

## Successful Dialogue

**By Joan Anderson**

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Is dialogue the way of the future? Attending the recent "Earth Dialogues" conference in Lyon, France (Related story), and having been a participant in the global process of grassroots dialogue which produced the Earth Charter, I am tempted to hope that it is. The SGI has named the year 2002 "The Year of Expanding Dialogue" and, in order to explore what constitutes genuine dialogue, in the first of a series of articles, the SGI Quarterly has selected insights from specialists in the art.

William Isaacs, founder and president of DIALOGOS Inc., a Cambridge company that consults on organizational learning and the creation of dialogue, says dialogue is more than just talk. He says, "Dialogue is the embracing of different points of view--literally the art of thinking together. In dialogue people learn to use the energy of their differences to enhance their collective wisdom." He believes that problems between managers and employees, citizens and elected officials, and even between nations, often stem from an inability to conduct successful dialogue.

He says that most of the time we come to our conversations well prepared. "We know what we want to say and wait our turn to say it. We are closed to hearing the unexpected from others, cutting ourselves off from honest exchanges that leave us enlightened and inspired to take action. This is the antithesis of dialogue."

Another element in genuine dialogue is the challenging business of shifting the relationship of power, he adds. "As long as there is a power difference in your roles, dialogue is very difficult. We must suspend our differences, so the professor can learn from the student and the boss from the employee. If I see you as a partner, rather than an employee, suddenly the possibilities for creativity are present."

### ***Moving Forward Together***

In a real dialogue, no one is trying to win, but the participants' aim is rather to move forward together. Groundbreaking physicist, the late David Bohm, said, "It is important to see that the different opinions that you have are the result of past thought, all your experience, what other people have said and so on. But opinions tend to be experienced as 'truths' even though they may be only your assumptions and background. Everyone has a tendency to defend their opinions, even in the face of evidence that proves they are not right. If we defend our opinions in this way, we are not going to have a dialogue."

Masao Yokota of the SGI-affiliated Boston Research Center for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, who has participated in several of the many dialogues carried out by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, says listening is the key.

"People in our society experience pain constantly. One of the deepest forms of pain we feel is the pain of separation. This sense of separation also tends to make us arrogant, looking down on others. We can heal our wounds of separation through sincere dialogue. This is one of the most important purposes of dialogue, and the best way to conduct it is to listen to others." He remembers comments made by Bernard Lown, M.D., cofounder of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. "Dr. Lown says that the average time a doctor spends listening to a patient is less than one minute.

"Dr. Lown told me that when he sees a calls, nor does he look at his watch. He pays full attention to the patient. He patiently listens. Only then, he says, can a doctor become a great healer." Mr. Yokota adds that, by listening, we can heal one another and transcend our own selfishness. When we treat the other person with genuine sincerity and compassion, willing to learn from them, dialogue will also leave them feeling deeply encouraged.

Daisaku Ikeda comments, reflecting on the numerous dialogues he has engaged in, "Dialogue goes beyond mere verbal exchange. Rather it is how our character and spirit communicate with others. By conversing on a profound level, people can awaken to a more valuable way of life."

### *Socratic Origin*

The idea of dialogue as a process of joint searching for truth and understanding originated with the Greek philosopher Socrates. He would begin by posing a question--for example, "What is justice?"--and ask his pupils for their thoughts. The pupils would answer, and he would respond in order to pare the concept down to its universal essentials. He aimed to bring out ideas latent in the students' minds. The dialogue was a process of learning together to deepen understanding.

Recently the Socratic method has enjoyed a revival in the U.S., thanks to Christopher Phillips, founder of the "Socrates Café" concept where people meet informally to hold discussions using the Socratic method, "asking questions to help people gain a better understanding of themselves and their potential for excellence."

Phillips says, "At a Socrates Café we do not assume automatically that we will all have the same notion of any concept. What kind of discussion would ensue if we all had precisely the same view, without the slightest variation, on what each concept meant?" He claims that it is exhilarating to engage in this process. "It's by engaging in this collective quest that I am forced to ask myself questions like: 'How does my view compare to this person's very different and extremely thoughtful and compelling perspective on this question? Does my own view need to be amended or fine-tuned in light of the other perspectives I've heard?'"

This same spirit of openness is highlighted by organizations such as the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research which uses dialogue as a key methodology in peace building. Director Majid Tehranian comments, "What is the magic of dialogue? It begins

with the assumption that 'truth' or 'meaning' is not the monopoly of any single person or group. The truth must therefore be negotiated, and any parties to a dispute must enter an open-minded conversation on their conflicting perceptions of the situation at issue."

### ***Ten Commandments***

The Toda Institute has drawn up ten commandments for dialogue which, Tehranian stresses, are open to negotiation and modification. They are:

- 1) Honor others, and listen to them deeply with all your heart and mind.
- 2) Focus on the agenda while seeking the common ground for consensus, but avoid group-think by acknowledging the diversity of views.
- 3) Refrain from irrelevant or intemperate interventions.
- 4) Acknowledge others' contributions to the discussion before relating your own remarks to theirs.
- 5) Remember that silence also speaks; speak only when you have a contribution to make.
- 6) Identify the critical points of difference for further deliberation.
- 7) Never distort other views in order to advance your own.
- 8) Formulate the agreements on any agenda item before moving on to the next.
- 9) Draw out the implications of an agreement for group policy and action.
- 10) Thank your colleagues for their contribution.

But genuine dialogue is also to do with the quality of our speech. If we can find our most authentic voice and speak from the heart, we reveal our true self and this can help us converse on a more profound level, where we encounter each other in our raw humanity. This has implications for every human being in his or her personal interactions, and for the discovery of common ground in local and international situations of conflict.

In fact dialogue is the only legitimate weapon for realizing peace.