

The Dialogue Experiment

From:

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Seven Life Lessons of Chaos — spiritual wisdom from the science of change.

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We'll call him Ed Brown. That isn't his real name, and we're going to change some of the details of his story because he asked us to. His name isn't important anyway, because he says, "Part of what I realized in all this was that we place too much emphasis on someone taking credit. The idea is that it's a process. That's what's important, not who gets stroked for what."

Ed's story begins when he joined a "dialogue group" some years back. Around the world different groups of people are coming together to explore the nature of group relationships. These aren't group therapy sessions. They're an attempt to understand how our individual and collective presuppositions control our interactions with each other and to explore the possibilities for collective creativity.

The physicist David Bohm, who devoted his last years to the investigation of dialogue, described it this way. Dialogue is "not an exchange and its not a discussion. Discussion means batting it back and forth like a ping pong game. That has some value, but in dialogue we try to go deeper...to create a situation where we suspend our opinions and judgements in order to be able to listen to each other." This suspension is often less a willful act on the part of the group's individual members than it is an effect of dialoguing itself. Because there are so many diverse points of view flying around in a dialogue, everybody's opinions and judgements can end up getting suspended. Another dialoguer, painter and psychiatrist David Shainberg, called dialogue an "open process of making forms."

One of the major ideas of dialogue is that people are tied to what Bohm called "nonnegotiable" convictions that underlie even their most casual disagreements. These nonnegotiables can't be reasoned out, but they may be suspended and transformed, as Ed discovered, through the process of collective creativity.

Ed's group consisted of about twenty individuals who met once a month in an apartment in a major city. They agreed to have no leader, no agreed project, no set topics for discussion. This stripped away the usual props that groups rely on, laying bare the issue of how individuals relate to the group.

"One thing I saw right away was that we wanted somebody to be the leader. We were uncomfortable without one. But nobody wanted it, or if anybody did we wouldn't let them keep it. Also, we were all the time also looking for some structure and we couldn't agree on one. It was very frustrating. I think it's how a lot of people feel in

groups. Always wanting to be heard, wanting the group to match your sense of things and feeling that it doesn't."

the group taped their sessions, and Ed learned that beneath the chaos of the frustration there was an order going on. "I saw that even though I felt I was never changing anybody's mind about anything, I actually was and my mind was getting changed too. It was very subtle. If you followed the conversation around, on one level it looked chaotic, but you could also see how people would pick up each other's words and ideas and internalize them somehow. It was pretty clear that we were all influencing each other.

"Sometimes you would argue with somebody and after a while you'd begin to see you really didn't understand what they meant. You were just reacting to the words. Once you got past the words, you realized they were saying something interesting. I also saw that I didn't really understand what I meant until people brought things out in what I said.

"Toward the end of the session, even though we'd talked about a hundred different things, most of the people in the group would seem to come to something. It was like we had created or discovered something in common but it was different for each of us. It was very peculiar."

One of the subjects that frequently came up in the discussion was whether what was happening in dialogue had any practical application. Ed decided he would test this question by getting involved in civic affairs in his suburban community and continuing the dialogue experiment in a "real, practical" setting.

Ed volunteered to work on a committee to renovate the library of his town and was selected as the committee's chairman. From the first meeting, he realized the group was headed for trouble. There were two factions on the committee, each one backing a very different kind of renovation solution. Some of the members of the committee were in-laws bitter toward each other from old wounds, there were also old towners and a couple of people who had recently moved in. The committee therefore contained a fair representation of the town's animosities and rivalries.

"Each of the factions wanted me to join their side. But one of the things I'd gotten from the dialogue group was that I didn't need to join the polarity. I was taking a chance that both sides would be mad at me, but what felt right was to listen to the factions and help each side make the best case they could for their position. Then I'd try to present one side to the other in as understandable a way as possible. It was more than just being neutral. There were a lot of tensions in our meetings — egos and power plays. The fact that somebody in the room wasn't taking sides and was actually interested in what people were saying confused the committee members at first but also freed them up. After a while they started to break out of their positions and ideas started to branch out until there weren't just two solutions but a whole bunch of variations. Soon even the most entrenched people were moving a little.

"But then we got stuck again and the old pattern re-formed. It was depressing. Things began to look really hopeless until one night one of these more neutral people suggested a solution that was a little different from anything we'd discussed before.

To everybody's surprise — you could literally see we were surprised; our eyes jumped — we all liked it. In retrospect, maybe this idea was something we could have seen from the beginning but we didn't. We couldn't see it before, but now we could. Probably we could because of all the movement we'd gone through. The whole context had changed. Suddenly we were unanimous and we'd come up with a great solution for the town."

The solution was not a compromise. "Compromises are worse than defeat. They mean everybody feels cheated a little, or that you've given in to the power thing, winners and losers. This was much more exciting and interesting and satisfying to everybody than any compromise would have been."

Ed's authentic interest in the merits of the two sides and his skepticism that either side had the right solution provided a "subtle influence" that helped his colleagues suspend their polarities and nonnegotiable convictions long enough for something new to emerge.

Ed's story sounds something like the way many indigenous people work....Among the Iroquois, for example, the traditional council of chiefs was required to have the complete agreement of all its members on any decision. The Iroquois did not believe in majority rule. Their council sat for as long as it took to find a solution that everyone could agree on. Discussion was often vigorous and heated. Sometimes the council lasted for days, weeks. In some cases, decisions were not made because no unanimous agreement could be reached. But when a decision was taken, it was one that everybody "owned" and felt committed to. It was their decision, both collectively and individually.

In our complex and problem-ridden mass society, we need to develop radically new understandings about collective action. What seems clear is that the problems of our collective world are such that no leader or system could ever resolve them. In fact, attempts to find solutions in that tried and untrue direction will undoubtedly lead to further complications.

The sad fact is that our organizations isolate and keep each of us apart. As much as they hold us together. We have assumed that because individuals are essentially separate particles, collective action must be coordinated through these imposed external structures. But what if we dropped that assumption and allowed self-organization to create our communities? What if we intentionally forged our social solutions in the fires of creative chaos?