Chapter One

Introduction

Beginning the Conversation

On Understanding—

Understanding, writes Hans-Georg Gadamer, is a fundamental
endowment of humans, one that appears to distinguish us not only
from domesticated pets but also from even our dolphin and pri-
mate cousins. Efforts to explain understanding almost universally
rely on the construct "linguisticality" or "language." As Gadamer
puts it, "above all, [understanding] takes place by way of language
and the partnership of conversation [1989, 3]."

—John Stewart, *Language as Articulate Contact*

Roots as the Wellspring of Life—

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized
need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human
being has roots by virtue of his [or her] real, active and natural
participation in the life of a community which preserves in living
shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particu-
lar expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one,
in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, con-
ditions of birth, profession and social surroundings. Every human
being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him [or her]
to draw wellnigh the whole of his [or her] moral, intellectual and
spiritual life by way of the environment of which he [or she] forms
a natural part.

—Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*

The aim of this interpretive work, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationships*, is to understand the contributions of a number of authors who have written about dialogic approaches to interpersonal communication, linking some of their central ideas and insights to our historical era. The writers we discuss have in common a dialogic voice. The concept of a dialogic voice suggests, for us, the ability to meet life in this historical moment and seek to uplift the human spirit, propelling us toward what Seyla Benhabib calls more "respectful" interaction with the *other* (1992, 38), even in painful circumstances. Our communicative task becomes increasingly complex in our attempt to respond with respect and sensitivity to multicultural perspectives. This work invites the reader into an ongoing conversation about human dialogue in a changing historical era.

An Overview

Part I: "Interpersonal Praxis: From Communicative Crisis to Narrative Action" examines our contemporary moment. Part I outlines the philosophical focus of this interpretive work, calling attention to the problematic nature of unreflective cynicism in daily interpersonal communication. We suggest the wholesale use of cynicism has contributed to interpersonal rootlessness; we offer "historicality" as an alternative to the therapeutic/relational perspective on interpersonal communication. We assess our contemporary era, a time we equate with the lack of a collective guiding moral story. Disenchanted communicators make it difficult for dialogic voices to be heard—such persons spend more time lamenting the lack of an ideal than listening to and meeting the common sense questions of the historical situation. We ask, *"How might dialogic voices invite civil interpersonal exchange, not in quest of a theoretical ideal, but in the historical moment of routine cynicism and lack of metanarrative direction?"* In summary, Part I includes chapter 1, *"Introduction: Beginning the Conversation"*; chapter 2, *"Voices of Cynicism and Hope"*; chapter 3, *"Historicality and Presence"*; and chapter 4, *"Common Ground: Interpersonal Narrative."*

Part II: "Interpersonal Voices" outlines the work of scholars speaking in dialogic voices about human communication and discusses historical questions that may have prompted their dialogic

work. Section 1, "Narrative Decline: Interpersonal Dialogue and Self" (chapters 5 and 6), examines how Carl Rogers (1980) and Abraham Maslow (1971, 1954/1970a) responded to an era in which previously accepted narratives were questioned and critiqued. Their answer to that historical moment was the dialogic self. Rogers emphasizes trust in the organismic self, while Maslow places trust in the actualizing self as an alternative to narrative decline and confusion. Section 2, "Narrative Confrontation: Interpersonal Dialogue and Crisis" (chapters 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11), outlines how Martin Buber (1966b), Carol Gilligan (1982), Paulo Freire (1970/1974; Shor and Freire, 1987), Sissela Bok (1978/1979, 1989), and Viktor Frankl (1959/1974) demonstrate concrete ways in which dialogue is necessary in the midst of crisis-ridden environments. Their answer in the historical moment was dialogue in response to crisis. Buber writes in response to hatred propelled by ethnic and nationalistic impulses. Gilligan offers a response to the crisis of muted voices based on gender. Freire responds to literacy denied, resulting in oppressed voices. Bok issues a response to the ethical crisis of value disagreement in postmodern discourse. Frankl responds to narrative destruction resulting in lack of meaning. Their dialogic voices were heard over the chaos of crisis. Section 3, "Narrative Construction: Interpersonal Dialogue and Story" (chapters 12 and 13), describes the work of Robert Bellah (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985, 1991) and Nel Noddings (1984), who point to the importance of hope in the midst of an unclear sense of moral direction. Their answer to our historical moment is dialogue and story. Bellah suggests a nonpsychological community-based story. Noddings points to the story connections of fragmented lives. In short, we explore dialogue propelled by three distinct metaphors—self, crisis, and story. None of the authors ignore self, crisis, or story, but each tends to punctuate one of the emphases with greater vigor in understanding human dialogue.

We associate each author with the historical commonsense question that seems to propel his or her writing. We ask, "what common sense questions did the author knowingly or unknowingly address in the given historical moment of theory construction?" We enter dialogue with the authors with a bias—we ask how each responds to the notion of metanarrative decline, either in implicit or explicit form. Clearly, one could see different questions that propelled the authors, if a different interpretive bias (other than the question of metanarrative decline) guided the inquiry.

In addition, a summary of some of the major concepts compris-

ing the author's work is included. Finally, we respond to the question, "What elements of a given theory seem particularly important as we develop a view of interpersonal communication from a perspective of dialogic civility that meets our contemporary moment of routine cynicism and the decline and/or collapse of metanarrative agreement?"

Part III: "Dialogic Civility" addresses components of dialogic civility as an alternative to interpersonal communication issues of technique-driven cynicism and interpersonal rootlessness in our present historical moment. We offer components from the previous chapters that suggest the greatest potential for the interpretive task of understanding routine cynicism and interpersonal rootlessness driven by a lack of moral stories.

This final chapter keeps hope alive in a narrative of dialogic civility, concerned with the welfare of the common good—"us." Dialogue (interpersonal discussion focused on the "other," person, text, and historical moment) and civility (bringing respect for person, topic, and historical moment to the public domain) frame our view of dialogic civility. Diversity of persons, philosophies, races, religions, and ideas call us to celebrate difference. Impulses of dialogic civility encourage grace toward difference and move us to seek points of common ground within our present historical moment.

Horizon of Significance

A number of terms are central to this interpretive work. We point below to their horizon of significance or general use within the text. These terms provide commonplaces for discussion of dialogic civility as a needed narrative background for daily interpersonal interaction.

a. Practice is engaged in an unreflective manner and in routine action.

b. Praxis requires reflective integration of theory and action.

c. Metaphor is a term whose characteristics exemplify and point us poetically and indirectly to meaningful understanding beyond the symbol itself.

d. Narrative begins with a speech act that is tested by people and competing world views, then is fashioned into a story

with main characters, a history, and a direction; a story becomes a narrative only when it is corporately agreed upon and no longer the product of an individual person.

e. Metanarrative is an implicitly and uniformly agreed-upon public virtue structure that functions as a universal standard.

f. Metanarrative decline is the gradual awareness of lack of agreement on virtue structures that many people no longer consider responsive to the historical moment.

h. Interpersonal communication, as we limit it to dialogic civility, is shaped by dialogue between persons, appropriately connected to the historical moment of interaction. Interpersonal communication includes both intimate and public discourse. The former is tied to agreement on communication in the private domain and the latter is key in an era of diversity and difference. While our use does not exclude private intimate discourse, we focus our discussion on the public domain of interpersonal communication.

Dialogic civility is used in a twofold fashion. First, as a metaphor that points to the importance of public respect in interpersonal interaction. And, second, when such a metaphor is agreed upon by a large number of communicative partners it begins to take on the character of an implicit background narrative for interpersonal communication.

The Conceptual Key

This book-length series of interpretive essays points to dialogic civility as one narrative background commitment that might offer guidance in an era of narrative confusion. Much work on interpersonal communication concentrates on the foreground issues of how we might communicate with one another. This book assumes a much different focus; exploring the why for beginning an interpersonal exchange with another person.

Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationships is a story calling for a narrative background to undergird daily interpersonal action. Concepts of cynicism, historicality, praxis, and dialogic civility are the main characters in

this story. These concepts act as main characters, appearing throughout the text, weaving continuity and meaning into our story that calls for a public narrative of dialogic civility in this historical moment of routine cynicism and narrative confusion.

This work deliberately brings together the hope of dialogic voices and the cries of cynicism. As suggested in *Dialogic Education: Conversation about Ideas and between Persons*, our task is to embrace contraries, offering a view of life that avoids undue optimism and is simultaneously guided by a realistic and enduring sense of hope:

> Hope and disappointment compose a sort of practical philosophy that calls for an education that can make a difference while offering a realistic warning that pain and disappointment will need to be met and dealt with creatively along the way. Caring is not just something that emerges spontaneously. It can and should be part of the practical education on a campus or department. When Aristotle detailed the importance of a practical philosophy, he was concerned about the education of virtues. The virtue of caring that embraces both hope and disappointment is fundamental to dialogic education. . . . Dialogic education works with a dialectic understanding of caring. Somewhere between the extremes of undue optimism and too much focus on difficulty and disappointment rests an education that prepares us for lifelong learning. (Arnett 1992/1997c, 113)

We invite you to enter into a conversation about what we consider to be a significantly needed task—providing hope for dialogic voices with the conviction that the cynics' singular world view must be met head on, not ignored. We are convinced Martin Buber (1966b) was correct: "According to the logical conception of truth only one of two contraries can be true, but in the reality of life as one lives it they are inseparable" (111). Life is best lived in the unity of contraries. We must temper unreflective cynicism with a sense of hope so a background commitment of dialogic civility can propel interpersonal communication and not be lost in our confused and disrupted historical moment.

We offer dialogic civility as a metaphor that reminds us of respect and possibly as a public narrative background that propels us toward the other in an action of respect. Perhaps our ability to

work together interpersonally in an age of diversity may depend on dialogic civility becoming an agreed upon minimal background narrative structure that guides our communication together. From metaphor to narrative, we invite the reader into a story about dialogic civility.