

## Dialogue

### Dialogue as a Way of Life

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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**Meditation:** “As living persons, we are relational beings. We are born into relations and all the relations within which we live become embodied in the structure of our living bodies...Nothing is more needed than being heard and taken seriously...” “The word always wants to be heard, always seeks responsive understanding....For the word (and consequently for the human being) there is nothing more terrible than a lack of response.” “The only transcendence of our individual loneliness we can experience arises through the consensual reality that we create with others, that is, through love.” (Seikkula, Bahktin, and Maturana from Seikkula, “Healing Elements of Therapeutic Conversation: Dialogue as an Embodiment of Love,” 2005, and “Becoming Dialogical: Psychotherapy or a Way of Life?” 2011)

I recognize that there is some irony in that I am going to be talking about dialogue by means of a monologue, a sermon. My hope is that what takes place will be like how I describe my work to others—that it’s not ministry *to*, but ministry *with*. There’s nothing passive or one-way about how we live, search, worship and serve with one another here. We minister *with* one another; and I am the one often provoked, inspired and blessed by your insights, experience and care. One more thing: it’s a bit ironic that I’m speaking about dialogue because, as my family can attest, I’ve been known to inflict long-winded speeches at the dinner table, express powerfully disarticulate body language, and been painfully at a loss for words and gestures that enable the creative give-and-take of dialogue to happen. Just so you know where I’m coming from...

Before I go any further, some descriptions: we know there are differences between monologues, discussions, debates and dialogue. *Monologues* range from long speeches spoken by a single actor in a play like Hamlet's "to be or not to be," to one party holding forth at the dinner table. The first can seize our imaginations and draw us into the inner workings of another person's psyche; the second can silence others by sucking up a lot of the available oxygen in the room. *Debates* focus on right and wrong, on advocating one perspective or opinion and searching for advantage by capitalizing on flaws in argumentation and logic. Debate invalidates feelings and judges other viewpoints as inferior and "listens" only with a view of countering what's been said, because the point of it is to win. And *discussion*?—that's the way a lot of communication takes place, especially in meetings, where the point is to solve a problem in order, usually, to achieve some preset goal or outcome. We share and then analyze ideas and information; we avoid silence and feelings, listen for places of disagreement, and strive to persuade and enlist others to arrive at an answer, a solution to our own and others' problems. (see Huang Nissan and Tanya Kachwaha, "Exploring the Differences Between Dialogue, Discussion and Debate," Program on Intergroup Relations, U of Michigan, 2002, 2007)

Dialogue is something else altogether, and we know it. When we enter into dialogue, we cross into a qualitatively different domain of relating to one another. The very first definition of the word you encounter in the Canadian Oxford dictionary is "a conversation between two or more people." And when you look at the root meaning of that word—**conversation**—let me read this to you: to converse is to associate with, to live with. The prefix: *con* means with, and the verb stem *versari* means to dwell (literally to turn oneself about). To converse, to dialogue... what it says is: a state where we dwell with one another in such a way that when a word is

spoken, it is heard and responded to seriously enough that we will be changed, turned about—and when that happens, a new transformative reality breaks through.

Developmental psychologists have shown that in “the development of the structure of human brain and body, dialogue is a fundamental formative process originating in the first months of life.” The mind emerges in relationship; dialogue is our original blessing. “In the first few weeks of life...parent and child engage in an exquisite dance of mutual emotional attunement by means of facial expression, hand gestures, and [vocalizing]. “This is truly a dialogue,” writes Finnish psychologist Jakko Seikkula; “the child’s actions influence the emotional states of the adult, and the adult, by engaging, stimulating, and soothing, influences the emotional state of the child...[This] emotional dialogue between adult and child” goes on to “shape the ability of the child’s nervous system to self-regulate emotional states and prepares the parent-child system for later learning of language, with its seemingly limitless capacity for expanding dialogue.” (Seikkula, 2005)

“The seemingly limitless capacity for expanding dialogue...” I read those words, and wonder, why is it that monologues, debates and discussion, rather than the “exquisite dance of mutual emotional attunement” of dialogue dominate so much of our communication? From advertising to media, instruction and public rhetoric, all the way into our interpersonal relations and discourse—how much do we see and experience the kind of dwelling with another, the kind of transformative engagement, that is a hallmark of genuine dialogue?

I was thinking about that when lyrics of the Cat Stevens song—“Father and Son”—leapt to my mind: The father says to his son: “It's not time to make a change,/Just relax, take it easy./ You're still young, that's your fault,/There's so much you have to know.” And the son replies:

“How can I try to explain, when I do he turns away again./It's always been the same, same old story./From the moment I could talk I was ordered to listen./Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away./I know I have to go.”

To go is the opposite of to dwell. Here's a father and son desperately in need of mutual attunement, of dialogue, and this is exactly what's not happening. The father delivers a preconceived solution, a pat monologue in answer to the son's existential crisis. The son's yearning to be heard in order for his life to have some semblance of meaning—it's just not in the cards, not in this story. And that tragedy, how often is it taking place all around us from the past, to the present, from the politics of nation states to our own homes? Let me repeat some of the words I shared in the meditation: “Nothing is more needed than being heard and taken seriously...” “The word always wants to be heard, always seeks responsive understanding....For the word (and consequently for the human being) there is nothing more terrible than a lack of response.”

Contemplating this sermon and writing these words dredged up a lot of memories and feelings. Looking back, I see a house full of love and secrets, of light and shadow, of everyday joys, routines and unexpressed, inexpressible pain. The parents are long gone; their children growing gray and old in their turn. We may have lived under the same roof for a season, the six of us, but I don't think we knew how to dwell together in dialogue. Somewhere along the line we unlearned it—we lost the steps to that “exquisite dance” of the original dialogic blessing between parent and child. When does it happen—that forgetting? Or is it that a different dance to another kind of music altogether takes its place? I see myself leaving that house longing for a

dialogical, responsive way of life. And then several things happened in my late teens and early twenties that really were formative, underlined that need and set me on a course to regain it.

First scene, mid 70s: a small, dingy meeting room lit like a pool hall in a middling size city in France. A couple of dozen wooden chairs laid out in rows. A slightly raised platform at one end. There's a long table on the platform, four chairs, four Bibles, two pairs of young men locked in combat with each other, zealous for the Lord's truth, and determined to prevail over the other side. In addition to the four debaters, there are maybe eight other people in the hall. Everyone in the room is a missionary, all in their late teens and early twenties, half Mormon, half Jehovah's Witness. No public audience. This is an apocalyptic showdown with Bibles as weapons, taking place behind closed doors with, as they believed, everything at stake. Both sides claimed victory. I was one of the debaters and had been caught up in a kind of rapt inspiration during the process. However, when it was over, I walked away feeling something precious had been lost.

Next scene, not long after that minor apocalyptic showdown, two missionaries had just left the apartment of an exiled Polish Catholic intellectual and his book-lined study. I had listened to this cultured, patient man—to his story, his deeply informed faith—with genuine interest. Out in the street, however, my companion wheeled around on me and with barely contained rage, said: “Elder, can you please tell me what just happened in there? You acted as though you cared what he had to say!” And then, and I'll never forget this, he quoted chapter and verse at me: “Hearken ye elders of my church whom I have appointed: Ye are not sent forth to be taught, but to teach...the things which I have put into your hands by the power of my Spirit. Hearken ye, for, behold, the great day of the Lord is nigh at hand.”

Well, that's the thing about ginning up the end of the world, about religious *and* secular apocalyptic thinking, isn't it? If you're cocksure that you're right and the time is short, there's no reason to dwell with one another in the meaningful, creative give-and-take of dialogue. There is nothing novel, no new possibilities to emerge. No ambiguity, everything is crystal clear, shadow and light, the villains wear black hats and yours are white.

Last scene: the missionary returned home; I was back at university where a large-scale anti-apartheid, divestment demonstration is taking place in concurrence with a meeting of the university's Board of Trustees. Impassioned speeches, placards, a lot of drumming and coordinated sloganeering culminate with a march on the administration building. Here's the picture: on one side of the street the mass of demonstrators comes to a halt. On the other side, Trustees informally emerge from the building, and then like rabbits caught in the headlights, they too come to a halt. Two sidewalks. An empty street. Catching sight of the Trustees, a storm of sound rises from the crowd. Agitated placards jerk about. On the other sidewalk, the quarry—those Trustees—quail uncertain and afraid. And then, I walked out from the fringe of the crowd, stepped from the curb, crossed the road, and quietly tried, as best I could, to present the demonstration's demands. And suddenly the atmosphere changed. The Trustees relaxed and gathered round. Some people behind me, crossed the road, joined us, and meaningful dialogue ensued. It just took one step, and then another.

Not long after that, to my amazement, I discovered that there were academics in religious studies, and lay folk and religious professionals, exploring and groping their way into something they called *inter-religious dialogue*: an undertaking where the bare presentation of positions and tolerance of difference, where feel-good harmony wasn't enough. Rather, it was an

endeavor marked by two singular expressions; first, a frank recognition of the deep damage religious people, fueled by poisonous scriptures and theologies have inflicted upon each other. And where, as a consequence, you heard and experienced a surprising amount of genuine contrition. And second, a sober but hopeful embrace of dialogue as a way of being and dwelling with one another; where diversity and the many-voiced polyphony of the whole spectrum of human belief and experience was explored and embraced in order to bring about growth and change in those who participate in it.

Here were people embarked on transformative learning. We learned what each other *truly* believed, not what we prejudged or assumed we knew. Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists and others entered into this place with honesty and sincerity. Each defined themselves, knowing that only a Unitarian knows what this religion could possibly look like from the inside, and knowing *that*, you don't presume to know what it's like to be Hindu.

We didn't compare what was ideal in our religion with what's flawed in others. It's not "turn the cheek" in my religion versus the sword in yours, or "my religion is rational and yours is kooky." This means that in dialogue, you're upfront about the strengths and challenges, the light and dark sides of your own faith tradition. And this requires, as you can imagine, that participants are self-critical about themselves and their own religious traditions and practices.

By conversing and being with others in this way, I discovered that we possess and share extraordinary resources for healing the pain and misunderstanding that all-too-often exists within and between religious people. Knowledge expands, awareness deepens, and attitudes and behaviours toward each other and *within you* radically changes. (on inter-religious dialogue, see <http://institute.jesdialogue.org/fileadmin/DI/DIALOGUEDECALOGUE/MAY2011.pdf>)

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Years later, perhaps inexorably because of these experiences, my days as a member of a monolithic, monological religion were numbered. However, my experience with a monolithic, monological belief system, institutions, and power did not end there; nor did my commitment to dialogue as a way of life.

It's no secret that I have issues with our conventional mental health delivery system. The more I have learned and seen about the catastrophic rise in "mental illness" in the past thirty years, the damage its wreaked on countless lives and families, and the more I have learned about the misconceived, broken attempts to address it, the more I have become distressed. Though I know and have met sincere, capable, and effective practitioners, our experience, personally, has basically been a nightmare. We have been patronized by top-down authorities, our careful observations dismissed, our words not heard. It's like being pushed back into our experience with the Mormon Church, where human complexity and existential needs were denied by authorities in thrall to a rigid, one-size-fits all dogma backed up by inordinate power to impose it.

And so, when we learned about something called "Open Dialogue"—a well-documented, and remarkably effective therapeutic approach to mental health crises in Western Finland, we decided to find out what was going. This part of Finland had high unemployment rates, decaying industries, and severe mental health problems. What's wild is that in past thirty years, schizophrenia has virtually disappeared in this part of Finland.

In sum, let me tell you this much. Last summer, my wife and I were accepted to participate in a year-long set of workshops at the Institute for Dialogic Practice in Western Massachusetts. We are the only non-mental health professionals, and the token Canadians, among a group whose participants hail from the US East Coast and the Mid West.

The goal of the Institute is to train people in the Open Dialogue approach as it's been developed and practiced in western Finland. I wanted to do this to find out if it was for real, and if it offered an effective and valid alternative approach. As well, I am hoping that it will help me to be a better pastoral minister and better person.

In Western Finland, when a call comes from someone in mental and emotional distress, a team of mental health workers is dispatched to the person's home within 24 hours. Before hand, they try to round up as many people from the afflicted person's social network—friends, teachers, co-workers, family members—as possible to attend the meeting. The team arrives with no prejudged diagnosis, preplanned treatment or questions.

The meeting begins with questions that are as open ended as possible to guarantee that the person in crisis and the rest of the social network can speak about issues that are most relevant at that moment. Responses are carefully adapted and attuned to questions and to what's said, often taking the form of a further question, often repeating back word for word some part of what has been said in order to encourage further speaking on the subject. Everyone has the right to speak and to be heard. At times, the team comments reflectively and openly in front of everyone what they have heard, thought and understood in response to what's been said. Together, in open dialogue, back and forth, with everyone participating, a treatment response is talked over and agreed to and commitments are made about how to continue. Nothing is said about that person in crisis unless she or he is present. That original response team will then work with the individual and her social network for as long as it takes until recovery is achieved. (see Seikkula, 2005, 2011)

This doesn't sound like rocket science, but I have been struck by how skilled and compassionate these mental health workers are at listening, reflecting, and responding with acute

attunement to what's been said. One more thing, and this reminds me of the ground rules and my experience in inter-religious dialogue: teams go into those settings convinced that a person in distress can recover from psychosis and that he or she possesses profound curative resources, as does the social network surrounding that person, to effect their recovery.

Last October, we observed one of these sessions with a family: parents and two teenage daughters, one of whom had been struggling with issues for years. By virtue of the kinds of questions asked and the generous space given for their words to be heard, the parents shared stories about their own struggles their daughters had never heard before. As their parents opened up, and the interviewers openly reflected on what they had heard, the young girls quietly set aside some paper and strings they had fidgeted with and leaned in toward the adults with rapt attention. A calm descended in the room. That family heard themselves with ears that had never listened like that before.

I don't know if you know how rare it is for people at Detwiller, or the psych wards at St. Pauls, or VGH or Riverview, or god knows where else, to really speak and to be seriously heard and responded to with understanding, patience and compassion.

I have seen the power of dialogue in family, religion and in therapy; I know from long experience what the opposite looks like and the damage it does to the soul.

In closing, when I look over the extraordinary range, the diversity of sources we claim as crucial to our living tradition, when I look out into this room at you and me, I discern, I hear a polyphony—a many voiced people—whose walking with and service to one another is inspired and enriched by a way of dwelling together in dialogue that can be resources of extraordinary power. May we claim them, each other, and the fullness of this day and the year to come.

