

‘Generative Dialogue’, Dialogue, Bill Isaacs (extract) - (1999)

All too often our talk fails us. Instead of creating something new, we polarize and fight. Particularly under conditions where the stakes are high and differences abound, we tend to harden into positions that we defend by **advocacy**. **To advocate** is to speak for your point of view. Usually, people do this unilaterally, without making room for others...

But **dialogue** is an altogether very different way of talking together. Generally we think of dialogue as “*better conversation*.” But there is much more to it. *Dialogue, as I define it, is a conversation with a center, not sides.* It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people. *The intention of dialogue is to reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act.*

The roots of the word **dialogue** come from the Greek words *dia* and *logos*. *Dia* means “*through*”; *logos* translates to “*word,*” or “*meaning.*” In essence, **a dialogue is a flow of meaning**. But it is more than this too. ***In the most ancient meaning of the word, logos meant “to gather together,” and suggested an intimate awareness of the relationships among things in the natural world.*** In that sense, *logos* may be best rendered in English as “relationship.” The Book of John in the New Testament begins: “In the beginning was the Word (*logos*).” We could now hear this as “In the beginning was the Relationship.”

To take it one step further, dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in relationship. Thinking together implies that you no longer take your own position as final. You relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result simply from being in a relationship with others - possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred.

Most of us believe at some level that we must fix things or change people in order to make them reachable. Dialogue does not call for such behaviour. Rather, it asks us to ***listen for an already existing wholeness***, and to create a new kind of association in which we listen deeply to all the views that people may express. It asks that we create **a quality of listening and attention that can include - but is larger than - any single view...** Dialogue seeks to address the problem of fragmentation not by rearranging the physical components of a conversation but by uncovering and shifting the organic underlying structures that produce it... it presumes an existing or underlying ‘wholeness’.

With

Levels on the way to 'Generative Dialogue', Bill Isaacs

Conversation

When you begin to talk with someone, you often begin with a **conversation**. The roots of this word mean *"to turn together"* (**con verser**): You take turns speaking. As you listen and participate, some things will strike you as relevant and others as irrelevant... you **deliberate**, which means to "weigh out." You weigh out what you like and do not like; you pay attention to some things and not to others. It is at this point that you face choice: to suspend what you think, relaxing your grip and remaining open; or to **defend** it with the assumption that you are right. Typically, this is not a choice you make consciously...

Discussion

Discussion in one form or another is the dominant mode of interaction in most professional settings. Discussion is a powerful mode of exchange, but a limited one.

While people may aspire to have dialogue, much of the time their conversation reflects the tendency to think alone: People choose to **defend** their views and sustain their positions. The word **'defend'** comes from the roots that mean *"to ward off an attack."* In a **discussion**, people see themselves as separate from one another... (it's a binary, either / or mode of thinking). The roots of the word discussion are the same as concussion and percussion, and mean *"to shake apart."*

Debate

The roots of the word **'debate'** mean *"to beat down."*

Decide

The word **'decide'** means *"to resolve difficulties by cutting through them."* Its roots literally mean to *"murder the alternative."*

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"Generative dialogue emerges as people let go of their positions and views. They find themselves attending simply to the flow of conversation, a flow that envelopes us and lifts us to new levels of shared understanding. This progression from defending to suspending, and on to dialogue, has remained a common thread in my exploration of this field." - Bill Isaacs

