# Aspects of Effective Dialogic Interventions

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**Abstract**: Based upon on a broad reading of quantum physicist David Bohm's work and upon my organisational experience, I propose that effective interventions into problem situations require three aspects: dialogue, whole-system involvement, and identification of systemic issues. Without partnership of these three aspects, the real problem often hides in the crevices, leading interveners to focus on the wrong problem and to further solidify the original conflict. Concepts that underlie Bohm's science and philosophy serve as metaphors for his process of dialogue as well as for this paper. In Bohm's view the relationship of wholes and parts underlies scientific as well as all other processes. A problem arises from *fragmentation*, a breakage within the essential relationship of the parts that manifests in our societal, organisational and personal conflicts. His process of dialogue proposes to mend and reweave those fragments back into their participation in the whole. In dialogue, by placing a societal or organisational issue within its context and by viewing fragmentation from various perspectives, we begin the process of mending and rebuilding a broken issue back into wholeness. The image of the spiral suggested by Bohm describes the pattern underlying his dialogue, as well as the intervention model I propose. Brief narratives from organisational and societal-cultural interventions based upon these three aspects demonstrate their application in diverse situations and types of conflict.

## Introduction

After many years of intervening in a variety of disagreements and problems within a large diversity of organisations and situations, I have come to a few conclusions. One is that *dialogue is the most indispensable tool* in my tool chest for helping groups move beyond difference. In addition, I have concluded that while every problem has its uniqueness, successful interventions into various types of problems seemingly

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share at least two other common aspects: the intervention must be a *whole-system* process, and the intervention must be based on an assessment of the *systemic issue(s)*. In this paper I will describe how dialogue, along with those two common aspects, lays the groundwork for successful intervention, illustrating these aspects in the societal-cultural milieu as well as in work organisations. As well, I wish to propose a pattern, inspired by the work of quantum physicist David Bohm, which underlies this set of three aspects.

My own dialogue journey began in the early 1990s when I was the administrator of a large healthcare system. During my doctoral studies I had become very interested in systems theory and in translating into management practice the concepts of early systems theorists. It was during early excursions into systems thinking that I happened upon David Bohm's writing and his then-nascent process of dialogue. After having participated in training by Bill Isaacs, at that time a lecturer at MIT's Sloan School of Management and president of the consulting firm DIA*logos*, I felt that dialogue provided a methodology for translating the concepts of systems theory into practical application. I was not disappointed. Dialogue has proven itself invaluable in supporting groups to evolve beyond difference.

Yet, something was missing, something I could not articulate. Experiences within the dialogue circles at times were unexpected and perplexing. On occasion dialogue participants described memories that had busrt into awareness of troublesome, long-forgotten incidents, long tabooed from awareness. Sometimes long-held animosities between individuals in the dialogue suddenly and inexplicably dissolved. Not infrequently, an entirely new and unanticipated possibility burst forth that held potential to resolve a previous dispute. Many times, I read and reread the essential methodological description that had guided me, *Dialogue, A Proposal* (Bohm, D. et al 1991, 1-8). That missing, unarticulated *something* continued to prod my curiosity.

Early in my organizational career I experimented with various ways of structuring interventions and from those experiences came to articulate the aspects to be described in these pages: the important partnership of dialogue, whole-system approach, and identification of systemic issues. And at the same time, that nagging 'something's missing' feeling continued and led me into a deep study of David Bohm's life experience, his science, and his philosophy. What I propose now – even as that deep study continues – is that the three aspects hold together because of a pattern which I suggest underlies and flows through Bohm's many faceted life and work.

A caveat is warranted before pursuing further my assertions regarding aspects of effective intervention lest they appear to advocate an overly idealistic picture. Certainly, intervening in conflict situations is complex, and those who do so (hopefully) have a large repertoire of skills and processes that operationalise the

overall change plan. In my own case, even before an intervention is planned, I carry out various diagnostic processes such as conducting deep interviews with key players, engaging with those who carry authority within the system to assure their willingness to confront difficult underlying issues, and meeting with participants to form sufficient rapport so that my facilitation is trusted to be neutral. Those are just a few examples, and other consultants or leaders could well add to the list of processes needed to fully populate complex interventions. And beyond that, even with the best and most skillful planning and intervening, the success of such an effort may not be the result. History's many societal and organisational upheavals display the evidence that even the best plans and highest skills can fail to deliver the desired result. Yet, in situations where we do perceive the potential for change, the three aspects advocated in following pages address at the broad structural level those which in my experience establish the necessary framework for effective intervention.

## A Common Pattern in David Bohm's Life and Work

Common ideas underlie Bohm's science and philosophy and serve as metaphors for his process of dialogue as well as for this paper. An interview conducted by a Buddhist mystic, Nish Dubashia, a year before Bohm's death, well summarises these common ideas. Bohm's starting point in all his work pivots on the *whole*, its *parts*, and their *interrelationship*. Said Bohm, 'Every part affects the whole, and the whole affects every part' (Dubashia 2018, 26), and further, the parts arise from the whole: 'You can see that the particular originates in the universal – the universal particularises itself' (Dubashia 2018, 30).

In Bohm's view the two together – parts and wholes – underlie cosmic as well as all other process, but a problem arises from what he might have called a part-gone-wrong, in his terminology, *fragmentation*. We could think of parts of a mechanism, perhaps a watch or a machine, in which all of the parts fit together precisely and all work toward some intended purpose (Nichol 1996, xvi-xvii). But in many cases, our societally based attitudes have taught us incorrectly to treat parts as separate when they are not, that is, as fragments by breaking apart their natural relationships to each other and to wholeness. He gives the example, '...like the fragmentation between countries. People come to believe that the boundaries between countries really exist and say "This is my country." But these countries all depend on each other.' (Dubashia 2018, 19). Sadly, in today's world such fragmentary attitudes are common, and as a result we engage in incoherent ways of thinking and acting toward ourselves and others. The broken relationships are the origin of our societal, organisational and personal troubles. His process of dialogue intends to mend and reweave those fragments back into their participation in the whole.

Bohm liked the image of a *spiral* to describe the pattern of the whole breaking into

parts and/or fragments in a downward movement, and then the relationships among fragments and parts mending in order for movement to flow upward again into the whole. He called this the process of unfolding and enfolding (Bohm 1980, 228). In dialogue, by placing a societal or organisational issue within its context and by viewing fragmentation from various perspectives, we begin the process of mending and rebuilding a broken issue back into wholeness.

This image of the spiral serves as an initial simplistic description of the pattern to be articulated here, again in my attempt, as from early days of learning systems theory, to translate concept into practice as well as using the image as a partial response to my early 'something's missing' questions.

## Some Starting Descriptions

In previous paragraphs the term *intervention* was used, by which is meant planned actions intended to achieve a particular change. In addition to dialogue, I propose two aspects of an effective intervention: involving the whole system and identifying systemic issues:

*Whole-System Interventions*: Bohm was very intent in his emphasis on the *whole*, and an effective intervention strategy begins with the whole system. As we work with organisational or societal issues, the *context* of the issue contains the whole system. An effective intervention has been structured so that *representatives* of every segment of the affected groups, or entities –the involved families, cultural groups, organisations, professions, shifts, levels, functions, etc. – are included. All are simultaneously engaged in articulating and becoming aware of the dynamics of the issue as it plays out across the whole entity. Participants, regardless of their position or location in the problem structure, jointly hear the same stories about the meaning of the conflict situation.

*Systemic Issues*: Bohm utilised the term fragmentation to refer to damaged relationships among parts of a system. In an organisational or societal sense, the fragmentation impacts the whole system, manifesting in problems that are very difficult to attribute to just one person or segment. The fragmentation may be so embedded as to have become unobvious, wasting significant human and financial capital. Discovering, articulating, and resolving these issues requires engagement of the whole system.

As Bohm said, the whole is all-encompassing. Dialogue, whole-system engagement, and pinpointing the systemic issues interweave into one pattern. They rely on each other. Without the partnership of these three aspects, the real problem often hides in crevices and shadows, evading detection and resolution.

## Involving the Whole System

Coming to clarity about what constitutes the whole system requires effort. Metaphorically I think of this as the big upper arc of Bohm's spiral.

The whole system will be unique in each intervention situation. The system may not conform to obvious and logical boundaries, but rather could be tied to a particular dilemma that affects a subgroup by crossing boundaries within a larger context, for example, individuals within a professional discipline spread across several organisations, or individuals from multiple countries interested in the practice of dialogue. In other cases, system boundaries may be easily apparent, such as those that involve specific societal groups, cultural upheavals or a specific organisational entity.

Several examples will illustrate the idea of *whole system* as portrayed through actual intervention experiences. Because my own work has been primarily in the realm of large organisations, two of my colleagues have graciously shared from their own work in cultural and societal issues to provide a broad representation of examples. Here is a description of an intervention from my own experience to illustrate the risk that accrues when the whole system has *not* been included.

Along with George, an unusually employee-centred leader, I had sketched out a far-reaching transition plan after several previously independent segments of a large multi-national corporation were being brought together into George's new business unit. Prior to reorganisation the cultures and countries which these individuals represented differed significantly so that blending into one whole effective new culture would be difficult. Our plan brought small groups together with the new leadership team to hear and engage around the transition plan for the new business unit. Every employee had a chance to hear and be heard. Various other engagement processes were planned over a period of the next many months to keep employee concerns and experiences front and center during the transition. That process, though immensely time consuming, calmed people's worries and encouraged them in quickly adopting the new work processes.

But an unanticipated outcome arose. People at the boundaries of this new business unit had frequent contact with colleagues in other business units and shared their surprise and pleasure at the seriousness with which George sought to engage employees. These across-the-boundary colleagues were not having the same experience in their own new business units where they too were under serious reorganisation. They complained to their new bosses, 'Why aren't we getting that same kind of treatment?' Sadly, those leaders did not share the importance of employee engagement, and at their own level they began complaining to the company vice president: 'Why is George wasting so much time on an over-the-top reorg plan that is causing us trouble now in our own

groups?' Although we were able to proceed with our transition plan, George took a beating from his peers and boss.

We had failed to assess accurately the whole system which would be affected by our intervention. That lesson came with a heavy price tag of wasted human capital and time as well as damage to George's relationships to peers. That led both George and me to reassess what is meant by that concept, *whole system*. While it is easy to draw boundaries around a particular organisational unit, a community, a cultural group or another entity for which we may have been called to assist, I am suggesting that we need to look deeply for a clear identification of those who, though outside of legal, geographic or cultural boundaries, yet function as an essential part of the contextual system and whose participation makes a difference in the primary group's capacity to achieve its purpose or intentions.

Two other examples demonstrate the whole-system concept in diverse contexts, this time with positive results. First, a long-term healthcare facility in the US was experiencing a variety of quality and administrative issues and requested my assistance. Part of my initial assessment had to do with the overarching culture of the facility. Rivalries were rife among professions, among shifts, and among levels of employees so that the possibility of any intervention working was doubtful unless the culture itself improved first. That was the initial step in the intervention plan. All 180 employees were trained in dialogue, and then approximately half of them participated in a year-long series of dialogues focusing on the causes of the difficult culture. It was an intense year of dialoguing in which many points of conflict arose as we engaged in the experience of listening and considering together the negative effects those conflicts had manifested. Because all staff had been trained, those participating in the year-long effort were able to continuously share with their own teams the experiences in the facility-wide effort and to initiate their own team-based dialogues. The full staff involvement lessened resistance to the overall intervention. The size of this healthcare organisation was small enough that the whole system could be involved.

At the other end of the size continuum is the Truth and Reconciliation process following the South African Apartheid. Aimed at unification and reconciliation of a deeply divided population, the Commission's constituency included the whole country, about fifty-eight million people. As it held public hearings in various locations across South Africa, the Commission carried out its charge 'to bear witness to, record, and in some cases grant amnesty to the perpetrators of crimes relating to human rights violations, as well as offering reparation and rehabilitation to the victims' (Wikipedia (n.d.)) in the hopes of bringing out and historically documenting the truth and beginning the healing of decades of societal fragmentation. Many of the public hearings as well as weekly summary presentations were broadcast live on television and radio for the purpose of making the process accessible to individuals all

over the country. Although it is clearly still a very long-term work in progress, which unfortunately has suffered significant setbacks since Mandela and Tutu's initial work, the example reinforces the challenges involved in truly large systems change, as well as the potential that lies within this approach.

## Getting Practical About Intervention Size

These two examples run the gamut of system size. Both are unusual in real life because each did include the whole. Suggesting such a broad definition of a whole system as I have raises questions of practicality. My colleague, David Vogel (Vogel 2019), a consultant with over 30 years health systems reform experience and a social-economic activist in Albuquerque, New Mexico, poked me a bit on what it means to involve the whole system. Said David, 'Yes, and then you include this group because it's part of the context, and then you see that this other group needs to be included, and pretty soon you've got the universe involved!' While agreeing with me that the ideal is for the whole system to be involved, the fact is, David contends, we have to get real about what is possible. What is more, we are almost always wrong about critical representatives of the full system who *must* be included unless we do some digging. So, defining the system is a matter of both practicality and investigation.

David is a founder of and mentor to the Common Ground Project which was initiated as an early stage effort to bring together young community leaders in New Mexico's Middle Rio Grande Region. The purpose is to engage these young leaders in collaborative exploratory conversations that hold the prospect of yielding greater cross-cultural understanding while building the long-term foundational relationships and human capacity required to lift up the entire region. A core group of intentionally diverse, young adult leaders who seemed likely candidates to be engaged in future conversations was identified. Once the initial group was convened, the group asked itself the question, 'Who else is really critical to be engaged in this conversation?' Numerous excellent suggestions were made by group members regarding additional participants in the conversation. The resulting group wasn't a product of the various community groups' organisational charts, but rather the informal inner network of young adults who know and live within the experience of the community issues that are ripe for resolution. Their day-to-day lives are immersed in feeling and struggling within these issues.

Another colleague, Randall Butler (Butler 2019), is an attorney who has specialised in conflict mediation and who founded the Institute for Sustainable Peace. In 2002 Randall had been recruited to support a leadership development and peace gathering among young adults from the different ethnic groups whose home communities had been torn apart by the ethnic conflicts and wars accompanying the break-up of Yugoslavia. The project had grown out of what Randall describes as an 'indigenous'

effort during the crisis in a mountainous region of Croatia where different ethnic groups had continued in relative peace. People of the diverse sides of the conflict had been working together for years taking care of refugees. Randall describes that as the turmoil ended and refugees began to go home, those who had formed deep bonds while working with the refugees wondered, 'Now what? Do we want to stay together and keep working?' And there was a young lady from the region who said, 'I have this idea...'.

In populating this programme with potential young leaders, the programme leadership's dilemma was much like David's, how to select participants who knew the realities, the traumas, and the wounds that had torn their peoples apart. The solution was more formal than David's and yet relied on that same principle of selecting those with knowledge of the realities who could form future leadership networks. As word of the project spread throughout the region, nominations were requested, and once nominated, individuals needed at least two written references on their behalf indicating that they possessed real leadership potential and connection to take on the challenge once back home of building the fabric of an inclusive and tolerant society. In selecting participants, the organisers worked hard to put together a group of equal numbers of participants from all the different ethnic groups and different states in the region.

A final example took place in a work organisation to which I served as consultant. The organisation had been poorly managed for years, and the new leader, Raul, could see that underlying attitudes could negate any real efforts at reconstituting a healthy work environment. One indicator we found was a secretive introduction of new employees into the informal authority of the 'old-timers' network.' Said one new employee, he had been given a list of 'ten commandments' expected of all employees by one of the powerful old-timers, the first of which was 'never tell management exactly what you're doing.'

Even though younger people disliked the old-timer's informal authority, they feared not conforming to it. Turning around such buried attitudes would be a challenge. We enlisted the involvement of a group of twelve new employees, folks who were still new enough to the organisation that they were seen by others to be politically safe and low enough on the totem pole that they posed no risk. We trained the young folks in soft interview skills and gave them a set of broad questions about how employees felt about the workplace and what it would take to turn the culture around. Every month each of these young professionals was given a list of ten employees randomly chosen whom they would interview confidentially. Given the perceived lack of political risk these young people posed, even the old-timers were willing to talk. Then with their results summarised the interviewers met with Raul and his transition team each month to discuss their findings. Their summary reports were shared across the whole

organisation so that all employees became aware of how their peers had responded and the issues going forward to leadership. This was a very different approach as only a small number of people were involved in the transition process, but yet over a period of months every employee had a safe chance to say their piece and to be heard.

## Identifying the Systemic Issues

Returning to Bohm's imagery, an intervention structures a practical but effective method of involving the whole system by which all parts are concurrently involved, directing our attention downward on the narrowing arc of the spiral.

The last examples hint at the second aspect of effective interventions, that is, the necessity of engagement of the whole in sleuthing out those systemic issues lying hidden in the shadows. Even if known, these issues might be too touchy for anyone to speak about openly. Or, participants may have become so accustomed to the issues that they no longer noticed while being blindly acted out. These are the issues that fester and feed fragmentation and division. Examples will illustrate the identification of such issues.

At the beginning of this paper, the case of a healthcare facility was described. A major problem faced by the facility was an unusually high rate of absenteeism, particularly among nursing staff. In fact, nursing was overstaffed by nearly fifty per cent in order to keep units covered twenty-four hours a day, resulting in a very high budget impact. Every conceivable human resource process had been tried over the past few years – focus groups, questionnaires, punishments for excessive absenteeism, rewards for showing up at work, etc. – and all to no avail. The intensive dialogues led to a different, deeply engaging process that offered up an unexpected revelation.

One of the dialogue groups – a diagonal slice of staff representing every department, discipline, and level of the facility – gathered for an all-day dialogue. Joe, a maintenance man who had worked at the facility his whole adult life and a usually quiet and stoic man, looked grey and distressed as he sat down in the circle of chairs. His demeanour was very out of character, and he was near tears. As the group settled and noticed his distress, I asked if he was okay. 'Oh,' he started, 'Mr. Smith died last night, and I just heard about it right before I walked in.' Mr. Smith had long been a patient at the facility. Joe continued haltingly, 'He was like a father to me, and I visited him most every day for the past ten years. And... he has died... .' The group fell silent, holding the pain this man was trying so hard to choke up within himself, but could not. Finally, one of the nurses spoke. 'I know, Joe, just what you're feeling. Some days when I leave, I think to myself, I don't know if one of my patients will last through the night. And I can't stop thinking about it all evening, worrying... .' And then another nurse added, 'Yes, me too. Some mornings when I pull into the parking lot, I sit there

with the car in park, and I wonder who has died since my last shift. It's all I can do to keep from putting my car back in drive and going home to call in sick.' And so it went with one after another of the staff sharing their deep distress when patients to whom they had provided such intimate care passed away.

All of the various methods of attempting to force people to show up for their shifts had failed. The essential issue had been missed. Human hearts were suffering as patients they cared for and loved died. Of course, it was a long-term care facility, so death was to be expected. What was not expected – even to the staff themselves – was the toll that human grief was taking and the strength of that grief to evade all the mechanical, feelingless procedures that had failed. It was the sharing in the circle of people from diverse parts of the facility that allowed the common and unrecognised grief to emerge into awareness. The facility began offering grief therapy for staff.

It was a learning about the power of the human spirit that touched that facility deeply. Other issues, even though they have different contours and colours, equally strike to the depth of human life and culture.

One of David Vogel's projects, the New Mexico Commons, began in 2011 by convening grass roots citizens, who live in neighbourhoods surrounding a blighted 234-acre State Fairgrounds, around the re-envisioning of that site as a public common. That project gradually evolved and expanded to include various sites throughout the region, as well as multi-lateral collaboration with similar initiatives already underway in the community, thereby defining a network of 'nested' systems.

The New Mexico Commons Project stimulated the companion 'Living System Project,' a two-year investigation that involved conducting one hundred one-on-one in-depth interviews with formal and informal community leaders in New Mexico's Middle Rio Grande Region, the population and economic hub of a majority-minority state and home to half the state's population of two million people. Each leader was asked, 'Why has New Mexico, and specifically Albuquerque and the Middle Rio Grande Region, been at the bottom of almost every economic and social indicator for most of the period since the area was colonised in the 1500s?'

Of course, over the years many studies had been conducted in the traditional ways of accountants and consultants, but the issues remain. David queried, 'Why is that? Don't tell me the symptoms. I understand the symptoms: education, crime, poverty, etc. What I'm really interested in knowing is what you believe to be the base cause of these symptoms?' Through the interviews and the dialoguing among Living System Project participants, the real underlying issues emerged. In David's words,

> It's cultural. Culture was overwhelmingly identified as the heart of the

economic and social malaise of this entire "system." It has to do with European colonialism and the disparity of haves and have-nots, landowners and land slaves, originating 500 years ago. The disempowerment that originated in colonialism prevails. It's alive and well in New Mexico today. And it is a primary cause of the economic and associated social woes of a culture and people who feel they don't have the capacity to move beyond where they've been in the past and to lift themselves up toward a different future. I now have had enough of those conversations, many of them with fellow citizens whose families have lived in New Mexico for eighteen generations and more to begin to see and understand more clearly. When you have conversations with long-term residents and others about this delicate topic, moving through and beyond hurt, anger, denials, and symptoms versus causes in a dialogic way where you're in a deep listening and inquiry mode, rather than an advocating mode, you begin to encounter moments of truth.

An additional key finding of the Living System Project research was the almost unanimous consensus that in order to understand and effectively address this large-system, culturally based challenge, it is essential to frame subsequent work with the understanding that it will take at least a generation, if not longer, to resolve several hundred years of cultural disempowerment.

In the process, it became obvious that the youth of the region had to be at the core of this effort, partly because they were going to be the beneficiaries of whatever cultural change is ultimately manifested, partly because many, if not most, Millennials, Next and X-Genners are already hungry for change and opportunity to influence their own lives and communities, and partly because their seniors are too entrenched in historical, dysfunctional, cultural beliefs. These young adults are ready and eager to redefine the 'system' in which they feel disadvantaged and encumbered. That insight lead to David facilitating the Common Ground Project cited previously.

Likewise, Randall Butler's work with young leaders following the wars in the former Yugoslavia penetrated deep below the surface. These potential leaders represented all of the ethnic and national groups of the region. The young people were to gather after their fathers and grandfathers had fought each other and many had lost family members to their adversaries. The end goal was for these young people to return home with skills and relationships to bridge across the factions so that sustainable peace could be built. But, to be able to enter into serious dialogues and to see beyond the wartime wounds would require first finding enough commonalities.

Randall and the other leaders oriented the first few days to building personal relationships and to breaking down rigid assumptions each group held against the others. A common pervasive belief was that each participant's own ethnic group had been the victim of the war, not the victimiser. About half-way through the project,

they created small groups of participants representing all the different ethnic groups the assignment to tell a story in the first person of someone whom their own ethnic group had victimized. That had been an *unspeakable*, the idea that one's own ethnic group had victimized others. But they took on the assignment, speaking in the first person, 'My name is _____' and then telling a real story they had heard or realistically telling a story made up by combining elements from true stories of experiences of the group members. For the story tellers and for the listeners, the experience was powerful beyond words. Clearly, no ethnic group had clean hands. All ethnic groups had committed victimising deeds against others. It was hard for many to take, yet the proof was in the room. And they were stunned. No more good guys and bad guys. They all were both. That was a major system issue!

The idea of *responsibility* arose graphically during their dialogues, bringing this experience to a climax. They had begun talking about the role of *corporate repentance*, the acknowledgement and restitution by a body of people for its role in having hurt others. One participant took issue with the idea. He asked, does a society come to the point of having met the guilt head on so that the shame could become complete? How long must the societal shame go on? Would it never end? Impassioned, he said, 'I'm not responsible for what my parents or grandparents did!' One young lady let that soak, then stood and shared her response: 'True, none of us are responsible for the terrible things that our grandparents did, for the problems they created. But we *are* responsible for the solutions.' What better incorporation of a *systemic issue* could have happened than for young people in dialogue with former ethnic enemies to go home to their communities as leaders knowingly *responsible for the solutions*?

It seems that the systemic issues are there hiding in plain sight. But it takes the co-presence of – if not the whole system, then at least meaningful representation of – the whole system to bring those issues into full focus. Each of us carries our own protections to maintain our self or group image and identity, and left on our own we defend that identity, shuttering out of full view the real systemic issue. We hold tight to our fixed positions. With the full system represented, those defences cease to go unnoticed. We are called to take off those shutters. Then we are enabled to see the reflection of our own defences in the eyes of others and to see the effects of our collective ways of participating in common problems. By creating a safe place for participants representing the whole to safely dig under the surface together, the real issues that belong to all are given potential to emerge.

## Underneath the Systemic Issues

It seems to me that effective interventions follow the arc of Bohm's dialogue downward until a certain point is reached, a certain sense seems to emerge across a segment of the dialogue circle and then to spread. I particularly watch for it when participants have

shared, often with emotion, their differing perspectives and their fellow participants have attentively listened and seemingly understood, though not necessarily agreed with, the perspectives shared. At those times there seems to be equity between the sharing and the receiving.

The examples that have been presented, though from very different contexts, all pivot around an underlying realisation by participants. In each of their contexts the real issues may differ in how their contours and colours manifest, but underlying all is coming to the realisation of *shared common ground*. Again, some examples.

In the long-term care facility introduced in earlier pages, one of the dialogue groups stumbled into a conversation about the impact status had on working relationships. A nursing aide had joined her early morning dialogue group in a dark mood, angry at a nurse in her unit and accusing that nurse of treating her 'like dirt.' Her emotional outburst evoked an equally strong outburst by a nurse from another unit who had an equally evocative example of how poorly she felt she was being treated by higher management. As the day of dialoguing progressed, the head of pharmacy angrily stated that he felt dissed by uncooperative nursing staff, and frontline staff were being restricted from participating in care staff meetings because they were too low on the totem pole. In the daylong cacophony of these deeply troubling and pervasive victimisation stories, the medical director – the person highest on the totem pole – became emotional: 'Do you have any idea how you all treat me? I walk into the break room and all conversation stops. Do you ever ask how I am? Do you ever invite me to your birthday celebrations? You treat me as if I carry the plague.' That was the showstopper. Even the head physician felt emotional abuse. The group sat in silence, and finally one of the nurses said what was so for them all. 'As I listen to all our comments, I'm thinking, gee, we *all* sure treat each other bad here.' Status was not really the issue. The common need for regard and respect regardless of position had been laid bare for this diagonal slice of the facility to see together and to act upon as they left.

David Vogel relates his experience of coming to common ground within the societal realm. Says David, the word *common* is intentionally included in the names of his various projects and forms a starting place in their working. In the Common Ground Project that brings together Next and X-Genners, the first order of business has been to support participants in finding *common ground*. The group of forty or so young leaders represents a wide diversity – every race, creed, sexual preference imaginable. In their first meeting David observed that, 'You all live in Albuquerque or the surrounding area, you all experience what this environment is like. You all know the challenges and issues here. How would you describe them?' And then one at a time they went around the room. Each had a heart-wrenching story. Sharing those stories in the dialogue circle began to bond the group, allowing each person to be open and

to reveal situations that others knew or suspected. It confirmed the commonality of hopes and worries that confronted all even though they came from different pockets of society.

From a different context, Randall Butler offers another effort within which common ground came to flourish. For several years Randall facilitated a dialogue group of Muslim and Jewish men in Houston, Texas, who wanted to reach beyond their religious and cultural divides. Randall conducted a retreat in their early days together to deepen their process and to create a strong base. Randall's contention is that the more opportunities in which folks experience real empathy, the deeper the change that can happen. So, during their retreat this group of Jewish and Muslim men took an 'empathy walk.' Their instructions were to walk with a man of the opposite faith and to tell life stories. Perhaps the stories would be of high times or low times, family origins, heroes, one's faith or a profound experience of the transcendent. Randall recalled that watching the pairs walk and talk was astonishing. Partners' engagement in each other's stories was almost palpable, and even following the walk's completion, those pairs hung out together, furthering their budding relationships. Months later participants still echoed the closeness they felt to each other.

But then came a real challenge. The Israelis had made an incursion into Gaza. What might be the impact of such a real world happening to the deeply felt relationships among this small group of Jews and Muslims? Even as the incursion was being broadcast on the morning news, the group met for its usual breakfast meeting, this time at the home of one of the Jewish members. With cordial smiles they greeted each other, but the tension was so strong it could have been cut with a knife.

Randall asked them to begin their conversation by going around the group and each person sharing what they most appreciated about each of the others. The tension lifted slightly with each participant's sharing. And then, Randall said, 'And now we're going to talk about Gaza. But first, how can we have that conversation in such a way that it strengthens the fabric of the fellowship that's so in evidence in this room?' The group took up his challenge, each of them then telling their own stories and perceptions of Israel and Palestine. Then, one of the Jewish members took the process further, recalling Randall's frequent advice of 'walking in the other's shoes.' He told a story about Gaza from the perspective of a Palestinian. That story shook the group with its realness. Said one of the Muslim men, 'I wouldn't change a thing in your story. You really get it from our perspective.'

That series of steps of Randall's guidance allowed them both to air their own perspectives and to take on the other's perspective, opening these men's learning and understanding far beyond their own cultures' divides. One gentleman summed up for the group, 'There's nothing you can say to me today that will make me quit being your

friend.' Common ground had been reached.

## The Turning Point

As the awareness of common ground settles into a group, be it articulate or fuzzy, the downward-most point of Bohm's spiral has been reached, the point between unfoldment and re-enfoldment. The process begins shifting from downward to upward. Reaching the point at which meaning congeals across the group, it seems that a shift in the kind of sharing occurs and signals that mending of the initial fragmentation is beginning. With that, movement begins to flow back up the spiral.

As my conversations with both David and Randall progressed, we began reflecting. How do we know the turning point is near? What might be the indicators? David, Randall and I posited our ideas.

First, that sense does not just *happen*. One of David's favourite words is *patience*. We can set the context that encourages commonality to become apparent, but we cannot force it to come forth. It may be a 50-year project, not a five-year project. Breaking through long-standing resistance and emotional strains takes time and will not happen until enough *trust* has been established. But, then, when it does happen, the basis is laid for building or rebuilding relationship by *connecting people through their hearts*, by their sharing both what makes their hearts break and what makes their hearts sing. In David's words, this heart language is an 'organic identifier,' and bridge builder. When that point is reached, people's language reflects a softened, sensitive, empathic attitude toward their peers.

Randall concurs with the idea of taking a long-range view. 'I don't know in my lifetime if the turning point will be fully reached. This is a generational thing and we're working with a younger generation, knowing that they are the ones who will have to pick up where we have left off,' he says. Yet already, participants in the former-Yugoslavia programme of which Randall spoke have taken on key leadership roles in their communities. That programme planted seeds of tolerance and understanding in these young people, and the full fruition may require years to mature. But in those seeds are the remembrances of having had a riveting *experience of the other's humanness*. That was the initiation of the turning point for those young Balkans, the point when they experienced empathically their mutual humanness which will be with them throughout their lives.

From my own experience, I think when that kind of melting point happens, that the people, not intellectually but *experientially, feel each other's sameness*. There comes a moment at which we experience the essential, rock-bottom likeness of ourselves and others. It is when that *sense of deep humanity* arises unmistakably and is acknowledged,

recognised and held. It is when individuals experience being deeply heard and seen for the real human beings that they are. The connection of one human self to an 'other' signals the turning point from which the troubling conditions shift. Energy begins flowing back up the spiral.

A very poignant example of humanness and connection sums up this idea of the *turning point*. It comes from David's story of working on a health system redesign project for the Mandela administration in South Africa after the ending of Apartheid. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had brought together people of different ethnic groups for what might have been for some their first ever face-to-face conversations. As David recalls,

> There was a white person sitting there together with a black person, and neither really had talked to the other side before, at least never within the context of equals. It was Tutu's background that had brought them into a conversation with care and understanding rather than positioning, negotiating or advocating. And then there came a moment in those people's conversation as the recognition set in. *Oh my God, that's also a human being. That person and I have something that we share together*.

## Spiralling Up

In these pages and examples, I have laid out my assertion that effective interventions, regardless of the type of problem situation, involve three aspects: dialoguing, involving the whole system and identifying systemic issues. After my own training in the practice of dialogue, I felt that some essential knowledge about that process was missing, and so began a quest to find what that was. To a large degree, the missing links became apparent through an awareness of a pattern that Bohm considered essential and that crossed over his life experience, his science, his philosophy and his dialogue. The words and the examples in these pages have sought to describe that pattern through the metaphor of Bohm's image of the spiral, linking the three aspects posited as underlying an effective intervention.

Were we able to query David Bohm on his own thinking, we might hear something like this:

> Things start out whole, but that wholeness often becomes fragmented as the energy winds down to the level of our manifest human experience. The process isn't a straight line, rather, it goes like a spiral. Our job is to bring those fragmented parts back together, to weave them back into a whole. As the lower point of the spiral is reached – assuming our process is effective – insight happens, and commonality is perceived. Fragmentation begins to mend. Movement winds its way upward coming back to wholeness, but at a higher level than our starting point. Through the downward then upward flow, *new meaning* has emerged (Dubashia 2018, 34).

At the lower curvature of the dialogue spiral, the fixed positions that each initially held – the fragments – soften as they are seen within the larger context, and with continued dialoguing around the systemic issues, a turning point is reached. A new possibility emerges, not a compromise, but something unanticipated that evolves the wholeness. Bohm called it new meaning, an order *beyond* (Peat 2014).