

Issue Number 2 - 1st May 1993

Newport Dialogue - On Sunday 28th March a group of us gathered at Newport. We intended to spend a day together in an attempt to carry on the enquiry in the spirit of "dialogue" and with the possibility of creating a practical environment favourable to the process of communicating at depth through dialogue. About twenty two took part in the experiment which was generally agreed to have fallen short of our aims.

This is not surprising in view of the difference between dialogue and our usual way of conducting meetings, seminars, etc. As a reminder of what we are attempting I have printed an extract from the USA quarterly Newsletter on the reverse of this sheet. In order to make sure we learn from the experiment I spoke to a number of the the group. Some of the suggestions:

- * We were a very mixed group with too wide a range of interests and expectations. Better to have smaller groups with interest more focused.
- * The dialogue process requires a free flow between all participants. As usual, although a flow began to develop, on occasions the interaction was dominated by a few speakers.
- * The interrogative approach with a facilitator "interviewing a "volunteer" creates a strong resistance to dialogue. This results from the interviewee and the listeners trying to get into the mind of the interviewer, "what is he/she getting at, where is this leading, where am I being led". The outcome was that statements were challenged rather than welcomed as contributions to the process.
- * One result is that the interviewer and the interviewee start to sing a duet and thereby cut out the rest of the group.
- * The talkers need to listen more - the listeners to speak more (participate).
- * There was a lot of knowledge in the air. The essence of dialogue is "finding out" which requires the suspension of knowledge for the process to work.
- * To overcome the conflicting needs of social interaction and enquiry, we should make distinct provision, on the day, for both. Arrange separate times.

Having said all that, I found it it both an interesting and illuminating day.

Thanks to those of you who came and risked all. If you decide to come again, come in the knowledge that we may be through the preliminary "awkward" stage.

Alan Mann

Issue Number 7 - 1st December 1993

We decided to use the next meeting on 19th December to pull together an Australian response to the request in the USA DIALOGUE Newsletter for feedback. I attach a copy of the article.

A reminder of what DIALOGUE is supposed to be about.

A process of enquiry which is designed to expose our assumptions and thereafter progress without their interference. It involves a high quality of listening, not only to what the other is saying but also to the reaction arising in me.

It involves a sensitivity which is prepared to allow the other's point of view to stand as it is.

Summary

** Challenge assumptions*

** Listen to:*

The external input

The internal reaction

** Suspend one's own point of view*

Not with the aim of finding answers but rather transcending the dimensions of difference and allowing a fall into meaning.

Reading the overseas newsletter reveals that others are going through the same process of adjusting to this apparently unusual way of doing things. Until recently I felt most comfortable if some form of structure or direction is established through agreeing on a topic for discussion. Nevertheless, I was frequently surprised by how relatively unimportant this really is. On reflection, I suppose that a general direction is implicit in our coming together in the first place. The answer to the question "why are we here", raised by the USA group article is probably answered by the banner headline to our newsletter. And, second question, does this provide us with a group identity?

In an attempt to prepare the ground I have summarised the issues arising from the article and our own discussions in a series of questions:

* What is our feeling about the process of dialogue?

* What are our expectations?

* Is it working and, if so, in what way?

* If it is not working, why not?

* The question of discussing an agreed topic.

You may have other questions we can add on the day. There is another interesting query in the UK article "is DIALOGUE of value other than friendly get-togethers"?

Issue No.8 - 1st March 94

Our meeting on the 20th Feb was a lightly attended but spirited affair at which we knocked out the final draft of our letter to America. Thanks to those of you who contributed at the last two meetings and in print. The 'letter', is our reply to the USA "Dialogue Quarterly Newsletter" request for input into the DIALOGUE within their columns. The reply forms the bulk of this edition and is included because most of you missed the final workings at the last meeting.

This is what we sent.

THE GROUP

One thing we all agreed on was that the group had to be itself. To be what it is; no barriers to growth or reduction through the imposition of rules, structure or subject matter.

Our group size varies between 8 and 20, averaging out about 10. I am fascinated by the suggestion that 40 is a good group number for effective DIALOGUE, this seems absurdly high. Apart from the impossibility of balanced participation, how does such a big group ever get to the point of speaking the same "language" let alone allowing silence into the equation? Large groups can create a feeling of security through anonymity. In a group of 40, DIALOGUE would need to extend for many hours to provide adequate time for a contribution by all as well as allow for silence. Does everybody have to contribute verbally? There are various views on this.

Some of us think a larger group would provide the diversity necessary to give the widest range of challenge and maybe a required critical mass of assumption. That is, the deeply buried assumptions may be more readily revealed. In a small group we get to know one another so well that we may unconsciously develop a collective protection and projection of group assumptions. This is possible in larger groups through the formation of factions but it seems less likely.

Too much harmony could lead to complacency, a sort of group coma, and there is a need for challenge, even conflict, to bring out the deeper assumptions and entrenched attitudes. That's why the disrupters and the 'get up and leave in disgust' types have a real contribution to make. Some of us felt this to be too charitable a view as departure may also signal inability or unwillingness to DIALOGUE or sheer boredom.

PREDETERMINED SUBJECT FOR DISCUSSION

I nearly always start a meeting with some discomfort about not having the direction provided by a set topic for discussion. Our group will have noticed how I manage this by rustling old Newsletters and making a few "announcements, apologies from the absent, etc. This in spite of the fact that it has never proved to be a problem. Most of us feel there is no need for any structure other than the guidelines adopted in the hope of giving DIALOGUE the best chance to develop. The general view is that content will take care of itself.

GROUP IDENTITY

Do we have a group identity? To the extent that we share a common interest, as expressed in the caption to the Newsletter, yes, we do. Is this an obstacle to DIALOGUE and does it provide a hidden "topic for discussion"? What assumptions does it carry with it? It seems we do have a form, an identity and should be aware that it carries baggage and that adding "topics for discussion" to this existing structure will impose further impediments to free flow.

WHAT ABOUT THE PROCESS ?

We have to remind ourselves from time to time that we are DIALOGUING otherwise we drift into our usual patterns of random communication. I usually start off a meeting very uncertain about the likelihood of "getting it right" but I'm nearly always pleasantly surprised at the outcome. In spite of a tendency to revert to "debate" I feel comfortable with the process and realize it has value. Some think that longer meetings, over a weekend or several days, would be fruitful or at least, an interesting experiment. Silence is vital to hear the inner response clearly.

DOES IT WORK AND, IF SO, IN WHAT WAY?

Well it works for me. In the recent Greville Street meetings it has exposed a number of blind spots or blockages thereby generating further enquiry into the area we are covering or, more accurately, uncovering. In earlier meetings, at Narabeen, we tended to run into silence more frequently and this often resulted in an unpeeling of consciousness which stripped off of the thought-imagery layer of the daily mind and revealed the underlying spontaneous movement.

WHAT ARE OUR EXPECTATIONS ?

I admit to high expectations. They are based on previous experiences of group interaction in a DIALOGUE climate although for many years we did not have a name for it. It seemed to come about automatically when we had exhausted the self. I am assured by these experiences that DIALOGUE works but I'm probably conditioned by them to expect it to work in the way it has worked before. Expectations do narrow the opportunity? It is possible to be aware of this danger, to DIALOGUE openly and see what happens, what unfolds.

ELECTRONIC BULLETIN BOARD ?

The question relevant to this possibility is, can a DIALOGUE take place via 'remote' media, whether on paper or electronically, with all the inherent delays and lack of 'spontaneity'.

Is international networking by computer too expensive a form of keeping one another up to date? It would allow an enormous number of people to be involved with the same questions, with no pressure and all the silence we need.

Do related or sympathetic Bulletin Boards already exist?

END OF OUR RESPONSE

Dialogue at Springwood

Donald goes to gatherings at Kuranda fairly frequently. Kuranda is a property on the Queensland - NSW border owned by Geoffrey and Shirley Miller at a place called Springbrook. The Millers have been organising weekend gatherings of people with diverse interests for many years and I persuaded Donald to let us have a report of the February meeting for inclusion in this edition of the newsletter.

Twenty five people came to the live-in weekend at Kuranda, the full complement that can be accommodated in that magnificent mountain wilderness. They already knew the proposed theme "The Future is Now".

To come to such a remote place they needed some notice of the proposed topic. It was pointed out that the title "The Future is Now", had no question mark - that it was a statement to be investigated, its meaning uncovered and its truth or falseness discovered.

The early DIALOGUING concerned traditional understanding of time and sequence. One member asked whether it would be possible to put both the past and the future aside and enter the only domain in which we can actually act, the eternal present. We talked for a while about the vast evolutionary past and the future extending into infinity and the cultural concept of the minuscule fleeting present, how most thoughts and acts had their roots in the past and consequences in the future, the traditional "Tempus fugit" approach to life and living.

This opened the domains of religion, education, social practices and institutions; Organised Religions with their doctrines of rewards and punishments - if not in this life then afterwards or next incarnation; Education - learn the subject, the theory now and practice in the future; Politics, work at policies, make plans to be realized sometime later. All geared towards tomorrow, none directly related to living, being aware here and now; all future oriented.

By the Saturday evening there was an easy interflow and a realization that the physical senses: hearing, seeing, feeling operate only in the present, timeless moment.

Before we went our separate ways late on Sunday we had shared a unanimity of experiencing to answer one of the queries raised during the weekend, "What is the greatest gift I can give to anyone?" (Before reading the next paragraph please put the question to yourself - "What is the greatest gift I can give to anyone?")

There was a realization that the greatest gift I can give is also the greatest I can receive - open,full attention - with all this means: going with the other, allowing the other persons to be themselves. Full open attention is a total action that can only happen in the present.

Donald Ingram Smith

Issue No.9 1st May 94

GROUPS

After the March meeting, Gladney raised the question of group life cycles. I asked him to summarise for inclusion in this Newsletter.

You asked me to set down on paper the late night thoughts we shared on the lifespan of "groups". I recall these points:

a) that many reached an end to their creative growth in a relatively short period of time, 6 to 9 months, and were often dissolved (by the originator) to enable fresh growth. It was pointless to see such dissolution as implying criticism of anything at all.

b) that the best writing I had come across on the subject was Sufi literature, where there was an emphasis on the ability of a group to remain in existence for hundreds of years with virtually no spiritual benefit for the participants who were unable to distinguish welcome social warmth from (genuine, deeper, higher) spiritual processes.

c) that such confusion (social : spiritual) accounted for the existence of many organisations with diminished spiritual function though presently doing yeoman service socially, in the eyes of their participants.

d) that most ex-group members moved on to new groupings, clusterings, associations, each seeking to further individual social or spiritual development, which could now proceed on a new front.

e) that in any case the convenor (creator) always had the sovereign right to deconvene, as (s)he had once convened.

f) that any garden provided plenty of metaphors the process, as blossoms lost their perfume and only maintained their colour.

g) that I had witnessed, as perhaps most of us have, instances where individuals had attempted to prolong, beyond the natural life, an association, and in such circumstances, change could come as quite a jolt.

Gladney Oakley

I found this very reaction-stimulating in view of my interest in the effective operation of our group and would be interested in your views. Gladney concluded by identifying the source of the Sufi references as the work of Idries Shah.

The aim of the monthly get-together is to provide a regular time and place for DIALOGUE and discussion. An event which can be relied upon to occur. There is no intention to change present arrangements but we should be aware of the dangers of trying to keep alive something which has outlived its usefulness and is trying to die. We will continue as long as there is a need. Some of the non-attending readers might now be ready to try the odd meet?

Dialogue

Donald asked me to summarise what DIALOGUE means to me. I thought it would be easy but it proved to be quite difficult. Maybe we should all do it. Here is my effort.

In conversation, unless I know absolutely nothing about the topic, I find I almost invariably have a point of view about the subject under discussion. Even when I don't know anything about the particular issue, it doesn't take long for memory to draw on related areas of my experience and tack together a composite, interim viewpoint or opinion.

I find I have an opinion on just about everything. This mass of viewpoints is the basis of my relationship with whoever I meet. It is the foundation of interaction from which I draw when engaged in discussion; a static body of knowledge. It is now so pervasive that I am surprised when reminded that it didn't always work that way. There was a time when consciousness was not dominated by the static accumulation of the known but by dynamic "not knowing". And, if I look really closely, I see there is still a time where the dynamic dominates and that is NOW. The dominance of the static is simply the result of my determination to overlook what is actually going on now and to live out of past experience.

DIALOGUE is a simple discipline designed to awaken us to the dynamic in relationship. It achieves this by insisting on a more intense form of listening than we usually bring to our exchanges. Instead of hearing what the speaker is saying and standing by, ready and waiting, with the conditioned response from my library of past experience, I listen to what is coming in from the speaker whilst applying an equivalent level of attention to the internal reaction which forms in response to the speaker's words. As a result, the assumptions which normally lie unquestioned in my static viewbank, are brought out into the open.

The result is an alertness of mind which is ready to challenge not only what the other is saying but, more importantly, the reaction arising in me to what is being said. Thus my library of opinion is coming under scrutiny. This is revolutionary, it hasn't happened before. My static mass of knowledge is under attack, it is starting to wobble, it may, under the spotlight of DIALOGUE, actually give way to the dynamic; make room for the NEW. The possibility of change arises and change is the essence of the dynamic.

All very well but does it work? DIALOGUE is really very simple yet I find it enormously difficult in practice. This is due I think to the stranglehold which habit has established over the past fifty years; entrenched to the point where it seems that the only effective response, in any situation, is the response of the static. Nevertheless, I have used the DIALOGUE approach in some recent conflict and problem areas at work with very positive results. It

sometimes works for me at the NOW meetings as well but, in spite of the apparently ideal conditions, I find we fall out of DIALOGUE at the meetings as readily as anywhere else.

Whilst DIALOGUE has obvious practical applications of the type I am finding useful in day to day relationships and work situations there is an even more interesting application.

The careful attention which is given to the assumptions underlying my reaction to a particular issue can be applied to the assumptions which support my "world view". For example my ideas about self, time and so on. The first discovery might be that they are, in fact, not fact but merely inflated ideas and, therefore, a fairly shaky foundation for life. Thus the wobble gains momentum and the static may start to make room, not only for the new in relationship, but also for the free flow of the dynamic as NOW.

The value of DIALOGUE lies in its ability to undermine my dependence on knowledge and, without denying the value of past experience, create an openness in which something new can happen, free of any restraint imposed by what has gone before.

I look forward to some energetic challenges to the assumptions which underpin the foregoing when we meet.

Alan Mann

Issue No.12 - 4th September 94

Two changes at the August meeting which seemed to help the process. Inspired by the Omega Group format we started with ten minutes silence to give us an opportunity to watch the mind in action and reaction even when it has no "external" input from fellow DIALOGUERS . Following a suggestion made at the July meeting we put the DIALOGUE basics up on a blackboard as a constant reminder to us when we go astray. This is the present content of the board:

*An enquiry not a debate
Questioning not asserting
Always allow speaker to finish
Question assumptions
Suspend point of view
Priority of ear over mouth
Group interest over self interest
Process over content or result*

The changes helped keep us more on track than usual. I felt we adopted a greater degree of commitment to the process, to protecting the flow, than we have been able to do in the past. We will continue to experiment. The whole process is an experiment, of course, and change or openness to change may be a critical ingredient.

I caught the tail-end of an episode of the "Long Search" on an Open Learning programme. The interviewer was talking to Jacob Needleman who said.."*your programme is well named but the important thing to watch is that the long search is not simply made longer. What is needed is to go deeper, not longer*". This is why I think DIALOGUE is important; I believe it carries the possibility of delivering us to depth. To waste the opportunity at the conversational level will ensure that we make the search longer but that is all. Whizzing around on the surface, enjoying the froth.

Alan Mann

