

# Creativity and Transdisciplinarity: An Interview with Alfonso Montuori

Russ Volckmann

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—Russ Volckmann

*Russ: Alfonso Montuori, it is a real pleasure to talk with you. I've had a chance to think a bit about your life and your work, and one of the very first things that struck me was the fact that you are Italian and you hardly ever lived in Italy. What was that about?*

Alfonso: My father was a diplomat for the Italian government. He married my mother when they were in Portugal, and my dad then was transferred to Holland. Coincidentally, my mother is Dutch. I was born in Holland, and lived in Lebanon, Greece, and England, before I came to the US. Despite the fact that I had an Italian passport, I never lived in Italy. I didn't live in the country that issued one of my passports until 2007, when I became a dual U.S. citizen.

*Russ: It's really quite extraordinary, the impact of that kind of lifestyle on individuals. I'm an Army brat myself, so I lived many different places. I found you lived in the U.K. for a time. I got the impression that you were involved in music while you were there—is that correct?*

Alfonso: Absolutely. I played saxophone professionally in a number of bands for five years or so.

*Russ: Would you describe yourself as more like Coltrane or Desmond?*

Alfonso: (laughs) Well, I loved both of them, and I was always very much influenced by jazz, but I didn't really play jazz. That was an interesting time in London in the mid- to late-70's when the stranglehold of the big record companies was broken. Young bands always had the Catch-22 of needing a record deal to get a gig and needing a gig to get a record deal. That all broke down around then with the punk revolution. That also coincided with everyone and their dog creating independent record labels and putting out their own music, which is what I ended up doing. After playing in a number of different bands, I created Banana Records when I put together my own band. Initially the band was more of

a joke than anything else. It was really just an excuse for friends who were in different bands to get together and play wacky music we didn't think other people would like too much. But of course that happened to be the most successful band of the lot. We did a lot of really great gigs, we toured, recorded a radio show for the BBC, made some recordings that were well received, had a good agent and a good time. That was a nice stretch of time for me there.

*Russ: How would you describe the style of music you were playing if it wasn't jazz?*

Alfonso: That's an interesting question. When we started getting more successful and getting the attention of major record companies who wanted to sign us, they kept saying, "You obviously have a lot of fans, and we like the way you sound, and we like what you do, but we don't know what bin to put you in, in the record stores." This was in the day when there were still record stores and people would browse under different categories. They didn't know what to call us—rock, funk, jazz, comedy—we were a pretty crazy band. We crossed musical genres and that confused the hell out of them. We would do all kinds of stuff—we'd start every set by playing the theme from "Hawaii 5-0." From there, we'd go in any number of different directions and have a smattering of jazz, soul, bizarre tunes we'd write. We were like a psychedelic world-beat band—but not really!

*Russ: So you'd start with one of the favorite tunes for surf bands and then move into the rest of the world. (laughter)*

Alfonso: Exactly, and we had drums, bass, percussion, keyboard, guitar, trumpet, sax—we pulled it off.

*Russ: Does this diversity of taste that you seem to have had in any way predict directions that you moved in when you left music?*

Alfonso: Absolutely. For me, it's all autobiographical. All of the things that I'm looking at now in terms of creativity, transdisciplinarity and so on have their roots in my own experience. Things like people asking simple questions, such as, "Where are you from?" That always involved a story. I could never just say, "I'm from San Francisco." I'm not. It made me reflect on issues of identity. Sometimes I would just say, "I'm Italian," because I didn't have the energy to go into a spiel, or I'd brush it off by saying, "I'm from downtown Europe." But it felt more complex and anyway, saying I was Italian without actually having lived there felt somehow dishonest. So that definitely had an impact for me, because I believe that ultimately this complexity and diversity exists in every one of us, in different ways. It's just that for me the diverse cultural background made it more evident—it was a more glaring manifestation. It triggered a lot of my current interests. Categorization, disciplines, and narrow labeling inevitably mutilate the complexity of a human's life...

*Russ: And constrain the creative potential that's there as well.*

Alfonso: Exactly right! So I was also very interested in things like prejudice, racism and stereotyping, which all tied back to some of the work of people like Krishnamurti and the spiritual traditions that argued strongly against a tendency to label, categorize and think that we have these nice, ready-made understandings of what the world is really about. To me it was always far more complex and mysterious. No label or set of labels could do life justice. We live with this illusion that we know what's going on—maybe not cosmically, but at least in terms of everyday things, events, and interactions—but nothing could be further from the truth. I don't think we have a clue about anything. We just live with this delusion of familiarity.

*Russ: I know you did your dissertation at Saybrook with Béla Bánáthy and others. How did you move from the world of jazz into working on a Ph.D. there?*

Alfonso: I was in London in 1983 and I'd completed my B.A. at the University of London. Then the band broke up, as bands will; some friendships were broken. They've since been healed, but I was ready to get out. I didn't really feel any deep roots in England. England itself was going through a depression at that point, and there was a resurgence of nationalism. The Falklands War was going on at that time. There were right-wing racist movements like the British Movement and the National Front. I was always fascinated by California. The kind of people that I was interested in always seemed to come out of California, along with the music I was interested in, the writers that I liked, and so on. I decided to go check it out—surely the weather had to be better, and the food couldn't be any worse.

*Russ: (laughter) And in that process you found Saybrook.*

Alfonso: Yes. Initially I found the Monterey Institute of International Studies where I got my degree in International Relations. I had no idea what I was doing when I left London. I just went to an office on Baker Street in London and looked for a few universities that seemed to be in California. For some reason I thought I would do international relations—maybe because it was related to my experience living in different countries—I can't quite remember what my rationale was. I got a number of catalogs including one from San José State—I had no idea where San José was—and one from Berkeley that emphasized the difficulty in getting housing—and one from the Monterey Institute that had nice pictures of beaches and talked about the local seafood.

(laughter)

And I thought, "That sounds like the place for me!"

*Russ: Well I don't blame you. It's part of the reason I live here.*

Alfonso: Exactly! It was a beautifully soft landing. Monterey in 1983 was still a pretty boring and sleepy little town. So, in a sense it was perfect for me because there were no distractions. Actually, I thought there would be jazz—I didn't realize that jazz was only in Monterey three days out of the year for the Jazz Festival—so there wasn't any music

worth talking about. I suddenly found that I had fallen in love with research and writing. The world of ideas had always been my other love. My father was a well-respected philosopher, as well as a diplomat. He wrote extensively on the Socratic problem, and my maternal grandfather, who was the CEO of a multi-national, had an amazing library with really interesting and diverse material—Jung, Fromm, all sorts of philosophy from Plato to Bergson to Heidegger, economics, Yeats, Joyce, Henri Miller, and much more. I spent hours browsing. I was always buying tons of books and records—and it just turned out that after all that music, I now enjoyed playing with ideas a lot. I got my M.A. and then went to China to teach for a year, because I realized I didn't know anything about China. I taught at the Central South University in Changsha in Hunan Province, and that was a remarkable experience. I went back there for a conference on the work of Edgar Morin, and of course the changes from 1985 to 2005 were mind-boggling...

*Russ:*     *Fascinating.*

Alfonso: I came back from China and looked for a Ph.D. program. Again, this is one of the things that was very motivating for me later on—I talked with a lot of different people about my interests. People in psychology said, “Well, you should be in sociology,” Sociologists said, “Well, you should be in political science.” Political science folks said, “You know, this sounds more like philosophy,” and the philosophy people would say, “Try anthropology.” The anthropologists would send me back to psychology.

(laughter)

It didn't make any sense! Really, I wanted to work with Frank Barron at UC Santa Cruz. Frank was one of the major creativity researchers, but he warned me that UCSC would frown on my disciplinary promiscuity, so I had to look elsewhere. Before I met Frank I had no idea that there even was such a thing as creativity research out there. I only came across Frank's work because I was interested in the CIA's experiments with LSD. I had written a paper on it in Monterey and I knew that Frank knew about this frankly shocking “research.” Not that he was personally involved, but he was one of the people that played a considerable role in the psychedelic movement in the U.S., if only because he's the man who turned Tim Leary on. Frank was really serious about the potential and also about the dangers of psychedelics, and traced his roots back in the U.S. at Harvard, at least, to William James. He was actually thoughtful about the relationship of psychedelics to creativity and the evolution of consciousness.

*Russ:*     *Did creativity play a role in your choice of dissertation?*

Alfonso: It was absolutely central. My interest in creativity did not come from my musical experiences, initially. I had read Adorno's, Levinson's, Frankel-Brunswik's and Sanford's *Authoritarian Personality* in Monterey because of my interest in racism and prejudice. Then I came across Frank Barron's work. He had done a lot of the key work at the Institute of Personality Assessment and Research at Berkeley on articulating the characteristics of the creative person. I put the creative person and the authoritarian person side-by-side and I saw that they were practically opposites. The authoritarian

person would score high on intolerance of ambiguity; the creative person scored high on tolerance for ambiguity. The authoritarian person scored high on conformity; the creative person scored high on independence of judgment, and so on.

That was fascinating to me. I started to think about creativity not as something that's just confined to the arts and sciences, but as a way of being in the world. I started looking at educating for creativity as a way of educating for life in a complex, pluralistic, uncertain world. It seemed to me that creativity gave people the ability to respond to unforeseen situations, different situations and different kinds of people in a more creative and constructive kind of way. An authoritarian person would want to control or eliminate differences and surprises.

My experience with music and specifically with improvisation was very useful there, because it seemed to me the ability to improvise—to deal with the unforeseen, the unexpected, and in fact to generate it—was becoming essential for what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls “Liquid Life.” In the industrial, mechanical worldview of modernity we were educating for a “solid,” predictable, homogeneous factory life where everybody's part in life, in the social order, was pretty much established. Improvising there meant having to make something up because the “one right way” couldn't be followed for whatever reason—it was essentially a response to a mistake, and, second best, born of necessity. But in jazz, improvisation was at the heart of the process, a central value, rather than a remedial move. And that's also why jazz has been called “the sound of surprise.” So this is one way of articulating a tremendous shift in worldviews that reflects the centrality of creativity, and specifically an embodied creativity, in the moment.

*Russ: Interesting. Out of the U.K. comes the work of Sir Ken Robinson who I've interviewed for Integral Leadership Review. His work is on trying to promote more attention to fostering creativity in elementary and secondary education.*

Alfonso: Exactly. I think that's vital work. He's promoting a more complex and nuanced understanding of education and creativity. When I tell people I'm interested in creativity, I always want to hear what they think about creativity. How do they understand it? What does it mean to them? I'm interested in the implicit understandings of creativity. I think right now, we're going through sort of a transitional phase where there's a certain kind of creativity—an understanding of creativity that emerged in modernity—that is beginning to fade. It has to do with the lone genius—the “who” of creativity. It has to do with creativity being limited to the domains of the arts and sciences—the “where” of creativity. It has to do with the creative process portrayed as limited to the moment of insight, the moment the light bulb goes off—the “how” of creativity. There's a shift happening in our understanding of creativity that's quite significant, and I can even see it generationally. When you ask baby boomers about creativity and millennials about creativity, you get different responses.

*Russ: I would assume that what we are doing is going from the place of the individual creative act—the individual as a creator or having creative capabilities, and the*

*collective as a source of a creative phenomenon while recognizing that creativity very often is emerging from the dynamics of relationships, interactions and life conditions and a variety of variables—into a position of a both/and. There are the dynamics of creativity at the individual level as well as the collective dynamics of creativity. Is that the kind of thing you're getting at?*

Alfonso: Exactly! There's an emerging networked relational understanding of creativity, with more emphasis on everyday/everywhere creativity, and with popular books such as Gladwell's *Outliers*, an increasing awareness that yes, creativity also requires hard work, practice, etc., which counteracts the romantic myth of genius without learning.

When I started looking at the creativity research in the 80's, my experience of creativity had very much been playing in a band. But there was no research on creative groups in the literature, and there is not nearly as much as on the creative individual. I thought that was really interesting, because that also reflects what we think creativity is, where it can happen, and how our ways of thinking influence how we approach a phenomenon—think reductionism and individualism, in this case.

Until very recently, when people talked about creativity, they talked about it in terms of the creative person, process and product, PPP. In this frame, the “who” of creativity always has to be an individual. It can't be a group or a relational process. So inevitably, the “who” or the unit of analysis—the actor—is always an individual.

That's beginning to change. We're also starting to look at the individual as not being a closed system that's isolated from the world. We're looking at the fact that creators work in *domains* that have a history. Coltrane and Charlie Parker were both great innovators, but they were part of jazz. They were part of an existing discourse that they had already internalized. This inquiry also starts challenging what our understanding of the individual is. The discourse refers to individual and social dimensions, but we can't forget that the individual is also social. We are in society and society is in us.

*Russ: It would seem to me too that one of the things that would be useful in terms of thinking about creativity would be that of perspective. From a first-person perspective, something that may be creative for the individual in terms of his or her own life experience might be different from that which would emerge from a second-person relationship. That might be different from the point of view of an “objective observer.”*

Alfonso: It's the classic case of someone who comes up with a very interesting and creative solution to a problem, but that doesn't mean it hasn't been done before. Now the fact that that person comes up with an interesting, original solution is a sign of creativity. It feels creative and it is creative from that person's first-person experience and in that context. You frequently have this with children. Children are constantly creatively reinventing the equivalent of the wheel. From their perspective, it's a creative process and a creative product.

A different example: My wife and I like to travel, for business and pleasure. Occasionally she'll go into a hotel and say, "Well, it's clear that whoever designed this hotel has never actually stayed in a room they designed." And I think that's a brilliant insight. Academically, there's great research on this in Flores' and Winograd's book, *Understanding Computers and Cognition*, and the whole issue of first person perspectives. Very often, though, that's completely left out, and there's stuff that looks great on paper. Even when you see a drawing of it and you think it's fantastic and chic and elegant...the bottom line is, there's no place to put stuff in the bathroom, you know? What do you do with your stuff? This may look great, but there's no functionality.

*Russ:* Before we leave the stage of your dissertation, your Dissertation Committee Chair was Béla Bánáthy. What was his role in your thinking around this theory?

Alfonso: I was really lucky, because Béla Bánáthy was a wonderful teacher. Béla had deep roots in the systems world and had been President of the ISSS—the International Society for the Systems Sciences—so I was really happy and privileged to work with someone who had that kind of in-depth experience of the field and the community. Béla was very idealistic and very optimistic about the ability of systems approaches to be able to make a difference in the design of educational systems. He really stressed the "thinking" in systems thinking, and emphasized the radical nature of the shift implied by taking systems theory and cybernetics seriously. I also read and then met Heinz Von Foerster, Paul Watzlawick, the Italian epistemologists Mauro Ceruti and Gianluca Bocchi, and finally Edgar Morin, who developed the notion of complex thought.

*Russ:* So this whole piece about how we think—as you say—it has been an important piece. Can you say a bit about what that is?

Alfonso: Growing up in different cultures and always enjoying being exposed to different perspectives—when I was in London, I was a university student, I was playing in a band and working as an interpreter for the police in Scotland Yard. My parents were diplomats, so I moved around in a number of circles ... And today, I have multiple lives: in academia, in the consulting world, and in music—I perform with and produce my wife, Kitty Margolis's work: she's a very well respected jazz singer (<http://www.kittymargolis.com/>), and working on her CDs, with such incredible musicians as Joe Henderson, Roy Hargrove, and others, has been an invaluable experience for me, not to mention a lot of fun.

From an early age, I realized that individuals and cultures construct worlds differently. That sort of became a continuing theme for me. Then in grad school, I read Thomas Kuhn's work and immersed myself in the philosophy of social science. I became very interested in the underlying assumptions of Western academic inquiry and Western thought in general. That's when I became interested in epistemology, in how we think about particular issues, the different frames we create, and how they both obscure and reveal. My personal frame was that it was all a creative process. I also realized that thinking has a certain logic, a certain architecture, if you will.

To give you an example, I think many misunderstandings arise about creativity because it is a paradoxical phenomenon. Creative individuals are said to be both more playful and more grounded in “reality,” both rebellious and conservative, both “crazier” and “saner,” and so on. But this requires a different way of thinking, a way of thinking that goes beyond our common logic of either/or. Because otherwise it’s just, “see, creative people are crazy,” and we focus on one dimension without taking into account the other. But if they’re both crazier *and* saner, what does that mean? What are the implications for our definition of psychological health? What does that look like? There’s also a shift to an ongoing process rather than a “thing,” a broader spectrum of psychological and experiential possibilities, a different view of identity, and so on.

*Russ: When I think about systems theory, one of the critiques of pure systems theory is that it does not attend to those kinds of variables (what cannot be measured directly). Even in the case of transdisciplinarity, that whole piece about what we cannot directly observe has not played a central role—at least in Nicolescu’s work, other than the notion of the included middle. But it does have a potential in the sense that in transdisciplinarity we’re talking about levels of reality and complexity and the logic of the included middle.*

*Actually, in an earlier issue of Integral Review, I have an interview with Nicolescu about this. We’ll have an article by a philosopher from Holy Cross, Predrag Cicovaci appearing in the October 2009 Integral Leadership Review entitled, “Transdisciplinarity as an Interactive Method: A Critical Reflection on the Three Pillars of Transdisciplinarity.” The criticism that he brings is that there has not been adequate attention to a fourth pillar that he would add which is values.*

*In light of that kind of work, how has transdisciplinarity become a significant approach/perspective/methodology in your work?*

Alfonso: I have interpreted transdisciplinarity drawing on my own experience. So for me, I have four dimensions of transdisciplinarity. For me, it’s inquiry-based rather than discipline-based. As an example, if I get called in by an organization that wants to be more creative, if I approach the job exclusively with the disciplinary perspective of the psychology of creativity, then what I’ll do is to focus on individuals and give them a “creativity tool kit” so they can explore lateral thinking and other things in order to be more creative *individually*. Here you have an example of how a disciplinary lens directs you to certain kinds of approaches. An approach that’s inquiry-based starts with the phenomenon in question, in this case looking at the organization and there many, many different things going on. That includes individuals, relationships, organizational culture, organizational structure, openness to risk-taking, the business climate, and all these issues that are typically addressed in different disciplines. For me, the important thing isn’t the discipline, but the issue that I’m addressing. Then you bring in *pertinent knowledge* from whatever disciplines are relevant.

The second dimension of transdisciplinarity is something I call the “meta-paradigmatic.” In other words, the question then arises that you’re going to be drawing from all these different disciplines. Do you have to know everything about everything?



It's a typical question that's asked of people who want to do interdisciplinary work. The answer, I think, is no. If you're going to be drawing on other disciplines, you have to have an understanding of the historical emergence of that discipline, and you also have to have an understanding of the underlying paradigmatic assumptions. For instance, in the case of creativity, a sociologist and anthropologist have historically looked at creativity as a social phenomenon. They tend to be methodological holists, so for them, the individual is not important. For them, the individual is epiphenomenal in the same way that for psychologists, who are, by and large, methodological individualists, society is epiphenomenal.

If you look at most of the studies of famous creative persons, there's not too much interest in the historical context. The focus is usually personality and cognitive processes. For sociologists, it's the other way around. It's like, "Hey, look, if it hadn't been Darwin it would have been Alfred Russell Wallace. If it hadn't been Freud, it would have been someone else." In their view, society had collectively reached a point where certain questions and certain issues were ready to pop. Someone would have figured this stuff out sooner or later. So these are very, very different fundamental assumptions, very different units of analysis. Here we get into the philosophy of social science. It's how you create your understanding of creativity.

To make a long story short, no, you don't have to know everything about everything, but you have to know how different kinds of knowledge are constructed. How is knowledge created and constructed?

The third dimension of transdisciplinarity is that you have to have a thinking that allows for complexity, so it connects that contextualized information. It can't be reductive and disjunctive. It's not either/or. It has to connect and contextualize, because otherwise none of this makes sense. There's a common criticism that's legitimate of many forms of systems theory, namely that it is a form of mapping. The kind of systems-influenced work I'm interested in is quite different, and is fundamentally epistemological in nature.

When you look at the organization of both universities and the organization of thinking, there are interesting architectural parallels. When you look at the university, you have these different departments usually housed in different buildings. Disciplines have all these different branches. Knowledge is reduced to finer and finer levels of granularity. That's a reflection of the way we were traditionally taught to think—by reducing and isolating and getting down to the smallest variable—the logic of either/or until you reach the bottom. The university is the concretization and institutionalization of a certain way of thinking. So for transdisciplinary work, you have to learn how to contextualize and connect. That's originally what systems theory was attempting to do. The original mission of Von Bertalanffy was to create that kind of transdisciplinary language.

*Russ: It seems to me that one of the drivers of Nicolescu's work is also the connection between theory and research; seeking to understand and practice. It sounds like that's something you share with him.*

Alfonso: Absolutely. Transdisciplinarity is not at all some abstract, purely theoretical endeavor for me. It emerges out of a real need to address the complexity of life. And for me, the fourth dimension is that you have to integrate the observer into the observed, the researcher into the research—the person actually dealing with this complexity and trying to make sense of it. You have to address the researcher and his/her perspective and values and where s/he is coming from. You can't just bracket that or ignore that. For me, that's an essential part of transdisciplinarity.

In both of the programs that I designed at CIIS, we start out by asking people about their passions. When they tell us, that in itself becomes an opportunity for inquiry. You ask, why they are passionate about one topic but not another. This gives an opportunity for self-reflection, self-inquiry and finding out why one cares about something specific—and in fairness, why you would want to spend 4-6 years and a lot of money working on it. As a result, a number of different issues emerge from their own life stories. So passion in this sense is good. We want passion—intrinsic motivation is central to creativity. At the same time we don't want people to be blinded by their passion, so once again you have an opportunity for self-inquiry.

*Russ: From the point of view of the inquiry and the relationship to the transdisciplinarity perspective, doesn't this also speak to the value of recognizing the collective dynamics of that inquiry? For instance, when you go into a system as a consultant, you're engaging those people in that system in the inquiry. So the exploration or the design of the approach to generating creativity within the organization is going to be something that emerges out of that collective inquiry.*

Alfonso: Absolutely—I couldn't agree more! When I talk to people about creativity in organizations, especially in a consulting context, they often expect me to come in with a specific process already in place, because that's what they're used to. I tell them each time that there is no cookie-cutter approach I embrace. I think it has to start with a collaborative research process in which we figure out what the best way is to facilitate the development of creativity in any particular context. That's definitely part of the process.

*Russ: So transdisciplinarity and your interest in the metaparadigmatic also lead us into meta-theory. A couple of examples that have gained attention in recent years include Wilber's work in integral theory, and Ervin László's work in his theory of everything in the Akashic Field. How would you characterize, from your point of view, the transdisciplinarity overlay, the perspectives being offered by those two leading thinkers?*

Alfonso: They each open a range of possibilities in different ways. Wilber does something I have always found very important, and that's expanding our understanding of human nature and of human possibilities. Underlying political, psychological, sociological, and essentially all theories in the social sciences is an understanding of human nature. These

were still addressed explicitly by philosophers—from Plato to Hegel. But as the various disciplines spun off philosophy, the fundamental philosophical assumptions—such as the nature of human nature—were generally not addressed anymore. Specialization led to these key questions remaining un-addressed, which is why political theory has mostly barely addressed Freud, let alone Maslow. Another thing Wilber does very well is showing how much is typically left out of any particular inquiries and the extent to which they come out of a particular frame.

*Russ: He points at our blind spots.*

Alfonso: Exactly. What's also so interesting about Wilber and László is they are really pushing out into areas beyond what is considered safe within traditional academic boundaries and context. They are independent researchers who don't necessarily have to play within those kinds of safety margins in order to be assured of tenure or respectability or whatever. They can do that. In the programs I designed at CIIS we want to capture that excitement and creativity, and create a new context for academic research.

*Russ: You've had a relationship over the years with Ervin László, and as I recall, you edited an edition of World Futures.*

Alfonso: I'm the associate editor of *World Futures*. I've known Ervin for about 20 years, he's a truly remarkable individual. *World Futures* is the journal of the General Evolution Research Group, an interesting group of researchers that included Bela, Riane Eisler and David Loye, Karl Pribram, Allan Combs, Ilya Prigogine and Ralph Abraham among others. I think Ervin was interested in having these multidisciplinary dialogues and finding ways in which researchers in different disciplines could draw on these evolutionary and systems concepts. A lot of important work has been done, and these ideas are now becoming more widespread.

*Russ: In the field of leadership studies, there was an attempt under the auspices of James MacGregor Burns to use a multidisciplinary process to create a general theory of leadership. They published a book titled The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership under the editorship of Goethals and Sorenson. What is most striking about the results of their work that took place over several years was the fact that they did not, in fact, achieve a general theory of leadership. One of the things that I argued with Sorenson about was that one of the key reasons they did not succeed, at least from my perspective, was because they started from the point of view of multi-disciplines, and not with a meta-theoretical perspective. I'm wondering if you have any reflections on the importance of meta-theory and the practice efforts that we are concerned with.*

Alfonso: It's all too common to get people from different disciplines together and have dialogues that really don't go anywhere. Ultimately, there is little understanding of each other's fundamental, underlying assumptions. So the participants are really coming at issues from different theoretical perspectives, and are literally not speaking the same language.

I think a meta-theoretical perspective is really important. That's one of the reasons why I think a kind of thinking that is more open to connection, contextualizing, and draws upon systems and related theories, but isn't confined to them, is very important. It addresses some of the key fundamental issues and provides a language that can go across disciplines. Without that—without understanding each other's assumptions; without a shared meta-language—it's really difficult. Otherwise, you're just comparing positions rather than understanding them and communicating about them.

*Russ: What is the contribution of László's "theory of everything" to our efforts at finding a framework or perspective that helps us embrace the whole?*

Alfonso: One of the things that he did, particularly in the early days when he was still widely identified as a systems philosopher was to articulate some of these basic concepts in books like *Evolution* and the early systems books. I think many of those concepts can be used effectively to provide that kind of language and some basic concepts that cross any number of different disciplines. Just the concept of system, and the distinction between open and closed systems is very valuable, and in need of much more study. But not just in the context of ideas and how we use them. I think essentialism in all its forms is explicitly marked by a form of closed system thinking, for instance. Once you start looking at it that way, a number of interesting implications emerge. Over the last 10-15 years or so, I've found that Edgar Morin's work has been very useful to me. His work is not so much in the tradition of the Santa Fe Institute, but more on the epistemology of complexity. That's what really makes a difference. What is particularly interesting about Morin is that his work, which has already made a profound impact in the social sciences is now being recognized by biologists as leading the way beyond the reductive perspective of molecular biology. That's quite a feat, when you consider the contempt much of (post-)modern philosophy and social science is held in by "hard" scientists.

More broadly, what we need is a kind of education that prepares us for complexity, interdependence and uncertainty. But traditionally we have been taught that simplicity, isolation of variables and certainty are the *summum bonum* of inquiry. Our thinking has reflected that bias. In order for transdisciplinarity to thrive, we have to cultivate a new way of thinking, and, to be clear, a thinking that is not isolated from feelings, intuitions, and experience.

*Russ: Despite the resistance of academia to some of these things, there are glimmers of hope around the world in Brazil and South Africa and Europe where educational institutions are trying to take on transdisciplinary perspectives in their approach. I've just recently learned that Arizona State University has taken that on in a number of programs. I'm trying to find out more about that, and I'm going to Tempe for about six weeks later this month. Any hints as to someone I can talk with?*

Alfonso: No, I am actually more familiar with what has been happening outside the US. I've just recently found out about ASU. I've been meaning to look into it. I was down at the University of Vera Cruz in Mexico not long ago. They have a really innovative master's degree in transdisciplinarity and sustainability. They are very influenced by Morin's

work. The head of that program, Enrique Vargas, was about to head out to ASU to study their work.

As you said, in Brazil, there is a great deal is going on in this area, and I was just in Peru where I was invited to be on the board of the Edgar Morin Center for the Study of Epistemology of Complexity at Ricardo Palma University in Lima. In Italy, at the University of Bergamo, there is a transdisciplinary doctorate, and there is some truly remarkable work going on out there. I'm thinking particularly of the work of Mauro Ceruti, Gianluca Bocchi, Sergio Manghi. At the University of Messina in Sicily, they are doing inspiring work on the philosophy of science and in education. In South Africa, John Van Breda and his colleagues are also doing some wonderful things looking at sustainability from a transdisciplinary perspective. So there is definitely a movement in the right direction.

Bruce Wilshire wrote a fascinating book about the perils of disciplinarity 20 years ago, *The Moral Collapse of the University*. He discussed disciplinary boundaries, and used Mary Douglas' work on purity and pollution to illustrate the way that new faculty members were purified of any polluting influences of other disciplines, precisely because there are a lot of issues having to do with territory, identity, where you belong, where funds come from, and also with the fact that if people are starting to play around with all these different concepts from different disciplines in one particular paper, then my education has to change. I can't just be a psychologist. I have to start spreading out, and the implications are huge. It's not just the students who are facing these challenges—it's the faculty, perhaps above all! So we still have a struggle ahead of us.

*Russ: I'd say this is just the beginning.*

Alfonso: There are signs that we will, by necessity, be heading in this direction. I think one of the important things to illustrate is this is not some abstract, theoretical effort. This is really an attempt to deal with the world and to do so with extremely practical implications. It's perhaps not surprising that transdisciplinarity is now associated so often with ecology and sustainability: one discipline just can't do the trick.

*Russ: Can you speak a bit to creative inquiry? We touched on that earlier.*

Alfonso: Creative inquiry is essential to both the doctoral and the master's programs that I designed at CIIS. If you look at the definition of a Ph.D. dissertation, it's defined as an *original* contribution to your field. But the bottom line is, no one ever talks to you about what "original" is, unless they're talking about plagiarism. I thought, "Well, what if we took this definition of a dissertation seriously?" Then, by definition, if it has to be an original contribution, then the dissertation has to be a creative product, and, the educational experience has to be a creative process. How about that as a starting point?

What I'm interested in is an educational process that is a creative process, whereby the process of inquiry itself is creative—where we are also engaged in a process of self-creation as scholars, as participants in this remarkable time, and ultimately as human

beings. Any kind of university or educational experience has a tendency to change people, even a little bit. But what if we made that explicit? If a person is going to spend five years or so working on a dissertation, let's look at that as an opportunity for you to engage in self-inquiry and self-creation, as well as the creation of an "original contribution to the field."

When someone emerges from a program with a Ph.D., what does that really mean? What are you going to have your doctorate in? Why are you doing your research on this subject? Where do you situate yourself in your field? What contributions do you want to make? Who are you becoming? How are you spending your time? In that sense, we're making some of the things that are implicit in the process very explicit. We're framing the whole thing as a creative process, and I think the results have been very interesting. On the one hand, it's natural, and students think it makes a lot of sense. On the other hand, it scares the bejesus out of them. It's arguably a lot harder and more challenging, but well worth it.

Recently, education has fallen into more of what I would call a reproductive approach, which involves reproducing what the faculty tells you to in order to get the grade. It's also reproducing a certain form of social organization and a way of being in the world. While students really like the idea of creative inquiry, typically they tend to have a little bit of an existential crisis, when they actually have to engage in it. It's the anxiety that comes with freedom. Because at the same time they're thinking, "This is exciting!," they're also thinking, "I may be free, and you may be telling me that it's good to be creative, but what's going to happen to my grade, and how do I know what I really like? Am I really creative? What do I really care about?" It raises a lot of deep questions. So inquiry and self-inquiry are inextricably connected.

*Russ: This reminds me of William Perry's work and his research on students in particular. He has a model that, with all its nuances, has a dozen or so different levels. His research showed—and this has been replicated in research particularly with engineering students in Colorado and Pennsylvania and probably elsewhere—that in a 4-year college education, students initially see the faculty member as the authority figure with the knowledge. During their education, they shift through several levels, and by the time they graduate, their locus of authority is more internal rather than external. Yet, I'm hearing you suggest that at the graduate level now, we still have the phenomenon—maybe socially inspired or inspired by the nature of the educational system—that even though I may have reached a point where I privately might rely on my own internal locus of authority, publically I need to continue to pay attention to the external one.*

Alfonso: Right. And this is the case all over the country. There's lots of new research about the way the Millennial generation has been educated, the implications, and the challenges they're facing after being hounded about grades. I like the reference to Perry's work, because I differentiate between what I call reproductive, narcissistic, and creative inquiry. If you break Perry down into those three main perspectives, it goes like this: In the beginning, or reproductive stage, the authority is all with the instructor. The next stage is where the students think it's all relative: with the collapse of authority, "the one right

answer,” they think anything goes. This is a practice that translates into the students feeling it’s all about them, all about their feelings, all about where they are, their “subjectivity,” all the stuff education formerly rejected—the return of the repressed, right?

(laughter)

But at the same time, at that stage they may not understand what counts as significant anymore, so they don’t appreciate the value of tradition, craft, hard work, and so on. They don’t appreciate that some statements may be more valuable than others and that leads to the more narcissistic stuff. Creative inquiry is about cultivating a much greater sense of context, more of a sense of collective self-creation. I think that’s when things get really interesting. It definitely maps onto the Perry work.

The way I see it, it’s about an ongoing process of creative inquiry, where the process is the product. I think this is similar to a jazz performance of a “standard” from the Great American Songbook, which offers an opportunity to perform together, to inquire together, to allow for the emergence of novelty from the interactions of the participants. The point is not to find THE answer, but to find ever greater opportunities to continue the inquiry, illuminating new dimensions of what may be a well known song, finding new forms of expression, new ways of being together and developing new insights into the material we’re given. Are you Coltrane or Desmond, Miles or Satchmo, Elvin or Max, Jaco Pastorius or Paul Chambers, Herbie Hancock or Art Tatum, Ella or Sarah or Carmen or Betty or Kitty? Are you finding your own voice, and articulating new insights into the songs that can be meaningful and generative for you, for your context, for other people? That’s our challenge.

*Russ: And this is what you’re trying to foster at CIIS?*

Alfonso: It is—in the leadership program, in the doctoral program, and in my consulting work with corporations and artists.

*Russ: Alfonso, I thank you very much for our time together, and I hope this has been as interesting for you as it has been for me to hear the broad spectrum of work that you’ve done and the interests that you have.*

Alfonso: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to dialog with you; I’ve enjoyed it a lot.