

# On Facilitation & Purpose

By Donald Factor

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This is an excerpt from a letter I wrote to the organizers of "The Sundance Gathering" December 1994, organized in Utah by Bill Isaacs and Margaret Wheatley amongst others. It is aimed at clarifying the difference between our approach and Bill's.

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## An open letter

....As you may be aware Anna and I worked closely with David and Saral Bohm for ten years. During that time the idea of group dialogue emerged and grew. Because the project involved ideas that were subtle and quite new to the culture it seemed important to try to clarify, so far as we could, what we were attempting. I, along with David Bohm and Peter Garrett, wrote a paper entitled "Dialogue - A Proposal" as a starting point. Of course, since David's death the nature of what we began continues to unfold.

One reason for this letter is that I have noticed what I believe is a deep confusion that has arisen amongst many of those who are interested in dialogue and that I believe ought to be addressed in the sort of gathering that you have arranged. It seems to me that this can best be expressed through a consideration of two topics that I take to be crucial to both the theory and practice of dialogue - at least from a Bohmian point of view.

They are:

- Facilitation
- Purpose

Notions of the need for facilitation arose early in the development of dialogue because of the fact that the nature of the activity seemed to lack any obvious precursors in our general culture. We were unable to find acceptable models that were relevant to our intentions. Not even T Groups which appeared to have much in common with what we were after seemed entirely to fit. Patrick DeMare's work with median groups in London was the most relevant but, unfortunately, remained relatively unknown. And "action" oriented methods seemed to derive from very different assumptions. Because of this, in introducing people to dialogue David Bohm used to take the approach of conducting a two or three day seminar discussing with them his notions of the nature of thought as a system and how it tends to lead inevitably to self-deception, before introducing them to dialogue. When the dialogue began he then behaved, not as a facilitator, leader or expert but as an engaged participant. Of course, this must be seen in the light of the fact that he was well-known and that most participants came primarily because of him. However, his intention was to make dialogue a conversation among equals where everyone's ideas,

opinions or theories would be taken seriously but also be vulnerable to challenge and inquiry.

Since his death we have attempted to continue our exploration in this same direction. These days there are no stars or perceived leaders to whom members of the group can look for aid or advise. Participation has thus come to be seen as a collective undertaking, a mutual responsibility for what goes on \_ or what doesn' t go on. If someone attempts to control the group process or to guide it toward his or her objectives or personal viewpoint it is incumbent on other members of the group to query this, no matter what authority might be claimed. If an individual in a group feels that the conversation has become stuck, circular or out of line with the intentions of dialogue, then it is important for that person to say so in order that the whole group can look at what is actually happening. The intent is neither to criticise nor to alter what is happening but to try and see how it arises and what it means.

Clearly, if a designated facilitator takes on this sort of role then the other participants will expect him or her to do the intervening and keep the dialogue "on course." No further thinking will be required nor will there be much possibility of insight. Whatever learning occurs will derive largely from giving attention to an external authority rather than from any first-hand recognition. Further, since the facilitator plays a role that is different from that of the rest of the group, s/he will be limited in his or her ability to fully participate. We have noticed that if one or more participants remain relatively aloof from the nitty-gritty of the dialogue then a subtle \_ or sometimes not so subtle \_ sense of being observed, judged, manipulated or studied, by the one who necessarily has to protect his or her vulnerability, will arise and tend to limit the possibilities for expression in the whole group.

I accept that this non-interventionist approach is not shared by all practitioners of dialogue. I am not arguing that it is "the one true path" but I am raising this issue because I believe that both the interventionist approaches and the non-interventionist approaches have validity, but in different realms. Can they, somehow, be harmonised? Frankly, it seems to me that a blending of these methods would be extremely difficult because at least one core assumption is not shared. I will refer more to that in the following section on purpose.

But first I want to mention that what I am suggesting, here, is an approach that treats the common occurrence of frustration in dialogue as an unavoidable and necessary product of the process itself. In my experience frustration is the one thing that is universal in a group' s experience and this appears to also be the case in our entire culture. Generally, frustration will lead, on one hand to alienation or on the other to violence. It could be argued that a great deal of our culture is dedicated to distracting us from our frustrations in an attempt at defusing them. The painful experience of frustration is, therefore, something that needs to be sustained in the dialogue so that its meaning can be displayed and understood. I have come to suspect that frustration may have to be seen as the crucial motivating force that can drive the dialogue deeper into unknown territory and thus toward the experience of creative insight. If this is the case, then a facilitator can serve little purpose other than to help the other members of the group to reduce such uncomfortable periods so that the conversation will flow along a course that is more

satisfying or satisfactory to the desires, assumptions and agendas of those concerned. Frustration does not require facilitation.

My second topic is purpose. As we suggested in "[Dialogue - A Proposal](#)":

Usually people gather together either to accomplish a task or to be entertained, both of which can be described as predetermined purposes. But by its very nature Dialogue is not consistent with any such purposes beyond the interest of its participants in the unfoldment and revelation of the deeper collective meanings that may be revealed.

The moment that somebody turns dialogue into an event for which money is charged, or uses it to aid an organisation then, it seems to me, that it has, implicitly, taken on a predetermined purpose. It must, at the very least, satisfy the desires of those who foot the bill or give a good impression to those who have paid the price of admission. If the facilitator is working as an entrepreneur then this concern is magnified since his or her need to make a living also becomes part of the purpose. Now, I have no objection to this in and of itself. What concerns me is the confusion between this and the kind of dialogue that David Bohm and those of us who persist in continuing his work value highly.

There are also many obvious similarities between these approaches but this in turn raises the issue of what Bohm called "similar differences and different similarities". (See: Bohm & Peat: Science Order and Creativity) These, he argued, are crucial to how thought organises our perceptions of reality and why we so often get it wrong. He also pointed out that the strong desire - often experienced as a necessity - for practical outcomes of an activity are generally the result of deep cultural assumptions that need, along with all other assumptions, to be inquired into. In this context he suggested that the meaning of dialogue lies outside our culture and that dialogue might be a valuable way to begin to transform the culture as a whole.

At the time that we wrote "[Dialogue - A Proposal](#)" we added a final section to address the question of dialogue in existing organisations. But I now believe that our view was too optimistic and that it also may have added to the confusion that concerns me. I suppose Patrick deMare' s comment to me about the sort of dialogue that he and Bohm envisioned sums up the difference. "Yes, dialogue is very subversive."

No organisation wants to be subverted. No organisation exists to be dissolved. An organisation is, by definition a conservative institution. If you didn' t want to conserve something, why would you organise? Even if an organisation runs into serious trouble - if, perhaps, its market or reason for existence vanishes \_ there remains a tremendous resistance to change. (And, by the way, our larger culture is also an organisation.) I suggest that the most one can hope for is a change in the more superficial elements which would naturally occur as an organisation co-opts (See: Schon, D. "Beyond the Stable State") some of dialogue' s ethic of inquiry. And maybe that is all that is required to accomplish its aims. But any deeper change, any change that might threaten the very meaning and therefore the existence of the organisation or its power relations would tend to be rejected - perhaps subtly and tacitly - because such vulnerability would not only be threatening to those within the group, but almost certainly to those who perceive from

without - perhaps from higher up the corporate ladder - what this subgrouping of their organisation is getting up to.

In such situations then some form of direction is obviously required. I do not mean to argue against a process that works. What is more interesting to me are the questions, "Is it possible to sustain a group (and to sustain it as a creative enterprise) without a pre-existing purpose?" And "Is there value in attempting this?"

My tentative reply to these questions would be that it can be sustained and that it does have value, but that to realise this requires a very unusual level of commitment on the part of those involved. It means, first of all, that participation in a dialogue group ought to be sustained for a long period of time. This is especially difficult in the sort of process that I have been describing because there is no clear idea where it is heading nor what might unfold. There is much doubling back and repetition. In time, though, the various rhythm' s of the process can be perceived. This sort of dialogue is about the process of thought, not its products. If it is to be sustained gratification must be postponed - maybe, indefinitely. But in the meanwhile learning does take place, often subtly and as an integral part of the process. This learning does not necessarily improve the functioning of the group because the group is always attempting to progress into unknown territory. However, it does tend to get translated into other activities where creativity can be released. It' s all very non-linear and ambiguous and frustrating and doesn' t sit easily with our normal cultural assumptions. But for me it has been of immense value.

This is some of my present thinking. I hope that it might help to stimulate further exploration. We would be grateful for some feedback on these issues which we believe are very important along with any other comments you feel might be helpful. Anna and I both hope the gathering goes well and look forward to hearing about it.

Yours sincerely,

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