

DIALOGUE - A PROPOSAL

by

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http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html

We are proposing a kind of collective inquiry not only into the content of what each of us says, thinks and feels but also into the underlying motivations, assumptions and beliefs that lead us to do so.

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DIALOGUE – A PROPOSAL

Dialogue, as we are choosing to use the word, is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations and even different parts of the same organization. In our modern culture men and women are able to interact with one another in many ways: they can sing, dance or play together with little difficulty but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariably to lead to dispute, division and often to violence. In our view this condition points to a deep and pervasive defect in the process of human thought.

In Dialogue a group of people can explore the individual and collective presuppositions, ideas, beliefs and feelings that subtly control their interactions. It provides an opportunity for them to participate in a process that displays their successes and failures of communication and it can reveal the often puzzling patterns of incoherence that often leads them to avoid certain issues or, on the other hand, to insist, against all reason, on standing and defending their opinions about them.

Dialogue is a way of observing how hidden values and intentions can control our behaviour, and how unnoticed differences in culture or gender can clash without our realizing what is occurring. It can therefore be seen as an arena in which collective learning takes place, and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity can arise.

Because the nature of Dialogue is exploratory its meaning and its methods continue to unfold. No firm rules can be laid down for conducting a Dialogue because its essence is learning - not as the result of consuming a body of information or doctrine imparted by an authority, nor as a means of examining or criticizing a particular theory or programme, but rather as part of an unfolding process of creative participation between peers.

However, we feel that it is important that its meaning and background be understood.

Our approach to this form of Dialogue arose out of a series of conversations begun in 1983 in which we inquired into David Bohm's suggestion that a pervasive incoherence in the process of human thought is the essential cause of the endless crises affecting mankind. This led us, in succeeding years, to initiate a number of larger conversations and seminars held in different countries with various groups of people which in turn began to take the form of Dialogues.

As we proceeded it became increasingly clear to us that this process of Dialogue is a powerful means of understanding how thought functions. We became aware that we live in a world produced almost entirely by human enterprise and thus by human thought. The room in which we sit, the language in which these words are written, our national boundaries, our systems of value and even that which we take to be our direct perceptions of reality are essentially manifestations of the way we human beings think and have thought. We realized that without a willingness to explore this situation and to gain a deep insight into it the real crisis of our time cannot be confronted, nor can anything more than temporary solutions to the vast array of human problems that now confronts us ever be found.

We are using the word "thought" here to signify not only the products of our conscious intellect but also our feelings, emotions, intentions and desires. It also includes such subtle, conditioned manifestations of learning as those that allow us to make sense of a succession of separate scenes within a cinema film or to translate the abstract symbols on road signs along with the tacit, non-verbal processes used in developing basic, mechanical skills such as riding a bicycle. In essence thought, in this sense of the word, is the active response of memory in

every phase of life and virtually all of our knowledge is produced, displayed, communicated, transformed and applied in thought.

To further clarify this approach we propose that, with the aid of a little close attention, even that which we call rational thinking can be seen to consist largely of responses conditioned and biased by previous thought. If we look carefully at what we generally take to be reality we begin to see that it includes a collection of concepts, memories and reflexes coloured by our personal needs, fears and desires all of which are limited and distorted by the boundaries of our language and the habits of our history, sex and culture. It is extremely difficult to disassemble this mixture or to ever be certain whether what we are perceiving - or what we may think about those perceptions - is at all accurate.

What makes this situation so serious is that thought generally conceals this problem from our immediate awareness and succeeds in generating a sense that the way each of us interprets the world is the only sensible way in which it can be interpreted. What is needed is a means by which we can slow down the process of thought in order to be able to observe it while it is actually occurring.

Our physical bodies have this capacity but thought seems to lack it. If you raise your arm you know that you are willing the act, that somebody else is not doing it for or to you. This is called proprioception. We can be aware of our body's actions while they are actually occurring but we generally lack this sort of skill in the realm of thought. For example, we do not notice that our attitude toward another person may be profoundly affected by the way we think and feel about someone else who might share certain aspects of his behaviour or even of his appearance. Instead, we assume that our attitude toward him arises directly from his actual conduct. The problem of thought is that the kind of attention required to notice this incoherence seems seldom to be available when it is most needed.

WHY DIALOGUE?

Dialogue is concerned with providing a space within which such attention can be given. It allows a display of thought and meaning that makes possible a kind of collective proprioception or immediate mirroring back of both the content of thought and the less apparent, dynamic structures that govern it. In Dialogue this can be experienced both individually and collectively. Each listener is able to reflect back to each speaker, and to the rest of the group, a view of some of the assumptions and unspoken implications of what is being expressed along with that which is being avoided. It creates an opportunity for each participant to examine the preconceptions, prejudices and the characteristic patterns that lie behind his or her thoughts, opinions, beliefs and feelings, along with the roles he or she tends habitually to play. And it offers an opportunity to share these insights.

The word "dialogue" derives from two roots: "dia" which means "through" and "logos" which means "the word", or more particularly, "the meaning of the word". The image it gives is of a river of meaning flowing around and through the participants. Any number of people can engage in Dialogue - one can even have a dialogue with oneself - but the sort of Dialogue that we are suggesting involves a group of between twenty and forty people seated in a circle talking together .

Some notion of the significance of such a Dialogue can be found in reports of hunter-gatherer bands of about this size who, when they met to talk together, had no apparent agenda nor any predetermined purpose. Nevertheless, such gatherings seemed to provide and

reinforce a kind of cohesive bond or fellowship that allowed its participants to know what was required of them without the need for instruction or much further verbal interchange. In other words, what might be called a coherent culture of shared meaning emerged within the group.

Dr. Patrick de Mare a psychiatrist working in London has conducted pioneering work along similar lines under modern conditions. He set up groups of about the same size the purpose of which he described in terms of sociotherapy. His view is that the primary cause of the deep and pervasive sickness in our society can be found at the socio-cultural level and that such groups can serve as micro cultures from which the source of the infirmity of our larger civilization can be exposed. Our experience has led us to extend this notion of Dialogue by emphasizing and giving special attention to the fundamental role of the activity of thought in the origination and maintenance of this condition.

As a microcosm of the larger culture Dialogue allows a wide spectrum of possible relationships to be revealed. It can disclose the impact of society on the individual and the individual's impact on society. It can display how power is assumed or given away and how pervasive are the generally unnoticed rules of the system that constitutes our culture. But it is most deeply concerned with understanding the dynamics of how thought conceives such connections.

It is not concerned with deliberately trying to alter or change behaviour nor to get the participants to move toward a predetermined goal. Any such attempt would distort and obscure the processes that the Dialogue has set out to explore. Nevertheless, changes do occur because observed thought behaves differently from unobserved thought. Dialogue can thus become an opportunity for thought and feeling to play freely in a continuously engaging movement. Topics of a specific or personal nature will become entwined with areas of deeper or more general meaning. Any subject can be included and no content is excluded. Such an activity is very rare in our culture.

PURPOSE AND MEANING

Usually people gather either to accomplish a task or to be entertained, both of which can be described as predetermined purposes. But by its very nature Dialogue is not consistent with any such purposes beyond the interest of its participants in the unfoldment and revelation of the deeper collective meanings that may be revealed. These may on occasion be entertaining, enlightening, lead to new insights or address existing problems. But surprisingly, in its early stages, the Dialogue will often lead to the experience of frustration.

A group of people invited to give their time and serious attention to a task that has no apparent goal and is not being led in any detectable direction may quickly find itself experiencing a great deal of anxiety or annoyance. This can lead to the desire on the part of some either to break up the group or to attempt to take control and give it a direction. Previously unacknowledged purposes will reveal themselves. Strong feelings will be exposed, along with the thoughts that underlie them. Fixed positions may be taken and polarization will often result. This is all part of the process. It is what sustains the Dialogue and keeps it constantly extending creatively into new domains.

In an assembly of between twenty and forty people extremes of frustration, anger, conflict or other difficulties may occur, but in a group of this size such problems can be contained with relative ease. In fact they can become the central focus of the exploration in

what might be understood as a kind of "meta- dialogue" aimed at clarifying the process of Dialogue itself.

As sensitivity and experience increase, a perception of shared meaning emerges in which people find that they are neither opposing one another, nor are they simply interacting. Increasing trust between members of the group - and in the process itself - leads to the expression of the sorts of thoughts and feelings that are usually kept hidden. There is no imposed consensus, nor is there any attempt to avoid conflict. No single individual or subgroup is able to achieve dominance because every subject, including domination and submission, is always available to be considered.

Participants find that they are involved in an ever changing and developing pool of common meaning. A shared content of consciousness emerges which allows a level of creativity and insight that is not generally available to individuals or to groups that interact in more familiar ways. This reveals an aspect of Dialogue that Patrick de Mare has called *koinonia*, a word meaning "impersonal fellowship", which was originally used to describe the early form of Athenian democracy in which all the free men of the city gathered to govern themselves.

As this fellowship is experienced it begins to take precedence over the more overt content of the conversation. It is an important stage in the Dialogue, a moment of increased coherence, where the group is able to move beyond its perceived blocks or limitations and on into new territory. But it is also a point at which a group may begin to relax and bask in the "high" that accompanies the experience. This is the point that sometimes causes confusion between Dialogue and some forms of psychotherapy . Participants may want to hold the group together in order to preserve the pleasurable feeling of security and belonging that accompanies the state. This is similar to that sense of community often reached in therapy groups or in team building workshops where it is taken to be the evidence of the success of the method used. Beyond such a point, however, lie even more significant and subtle realms of creativity, intelligence and understanding that can be approached only by persisting in the process of inquiry and risking reentry into areas of potentially chaotic or frustrating uncertainty .

WHAT DIALOGUE IS NOT

Dialogue is not discussion, a word that shares its root meaning with "percussion" and "concussion" both of which involve breaking things up. Nor is it debate. These forms of conversation contain an implicit tendency to point toward a goal, to hammer out an agreement, to try to solve a problem or have one's opinion prevail. It is also not a "salon", which is a kind of gathering that is both informal and most often characterized by an intention to entertain, exchange friendship, gossip and other information. Although the word "dialogue" has often been used in similar ways, its deeper, root meaning implies that it is not primarily interested in any of this.

Dialogue is not a new name for T groups or sensitivity training, although it is superficially similar to these and other related forms of group work. Its consequences may be psychotherapeutic but it does not attempt to focus on removing the emotional blocks of any one participant nor to teach, train or analyze. Nevertheless, it is an arena in which learning and the dissolution of blocks can and often do take place. It is not a technique for problem solving or conflict resolution, although problems may well be resolved during the course of a

Dialogue or, perhaps later, as a result of the increased understanding and fellowship that occurs among the participants. It is, as we have emphasized, primarily a means of exploring the field of thought.

Dialogue resembles a number of other forms of group activity and may at times include aspects of them but in fact it is something new to our culture. We believe that it is an activity that might well prove vital to its future health.

HOW TO START A DIALOGUE

SUSPENSION of thoughts, impulses, judgments, etc., lies at the very heart of Dialogue. It is one of its most important new aspects. It is not easily grasped because the activity is both unfamiliar and subtle. Suspension involves attention, listening and looking and is essential to exploration. Speaking is necessary, of course, for without it there would be little in the Dialogue to explore. But the actual process of exploration takes place during listening - not only to others but to oneself. Suspension involves exposing your reactions, impulses, feelings and opinions in such a way that they can be seen and felt within your own psyche and also be reflected back by others in the group. It does not mean repressing or suppressing or, even, postponing them. It means, simply, giving them your serious attention so that their structures can be noticed while they are actually taking place.

If you are able to give attention to, say, the strong feelings that might accompany the expression of a particular thought - either your own or another's - and to sustain that attention, the activity of the thought process will tend to slow down. This may permit you to begin to see the deeper meanings underlying your thought process and to sense the often incoherent structure of any action that you might otherwise carry out automatically. Similarly, if a group is able to suspend such feelings and give its attention to them then the overall process that flows from thought to feeling to acting-out within the group can also slow down and reveal its deeper, more subtle meanings along with any of its implicit distortions, leading to what might be described as a new kind of coherent, collective intelligence.

To suspend thought, impulse, judgment, etc., requires serious attention to the overall process we have been considering - both on one's own and within a group. This involves what may at first appear to be an arduous kind of work. But if this work is sustained, one's ability to give such attention constantly develops so that less and less effort is required.

NUMBERS: A Dialogue works best with between twenty and forty people seated facing one another in a single circle. A group of this size allows for the emergence and observation of different subgroups or subcultures that can help to reveal some of the ways in which thought operates collectively. This is important because the differences between such subcultures are often an unrecognized cause of failed communication and conflict. Smaller groups, on the other hand, lack the requisite diversity needed to reveal these tendencies and will generally emphasize more familiar personal and family roles and relationships.

With a few groups we have had as many as sixty participants, but with that large a number the process becomes unwieldy. Two concentric circles are required to seat everybody so that they can see and hear one another. This places those in the back row at a disadvantage, and fewer participants have an opportunity to speak.

We might mention here that some participants tend to talk a great deal while others find difficulty in speaking up in groups. It is worth remembering, though, that the word "participation" has two meanings: "to partake of", and "to take part in". Listening is at least as

important as speaking. Often, the quieter participants will begin to speak up more as they become familiar with the Dialogue experience while the more dominant individuals will find themselves tending to speak less and listen more.

DURATION: A Dialogue needs some time to get going. It is an unusual way of participating with others and some sort of introduction is required in which the meaning of the whole activity can be communicated. But even with a clear introduction, when the group begins to talk together it will often experience confusion, frustration and a self-conscious concern as to whether or not it is actually engaging in Dialogue. It would be very optimistic to assume that a Dialogue would begin to flow or move toward any great depth during its first meeting. It is important to point out that perseverance is required.

In setting up Dialogues it is useful at the start to agree the length of the session and for someone to take responsibility for calling time at the end. We have found that about two hours is optimum. Longer sessions risk a fatigue factor which tends to diminish the quality of participation. Many T Groups use extended "marathon" sessions which use this fatigue factor to break down some of the inhibitions of the participants. Dialogue, on the other hand, is more concerned with exploring the social constructs and inhibitions that affect our communications rather than attempting to bypass them.

The more regularly the group can meet, the deeper and more meaningful will be the territory explored. Weekends have often been used to allow a sequence of sessions, but if the Dialogue is to continue for an extended period of time we suggest that there be at least a one week interval between each succeeding session to allow time for individual reflection and further thinking. There is no limit to how long a Dialogue group may continue its exploration. But it would be contrary to the spirit of Dialogue for it to become fixed or institutionalized.

LEADERSHIP: A Dialogue is essentially a conversation between equals. Any controlling authority, no matter how carefully or sensitively applied, will tend to hinder and inhibit the free play of thought and the often delicate and subtle feelings that would otherwise be shared. Dialogue is vulnerable to being manipulated, but its spirit is not consistent with this. Hierarchy has no place in Dialogue.

Nevertheless, in the early stages some guidance is required to help the participants realize the subtle differences between Dialogue and other forms of group process. At least one or, preferably two, experienced facilitators are essential. Their role should be to occasionally point out situations that might seem to be presenting sticking points for the group, in other words, to aid the process of collective proprioception, but these interventions should never be manipulative nor obtrusive. Leaders are participants just like everybody else. Guidance, when it is felt to be necessary, should take the form of "leading from behind" and preserve the intention of making itself redundant as quickly as possible.

However, this proposal is not intended as a substitute for experienced facilitators. We suggest, though, that its contents be reviewed with the group during its initial meeting so that all the participants can be satisfied that they are embarking upon the same adventure.

SUBJECT MATTER: The Dialogue can begin with any topic of interest to the participants. If some members of the group feel that certain exchanges or subjects are disturbing or not fitting, it is important that they express these thoughts within the Dialogue. No content should be excluded.

Often participants will gossip or express their dissatisfactions or frustration after a session but it is exactly this sort of material that offers the most fertile ground for moving the Dialogue into deeper realms of meaning and coherence beyond the superficiality of "groupthink", good manners or dinner party conversation.

DIALOGUE IN EXISTING ORGANIZATIONS

So far we have been primarily discussing Dialogues that bring together individuals from a variety of backgrounds rather than from existing organizations. But its value may also be perceived by members of an organization as a way of increasing and enriching their own corporate creativity .

In this case the process of Dialogue will change considerably. Members of an existing organization will have already developed a number of different sorts of relationship between one another and with their organization as a whole. There may be a preexisting hierarchy or a felt need to protect one's colleagues, team or department. There may be a fear of expressing thoughts that might be seen as critical of those who are higher in the organization or of norms within the organizational culture. Careers or the social acceptance of individual members might appear to be threatened by participation in a process that emphasizes transparency, openness, honesty , spontaneity and the sort of deep interest in others that can draw out areas of vulnerability that may long have been kept hidden.

In an existing organization the Dialogue will very probably have to begin with an exploration of all the doubts and fears that participation will certainly raise. Members may have to begin with a fairly specific agenda from which they eventually can be encouraged to diverge. This differs from the approach taken with one-time or self-selected groupings in which participants are free to begin with any subject matter. But as we have mentioned no content should be excluded because the impulse to exclude a subject is itself rich material for the inquiry .

Most organizations have inherent, predetermined purposes and goals that are seldom questioned. At first this might also seem to be inconsistent with the free and open play of thought that is so intrinsic to the Dialogue process. However, this too can be overcome if the participants are helped from the very beginning to realize that considerations of such subjects can prove essential to the well-being of the organization and can in turn help to increase the participant's self-esteem along with the regard in which he or she may be held by others.

The creative potential of Dialogue is great enough to allow a temporary suspension of any of the structures and relationships that go to make up an organization.

Finally, we would like to make clear that we are not proposing Dialogue as a panacea nor as a method or technique designed to succeed all other forms of social interaction. Not everyone will find it useful nor, certainly, will it be useful in all contexts. There is great value to be found in many group psychotherapeutic methods and there are many tasks that require firm leadership and a well-formed organizational structure.

Much of the sort of work we have described here can be accomplished independently, and we would encourage this. Many of the ideas suggested in this proposal are still the subjects of our own continuing exploration. We do not advise that they be taken as fixed but rather that they be inquired into as part of your own Dialogue.

The spirit of Dialogue is one of free play, a sort of collective dance of the mind that, nevertheless has immense power and reveals coherent purpose. Once begun it becomes a continuing adventure that can open the way to significant and creative change.

THE END

*GROUP DIALOGUE WITHIN PRISONS**Peter J T Garrett*

Dialogue Groups are an innovative approach to groupwork currently being pioneered within HMP Whitemoor, a maximum-security prison in Cambridgeshire, where it was introduced by the author and Dave Parsons (both of whom are experienced groupworkers). This article explains the need for a new socio-therapeutic approach in prisons, gives background details about Dialogue and its principles, and follows with a narrative description of the first year of a Dialogue Group in HMP Whitemoor. Details are then given of The Prison Dialogue, a charitable organization set up to encourage Dialogue in other closed institutions.

Group Dialogue as Socio-therapy

Group Dialogue is a new approach based on meaning as the primary principle. It is more concerned with the humanizing of the society than the socializing of the individual. It does this through regular, open, on-the-level communication between a cross-section of those living and working in the prison. Since meanings are formed collectively as well as individually, it works to assist participants to discover both the social and individual nature of their behaviour. It is concerned with establishing a community of enquiry. Rather than trying to impose corrective patterns on anti-social traits (which simply continue to act underneath until the pressure is too great and they burst through into expression again), the Dialogue is concerned with the quality of relationship as the norm to which people unconsciously revert. As individuals become aware of their own (and the groups) thoughts and feelings, and start to reassess the value and consequences of them in the light of other's views, then we have the basis for a therapeutic community in a setting which has traditionally denied all such opportunity.

The Dialogue Group addresses social fragmentation directly through open communication in a large group. Aspects of fear, revulsion and hatred that are present are allowed expression so that they can be seen afresh in the present situation, and be reviewed and re-assessed in the light of the attitudes and comments of others. This is a collective addressing of the collectively induced thoughts and feelings, including the peer pressures exerted by inmates on their fellows, and prison staff on their fellows. Other therapeutic approaches which deal with the individual in isolation (or in very small groups) have the limitation that the attitudes, which seemed to have changed, tend to re-assert themselves when the prisoner (or member of staff) returns to the landings and is subject to peer pressure to behave in ways that are acceptable to colleagues. In such circumstance people almost invariably revert to their norms of behaviour. The Dialogue group is actively creating a new norms of behaviour amongst sub-cultural groupings within the whole prison society.

Background to Group Dialogue

We recognized that people speak and act the way they do because of how they think and feel, but we were deeply disturbed to realize that most individuals have little or no

awareness about how they come to hold the thoughts and feelings that they do. It dawned on us that this lack of awareness is the root cause of the social fragmentation. Life-styles have changed and become abstracted (I may specialize in underwriting marine reinsurance whilst my neighbor repairs central heating), but the resulting way people have to think (and feel) in this "civilized" world has not really been attended to. It has gone wrong, and the tacit infrastructure of our collective thought has become incoherent.

Of course you assume automatically that when you have a problem, you should think about it to find a solution - but we were suggesting that it is the working of thought itself that has gone wrong. More of the same damaged thinking simply compounds the problem. As David Bohm put it: *"..fragmentation is now very widespread, not only throughout society, but also in each individual; and this is leading to a kind of general confusion of the mind, which creates an endless series of problems and interferes with our clarity of perception so seriously as to prevent us from being able to solve most of them... The notion that all these fragments are separately existent is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion."* But unless we find a new way of talking and thinking together, the illusion of separate, fragmentary experience is reinforced rather than broken.

Features of Group Dialogue

Group Dialogue is a new type of communication we have proposed to bring about awareness of these subtle processes which have been going on unnoticed within each of us, and to clarify the ground out of which our relationships arise. The following may give a sense of the activity:

- Dialogue is an enquiry into what leads us to think, feel, speak and act as we do.
 - A Dialogue Group involves 15 to 30 people meeting weekly for a year or more.
 - Participation is voluntary.
 - Diversity is helpful, with individuals from a range of different sub-cultural groupings. Participants are seated facing one another in a single circle and have one conversation.
 - There is no agenda or fixed topic of conversation, and there is no taught content.
 - No subject is prohibited from the conversation.
 - There is no objective, such as reaching consensus, a decision or agreed action.
 - Participants are peers and no particular individual is more important than any other.
 - Facilitators bring out the intention of Dialogue in the early stages, in a non-directive way, but aim to give up their special role quickly and become peer participants.
 - Everyone has the right to their own perspective, and the responsibility of listening to other speakers seriously, even when they do not agree with what they are saying.
 - It is not talk for talk's sake, but talk in order to engage and exchange here and now.
 - It is a forum of open communication which concentrates on listening and inclusion.
 - The encouragement is to recognize how it is and consider why it seems to be that way. Attention is on the meaning of both the process and the content of the conversation.

- It is an enquiry with others, rather than something which is done to others.

Listening and Suspension

Listening is the key activity - only one person speaks at any time whereas everyone present may listen. Surprisingly, most people have never discovered how to listen, and instead spend most of the time whilst another is speaking working out what to say the moment he or she stops, whilst almost nobody listens to themselves speaking. On this basis we have a *discussion* (from the same root as *percussion* and *concussion!*), where people maintain fixed views which are promoted and defended by argument. On the other hand Dialogue (from *dia* meaning *through*, and *logos* which is the *word*) suggests a flow of meaning through the group where you move with the views of others and they enter into yours. How one listens is a major factor in determining what another is able to say, and with practice it is possible to actually listen to what the other person is attempting to say. This requires the holding of one's own opinions more loosely so that there is space for what the other is saying, and includes seeing from another's point of view, which is an exchange of meaning. When this exchange of meaning is undertaken together by a group we have a Dialogue.

Yet greater skill is required to attend to the movement of meaning, and this requires a *suspension* of thoughts and feelings. For example, rather than say openly insulting someone in the Dialogue, I may hold back from that impulse and instead do it within my thoughts. But now I *suspend* the insult going on inside me as well, and just look at it, as if it were reflected back to me from a mirror. Metaphorically, I can walk around the thoughts and feelings, and the impulses and dispositions behind them, to explore them and see them more clearly for what they are. This reveals unnoticed judgments, assumptions, defenses, etc., and opens the way to discover the nature of thoughts and feelings (as a social process as well as an individual one), and how they arise and are sustained. I get an internal feel for the whole movement, so that just as I might have been aware of some movement in my body, there is now an awareness of movement in consciousness.

Size of the Group

A Dialogue Group usually has between 15 and 30 people. Although a group larger than 30 is feasible (but more awkward because each person has less chance to speak), less than 15 is insufficient to reveal the collective nature of much of our thought. The group needs to be large enough for sub-cultures to be able to reveal themselves and for individuals to find themselves identified and aligned with others, even when the apparent reasons for doing so are shown invalid. A smaller group, of say 6 to 12 people, never really achieves this. At first some people prefer the smaller group for just this reason - it avoids the intensity of sub-cultural confrontation and the group is therefore easier to control and more comfortable to take part in - but for socio-therapy it is clearly lacking.

Facilitation

At the outset the group is led from behind by one or more facilitators. Their role early on is to convene the meeting and convey the intention of Dialogue, but they do not direct the proceedings or control the subject matter. There is no agenda or fixed topic of conversation. They may intervene to foster enquiry by drawing attention to what is happening, to enable individuals to speak, or to stop things from getting out of hand. But they openly reveal their

intentions in away that makes it easy for others to take similar action if they feel it to be appropriate, and thereby steadily work themselves out of a job by relinquishing their initial power (of apparently knowing how to do it) and become peer participants.

Getting Started

To announce the voluntary Dialogue Group, Dave Parsons drew up and displayed a poster on the wing with the caption: *"When you fight with monsters, make sure you don't become a monster yourself"*, and a cartoon drawing showing an individual (who could be an inmate or a member of the prison staff) confronting a monster. The text described the monster as *"an unfair society, uncaring aspects of an institution or perhaps a cruel family"*, and said there was a need for Dialogue as *"an antidote to bullying, scapegoating, a lack of listening"*, etc. It specified that *"there will be no agenda or decisions"*, that *"there may be anger expressed and uncomfortable silences"* but *"there will be no physical violence"*, and that it would be a mixed group of between 15 and 30 participants including staff and volunteers from outside the prison.

The first meeting attracted just a dozen inmates. an assistant chaplain and a volunteer from outside the prison to join us. By the third meeting we had added two prison officers, and as the term proceeded we were joined by other inmates. another probation officer and a psychiatrist. Our later meetings averaged 20, including a member of the prison's Board of Visitors. All inmates were category B, non sex offenders. and several were serving life sentences. There was some turnover of participants because of transfers to and from the prison, but the majority attended over 75 % of the meetings. We typically had two women (staff) and two blacks in the group.

The Need is Blatant

The need for Dialogue stood out loudly from the outset. This was clearly a fragmented society, with evidence of isolation for some: *"I get no outside visitors –these Dialogues are my only direct contact with the outside"* and of extreme rejection by many: *"He doesn't want to know me because I'm a convict, and I don't want to know him because he's an arsehole"* (inmate about a governor). There was a barrage of complaint and criticism by the inmates, and when staff pleaded, after several weeks, *"how can we move beyond this cynicism?"*, the blunt explanation was *"You would have to be pathologically ill not to be angry locked up in prison"*.

The anger, resentment and frustration in the inmates was being directed at the officers, who were being held responsible in an unpleasant way. *"All officers are dickheads - I never once heard an officer admit he was wrong."* The officers were surprisingly professional. considering the taunting nature of the exchanges at times. as the facilitators were deliberately encouraging an environment where individuals could be real on their own terms, and be listened to, however outrageous their views. The officers' response was firm and frank: *"We don't trust you and you cons don't trust us - that's just how it is."* No doubt such remarks are often made in prisons, but in the Dialogue the meaning behind what was being said was being listened to seriously, not only fellow inmates, but also by a whole range of prison staff and volunteers from outside the prison.

Officers and Inmates : Leading From Behind

We did hold true to our commitment not to direct the content of the conversation. Gradually the inmate/officer confrontation subsided and individuals began to see each other beyond their roles. One inmate remarked: *"I thought every officer had the shit in for me until I met one of them who was a person that cared"*. The prejudice many officers held against inmates (whom some had considered to be animals who would never change) was brought out in the exchange where an officer said *"Its all very well here in the Dialogue where we are mature adults talking reasonably together, but most of the prisoners are not like this."* An inmate replied: *"That's where you are wrong - everybody is capable of behaving just like we are now if they are approached in the right way. It is all a matter of how people are approached"*.

The blame, abuse and condemnation was gradually transferred from the prison officers to the penal system: *"All I am learning in this prison is frustration, resentment and anger."* This was a definite progression, and established common ground with the officers who were at times, after all, simply doing what they were told to do by management. Indeed by the second month the officers in the Dialogue Group were clearly considered to be exceptions (to the general rule that *"all officers are dickheads"*) and as the year progressed I recorded reminiscing and commiseration between officers and inmates who had realized many Common interests. Of course officers and inmates are both held long term in the prison, one by sentence and the other by mortgage, and both want to make the best of it. Later in the year, any verbal assault on an officer was quite rare (and restricted to new comers to the group). This initial sub-cultural clash had not subsided because of exercises or cognitive techniques, but because each had spoken openly in the presence of the other, and been heard over a period of time, with the participants determining the content of conversation throughout. There wasn't any one moment when the change occurred, but the norm of relationship has certainly shifted and mutual respect (although not necessarily liking) has increased.

This change was also evident beyond the Dialogue group where there was a shift in the unspoken resistance we had felt from prison officers who had never attended a Dialogue meeting. It had seemed that our open communication and encouragement to *"say it how it is"* had been an intrusion into the status quo, and had resulted in some discomfort. We had met an inertia and lack of communication resulting in officers not being available sometimes for the group which had caused us great frustration and annoyance at times. Now I perceived this giving way to a general sense of support, or at least an acceptance, of what we were doing. *"I think other officers actually are keen to sit in on Dialogues, but don't want to say so in case they get ragged by their colleagues."* Indeed we discovered that some officers even chose to come in on their days off simply in order to take part in the group.

Other Confrontations

For other staff in the Dialogue, however, the transfer of complaint from officer to the prison "system" was no relief. Some with a commitment to religion found it excruciating at times, and probably considered the facilitators irresponsible for not cutting off the negativity and leading the group into more hopeful topics of consideration. Our intention, however, was to *lead from behind*, by consistently supporting genuinely felt observations and criticisms

(including those of us as facilitators!) whilst encouraging enquiry into what was back of those views. We were looking to be peers in an open enquiry, learning together. We were not trying to change other's opinions, but to understand them more fully.

What they hadn't realized was that they themselves formed a religious subculture which in due course confronted an anti-religious subculture. *"You can't talk about spirituality with a chaplain because he thinks he knows the answer and tries to tell you how you should think."* Part of it involved differing commitments to positivity and realism, and a plea for being less cynical was met the view: *"What's wrong with reality? Shit stinks. Perhaps by displaying the situation as I actually see it we can all get some perspective on it so that it effects us in a different way."* These exchanges, over time, contributed to a healthy shift away from statements about *"How it is"* to ones about *"How it seems to me"*.

After a couple of months I put it to the group that we should invite a member of the Board of Visitors (BOV) to join the Dialogue. The inmates wanted to test whether they had any real say in the matter and voted against the idea. No invitation was sent. When I broached the same proposal a month later there was more openness. Some were against it: *"There's absolutely no point in talking with a BOV - they have tea and biscuits with the governor"*, but the majority were willing and we were duly joined by a woman with counseling and groupwork skills. Intriguingly, those who voted against her coming welcomed her most whole-heartedly when she was actually present, and after her first week being grilled. We had two BOV members during the year, and I think they both appreciated how much they learnt about themselves and the prison from their involvement.

Perhaps the deepest split within the dispersal prisons is against sex offenders (who for their own safety are housed on separate wings at HMP Whitemoor, along with other vulnerable prisoners). Almost all the officers and inmates were disgusted by the stereo-type images they held of these inmates, whom they usually referred to as paedophiles. *"Sex offenders are never successfully treated - once they are released they reoffend They should be locked up and the keys thrown away."* There was tremendous revulsion when the sex offenders took over the kitchen jobs and a number of inmates refused all food prepared there for months. The most unlikely social integration at this (and many other) prisons would be the inclusion of known sex offenders with non sex offenders in a single Dialogue Group. Sex offenders have to disguise their crimes in prisons where segregation is not available, and risk having their cells burnt out if discovered. One such offender was murdered in the prison during the year, so such a group could not realistically be considered at present at Whitemoor.

Widening the Enquiry

Participants came to trust the Dialogue process increasingly, as indicated by a prisoner saying: *"Being in the Dialogue it is possible to let your guard down a little. Back on the wing you can't do that because you get hurt"*. We had sometimes heated, and sometimes rounded, conversations for and against drugs, immigrants, abortion, violence as a means of implementing change, and pride and shame about being a criminal. Issues came up as and when they were of interest to people. We pondered on the media and reporting, royalty, former Yugoslavia, homosexuality and AIDs, abortion, contraception, religious experience, insanity, the Bolger murder, Zimbabwe, Nelson Mandela, money management, employment, friendship and love. One of the volunteers from outside the prison said to me: *"We have better conversations here than in my country club, and the subscription there is £500 a year!"*

Personal Development

Some inmates began deliberately reading newspapers in order to be able to contribute to the conversation, and I noticed a steady increase of vocabulary on the part of many. In the early meetings swear words had substituted (rather ineffectively) for adjectives in almost every sentence, but gradually individuals wanted to express their views more accurately and they had to rediscover a wider vocabulary in order to do so. One governor who had never attended a Dialogue mentioned to me *"I see far more conversation generally now in the prison now than there was a year ago and I attribute that in good part to the Dialogue Group."*

Some inmates did not speak for many meetings, and we did not require them to do so. At first the only words one prisoner would say (muttered under his breath) were "scum of the earth", referring to prison officers. He later contributed one-liners for several months, but now tells non-abusive, narrative stories and displays a good (although unusual) sense of humor. I noted how his aggression was associated with insecurity and lack of confidence. Although we sometimes lost participants to the segregation unit or healthcare because of (violent incidents on the wing, these clearly lessened as inmates gained self-esteem and began valuing their own views. It felt as if some of these individuals have never really been listened to. People started, at their own speed, to reassess their lives: *"I zigged when I should have zagged"*, and ponder their future: *"What do you do when you don't have enough money?"* Some family details were more personal than would be appropriate for this kind of report.

Re-negotiating Trauma

There had been minor rioting on a couple of the wings immediately before Christmas which had led to severely uncomfortable conditions for many inmates over the Christmas period, and then to the introduction of a harsher regime throughout the prison. During this period the Dialogue groups acted as a crucial pressure valve allowing steam to be released which otherwise, once the pressure became unbearable, would have been expressed in extreme physical violence. The pain and distress was deeply disturbing and it was clearly necessary that it be expressed in some way. *"I keep thinking this is a nightmare and that one day I will wake up and it will all be over"* and *"they smashed up the TV sets because they didn't want to smash up you (officers)"* were statements made at this time. There was such frustration that sometimes inmates were unable to remain seated whilst they expressing their feelings. On other occasions the extremes of aloneness came through: *"I find the best way is to keep myself to myself. The only time I really communicate with other people is in the Dialogue group."* This lasted for six or seven weeks. Through the Dialogue, traumatic events were allowed to become memories, and once the awful reality had been translated into symbolic form it could be handled by the mind rather than remaining intolerable. This was a collective experience. We later saw similar examples for individuals who suffered the trauma of being segregated for some time or witnessed suicide attempts

A Plea for Rehabilitation

There has been a repeated plea for more rehabilitation: *"I want to do more than learn how to wield a mop!"* Inevitably, the strengths and weaknesses of various remedial programmes currently being offered came up for consideration at times. One inmate revealed: *"I did learn something from the Anger Management course, but after a session one day I saw the instructor getting angry with one of the prison staff about something, and I thought 'this doesn't really work, does it?'"* Similarly a prison officer observed: *"The street-wise cons learn to jump through the hoops, but have no intention of actually changing because they enjoy the power their anger gives them over others, and anyway they like hurting people"*. Of course I had heard both encouraging and disparaging reports about the value of our own Dialogue groups, ranging from: *"I can't see any change what-so-ever coming out of these groups"* to *"I had so much support from that group - a month after leaving I still feel a gaping hole!"*. I recognize the need for a variety of approaches to address the complex personal and social difficulties encountered amongst those living and working within prisons. I see the Dialogue group to be an on-going nourishment and support to underwrite any counseling, one-to-one and group therapies offered in prisons. At times issues arise in the general conversation which are taken up outside the Dialogue by an inmate with a probation officer, chaplain or BOV member. Also, several inmates who had attended the Goose Theatre workshops (who use masks to provide a language to express various layers of an individual's personality) then joined the Dialogue group to sustain their learning experience, at the same time introducing to others in the Dialogue group the concept of living behind masks.

The Prison as an Institution

The Prison Service pledges to look after those in custody *"with humanity and to help them lead law abiding and useful lives in custody and after release"*. This is not easy to do, and in reality the fragmentation of society, family and the individual is felt very keenly within the walls of a prison, and the dehumanizing bureaucracy of the prison system itself adds significantly to this. As one prisoner commented: *"Introducing Samaritan programmes into the prison when it is the prison itself that is causing people to commit suicide, is like sending troops into battle then following up with the medical corps to deal with the casualties, It is the inhumanity of the prison that is causing people to commit suicide. A cosmetic reduction in the number of suicides for the media is not really that helpful "*

There is brutality, hopelessness and isolation, interspersed with compassion, humor and indifference. During one painful conversation about an inmate who had just tried (unsuccessfully) to commit suicide, an officer found himself reminiscing about a reprimand he had given to the man: *"I booked him recently for taking excessive amounts of custard In a similar situation in the future I would not do so automatically, I would certainly think first about why a con acts as he does."* Kindly breaking the tension, a prisoner remarked *" It must have been obvious that something was seriously wrong, or else he was a very brave man - nobody in their right mind would take extra servings of prison custard!"*.

What has been learnt from the Prison Dialogue?

1. Dialogue Groups have an fundamental role to play in humanizing the prison society.

2. A community of enquiry emerges, not because everyone agrees but because everyone listens.
3. The behavioural norms (to which those who live and work in prisons unconsciously revert) can be changed through sustained Dialogue.
4. Trauma may be re-negotiated and thereby reduced in individuals and the group as a whole.
5. The Dialogue is a therapeutic environment for the individual participants.
6. Inherent in this form of enquiry is listening, which leads to a deepening of respect between the participants.
7. The Dialogue stimulates conversation and thoughtfulness.
8. Individuals learn how to change their views and form new ones.
9. The large group is a challenge, but quieter individuals do find their own voices and dominant ones do learn to hold back without being prompted.
10. Self-esteem increases as individual participants realize their unique view has validity and relevance, even though it may be different from that held by others.
11. Descriptive and emotional vocabulary increases as participants find the need to express themselves more clearly.
12. The Rigid stance (*How it is*) loosens to become a participatory one (*How it seems to me*).
13. Allowing each their own speed, a self-organizing common sense emerges in the group.
14. What is learnt in the group is first hand (experienced) rather than second hand (taught).
15. Although confidentiality is not contracted, and cannot be in a maximum-security prison, participants do tacitly agree a sound level of confidentiality based on respect for each other and the group as a whole.
16. Published reports have helpfully informed and included those in the prison who do not attend the Dialogue.
17. The Dialogue comes to be owned by the group. (eg: inmate ad dressing me: "*Dialogue may be something that you wanted to do in a prison, but for us it is more important than that.*")

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About the author

Peter Garrett's post-graduate research work at the Centre for, Action Research, (School of Management, University of Bath), is based on his experiences of Group Dialogue, including his work in prisons. He has had ten years of experience with Dialogue groups, and acknowledges Prof David Bohm and Dr Patrick de Mare in particular, along with many others who have contributed to this new understanding of consciousness, fragmentation and the profound need for the humanizing of society. Also he is indebted to Dave Parsons, without whom the Prison Dialogues would have remained simply a good idea, together with the many inmates, prison staff and volunteers who have contributed through their participation. He is a fellow of the RSA, and a founding member and current director of *The Prison Dialogue* where correspondence may be addressed to him at P O Box 44, Chipping Campden, Glos GL55 6YN, England.