DIALOGUE: A PROPOSAL

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Dialogue, as we are choosing to use the word, is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations and even different parts of the same organization. In our modern culture men and women are able to interact with one another in many ways: they can sing dance or play together with little difficulty but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariable to lead to dispute, division and often to violence. In our view this condition points to a deep and pervasive defect in the process of human thought.

In Dialogue, a group of people can explore the individual and collective presuppositions, ideas, beliefs, and feelings that subtly control their interactions. It provides an opportunity to participate in a process that displays communication successes and failures. It can reveal the often puzzling patterns of incoherence that lead the group to avoid certain issues or, on the other hand, to insist, against all reason, on standing and defending opinions about particular issues.

Dialogue is a way of observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behaviour, and how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring. It can therefore be seen as an arena in which collective learning takes place and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity can arise.

Because the nature of Dialogue is exploratory, its meaning and its methods continue to unfold. No firm rules can be laid down for conducting a Dialogue because its essence is learning -not as the result of consuming a body of information or doctrine imparted by an authority, nor as a means of examining or criticizing a particular theory or programme, but rather as part of an unfolding process of creative participation between peers.

However, we feel that it is important that its meaning and background be understood.

Our approach to this form of Dialogue arose out of a series of conversations begun in 1983 in which we inquired into David Bohm's suggestion that a pervasive incoherence in the process of human thought is the essential cause of the endless crises affecting mankind. This led us, in succeeding years, to initiate a number of larger conversations and seminars held in different countries with various groups of people which in turn began to take the form of Dialogues.

As we proceeded it became increasing clear to us that this process of Dialogue is a powerful means of understanding how thought functions. We became aware that we live in a world produced almost entirely by human enterprise and thus, by human thought. The room in which we sit, the language in which these words are written, our national boundaries, our systems of value, and even that which we take to be our direct perceptions of reality are essentially manifestations of the way human beings think and

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have thought. We realize that without a willingness to explore this situation and to gain a deep insight into it, the real crises of our time cannot be confronted, nor can we find anything more than temporary solutions to the vast array of human problems that now confront us.

We are using the word "thought" here to signify not only the products of our conscious intellect but also our feelings, emotions, intentions and desires. It also includes such subtle, conditioned manifestations of learning as those that allow us to make sense of a succession of separate scenes within a cinema film or to translate the abstract symbols on road signs along with the tacit, non-verbal processes used in developing basic, mechanical skills such as riding a bicycle. In essence thought, in this sense of the word, is the active response of memory in every phase of life. Virtually all of our knowledge is produced, displayed, communicated, transformed and applied in thought.

To further clarify this approach, we propose that, with the aid of a little close attention, even that which we call rational thinking can be see to consist largely of responses conditioned and biased by previous thought. If we look carefully at what we generally take to be reality we begin to see that it includes a collection of concepts, memories and reflexes coloured by our personal needs, fears, and desires, all of which are limited and distorted by the boundaries of language and the habits of our history, sex and culture. It is extremely difficult to disassemble this mixture or to ever be certain whether what we are perceiving -or what we may think about those perceptions -is at all accurate.

What makes this situation so serious is that thought generally conceals this problems from our immediate awareness and succeeds in generating a sense that the way each of us interprets the world is the only sensible way in which it can be interpreted. What is needed is a means by which we can slow down the process of thought in order to be able to observe it while it is actually occurring.

Our physical bodies have this capability but thought seems to lack it. If you raise your arm you know that you are willing the act, that somebody else is not doing it for or to you. This is called proprioception. We can be aware of our body's actions while they are actually occurring but we generally lack this sort of skill in the realm of thought. For example, we do not notice that our attitude toward another person may be profoundly affected by the way we think and feel about someone else who might share certain aspects of his behaviour or even of his appearance. Instead, we assume that our attitude toward her arises directly from her actual conduct. The problem of thought is that the kind of attention required to notice this incoherence, seems seldom to be available when it is most needed.

WHY DIALOGUE?

Dialogue is concerned with providing a space within which such attention can be given. It allows a display of thought and meaning that makes possible a kind of collective proprioception or immediate mirroring back of both the content of thought and the less apparent, dynamic structures that govern it. In Dialogue this can be experienced both individually and collectively. Each listener is able to reflect back to each speaker, and to the rest of the group, a view of some of the assumptions and unspoken implications of what is being expressed along with that which is being avoided. It creates the

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opportunity for each participant to examine the preconceptions, prejudices and the characteristic patterns that lie behind his or her thoughts, opinions, beliefs and feelings along with the roles he or she tends habitually to play. And it offers an opportunity to share these insights.

The word "dialogue" derives from two roots: "dia" which means "through" and "logos" which means "the word", or more particularly, "the meaning of the word." The image it gives is of a river of meaning flowing around and through the participants. Any number of people can engage in Dialogue -one can even have a Dialogue with oneself -but the sort of Dialogue that we are suggesting involves a group of between twenty and forty people seated in a circle talking together.

Some notion of the significance of such a Dialogue can be found in reports of hunter-gather bands of about this size, who, when they met to talk together, had no apparent agenda nor any predetermined purpose. Nevertheless, such gatherings seemed to provide and reinforce a kind of cohesive bond or fellowship that allowed its participants to know what was required of them without the need for instruction or much further verbal interchange. In other words, what might be called a coherent culture of shared meaning emerged within the group. It is possible that this coherence existed in the past for human communities before technology began to mediate our experience of the living world.

Dr. Patrick de Mare, a psychiatrist working in London, has conducted pioneering work along similar lines under modern conditions. He set up groups of about the same size, the purpose of which he described in terms of "sociotherapy". His view is that the primary cause of the deep and pervasive sickness in our society can be found at the socio-cultural level and that such groups can serve as micro-cultures from which the source of the infirmity of our large civilization can be exposed. Our experience has led us to extend this notion of Dialogue by emphasizing and giving special attention to the fundamental role of the activity of thought in the origination and maintenance of this condition.

As a microcosm of the large culture, Dialogue allows a wide spectrum of possible relationships to be revealed. It can disclose the impact of society on the individual and the individual's impact on society. It can display how power is assumed or given away and how pervasive are the generally unnoticed rules of the system that constitutes our culture. But it is most deeply concerned with understanding the dynamics of how thought conceives such connections.

It is not concerned with deliberately trying to alter or change behaviour, nor to get the participants to move toward a predetermined goal. Any such attempt would distort and obscure the processes that the Dialogue has set out to explore. Nevertheless, changes do occur because observed thought behaves differently from unobserved thought. Dialogue can thus become an opportunity for thought and feeling to play freely in a continuously of deeper or more general meaning. Any subject can be included and no content is excluded. Such an activity is very rare in our culture.

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PURPOSE AND MEANING

Usually people gather either to accomplish a task or to be entertained, both of which can be categorized 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.

These may on occasion be entertaining, enlightening and lead to new insights or address existing problems. But surprisingly, in its early stages, the dialogue will often lead to the experience of frustration.
A group of people invited to give their time and serious attention to a task that has no apparent goal and is not being led in any detectable direction may quickly find itself experiencing a great deal of anxiety or annoyance. This can lead to the desire on the part of some, either to break up the group or to attempt to take control and give it a direction. Previously unacknowledged purposes will reveal themselves. Strong feelings will be exposed, along with the thoughts that underlie them. Fixed positions may be taken and polarization will often result. This is all part of the process. It is what sustains the Dialogue and keeps it constantly extending creatively into new domains.

In an assembly of between twenty and forty people, extremes of frustration, anger, conflict or other difficulties may occur, but in a group of this size such problems can be contained with relative ease. In fact, they can become the central focus of the exploration in what might be understood as a kind of "meta-dialogue", aimed at clarifying the process of Dialogue itself.

As sensitivity and experience increase, a perception of shared meaning emerges in which people find that they are neither opposing one another, nor are they simply interacting. Increasing trust between members of the group -and trust in the process itself -leads to the expression of the sorts of thoughts and feelings that are usually kept hidden. There is no imposed consensus, nor is there any attempt to avoid conflict. No single individual or sub-group is able to achieve dominance because every single subject, including domination and submission, is always available to be considered.

Participants find that they are involved in an ever changing and developing pool of common meaning. A shared content of consciousness emerges which allows a level of creativity and insight that is not generally available to individuals or to groups that interact in more familiar ways. This reveals an aspect of Dialogue that Patrick de Mare has called koinonia, a word meaning "impersonal fellowship", which was originally used to describe the early form of Athenian democracy in which all the free men of the city gathered to govern themselves.

As this fellowship is experience it begins to take precedence over the more overt content of the conversation (sic). It is an important stage in the Dialogue, a moment of increased coherence, where the group is able to move beyond its perceived blocks or limitations and into new territory, but it is also a point at which a group may begin to relax and bask in the "high" that accompanies the experience. This is the point that sometimes causes confusion between Dialogue and some forms of psychotherapy. Participants may want to hold the group together in order to preserve the pleasurable feeling of security and belonging that accompanies the state. This is similar to that sense of community often reached in therapy groups or in team building workshops where it is taken to be the

evidence of the success of the method used. Beyond such a point, however, lie even more significant and subtle realms of creativity, intelligence and understanding that can be approached only by persisting in the process of inquiry and risking re-entry into areas of potentially chaotic or frustrating uncertainty.

WHAT DIALOGUE IS NOT

Dialogue is not discussion, a word that shares its root meaning with "percussion" and "concussion," both of which involve breaking things up. Nor is it debate. These forms of conversation contain an implicit tendency to point toward a goal, to hammer out an agreement, to try to solve a problem or have one's opinion prevail. It is also not a "salon", which is a kind of gathering that is both informal and most often characterized by an intention to entertain, exchange friendship, gossip and other information. Although the word "dialogue" has often been used in similar ways, its' deeper, root meaning implies that it is not primarily interested in any of this.

Dialogue is not a new name for T-groups or sensitivity training, although it is superficially similar to these and other related forms of group work. Its consequences may be psychotherapeutic but it does not attempt to focus on removing the emotional blocks of any one participant nor to teach, train or analyze. Nevertheless, it is an arena in which learning and the dissolution of blocks can and often do take place. It is not a technique for problem solving or conflict resolution, although problems may well be resolved during the course of a Dialogue, or perhaps later, as a result of increased understanding and fellowship that occurs among the participants. It is, as we have emphasized, primarily a means of exploring the field of thought.
Dialogue resembles a number of other forms of group activity and may at times include aspects of them but in fact it is something new to our culture. We believe that it is an activity that might well prove vital to the future health of our civilization.

HOW TO START A DIALOGUE

Suspension

Suspension of thoughts, impulses, judgments, etc., lies at the very heart of Dialogue. It is one of its most important new aspects. It is not easily grasped because the activity is both unfamiliar and subtle. Suspension involves attention, listening and looking and is essential to exploration. Speaking is necessary, of course, for without it there would be little in the Dialogue to explore, But the actual process of exploration takes place during listening --not only to others but to oneself. Suspension involves exposing your reactions, impulses, feelings and opinions in such a way that they can be seen and felt within your own psyche and also be reflected back by others in the group. It does not mean repressing or suppressing or, even, postponing them. It means, simply, giving them your serious attention so that their structures can be noticed while they are actually taking place. If you are able to give attention to, say, the strong feelings that might accompany the expression of a particular thought -either your own or another's --and to sustain that attention, the activity of the thought process will tend to slow you down. This may permit you to begin to see the deeper meanings underlying your thought process and to sense the often incoherent structure of any action that you might otherwise carry out automatically. Similarly, if a group is able to suspend such feelings and give its attention to them then the overall process that flows from thought, to feeling, to acting-out within the group, can also slow down and reveal its deeper, more subtle meanings

along with any of its implicit distortions, leading to what might be described as a new kind of coherent, collective intelligence. To suspend thought, impulse, judgment, etc., requires serious attention to the overall process we have been considering --both on one's own and within a group. This involves what may at first appear to be an arduous kind of work. But if this work is sustained, one's ability to give such attention constantly develops so that less and less effort is required.

Numbers

A Dialogue works best with between twenty and forty people seated facing one another in a single circle. A group of this size allows for the emergence and observation of different subgroups or subcultures that can help to reveal some off the ways in which thought operatives collectively. This is important because the differences between such subcultures are often an unrecognized cause of failed communication and conflict. Smaller groups, on the other hand, lack the requisite diversity needed to reveal these tendencies and will generally emphasize more familiar personal and family roles and relationships. With a few groups we have had as many as sixty participants, but with that large a number the process becomes unwieldy. Two concentric circles are required to seat everybody so that they can see and hear one another. This places those in the back row at a disadvantage, and fewer participants have an opportunity to speak. We might mention here that some participants tend to talk a great deal while others find difficulty in speaking up in groups. It is worth remembering, though, that the word "participation" has two meanings: "to partake of", and "to take part in". Listening is at least as important as speaking. Often the quieter participants will begin to speak up more as they become familiar with the Dialogue experience while the more dominant individuals will find themselves tending to speak less and listen more.

Duration

A Dialogue needs some time to get going. It is an unusual way of participating with others and some sort of introduction is required in which the meaning of the whole activity can be communicated. But even with a clear introduction, when the group begins to talk together it will often experience confusion, frustration, and a self-conscious concern as to whether or not it is actually engaging in Dialogue. It would be very optimistic to assume that a Dialogue would begin to flow or move toward any great depth during its first meeting. It is important to point out that perseverance is required. In setting up Dialogues it is useful at the start to agree the length of the session and for someone to take responsibility for calling time at the end. We have found that about two hours is optimum. Longer sessions risk a fatigue factor which tends to diminish the quality of participation. Many T-groups use extended "marathon" sessions which use this fatigue factor to break down some of the inhibitions of the participants. Dialogue on the other hand, is more concerned with exploring the social constructs and inhibitions that affect our communications rather than attempting to bypass them. The more regularly the group can meet, the deeper and more meaningful will be the territory explored. Weekends have often been used to allow a sequence of sessions, but if the Dialogue is to continue for an extended period of time we suggest that there be at least a one week interval between each succeeding session to allow time for individual reflection and further thinking. There is no limit to how long a Dialogue group may continue its exploration. But it would be contrary to the spirit of Dialogue for it to become fixed or institutionalized. This suggests openness to constantly shifting membership, changing schedules, or other manifestations of a serious attention to an implicit rigidity which might take hold, or merely the dissolving of a group after some period.

Leadership
A Dialogue is essentially a conversation between equals. Any controlling authority, no matter how carefully or sensitively applied, will tend to hinder and inhibit the free play of thought and the often delicate and subtle feelings that would otherwise be shared. Dialogue is vulnerable to being manipulated, but its spirit is not consistent with this. Hierarchy has no place in Dialogue. Nevertheless, in the early stages some guidance is required to help the participants realize the subtle differences between Dialogue and other forms of group process. At least one or, preferably two, experienced facilitators are essential. Their role should be to occasionally point out situations that might seem to be presenting sticking points for the group, in other words, to aid the process of collective proprioception, but these interventions should never be manipulative nor obtrusive. Leaders are participants just like everybody else. Guidance, when it is felt to be necessary, should take the form of "leading from behind" and preserve the intention of making itself redundant as quickly as possible. However, this proposal is not intended as a substitute for experienced facilitators. We suggest, though, that its contents be reviewed with the group during its initial meeting so that all the participants can be satisfied that they are embarking upon the same experiment.

Subject Matter
The Dialogue can begin with any topic of interest to the participants. If some members of the group feel that certain exchanges or subjects are disturbing or not fitting, it is important that they express these thoughts within the Dialogue. No content should be excluded. Often participants will gossip or express their dissatisfactions or frustration after a session but it is exactly this sort of material that offers the most fertile ground for moving the Dialogue into deeper realms of meaning and coherence beyond the superficiality of "group think", good manners or dinner party conversation.

DIALOGUE IN EXISTING ORGANISATIONS

So far we have been primarily discussing Dialogues that bring together individuals from a variety of backgrounds rather than from existing organizations. But its value may also be perceived by members of an organization as a way of increasing and enriching their own corporate creativity.

In this case the process of Dialogue will change considerably. Members of an existing organization will have already developed a number of different sorts of relationship between one another and with their organization as a whole. There may be a preexisting hierarchy or a felt need to protect one's colleagues, team or department. There may be a fear of expressing thoughts that might be seen as critical of those who are higher in the organization or of norms within the organizational culture. Careers or the social acceptance of individual members might appear to be threatened by participation in a process that emphasizes transparency, openness, honesty, spontaneity, and the sort of deep interest in others that can draw out areas of vulnerability that may long have been kept hidden.

In an existing organization the Dialogue will very probably have to begin with an exploration of all the doubts and fears that participation will certainly raise. Members may have to begin with a fairly specific agenda from which they eventually can be encouraged to diverge. This differs from the approach taken with one-time or self-selected groupings in which participants are free to begin with any subject matter. But as

we have mentioned no content should be excluded because the impulse to exclude a subject is itself rich material for the inquiry.

Most organizations have inherent, predetermined purposes and goals that are seldom questioned. At first this might also seem to be inconsistent with the free and open play of thought that is so intrinsic to the Dialogue process. However, this too can be overcome if the participants are helped from the very beginning to realize that considerations of such subjects can prove essential to the well-being of the
organization and can in turn help to increase the participants' self-esteem along with the regard in which he or she may be held by others.

The creative potential of Dialogue is great enough to allow a temporary suspension of any of the structures and relationships that go to make up an organization.

Finally, we would like to make clear that we are not proposing Dialogue as a panacea nor as a method or technique designed to succeed all other forms of social interaction. Not everyone will find it useful nor, certainly, will it be useful in all contexts. There is great value to be found in many group psychotherapeutic methods and there are many tasks that require firm leadership and a well-formed organizational structure.

Much of the sort of work we have described here can be accomplished independently, and we would encourage this. Many of the ideas suggested in this proposal are still the subjects of our own continuing exploration. We do not advise that they be taken as fixed but rather that they be inquired into as a part of your own Dialogue.

The spirit of Dialogue is one of free play, a sort of collective dance of the mind that, nevertheless, has immense power and reveals coherent purpose. Once begun it becomes continuing adventure that can open the way to significant and creative change.

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