

# **Dialogue, Depth Psychology and the Ground of Being:**

A Method for Individual and Collective Transformation

*By Tayria Ward, Ph.D.*

I recently spent ten days in the woods on a solo retreat. “I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately,” as Henry David Thoreau articulated it. About the fourth or fifth day of my stay I realized that civilization and its conversations seemed like a dull and distant hum compared to the roar of this life around me. As I looked at the colors of the sunlight on the hills and watched a hawk soar above them, I remembered a term used by Meister Eckhart, “the ground of being.” I sensed whereof he spoke; the ground that is everywhere and nowhere, that which perpetually supports and gives us life, the stuff of our own make-up, closer than our breath.

Quantum physics has recently led the scientific mind to the discovery of what might be a rationalist’s proof that there is indeed a ground of being. Scientifically we now understand that there is one basic kind of matter out of which everything, animate and inanimate, is made. The character of our reality is that of an unbroken wholeness. At this level, we are all one thing; and these physics suggest that there is a unity of consciousness shared by everything that is. Mystics, like Eckhart, have been speaking of something like this level of reality for aeons. Science is beginning to be able to prove what has been known by these other methods of investigation into the nature of things.

If we take this basic coherence and unity to be so, then we can believe that a central problem humans face, individually and collectively, is a failure to apprehend and think through this awareness. We seem only to see and focus upon parts, fragments of the whole, and believe them to be separate from each other. You, me, the rock, the tree, the air - all separate things, we think; the continuity that essentially underlies and unifies us all is not perceived.

Our thought worlds, our thinking and our behaviors arise out of the ground of that which we take to be true. If these worlds are constructed on the basis of a foundationally flawed illusion of the reality of separateness and fragmentation, our daily lives, our self-concepts, our beliefs and the actions that issue from them, no matter how authentic we try to make them, have the character of living a lie. We live in a house of cards standing upon shaky ground. Many people sense it, but few know what to do about it.

There are myriad age-old responses to some version of this dilemma and numerous approaches to addressing it. Philosophy, religion, and more recently depth psychology offer articulations and methods of response to the uneasiness and uncertainty of knowing that we live an illusion and the idea that there might be a way to dispel it, a through-line into an awareness that will clarify. In my own diligent quest, I have been captivated in recent years by the possibilities inherent in a method developed by theoretical physicist David Bohm which he called, simply, Dialogue.

I first encountered the dialogue theory 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 that I heard gripped me more compellingly, however, than the plenary held on one of the first nights during which were presented the thesis and ideas behind Dialogue. Though it was marvelous to hear from one stream of religious thought or another, a method for encouraging them all to talk to each other, safely holding together the inherent tensions and differences long enough to assemble each voice like a piece in a puzzle so that a larger picture could be seen, seemed to present more possibilities for generating energy and insight than anything else I encountered.

The years that followed found me shifting my focus from a long career of study and practice of religion into one of training in dialogue and working upon a doctorate in depth psychology. The dialogue work and depth psychology studies were apparently tandem, “side-by-side” endeavors, but the two became increasingly woven together in my understanding of and interest in them.

If touching the “ground of being” is something one instinctually reaches for through religion, depth psychology offers an alternative through its investigation into the collective unconscious out of which our apparently individual psyches arise, presenting an incisive, daily approach to touching this ground. And Bohm’s methodology for dialogue work offers, through a study of the nature of *thought itself*, a way through the fragmentation created by thought into an exposure of underlying meaning and coherence which flows through and binds us, even as we are unaware of it. This is accomplished through deep conversation with methods of inquiry and listening, holding in mind the intentionality of the process.

I was privileged to spend some weeks in Kenya with a remarkable African woman, Wangaari Mathai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. Wangaari speaks of the confusion created in the indigenous minds of the African people when the white man came to their continent and started drawing invisible lines on the ground, saying this is one nation and that is another, separating everything, creating divisions in cultures and economies, and then instincts to war over ownership, none of which had been there before the thinking of the Westerners divided things up. The Native Americans had the same confusion and incomprehension when Europeans landed and took over this continent. David Bohm talks about the demarcations between such entities as nations, religions and sciences as divisions that thought put there. They are only there because of the way we think. There is absolutely nothing ontologically inherent about them, yet we will offer our lives defending them.

Dialogue’s investigation into the nature of thought is intended to reveal thinking as a tacit process, mostly unexamined, which runs our life. Thought is a thing in itself. We “breathe” it in like we breathe in oxygen, unaware of exactly how it functions in us. We tend to believe that we are the author of our thoughts, we are the thinker of them;

however, to a very large extent, *thought thinks us*. The dialogue process helps to reveal and examine the nature of thought, creating the possibility for one to re-think, and thus re-create a more sustainable life and world built upon the ground of more conscious engagement with the thinking faculty, both individually and collectively.

Dialogue and depth psychology both involve precise methods of inquiry. In ancient Greece, Socrates discovered that by asking the right stream of questions a young boy, formerly untrained in mathematical theory, knew and understood very complex principles of mathematics. These could be drawn out of him through asking the right questions in the right order. “What if everything we need to know is already inside of us?” This is one of the questions I heard asked at the plenary on dialogue at the Parliament in Chicago.

The root of the word education, *educare*, means “to draw out.” Unfortunately, most of our methods of education in the West have developed into an approach that “pushes in” rather than draws out information. Buckminster Fuller often complained that when he went to school as a curious child he was consistently told not to pay attention to his own thinking, but rather to “shut up and listen to what I’m telling you.” He believed that most young children are born geniuses, and tragically become “degeniused” in the education process. In our information age, when we leave the classroom we continue to take in information from lecturers, audio tapes, books, television, radio, the internet—ad infinitum—but rarely are we in a context wherein that which we authentically know is called forth, witnessed and valued. My love for and fascination with both depth psychology and the dialogue process are due to their reversal of the “pushing in” trend, and their methods for drawing out what it is that we already know and do not yet even know that we know. The source of so much knowledge and wisdom is always available, yet it is not so often consciously drawn upon or understood for what it is.

When I visited Israel years ago, I remember being profoundly struck by the sense that in almost any humble back yard in the whole nation one could probably dig for and find ancient, fascinating artifacts. The ground itself felt like it was exploding with information and history. My dreams for months afterward were about being on archaeological digs, and finding, and finding, and finding things. Both dialogue and depth psychology are like being on one of these digs. You may have to riffle through a lot of dirt and seeming nothing before the “aha!”, but once you hit it you will never be sorry you spent the time digging.

The idea that the ego is merely a feature of the self, rather than the whole of the Self, is one that may be easy to grasp intellectually, but it can be difficult to achieve an experiential awareness of the fact. A similar difficulty is experienced as one attempts to achieve the perception of the individual as merely a feature of a larger body, not a whole in itself. In my dialogue training the image of an aspen grove was used. One of the largest living organisms on the planet is an aspen grove. It appears to be acre after square acre of separate trees, yet each seemingly separate tree arises out of the same root system; each is actually a branch. As we sit in a dialogue circle, we *look* like separate beings, the

appearance is there, but it is illusory. We arise out of the same root system, and are in some real sense merely branches of it. An increasing awareness of our shared root system and its characteristics can be developed through sustained, persistent experience with the dialogue process.

Dialogue's methodology presupposes that we can achieve these awarenesses of the coherence and meaning in our collective root system by talking *together*, thinking *together*, finding out what we know *together*. The individual's private investigation is inherently limited. Carl Jung wrote:

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.

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.

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. (pp.35-37)

To engage the dialogue process sincerely is to challenge one's self to loosen, suspend, and sometimes let go of ways of thinking and thought patterns that have become comforting or habitual. In order to examine the nature of thought, one has to look at how it is created. Dialogue theory breaks this down and probes it. It explores how the assumptions one makes—which are very often based upon incomplete data, flawed perceptions, and the knee-jerk conclusions unawaresly formed—tacitly become the basis for thoughts, certainties, opinions and beliefs. More thought and beliefs are structured around these ill-considered notions, and out of this arises a whole world of perception, which then, of course, guides our behavior.

It can be very emotional and disconcerting in dialogue to discover how much we have become identified with our thoughts. We have sensations that suggest that we ARE what we think. If our *thought* is challenged, *we* feel challenged. Bohm states that thoughts that become comfortable, familiar, habitual produce endorphins in the brain. When we try to think thoughts that are challenging or unfamiliar to the way we have

constructed our thought world, the endorphin level drops and we can enter a state of despair or panic. We literally become physically addicted to our thoughts and ways of thinking. When we try to change our thinking we are hindered not only by our psychology, but by our biology! We sometimes bring “the instinct of the jungle” (Bohm, 1990, p.21) to the defense of our opinions, as we feel our physics, or physical survival, being challenged.

Because of these defenses, we tend to go through the world overlooking, not hearing, not seeing, dismissing information that might disconfirm the ways we have come to perceive things. The challenging work of a true dialogue is learning how to identify and then suspend one’s assumptions and opinions, to allow for and even invite disconfirming information to one’s most cherished points of view. When the tension between opposing views is held by the group, the result can be a broadened and transformed perspective for everyone, and new meaning emerges. Think of the story of the five blind men and the elephant. One blind man has felt the tail of an elephant, another the ear, another the side, another the trunk, another the leg. Each have a bodily experience that they *know* and will *defend* of what an elephant is: an elephant is like the side of a mountain, an elephant is long and skinny, an elephant is like the trunk of a tree. If, rather than canceling out the odd information being offered by each of the other men, they will listen and hold with value each experience, the larger reality of what an elephant is can be discovered. So it can be in a dialogue when we overcome our impulses to beat down or brush off points of view that don’t meet with our experience of reality. This is easier said than done; our instincts and defenses are so automatic, and physical addiction to habitual ways of thinking is serious. When endorphin levels drop, the impulse to lash out or run away is very strong. Developing the courage and capacity to stay in the uncertainty and withdrawal takes vision, time and commitment.

Similar to the fact that we can never know what we look like without a mirror, we need each other as mirrors in order to catch ourselves in defensive routines, and thereby challenge them. Looking at matter at the quantum level, and how consciousness arises out of it, physicist Danah Zohar notes: "Consciousness is, in its essence, relational, and it can arise only where at least two things come together. `It takes two to tango.'" (p.104) Tacit infrastructures of our own thought, and those of collective thought cannot be altered until, working together in such ways, we expose them. And, as quantum physics reveals, the observer affects the observed merely by the act of observation. If it is flawed thinking that is making a muck of our personal and collective lives, then the thinking itself needs to be exposed in order to be challenged. The act of exposition alters it already.

In his book Unfolding Meaning, Bohm (1985) proposes a third fundamental aspect of reality ignored by much of science. Science has for the most part dealt with only two aspects: matter and energy. Einstein’s famous theory equates these two, proving that they are actually two different forms of the same thing. Bohm says that there is a third element just as significant as the other two, which is actually enfolded in the other two. This element he calls “meaning.” Meaning, he says, is an inherent and essential part of our physics, our physical reality, not some ethereal quality having its existence

only in the mind. The evolution of our consciousness unfolds meaning, which then becomes manifest as an element in the explicate order. In his words:

Now if meaning is an intrinsic part of not only our reality but reality in general, then I would say that a perception of a new meaning constitutes a creative act. As their implications are unfolded, when people take them up, work with them, and so on, the new meanings that have been created make their corresponding contributions to this reality. And these are not only in the aspect of significance but also in the aspect of soma. That is, the situation changes physically as well as mentally. (p.94)

As we unfold new meanings, we are changing the physical reality in which we live. Bohm says that a deep change in meaning creates a deep change in the material structure of the brain as well. “If the brain holds the old meanings, then it cannot change its state. The mental and the physical are one.” (1985, p.95)

*Staying with* the challenging, sometimes exasperating, sometimes boring, often thrilling process of dialogue will, without a doubt, unfold wave after wave of new meaning. A commitment to this process is a commitment to change: deep, transformative, personal and collective change. In the face of overwhelming trends of destruction in our ecology and in the culture, we can lose the sense of our own empowerment and of what an individual or just a few people can do. Einstein once said that we will never think our way out of our problems using the same kind of thinking process that produced them in the first place. The dialogue method offers a way to dig in and alter the tacit infrastructures of thought itself, the thought that is thinking not only us, but everyone else. Our seemingly small, grassroots efforts can have a more powerful impact than is easily conceived of or realized.

History has long revealed that when a few people are willing to submit themselves to the chaos of transformation, the larger culture is impacted by these efforts. In the chaos, an image that continually stabilizes me is that of reaching down to touch the ground. Buddhists talk about finding the space between thoughts. In a dream I once heard the words, “You have to listen to the space between heartbeats.” There is a realm, a shared ground that can be reached. If one can find it, when the “other ground” we thought was holding us up begins to shake, and the world our thinking has constructed which we took to be real starts to melt away, reaching down to touch the ground of being can be an antidote to the anxiety of the process. Out of this ground everything else arises, every thing can be made again, the world is found to be teeming with potential and endless possibility for renewal. Reality is not an “it” that works or doesn’t, that is broken or has to be fixed. Reality can be endlessly recreated and reimagined.

These truths suggested by the new physics I have found can be experienced in the process of dialogue. Being in dialogue creates a life skill, a new way of being, a new way of thinking, and a new way of being together. No matter how much internal process work we do individually, nothing much happens until we learn to do things differently together. Relationships are an art form, and, as Angeles Arrien once put it, “are the most

rigorous spiritual practice on the planet.” Dialogue is a tool, a way of engagement with this practice which unfolds and reveals the effulgent creative potential continually begging to be realized.

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