

A WORKBOOK AND ONLINE COMMUNITY for Co-CREATING OUR SUSTAINABILITY ETHIC

Section III – Transformative Learning

Chapter 4 - Dialogue

Any interaction that is reciprocal and open-ended should be viewed as dialogic. I say "should" because by understanding the idea of dialogue too narrowly, we stand to miss the splendid things that nature can teach us about itself and ourselves..... Nature talks and responds to itself, not in words but in eloquent gestures, as minute as the excretion of a hormone, as enormous as the evolution of a species. Dialogic. It takes unto itself and even derives energy from the contradictions and ambiguities of human experience, dialogue accommodates the paradox, ambiguity, randomness and conflict that characterize the living mind at work. More than any other form, dialogue imitates the multifariousness, disorder and creativity of live thinking.

On Dialogue,
Robert Grudin, pp.12-13

How might we see dialogue as being far more than a style of conversation - as a metaphor for all of life?

When studying and practicing Learning Organization disciplines, it became very apparent that being able to design, facilitate and participate in dialogue was critical. The dialogue is grounded more in listening and mutual learning than in speaking. It is essential that one be in touch with one's own Mental Models and be able to help others explore the basis of their thinking and world views. It is a respectful questioning process in which people can grow and shift without feeling coerced or brow beaten. Participants become adept at saying what needs to be said so the 'elephants in the room' are identified. At the end of a true dialogue session, each person leaves the room feeling that they have learned and contributed to the learning of others. Deep relationships of mutual admiration are often formed. New, individual and communal, truths may emerge, some through compromise and more often through clarification of misunderstandings.

Dealing with divisive, volatile issues takes participants who have developed their own 'Personal Mastery', and often requires a skilled facilitator with tools such as 'Dialogue'.

Paula Underwood, a Native American, was facilitating a breakout session at a 'Systems Thinking in Action' conference several years ago. A participant in the session was very angered with the way Native Americans were treated, and from her agitated state, asked

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Paula for her thoughts. Paula responded with the most beautiful sense of serenity, and said the following, "I was always taught to look at every problem and concern from at least six (6) perspectives, none of which are absolutely true and none of which are absolutely false.". I had learned '[The Rule of Six](#)', and developed a new perspective on Dialogue.

When I heard Paula Underwood's response, I immediately perceived the angry lady's question to be one of six or more perspectives around the outside of a circular space. Prior to that moment, it had always seemed logical to me that when problem solving, it was a clear statement of the problem that belonged at the center of the space, and the arguments grouped around the outside. The framing of the argument essentially controlled the agenda of the group. But when applying the 'Rule of Six', the lady's angry question didn't reside in the middle of the space as the central point for the conversation that followed, or alone in the space with a single other perspective so that a debate might ensue. Instead, new perspectives were welcomed and honed, and I assumed that the middle of the space would fill with some sort of consensus.

Let me share a couple of stories, one of a particularly difficult incident where I learned that something other than consensus best filled the center of the space, and another regarding how one particularly poignant comment can lead to re-framing the problem in a way that might lead to emergent conversation and actions.

In the next chapter, I will be a little pedagogical explaining the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process. But for now it is enough to know that I was using AI extensively on a project with a community outside Portland. I met with the Principal of an Elementary School, Patricia Martinez, regularly and she would invariably tell me of a difficult situation she was dealing with and ask me how it might better be handled using AI. Patricia is Mexican American who is filled with an infectious energy that was evident everywhere in her school. There was a genuine happiness throughout the school as she connected with students, staff and parents. One day as we were driving to lunch she told me of a well-respected, active parent who had visited her and accused her of being racist. His point was that she, because of her heritage, was bending over backwards to help the Latino community, and it was at the expense of several other minority communities in the school. This was very difficult for Patricia to understand, in part because her view of love and caring for all her students has a kind of boundlessness – her worldview is one of abundance. When I reflected on her dilemma, what struck me was that both Patricia and the parent wanted the same virtue, fairness, and that's what needed to be in the center of the diagram – the applicable virtue(s) - specifically 'fairness' in this particular discussion.

The second incident happened quite recently in an 'Anti War Rally' planning meeting in which we had an agenda, tight time constraints, and used parliamentary procedures for making decisions. We were trying to hone in on the goals and theme of the Rally, and how best to create marketing material to enroll a large number of diverse attendees. A wide range of topics were introduced often with a great deal of passion, and at one point a gentleman said to us that, 'we should remember that the war is a symptom of our problem – not the problem itself'. The observation resonated with me deeply, and upon reflection, I

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came to realize that it offered another insight into how I perceive problem solving and the use of dialogue.

The reason that 'war as a symptom rather than the problem' resonated with me is that it concurred with my own beliefs, and gave me an improved way to articulate them. I believe that war is the vehicle used by our highest government officials to give them the political capital to attain personal wealth and power in the form of programs, ideology, and the structure that guarantees them 'winning'. If I discern war as symptomatic, then the problems that cause so much concern and anger like poverty, education, healthcare, jobs, NAFTA, imperialism, and the devastation that war brings are all real, but will continue to be ignored. I then framed my thoughts in an appreciative way. What is it I love and cherish that is being lost by the quest for political capital and power? I realized how I cherish democracy and America's place in the World as a leader in diplomacy and ethical conduct. From the perspective of virtues, these are all that are expressed in the Constitution, its Preamble, and The Bill of Rights, plus those that we have developed as we assumed our place in World leadership. From the perspective of the Rally, I felt that we needed to state clearly what we were for, peace, rather than all the symptoms we perceived as problems and wanted to change. And our actions should be to –

1. Rescind the 'War Powers' delegated by Legislators to the Executive Branch;
2. Impeachment of those who blatantly lied for political and personal gain; and
3. Embark on a long-term program designed to sustain Global Community.

The picture of dialogue I hold in my mind is multidimensional. Not only are there 'n' perspectives situated around the outer edge of the space; the perspectives have a 3-dimensional feel to them as we drill deeper until we have uncovered the essence of the problem; and the virtues underlying our perspectives hold the space in the center.

It is wonderful that we can learn from other cultures, and raises two questions –

1. What is it that seems to have masked this most resonant way of conversation? and
2. What world-view or way of thinking makes it so natural for other cultures.

I believe that the conceptualization of dialogue comes more from nature, and all life is dialogic -- every system is 'in a dance' both internally and with every other system with which it coexists. There are some who say that all life is a conversation. I think it is more accurate to say that conversation is a facet of dialogue, and all life is in dialogue. Perhaps the Native Americans capacity for discerning Nature as a mentor and a model, inspired them to speak in such an emergent manner.

After facilitating and participating in dialogue for years, I took a graduate class that had regular tests where we were each on our own. I had to reset my thinking because my initial impulse was to engage others in conversation to answer the test questions. No doubt there's real benefit to individual testing as sometimes it's important to be able to measure competency and how students are doing relative to one another, but far and away the most important learning for me has come by being in dialogue with others who offer great insights, are good listeners, and offer time for reflection and synthesis. The importance of

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this way of learning mustn't be understated, and is expressed beautifully by Robert Grudin in his book 'On Dialogue', pg 9, when he writes, 'Dialogic thinking, which deflects self-interest in the name of interpersonal understanding, becomes in the process a force of social evolution'.

Reflection

We have all worked through difficult situations, often conversationally. Think of a time when you were able to restructure a (potentially) combative situation through mutual agreements and learning. Perhaps you even surfaced a common virtue that allowed you to overcome differences in how you expressed or valued that virtue.

What was the situation?

Who was involved?

What was the resolution?

What have been the subsequent benefits?