Interview

with Adam Kahane

LARGE-SCALE TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES AND THEORY U: AN INTERVIEW WITH ADAM KAHANE

Currently a partner in the Cambridge (MA) office of Reos Partners and an Associate Fellow at the Saïd Business School of the University of Oxford, Adam Kahane has spent the last 25 years as an organizer, designer, and facilitator of processes through which business, government, and civil society leaders worked together to address their toughest challenges, such as climate change, health care, judicial impunity, child malnutrition, and unsustainable food system. He has worked in more than 50 countries, in every part of the world, with executives and politicians, generals and guerrillas, civil servants and trade unionists, community activists and United Nations officials, clergy and artists. The Mont Fleur Scenario exercise in South Africa was where he started to develop his own approach to solving complex social problem. At the time, he worked for Shell as the head of the team that produced scenarios about possible futures for the global political, economic, social, and environmental context of the company. In 1991, his group received an invitation from 2 professors at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town to provide a methodology to help the left-wing opposition to navigate the national transition away from apartheid. A joke was being told at that time in South Africa that there was a practical and a miraculous way to face the enormous challenges ahead. The practical way consisted of praying on their knees, while the miraculous one consisted of talking to each other to resolve the challenges. That event had 2 particularities. First, Adam Kahane facilitated meetings with incredibly diverse stakeholders, from the very privileged to the socially disempowered, from Black and White, from left and right wings. Second, a crucial innovation in the scenario planning that happened was related to the intention of the group. At Shell, the scenario planning was used to adapt to what might happen, while at Mont Fleur, it was perceived as a mean to influence what might happen. He often said that he did not fully understood what he experienced at the time—as if he saw a landscape at night during a lightning bolt—and that he spent the next 2 decades trying to figure out what he had seen. Adam Kahane wrote 3 books on his learning journey, all published by Berrett-Koehler: Solving Tough Problems (2004), Power and Love (2010), and Transformative Planning Scenarios (2012).

INTERVIEW

Charles Baron: Adam, the goal of our interview today is to get to know your learning journey as you worked to solve complex social problem and to hear more about how your understanding and practice of
the U process has evolved. In your book *Transformative Scenario Planning*, the U process appears more clearly linked to your work that in your other books. You posit the five major steps of the *Transformative Scenario Planning* along the U itself and you end the book by underlying how important it is for the participants to suspend both their assumptions and their attachment to any result in particular. That said, your experience of running change labs over the last twenty-five years has helped you to develop your practice beyond the standard description of the U process. For example, a major contribution of your last book seems to be the realization of the transformative effects of the scenarios that often result in the *co-presencing* phase, when participants discover what can and must be done. Indeed, you seem to have discovered that the articulation of scenarios is more significant than just a prototyping exercise, and that it can link the transformation of the participants to the thought, relation and intention levels. Could you tell us more about how you understand the relationship between scenario planning and the U process?

Adam Kahane: It is possible to understand scenario work with reference to the U process in two ways or at two scales. At one level, scenario planning is a tool for the bottom of the left-hand side of the U—a tool for synthesizing our understanding of what is going on in the system in which we are operating. Scenarios are stories about what is possible in the system. The bottom of the left-hand side of the U consists of observing what is happening—trying to make sense of it. In another way, you could say that the scenario planning exercise uses the whole U inasmuch as a scenario report is in itself a creative result. In that regard, it is important to understand the U process as a fractal and not at all as a linear sequence. It would be a very unhelpful simplification to say that the presencing work, the understanding of what is going on in our role and what is needed of us, always occurs in time after co-sensing. And in fact my most important story about co-presencing, which happened in Guatemala, occurred in the first meeting of that team. So these are some of the ways in which the scenario process is related to the U process. Now, it would be an exaggeration to say that the articulation of scenarios could be more powerful than prototyping. The process of writing the scenarios is an iterative process. Iterative because you make a text and step back from it, and you say how can this be improved. For example, in a recent scenario planning process convened by the Organization of American States (OAS) that revolved around the Drug Problem in America, the final text went through perhaps thirty iterations. It was a long and tiring process. But in the end, the scenarios produce no action—or the only action they produce is the publication of a cell of ideas, of a cell of stories. And in that sense, the acting to transform the system, which should be a more standard understanding of the right-hand side of the U, is not covered at all in the scenario process.

CB: Would you say then that scenario planning allows a particular opening of the heart, so that we can better see what is possible, what can emerge when we immerse ourselves in a situation?

AK: Well, let me take a different angle on it. Of course the scenario planning process can involve an opening of the heart and sometimes it does. But I would say the scenario planning process is above all an intellectual process. It is very much about the opening of the mind. That does not mean that opening of the heart and opening of the will cannot and does not occur, but its strength, maybe also its limitation, is that it is an intellectual process. And this is what allows it to be used as a tool in complex and conflictual situations. My teacher in scenario planning was Kees van der Heidjen, a Dutchman who was my boss at Shell and later became an academic, who has written several important books on scenario planning including *Scenario: the Art of Strategic Conversation*. I remember when I started working with him, he used to say: “rationality is the language of business.” I never understood what that was, what he meant and at that time I was infatuated with the idea of the opening of the heart. But I have come to appreciate that comment. Actually, the primary language in business and in politics and in social life, for dealing