

A Skill for Life: The Dialogue Method for Individuals and Organizations

An interview with Tayria Ward, PhD, Dialogue trainer and consultant
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Q: What is dialogue?

Dialogue is a very specific method of conversation and communication developed by the physicist David Bohm. First, dialogue helps participants discover their authentic voice, what it is they want to say when someone is carefully listening and deeply inquiring into their thoughts. In that context, what we have to say may really surprise us. Second, dialogue is about very deep listening. This includes listening to others as they speak and listening to our own internal responses. Third, Dialogue is reflective. It asks us to examine our responses, particularly our assumptions, and to suspend those assumptions as much as possible so that we can more deeply hear what another is saying. And, importantly, dialogue is a method of inquiry, of asking the next question, and then the next. When we hear something we don't understand or maybe prefer to overlook, we don't just ignore it, or move onto the next subject or speaker. Instead, we inquire into what we have not understood.

The method of dialogue helps develop these skills: finding our authentic voice, deeply listening to others, listening to and examining our own thoughts and assumptions, and inquiry. In addition, Dialogue invites us to explore the nature of collective thought and how it functions within our own thinking processes; how subtly collective thought is running our own thought. Most of us don't realize how much collective thinking actually runs our thinking. As Bohm says, thought thinks us, not the other way around. We tend to think of ourselves as the author of the thoughts in our heads, but very often that is not the case. Thought can be compared to the breath. We take it in automatically without attention to how it functions in us. Both thought and breath do their work tacitly and invisibly. But just as much can be gained by conscious attention to the breath, very much can be gained by conscious understanding of how thought works in us. Dialogue work helps achieve this awareness. It breaks down thought. Thought is the lens we see through, but we don't realize we are looking through a lens! Dialogue rattles the lens so we know it is there. It will be discovered that so much of our thinking needs to be re-explored and reexamined. It can be very disconcerting! But also highly exciting and creative, too.

Q: For the person who experiences dialogue for the first time, what do you think is most surprising or disconcerting?

A very surprising and difficult thing is to realize, while in the Dialogue process, how much we have become identified with our thoughts. We think that *we are* the thoughts we think. It's very demanding to have our *thoughts* challenged and to realize that *we* are not being challenged; a thought is. The thought is not us; it is not who we essentially are. We can have very defensive routines around our thinking because we think that we are defending ourselves. So in Dialogue we start sorting ourselves out from our thoughts, no matter where the thought comes from: our family upbringing, our education, our religion. These thoughts deserve to be challenged! They deserve to be suspended! But it can be very difficult for the individual. Bohm says we bring the instincts of the jungle to the defense of our thinking, and he's right.

Q: After this examination and sorting, I can imagine someone wondering "well, if I am not my thoughts, then who am I?" Have issues of identity come up in your dialogue work? How do you deal with them?

That's a good articulation of the fear one faces. Basically, the way to deal with it is to get in there and discover who we are when our thoughts are suspended. What's left? Well, there is still a "me" sitting there. There is still somebody who is a collection of experiences and emotions and thoughts that have passed through "me," it's just that we don't have to identify with those thoughts. It is a challenging and creative process to go to a deeper layer of who we are individually—and who we are as part of a collective. When we enter into that deeper awareness of ourselves, we realize that we are vitally connected to each other in a variety of ways. Often ways that are unrealized and unexplored.

One of the images my Dialogue training used to illustrate this deep level of connection is the Aspen grove. An Aspen grove is one of the largest, living organisms on the planet. Most of us don't realize that it's one organism. We think it's a forest of separate, individual trees. But the reality is that acre after acre after acre; the trees that rise above ground are just branches of one massive root system. In the Dialogue process, we have an experience of that. We find that each of us is a branch rising out of a deeper collective reality. In many ways, the individual is an illusion. This can be exciting and disconcerting to discover and to actually experience in a Dialogue group. Quantum physics verifies this. It actually proves that the nature of our reality is that of an unbroken, undivided wholeness. We're all made of the same stuff. We're all one thing. So to think of oneself as separate is, in certain ways, simply an illusion. Dialogue can give us an experience of this and it's quite astonishing.

Q: I'm noticing right now the painting of the Aspen grove on the wall behind you. The predominant color is gold, which I associate to alchemical gold. This leads me to think that discovering the nature of thought, the nature of individuality, and the nature of the collective, is, so to speak, the "psychological gold" of the Dialogue process.

I think that's a wonderful image. The gold is the goal of process, in alchemy, the culmination of the work, isn't it? And in personal growth and transformation, which is how Jung re-imagined the ancient art of alchemy, the individual also strived for psychological "gold." The gold of the Aspen grove, like the gold of Dialogue, is

achieving a deeper and broader and more realistic understanding of who we are as individuals and who we are as part of a whole.

Q: When I think of alchemy, I recall something Carl Jung said about individuality. Life always tends towards the individual and the unique. That's why a life individually lived is so important: only the individual can be the bearer of consciousness. And so it seems to me that though we are connected at the root level, like the Aspen grove, it is still tremendously important to recognize and express our individuality.

I agree. The discovery of our collective nature actually helps us to have a vision of our individuality that is more precise and sharp. That's a paradox. But we really do experience our unique perception, our particularity, as we gain a clearer perception of the collective.

Q: So Dialogue doesn't extinguish individuality?

Oh no. It heightens and sharpens our own expression. We're looking for our own authentic voice in the midst of the collective voice that we very often are unconsciously demonstrating. The process takes us further into the truth of our own individual thinking, and helps us discover a sharper articulation of it. This happens through the inquiry process, and through the reflective piece, through deep listening to one's self while we are listening to others.

Q: Perhaps one of the things Dialogue can do is to help us become aware of the array of collective experiences each of us participates in. For example, my family is one collective, my work is another collective, my friends are another ... and so on. Is that true?

I would say that we discover, in Dialogue, the multiplicity of our own individuality. Often, the characters of the different environments we inhabit—the family setting, for instance—will "show up" in a Dialogue group. And we find ourselves reacting the way we react to our family. Or another person represents an opinion we encounter at work, or during our education. Part of the challenge is to sort out our gut reaction to the person in the Dialogue group, who may be a complete stranger, from our gut reaction to a familiar family member or work colleague. Are we reacting to them as we have reacted historically? What are we assuming about them, based on the many layers of our previous experience? How are we imposing our assumptions on that person? Can we discover and suspend those assumptions instead of imposing them upon the Dialogue group member? Can we challenge ourselves to let that person show up in a fresh way and listen to what they are actually saying in the moment?

Q: So in Dialogue the idea is to bring our freshness, our alertness, to each moment?

Dialogue is about deep attention. It is an awareness building process. We learn to pay attention to the speaker, to our own responses to the speaker, and to what is going on in

the group as a whole, and what may be shifting or moving in that whole field. So it teaches us to develop many layers of attention all at once, and it teaches us that *each* layer of attention is just as important as the others.

Q: Sounds like quite a challenge. You're confident that this is a skill that the average individual can learn?

Oh, absolutely. I think we are doing these things all the time, but without realizing it, so we're not sharpening our skills. The awareness is there, but they need to be developed more fully to mine the rich information that's available all around us all of the time. There is tremendous wisdom that we can achieve through Dialogue.

Q: What would you say to a person who isn't interested in examining their assumptions, someone who likes the status quo?

Well, two things. If that's really the case, then I would say to that person that "Dialogue isn't for you." But I would then ask them, "What kind of perceptual prison are you putting yourself in? What is your worst fear about having your thinking challenged? What is your investment in that structure of thought?"

Q: How would you persuade business people to engage in Dialogue? What would be the particular benefits to them?

In any group of people working together, there is a vast resource of human potential that is going untapped—for the simple reason that professional colleagues so rarely engage each other in deep, meaningful conversation. Too often we go about our lives in our own little worlds, our own little orbs of thoughts. By not engaging one another, by not placing my thoughts alongside my colleagues thoughts, we lose a tremendous opportunity for creativity and creative relationships. Dialogue is a great way to meaningfully connect—for discovery, for wisdom, and for meaning. Many tribal cultures understood this. They didn't need Dialogue training the way we now do. The members of the tribe simply would gather at the end of the day and just talk without an agenda. Anyone could speak. Everyone was heard. Today this skill has been lost. And with it we have lost our capacity for connectedness, which is a large part of what it means to be human. We are all lost in a kind of cultural narcissism of our own self-involvement. I think the resolution of that narcissistic neurosis is a pivotal key to health for any individual, group, business, or organization.

Q: In all of my business research and experience in the last twenty years, I am struck by how often it is stressed that the leader's obligation is to listen deeply to all of the voices within the organization.

There are certainly times when an autocratic style of leadership is worthwhile and even necessary. But increasingly, we're seeing the limitations of that style being discovered and exposed. We're learning that paying attention to many voices, many sides of the issue, many points of view and assembling them together, will create a much broader and deeper vision. Certainly, if a leader is interested in mining and fostering the creative

potential of his or her employees, then I would unquestionably recommend Dialogue as one of the most powerful productivity tools. When everyone puts their thoughts together, the organization can produce absolutely new, brilliant ideas that would not have been possible from solitary thinking. In an organizational community guided by the principles of Dialogue, the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts.

Participatory, relational leadership is challenging, especially if the businessperson is accustomed to a more autocratic style. But learning to listen deeply to other points of view while suspending our own assumptions has clear benefits. The leader will be able to encourage the latent creative potential within the organization—potential that would otherwise be lost if he or she relied exclusively on an autocratic leadership style.

Q: I'm reminded of one of my favorite statements by the psychologist James Hillman who said, "attention is the cardinal psychological virtue." It sounds to me like Dialogue is training for Life.

Everyone who engages the Dialogue process is learning a very valuable life skill. One of the most exciting parts of Dialogue for me happened as I was coming home from the first session of training. I had spent days listening to all of the voices in the group, and in the when I got alone with myself, I began hearing in a new way the multitude of voices inside me. I also began to realize which of these voices I accepted, and which ones I had internal judgments about—that I marginalized, silenced, or shamed. So being in a Dialogue circle is a marvelous experience, but when you come away from it, you have another marvelous experience: a developing ability to listen to all the voices of your own psyche with skill and attention and compassion.

During my Dialogue training, I realized I had been operating under a very autocratic leadership model within my own psyche. There were one or two dominant voices who decided how "I" should be, how "it" should be, and so on. When I started really listening to the many different thoughts and emotions that I hadn't allowed, it had a big impact.

One of the things I've done in the last few years is begin to hold family meetings with my daughters. We sit down and speak about what's going on. It's given my children a chance to find their voice, to be listened to and respected. This isn't the way I was raised. Family styles in my generation didn't often include inviting the thoughts and opinions of children into the shaping of family decisions and dynamics. But my children know that their thoughts and ideas are really valued, really cared about, really invited, and will have an impact upon decision-making processes. It creates a new dynamic for a family.

Effectively, Dialogue has changed all of my relationships ... for the better, I would say. But I have also lost some relationships, not necessarily because of the Dialogue. That's part of life.

Q: So there are lasting effects of Dialogue? It's not just limited to the group experience itself?

Absolutely. Oh yes. For instance, Dialogue has affected who I am, how I function in the world, how I perceive everything in the world. I would say that the experience of true Dialogue produces a deep shift within us. It transforms our thought and it creates new realities. You want more out of relationships—and there's no going back.

Q: What would you say to a person who is afraid of the kind of change that Dialogue promises?

At the basis of every philosophy and every understanding of life, existentially, is the idea that change is the nature of life. We are changing every day, life is changing every day, circumstances are changing every day. To have a fear of change is natural. We resist change. The paradox is that change is the only constant in life. So the members of a Dialogue group, who are intentionally confronting the fear of change, are learning a very valuable life skill. They are challenging their perceptual worlds and changing their relationships to themselves and to each other together and they are building a level of safety and trust in their shared vulnerability. Maybe especially for the person who fears change, dialogue would be important.

Q: If there was one place or situation in the world where you could do dialogue now, where would it be and why?

Since you ask me this question in September of 2001, obviously my fantasy would go to bringing together the leaders of nations with the leaders of terrorist organizations. What if everyone were capable of listening with respect to the values, intentions and thinking behind each nation, behind each religious group? Maybe on all sides we haven't been inquiring deeply enough or listening deeply enough. Why do we have to have bombs explode in our collective and personal lives before we start listening and really asking some appropriate questions? What is it that everyone needs to say, to have listened to? And what if we were able to hold together, just for a moment, the inherent differences and opinions and value structures and thought structures, and listen into the assembly of all these differences—hold them together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle—if you just put all of the pieces in, you see a bigger picture. I know this wouldn't be simple at all; and at this point it is probably an impossibility. But that would be my complete fantasy of where we would go today, in September of 2001, to conduct a meaningful Dialogue.

Q: Your answer points out that one of the absolute necessities of Dialogue is the willingness to listen respectfully. Respect is the word I keep hearing over and over again. It seems to me that that would be the major challenge in any Dialogue. What do you do in a group when it is apparent that someone doesn't respect another person?

We tend to have an either/or sense about opinions and ideas. Either it's this or it's that. But what if it's both? Can we suspend our either/or thinking, or our right and wrong thinking, or our good and evil thinking? There are certain things we think we understand, that we know that we know. But, perhaps there is an equal and opposite truth from our own, a truth that is just as legitimately based on another's experience. It reminds me of the old Sufi story of the five blind men and the elephant. Each man touches a different

part of the elephant—one touches the elephant's tail, one touches the flank, one touches the trunk—and, naturally, each blind man comes away with a different perception of elephant. Every blind man is sure he is right, but until they describe their unique experiences as a group, they really don't know what an elephant looks like. Individual perception isn't enough to get the whole picture.

So often our points of view are just this way. We are so convinced that our individual experience—the experience we know fully and directly in our bodies—is the true one that we can't even listen to another point of view, especially one that is so opposite from our own. But if we can start to assemble the contrasting viewpoints, the larger experience of how they are all true together can reveal a much greater, deeper and broader reality than we knew through personal experience.

Q: What is the unique contribution of Dialogue?

Dialogue is unique in its intention. There's a story about Socrates and a 6-year old boy, in which the philosopher demonstrated that knowledge isn't acquired, it's remembered. By asking this boy a series of thoughtful questions, Socrates was able to draw out of him complicated mathematical knowledge, knowledge he couldn't possibly have learned at his age through study. I think that's true for all of us: we have untapped knowledge that we aren't even aware of. When we engage in the Dialogue method, we can draw out of each other this wealth of individual and collective knowledge. It's like an archaeological treasure that is unexhumed, unexamined, and unknown, until we bring it up from the depths.