

Issue No. 67 - October 200

Dialogue

Some thoughts on the dialogue and the Now issue: for me Dialogue is to connect with people, very complicated in a lot of ways.

The question is: whether to do something spontaneous or refrain from doing it (writing this letter, sharing a poem), to say something from the heart (positive or negative) or keep your mouth shut (dilemma), to embrace and hug freely (general) or to withhold.

The written contributions in the "Now Issue" I'll leave to the thinkers. As a doer, that would take too much out of me. I enjoy so much the meetings. I always enjoy so much the meetings, I always feel excited to come to one and be alert to participate in whatever is going on.

Ingrid Sweeney

Issue 70 – January 2000

Dialogue in Canberra from Dave Knowles

The writer of the following note, originally a contribution to the Bohmian Dialogue email list, has been associated with a regular group which has been meeting in Canberra for the last 15 years. I met Dave through my connection with the Australian Transpersonal Association in particular the email list he has been managing for the Association. He came to the August Greville Street meeting and we are hoping that will be the first of some interesting exchanges. Ed.

It's a mysterious thing this dialogue - even more mysterious for me in that I am not a member of any Dialogue group, yet have found out through conversation with a friend, Alan, who "hosts" one, how uncannily similar the operation of our Men's Group is. I have often wondered in the last year or so what makes the regular fortnightly breakfast meeting of this loose grouping of somewhat grizzled men so satisfying. No agenda - no plan: sometimes we just eat breakfast - sometimes the usual male-type thing on how well your carburettor works, sometimes a plunge into the meaning of life, sometimes the deep listening to one of us with a life-problem.

And yes - sometimes dialogue, or conversation, or argument, or counselling, or musing, or thoughtful silence, or jokes. It would seem to me that the common thread is the intent brought to this - that we all are prepared to listen first and especially to be sensitive to any sort of unusual need of the part of another. The intriguing common thread is that we have just about all been through some form of Lifeline training and (in most cases) the subsequent answering of crisis telephone calls, though few of us are still practising this. I would guess we have learnt to not ride our own hobby-horses so hard, but to exercise some degree of empathy and it is this that provides the stable underpinning of unpredictable and satisfying dialogue.

Alan has pointed me at the Bohmian underpinnings of Dialogue and that sat easy with me. I feel privileged to find myself in a group that sort of stumbled across something similar by "accident". To extend my experience and satisfy my curiosity, I am now planning to make the trip from Canberra to Sydney to attend the Greville Street meeting. About the facilitation aspect: the role of "facilitator" pops up occasionally as a transient mantle that can be taken on by anyone as they see fit and then discarded again. It quite often leads to a temporary meta-discussion about what are we doing here anyway. This is usually defused by someone asking if we'd like another sausage or something.

Dave Knowles

Issue 76 –November 2001

Open Dialogue - What it is and could be. – From Terry O'Brien

These notes are an attempt to summarize my understanding of Open Dialogue, drawing on eight or more year's involvement in exploring the practice.

Open Dialogue is a whole and creative way of communicating and relating. It begins with self-knowing - and moves through a process of enquiry, exploration, and shared meaning - to a unified state of fellowship and communion.

'Dialogue' comes from its Greek derivative *dialogos*. **Logos** means - 'the word', or as we are applying it - 'the meaning of the word'. **Dia** means 'through' - it doesn't mean two, thus—'through the word'. A dialogue can be among any number of people, not just two. This suggests a stream of meaning flowing among, through, and between the participants.

Communion is the ultimate communication. As we venture 'through' (dia) the 'meaning' (logos) - of our conditioned responses, we may experience communion as an unconditioned reality—a state of non- separation. For me this is no longer a proposition - it is a real. Traditionally, a dialogue is understood to mean a conversation between two or more persons aimed at finding an answer to a particular question, or arguing through a difference of opinion to try to reach agreement or compromise. Since the early 1980's, a different approach, based on a proposal by physicist David Bohm, has become more widespread and increasingly popular.

He experimented with the process of Open Dialogue, as a way to communicate **meaning** by exploring **thought**, in relation to **consciousness**. As he said –

"If we are to survive and lead meaningful lives, it is critical that we reach a better understanding of that question." - (the question of how we think, and create meaning) Together with his colleagues Donald Factor, and Peter Garrett, he stated in the paper: 'Dialogue, a Proposal' - *"We are proposing a kind of collective inquiry, not only into the content of what each of us says, thinks and feels, but also into the underlying motivations, assumptions and beliefs that lead us to do so."*

Open Dialogue is not an ideology, nor is it a debate. It is a process of enquiry to gain **insight**, rather than answers - into questions of relationship, conflict, intelligence, and the nature of human thinking. It is also an expression of art – **the art of creative change**.

Dialogue, as it stands at present, seems to have overlooked Bohm's original intention. Many individuals, and organisations now use Dialogue as a practical format to improve relations, within specific groups, by creating an environment for more effective communication. This introduction will look closely into what Bohm believed was a more serious priority—to explore the possibility of a fundamental transformation in human consciousness.

"...it is proposed that a form of free dialogue may well be one of the most effective ways of investigating the crisis which faces society, and indeed the whole human nature and consciousness today. Moreover, it may turn out that such a form of free exchange of ideas and information is of fundamental relevance for transforming culture, and freeing it of destructive misinformation, so that creativity can be liberated."

The form of dialogue suggested by David Bohm can bring about greater awareness of ourselves, and of each other, as we interact together. This in turn facilitates greater co-operation and

understanding among people, living and working together in various communities. Significantly, it reveals underlying potential to change the very way we think—the nature of our consciousness.

If we are serious about exploring this potential, and if we see a need to, then what we talk about in dialogue has to be secondary to listening and questioning—to first discover what it is to be a conscious human being. From this common ground, we can move through this process to reach beyond our self-enclosing barriers to a new meaning - a shared meaning - as it unfolds in the living present. This could benefit a more creative and quite different culture – perhaps in every strata of society.

From a business perspective, open dialogue can provide a unique opportunity for those involved, to begin to appreciate their work as integral to a whole and creative life. It can also open a space for more genuine and productive relations among staff, and between staff and management.

As dialogue is less of the intellect and more of the heart, attempts to explain it range from very difficult to impossible. The following is an attempt to convey the spirit of dialogue, together with some of its more practical aspects. Experiencing the living process remains its own best instruction. (Having read these guidelines, perhaps then ‘semi-forget’ them – thus relaxing any expectations to conform to a particular standard).

For ease of expression I have listed my observations on Dialogue, interwoven with some of the original guidelines from David Bohm, Donald Factor, and Peter Garrett (of the U.K.), under the headings: **Purpose - Process - Awareness - People - Communion**

I have presented this summary in general terms so that my comments can be applied to all aspects of life - home, work, community, and society.

PURPOSE – to explore and communicate

Basically we live in a divided world of me and you, us and them, those kinds of people, our kind of people; ‘we’ - as separate from nature. Our differences are many in terms of lifestyles, beliefs, opinions, and views. So the importance of what we have in common is often overlooked in a struggle to reconcile ideology with actuality. We need a bridge – a point of crossing where we can put our differences aside and discover our common humanity. This is the place of Open Dialogue.

There are no specified objectives such as reaching consensus, a decision, or agreed action. It is an open-ended activity, which is ongoing and non-conclusive. Discovering the very nature of our condition, and our conditioning, is the essential quest. We are not aiming to be ‘non-judgmental’—we are judgmental. We want to discover how and why we judge, and the effect this action has on our relationships.

We do not engage in dialogue to achieve a direct result. We meet to experience a different way of ‘being’, and being together – a way of relating which can lead to harmony and trust. This is a very different expectation from a deliberate goal set endeavour. A relaxed and informal space like this, free of inhibiting expectations, is essential for a more grounded understanding of one another. Dialogue in the workplace, for instance, can serve as a preliminary activity, to help overcome personal barriers which obstruct practical decision making. Agreement on a decision can arise incidentally from a dialogue, but not as a direct intention.

PROCESS – discovering

Dialogue is firstly an enquiry into what leads us to think, feel, speak, and act as we do. Attention is more on the **process** of the interaction than the **content** of words spoken.

It is perhaps important to note that our minds are incredibly quick to interpret, and judge and to censor selectively what we hear. To be effectively open to **difference**, we have to be aware, and notice this process in action. The quality of our response may then be different from an immediate reaction. To share meaning together, we have to become aware of our otherwise unconscious assumptions, and suspend them in favour of greater understanding. This presents the biggest challenge in dialogue—to listen to others with tolerance and patience, and allow one another space for self-expression.

By engaging in dialogue without expecting a result, we can relax into its intensity. It requires a lightness of being – a gentle willingness to be vulnerable, impartial, and thus open to insight. It is impossible to learn ‘proactively’ about the essential nature of thought and consciousness. We have to approach it as passive witnesses – otherwise we defeat the purpose.

Dialogue points to a way of communicating which is never conclusive. Nor is it perfect - asserting, defending, and debating are inevitable. **Fundamental learning** arises from the greater awareness that highlights a dialogue. The communication may then culminate in communion – a fellowship of understanding, and an unfolding of shared meaning.

AWARENESS

Learning

Dialogue involves an inward awareness in balance with outward perceptions. Emphasis is on the intrinsic meaning of inner and outer perceptions, without analysing them – we are **learning from how things are**, rather than projecting how they should, could, or might be. Dialogue is as much about unlearning, as it is about learning – perhaps we are actually **learning to unlearn**. Like a return to innocence – with maturity in place of naivety. Uncertainty is not a cause for alarm. It is a positive aspect of learning which may indicate a movement closer to a new discovery.

Silence is another challenge – we needn’t be uncomfortable with it. When the group falls silent, it is an opportunity to reflect, to gather our thoughts, or just sit quietly. Participants are not dependent on the group, but are inter-dependent. We may discover in dialogue that we are an extension of the group, as the group is an extension of ourselves. In essence we are not separate. What one experiences, as the group, is an aspect of oneself – our **collective consciousness**. This is how we learn, communicate, and share meaning together.

Listening

Attention is a major key to awareness, as listening is to attention. Awareness is limited to how openly and objectively, we can listen – especially to ourselves. Discovering our own limitations in the light of the moment is essential for creative dialogue. We are not out to ‘get it right’ but to discover how it is. We do not need to be ‘good’ communicators, we need to be honest ones—good, bad, or indifferent. As a guide—open listening does not have a specific motive. When truly open, we can hear beyond words and opinions - to connect with the **person** who is speaking.

Each participant has the responsibility of listening to other speakers seriously, allowing them time and space to express their individuality. Care and respect are cornerstones of good dialogue. It is vital that we listen inwardly to our reactions, as well as outwardly to others, to sensitively detect our

often hidden fears, prejudices, imaginings and uncertain beliefs. Yet our attention needs to remain light, as well as open. We are not out to whip ourselves, but simply to learn.

Attention

Our only source of insight is – **not knowing**. Our approach requires (ideally) a **choice-less** quality of attention, open to a fresh understanding. Suspending our assumptions is therefore critical for an original response. Humility – or at least prudence, in the face of what remains a mystery, is a helpful attitude to adopt.

It is not talk for talk's sake (content), but talk in order to share common, and uncommon, meanings (process). Nor is it about who is right or wrong. It is about considering our similarities, questioning our differences, and acknowledging the place of both. Frustration is common, especially for beginners. Listening, and maintaining attention, is its only remedy. All our reactions and emotions, pleasant or unpleasant, provide an acute opportunity for self- knowing, and thus self- change. Subsequently, the group will also change.

Dialogue is a **here and now** activity. This is why attention is so crucial. We cannot fixate our minds in the present, but we can become aware of a significant difference between 'here & now' and 'there & then'—to notice the movement from 'present'—to projected, or reflected, states of consciousness. Change (transformation) can only be realised in the present, via insight, which is not bound by time. Our minds are mostly caught in time.

Impartial awareness requires effortless yet broad attention, unlike concentration, which is deliberately focused. The quality of attention required for dialogue is as subtle as meditation - with a group, it can be a communal meditation.

PEOPLE – reaching out

Everyone has the right to his or her own perspective, no matter how different from anyone else's. Diversity is helpful, with individuals participating from a range of backgrounds, beliefs, and sub-cultures. Surprisingly, the less in common among a group, the more there is to learn. Discretion is important – a dialogue is not meant to be invasive or obligating. There are few expectations other than co-operation and courtesy within your group.

It is an enquiry 'with' others, and not something which is 'done' to others. It is not to judge, classify, or condemn (though notice when you do), but to observe and discover without conclusion – then a dialogue can be vitally original. Dialogue will not work if only 2 or 3 people hold the floor. As a general suggestion - those who like to speak try to listen more; those who like to listen feel free to speak more. Dialogue can be fun and informal, in unison with serious intent, so long as we maintain a neutral space where people are always greater than the sum of their various identifications.

COMMUNION – coming together

Open Dialogue has no fixed topic, no set agenda, no leadership, no authority, and no (intended) lecturing – the group regulates its own unique direction. It is less a doing process, and more a happening experience. At its finest it becomes a communion.

Convenors may comment on procedure before commencing, but then become peers within the group. There are **no experts**. All participants are equally co-facilitators. The quality of the communication relates directly to the mutual co-responsibility of those involved. A group can

include all ages, needs just 2 people to commence, and may number 20 or more. Dialogue with **oneself** is an important, ongoing continuum from the group experience. Personal transformation may thus become a continual way of life. Ideally meetings are held regularly (at least once a month). Organisations may require to meet weekly for the first few months to practically establish this different paradigm of interaction.

With the group seated in a circle for about 2 hours, a dialogue operates as **a single conversation**. The challenge is to listen ‘openly’ (without separation) —suspending our opinions in favour of detecting and reaching beyond our assumptions (be wary of a difference between suspending opinions, and suppressing them). No subject is prohibited, including the challenge to anyone who attempts to dominate the group. It is not to assert or defend our views, but to consider how and why we have those views. Expression of dogma, as ‘content’, is inevitable. **Looking beyond the dogma** can create a breakthrough in the communication. We might then come into contact with the underlying desperation of the communicator – their concerns and difficulties. This then is the ‘process’.

Dialogue is at first a difficult process. For our present culture it is a very different way of communicating and being together. For the world to change for the benefit of all, it has to begin with each one of us. Old ways give way to new, and we have to move with them. Change of this nature cannot be forced. We can only be open to its natural flow – a free flow of shared meaning.

TODAY

A considerable number of professional educators, organisational trainers and various group co-ordinators from within Australia, Great Britain, and the United States, have also written extensively on the Dialogue process. Developing on a more structured ‘building blocks’ approach, many are successfully introducing Dialogue to various corporate, educational, community, health and welfare organisations. Many of these groups are finding Dialogue to be an effective format for better, more honest communication, and more harmonious relations. For more information about contacts – please enquire via email to: opendialogue@optusnet.com.au

Current ‘Open’ Dialogue meetings:

Regular monthly meetings are operating throughout Sydney and in Nowra – they are mostly free of charge, but donations are helpful. Because these meetings are open to individuals from all walks of life, they tend to explore topics that affect people emotionally and spiritually. During the course of these exchanges there seems to be no specific direction, yet at the end one often experiences an unpredictable sense of intense fulfilment. Perhaps this in-definable satisfaction is the result of significant changes at the ‘tacit’ level of consciousness – the unknowable, yet tangible response to a shared coherent meaning.

Terry O’Brien

Dialogue - from Barry Hora

The major stumbling block is the context trap. After all these years dialoguing we still get caught up in the context.

Even though we say that process is what it is all about we shift almost automatically into our comfort zone which is the expression and defence of our views about the subject under consideration.

So dialogue becomes just another tool for finding out what is right or wrong – instead of – instead of what?

What would be 'right operation' as far as dialogue is concerned?

Is it possible for the process to be more important than the content? If we follow this question carefully we see how the question can become an example of the problem. The question about process becomes content, the subject of the enquiry. And, yet again we fall out of process into a focus on content.

Can we enquire without turning what we enquire about into content. Is looking for answers the problem? I think the sharing process slips away when I'm forced back into thoughts about what is being tabled by way of further statements or answers. This only maintains my separateness from the group.

Barry Hora

Issue 78 –January 2002

Dialogue 1 – from Barry Hora

On Saturday last I attended the second Dialogue meeting held on the Gold Coast. It's only a small group of people with two main common interests. The first being the work and writings of David Bohm and secondly the challenge of change.

At that meeting, right from initial conversation, I observed myself again being caught up in the context and this was because my statements (assumptions) were under attack. When I realized I was reacting by defending my assumptions (caught up in context) I chose, at that moment, not to go down that path. It was a very definite choice not to do something, not to be something else, but not to do.

I changed my path and direction by making another statement, that was a fact to me in that present moment, arising from my direct self-observation. In operating from this observation I found my attention increasing and in attending in this way I was starting to be WHO I really, really, really AM. I found this very catching for the whole group was also attending and the group observation and statement, at that moment was; "attention is the key".

Barry Hora

Dialogue 2 - 'Dialogue about Dialogue' from Lyn Willmott

Last Saturday I joined a group of about 20 people in Melbourne, meeting to participate in what Gary Hipworth titled a Dialogue. As he explained, Dialogue can offer fundamental learning through the exchange of ideas. It unravels meaning, offering insight and understanding instead of conflict and argument. Gary explained that he is drawn to this method because of his abhorrence of violence. A civilized and understandable position, and who would disagree? Yelling at each other will not change anything; but unfortunately, because our beliefs reflect who we are I don't think any type of intellectual interaction will bring about radical change. Certainly Dialogue helps with the process of listening, and accepting another point of view. It's claimed it can help bring a realisation of self, but can it impact on deep and fundamental beliefs that actually reflect who we are?

So here it is, the monumental chasm preventing real human intimacy. The structure of our beliefs; bringing into focus the vital question of how dialogue interacts with belief?

If we are able to agree that the human framework of personality ego and belief supports human action/interaction (without even considering the all important Self for a moment) then no matter how much meaning develops in dialogue, there will be very little real change. The personality type has built a belief system conducive to the personality's survival, and the ego is in constant support of this. Sooner or later a free exchange of ideas and information will come up against some mighty belief barrier. Call it dogma or brainwashing, it does not alter the fact that the belief system is the structure that supports the survival of the individual. Experience, which is constantly forming and reshaping this structure, is the major pathway to change.

Talking about it is a process of thought, an intellectual exercise that may sometimes touch the heart, but is only suitable for some personality types. That being said, Gary went on to talk about thought. And we all seemed to agree that thought was a human process, like breathing or walking, and that it could trick one into getting caught up in the process, and for many people, the ongoing cycle of thought was like a Ferris-wheel that never stopped, never allow them to dismount, making thought an ongoing, never ending process (whilst one was caught up in its power). We also seemed to agree that the Self was not the thinker. That the Self was a separate entity, standing apart from thought. The thinker is part of the thinking process, part of Gary's string of ideas giving the illusion of a personal reality. The Self is separate.

It was while we were discussing 'thought' that the subject of imagination was introduced, and this human function was lumped in with the thought process. Immediately an argument developed between two of us. One an artist, the other a psychologist. The artist maintained that imagination although seemingly a product of thought, was far different in function and intent. The psychologist claimed that all functions of the mind are to be classified as thought.

So here was an example of the two opposing beliefs. Perhaps before I go on to describe how Gary used this argument as an example of our need for Dialogue I should enlarge on the argument

This is where I have to identify myself as the champion of imagination, and because I was so busy arguing, I did not hear the psychologist's full explanation of how imagination fits into the thought process, so cannot include in this report. Ah-ha I hear Gary saying... but for me it does not really matter, because my absolute belief brought about by living experience (imagination has often freed me from the bounds of thought) will always power my passion. I know I am being unfair here because I am not giving a balanced account of the argument, but my belief claims that imagination flies far beyond thought. Imagination builds a personal reality, an internal place that stands apart from material reality. Imagination is not part of intuition, although this function can often enhance imagination. Imagination is not meditation, though this mental practice often stimulates imagination. Imagination is not dreaming (symbols within the dream often lodge in memory as if an actual experience) yet the dream can add to imagination. None of these functions belongs to thought, and all of them, dreaming, intuitive understanding, and meditative insight crowd into the imagination, lifting the Self beyond the shackles of thought, allowing expansion into other realities. So according to my belief imagination is not thought.

As mentioned, Gary interrupted our argument, using it as an example of a lack of dialogue, suggesting that if we had enquired and investigated each other's point of view, a third option would have been immediately obvious. Not that either protagonist would have changed their belief, but it would have added weight to the overall dialogue. It might have led to David Bohm's proposal that if we inquire into our content, motivation, and the beliefs we might bring about a better understanding of each other. The reasonable, rational part of me nods in agreement, but the passionate, belief driven, activist knows that dialogue will only bring about minuscule change. Experience is the real teacher.

Dialogue 3 - from Don Factor

The following piece is a note from Don factor in reply to Terry O'Brien who sent him a copy of his essay on Dialogue which appeared in Now letter 76. Don is one of the Bohm, Garrett, Factor trio which kicked off dialogue in its present form. Ed.

“Since [David Bohm’s] death we have attempted to continue our exploration [into dialogue] in this same direction. These days there are no stars or perceived leaders to whom members of the group can look for aid or advice.

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 criticize nor to alter what is happening but to try and see how it arises and what it means. "In other words, your perception is as interesting to me as mine might be to you.”

Don Factor

Issue 81 –June 2002

Probably Not Dialogue from David Allan.

He told me that his years of study,
of science, philosophy, religion,
(garnished, no doubt with a side serving of meditation)
had shown him what humanity was,
and where he stood,
in the big picture.

Oh! I mustn't forget here, of course, his speciality –
the relationship between technology and mankind,
from stones and bones in caves,
and such symbols and all the rest
to the great cyber-whatever.

(I wish I lived in cyberspace
where I'd let my own mind pace,
up and down,
therein I'd let the bastard race,
till at last it found its place –
Recognition! And renown!)

But,

I suggested that all this only told him,
who he *thought* he had become
in the little picture,
of his little mind. After that,
he didn't ever tell me anything else,
ever, again.

David Allan