

April 2009

## The Third Possibility: THE POWER TO INQUIRE

The POWER series by Paulette Sun Davis

**“Many people say they’re open-minded. The awkward truth is probably closer to the idea that we’re open to what we already agree with and not genuinely open to anything else.”**

This is a practice in staying open-minded even in difficult conversations. It’s a practice that will stretch your thinking and strengthen your relationships beyond current boundaries and limitations. While reading this practice, think about conversations that are difficult for you, and discover what you can do to create a third possibility and a true exchange of ideas.

Creating the “third possibility” relies on the power to inquire. What is the power to inquire? Let me break it down.

Power is the ability to do or act. To inquire is the ability to question without preconceived notions. The power to inquire is the ability to have a dialogue without your answers or opinions getting in the way.

First you have to acknowledge that you have preconceived notions before you ever start a conversation, dialogue, or interaction. Simply stated your preconceived notions are derived from what you think is right or wrong. If you wish to inquire into the nature of something you must know your bias and set it to the side so you can ask questions and truly be open to discover something new.

All you have to do is watch two people arguing to understand that it’s hard to set your “bias” to the side. Most people don’t think they’re biased, they think they’re right. What makes it easier is to shift your thinking from being certain you are right (making anyone who disagrees with you wrong) and be open to the idea you may be right and there may be other points of view that are equal or better than yours.

If you think you’re right and someone else is wrong you only have two possibilities, which places you squarely in a forced choice—which I call the dilemma of either/or thinking. **The dilemma of “either/or thinking** shows up like this: EITHER: I’m right and

you’re wrong. OR: I’m wrong and you’re right. This is a classic definition of a tug of war and will shut down the power to inquire into anything other than the two choices. In a tug of war you lose any further discovery that could emerge from the cultivation of a third possibility, like putting down the rope. Practicing the power of inquiry moves you out of the orbit of an either/or choice and opens up the field for entertaining something new. President Obama illustrated an either/or choice scenario in his inaugural address when he said, “We reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals.” and extended an invitation to the world to solve the problems we face from shared interests and respect. He rejected the notion that it was either safety or ideals and offered a third possibility.

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Innovation comes from questioning existing notions about what’s possible and offering something new and unprecedented. The potential of the third possibility is to create breakthroughs in our thinking, words and actions.

This practice applies the same kind of innovative thinking that creates breakthroughs in political issues, to your everyday relationships, and communication. The power to inquire is part of your essential originality that allows curiosity at any age. It replaces excessive criticism with interest that is fresh and available. You’ll be able to discover what’s possible instead of the same stale arguments promoted day-to-day in the either/or world.

What’s the risk? You may be saying that you don’t have the time to inquire ... or that it slows down the decision making process. I see that as a benefit. Most decisions are not emergencies and if you’ve ever said, “I wish I would have thought that through or talked to someone else about it,” or “I wish I would have listened to you,” you know that slowing down decision making with

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further inquiry could serve you, your family and business. Take a moment and think about what causes you to refuse to consider a different thought or idea from your way of thinking. What's the risk? Is it the unknown?

The risk is worth taking when you understand that the greatest block to your progress isn't the unknown it's the

illusion of knowledge. You'll know you're gaining muscle in this practice when you leave a conversation or meeting exhilarated, thinking or challenged instead of heading to the proverbial water cooler to complain or with a bloated sense of being right.

### **Today notice when you're in the midst of a forced choice... where you think or feel you have to:**

Agree or disagree,  
Think something is possible or impossible, or  
Take sides.

Then use these situations to engage in an inquiry where you have room to think, reflect, and bring to light something new. Considering a third possibility allows you to let go of attachment to any one idea and have the freedom to question and think outside the constraints of either/or thinking. This can be as simple as saying: "Let's look. What else is possible?" Then listen to others the way that you would like to be listened to.

***Uncross your arms, lean forward and engage.***