



**Transcript of Em Griffin's interview with Barnett Pearce,  
creator of Coordinated Management of Meaning**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvME-Y5A3Og>

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Griffin: I'm with a co-founder of The Public Dialog Consortium. Barnett is one of the co-founders of Management of Meaning, the Theory of CMM. Barnett, What's CMM?

Pearce: CMM is really a vocabulary or a grammar, a way of talking about communication that focuses on what we call persons-in-conversation; and that is one thing – persons-in-conversation.

Griffin: I know. When I've written it, you've insisted that I use hyphens in there.

Pearce: Right, because what we're trying to emphasize there is that the basic unit of understanding communication is what you and I do in reciprocal response to each other that extends forward into time; and at any moment in time we have a history which we know something about, have a story about, and a future which we're not sure is going to happen but we're making it in this moment. When we are persons in conversations, we are constructing some coherences; and there will always be tensions and differences among them.

Griffin: Differences between the stories told and the stories lived?

Pearce: Thank you for that. And also differences among the stories told, but always a difference between the stories that we tell about what we are doing and the actual living of it because they're in different mediums. One is in language and the other is in body. Those are never separable, but they can never be totally reduced to each other. And that is enough to keep us in suspense for the rest of our lives trying to figure out who we are, what we want, what is the good, what is that which we strive toward, because we can never get all of our stories lined up. The goal is not to find the ultimate answer that makes everything click into place – after that, what would we do? It is to deal with the tensions among our stories and our lives.

Griffin: The last time I wrote on CMM, I had a question in the probes for students. I said, "social constructionists want to be curious participants in a pluralistic world. Are you willing to give up certainty detached perspective, and the idea of the truth to join them?" My question is, is that a fair statement of the choice we face?

Pearce: No, it's not, because what happens is we get a different kind of certainty. So, it's not a question of certainty versus uncertainty; it's a matter of certainty that focuses on the content of

stories as opposed to a certainty that grows out of an awareness of process. And, yes, that's a different kind of certainty. If I were to say, for example, that "that" is true, whatever "that" is, one way of understanding my statement is to look at the object referred to and try to decide whether or not the statement is true or false. And that would be to do, I don't know what – epistemology or ontology – to look at the reference. I am a communication theorist. When someone says to me that "this" is true, what I hear is an assertion; and it's an assertion in the middle of a conversation that has a beginning and an end, and that assertion is doing various kinds of work. The person is really saying "I believe, or I assert, this is true." The person is perhaps also saying "and you should believe it too;" maybe even saying "all people everywhere ought to believe it." So, there's some work being done in making that statement that sometimes is masked by the form of the statement "this is true." My job as a communication theorist is to start looking at that kind of work and see what kinds of "things"--in the sense of episodes, relationships, politics--get made when people do certain kinds of work. So, one of the questions, that we've talked about before is do you have to give up your believe in a divine being or a transcendent story or a master narrative if you're a CMM theorist? My answer is "no, you don't." But what you do have to do is start giving attention to the kind of social world that you create when you affirm that belief in certain ways.

Griffin: And what if I find "oh, I don't like that creation"?

Pearce: That thing you create?

Griffin: Mmm hmm.

Pearce: Yes, great. Now that is what CMM is really designed to do, to give you the ability first to look at what gets created and then some options to create something different.

Griffin: I could ascribe to what post-modernists would call one of these "grand narratives" and still be an advocate of CMM?

Pearce: Yeah. I think though the way you would advocate those "grand narratives" would probably change and would probably make you a better person.

[laughter]

Griffin: What do you mean you are not trying to persuade me? [more laughter] How about that... don't you have some persuasive bones in your body?

Pearce: Yeah, yeah. I want to be very selfish about this, because I really believe we do create the world we live in and that world creates us; so, how could I not try to spend my time trying to improve this world around me?

Griffin: What form of conversation are you trying to get in the consortium?

Pearce: In my book *Communication and Human Condition* I use the term "Cosmopolitan Consumption." So let me give a couple examples of cosmopolitan consumption. The Public

Conversations Project that is located outside of Boston has been working for years in a very wonderful way of bring people who are at absolute opposite ends of the most horrendous issues – they started with the issue of abortion – of bringing them together and by using a very carefully scripted and prepared facilitation process, getting people who are rabid pro-life and rabid pro-choice together so that they can understand each other and decide how to go forward in a much better way than what usually happens with placards and slogans and bombs and guns. So, I would say that's an instance of cosmopolitan consumption and it's something achieved at great effort.

Griffin: And is that developed? Are you encouraged that it's not just good genes, being born into the right family, the right traditions produces that, that a person can become an agent of cosmopolitan consumption?

Pearce: It's learnable; it's teachable; and it's contagious. We've been doing a lot of teaching about facilitating these forms of communication at the high school level with people from all walks of life in the community; and we're finding that people who could not do that can learn how to do that. And I think that's wonderful.

Griffin: Can they learn it by listening to this tape?

Pearce: Hmm... no, but that could be a start. They could develop a taste, but you can only learn by doing, I think.