is merely a projection of

me. In that instance, it becomes almost a case of solipsism, where

I am essentially the only reality that matters—no pun[7] intended."

"And none taken," replies the old man, dryly, the corner of

his mouth turning up almost imperceptibly. "So what you are

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[6] Buber, 1923/1970.

[7] *It* becomes…

attempting to explain is that 'the self becomes a self by recognizing a Thou as a Thou.[8]'"

"Yes, exactly. Just as Buber explained," I respond.

"Nishida Kitaro also read Buber," explains Nishida—that is, the Nishida who sits opposite me. "'Self becomes a self,' and so on, is Nishida Kitaro. He connected Buber's work to the Zen conception of *pure experience*, 'the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination.'[9] There is a consciousness of a visceral experience, of course, but no *conception* of it. Conception is thinking, and 'thinking is the response of consciousness to a mental image,'[10] placing the particular mental image in relation with all that one has experienced."

I interrupt my *sensei*. "Let me see if I understand this. I experience the world without necessarily thinking about what it is that I am experiencing. In other words, in this 'pure experience,' I am not matching a prior mental image – even a prior experience – with the current one."

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[8] FPoP, p 43.
[9] IitG, p. 3.
[10] IitG, p. 14.

"That is correct."

"When I do connect an experience, it is with some mental image that, in part, comprises the context of my entire consciousness. All of these mental images – ideas, really – taken together create meaning, allow me to reflect, enable me to understand experiences as they enter my consciousness and transform into thought."

"Precisely. That is where the Enlightenment was not so enlightened."

"The problem with Descartes," I respond, nodding my head. "'I *am*, therefore I think,' might be the better representation, according to Nishida."

"Or, as he puts it," replies *sensei*, "'it is not that there is experience because there is an individual, but that there is an individual because there is experience.'[11] So now you understand the connection between Nishida Kitaro and Martin Buber."

I give *sensei* a quizzical look. "No, I don't."

He sighs, wearily. "I becomes I by recognizing Thou as Thou. That is both Buber and Nishida. There is no thinking about

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[11] IitG, p. 19.

it, no material interaction, as thinking and materiality – a purpose outside of oneself – creates a mediated relationship that, in Buber's philosophy, recreates the I-Thou relationship as *Ich-Es*. It is then not 'mutually determining,' as Nishida puts it. Yes?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now, Nishida describes how, when the self determines the self by recognizing the other as other, the self is simultaneously affirmed and negated. By this he means that the individual no longer exists as a solitary entity floating in a universe of absolute nothingness. In the act of I-Thou affirmation, there is also negation of individual as lone individual. It is like matter and anti-matter coming together, releasing tremendous energy. It is the energy of existence. Mutual determination of individuals is like an existential Big Bang."

"Now I see."

He continues. "Nishida also says that 'mutually determining individuals require some spatial relationship in which they exist, that is, something like an absolute space. This is a field in which they determine one another.'[12] He explains – as

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[12] FPoP, p. 47.

much as he explains anything – that this becomes a paradoxical dialectic process, affirmation as negation, and negation as affirmation." *Sensei* moves his hands in an opposite up-down motion, as if they are a balance scale, weighing one concept against the other. "'But the mutual determination of individuals is not merely a dialectical process. … [It] has a meaning, that is, that of the determination of *basho*—a place. … It does not merely signify a space in which things exist. It must rather signify a place in which things are mutually determining, which is, as it were, a physical space of personal action. The mutual determination of individuals is not at all an unmediated relativity of points. The mutual determination of things also implies that the place is self-determining.'[13]"

I turn this over in my mind. Self. Other. Self recognizes other and becomes no-longer-self—negated in one sense. But, in another sense, self and other become something more than they were: as they come into existence, they bring a metaphysical place *of* existence, *into* existence. *Basho*. Place.

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[13] FPoP, p. 48.

"So that means," I begin, "that 'the existence of a thing means the self-determination of *basho* itself, and vice versa.'[14]"

"Nishida Kitaro could not have said it better himself," smiles the master. "'For there to be life, the mutual determination of individuals must exist as the determination of *basho*. Thus, the world of life becomes the determination of *basho*.'[15] This, perhaps, connects to Jurgen Habermas[16] in an interesting way, distinguishing between *lifeworld* and *systemworld*."

"Yes. I see that. If, for example, you are creating an organization that is part of the *systemworld*, it would be determined instrumentally, external to the individuals who are later called to occupy its offices. But – and I now see this as an important distinction – if you are creating an organization that is part of Habermas's *lifeworld*, you must create it in *basho*."

"Very good," says Nishida. "You now begin to see how your Chair recreated your department, from *systemworld* to *lifeworld*, in one day. But it was not merely the activity of the one-day retreat that accomplished the transformation. Listing

[14] FPoP, p 51.
[15] FPoP, p. 53.
[16] Habermas, 1984.

objectives and goals that is merely an act of dividing one thing into many parts remains simply the attempted self-determination of one thing – an organization, for instance, that stands disconnected and apart in its own universe – even though there may be many people participating in such a mediating activity. The only mediating interactions and reactions that create a self-determining entity – a *lifeworld*-created organization, for example – are the mediating activities that result in mutual determination that creates *basho*.[17]"

He continues: "As one individual recognizes another, mutually determining each other, the act of that recognition creates *basho*. They *know* each other in a profound and intimate way. There is a common sensibility, a common understanding of *place* and circumstances, and a common volition to action—commonality of purpose in each individual's personal action that comes from their moral centre.[18]"

"So you are saying that *basho* is also the place that emerges from their common values," I offer.

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[17] From FPoP, p. 54-55.
[18] From FPoP, p. 70-73.

"And values emerge from *basho*," he responds immediately. "It is, as Nishida Kitaro calls it, 'circular determination rather than linear determination'[19] that links past and future through one's personal action. Personal action is grounded in those values, and it is personal action that provides one's purpose. Purpose, as you might expect, also emerges from *basho* in the same way: it is the individual and their environment mutually determining each other, creating *basho*, emerging from *basho*, determining and being determined by *basho*. If that environment is one of your organizations—" His voice trails off.

"Yes! Of course!" I shout. "Each person who participated in that retreat day actually participated in determining the department, and in a very real sense, that determination of the department determined them as members, as well. There were new relations created that went far beyond the instrumentality of merely being a staff or faculty member, or a student. Those relations enabled a common understanding of who and where we are, and the common volition to action. Individuals took up projects not because they were instrumental projects on a to-do

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[19] FPoP, p. 71.

list, nor entwined with externally imposed, incentive-based reward-and-punishment schemes. They took up those projects because the organization's projects became projects of their own self-determination. Our department as a separate and distinct entity – *organization* – has its own life, both determined by, and creating its own *basho*, its own *place*.

"You now understand," intoned Nishida, looking very pleased. "In that transformation, the *place of organization* – organization-*ba* – was created." He glances over to the front of the room, where I had been pacing. "And now, no more need for *aruki-ba* – the walking-place – I trust."