

Adapted From “Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together”

by William Isaacs

Dialogue is about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do to another person. It is something you do with people. Indeed, a large part of learning this has to do with learning to shift your attitudes about relationships with others, so that we gradually give up the effort to make them understand us and come to a greater understanding of ourselves and each other.

A decade and a half of writing about and conducting Dialogue around the world has led me to realize that the most important parts of any conversation are those that neither party could have imagined before starting.

Dialogue can enable people to bring out differences and begin to make sense of them, fostering communication and understanding among people. It does this by helping people create settings in which their differences can be safely and consciously reflected upon. Too many of us have lost touch with the fire of conversation. When we talk together, it is rarely with depth. For the most part, we see our conversations as either opportunities to trade information or arenas in which to win points. Miscommunication or misunderstanding condemns us to look elsewhere for the creative intensity that lies dormant within and between us. Yet it is an intensity that could revitalize our institutions, our relationships, and ourselves. In the end, this book is about rekindling that fire.

When was the last time you were really listened to? If you are like most people, you will probably find it hard to recall. Most of us, despite our best intentions, tend to spend our conversational time waiting for the first opportunity to offer our own comments or opinions. And when things heat up, the pace of our conversations resembles a gunfight on Main Street: “You’re wrong!” “That’s crazy!” As one person I know recently joked, “People do not listen, they reload.” All too often our talk fails us. Instead of creating something new, we polarize and fight.

Dialogue, as I define it, is a conversation with a center, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people.

The aim of a negotiation is to reach agreement among parties who differ. The intention of Dialogue is to reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act. In Dialogue, one not only solves problems, one dissolves them. We do not merely try to reach agreement, we try to create a context from which many new agreements might come. And we seek to uncover a base of shared meaning that can greatly help coordinate and align our actions with our values.

To take it one step further, dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in relationship. Thinking together implies that you no longer take your own position as final. You

relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result simply from being in a relationship with others— possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred.

Dialogue presents a paradox. It is both something we already know how to do and something about which there is much to learn. On the one hand, the tradition of dialogue can be traced to the talking circles of the Native Americans. Those who try to minimize the complexity of Dialogue by reducing it to a few simple techniques about talking together will be sorely disappointed. Doing so fragments conversations in new ways by imposing oversimplified rules instead of stimulating an inquiry into what is preventing people from talking well.

DISCUSSION VS DIALOGUE:

We need both discussion and dialogue. There are times when it is fruitful to think alone, or use discussion, and there are times when it is essential that we think together or engage in Dialogue. Discussion is about making a decision. Dialogue is about exploring the nature of choice. Discussion seeks closure and completion, unlike Dialogue which seeks to open possibilities and see new options.

Dialogue can give us a way to create an atmosphere in which we can perceive what really matters to most to us, and to one another, access to a much finer and subtler kind of intelligence than we might ordinarily encounter. To listen respectfully to others, to cultivate and speak your own voice, to suspend your opinions about others— these bring out the intelligence that lives at the very center of ourselves. My colleague, musician Michael Jones, calls this the “intelligence of the heart.” Through dialogue we learn how to engage our hearts.

Dialogue provides a means by which we can learn to maintain our equilibrium. It lets us reconnect and revitalize our emotional capacity because it compels us to suspend our habitual reactions and frozen thoughts. It requires that we learn to include and take into account opinions different from our own. Dialogue requires that we take responsibility for thinking, not merely reacting, lifting us into a more conscious state. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote of this as “the high freedom of great conversation.”

In Dialogue, you yourself are part of the method. You cannot be separated from it. To engage in dialogue is to engage with yourself in a profoundly new way. There are no steps that you can use on others, independent of how you yourself function. There are, however, definite and reliable practices to follow— if not steps to take— that determine whether the conditions for dialogue are present or not. That’s why you need to understand the theory and principles of dialogue— the interlocking forces that determine “how and why” dialogue works. Without an underlying theory about why things work— in this case, why and where dialogue is effective— we can go only a short distance toward proficiency.

Without conscious consideration, the mastery remains beyond mystery. Luck is not enough to reliably produce the dialogic experience over time. There is an important difference between having an experience and being conscious of what led to that experience. It means developing practical and articulable knowledge that can be conveyed to others. Without practical knowledge, people inevitably become dependent on others to re-create an experience for them,

since they themselves have no understanding of how it happened. Put differently, they may dance to the music, but they may not understand how to play it. In my view, the promise of dialogue is that everyone can come to an understanding of how to play the music of dialogue.

The paradox here is that in the end, Dialogue is a quality of being, not a method at all.

THE FOUR PRACTICES:

Listening, Respecting, Suspending, and Voicing, are the key building blocks to accomplishing this task. This part explores each of these, providing you with ways you might both understand and develop them within yourself.

LISTENING:

The heart of dialogue is a simple but profound capacity to listen. Listening requires we not only hear the words, but also embrace, accept, and gradually let go of our own inner clamoring. As we explore it, we discover that listening is an expansive activity. It gives us a way to perceive more directly the ways we participate in the world around us. This means listening not only to others but also to ourselves and our own reactions. Recently a manager in a program I was leading told me, “You know, I have always prepared myself to speak. But I have never prepared myself to listen.”

To listen, is to develop an inner silence.

You do have to do some deliberate work to cultivate settings inside yourself and with others—where it is possible to listen. In other words, you must create a space in which listening can occur.

To listen, you must slow down.

To listen well, we must attend both to the words
and the silence between the words.

On the second day of a Dialogue session, I opened the proceedings by simply asking people to reflect on the day’s events. To people’s surprise, there was a profound silence. The silence filled the room like a rest between the notes. The silence seemed to take us in, bring us alive, evoking a profound state of listening. In that state all one’s words feel inadequate, almost an imposition. Slowly people began to put their thoughts into words. Many later reported that like a jazz ensemble playing together, they felt they had to improvise, that all of their previous ideas seemed out of place. They tried to speak in a way that matched the intensity of the silence.

Learning to listen begins with recognizing how you are listening now. Generally, we are not all that conscious of how we listen. You can begin to listen by listening first to yourself and to your own reactions. Ask yourself, What do I feel here? Or How does this feel? Try to identify what you feel more carefully and directly. Beginning with the perception of your own feelings connects you to your heart and to the heart of your experience. To learn to be present, we must learn to notice what we are feeling now.

One of the ways we sustain the culture of thinking alone is that we form conclusions and then do not test them, treating our initial inferences as facts. We wall ourselves off, in other words, from the roots of our own thinking. And when we are invested in an opinion, we tend to seek evidence that we are right and avoid evidence that we are wrong.

Perhaps the simplest and most potent practice for listening is simply to be still. By being still in ourselves, quieting the inner chatter of our minds, we can open up to a way of being present and listening that cuts through everything. Think of this as calming the surface of the waters of our experience so that we can see below to the depths.

Listening Together:

Listening is usually considered singular activity. But in Dialogue one discovers a further dimension of listening: the ability not only to listen, but to listen together as a part of a larger whole. This entails making a fundamental shift of perspective. It means taking into account not only what things look like from one's own perspective, but how they look and feel from the perspective of the whole web of relationships among the people concerned. This requires more than empathy, which might imply trying to put oneself in the other person's shoes while also sustaining one's own angle. Instead, we can enlarge our sense of ourselves— our sense of identity— so that we become what a colleague of mine once termed "an advocate for the whole." When people listen together, dialogue can sometimes evoke a deep and unusual experience of common understanding and communion.

RESPECTING:

To be able to see a person as a whole being, we must learn another central element in the practice of Dialogue: respect. Respect is not a passive act. To respect someone is look for the springs that feed the pool of their experience. The word comes from the Latin *respecere*, which means "to look again." Its most ancient roots mean "to observe." It involves a sense of honoring or deferring to someone. Where once we saw one aspect of a person, we look again and realize how much of them we had missed. This second look can let us take in more fully the fact that here before me is a living, breathing being.

In Zulu, a South African language, the word **Sawu bona** is spoken when people greet one another and when they depart. It means "**I see you.**" To say "I see you" is to sustain you in this world. Respect also means honoring people's boundaries to the point of protecting them. If you respect someone, you do not intrude. At the same time, if you respect someone, you do not withhold yourself or distance yourself from them.

Treating the people around us with extraordinary respect means seeing them for the potential that they carry within them. Treat the person next to you as a teacher. What is it that they have to teach you that you do not now know? Listening to them in this way, you discover things that might surprise you. This does not mean being blind to gaps in what they might say and what they do, nor does it mean being overly slavish in pointing out their faults. Respect is, in this sense, looking for what is highest and best in a person and treating them as a mystery that you can never fully comprehend. They are a part of the whole, and, in a very particular sense, a part of us.

To listen in this way is to take seriously that what goes on around us exists not merely in others, it is also— however hard it is to see at the time— within us all as well. We get a clue about this most directly when we find ourselves irritated with others. We then know for sure that there is something in us too; it is in some ways already under our skin, or else we would not be feeling the disturbance! The challenge is to come to the point of acknowledging it. Put differently, one of the secrets to the dialogic way of being is the willingness to forgive that which we see in another and come to the point where we can accept it as being in us. This implies coming to a place of respect both for others and for ourselves.

Respect in Groups:

Often differences that emerge in a conversation ruffle feathers and disturb things to the point where people can no longer act as if all were in agreement. The effort to cover up and regain a polite veneer often can be enormous. But to enable a dialogue, a group of people must learn to do something different: to respect the polarizations that arise without making any effort to “fix” them.

The loss of respect manifests in a simple way: My assessment that what you are doing should not be happening. The source of the trouble lies in my frame: My belief causes me immediately to look for a way to change you, to help you to see the error of your ways. It causes me to avoid looking at my own behavior and how I might be contributing. People on the receiving end of this attitude experience violence— the imposition of a point of view with little or no understanding.

Remaining aware of those parts of us that do not respect others may be the most instructive thing we can do to help become aware of how to deepen our capacity for respect. As before, noticing the times when you seem to be doing the opposite of the practices listed above can be quite helpful.

SUSPENDING:

When we listen to someone speak, we face a critical choice. If we begin to form an opinion we can do one of two things: we can choose to defend our view and resist theirs. Or, we can learn to suspend our opinion and the certainty that lies behind it. Suspension means that we neither suppress what we think nor advocate it with unilateral conviction. Rather, we display our thinking in a way that lets us and others see and understand it. We simply acknowledge and observe our thoughts and feelings as they arise without being compelled to act on them. This can release a tremendous amount of creative energy.

One of the central processes for enabling us to enter into dialogue is the practice of suspension, the art of loosening our grip and gaining perspective.

The absence of suspension, as I have indicated earlier, is **certainty**. The word certainty comes from a root that means “to determine” or “to distinguish.” It has come to mean a rigidity about the distinction we have made. Some ideas have absolute certainty or necessity attached to them— they carry a non-negotiability to them. What makes you so darned sure you are right? Only by asking such questions will you be able to practice suspension.

To suspend criticism is to observe its motion, to take back into yourself the force you might otherwise put off onto others around you. If you neither suppress this energy, disavowing it (what, me critical?), nor express it (those idiots deserve what they get), you are left with having to hold it in yourself and explore its meaning and dimensions. This can be quite uncomfortable, which may be why it is rarely done. But it can lead to enormous insight, for instance, about the pervasive habits of judgment we can impose on others. The very act of inquiring into one's reactions in this way produces a change: To observe one's own thoughts and feelings is to bring into them a perspective and attention that can transform them.

The kind of thinking I am speaking about here is something we do while acting. Educator Donald Schön once described this capacity as "reflection-in-action": the ability to see what is happening as it is happening. Seeing one's own thought in this way is a little like opening the mind's factory door and looking at the processes inside. Typically, we are aware only of the products of this factory, our thoughts. We are not all that aware of how our thoughts are produced. Suspension is the act of looking at these thoughts.

Types of Suspension: In dialogue we can divide suspension into two types, one of which leads to the other. *Suspension 1* is to disclose, to make available for yourself and others the contents of your consciousness so you may see what is going on. To do this, you must locate, name, and then display for others what you are aware of.

There is another level, *Suspension 2*. In this we become aware of the processes that generate that thought. To suspend in this way is to move upstream— to make ourselves aware that our thoughts do not simply arise from nowhere but have an origin of a very particular and deterministic sort. For example, I might become aware of anger that I have toward someone. I can become aware that I am "thinking anger"— that is, thoughts come to my mind like, They have no right to treat me this way. How dare she? Who does she think she is? and so on.

As I look at this, I begin to see that all of this is in fact simply a stream of thought that is being triggered by a set of impulses within me. In a very real sense, I am causing this line of thoughts to flow. "They" are not doing anything to me. It is emerging strictly from within me, in particular from my inner ecology and the memories I have about these experiences. By observing my thought processes in this way, I transform them. This is one of the central transformational vehicles of dialogue.

Suspension requires that we relax our grip on certainty. As we see that our thought is just a medium by which we can understand the world, we realize that thoughts are in a very real sense "things." How do you let go of the conviction you have about something? You might begin by asking yourself, "Why are you so damned sure about this? What is leading you to hold on to it so intensely? What could the payoff be to you? What would happen if you let it go? What is at risk if you do? What might you lose? What do you fear you would lose?"

Most of us live in a world where it is unsafe to say, "I don't know." In both our professions and our families, we are supposed to have answers to problems. Instead of good answers, we need good questions. The power of dialogue emerges in the cultivation, in ourselves, as well as in

others, of questions for which we do not have answers. Identifying one good question can be vastly more significant than offering many partial answers.

“Mine for the questions.” By this I mean to look for the really important, hard questions that keep people up nights and go to the heart of our concerns. Each of us, I have found, has several questions that are at the very center of our lives. You might try reflecting on what questions live within you.

When people ask me to help them solve their problems, the first thing I do is listen for the quality of the questions they are asking themselves. I listen in particular for the degree of self-reflection in the questions. To what extent, I ask myself, do they see their own part in what they are exploring? To what degree do they attribute their problems to sources outside of themselves? Powerful questions are often notable for the silence that follows their utterance. People may not know the answer! In fact, it becomes clear that finding an answer too quickly is not necessarily a wise goal. To “mine for questions” is to cultivate the suspension of answers and to open the way for the dialogic way of being.

The Poet Rilke begs us:

To be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

One way to develop suspension is to look for what David Bohm called the **“order between”** the extremes. This does not mean looking for compromise so much as looking for the unresolved issues around which people are polarizing. This is difficult, because the positions that people voice are always partial, always limited, and almost always call up the opposite point of view. Thinking positionally polarizes. It tends to lead us down a path that says things are either this or that. To find the order between we must recognize that positions in this sense are always false, because they are pieces from a whole cloth.

Ask: **What Am I Missing?** Perhaps one of the most powerful ways to suspend thought is to ask the questions. What is it that I am, or we are, systematically leaving out of this conversation? What are we ignoring completely or failing to pay sufficient attention to?

Suspension in Groups: Collective suspension means raising to the surface issues that impact everyone in a way that all can reflect on them. Suspension at the group level, like at the individual level, has to do with interrupting the habitual functions of memory and inviting a fresh response. Collective suspension is the practice of shifting the ecology of a group so that it can begin to see it has alternatives, to understand that it no longer needs to be limited to a single point of view.

The shadow of suspension is that part of us that wishes to be certain. It is also the part that tends to see others as certain: “They are so opinionated.” But to make such a claim is a contradiction: We are being opinionated about their being opinionated! We do to others in this sense what we

abhor in ourselves, and often fail to notice it. When two people, or two groups of people, meet who are both full of certainty in this sense, conflict is inevitable.

VOICING:

To speak your voice is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of genuine dialogue. Speaking your voice has to do with revealing what is true for you regardless of other influences that might be brought to bear.

Finding your voice in dialogue means learning to ask a simple question: What needs to be expressed now? To do this you need to know how to listen not only to your internal emotional reactions and impulses— or to the many images of how you think you should behave— but to yourself. For many of us this is no small feat. We have been inundated with numerous messages about how we ought to behave, what we ought to say, in all the different circumstances of our lives. To discover what we think and feel, independent of these things, requires courage.

Self-Trust and Voice: It takes determination to speak your own voice. The pressures that arise both from within yourself and from others often seem designed to sap your energy. The antidote is self-trust. Only as you learn to take seriously the possibility that what you think might be in fact valid for others do you find the backbone and confidence to share it.

Finding and speaking one's voice requires first a willingness to be still. Daring to be quiet can seem like an enormous risk in a world that values articulate speech. But to speak our voice we may have to learn to refrain from speaking, ...and listen. Not every word that comes to us needs to be spoken. In fact, learning to choose consciously what we do and do not say can establish a great level of control and stability in our lives. Many people feel "pressure" to speak. Containing and holding that pressure, something can form within you. Let what is in you take shape before giving words to it. It is like letting a picture develop; you do not want a partially formed

Speaking one's voice also requires a willingness to trust the emptiness— the sense of not knowing what to do or say— that sometimes appears first. One of the reasons people chatter away is that they are lonely. They are afraid of silences; they fear that there is not a creative space in them but an empty void. But a little patience will be rewarding. What is often most lacking in us is the confidence that what does appear actually has merit, is worth saying— that we are worth listening to.

Such speaking requires a leap into the void. This presumes courage, a willingness to enter into the dark forest of one's own lack of understanding. Often the voice that is genuinely ours is not well developed. We may be an expert at mimicking others but not speaking for ourselves. In dialogue this emerges as the willingness to speak in the circle without knowing what you will say.

More than a gimmick, this is the very motion required to unleash our locked-up energies. Fear often reigns. To leap into a moment of silence with a thought that is not well formed or one that is potentially controversial, whose utterance might change relationships, terrifies. In these moments we can easily retreat into planned speech, the things we have said before. We can

cover our tracks through practiced routine, or we can practice speaking without knowing in advance what we are going to say.

Finding and then speaking your voice also means finding the right words. Yet most of our words are designed to sustain our separation. When we speak words that come from a place of wholeness and actually articulate that wholeness, we can sometimes feel it is if they are not entirely our own. One of the most common experiences people have in dialogue is the discovery that the whole is somehow larger than the parts. Paradoxically, we may hear our own voice most powerfully when we are with a group of others in dialogue.

Dialogue offers us another possibility, which is to discover that in speaking I can create. My voice is not simply something that reveals my thought, or even parts of myself; it literally can bring forth a world, conjure an image. But this kind of speaking requires that I learn to listen for the distant thunder that may ultimately turn out to be my own voice waiting to be spoken. This sometimes occurs as the feeling of being tapped on the shoulder by destiny. Suddenly I have the sense that everyone is waiting for me, that it is somehow my turn, that I have something for others that must come out. Often, I find people who have this experience look around anxiously for someone else to fill their shoes, to do this job for them. “They can’t have meant me.” Yet this inner call can be answered only by you, and in answering it one finds one’s own voice and one’s own authority. Everything else pales by comparison.

Finding Voice in A Group: The voice of a group differs from that of an individual. In every group one can ask the questions, “What is it that people together are endeavoring to say here? What is it that they want to say all together?” This is not the same as assuming that everyone says the same thing, or even that they agree on critical matters. It is a matter of listening for an emerging story or voice that seems to capture more than what any one person is able to articulate, and saying that. The voice of a group of people is a function of the emerging story among them. The narrative voice, the voice of the storytellers, is unlike that of the, rational, analytic mind. It does not break things up or categorize.

Let the Sound Cascade: The sounds in any conversation have a powerful impact on what is intended and stated. One practice, developed by Risa Kaparo, is to let someone speak and then to listen as the sound of his voice cascades into silence. People typically notice that there is a notable change in the meaning of what they heard as they wait a moment or two and make space to “let the meaning bloom”.

Often, of course, the energy in the conversation is such that speaking quickly is the norm, and waiting is seen as awkward or even impolite. **Giving a moment of space is a practice that a group could choose to adopt as the norm.** The idea here is to make space for what is seeking to be spoken to come through. To free this kind of space is to enable what the poet Rilke speaks of as uncontrived words: *“I believe in all that has never yet been spoken. I want to free what waits within me, so that what no one has dared to wish for, may for once spring clear without my contriving.”*

Speak to (and from) the Center: In Dialogues that seem to flow powerfully, people begin to realize that they are speaking to the common pool of meaning being created by all the people

together and not to each other as individuals. They are seeking to gather a new quality of meaning and understanding together. In a dialogue, people are not just interacting, but creating together. To be aware of the challenge of speaking to the center enables the collective voice of a group to emerge more quickly. This can be quite awkward if people use it as a strategy, as a rote step. It may help to think of the “center” here as the center of each person, the center of meaning emerging in and through everyone.

The center of the circle can be seen as a reminder of this emerging, invisible fact. People in groups quite often concentrate on the circumference of a circle, and this is the orientation of most group-dynamics approaches—they explore the nature of the interpersonal and shared assumptions and patterns of relationship among people. Yet it is the center that is most important. By literally looking only to the center, you may be able to break the habit of focusing only on interpersonal relationships. One must come to the point of listening fully to the center of each person.

PETER SENGE:

Several years ago, after a speech to a large group in Silicon Valley, I was asked to meet with a group of about twenty-five executives, mostly CEOs and executive VPs. Rather than present more, or have a question and answer session, I suggested that we put our chairs in a circle and do a “**check-in**.” This is one of the simplest practices of Dialogue, going around the circle and saying a few words about whatever thoughts and feelings are moving in me at the moment. The first several people made more or less perfunctory statements, expressing questions or commenting on the oddity of not sitting in the familiar “classroom” seating arrangement. Then one man said, “I think I know what this is about,” and told a story.

From that point onward, the “**check-in**” among the group of executives became quite different. Some people posed deep questions, questions which reflected core struggles in their lives. Others talked about issues that confronted them in their work and in their organizations— or in their families. It didn’t really seem to matter what the specifics were. Everyone seemed to understand the opportunity present, the opportunity to reflect and to be heard, and to reflect further on what it meant to be heard.

In almost every setting where practices of dialogue have become embedded and part of everyday routines, the ensuing changes have become irreversible, as near as I can tell. Once people rediscover the art of talking together, they do not go back. This rediscovery seems to awaken something deep within us, some recognition of what we have lost as our societies have drifted away from the core practices that can make them healthy. Once awakened, people do not go back to sleep. I have come to conclude that there is a deep hunger in the modern world for meaning and the core practices whereby human beings make meaning together.

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