

Dialogue as Ritual

By Tayria Ward

(Section taken from Chapter entitled "The Language of Ritual" in dissertation entitled "Reawakening Indigenous Sensibilities in the Western Psyche")

During my years as an ordained minister, I officiated at numerous public rituals – worship services, sacraments, weddings, baptisms, funerals and burials. These rituals were formal, and based upon long history in our social and religious culture. Since resigning from the ministry, I not only do not officiate at such events, but I very rarely attend anything of their nature. Presently there is only one form of public ritual that I utilize, facilitate and am constantly fed and transformed by, and that is the ritual practice of dialogue.

Dialogue as I speak of it here is a technique for speaking together in a group that was developed by physicist David Bohm. The practice is engaged by participants for the purpose of generating awareness of the nature of thought; for identifying the systems of thought that are running us; for noticing innate, tacit defenses against listening to new thinking; and for having an experience of the field of collective mind and thought of which each individual is merely a part. It is utilized to address the problem of fragmentation in thought – my thoughts working against, rather than in concert with, your thoughts – to establish coherence in our thought systems, and to unfold new meaning for individuals and the collective.

Participants are taught the theory of dialogue and utilize a particular method that allows for respecting and holding together diverse points of view. The power of this practice has amazed and astonished me increasingly over the years that I have been participating in it. It is not formal, is unpretentious, is always new and fresh – and I have seen minds, hearts and lives radically helped and transformed in very short periods of exposure to it. One student in my college classroom wrote in his mid-term essay, "We have only had four sessions of dialogue so far, and this class has changed my life forever." This is not uncommon feedback.

I first encountered dialogue at the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago in 1993. At this event there were, in many cases, the highest, best, most impressive representatives of most every religion or discipline regarding the sacred; and for seven unbelievably high-energy days a person could listen to one speaker right after the other, all day long. Nothing I heard gripped me more compellingly, however, than the plenary held on one of the first nights during which were presented the theory and ideas behind dialogue. This was being offered not as a religion or a religious practice – not at all – but as a tool to be used by the various religious adherents in order to more effectively

mediate the diversity of religious thought offered through the week. Dialogue facilitators were on hand, like nurses or doctors, to help sort out heated controversies that might arise.

My fascination for the dialogue more than for any of the religions being represented reminds me of the fascination I felt for Eze Anamalechi, the person brought in to create ritual, more than for any of the themes or speakers at a conference regarding Africa. Both of these were aspects in the margins of these other events, intended to compliment or facilitate what the focus of the gatherings were about. In each case, for me, the rest of the proceedings were interesting but forgettable, while these marginal elements utterly captivated and attracted me.

Thinking about why this might be so it occurs to me that both of these offerings served the function of working on the connective tissue, the web, the implicate order rather than focusing upon the things being connected. My attention and interest were less upon what was visible and apparent, and more on where the potentials are for discovering the invisible web or coherence that holds it all together. Ritual and dialogue, and especially dialogue as ritual, create such possibilities.

Not very long after the Parliament, I resigned from the ministry, took training in dialogue and began teaching and facilitating it in a variety of venues. I also began work on a doctorate in Depth Psychology. The dialogue work and the study of depth psychology began to weave together in my thinking and experiencing – each field contributing powerfully to the other in my mind. I believe that each of these endeavors have very much to offer the other.

There are a number of valuable approaches to the practice of dialogue, but it was the method developed by David Bohm, many of whose ideas I discussed in the previous chapter, that I studied and utilize. In his latter years, Bohm became interested in articulating a philosophical application of his physics, and his passion for dialogue developed. The idea originally occurred to him in two ways. While observing the behavior of cells under a microscope, he noticed that most cells have an impenetrable membrane, so that when they encounter one another they simply bounce off of each other. He noticed that by contrast, other cells open up their membranes to those they encounter and share information. It occurred to him that human thought works in a similar way. For the most part, in the business of living our lives our thoughts are simply bouncing off of each other's rather than opening up to share information. Bohm observed an inertia in the tendency of thought to maintain itself rather than transform itself – even if the thought is clearly outmoded, proven false, dysfunctional or even destructive.

In his field of science, he realized that researchers who were supposedly devoted to the on-going discovery of truth and reality instead had a strong tendency to become so personally invested in the systems of thought they

adhered to that they were dismissive and discounting of clear information that could disprove or alter their theories. If a reputation is built on a theory, or a life's work built around a certain idea, it is understandable that conflicting information would be unwelcome and disconcerting. But, in Bohm's observation, the discounting of new thought goes on at such a tacit level that most often humans do not even have conscious choice about whether they will open themselves to it or not. Thought systems begin to run us, rather than us running them.

Bohm spoke and wrote extensively about the physics of thought, thought as an element in our physical reality. We take in thought like we take in oxygen – invisibly and for the most part completely unaware of how it functions in us. Exactly like those just described scientists, our worlds are built upon an investment in systems of thought that we have ingested and developed, largely at a tacit, unconscious level. We think those thought systems are just reporting to us how things are, rather than realizing that they *create* how things are. How we think about something creates how it is. If we can change our thought, we change the world. But we rarely understand this about the nature of thought. As Bohm remarks, thought creates the world and then says it didn't do it. It would have us believe that it is objectively telling us what is so, not making it so.

Like the cells Bohm observed under the microscope, he noticed that for humans when thoughts considered "other" come our way they generally bounce off our own. Our membranes rarely open to receive information that would alter the infrastructures of systems we have developed. New thought is automatically dismissed as odd, is discounted and barely even noticed. In some cases, if the alternate thought is felt as a threat, we instinctually defend our thinking as if we were defending our own selves and our world; neurophysiological responses arise and we unconsciously act out of them.

In this way essential information is distanced from each human's awareness, and is defended against as if it were the enemy. Bohm found the practice of dialogue to be a very effective means for addressing this problem; a problem that he felt is the very root of grave and destructive behavior that is causing humans to work against rather than with each other and the natural world. Dialogue as a method exposes the tacit systems of thought we hold, and the incoherence between the systems that arise in the room full of practitioners. In most cases it simply takes *awareness* for change to begin to occur, for new thought, new intelligence and new coherence to arise.

The dialogue method is profound in its simplicity, but more difficult to do than it sounds. A group of people gathers together in a circle and begins to speak with each other without an advanced agenda. Initially there is a facilitator who is familiar with the theory and the method who helps the group to get started, but the facilitator's intent is to work himself out of a job so that the group

becomes leaderless. At first as the persons adjust to the method and each other, exchanges will be awkward and seem trivial or merely polite, but before long something else starts to occur. Topics arise in the collected psyche like dreams arise in the individual psyche. To me, the process is very much like dreaming together and out loud.

Every character in a dream has significance, and every voice in the dialogue circle is significant. Those gathered try to find the impulse from which to speak that is similar to that authentic place from which dreams arise. And each tries to listen deeply to the other with the same kind of interest that a depth psychologist pays to dream figures. If an individual or the group is fascinated by or resists an idea or opinion, the intent is to develop an inquiry that helps to discover and articulate why. Every opinion, even those diametrically opposed to one another, is allowed to be heard with equal respect and interest. Rather than attempting to disprove or cancel out opposing opinions, skills for inquiry into them and understanding of them are developed. This is not the norm in human interaction. When Saddam Hussein asked President George Bush for a public debate, the news media reported the possibility that these leaders may engage in a "verbal dual." They would use words to try to conquer rather than to understand one another. Sadly, this verbal behavior is unconsciously engaged almost everywhere, even by the most lauded minds, and even in people one would expect to be very conscious.

In a letter, Jung (Edinger, 1996) expressed his frustration with persons who have a subjective experience and then form it into a "truth;" they then assume to know, and automatically presume that anyone who does not believe as they do simply does not know. What develops is a crowd of believers who each announce their own particular truth. He observes:

Instead of saying: To me personally it seems so, he says: It is so, thus putting everybody else automatically in the wrong.

Now in my estimation it would be more human, more decent, and altogether more appropriate if we carefully inquired beforehand what other people think and if we expressed ourselves less categorically. It would be more becoming to do this than to believe subjective opinions and to damn the opinions of others as fallacies. If we do not do this, the inevitable consequence is that only my subjective opinion is valid.

(p.123,124)

The technique of dialogue advises participants to realize that we do experience our opinions as truths. It asks that we behave exactly as Jung suggests, stating a subjective opinion clearly, while holding in mind that ours is simply one point of view. A method of inquiry is used to invite other ways of thinking about the same issue. Each person attempts to listen openly and respectfully to the variety of thoughts that arrive in the room without

categorically canceling any out, but rather holding them all together. The tension between opposing points of view can be difficult, but exhilarating if an attitude of inquiry and unfailing respect is maintained.

David Bohm's explains findings that help us understand, in part, why this is so challenging for us. Chemicals are emitted in the brain that produce fierce defense mechanisms when our thoughts feel challenged. Our ways of thinking and familiar thoughts become addictive. When thinking in our habitual patterns, chemicals are released in the brain that produce a similar effect to that of morphine. Unfamiliar thoughts, on the other hand, cause the endorphin levels to drop, generating anxiety and sometimes panic. For these reasons, and for the reason that people in a dialogue circle might unwittingly trigger each other's most unconscious and intractable psychological complexes, deep listening in dialogue requires conscious effort and practice, a courageous willingness to be influenced, and a consistent focus on the intention of the process.

There are a number of priceless advantages to putting oneself through such a challenge and for staying with the discomfort and uncertainty that may be experienced in the process. One is to recover the art of truly thinking together. One way to describe this is as follows. If twenty people witness a given event, object, or incident – if each is isolated from the other and asked to describe what was witnessed, chances are that twenty significantly different accounts will be garnered. Is one of these accounts true? None? Only some? Or might all of them have their truth? What happens if we put all twenty versions together, giving each equal value in validity? Every perception is like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle – seen separately who could know that they belong to the same picture? But when they are meaningfully assembled, a larger picture, or reality, will become visible that would never be imagined by looking at just one of the pieces. Such is the inherent limitation of thinking alone rather than together – it is like reviewing again and again the information contained on just one piece of a puzzle.

Participants in a dialogue quickly notice how greatly similar viewpoints are appreciated and valued, while dissimilar ones are irritants or are disregarded and disrespected. The inertia of our personal thought systems cause us to hold more strongly to our own points of view and collect only information that will reinforce them. While it is important and helpful to clarify a personal standpoint, to voice it and value it, the dialogue method also encourages that individuals suspend their opinion long enough to allow other standpoints equal articulation and dignity in the collective field of thought. As this effort is made, not only does the collective mind become more apparent, but other faces and voices in a dialogue group may become mirrors for lost, forgotten or split off parts of the self. The multiplicity of the psyche is recovered, and practitioners are introduced to their own selves in fascinating and revealing ways.

Jung (1998) suggests:

You can never come to your Self by building a meditation hut on the top of Mount Everest; you will only be visited by your own ghosts and that is not individuation: you are only alone with yourself and the self doesn't exist.

That individualistic kind of development leads to isolation and death because one's life is no longer connected with the life of mankind. Life in one, single isolated individual cannot be maintained because the roots are cut off; our roots are in mankind and if we give up that connection we are just like a plant with no roots.

In his book, Sources of the Self, philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) similarly remarks:

One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it. (p.35)

I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition. (p.36)

The drive to original vision will be hampered, will ultimately be lost in inner confusion, unless it can be placed in some way in relation to the language and vision of others. (p.37)

The paradox acknowledged here is that in such a process we discover our collective identity, even as individual identity is sharpened and clarified. As many voices are encouraged to speak in an atmosphere of careful listening and safety granted for each contribution, the uniqueness of each voice is more clearly realized as it takes its place in the increased visibility of a larger whole of which each is only a part.

The tragedy in most group experiences that do not utilize such a method is that one or two voices are valued or considered superior, while the rest remain dormant, or worse, feel pressure to conform to the other's ideas or vision, devaluing their own. Our psyches are molded to function this way from very early on. In most family systems and systems of education, thinking is deferred to external authorities; valuing one's own is little developed or encouraged. Buckminster Fuller used to describe his experience of arriving in the classroom as a curious young boy and being consistently told, "Don't pay any attention to your own thinking. Shut up and listen to what I am telling you." His own fresh perceptions and original observations were not only never asked for, he was discouraged from respecting them in any way. Mr. Fuller often stated his belief that most children are born geniuses but become de-geniused in the process of education. This early pattern of honoring the "expert" over one's own perceptual capabilities is tacitly carried forward through much of life, and is unconsciously

engendered in most social and political structures. One external voice is honored over all of the rest who are considered less perceptive or less competent. The diversity of the psyche itself is tragically undermined in these ways.

The root of the word “education” is “educare” – which means “to draw out.” Education’s original intent was to draw out what is innately known. Socrates is reported to have taken a small boy untrained in mathematics, and by asking him the right questions in the right order drew out of him complex understanding of mathematical theory. Our classrooms have tragically reversed this idea – silencing, devaluing, and submerging innate, original knowledge and perception in favor of pushing in someone else’s concepts or way of thinking. I sat in a public auditorium at a recent conference watching as “mind” was projected onto the “expert” on the stage, while a room full of intelligent people sat silently. I was uneasy. It felt like a ritual of disempowerment, one which we have been undergoing all of our lives. Though I would love to listen to this accomplished person in dialogue, in this situation the question occurred to me: what is it to me what that man thinks? Why does he not seem curious to know how the rest of the people in the room perceive things? What might be learned if we were to assemble all our perceptual worlds with his *included* rather than so weightily considered?

Education, even in the highest, most hallowed halls, is for the most part presentation style rather than participation style. “Shut up and listen,” engage in a token break out session, and then go home and think alone while you read more of the “experts” and write from a personal perspective. Assimilation and regurgitation of another’s vision rather than genuine drawing out of original and collective vision is the norm.

This model of education perpetuates a monotheistic and hierarchical model of the psyche, wherein one or two internal value systems and voices assume domination over all the rest. The practice of dialogue challenges this structure, internally and externally. Less heard and less valued voices, when deeply listened to, have much to offer. Until I began to practice dialogue, I had never realized how much my internal world had silenced and devalued so many parts of myself so that I could fit into the structure of life and culture in which I was placed. The more I engaged in dialogue externally, the richer it became internally. I naturally began to listen, inquire into and consider the needs of marginalized parts of myself. And a dialogue increasingly opened between non-human intelligences and myself also. A gradual cure for human narcissism and autism becomes possible. It is a deep encounter with otherness.

In the last class of the quarter at the college where I teach a course entitled “Dialogue and the Physics of Thought,” I mentioned to the students that I had just read accounts of aboriginal rites of passage in which the young people are assisted by the whole community – in activities such as lying on the ground with

an ear to the earth for days at a time while the elders pound the ground with large poles, placing the youths into hypnogogic states, allowing for new awareness of the spiritual dimension and an experience of expanded consciousness to take place. I asked the students if they felt the lack of such initiations for our youth. To my surprise, one student sat on the edge of his chair and declared that he felt that this group of students had just experienced something very similar to such a rite in my class, and he thought everyone should have such an experience. The others in the room seemed to concur.

The great achievement of the West is the development of the individual. Tribal consciousness had no such concept. But the notion of the individual and of individualism has gotten out of hand, like a cancer, and needs to recover awareness of the individual's connectedness to the larger whole.

In discussing the evolution of our new brain, incorporating the old into the new, Joseph Chilton Pearce (2002) adjures:

. . . in order to transcend our present state we must be incorporated into a higher order of operation. But individuality itself is what is lifted up into that new order, for an individual self was (or is trying to be) the unique achievement of our particular evolution. (p.30)

Dialogue work actually adjusts and administers brain chemistry to assist individuals and the collective mind in this needed incorporation.

Jungian analyst J. Marvin Spiegleman in a lecture to the Analytical Psychology Club of Los Angeles on October 5, 2001, explained his belief that a new world myth is afoot in the development of Western consciousness. Over several thousand years it's myth has gone from the concept of a collective chosen people (the Jews), to a chosen One (Jesus), back to a chosen many – the six million who died in the Holocaust of the Jews, which he believes to be the chief religious event of the 20th century.* He stated his conviction that the newer dispensation will be a combination of both collective and individual chosenness, of community and individuation, but its achievement is not yet.

Edward Edinger (1999) writes of the need to move from individual to "collective individuation." He writes "One way or another, the world is going to be made a single whole entity. But it will be unified either in mutual mass destruction or by means of mutual human consciousness." (p. 174) We can each do our individual work, but until we do things differently *together* not much will be accomplished.

The highly acclaimed movie *A Beautiful Mind* celebrates the accomplishment of mathematician John Nash. His breakthrough theory of governing dynamics exposed the incompleteness of Adam Smith's premise upon which all of modern economics had been built – that the best result for everyone comes from each individual doing what is best for one's self; individual ambition

serves the common good. Nash was able to prove that this is not so, that utilizing this thinking individuals end up blocking each other and canceling each other out so that no one wins. His new theory proved that the best result comes when individuals figure out how to do what is best for one's self *and* the larger whole.

Each of these scholars is articulating a breaking awareness in Western thought that the individual is a delusion and a reality both at the same time. We are one with everything and distinct from everything, both at the same time. As legendary physicist Niels Bohr once said, "an ordinary truth is one whose opposite is false; but a GREAT truth is one whose opposite is also true." (Dossey, 1999, p. 32)

Dialogue is a ritual that powerfully assists in mediating an experience of great and opposite truths. But more importantly, heart space among participants is opened and deeply affecting. Very soon people are revealing important stories and awarenesses that, they often say, never in their lives have they had the courage to tell or the space where they would be respectfully heard. Alongside of the daily human concerns richly articulated, almost invariably the content also moves in and out of primal, instinctive insights that rarely find expression. Unusual experiences, dreams, déjà vu's, dying moments of a parent or friend, the most poignant experiences of a life are articulated in these little circles. What has been marginalized is revived, bit-by-bit, and a greater wholeness, individually and collectively, becomes possible. I have unfailingly found in my work with this practice that the thinking of the heart finds its voice. "The mysterious equations of love," which John Nash spoke of in the acceptance speech for his Nobel Prize, are revealed. Nash stated that the most important discovery of his career was that it is only in these equations that any true logic or reason will be found.

As we know, love is not always a feel good experience – it is demanding, rigorous and exacting as well as thrilling, soothing and ecstatic. Like an image I had in a dream of a tiger being born through the heart, love can be playful and gentle or fierce and wild. The heart space of dialogue contains all of these vicissitudes as well.

Bohm (1996) believed strongly in the need for this work. He wrote, "I'm suggesting that there is the possibility for a transformation of consciousness, both individually and collectively, and that whether this can be solved culturally and socially depends on dialogue." (p.46) Experience tells me that this scientist has articulated a scientific means to the way of the heart and the indigenous mind.

Can the psyche go through the tremendous processes involved in reawakening the indigenous mind without mirroring, support and careful containment? I do not believe so. Without these, an individual alone could get truly lost. I propose dialogue not only as an activator for the heart and the natural mind, but as a strong means of support and containment for groups of

individuals as they make their way through challenging transformational processes.

I could not help but think very strongly of dialogue all through the following words spoken by Brian Swimme (1995) in his lecture series, *Canticle to the Cosmos*:

Every species has habitat. And the habitat of the human is language.

Where do we go to reinvent the human? We have to go to the universe. How do we go to the universe? Where do we go for that source of power?

All of us want to know how to go to the source, how to go for power. And that traditionally is provided by the great spiritual disciplines. And the spiritual disciplines are constantly being reinvented. Somehow or another, all of us know how to do that. We do! We haven't been able to articulate it well enough and work with it, but as we do we will very definitely put into play at a very fundamental level an overriding, multicultural, planetary spiritual discipline—a process for drawing forth the promise of each person." (Tape #9)

Dialogue is the simplest of rituals, available to anyone, anywhere, any time. Personally I have never participated in a discipline that more powerfully places the human in his habitat of language; drawing forth, making articulate and visible, the profound promise of each participant; creating a space for persons of many cultures (which my classrooms unfailingly contain) so that they may speak to, deeply listen to, hear, witness, mirror and reflect one another; demonstrating vividly the rainbow hues of captivating differences and always astonishing similarities. I believe dialogue practice to be a new spiritual discipline to meet our dramatic and current planetary needs. It causes me time after time to fall in love all over again with my species. Unlike listening to a lecture or sermon, reading a book, watching a movie or witnessing an artistic performance, all of which place a person on the outside looking in, dialogue puts the individual right inside the field of intense energies—to rigorously experience in ritual form the grand human passions, conflicts, tenderness and noble beauty—exquisitely demonstrated and safely contained. It is all-inclusive, celebratory and uniquely human. I believe this practice holds great potential for helping humans to move into the next stages of renewal needed to create a more promising future.

* This particular belief expressed by Dr. Spiegleman can be extended, in my mind, to the tragically under acknowledged holocaust of the Armenians, as well as those of many, many other tribes and peoples in the last centuries.