

THE DYNAMICS OF AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE: THE LIFE AND WORK OF SUNNIE KIDD

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Born on October 29th 1942, from Cherokee Indian parentage, Sunnie D. ‘Sun Dance Rising’ Kidd spent her youth in Ivanhoe, California. A sensitive and poetic philosopher at heart, with a deep curiosity in themes ranging from esoterics to developments in quantum physics, her prolific writings demonstrate a wealth of talent and interests covering a large variety of disciplines. She developed into one of the expert philosophers in the field of hermeneutic phenomenology elucidating criteria set by, amongst others, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Her Taoist studies, started in 1970, led her to embrace Chinese philosophy exploring harmony and transformation in the work of 4th century (BCE) sage Chuang Tzu. It seemed to her that expressive harmony such as articulated in Chinese philosophy was also apparent in the creative work on reflexive consciousness by the Swiss phenomenologist Pierre Thévenaz.¹ Thévenaz’s work, and Stephan Strasser’s concept of dialogal phenomenology,² were threads leading her to a call for a new method in the humanities. In investigating lived experience, her *Experiential Method*, developed jointly with her husband James W. Kidd, is a unique, most natural system to conduct and co-ordinate research work in the humanities. In honoring the fundamental ground of personal existence, it strengthens the principle that a philosophy of being and a philosophy of consciousness are unbroken and integral.

Apart from an impressive collection of some 80 academic papers, most of them from the hand of Sunnie Kidd, the husband and wife philosopher team authored several books including *Experiential Method: Qualitative Research in the Humanities Using Metaphysics and Phenomenology*, perusing and building on Pierre Thévenaz’s idea to interpret intentionality on the ground of reflexive consciousness.³ In *Person to Person Inspiration*, an existential phenomenological work on inspiration, meditative reflection and projective consciousness, they carried their original dialogal and hermeneutic concepts into an even deeper dimension.⁴ The book’s core message is to make us aware of the imprint of others upon the projective function of consciousness, triggering our faculty of wonder and capacity for imagination. Sunnie’s concept of *Inbetweenness*, ranging from the all-embracing cosmic to interpersonal connectivity, provides a *modus operandi* to value and understand how the dynamic structure of reciprocal relationships comes into being.⁵ How deep-seated this experiential concept of *Inbetweenness* had nested itself into her own existence, and how beginnings of newly experienced personal relationships touched and inspired her

emotionally, is particularly clear from her poetic paper *Dimensional Flow* where she says:

I have been invited into another's existence...the doors opened to me and I accept I too open the doors. I walk and I look and I feel...I experience agelessness, eternity...the past is present, the future is present...in the I am and the to be...I feel beauty, love, warmth, unity, communion, tranquility. All of these adjectives to denote traveling through space and time and climbing into the heights and depths of consciousness. A release. No other world exists...Just eternalness within...timelessness...the secrets of the past are revealed in all their glory. I see myself, I see others, I see expansion...I see the intricacies of life. I touch gently and it responds, alive...and welcoming by entrance, inviting me to explore its existence, eager for me to discover...what I already know lies within.⁶

A number of theses, dissertations, and books were published utilizing Sunnie's research method in last three decades including work by Ariosto Jose Coelho, Peggy Thayer, Eva Wolfram and Deirdre Carney. Sunnie began working with Peterson B. Zhou on U.S. Court documents a few months before her passing on 27 March 2002.

I have enjoyed meeting Sunnie Kidd and her husband Jim at several occasions at Symposia on Universalism, in Warsaw, Poland, St. Catharines, Canada, in London and at home in Reeuwijk, The Netherlands, where I live. We corresponded in a true dialogical situation, carrying each other into fascinating exchange of thought, connections and prospective future activities across San Francisco and The Hague since our first meeting in November 1989 until the turn of the century. Her idea of *Inbetweenness* was truly manifest as a living presence in all she did. It impregnated every philosophical concept that came to bear within her spiritual and physical plane of existence, having originated in her mind through an experience she had as a child.

A wild hawk, whose broken wing she cared for, could never forget her and returned to her arms to die there. Hawks, who approached her throughout her life, stirred her imagination, and intensified her psychic bond with nature. It seemed that the animal world of experience and memory could effortlessly merge with her own, adding to her experience and knowledge. Apart from having access to skills that enabled this extraordinary communication with nature, Sunnie's search for meaning must have been strengthened by the inborn harmony ethic that prevails amongst the tribes of Native Americans. For the Cherokees this encompasses the conscious avoidance of interpersonal conflict thus maintaining reciprocally harmonious relations with all members. Renewal of their relationship to each

other and to nature is manifest in their sacred Sundance, when the Creator of earth and cosmos receives all the combined prayers of dancers and supporters while in exchange the energy of the cosmos comes down, concentrated in the dance arbor. Thus the New Year begins.

There is a deep influence of Taoism visible in her concept of *Inbetweenness*. Interdependent and interrelated life forces are manifest in the Tao where energies of co-operation drive the process of creation and the shaping of new forms. Then, there is the influence of Indian thinkers in her work, who view philosophy as a practical necessity that needs cultivation in order to best serve human ends. In Indian philosophy, a unitary underlying order, which is all pervasive and omniscient, carries all major phenomena in nature. The earliest mention of this appears in the *Rig Veda*, which speaks of the Brahman, or the unchanging, infinite and immanent universally transcendent and ethereal ground of creation. The Brahman lies beyond the sum total of the objective universe and is described as dimensionless, timeless and beyond reach of knowledge. It is mysterious and difficult to comprehend how Sunnie Kidd could reflexively master the soul imprints of so many human experiential worlds, within a dynamic process that eventually led to the formulation, development and birth of *Inbetweenness* as her own philosophy.

As I understand it, the absolute reality of *Inbetweenness* stretches beyond the referential concepts that anchor the human mind such as time, space, causation, future and past. Its fundamental universal quality gives rise to interrelatedness and cosmic connectivity. The psychic imprints that govern the senses and create the human phenomena of experience and knowledge, depict mind and matter as different fields of vibration. But since mind and matter continue to reverberate within cyclic patterns of movement and vibration, our mind is not only relaying a purely mental description to conscious awareness but interactively co-creates the phenomenon which it observes. Within the concept of *Inbetweenness*, a method is provided to understand the dynamic nature of interpersonal reciprocal relationships based upon the elimination of the illusionary duality of mind and matter. In accepting and understanding the double possibility of self-transcendence for each person involved in authentic dialogue, tension does no longer hamper the fluidity of understanding but is seen as a vital dialogal instrument to open up creative reciprocity as participants become attuned to enhance and renew one another's existential meaning by the investment of Self.

The French quantum physicist and philosopher Bernard d'Espagnat abandons any naive realism by pointing to the Kantian distinction of "the noumena," the essentially unknowable stuff that is dissimilar from observable phenomena. He points to a veiled reality that exists, independent from us, underlying the empirical regularities of scientific knowledge, the structure of which is not revealed.⁷ Questions about the sense and direction

of all life and human life in particular are, according to d'Espagnat, probably outside the domain of time and space as experienced by us.

Theoretical physicist David Bohm spent a lifetime searching for an implicate order where space and time are no longer the dominant factors determining the relationships of dependence or independence of different elements.⁸ Underlying his ingenious theory was the fundamental concept that beyond the visible, tangible world there lies a deeper, implicate order of undivided wholeness revealing holographic dimensions.

It is difficult to understand our evolutionary advantageous drive for perfection and elucidation without tangible anchors to tie to. Routes towards understanding the human phenomenon, its infatuations, passions and prospective possibilities may be fragmentary and fractional in the eyes of Imperishable Reality. Brain and consciousness research, the evolutionary bending back of humans towards the unraveling of the mysteries encapsulated in the subjective awareness of one's own existence, seems a sound step towards reconciliation with the immortal bond with nature. Hopefully such research may contribute to the cumulative redefinition and further refinement of knowledge about humanities place as observers and actors in nature; as ideal observers who cause no harmful perturbations in themselves as intrinsic part of the system being observed. There is a need to keep constructing and affirm concepts strong enough to govern thought and intuition towards the improvement of human stability and understanding, such as pursued by Sunnie Kidd.

At the same time, while our knowledge grows, there will be a forceful accumulation of passions to rise above prevalent mindsets. It is good to remember that we cannot hope to find completeness in knowledge, but humans do have access to the fullness of experience that may give a personal and all-conclusive meaning to life. It is here where the sharing in the destiny and hopes of others will continue to structure our offerings and enrich our lives.

Sunnie Kidd's work has greatly influenced many people who firmly believe in the existence of intrinsically sound and defensible reasons to demonstrate the possibility of wholeness and meaning in a world that seems torn apart by contradictions, misunderstandings and the lack of personal and intellectual integrity. She did this by conceptualizing and exploring how the social, metaphysical, and cosmic elements of human experience and inspiration could be bundled toward action, directed by the power of communion through authentic dialogue.

She had the precious gift to analyze the characters of those who were close to her to amazing depth and accuracy, as is clear from her publication *The Charactress*. In both her poetic, colorful characterizations of "the other

person” and her exploration of projective communion between individual subjective selves, she was greatly influenced by many existentialist philosophers admired by her. She mentioned more than once how Gabriel Marcel’s intimate and intensely personal way of relating to others, as expressed in all his plays and philosophical treatises, had inspired her profoundly.⁹ But above all, she lived a full, energetic and exemplary life, leaving a considerable volume of work that keeps inspiring many to explore the deeper, veiled dimensions to life and human living.

Notes

- 1) Pierre Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology?: and other Essays*, trans. James M. Edie, Charles Courtney and Paul Brockelman, ed., intro. James M. Edie, preface John Wild (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962).
- 2) Stephan Strasser, *The Idea of Dialogal Phenomenology* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- 3) Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd, *Experiential Method: Qualitative Research in the Humanities using Metaphysics and Phenomenology* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990).
- 4) Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd, *Person to Person Inspiration*, American University Studies, Vol. 164. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1994).
- 5) CF <http://www.inbetweenness.com>
- 6) The Charactress, “Dimensional Flow” in *Charactures and Poetry* <http://www.inbetweenness.com> pp. 51-53.
- 7) Bernard d’Espagnat, *On Physics and Philosophy*, publisher’s trans. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- 8) David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Paperback. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981).
- 9) Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, I: Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G.S. Fraser (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1960).

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