



Human Becoming – Becoming Human

Heinz von Foerster Festschrift

On Constructing a Reality

I first met Heinz von Foerster on a visit to his home at One Eden West Rd. near Pescadero, California, in the fall of 1997. I was in the company of Frank Galuzska, my professor at the time, and two other students - the four of us constituting an experimental course in design theory at the University of California, Santa Cruz that was my introduction to cybernetics and design. As part of that course, Frank had assigned "On Constructing A Reality" and I was eager to make my acquaintance with the man behind those words.



When we arrived, Heinz gave us what I am sure is the customary "tour of the estate." Those of you who have been there know the house sits atop a ridge that runs roughly north south with views across the valley. Tall firs sway quietly in ocean winds. Though the hillsides carry their share of forest shrubs and brush, the ridge top is free of undergrowth but crisscrossed by paths. On our walk, we passed sculptures by Humberto Maturana and benches with names and stories, the latter providing the perfect place to stop and talk.

It was on our way back down the hillside, surely to snack on tea and apricot pie, that the event happened which I have not forgotten. Heinz was still telling stories about the land when, with what can only be called a twinkle in his eye, he turned to me and said, "Everything which you cannot see, I removed with my bare hands."

Such strange language I did not understand. Looking out across Heinz's ridge top, I tried to see or imagine that which I could not see, and that which had been removed anyhow. Needless to say, neither my eyes nor my imagination was up to the task. Fortunately Heinz is a compassionate man. Witnessing my puzzlement, he quickly explained that when he had first moved there, the ridge top had been absolutely covered with brambles, poison oak, and briar patch, so that walking was not possible. Over a span of several years, he had cleared it all.

A simple enough response; still, its character stayed with me. In that and subsequent visits, I noticed Heinz often made comments of a similarly unusual and revealing nature. Asking me to see that which I could not see, I am reminded of the wonderful phrase from "On Constructing A Reality," a phrase that has been both inspiration and guide: "If I don't see I am blind, I am blind; but if I see I am blind, I see."

And this, more generally, has been the gift Heinz has given us, or at least me, and it is for what I

would like very much to thank him: the chance, at vision, into those places I previously could not see.

Timothy Gorter



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