

Listen To What You Love Most

Conversation with Bill Isaacs
December 21, 2001, Cambridge, MA

COS: Okay, Bill. As always, I have a list of questions but we both know that we are free to deviate in any direction the conversation may take us.

Bill Isaacs: There's something of an interesting cycle because it was, I think, what seven years ago?

COS: Yes, seven years ago.

I. Nonlocality and Place

Bill Isaacs: Pretty exactly. You came first to MIT and were not quite sure whom you would end up working with and I think we discovered that we were the right people to be working together when we first started. That there was kind of a resonance and sense of common intent. What's interesting is to see how our journeys have taken us off in different ways. You to your own dissertation and then a new book – series of books really – and all kinds of other adventures and I to my own set of ways. And here we are. So it strikes me as interesting somehow...

COS: Coming back to the place of the crime.

Bill Isaacs: Exactly – coming back to the scene of the crime.

COS: Which is actually this room – not the other room...

Bill Isaacs: That's true. We didn't quite have this office then. We were still at MIT, but we got this probably five years ago – so a couple of years after.

COS: Talking about the power of place. In Bohm and all his writings he emphasizes the non-locality principle – we all know that. I mean, look at the reality. The reality is that once things happen in some place, stories and a presence are created in a way. So you feel that – then you open with that remark...about “coming back to the scene of the crime.”

Bill Isaacs: I think that's a stretch...

COS: We'll come back to that. It's a function of this non-locality principle and the power and presence of things.

Bill Isaacs: I don't know actually – I don't know about that. To me there's a totality in any cycle. There's place, there's consciousness, there's emotion, there's the track of history and these larger rhythms that we experience which have a certain total or complete dimension to them and I think these kinds of things are happening all the time and that perhaps only sometimes are we conscious of them or only sometimes is there a sufficient intensity to sort of waken us to them. But for me, there is something to do with the place, but it's more to do with our relationship, actually.

COS: But what I mean is... of course the relationship to consciousness is part of the place...

Bill Isaacs: But it's anchored in the place in some way.

COS: Yes, like the Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida who distinguishes between three dimensions of place: the physical, the relational, and the spiritual or transpersonal.

Bill Isaacs: That's more what I think I'm talking about...

COS: But they kind of relate to each other. What I was alluding to, I guess, is that if we had met in this other room...

Bill Isaacs: It would be very different. It would be.

COS: Let me get to my main question. To lay the groundwork for it, I will start with a little story. Peter and I went to the First World Systems Management Conference this year. It was in Vienna in early May and there were 1,000 people there – thinkers of systemic management and practitioners from all over the place. And the first day, the really big guns were giving lectures – like Humberto Maturana, Stafford Beer, Peter Senge, and some others. After each presentation, there was a little Q & A. After Peter did his piece he was asked a powerful question that really turned the whole room into a sudden silence. A woman got up and said, "Well Peter, if you had to summarize everything you said and everything Stafford Beer and Maturana said into a single sentence to an eight-year-old, what would it be? What would you say to capture the essence of everything that you guys have presented this afternoon?" That question really turned the whole conversation around and I would like to direct that question now to you.

Bill Isaacs: I'm really curious to hear what he said.

II. Stand still and listen

COS: I will tell you later. I mean, Bill, after having written some 400 or so pages on dialogue, how would you explain the essence of your book to an eight-year old in a single sentence?

Bill Isaacs: (pause) I would say something very simple. Make sure you listen to yourself and the person sitting next to you. Listen to the course of the world and to your own nature; and you'll know what to do. Most people think that dialogue is a form of talking. It's more about articulating what's been heard and at what level. What are you actually listening to? And then [it's] the moral equivalent of saying, "Stand still."

COS: Stand still?

Bill Isaacs: Stand still, yes. There's a great Native American poem that was apparently given by Native American elders to children who were lost in the forest. And their first advice was to stand still and look at the trees around you. And the meaning of all of this is that adults are moving in a very fast-paced universe, basically. What may be needed more than anything is to stand still and to listen? A simple, vibrant reality is missed, just a notch below the surface.

COS: Bill, you distinguished among four different levels of listening: listening to oneself; listening to the other; listening to the...

Bill Isaacs: Listening to the unfolding music – the creative music – the unfolding order. Bohm used to call it the implicate order. But if it's the stage at the point of which you're aware of it, it's no longer implicate, right? It's listening to what's next. You could put it more like listening to what is next wanting to be said. Listening for the right, next word. So it's the unfolding sequence of things – the unfolding generative order of things.

COS: And then listening to your own nature.

Bill Isaacs: Yes, listening to your own nature.

One of the discoveries, I guess, is that this work around dialogue is very much an inquiry into identity and an inquiry into the question, "Who am I?" And the question isn't necessarily what one initially thinks it is. It's not simply a question of "Who am I?" in the sense of an amalgam of historical impulses coming out of the past – an amalgam self of hereditary influences and preferences and predilections sitting here before you. That is, I could argue, the equipment – the dust – isn't necessarily who I am. And when one begins to listen beyond the impulses and predilections and preferences and so on – the reactions– one can come to the realization that "I am here" and "here" is not just this physical location. It could be the thought of the intensive self and the extensive self. The self that's kind of immediately present and intensely here; that we're visible and we see one another. But there's the sense that a lot of native traditions have that what is out there is not separate from, ultimately, what I am. And that, more importantly, not only in an external sense, but the source of what is "out there" is emerging through me as much as it is emerging through whatever it is that's there. In that sense, I am

simply present and the world moves around me, but then it's not a physical movement. In essence there's nowhere to go, hence the original question, "What would you say to an eight-year-old?" has many layers of meaning. Stand still means: Discover who you are. Recover who you are which is at the most essential level abiding in the source of all things. There's nowhere to go.

COS: Nowhere to go?

Bill Isaacs: Nothing to prove – nowhere to go. We have to live in the world with time and space out here... where there seems to be both: catch the bus; don't be late [laughing].

COS: So you point out the importance of the center rather than the periphery and the periphery of the circle. There is a certain focus you propose that is useful...

Bill Isaacs: Absolutely, it's not diffusion. I find this quite interesting and useful to get clear. This is not about diffusion. I don't splatter myself all over the universe. I am very present here. It's very useful that I brush my teeth and I don't try to brush yours. There's something quite useful about a sort of physical presence. But it's more than that. There can be many centers – many focal points without them being separate. And there can be many points of differentiation and many centers of focus without there being separation. This leads into the new territory that we're calling collective leadership. Collective leadership is the consciousness that a group of people can come to where they realize that each of them is a manifestation and articulation of a larger order of things. The people have a distinctive and powerful focus; they are capable of leading but, more importantly, they are capable of being conscious of the fact that they are part of a larger whole. And there is this holographic pattern here. You get more of the plate present to shine a laser through and you get more of the image.

III. Always pay attention to what you love most

COS: Now let me use my eight-year-old friend here for another question. If this territory is at the heart of dialogue – the listening and the different levels that you described– how would you now explain to a child the "how to" dimension of listening? How would you explain how I could enhance my own mastery in performing and engaging in this social act?

Bill Isaacs: Well, what I would say to my eight-year-old friend is: Always pay attention to what you love most. You will go in the direction that you put your deepest passion – your deepest love. **What you love most will tell you where your compass is.** You will go in that direction. So always be careful where you put your attention. To put it another way, **listen to what you love most.** Always listen to that. You will always go in that direction. In that sense, you're continuously asking for something – some would say praying, actually. I think you could say it in more secular language: you're continuously seeking or

continuously in a kind of inquiry. This is, I think, the heart of the old saying, “Be careful what you ask for; you might get it.” If you’re not sure what you’re asking for, what does that mean? Then look around you. Look at the world you’ve created. Look at the world that’s around you right now. I may not say all of this to an eight-year-old, but I would say, “Always pay attention to what you love most.”

COS: That’s wonderful.

IV. The other side of dialogue: the capacity to express what you love most.

Bill Isaacs: In some respects, the eight-year-old in every adult might be usefully reminded of that. **Love what’s highest – what’s highest to you.** That brings you to a greater awareness. And often for people it feels like something outside of them – beyond them. I think there’s a very definite process of development that goes on here where initially it does feel like it’s sort of in someone else that you admire – traits or qualities you admire very much in someone else, and probably feel, *I could never be that. But aren’t they extraordinary?* Well, I would say the only reason you can actually even notice that is because whatever those qualities are, they are also in you. You wouldn’t see them otherwise. Now they may not be in as full and mature expression as they are in that person, and that’s your challenge. **Develop your ability to express that which you love most. And in some ways, that’s the whole game. So here’s where the other side of dialogue comes in, which is the capacity to bring out – to express what you love most.** And you know whether you’re doing it or not. You always know.

COS: So what is it in your life, Bill?

Bill Isaacs: I think I would say it’s the truth of these things. That is what I love most. The understanding of these things – the reality that has opened by an understanding of these things. That’s what I love most. In some senses that cuts through everything.

COS: Cuts through all the bullshit.

Bill Isaacs: Cuts through all the bullshit. It’s all real in that condition; things are what they are. And in some ways it feels to me that the process that’s required is – none of us yet, I think, by virtue of living in the world the way it now is – none of us yet abide in that condition continuously. “As long as any are bound, none are as free” as they say. And the challenge, in some sense, is to continuously clarify all the reaches of one’s consciousness with this understanding as each new experience comes up. How do you bring yourself to the present now? How do you bring yourself to an awareness of what’s real and waiting to unfold now? How do you express that into the circumstance? And thus charge the circumstance with these very qualities? So it’s not simply a passive act; it’s actually a positive act. I think this is the essence of leadership actually – all

invisible. It's not about going out and becoming a hero in the other world – this is the kind of leadership that may never actually be noticed.

V. The essence of leadership

COS: The essence of leadership is...

Bill Isaacs: The continuous expression of the finest qualities of being that one's capable of at any one moment. The ever-sounding sound of the universe! Whatever the qualities of life that wants to be expressed can be expressed in the circumstance. And it could be a joke; it could be a crude joke; it could be having a cigarette; it could be, shockingly enough, it could be whatever it is. There's no rule. You have to listen for the right thing to do. In this case, for us, it's beginning to think about and articulate some of the new ground, which isn't maybe so new, about how individualistic notions of leadership represent too partial a view. And how the leadership that emerged out of the dialogue work suggested a different territory. So in this context, the most interesting and highest-leverage action for leadership is to expand the way we think.

COS: It is to think...

Bill Isaacs: In this exchange what's interesting and what's always the case, I think, when you and I get together, is that I always see new things. New things come out. And to me that's partly the magic of dialogue – that we get enough out of the way that there's a crack in the universe where something can come through the two of us – like a river between the two of us that turns our minds and shows us things. We're there before we start. We can take credit for it and think we're all very clever, but the truth is, all we're doing is providing the paddle wheel for the movement of this energy.

You could say that I am that energy, but I didn't know what it was until it was expressed. **So leadership is the precise bringing forward of the essence that is meant to be brought forward in this moment in whatever the situation is.** And having enough stability – this could sound a bit eccentric, but you could connect it to things “real leaders” do. *She had or he had real poise*, people say. Well what does that mean? It means, in part, that they have the stability, grace under pressure. They have the stability to hold steady and be present when others are losing their heads, as it were. To not react – to not be carried away by circumstance – but to be in touch with the source of things, at least to some degree. That's always very inspiring. If it's the real thing – if it's artifice, if it's fake, it's worse than phony. It's horrible. It's distinctly uninspiring.

This is not quite what I expected to be talking about.

VI. Container building: Pay attention to the spaces

COS: I hear what you're saying about what it is that you love. Then I wonder about not only understanding this work on an individual basis, but about making it accessible for others in a social context. And that's the domain of my last "eight-year-old's" question for you today. What have you learned about creating the conditions in social settings for other people to engage in collective leadership or dialogue leadership? What did you learn about how to create these conditions? What would you tell an eight-year-old about how he or she could enter and operate in that domain?

Bill Isaacs: I'd say something that I think an eight-year-old would get very quickly but that adults tend not to get for long. I'd say, *pay attention to the space*. Pay attention to the feeling in the room – to the atmosphere. What's it like right now? Typically, you ask a child that and they'll tell you right away. They know exactly what you're talking about. You can even experiment with some children. You can actually ask a child to influence the atmosphere in a room by sitting with him or her and saying, "Let's be very, very quiet." You can try this. It's a little trick from the sorcerer's trade here. You intensify the silence between you. You can hold that. Its intensification will require certain muscle. If you can do that, you will notice an impact on the room. The room will quiet down to the point where, if you really keep it up, the whole room will wind up looking at you. What's that? That's working with the energy of the room– the atmosphere – the feel.

Understanding that space and what is actually going on there is the subject of many hours of consideration, but the gist of it is: pay attention to the space. And notice your impact on it. You influence that space – you always influence it. How you feel matters, and you can contribute to how it feels. I'd say why don't you try and practice a few times and see how you do. Come back and let me know. And again, it might sound to some adults to be a little nutty, but at some level most of us are familiar with the fact that every room we go into has a different atmosphere. If we go home, if you go to your room, your room feels like home. It doesn't feel like a hotel room. It's partly because it's a different physical circumstance, but your atmosphere is in that room. So there could be a sense of place connected to these things. But it's more than that. It's these other levels of place. One of the most important things we've learned is that there is an incredibly important factor called "the nature of the space." And what we've done is use a term, which is controversial (because it's difficult to translate) and not terribly well liked term, but a term that turns out to be incredibly useful: "container." The roots of it are very nice –to hold together – to hold not in the physical sense simply or only, but to hold in consciousness the factors that are moving in and among a group of people. And in some respects, the art of a practitioner is to read the quality of the container. What can be said here and thought here and felt here that could not be done anywhere else?

COS: So the container is the field – the enabling conditions that define what's possible and what's not possible in a situation? Or what's the container from a pragmatic point of view?

Bill Isaacs: **The container is the pattern of energy and relationship.** It's the quality of relationship and the pattern of energy that moves in that quality of relationship. And the relationship isn't just interpersonal – it's the relationship with everything. There's a distinction here between that which is within something that happens and the something that happens.

And I think there are several “somethings” that happen. One is a certain field – what a number of us are calling a field of energy. You could think of it as a magnetic field. Within that field is a focus, though, and the focus tends to move. So there's a pattern of design within the field. So it's actually quite precise to the point where you can begin to have a sense of – it doesn't always come out in ways you predict because none of our lenses are perfectly clear yet – of where things might go next. You can begin to anticipate where things are going. Some people say future events cast their shadow. What's that mean? It means the pattern of energy has a certain order in it and a certain design in it and you can sense what that is.

VII. Future events casting their shadow: 9-11, 1933

COS: What's an example? Do you have a story that would exemplify that – the future and what it is casting?

Bill Isaacs: I have a story from a dear friend who actually just passed away at the age of 90 about one week ago. He was a remarkable magician when it comes to this kind of subject. He had a very deep understanding. I learned a great deal from him. He was a young lad in 1935-1936 in Canada and had been a child just prior to World War I. He had experienced the First World War or had at least been in the atmosphere of it – I guess he was 8 or 9 at the time in 1933; he and a whole other group of young men were seeking to make their fortune in Canada. And he said he couldn't find himself – he found himself not quite able to get into it. But the young men around him were kind of – he said it reminded him of the early 90's in the United States – the kind of getting hunger and the sort of achievement frenzy and everyone was charging forward. And he said he couldn't quite get into it. He began to listen to Chamberlain and the Canadian Prime Minister talking about what was emerging in Germany. He began to get a sense that he could see something coming – he could feel something coming that he felt others didn't necessarily see. He said perhaps it was because he had been in the first war, but he said the sense was that something large was coming that was going to dwarf all that was moving then. And of course, it turned out to be true. I mean a few years later, the world was at war.

And of course the significance of this story is that we were talking about this about one year ago, and he said he had the same sense then. This was one year before September 11th. He said he felt it actually prior to Y2K. Well, some people think it's Y2K; I don't think that's it. He said it's the same feeling and he

said that most people are not willing to face facts about this. In fact most will deny it. So he was a bit of an insightful character, but I think he's not alone. My hunch is that many people knew or had a sense something was up prior to September 11th.

COS: And I certainly did as well. In fact, 1933 was one of my first associations after September 11. I really don't know exactly what it is – but that you have that sense of foreshadowing.

Bill Isaacs: And I think that the interesting question becomes: *What does one do?* How does one deal with what one senses? I remember I was on vacation for most of the month of August and was incredibly uncomfortable for most of the month. I had all kinds of bad, horrible dreams and all kinds of deep disturbances and feelings that something was going to go badly with my work. A big client is going to reject me. I would arrive at the big client, and they'd say: "What are you talking about? What do you mean?" As I reflect on it now, and it was a good lesson to realize this, I see that I translated it personally. I was translating the energies and disturbance into the terms of my little life. In fact, it had nothing to do with me personally in that sense. There were no correlates. I'd have to say in the last few weeks, there's been a similar sense, and I think this is helpful...

COS: You now have a similar sense to your feelings prior to September 11?

Bill Isaacs: A similar sense- something like that, yes. Intensification. And what I do find myself doing with that is saying – is not grabbing hold of it quite so much, but letting it – stepping back a bit – seeing if I can maintain my perspective now and maintain a sense of assurance. Maintain my own injection of a sense of assurance into my world, as well as my own heart and mind, so I'm not buffeted by factors that are invariably very intense for people. **I think that this is another way of thinking about leadership – providing and doing the work inside oneself so that one is able to provide the point of reassurance for one's world that it, in some sense, seeks.** It's not as if it seeks it meaning it sort of comes to you, but it's more like you provide a point of balance and perspective or you provide a point of disturbance and annoyance – take your pick. So it's sort of my aspiration to achieve at least the former.

COS: One way to describe the work we are doing is that we are facilitating a larger opening at a very collective level. Now you described that with September 11th and shortly before and certainly after, something changed in terms of what is coming out as the result of that opening. There's also a lot of distraction which gets stronger and which is stronger now than six months ago. Would you also have that experience?

Bill Isaacs: Tell me what you mean by opening.

COS: Well, with opening I mean, basically, that with a larger or deeper dialogue process, you're really trying to uncover what's underneath. You try to go through an opening process where you pay attention to the various levels you described. And what I'm noticing, and what I have been noticing in some meetings right after September 11th was that as you do this opening process in organizational settings, what tends to kick in now is also a lot of distraction like anxiety or '*what will happen?*' This whole force is overshadowing the larger societal opening processes that were in the making over the past two or three years -- which was really, you could say, a spiritual opening, particularly in the West. And now with this kind of force, we have exactly -- how would you describe...

Bill Isaacs: Well, the disturbance leads people to kind of want to climb into their beds or into their caves, to use an analogy. I mean it's true that, under conditions of stress, people reverse or regress. And it's animalistic. Under stress, any animal will regress to a very authoritarian state. This is why Rudy Guillian looked good; he's an authoritarian character -- everybody wanted a strong character -- boom! Now under circumstances that are more tempered, he looks too authoritarian and everyone rejects him. So it's a particular moment -- *cometh the hour, cometh the man*, as they say.

But to me what I found actually happened, and that I find what continuously happens, is that ... in a lot of contexts, and we were in a number of organizations and contexts post 9-11, and a number of people came to seminars and said, "Oh, I was hoping for a distraction. I was hoping to learn something to keep my mind off whatever was happening." And I pressed a little bit and I said, "Really?" The answer was: "No, not really." For many Americans, the initial reaction was absolute blank. People had absolutely no idea. And I know in your work, you think about blind spots. I mean this is clearly a national blind spot. How could they hate us? Well, it turns out to be remarkable how many people in this country had absolutely no idea whatsoever. And then I think that that question is still very important to keep on the table and tends to be kind of intense and tends to be not so consciously held.

I think the signal is not so much that a lot has changed but that we have become-- particularly in the United States, but maybe more particularly in the Western World-- more conscious of a very fundamental rift and breakdown in the relationships in this kind of human family that were there all along but came to a particular focus. But I think that what is disturbing about events like September 11th is that it conjures memories that are actually much older than current circumstances. Human beings have lived through, on this planet, traumas -- major cataclysms. The shape of this planet has changed dramatically over the ages. And while none of us were around to hear it and see it, there is still a mass memory of these things.

COS: A metamorphic resonance...

Bill Isaacs: Something like that – and when one sees buildings tumbling – for any of us that actually watched the endless footage – that calls up a kind of a terror that’s way beyond that circumstance. It’s more than a war or a particular city being bombed. It reminds human beings of a certain kind of fragility. That the ground we stand on is not nearly as solid as it looks. At one level the jumpiness that people experienced after that is, in my mind, a call to discover a place of stability in oneself. Discover a place to stand that is in fact stable. And then I think if held by enough people, it would mirror itself in the external world.

COS: And to discover the big towers that are crumbling within ourselves.

Bill Isaacs: To discover the towers that are crumbling within our little selves is a very nice way to put it. And there’s an immediate set of circumstances. So that’s kind of looking through time and through the ancient past.

But one could also look at the immediate circumstance and say: “What is it that a group of people want to say such that the only way that they can say it is to fly planes into buildings?” As one person actually put this in our calls... this is saying something that cannot be said any other way.

And, at one level, people dismiss an act of terrorism as the acts of a fanatic or people who want to destroy a way of life to promote their own and so on. I think however angry, disturbed and absolutist people are, in the end, there’s always an impulse underneath to bring out what they believe is right. And no one ever acts to produce anything that they think is wrong. Others may interpret their actions as wrong or horrible, and this is not a certain laxity – some of them are horrible to be clear. On the other hand, to the degree that we can actually come to the point of listening to the impulse underneath it and include it, however repelled we are...to actually overcome our repulsion, frankly. To the degree we do that, then we, in some sense, re-knit together the human family. And to the degree we fail to do that, we ensure fragmentation.

This takes a much larger container, you might say, than our political system seems currently capable of producing. Right now ... I mean there has been more nuance than one might have expected, although many people in Europe disagree with that – more nuance than I think I would have predicted – the conduct of this global police action or war or whatever you want to call it. Nevertheless, there is a kind of – one sees the government and a wide body of leaders, political and otherwise, waging a war. One doesn’t see them waging an inquiry. “Help us understand what’s really going on here. What in the world is this?” With as much passion and focus as we are intent on ridding ourselves, if we can bring that kind of intensity, I think we would discover some things we wouldn’t want to hear, but I think it would take the intensity out. It would take the wind out of a lot of sails, actually. Maybe not at first, but eventually.

And we've seen this in the smaller scale in a number of circumstances where impossible situations that are horribly violent and the right mix of people and the right containers are produced, people will talk. They always will. They always will. And then magic takes its course.

VIII. Emergence and the Hitler issue

COS: I go back to your notion of leadership, to bring forward what's wanting to emerge in a given situation. Now that's kind of sensing and tuning into the emergent and bringing that forward. Hitler did that as well in a certain way. How do we make sure that we are not moving or becoming instruments for the Hitler type of force that's going to manifest? And how do you personally deal with that?

Bill Isaacs: Well, I think that we should approach this from several different levels because I think this is a very important and, frankly, quite timely question. As an individual, what one could say is, you know that when you get into certain kinds of traffic situations – when you get into traffic, and you're wanting to go somewhere, and you're not able to go somewhere ... almost everyone feels some measure of irritation. You get mad. Why don't they get the hell out of the way? And you feel this reaction – this reaction comes up. Now what is that reaction? It's a memory. A memory pattern. It's sort of – so memories recycle...

COS: Playing the same tape...

Bill Isaacs: You got it. I think there are certain tapes that roll in human beings' experiences. I think that's the case for us personally, but we call them our buttons or our trigger points, whatever. I think the same is true for the collective. There are collective tapes. Collective patterns that roll... and I think the challenge that we face is meeting and transmuting – transforming these memories, which is a challenge personally, and a challenge collectively. And when something emerges that's a kind of a shadowy memory – a memory that's been suppressed or disowned. A memory that Carl Jung would call a shadow – a part of one's self that's been repressed and disowned and denied. I'm not an abusive person – well they didn't pay much attention to that last circumstance. You know, the abusive or difficult or problematic parts of one's self – that in society are ruled out – often are totally reintegrated unconsciously. The energy is reintegrated – they leak out. Ask any couple how it's going. Well, we don't fight. Well you're either completely hypnotized or you're lying or dead. Of course you fight. Relationships are containers in which these memories are meant to be processed actually. This is not what they tell you when you start. If they did, most of us would probably not go there in the first place – the hormones are such that you have no choice – so it's sort of like you're betrayed by your hormones into a situation that's very different from what you end up finding is really the gig. That's sad. Relationships understood properly are containers in which these shadows can be transformed in life experiences and yet more sweetly as a result.

The point is, certain people have the capacity to bring a kind of hypnotizing current into the world. And to the degree...

COS: What's hypnotizing in this context?

Bill Isaacs: Hypnotizing – they have – I think Osama Bin Laden is a good example...a sweet sort of self-referential focused tone that seduces and draws in and then – for someone who has not differentiated in themselves strongly enough what is me and what is my memory– can be drawn up into a pattern of response to someone who seems to be clear and who is trying to suck to themselves or draw to themselves energy like that. Many people are quite vulnerable to that kind of hypnosis. Vulnerable basically to the hypnosis of their own memory patterns. The point in some respects is that there are people who will manipulate that material in the subconscious out of their own wounds actually – out of their own difficulties. So people will become responsive to that and loyal to that and die for it. And this has been the case all through history.

COS: It being the collective case.

Bill Isaacs: Yes; this particular phenomenon has repeated itself and what – now the Hitler phenomenon is a good one because here's a pattern of systematic destruction that almost certainly was not the first time it's emerged. Everybody said, "Oh, there's never really been anything quite like this." I don't believe it. There may not have been the technological tools back along the way, but the ultimate impulse that got rolling at that time most certainly was not initiated and created out of nothing. It came out of something. I'd say it came out of this collective tape. Now the interesting question here is, *how do you clear memory?* The answer isn't that you suppress it forever. So here's the question: How do you bring out these memories in such a way that we don't suppress them? How do you bring out individual memories in such a way that you can actually see them and move them and not back them out? It's very challenging.

I think we're in a similar circumstance now which is there is a certain pattern of disconnect and rift, you could say, between Islam and the West – you could say between the haves and the have knots, between the developed world and the non-developed world. You could think of it in lots of different ways – the clash of civilizations, whatever. Pick your frame. The question is: **Do we have collective containers that are large enough to shift how we frame this overall or do we act out the ritualized patterns of reaction that have always moved when these kinds of complications and fragmentations show themselves?** See, on the face of it, there's the potential blessing, which is that it's a memory – a crisis – that's brought to awareness something that could catalyze massive healing or it could catalyze massive destruction. That's the choice.

IX. Containers for healing the global crises of today

COS: It could catalyze massive healing under what conditions? What would it take?

Bill Isaacs: It would take two things. I think one is a realization that the way ... that a certain level of shift ... that there is a certain crumbling of an old order that patterns that have made sense up until now no longer work.

COS: In institutions...

Bill Isaacs: Exactly. At lots of levels: from classical mechanics to quantum physics, from industrial society to whatever comes after it – the post, post industrial – there's many different kinds of transitions here where many of the rules just don't apply. And in that breakdown, there are many people who feel left out of the game. Who feel they don't belong, and they're about that. And so that's the backdrop here.

COS: Argentinization, or L.A.tization.

Bill Isaacs: Exactly right. Looting and that kind of thing.

COS: So you said it would take two things.

Bill Isaacs: It would take...see I think it takes strange bedfellows. I think it's going to take Muslim clerics and CIA operatives working together as no one would predict. Muslim clerics who don't like Western authority...

COS: I mean they already did, right? But not the authentic ones.

Bill Isaacs: I'm talking about clerics who take a stance that says the West has a real problem and a value system that is fundamentally warped and says the destructiveness that's emerging between our cultures is far more problematic than any judgment I might make about this culture. And that we together must find a way to live in a more realistic mode and a mode that is a higher level of shared sense. The point of strange bedfellows where subcultures ... one can look at the situation and say it's impossible. There's a medieval Islamic that's never going to come into the modern world. They're not up for this – they're not going there. It's like courageous voices from that world that are saying now, actually; many are saying and many more are finding their voices now to say, "Well, we don't agree with what you've got, but where we're going isn't it either."

So we've got a crisis on our hands and we have to figure out how to solve it. We have to figure out how to work together or we're not going to have the choice of solving it. Some will say that, and it will be strange bedfellows – people you would never predict would get together. And why is that important? Because it's bringing subcultures together that are at the moment framed as polar opposites. So one critical element is the strange bedfellows, which opens the containers wider than they would ordinarily be. That's more a kind of grass roots shift, and

we've seen this happen in many circumstances now where management and union actually come together and find common ground. Where cops and ministers and kids find connection, violence goes down... verbal and emotional or physical violence ... whatever it is ... and violations are reduced. Arguably, the energies that are intensely present do not need to be expressed with undue force, which is the meaning of violence – the undue use of force. That there's a container large enough to hold those energies. My friend, Peter Garrett, once said, and I think accurately, that **inquiry and violence cannot co-exist**.

COS: Interesting.

Bill Isaacs: So that's one element.

COS: While listening, it occurred to me that as you were describing the example of the minister and the kids and the police ... in that case the container is as much about kind of creating the conditions for holding the energy as it is about making visible the whole system...

Bill Isaacs: To itself...

COS: To itself – to all the key players, actually. And so it strikes me that talking about 9-11 being a current crisis of the global system, particularly the north-south dimension, that building the container would be about creating that kind of transparency and visibility, right?

X. The Boston Miracle

Bill Isaacs: That's very good. One can imagine ... the Ten-Point Coalition story is very telling on this. This is the story that our friend Reverend Jeffrey Brown works with a number of others in the Ten-Point Coalition in Cambridge and in Boston proper and worked very diligently over many years – seven or eight years – and brought the homicide rate down in a situation that everybody thought was impossible to change.

COS: Tell me that story. How did that happen?

Bill Isaacs: The story is that the homicide rate in 1991 in Boston was around, if my memory serves, around 150 – 92 or 93 of whom were kids under the age of 21. There were 1,100 shootings and these ministers were joking that the only blessing here was that these kids were not very good shots otherwise there would have been more dead. And these are 12-, 13-, 14-, 15-, and 16-year-old children with heavy guns every other night. One hundred and fifty homicides means that almost every other night someone dies. And there are many areas in the city where people were too scared to go including the cops – the cops wouldn't even go. Anyway, there was a crisis, and a child was actually stabbed to death in a church in front of the altar because of a misunderstanding. One child was coming

to visit another who had died in a drive-by shooting and the family inside felt that this young boy was his friend from music class. The gang outside – and there were grief signs from a member of a rival gang – was afraid he was going to go and disrupt the service...[the gang] came in with their guns and shot the church up and as the minister came out of his study, he saw them stabbing this boy to death.. So this produced a kind of much wider turning point in conversation among a series of people of faith. These people met and had press conferences and wrote letters and did all the things that you and me would think of doing when a crisis hits. And in the end, somebody said, six weeks later, after they had been meeting, “The one thing we have not done is actually talked to the kids.”

And somebody said, “Where are the kids?” They’re all on the streets.

So somebody else said, “Well, I’m going to form a street committee. Meet me in front of my house at 10:00 on Friday night, and we’ll walk the streets and we’ll find these kids”

And they did that for many, many weeks initially. And then ultimately, actually, many years. Ten o’clock at night until two in the morning. Initially 14, and then ultimately four black ministers walking the streets. One of the lessons from this story is that they went out into the streets. They did what a minister doesn’t typically do. Typically people wait for the kids to come to them... for their flock to come to them. So they walked the streets and gradually connected with the kids. And then they realized that there was another group of people on the streets from 10:00pm until 2:00am – beside a whole lot of others – which was the gang unit police. Now many people in this country know that black clergy and black ministers and policemen typically don’t get along terribly well. And in Boston it’s worse because many of the cops are white and Irish and the clergy in this case were black. And there’s a whole history of animosity between those two...

COS: Collective tapes...

Bill Isaacs: Collective tapes – among those people, exactly. So when the ministers got phone calls from the cops saying, “Was that you?” and “What were you doing out there?” and “Can we talk?” there was a reaching out and a connection to a common problem that really began to make a difference. And gradually they found common cause in trying to reduce the violence.

And what moved in that circumstance was very powerful because gradually the cops and the ministers and then the kids were included in conversations and they began talking together in ways that were really quite powerful. The district attorneys got involved. The parole officers –none of them, it turned out, were talking either. The street workers, the social workers, the principals, the school police. And as soon as, as Jeffrey puts it, there was a new kind of table formed in which... when a child would get in trouble at a school, instead of locking them up, they would call this community and say, “Well, what do you know about this

person? What's needed for them?" Instead of throwing them into the system, they'd start to do some care and prevention.

They also discovered that the ministers' mental models for what it meant to do the work they were doing had to change dramatically. They also had to give up the notion that all people can be saved. Or, rather, all can be saved, but some of them need a prison ministry. And the cops initially would look at bunch of kids on a street corner and say, "There's 30 gang members." And the minister would say, "No, there's 12 gang members – 18 want to be's and two hard core. Get rid of the hard core and everything else will change."

And the cops did not have the fine-grained awareness that the ministers did. So these were parts of the system that had information for each other but they weren't willing to share it. Now they did. The homicide rate in '91-'92 was, as I said, about 150; by 1994, it was zero. And it stayed that way. It's gone back up to around a dozen or so. It's a 50-year low. It's been relatively sustained.

COS: So that was in Boston or in Cambridge?

Bill Isaacs: In Boston – crime rates and homicide rates have come down all over the place and in some cities it's been more because of what some people would call the imposition of a police state and a great deal more tension between police and community. In other cases, it's more like Boston. This has been called "the Boston miracle."

COS: You mentioned round table – side...

Bill Isaacs: It was more of a spirit, but what was very interesting was that these ministers – who were 4 and then 3 – had very compelling stories that give great illustration to the whole notion of collective leadership. First, they decided they wanted to be a collective – not a single point of leadership – but a group. They wanted to model a different kind of leadership from the very beginning.

Also, if you know something about African-American history in this country and political leaders, you know that black leaders tend to get killed when they take points of leadership. So they decided they wanted a group in case one of them got killed...the stakes were, in a sense, a great deal higher than most of us would ordinarily think. They met and talked together quite deeply and regularly and saw that the relationship among them was a kind of microcosm of the wider pattern. They realized that they were very different. They are all black ministers, but from very different states. So there's quite a wide range of diversity, actually, among them. And very unusual...

COS: The core group represented the diversity of the whole...

Bill Isaacs: Not all the diversity of the whole... and this would be kind of what we've begun to discover which is they had enough of it to catch the thing moving. In some respects, the core group that really formed was a pattern of relationship among cops, kids and ministers. And that that began to be enough of what we call a core sponsorship container to carry the microcosmic pattern that could have enough what we call requisite variety to begin to exert an influence on – there was enough complexity to mirror and begin to govern the situation as opposed to be governed by it.

And this is the big choice. Is there enough requisite variety at the core? Requisite variety means sufficient matching order of complexity to meet and manage the complexity around. If there's not, what people tend to do is lop off complexity and deny it. If there is, you can absorb it and essentially issue a pattern of governance into it. It doesn't mean control it, but it means provide direction for it.

So anyway, they met and worked together and that gradually brought many people together in all kinds of unusual ways. Initially the cops were feeling quite subversive. So many of the cops – who were then gang unit line cops, were saying, "If we told our colleagues, our other police colleagues that we were working with ministers, they would have said we were out of our minds. You can't do that." Interestingly now, many of these police – they've risen through the ranks and are faculty leadership of the police. So they're much more open now.

So there are many stories that one could go into here and it may be reasonable for you to get an interview with Jeff at some stage and hear his own – it's a stunning story. There's a Harvard Business School case about this now and all kinds of stuff. But what's interesting for Jeff was, in part, to read my book and to say, **"Well, we've been creating different kinds of conversation." That was what the essence of this whole thing was and that's led us on this journey of beginning to talk about what's the technology of introducing and producing profound change.** How do you bring about pattern of collective leadership and change? The fun in some sense is to articulate a way of introducing that kind of pattern into large systems.

XI. The Metamorphosis of the Container to the Grail

COS: The notion of container seems to me highly appropriate when dealing with quadrant two type of conversations, but maybe less appropriate when dealing with quadrant three or four conversations. In those cases, when entering into fields of generative dialogue, the Heideggerian term of *Lichtung*, clearing, seems to be more appropriate. *Lichtung*, clearing, literally means lightening; the word means light, which is a space that emanates from luminosity. So it's almost the inversion of a container. It's emerging from that light source or luminosity rather than a space that is being contained from outside. I wonder what you ...when you track

that through your own experiences of dialogic transformation and collective leadership whether you also have had this experience?

Bill Isaacs: Yes, this is the paradox around the word container, which is that: it's resisted in one, useful in two, and transcended in three. And it's sort of a...

COS: And inverted in four...

Bill Isaacs: And it radiates light you could say – yes the point of radiation; I think that's right. I think that the – if you think of it as an arc or a grail out of which intense energy emerges; they're much more interesting through those kinds of patterns.

COS: Interesting that you mention that term. So how come that – so I'm pulling out here a paper from Bill and the one sentence that I underlined is when describing what really is the essence of collective leadership. What you say is, "There are not many examples of leadership in this sense. King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table come to mind. Can you say more about that?"

Bill Isaacs: It's a wonderful story – or many stories. There are really two threads in the story and I have a friend (Diana Durham) who has just written a book called *The Return of King Arthur* which tries to go into the nature of the Arthur relationship to collective leadership and so we've talked for many hours about these things. But there are really – Arthur's story is important in part because it's a myth that – it's a story that seems to have immediate application now and it's a story that seems to point to our age. It seems to point to a future age. Arthur was the once from the future king.

COS: Arthur was...

Bill Isaacs: Arthur was the once and future king.

COS: What does that mean?

Bill Isaacs: Well, Arthur represents the coming together of the secular king of the divine kings – the coming together of divine authority in a common place and the convening of an order that is meant to be present on earth. So what's interesting is that there are pictures of the round table. In many of the pictures the tables are shaped like a donut so there's a whole in the center. So in the center is the chalice – the Holy Grail floating in the center. So the image – it's a very feminine image. The reception point of the sacred in this is feminine space. But with knights circling it. The male and female principles, you could say, coming together and there's a kind of charge in that you can still feel the kind of currents – kind of excitement around – the king who sits at the table with all the other knights that sit in a circle. There are very few knights or leaders today who will shape their table in a circle. Most of them are long and narrow and there's one guy at the end

– usually the guy. The notion of a round table is not thought of as a powerful symbol. Arthur is an interesting character. Arthur inadvertently stumbles on to Excalibur – the sword in the stone – the stone representing the stony awareness – the stony consciousness. And Arthur – **the myth was that the person, who took the sword out of the stone, out of the stuck structures of the subconscious if you will, was the king.** So Arthur took it and, boom, he’s the king. And Arthur was the – getting our power – reclaiming our power from the stuckness of our own subconscious is one part of this story. So Arthur actually has several threads through it, but the most exciting part of it in some ways is the emergence of this collective and the dynamics that it reveals.

COS: How does it emerge in that story? He pulls out the sword and then what happens?

Bill Isaacs: He becomes the king and calls the round table. Actually I think it was Merlin who created the table. The magician – my memory of the myth is not as accurate as it might be, we can check – creates the table.

COS: Arthur convenes the table...

Bill Isaacs: Yes, and the most interesting point is that Merlin who educates Arthur never gets a seat at the table. For all those aspiring magicians out there wondering why the leaders you serve don’t want you at their table, it’s because magicians never get to sit at the table. They always advise from the side. That’s how it goes. Get used to it if you’re a magician.

COS: Is that how you would see your role?

Bill Isaacs: Well, I think it’s changing actually.

COS: From where to where?

Bill Isaacs: See the Arthur myth – what’s happening now – the myth is unfinished. All the stories of the myth – and they’re told by several different authors in several different countries. Some authors finish them, but most of them are not finished. The suggestion is that we’re living in the age where the story finishes.

So to understand the story a little bit more, Arthur is betrayed by Lancelot who falls in love with Arthur’s wife and Arthur banishes Lancelot to France, where he’s from. Meanwhile Mordread – fear of death – who is Lancelot’s half brother threatens the throne and is the sort of evil brother and bastard brother, basically. The only way that Arthur could defeat Mordread was with Lancelot, but Lancelot can’t do it. So there’s a betrayal at the core, which leads to the downfall and the collapse of the thing.

Arthur, his last act –so that’s another lesson – so there’s lessons in the story, not just the dynamics of the collective. There’s a range of symbols here. Just to jump

to one – the collapse of the core – at least the collapse of the kingdom. The betrayal happens at the center; it doesn't happen outside. The container, which is that circle, that round table, holds the energy or fails to hold energy. Now the myth may be saying something different because the collapse may actually be, in a funny way, the right thing. Like who knows? What ends up happening is that Arthur's last instruction to his knight is to take Excalibur and throw it into the lake – to take the power of the sword and just throw it into the lake and as Arthur's sword goes into the lake, a woman's hand comes out of the lake, captures the sword and goes back down into the lake. In other words, the power is returned to the subconscious.

COS: To Mother Nature.

Bill Isaacs: Well, to Mother Nature, but to the mass – the collective – the mass consciousness. Because the emergence of the next Arthur is the collective emergence. I think that's the gift of the Arthur myth, and I think that's the unfinished story. So in that sense, Merlin and the knights, and the king and the lover all sit at the table.

XII. Parsifal's Journey

COS: What keeps the integrity of the table and what keeps that deeper source moving?

Bill Isaacs: It's always moving; it's always alive. I think there's another part of Arthur that needs to be brought in here. There are two main threads. There's the story of Arthur and then there's the story of the grail.

COS: What's that story?

Bill Isaacs: The quest for the Holy Grail, which the knights supposedly went on, has a central figure, a character named Parsifal. Parsifal means fool, but it also means pierce the veil. And piercing the veil of blindness, or ignorance rather. **Parsifal is the fool who takes on the most destructive and difficult knight and defeats him and is knighted immediately by Arthur.** Parsifal ends up in the grail castle where it turns out there is an alien king – the wounded fisher king – who's wounded in his thigh. His generativeness, in other words, is wounded in the land and dying and – wastelands are chronic of this.

It turns out there is another king. There's the wounded fisher king who is the kind of evil king – the kind of ego at large – Stalin. And I think this brings us to Hitler. With the wounded king, carrying the kind of the shadow energy of the land. And as long as there's – what the myth says is that there is a grail king. There's another king; there's three kings really. There's Arthur, and there's the grail king, and then there's the wounded fisher king. And the grail king represents the kind of holy space – sacred king – sacred order. It turns out that Parsifal, first time he goes to the grail council believes that all the maidens are furious with him. They

say, “You didn’t ask.” Well, what didn’t you ask? It turns out that the purpose of going to the grail council is to ask the question, “Whom does the grail serve?” That, in some sense, is a representation of what it takes to keep this table together. And it’s what I said to the eight-year-old at the beginning.

COS: There are two versions of that question. The other one is, “What ails you?”

Bill Isaacs: That’s true. But listen...listen...listen to what you love most. Listen to what you’re here to serve and bring it forth. And if you don’t, there’s trouble. It turns out that as you become conscious of these things, there’s a suppressed version of one of the gospels. The Gospel according to Thomas. Have you heard of this? There are a number of gospels that didn’t make it into the bible. The gospel according to Thomas being one of the most well-known ones.

And in that, supposedly, Jesus said something to the effect of, *that which you bring forth will transform you and that which you fail to bring forth will destroy you*. Which was I guess a little heavy for the edited version. It’s the same point.

In other words, if you fail to bring forth what you love most, it’s like it stifles; it festers, then it implodes. The value of the collective is that, in one sense, initially it can bring forth what’s present. It can activate and remind and provide a kind of resonant field in which it’s possible for me to ask my questions and hear my own answers. Later on – so that’s like the initiatory phases – later on it’s a process of continuous refinement of what’s emerging. Refinement and articulation of it. So the whole nurtures the center and the center nurtures the whole. And I think that’s the sort of more mature version of it. Learning how to operate in this way, it’s a very different matter than my telling others what to do or something. This is a process that requires muscles that I think are basically undeveloped and underdeveloped in all of us. And yet are being called upon now.

COS: Taking into account the other part of the story, actually, you could say Arthur represents the exoteric, and Parsifal the more esoteric context of the grail....

Bill Isaacs: You understand, absolutely.

COS: Now taking the other – the invisible part into account, what then is it that enables the circle to link to that – to the source? I mean to give one example, that kind of seems of relevance here that Parsifal’s journey is the journey of modern man that starts by messing it all up.

Bill Isaacs: Being a fool; being a dumb fool.

COS: Then after you hit the wall, then you start to become aware and the journey starts. That is the story of modern man – of us. And then he goes through all the levels of education and learning—and yet at the heart of his journey is to let go of all the rules and norms that society required him to emulate and to follow that which is

arising from the deepest point within, what arises through the opening of his heart.

Bill Isaacs: When I was younger, I heard, I saw through some of the things I was reading – they were intellectually pointing me to a condition. They were saying, there is a world – there's a place to stand that's clear. And I felt it to be – I kind of got this sense – oh yeah, there's some place. Well, walking across this green one day, it hit me. It was almost like a voice in myself that said to me: You must be that. You must relinquish everything that would hold you to the world as it now looks and be that in that transcendent place. That's your destiny; there's no other place to be. Be in that – well, in the language of the time, was to kind of be a – in Carlos Castaneda language – a warrior. To be fully released into a condition that was completely uncentered from the ordinary assumptions and models and connections.

And I remember thinking at the time, “Who said that?” And wait a minute, I hardly even got – I haven't gotten to have any of it yet, why do I have to give it all up? I was like, this isn't even fair. I have big plans. I have medical school to go to and I have all this stuff to do. The point was that the compulsion that makes one act a fool to give up the outer journey – the outer ambition and pursue a track – to go off into the so-called dark forest. To go off the path. In some people's experience, maybe it's gradual. In mine, it was like, boom. And it was immediately clear that I had no choice whatsoever.

Now it took me I would think, conservatively, 20 years to come to terms with that reality. To come to terms with the notion that I had to come to terms with that intensity. To actually begin, and there's a maturation process. I think in some respects, the foolishness – it looks foolish because what got Parsifal was Parsifal saw knights going by when he was young. And he was struck. I need to be that. I mean I think...

COS: What was that in your story?

Bill Isaacs: It was more internal. It was more a realization that the books that I was reading were describing a condition that was *my* intensity. It wasn't some other person. And I literally remember the spot on the commons – the place – the directional corner – I remember the spot where I actually had the experience. It was a literal place – exactly. Very powerful in some sense of the first moment of awakening.

COS: What was your age then?

Bill Isaacs: Nineteen-ish. I might have been 20.

COS: So if you track your journey from a 20-year-old to now, so what was that – what was the major transition point that helped you to become aware of who you are? What does it take to sustain that current?

Bill Isaacs: I think I knew all along. I knew it from even earlier that I had something to do. I didn't see the full path, but I saw steps. For instance, I knew early on that I needed to put myself in the circumstance. I would say now a container in which my ego could cook down a bit – could dissolve. Where I could strengthen in some senses my own depth of understanding without necessarily knowing what was to come. I could feel that I was meant to survive in a certain way, but I wasn't ready. But what I needed to do is I needed to go find a few years and literally get out of my mind – my intellectual state – the condition I had grown up in. And I needed to go and, in my case, literally shovel chicken manure for six months. And do a range of other things. And get – toughen up, actually. And several years' worth of it, and it greatly – I had to put my ambitions and my impatience on hold unless something burned up.

And I did it as much as I could bear at the time. I probably could have done a little bit more, but then went on and did a Ph.D. and then kind of sprung out of all that in beginning a doctorate and had to kind of escape, which took forever. That – I think partly because I was conflicted actually about whether to be in a mode of relinquishing all of that or pursuing it. In some respects for my journey, it's become pretty clear that those two things need to come together and my challenge in some way was to integrate.

Now it seems like the challenge is simpler – more clear. It's more a matter in this moment – the challenges are different. So the question you asked, what does it take? What does it take to sustain the individual current and the collective current? **And of course, the most important thing one can say I think about this is that to follow anyone else in this regard is death. The only way you could ever know the answer to that question is to follow yourself and become a leader of yourself. And that any root that suggests otherwise is a false one.**

And that what is fundamentally important to hear is not a challenge about becoming a leader of others. **It's becoming a leader of one's self.** That kind of mastery does put you in position to participate the mature way in the collective. And the collective will provide you with a resonant space to awaken you to what you need to do at first. But you're not really yet able to provide – participate in the more mature condition until you make this step of yourself.

XIII. Shadow work and the transformation of memory

COS: An important element of that that you began to describe as part of the conversation – so the journey of the kind of ego involves a crossing of a threshold and the crossing of the threshold is represented by meeting your shadow.

Bill Isaacs: Well, meeting your shadow is a part of it. It depends on how you understand shadows. I mean, I think this domain has been overstated actually. Bringing your own – to respond to a call – to the question, “Whom do I serve?” – to respond to the call to serve a larger order – to actually become conscious of being and simply, naturally part of that larger order equally calls up. The first call is to that, actually. One has resonance to that. It is the – it turns out though that the denial of that – well I’m not sure how to bring out the full sort of dimensions of this or even what they are, but as one seeks to embody what one hears in a sense, one meets all kinds of limitations and shadows. The requirement, in part, is to come to terms with all of that, in order to fully live out.

Now people have made the shadow pursuit the foreground. I think it’s background. I think it’s important, but I don’t think it’s the full story. I think the fuller story, if you will, is the steady embodiment and abiding in the true place in oneself, which will call out. But doing that in life, it will call up all the forces and factors that have not – it’s like a magnetic force. There are certain things that are resonant with that and there are other things that are repelled by that. It will call up everything that’s not part of that. And in those moments, one has a choice. What do you serve? The shadow or the truth? Or you could say the truth of the shadow – the energy – in some respects, what do you believe about yourself. Do you believe that when you’re feeling bad that you are bad? We’re constantly given, particularly when we rise up a little bit in our lives, we kind of take a little power; take a little responsibility. It’s like the next day, we have noticed, something hits you. It makes this big cling and then boom, it’s like your wife yells at you or your kid falls down or you get mad at someone crossing the street. It’s like the return. That is literally the returning cycle.

And \ if we’re conscious, it’s in those moments that you reiterate and repeat and put in to that circumstance that the energy of the stance you’ve assumed or you fall back into the same loop and essentially determine that you have to go that whole pattern again. That’s the transformation of memory. So there’s...

COS: The transformation of memory is...

Bill Isaacs: The meeting of the returning energy. It’s like you send a charge into your subconscious. Sooner or later it pops back up. And then the question is – it’s almost like saying, all right, did you really mean it? Or are you full of it? Can you stay awake in the natural processes of purification? You could think of this as leadership in the sense of the purification of consciousness because as you take steps in this way, then things are stirred up. Now you could say that as you’re leading a life that is moving in this direction or beginning to hold containers that carry it. What ends up happening is things – now we’re finding this among a group of us working together. It’s as we begin to come into a more aligned pattern, it’s like a seed pattern. It’s like the seed is increasing, in our case, in this phase of development. We think of it as a seed. The plants may start to grow but the full thing ain’t here yet. There’s a great deal of intensity that starts to move in

the seed. You look around and you think it's just this little seed. It's like this huge amount moving in it. Because it's preparing for something much vaster, and the question is, "Will that cycle hold or will it be thwarted? Can it hold?"

So there's this sort of process of transformation that is... I mean in some sense, this is sort of my language for it, **but this is invisible leadership and you may or may not get payments for this. This is not really about that, but it is what it's missing on the planet. And you could say that if no one does what I'm talking about, and then I think we're sunk.** Because every pattern will roll and they will roll right over us actually.

So who's to say which person and which circumstance will have the right kind of energy moving to allow something powerful to happen? The wonder of 9-11 was watching this remarkable outpouring of generosity and creativity, but does it last? Well, no, because it's a stimulus but it's not self-generative yet. So there's a kind of – one can be thankful for it without being cynical, but the trick is to activate this generative conscious awareness in, I think now – I think that what's happening actually is that we're being compelled.

My sense is that containers are forming where people have done enough work – they've done enough work in themselves to realize there isn't some great leader out there that's going to show up and tell them what to do. They are it. And while you may not know all the factors, you'll teach them to yourself, which is the point I made before. To follow an external source is death.

XIV. What is the Excalibur that's presented to us?

COS: So coming back to the King Arthur story. That story began with Arthur finding the sword, Excalibur, seeing it, connecting with it, and pulling it out. So what is the sword? What is the Excalibur that's presented to us? How would you share that with an eight-year-old?

Bill Isaacs: For a child it depends on their history as to what you say and when you say it. But the Excalibur presented to you, I would say, has to do with claiming your power, your birthright. This story implies a distinct moment of awakening, a break with the habits of the past, the habits of separation. Today I think it is possible that this break need not be so severe. The sword is out; it never gets put back in this time.

I do not think it is possible to completely avoid the crisis of coming conscious, that is, moving out of a state of youthful bliss, through some kind of breakdown and disappointment about the nature of the love that was supposed to be present for you, to then emerge into greater maturity and awareness. There's a way in which the natural process of living on this earth is such that we do crystallize and get rigid and lose awareness – the grail myth tells this story -- that most people have a memory of being in the grail castle. This magical transformative place.

And people get wounded by their circumstances. Their generativeness is wounded. And in some respects, you can see that the journey that many people are going through is a quest at one level to recreate or rediscover that – to find their generativeness again. They know they’ve lost it – their defensiveness gives it away. The hunger is to discover it.

I’m saying two things at once. I have a hope that it’s possible to educate – to invite patterns of education containers basically – where the memory never gets fully lost – where it doesn’t submerge. So while I think it’s not possible to be on this planet in this day and not have a kind of a fall at some level – a loss of consciousness, I think it doesn’t have to be as severe as it may have been at one point. I think there’s a necessary muscle-building step here, in coming conscious, for other reasons, that we don’t have time to go into. But I think there’s also a – it comes back to that story – **love what you love. And ultimately take back your authority. Dare to own your own authority. And author your experience. And dare to feel what that feels like: dare to love that. There’s not much more one can say about that.** What can provide a circumstance in which one – to someone’s highest ability models it and displays it and ultimately it’s each one’s choice. This is not an unknown thing to anyone, actually. **It requires courage.** And courage is a nice word, you know, because it’s got the word “cour” – heart. It also has the words “our age”.

XV. The Blind Spot of Dialogue

COS: Great, I love that! Bill, looking at the whole field of dialogue that has evolved over the past years and decades, what do you consider the blind spot of that community of people? What’s the blind spot of dialogue?

Bill Isaacs: There are probably three. One was – in some sense a response to an earlier pattern of blind spots and I haven’t really described that very fully – but I’m thinking partly here about our resolution of one of them through our generative spiral model and the processes of living change. So an earlier blind spot, in some sense, was the problem of **collective action**. It’s like, quite simply, you’re doing a lot of talking; but have you done anything lately? Well, what have you gone and done? So you’re thinking spiritually together – terrific! But people are still dying in Afghanistan, buddy. What good is that? So there’s this sort of – one piece of this sort of blind spot was that. And that remains a kind of edge for people. I think it’s partly a blind spot that people think that dialogue is talking and they don’t see it as doing something about thinking. So one dimension of it is the emergence of collective action.

I think that the bigger blind spot in some ways now, though, is the problems of **inclusion**. The creation of language systems and cultural separation – in other words failing to see that certain patterns of thinking – even the one that I’ve just described itself will exclude certain people from the reality that claims to be inclusive. You know people feel quite alienated by a pattern of this kind of talk.

Like, “I don’t see myself in all that.” They won’t say it that way; they won’t even say anything actually. They just won’t include themselves. So I think there’s a whole kind of multiple languages for all of this that fit the multiple subcultures of it that will need to emerge for whatever it is we’re talking about now and I don’t know what they are. I’ve seen hints of it. That’s probably one.

I think another big blind spot is the use of power.

COS: Can you say more about that?

Bill Isaacs: Well, I think ultimately this work is about the **transformation of power**. And many people who are drawn to it are not very good at power. They’re better at meaning and affect.

COS: What is power?

Bill Isaacs: Well in this case, I’m using it more as a language system and a way of operating that thinks and works more with efficacy in taking action than with sense making. I mean this is where I think – well, actually, this is a domain where we’ve started to experiment a lot more. How do we create different patterns of governance in the institutions that we have, when we have inherited kind of Stalinist or feudalistic systems in our great democracies and in our massive institutions that have larger GNP’s than some countries and that are anything but democratic inside them? I mean they’re downright fascist in some cases. What’s with that, as the kids would say?

COS: Pre-1989, pre-1945...

Bill Isaacs: It’s Middle Ages– quite literally. The great noble king and the nobles around that fight the inner court; it’s medieval.

COS: Bill, aren’t these the real dominating forces today on earth? I mean, aren’t we just kidding ourselves with all the talk about dialogue and everything we talked about the past two hours? Aren’t we just kidding ourselves into some shiny intellectual illusions?

Bill Isaacs: But I’d say that many intellectuals would be quite scared by what we’re talking about here. This is not an intellectual endeavor. In the sense that the actual manifestation of alignment – of true alignment among people – one will find that at the core of any successful entity anywhere and equally one will find its lack in any entity that’s failing – political, community, corporate, whatever. These are principles about how power actually moves. In some sense what we’re talking about here is rediscovering a kind of ancient machinery. I love this analogy in some ways. It’s kind of like ancient machinery that is actually us that’s been dormant maybe for centuries, maybe longer. And that what we’re doing is breathing life into it. And that this is – that one sees echoes of this all

through the street. The power of the collective – you could say that an example of this is the movement – the night of the ascension after Jesus left earth the disciples and a group of others had some time in an “upper room” – which is a symbol, ultimately, of a high place of awareness – and power started to move. And they proved utterly unable to hold the power. Well, I mean I think that’s the story of human beings. And I think that kind of power, when it actually moves, will make all the difference. So in some respects the blind spot is the difference between the talk and the action. The reality of this versus the theory of it, but I think we have to start somewhere. This will become attractive to business leaders – they’ll say, “Well, I’ll get better results.” Well, you will or your institution might disintegrate, too, you never know, watch out. You never know quite what you’re playing with here. But that said, I think that the institutions that human beings have created – in some senses it’s all here – it’s just not working yet. It’s like something’s missing that could let it all work.

COS: Which is?

Bill Isaacs: Well, this coming together at the core. I think it would rearrange the substance, but I don’t think that it would completely ditch it – I don’t think life ever does that – I think it builds from what we have. So I don’t think there’s going to be necessarily a kind of blinding flash and it all kind of goes away. I think we’ve got what we’ve got but I think that what’s been missing are certain critical pieces – the capstone. I think we *are* putting that in place. And I think each one of us, to whatever degree, has a role to play. And I think discovering that – realizing that – is in the act of collective leadership.

COS: Thank you.

Bill Isaacs: You’re welcome.