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How Does Interdisciplinary Work Get Done?

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INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK CAN GET DONE AND very well too—witness the work of this group. From my experience with this and other efforts at the Institute, I would like to make some observations on how it happens. I feel that the personal reference is justified because I believe that successful interdisciplinary work is based primarily on the participants undergoing personal change. Since none of us is all that willing to change beliefs and viewpoints, perhaps we should look at what softens people up enough to allow them to change.

The first essential is a healthy respect for the problem at hand. As a physician, I am quite accustomed to working with experts from other disciplines. Only I call it asking for a consultation, not interdisciplinary work. I do not do this out of largeness of character, but because I am scared of error and afraid of doing harm to a patient. That fear usually overrides pride because doctors soon learn how much damage can follow the failure to admit ignorance. If the first requirement is a healthy respect for the problem at hand, then the problems of ethics in the life sciences lend themselves naturally to interdisciplinary work. One must simply stand in awe of any set of issues which have withstood solution since the beginning of recorded time. Before

working in these interdisciplinary groups, I thought that the difficulty was merely that well-established ethical systems or philosophical understandings had not been applied to the issues raised by modern biomedical science and technology. While that may be partly true, to a larger degree it is basic understanding that is lacking. As in other fields, exposure to new challenges has revealed gaps in previous knowledge, insight, and methods of analysis. In other words, it is not merely that we are seeing situations in medicine and the life sciences that are new and unique—to which, for example, Aristotle's *Ethics* have never been applied. Rather, these new things would pose exciting challenges to Aristotle (as only one example) if he were around today. Indeed, I am distressed with my own tradition, Judaism, because I believe Jewish ethicists have not by and large yet understood that we are dealing with situations that are new and unique in the experience of mankind.

If the first requirement for interdisciplinary work is respect for the problem, then I think that the second requirement is a belief that the problem demands solutions. When I call a consultant to see a patient with a puzzling illness, I do not do so solely out of intellectual curiosity. I ask for help because I know that decisions must be made and actions taken. Here again, the similarity to the problem of ethics in medicine and the life sciences is clear. Discovery, invention, and change proceed with consequences good, bad, and who knows what in between. Our disquiet with medicine and science, which for some reason continue to see themselves as "value free," is deepening. There is an urgency here that is pressing despite the fact that the work may go on at this pace for many decades.

These two basic requirements, respect for the problem and an urgency for answers, are necessary, I believe, because of the effect they have on the people who must participate across disciplines. They create a community of interest that, at least for a time, directs the interests and attention of the participants toward the outer need and not so much toward each other and each other's discipline. I know well that attention falters and that side issues may obscure common interest in the challenges, but I also know that the fundamental issues are so compelling that it is

necessary only to raise them again to return common direction to the work.

What is being asked of those who do interdisciplinary research is that they leave the fixed intellectual navigating platforms from which each discipline or specialty views the world. For all its importance, I find that no easy thing. A person is defined, in part, by his conceptions, by the paradigmatic structure of values and beliefs about the world that relates each conception to the other. To ask of someone that he be prepared to call that conceptual structure into question is to ask that he be prepared to give up a piece of himself. People do not hold white-knuckle tight to their frames of reference out of pure reason but because to give up a frame of reference is extremely unsettling. The design of settings in which we do interdisciplinary work and the methods by which it is accomplished must take that potential for anxiety into account. It takes time for people to change their views; they are not changing something external to themselves, rather, they are changing themselves. Personal support is also required, and the best support is the sense that one is among friends and equals.

Therefore, to the requirements of respect for the problem and awareness of its urgency I must add more personal necessities for interdisciplinary research. I cannot emphasize strongly enough my belief that in successful interdisciplinary research, those things that promote change in individuals promote the work.

First among these is, I think, respect for the other participants. I lay aside a bit of myself out of the belief, derived from respect, that the view of the other person will support me even though I have not yet had time to test it myself. It is respect for the physician that enables a patient to do something for his health that he does not want to do, or that threatens injury or discomfort. In the setting of transdisciplinary work, respect arises from several diverse (and sometimes related) characteristics. One is sheer intellectual power: I do not see the problem as that man or woman does, but if someone as intelligent as that believes it to be so, I am forced to re-examine my own belief. Another characteristic often related, although not necessarily so, is depth and breadth of scholarship. Someone who knows his field and its

literature so completely that it has become a part of him also commands my respect for I love learning itself. The personal integrity of a participant may make us accept what he or she says as something not idly come to or lightly held.

At the first meeting I ever attended at the Institute, when I wanted to play tapes of patients' conversations I found myself in direct conflict with the late Henry K. Beecher, M.D., over the lack of written permission for the recordings.¹ The patients had known their conversations were being recorded, and I did not see the necessity for formal permission. Some sharp words ensued, and I left the session angry. At the meeting the next morning, I apologized somewhat reluctantly, as much out of respect for Beecher as from agreement with his point of view. However, I did start getting written permission after that, and by now, I have taken Dr. Beecher's position on a number of occasions. Change is gradual, but the first willingness really to listen may come out of respect.

I may appreciate what another person has to say but I may not respect his discipline. Interdisciplinary efforts do not go well when the participants do not respect each other's disciplines or their methods. Most of us have prejudices against this or that branch of science, against all physicians or some specialties, against all philosophers or some philosophical schools, or against all theologians or some professed beliefs. No seminar, working group, or conference can survive too many participants with such feelings. On the other hand, there is no such group that does not carry some burden of simple prejudice. The solution for the problem of prejudice is, once again, personal respect and the appreciation of the importance of the goals of the work.

Having discussed these personal issues in transdisciplinary research, it seems necessary to mention some specific things that either promote or hold back the work. The first and foremost specific is language: social and professional communities are communities of language. The extent that any of us share the same conceptions or world view, or can come to know that we do, is the extent to which we share a common language. By language, I mean, of course, not merely the same words, but the same meanings and usage.

The problem of jargon is well known, but the meaning of the

