

# Collaboration is Contagious:

The rewards of mutual learning and understanding  
our interdependency

by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

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*“There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that receives it”*

—Edith Wharton



The Messenger: Artist, Natasha Rabin (c)

Given the recent pandemic and the challenges that we will all be facing for a long time to come, there is a new needed paradigm to communicate and take care of each other. I am quite sure you have heard people say to you, “let’s be partners.” How successful have these partnerships been in your life? An alternative to being “partners” is to be “collaborators.” *Collaboration is a shift in perspective; it allows for a process in which any two individuals in the universe can find their relationship by “tuning in to” and*

*“being with” rather than “doing things to each other.”* This framework respects and encourages clear distinctions in our conversations regarding mutual learning and our interdependency, which in turn, can be systemically adjusted and corrected in a beneficial way. This is exemplified by the story of how the Pig and the Chicken were exploring the possibility of forming a partnership to create a ham and egg sandwich. The Chicken had no problem with this proposed partnership; however, the Pig had some strong reservations regarding his personal outcome. When he looked at his dilemma in a larger picture he decided that he desired a more collaborative agreement that would allow for both he and the Chicken to feel comfortable. After expressing his concern, they mutually decided on a final product which was a ham flavored tofu and egg sandwich, now found in your local health food stores.

Nora Bateson describes the benefits of mutual learning through what she calls *“Symmathesy,”* a verb to generate learning contexts through the process of interaction between multiple variables in a living entity.” By emphasizing this process, we can better assess and understand the interrelationships that hold together complex systems. In other words, how nature works and how we can make differences to better balance and collaborate with it (*“Small Arcs of Larger Circles”* 2016, Triarchy Press.)

Lynne McTaggart in her book, *“The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe”*, (2008) explains: *“At our most elemental, we are not a chemical reaction, but an energetic charge. Human beings and all living things are a coalescence of energy in a field of energy connected to every other thing in the world. This pulsating energy field is the central engine of our being and our consciousness, the alpha and omega of our existence.”* It makes sense to explore creative attributes.

A good exercise — to understand how collaboration is contagious — is to close your eyes after rereading and slowly absorbing McTaggart’s quote above. Then, reflect on a dialogue in your life that resulted in a collaborative outcome, and you will be able to see the power of connecting energy. This process can assist you in identifying the qualities that will help result in mutual solutions.

Closing the gap between how you communicate and how you would like to communicate is achieved by adjusting the energy that connects us, which exemplifies the potential of being collaborative, and most importantly, being mutually creative as our friends, the Pig and Chicken demonstrated.

When I lose sight of my ideal communication style I take five deep Coherent Breaths, slowly filling my stomach and then letting the air naturally rise to my chest for a six second count. I breathe through my nose and exhale with a positive thought, for another six-second count from my mouth with my tongue resting on the roof of my mouth to create a circular pattern of breathing and exhaling. This enhances and activates the Vagus Nerve (nerve of compassion). Next, I ask myself what differences I would encounter if I widened my lens and view my situation from this perspective. I then imagine how collaborating rather than negotiating with people may change my relationships.

In the 1980's I wrote a grant and set up an alternative high school program in Paterson, N.J. It was not difficult to get students to enroll. The notorious principal at Eastside High School, Joe Clark, who was popularized in the movie *Lean on Me*, had literally kicked out hundreds of students. As Bob Dylan sang in his famous song, *The Hurricane*, "in Paterson that is just the way it is..." I put an ad in the local paper, asking for one hundred high school age kids to be part of my program. The only prerequisite for those interested was that they had to attend classes and be collaborative rather than adversarial. The program was 100% African American. A former principal, who now ran the adult school where my program was housed, asked me "why don't you take care of our own kind." There was adversarial energy all over the city's governing forums; yet I really believed that a collaborative framework would regardless stand out and succeed.

The school was successful: we achieved perfect attendance and a curriculum based on working with community members from as many institutions that educate as I could find. The program easily met all the state proficiency standards and requirements needed to make it official. Dedicated people from various community agencies, hospitals and social service organizations, participated by being mentors. A local senior citizen center — ironically mostly elderly white people — gladly bonded with the students, providing them with reams of information and oral history.

I had arranged for a week long Outward-Bound experience through Princeton University that for most of the students was their first overnight stay outside of Paterson, not to mention being in the wilderness. This produced a strong sense of community that lasted throughout the entire school year. I had four teachers working with me who coordinated the student's individual academic portfolios and guest teachers from a local theatre company that led cooperative simulation games on our community Fridays. The resulting program had a climate of warmth and coherency.

During a field trip to a local museum, my students were able to borrow many valuable artifacts from the display cases despite security guards being present. When we returned to the school they showed me their collection, which we brought back to the museum with suggestions for improved surveillance. On another occasion I came out of my house to find my old Sears and Roebuck van in pieces with five smiling teens smirking and asking me if they could get extra math credit by putting all the parts back together. Much to my amazement it ran much better that evening and was the tipping point about feeling the utmost trust and loyalty with these creative, critical thinking young people.

When there was conflict, and there was at times, I would get paddles and a rubber ball and put the most adversarial students together, asking them (through a win-win volley), to work together to keep the ball on the table for a certain amount of time. This win-win exercise would always lighten the situation and create new opportunities for them to feel how it was to collaborate and resolve conflicts.



When they succeeded I rewarded them with a famous Paterson Jersey wiener (see above) boiled in oil and topped with a secret sauce spread over onions. This was another true win-win consequence, but I was not always sure if it was the collaboration or the “hot daugs” that brought it about. At one-time Paterson had dozens of these wiener restaurants and if you walked in and yelled “two two all the way,” you were rewarded with a poetic show of fast moving hands: one diving for the hot dog, the other holding cardboard dishes placed symmetrically on a curved elbow, while it seemed a third arm would scoop the gravy meticulously onto the upper surface of the bun.

## Implications for How to Collaborate Successfully:

**When we truly communicate, we must first synchronize and entrain our inner vibrations physically and emotionally.** This is the synergy of mutual learning and connecting with nature itself. However, old habits die hard, and individuals and institutions need support, structure and encouragement to freely collaborate. Begin with the questions below.



What emotional traits best describe your communication style when you seek to collaborate?

Think of ways you can create contexts to be collaborative.

In what ways can you adjust and maintain your collaborations?

What barriers would you encounter and how can you avoid them?

Imagine you are volleying with another in a very important moment of communication. What would you need to do to keep the conversation going in a way that creates a win-win moment?

How would you communicate with another person regarding the need to maintain a collaborative situation?

How would being more of a collaborator affect your emotional and physical well-being?

In what ways can you describe your interdependency with others, community institutions i.e. education, politics, economy, climate etc., and nature?

- The above is adapted from my book, *A Wider Lens: How to See Your Life Differently*

