

Transcript below is from one of our monthly ABUNDANCE Arts-Based Civic Dialogues (2002) organized and facilitated by Marty Pottenger as part of her ABUNDANCE Project in NYC (1999-2004) about America and Money. 60 New Yorkers attended two introductory dialogues, out of which Marty invited 18 people to participate in the year-long monthly dialogues about money and America. 14 people accepted, including two people with over \$1,000,000 in assets, two union members, one student, one professor, someone receiving public assistance, someone in the USA without legal permission and working 60 hours a week for \$50, two people working for NYC and someone on unemployment. The group was also very diverse in terms of age, race, gender, nationality, sexual preference and class background growing up. Videos of some of the art created during the dialogues can be seen on the ABUNDANCE project pages. The names have been changed. © Pottenger 2002. Please contact for permission to use text.

DIANE: I'm still too confused to have many insights, but about 8 months after talking with people with great wealth and of little wealth, I realized that it's not anyone's money, it's all of our money. That money is the result of all our labor. This Native American notion that you can't own land. That you can use the land, but that land is not something one can own, even if you wanted to. A woman in Hawaii explained to me that on each island there are many families, clans, and that the custom for centuries has been to divide each island up as if a pie with every piece starting at the very top of the highest mountain and coming down into the valleys and across the beaches and finally out to the ocean's first reef, second reef all the way to the outer coral reefs, so that every clan has access to all the resource that the entire island has to offer. This question keeps returning to me –what if there is no such thing as someone owning money?

DAVID: Last week I was with two men in the basement of my home. We were shoving a camera into a sewer drain. Now in my basement there is a cap where there once was a toilet. It's a very dark, muddy place. You stick the camera down the line and it's connected to a laptop. And on the laptop you can see what your sewer looks like. And it looks like surgery, fascinating. Let's do a triple by-pass on it! You see 8' underground which is where sewer lines run and the tree roots, because of the drought this summer, the tree roots were going into my line, cracking through the clay pipe. And you watch the camera snake through your line with it's twists and turns and you see the decay of it all. My home was built in 1892, the sewer line...it's unreal. And of course after \$986 worth of drilling and all they had to do to clear the line just to get the camera through they told me I needed to spend \$7000. to replace the line.

So plumbing is really a powerful metaphor for my life right now. Because really - the one moment that is my...the one moment that I work for, is to come home and have my three children in the tub and to be with them in the tub which is the most magical thing to just watch and play and just be silly and it's a great thing. It's a very intimate thing that you do when you have these little people around. In my mind, it's both this "whatever's happening down in the sewer drain" and this tub where this beautiful time happens.

Now here's my metaphor – lots of money coming in the faucet. That's because I make a lot of money. We made \$97,833 last year. Lotta money. We also have this thing that is the key to having money in America. If you have something that says "Deed" on it, and it's got your name on it, people will give you money. Every day a hundred people wanna give me money. They wanna give me more and more and more money. Because I own a little part of the world. I don't really own it, the bank owns it, but it's under my name.

So having a deed to a property means you can really turn the faucet on, any time you want to. The water can come keep coming in. This is all about America. The reason I have a deed is because at a certain

point, my people were allowed into banks and given loans. That happened in the 1950's. They started to give us loans. The Federal Housing Authority. Many Jews went from being in poverty to being landed people and getting homes and it was all because we could get a loan. And that's the magic of America if you are the right person of the right ethnicity and the right everything else.

So...there's my home and my three children floating in the tub and that's good. But unfortunately the water is running out. The tub is surrounded by three babysitters bills and a doctor's bill. And then nearby is one of my student loan bills and it reads "the Student Loan Service Center has informed us that you have failed to honor your...repayment obligation on one or more of your student loan guarantees. And I have like fifty grand of these student loan bills and my wife has another 20. And one of our credit card bills ...is over \$10,000. And we have another one at \$15,000. So we have about \$25,000...this is what is called 'bad credit'...'very bad credit'. Now this is just pulling all the water...and I'm wondering "where's the plug? Where is the plug? No plug. All this water going down the drain and there's no plug... that's not good."

ANAND: what's the relationship between the water that's oozing out and the water coming in the tap?

DAVID: I see a great injustice there. When I pay my water bill, which is like fifty dollars a month, I think, fifty bucks, that's so cheap. I love it, I think I get all this water and it's fifty bucks? That's so incredible. And then when I put it back out into the world, with all sorts of waste and everything in it, I feel so guilty, I feel like...I don't know...I produced all this waste, um...

ANAND: since water is metaphor for money. What relationship do you see between money coming in through the faucet and money going out through the drain.

DAVID: I think that's because I see money as a neutral. And it can be a wonderful thing and it can also be a poisonous thing.

JUNE: I was just at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. And everybody was talking about – the big issue being water. It was good that so many people were starting to think about water but one of the things that people...you said your water bill was fifty bucks? Well the reason that it was fifty bucks is because it is subsidized! We don't actually recognize the value of it. On the one hand it's the earth and it's free, it's what's here, but if you're actually looking at it from the standpoint of sustainable development - in fact –

DAVID: it's scarce.

JUNE: What if we thought of money in that same way. As a resource owned by the world community. It's really challenging, to me, because I just by default, by being born into the family I was born into, by being born here in the United States, I have access to that privilege. If I were to see myself and the money that I have in relationship to a world resource of "money" what should I be doing that would be taking responsibility? Cause I don't take responsibility now – I have it or I don't have it. I spend it or I don't spend it. Or I save a little bit, but it's all about me or the few people I care about.

ANAND: When I think of the bathtub, I think that the money is there to protect those three kids. But it's somehow tragic because although that is what it is there for, in another sense, it is eroding that, just as the sewers are eroding the foundations of your house. That's why I was asking how you see them connected. And what you said, I found intriguing, "That for you, money was neutral. That the ultimate

responsibility lies with the people who use money”.

The way I interpret what you said is that ultimately - it's not that we 'own' money, it's that we have reached a stage where we are using money as something we "own" rather than thinking of what we can use it for. We are all reaching the stage where money has become an end by itself, rather than what we use it for. I think -

JUNE: - the metaphor you gave of – “imagining the world’s resources as this mountain peak which stretches down to the ocean” – and dividing it that way, top to bottom, so that everyone has a piece all along the spectrum of the different kinds of resources...it really seems to me that it’s actually on a spectrum from poverty to wealth we also have access to different resources. I don’t see it as a stark dichotomy between having and not having, because there are things that you know, that you have access to when you don’t have money, that you are deprived of when you have money. And you know if only we could share those resources with each other. If only someone who lives in a subsistence community could offer what they have and what they know to someone who lives...in a totally different way than...

DIANE: are there concrete things that you think of being a part of that exchange?

JUNE: well, having the concrete experience of providing for yourself, of creating your own survival in a very direct way...farming...is something that is very valuable. Not to romanticize it, a lot of people do, but it’s hard, but there is a kind of confidence that you have, an ability to improvise, when you know that you can do that, that you don’t have when you only have experience of money.

DIANE: All of us here must know people with more money and people with less. My experience is that the greater the amount of money anyone has, the more they pull away from society as a whole. I mean Warren Buffet lives right in his original community. And he’s been fighting with some other billion and millionaires for the last four years to make sure that he IS taxed when he dies. Who here in this room have friends from a different economic reality?

The more sequestered, the more separate you make yourself and there is a part of one’s mind, like a cancer, that starts eating into your connection to the rest of the world. I see it in the relationships parents have with their children. Most of us, adults, are probably numb enough by the time we get old enough to be parents to not even notice, let alone feel, all the accumulated odd nesses and isolation that growing up in a society with such deep inequity has created. The people I know seem perfectly capable, of negotiating the in’s and out’s of ‘having’ 10 million dollars. But once they are parents, some inherent sense of what ‘good’ parenting looks like seems to kick in and it becomes pretty clear pretty fast, that living with a lot more than others is not easy to explain to an inquiring young mind. “Why is that man sitting on the sidewalk?” “Why doesn’t that person have a home?” “Are we poor?” “Are we rich?”

Magazines for the super rich are now filled with articles about new ways to set up “incentive trusts” for your kids to work and meet certain concrete objective goals before they “get the money”. Hundreds of articles on “how to instill lasting values in your child.” All these organizations and therapy centers have sprung up across the country to deal with the emotional impact of having so much more than other people. These people are twisting themselves into pretzels trying to...I think...basically create a more rational economic bubble around their children than the one they are living in themselves. Of course there’s a complete taboo on talking about money which insures nothing breaks the isolation. I’ve met

lots of husbands and wives who haven't spoken about money to each other in over 25 years and you can tell that they need to...want to even.

Sophie: Every afternoon, when I go home, in my mailbox, I take the mail and I go upstairs and there, my life becomes surrounded by all this attractive stuff. Since 1999 I am a "preferred customer". It is possible it seems to take a worry off my "to do" list and plan to retire richer, happier, sooner. An invitation comes to me to fly Virgin Atlantic to London and take a friend for \$199. "Thank you" they say to me...for Vallejeho - an exclusive club for golfers that comes with it a coupon that offers me a second car from Hertz...and it's "thank you" again, They are always very very polite and say "thank you". If I need to be "debt-free" rates just dropped and then I see the promise of some beautiful jewelry, accompanied by an offer for a sunny beach vacation where I can be a kid again if I see an advisor and then, after that, I can plan and relax. And of course I too can have a beautiful home too. "Thank you" again, always "thank you. "why I may never need another line of credit again". It's all a little system, a little world by itself. And it is filled with attractive words in bright colors and...promises.

I did two vacations in one this year. I didn't have a vacation last year so I had six weeks this year. I planned that I would go, rent a car, and go to Spain and learn to speak Spanish and do lots of things. And yes, I rent a car but I did not do anything of that.

A very dear friend, close friend, who has been struggling with...uh...death...uh...I don't know how many deaths you can have. And getting into alcohol and nearly killing himself with alcohol and then for about the last three years I've just been there very little. And I spent six weeks with him and he totally dry out, it does not mean that he will not come back to that, but he dry out and he has been answering his telephone and facing the people who he owed money to and because I am really far off being great with money I used that for myself how I could learn from that. And I spent six weeks seeing all different kinds of people.

We went to a farm, with one hundred cows and a lot of cow shit. We had a sheep being roasted and a guy cutting the sheep. And I met people from different life styles and I came back feeling good about how my life had been with my very different paths.

Sometime I made a lot of money and sometime I didn't make money at all. I made the right choice with my life. And although I can live a life where I can open my envelopes and pay on time more or less, to make a call, even the last minute, if I have to. The one time I went down and I've been progressing a lot.

So money has never been a very important thing in my life. I don't need very much money in my life and these dialogues have been making me very much more serene and in balance with all that. I'm on my way.

Diane: When you say you've made progress with your bills, do you mean since we've been meeting?

Sophie: Since we've been meeting. Because here, I heard a lot of other people – I mean I'm not making very much money – but I have a job that is not great, but I have the possibility to do things with it. Uh... although I am totally under-employed, but still, my personality can be recognized for who I am. So all that...someday I can ...before like a child covering my face, hiding, panicking with money...I've been raised to think "we don't have any money" which was far from true.

We had money, not very much, but we had money. We had shoes, we had two pairs of shoes. My skirts were made of my father's pants, but it was okay. I was able to go on summer vacation. I was able to see, here, hey...it's not a bad life. Although it is almost like a jail, a trap, the way things are set up, structured, and we are the mice. But they have to keep the mice alive if you want still use them. You keep them alive.

Diane: Citibank is now the largest concentration of wealth in the world now. Their ads are all about "live richly" All about valuing human things, not living for tomorrow. Here's the people who've hoarded more money than anyone in the world and...

Sophie: I was on Jury Duty earlier this week and was chosen, almost, to be on this case. It was a man who had worked his whole life at Kennedy Airport and now he was going to die from Asbestosis. And he had one lawyer and the corporations, they had sued many corporations, so they had 15 to 20 lawyers. And I told the Judge that I could not be a part of this case but they realized that it would be hard to put a jury together. So the next day they spoke with several of us individually and I told him, I cannot be a part of this case. Politically and socially, I cannot decide this.

The corporations would have to work twice as hard to prove that they did not do this and then we are supposed to decide how much it is worth. How can I decide that, how do I estimate how much money to compensate, knowing that this man is going to die. It is absurd. They finally let me go.

But I'm not going to feel guilty for that. I chose to become an American citizen. I came from France. I am a part of that. I am in it but I still think that I can have my little garden and try to pursue what is important for me in that.

HECTOR: I did not have the image of the mountain that you mentioned. But I did collect all these papers. So the first moment that I put myself in contact with all these papers...usually when I open the mailbox I have a strange sensation in my stomach. You all know the envelopes that are a little bit longer than the other ones. So my first thing is to see how much I owe. So on one side is the money that comes in and goes out. And on the other side is the legal part, the declaration of income tax, what I paid my lawyer to try to make me legal here.

The relationship with the bank is a very surreal relationship. Because I use the cash machine and I don't understand it. So I put in my card and put in some money and I know sort of how much money is in there. I feel it is a part of me but it is not inside me. Like a pocket. And I have to ask permission. It's strange, I have to ask this machine for permission. A wife is much more complicated. The numbers are an important part of my life.

And in the center, without a doubt they are important because this is a receipt for the money that I send to my children in Peru. This is the moment, the only moment in my life, when money makes sense. So this is the moment when the money has meaning, when it beats like a heart. All governments, not just here, every person has their number of identification, it can seem cold, for your taxes you have a low number, for your bank you have a high number.

So the important thing is to remember that money itself is not important but that we give it importance. For me money is important when I send it or dedicate it to a person. For someone else, when they buy a pair of shoes. It is important for the necessity that each person has.

I have a habit of folding the legal papers I have into pleats, it's a compulsion. I can't stop doing it. I don't know if I want them to fold in on themselves or become smaller but still readable. The pleats become like an accordion which you play over the heart, with a sad song, but more, not sad, but sending money to my children, there is a satisfaction in it as well as sadness. Not an experience of absence but more an affirmation of presence.

Since I was here last I made a puppet show, by myself. It changed my feelings. First of all because I had to do it quickly. I had to do it in English, perform it. I miss coming here, before coming here I arrive with a question of what am I going to hear and what am I going to say? I come worried about what I'm going to say, what will happen in the conversation here. The conversations provoke ideas and thoughts that I did not know I had, they emerge the way buds on flowers open.

Closing --

Anand: Our discussion on money as water. That money literally comes from water. That money can move us away from what's real. I'm looking forward to moving away from water and becoming dry. To stop using money for happiness.

HECTOR: I think the most important thing that came out of what we did was the measuring of money, not that we measure money, but that we are measured by money. I always find here the value of different opinions. Very different than mine, some similar. I always leave with reaffirmation or doubt until the next month.

Daisy: My highlight is always these two moments – being in a room full of people working together, especially when we are making art, there is a hum. And then talking with people about what they have made. It's so lovely to hear people talk about what they've made and why. It's always so brilliant.

Sophie: Highlight the same as last time. I am amazed at the consistency of the group. How we are a group and at the same time totally individual. The kind of energy as we were working, all going together at the same time totally individual. We had it last time with the photography and even more tonight. I liked the way people speak about the reality of their lives but in a simple way. The fact that we meet again in a month creates a reason for me to keep thinking in between.

David: The idea of asking permission from the machine. That's...just...sad. It's pathetic.

HECTOR: I never have bank account in Peru. Here, if I don't have an account in bank here, I'm nothing. Nobody can pay me.

David: When I used to work as a file clerk, the owner of the company gave me the money and I took it home and put it in this box and I didn't have to ask permission, just had it.

Jan: When people are working together and then talking about it. The unconscious popping in, it's very tasty and nice. I have twins in 12th grade and the college thing. It's amazing watching them and how they make choices and disappointments and successes and be aware of them not competing, sharing the joys and it's very deep, thick and human.

Katy: Many highlights. Hearing every person talk. Is it that this topic is bringing it out or that you all are like this anyway, but each person's mind is so interesting. Every time we meet. How someone's mind works is so interesting. Especially fascinating in this context of money. Tonight, I really put together two

thoughts together that I had never had before. What if we thought of money like we thought of natural resource. That's a fascinating idea to me and I was thinking about it this summer in South Africa.

Marty: It's rare that I get to see what things will look like in the future, after radical transformation has taken place regarding how we live as humans on the planet. Tonight – using art and the doors it opened – it gave me a glimpse of who we are and where we are headed and how much art-making is part of our genetic code.

Daisy: thanks so much for inviting us and for being flexible about the schedule. It was so rich what we got to do.

Marty: A friend of mine who has since died, said "I have to go now, I'm their leader and there go my followers."