

# Reflection: The Challenge and Power of Dialogue

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The word 'dialogue,' though in its dictionary definition the equivalent of 'conversation,' is most often used with a sense of purpose, usually that of bridging a gap of some kind, ending alienation, or resolving conflict.

Like most people, I have had plenty of experience with dialogue: in my case as a family member and as a parent, trying to reach agreements with teenagers; as a peace activist, trying to achieve consensus in groups and committees and trying to engage with a sceptical public; as a third party facilitator of dialogue in conflicts between neighbours and within organisations; and, particularly, in situations of violent or potentially violent conflict between politicians and/or armed groups. I have used this opportunity for reflection to gather together some of the salient things I have learnt over the years, from others involved in nonviolent activism and peace making and from my own experience. I have focused on dialogue as something distinct from negotiation, though the two things often overlap, especially at a point where the focus is on practical solutions of a political nature.

## Needs and Provisions

Even without any pre-existing conflict, dialogue can be difficult. Each person speaks from their own inner world, with its emotions, assumptions, beliefs, life experience, and preoccupations. Each sees the questions under discussion in the light of their own experience. Each is motivated by their own needs and fears, conscious and unconscious.

In situations of longstanding conflict, especially where violence has taken place, emotions will already be deep seated and intense. These will make themselves felt in any associated dialogue, both through the words used by the speaker and in the way in which those words are understood by the hearer. The perceived power

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relationships between the different parties will also affect the dynamics of the exchange. Dialogue calls for the building of trust, respect, and a willingness to talk with each other on the basis of human equality – no easy task in such circumstances.

Given these challenges, the context in which dialogue takes place is of great importance. A neutral, safe venue that is acceptable to both or all parties is the first essential, along with agreements about the confidentiality of the process: what, if anything, can be told to whom about anything discussed. Any ‘leaks’ of information can threaten the process – and lives. Such a dialogue will usually call for the help of a facilitator or facilitators (by whatever name) who have the trust of each of the parties and will be relied upon to ‘hold the process,’ so making the parties feel as safe as possible to speak and setting an example of respect for each participant, and for their culture, while encouraging them to show the best of themselves in their behaviour.

In the case of deep-seated and complex conflicts, the facilitation is likely to be provided by a team rather than by one individual, since the process may last a long time and call for facilitator availability at short notice when crises occur. In addition, separate conversations are likely to be needed between one or more facilitators and the separate parties, both before and during the process, to help them reflect on their own position and the way in which they are representing it. The ‘modelling’ of cooperation between facilitators is helpful too and can make a process seem less intense. Furthermore, as part of a team, the facilitators are able to support each other, digest what is happening, give each other feedback, and plan the next steps.

## **Deep Feelings and Connections**

The more challenging the conflict, the more relationships will matter. Dialogue is not a technical affair but a deeply human one in which personal respect and increasing trust and warmth can be transformative. The deepest understanding and change come when people are prepared to make themselves vulnerable to each other. Years ago, I read the first edition of Cornelius and Fare’s book, *Everyone Can Win*, and have used their idea of ‘needs and fears mapping’ on countless occasions. It is helpful, as intended, as a tool for facilitators to analyse and understand what motivates the different parties to a conflict. I have found it even more helpful for the parties to use, enabling them to understand their own needs and fears and explain themselves to their dialogue partners.

It is my experience that even the most hardened opponents, given the right support, are capable of empathy and generosity. I have seen a military leader famed for his cruelty who, at a moment of crisis in a vital conversation, prevented by his superior from making the kind of political gesture that would have defused the situation,

chose instead to confess his past cruelty and cite a particularly chilling example of it. Through this act of confession, in one sense irrelevant to the business in hand, he transformed the dialogue's dynamic.

That episode confirmed for me the primary importance of feelings, as against logic and strategy, in human relationships and responses. This means that dialogue processes can be greatly enhanced through the informal interactions that take place in the dinner queue or in organised events such as football matches. When there is an aspect of cultural or religious identity that is shared by the conflicting parties and transcends the conflict in question, traditional ceremonies, acts of worship, and other symbolic acts appeal to a deeper level of human commonality and allegiance and can be deeply moving for those involved – and indeed for facilitators if they are included. They deepen growing bonds and hence the commitment of the parties to the dialogue process. If agreements are eventually reached, those shared experiences will make them harder to go back on.

## **Reaching Agreement**

When the building of trust and understanding have prepared the ground sufficiently, the time will be ripe for focusing on possible agreements to resolve the conflict between the parties present and those whom they represent. With positive relationships established, a process of cooperative problem solving process will be possible, rather than the kind of antagonistic hard bargaining that negotiation often entails: one characterised by flexibility and creativity in creating the components of a solution that will address the needs and fears of the different parties.

However, an agreement reached in such a way and by individuals who are typically a step below those at the top of the power pyramid may not have the authority to make the necessary commitments on behalf of those they represent. Even if they had it in theory, in practice the political support at home may prove to be lacking. Some of the colleagues of those involved in talks may feel that their interests have not been served, and a top leader may decide to pull back when called upon to implement an agreement.

Unless there have been regular press and other briefings, if the dialogue has been held privately and in confidence, the supporters of different parties and the public at large may be unaware of the direction that a dialogue has taken, let alone the point it has reached. (Thus the Oslo Accords, welcomed with such jubilation around the world, did not win the acceptance and implementation at home that could have begun to resolve the tragic conflict in Israel/Palestine.)

A much wider process of dialogue may be needed to bring others on board, preferably

at an early stage: a societal conversation that can mobilise a 'peace constituency' and widen support for dialogue among political or military leaders. Members of that peace constituency can also keep those leaders in touch with the popular mood and let them know what is likely to be broadly acceptable to most people in an eventual settlement.

## **Oppression and Dialogue**

A 'peace constituency' of a different kind is needed in situations where 'the people,' or some sections of them, are oppressed or marginalised by those who govern them. Such a situation of extreme injustice or 'unpeace' in which the people dare not speak out and resist their oppression (as has been the case until very recently in Zimbabwe) is a hidden conflict: one that is waiting to happen.

No government will sit down in dialogue with people who have no collective voice or negotiating power. That position changes when a dialogue begins between those who have thought of themselves as powerless. That dialogue, often secret at first, enables them to realise that a dictatorship relies on their acquiescence and that if they begin to think and move together and withdraw their cooperation from the system, their power will increase, and when they find a public voice and extend their dialogue to others, to build their movement, the power relationship will shift and the beginnings of change will come within sight.

However, if there is no communication with the powers-that-be, if dialogue is not constantly on offer, if public communication is characterised only by anger and hate, rather than by commitment to a shared vision for the future, and if that vision does not include every sector of society, the dreamt-of future will not be achieved. After the traumas and on-going disasters of the 'Arab Spring,' it is time for the rhetoric of 'nonviolent revolution' to be replaced by the language and mind-set of nonviolent transformation: a more patient but no less courageous process. Deep change comes only when people begin to think differently, when relationships change, and when there is 'buy-in' from a good majority of the population. The dialogue needed will take countless forms and will have to include the healing of the past as well as understanding of the present and shaping of the future; but it will lead in the end to a peace built to last.

## **A Global Dialogue: The Need of our Time**

Conflicts will be present in any healthy human collective, even in a truly just, democratic, and peaceful society; so, the practice of respectful and empathic dialogue will always be essential to the maintenance of genuine peace and true security. Right now, however, that practice is constantly disrupted by a system of geopolitics that is

based on the contest for power and control between major economic and military powers. The efforts made within and between communities and societies to build understanding and co-operation are constantly overwhelmed by this global contest. Seemingly unstoppable 'extremist' violence continues because the only means of stopping it that seems to be considered by governments is counter-violence: fire against fire; and those who would outlaw nuclear weapons ownership by others persist in 'upgrading' their own capacity for nuclear genocide.

Despite and because of our global dominance, human beings are critically insecure, as result of the greed and folly of believing that getting the better of each other, consuming more, and exploiting the earth and its resources is a fit purpose for living. Countless numbers of us are already suffering and dying as a result – from local wars fuelled by hegemonic agendas and global divisions, from famine, displacement, and environmental destruction. Mass migration is unstoppable and climate change, which is already ravaging our planet and could bring about the extinction of our own and countless other species, is yet to be slowed down, let alone halted.

If we can only recognise what we are doing, acknowledge our interdependence, and see that our capacity for dialogue – for communicating and connecting with others through empathy – is the greatest gift we have as human beings, we will join a growing movement of people in a conversation (see [www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk](http://www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk)) across all boundaries to build a peace constituency like no other, whose aim is to re-imagine human security and wellbeing and create a new, shared narrative which even our leaders will begin to adopt, and so [as] to transform policy, nationally and internationally, to reflect the fact that our future will depend not on economic muscle and armed might but on dialogue, cooperation and the recognition of our human and ecological interdependence.

Humanity can yet step back from the brink and build a kind and sustainable world. The future is in our hands. I will close with the words of Edward O. Wilson, whose book *The Social Conquest of Earth*\* ends thus:

Earth, by the twenty-second century, can be turned, if we so wish, into a permanent paradise for human beings, or at least the strong beginnings of one. We will do a lot more damage to ourselves and the rest of life along the way, but out of an ethic of simple decency to one another, the unrelenting application of reason, and acceptance of what we truly are, our dreams will finally come home to stay.

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\* Edward O. Wilson. *The Social Conquest of Earth*. Liveright: New York 2012.