

## Transforming the culture through dialogue

David Bohm believes that dialogues held among groups of 20 to 30 people may save us all through their transforming effects on the culture. An emeritus professor of theoretical physics at Birkbeck College, University of London, Bohm is the author of several textbooks on modern physics and the landmark book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (Ark Publishers, 1980). His theories on dialogue and culture, however, make him a maverick within the scientific orthodoxy.

A FORM OF FREE DIALOGUE MAY WELL BE one of the most effective ways of investigating the crisis that faces society, and indeed the whole of human nature and consciousness today. Such a form of free exchange of ideas and information is of fundamental relevance for transforming culture and freeing it of destructive misinformation, so that creativity can be liberated.

The term *dialogue* is derived from a Greek word, with *dia* meaning "through" and *logos* signifying "the word." Here "the word" does not refer to mere sounds but to their meaning. So dialogue can be considered as a free flow of meaning between people in communication, in the sense of a stream that flows between banks.

A key difference between a dialogue and an ordinary discussion is that, within the latter, people usually hold relatively fixed positions and argue in favor of their views as they try to convince others to change. At best this may produce agreement



or compromise, but it does not give rise to anything creative. Moreover, whenever anything of fundamental significance is involved, then positions tend to be rigidly non-negotiable and talk degenerates either into a confrontation in which there is no solution, or into a polite avoidance of the issues. Both these outcomes are extremely harmful, for they prevent the free play of thought in communication and therefore impede creativity.

In dialogue, however, a person may prefer a certain po-

sition but does not hold to it non-negotiably. He or she is ready to listen to others with sufficient sympathy and interest to understand the meaning of the other's position properly and is also ready to change his or her own point of view if there is good reason to do so. Clearly a spirit of goodwill or friendship is necessary for this to take place.

The *spirit* of dialogue is, in short, the ability to hold many points of view in suspension, along with a primary interest in the creation of a common meaning.

—David Bohm & F. David Peat

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I'M PROPOSING THAT WE NEED TO LEARN how to dialogue with each other because of all the fragmentation in the world. It seems to me the only way we can overcome that is by experiencing our wholeness together. We need a kind of social enlightenment to help that take place. In the past, people have developed ways to foster individual enlightenment, a higher intelligence for the individual through meditation or mystical insight or what-have-you. But we haven't worked on ways to develop a higher social

intelligence.

I believe we need to create a situation where we can suspend our opinions and judgments in order to be able to listen to each other. The idea is that we might generate a kind of social superconductivity by having lots of energy in the interchange, while keeping the temperature low. To do that you need a situation in which people can talk together freely without a specific agenda or purpose to guide the proceedings, and you need a group large enough to develop a number of subcultures. If two people get together with different views, they will generally avoid the real issues. They will protect their separate information pools by avoiding connections that will agitate them. But when you have 20 or 30 people, there are bound to be subgroups wherein those deeper issues will come up. It's not controllable anymore. Eventually, the dialogue is going to touch an individual's non-negotiable assumptions, which will liberate high energy.

In Israel we held a dialogue group and the subject of Zionism came up. Somebody in the group said that Zionism makes the Arab-Jewish problem insoluble. At this point, a man popped up and said that without Zionism Israel and the Jews would go to pieces. He was very disturbed. The discussion had struck one of his non-negotiable assumptions. Other people began to get excited. There was danger. The whole meeting might have blown

up, except that there were still other people who were not quite that involved, and they came in tangentially and kept the temperature down so that we could begin to face these issues. Even the fellow who had gotten so excited about Zionism didn't get angry enough to walk out. Had he walked out, it would have stopped the dialogue. Eventually things cooled down and he was looking at his own view and the other views together. That created a common pool of information. Everybody began operating from the same pool of information.

When you listen to somebody else, whether you like it or not, what they say becomes part of you. So if the temperature is high, a conflict is generated inside and outside. But in the dialogue, the temperature is lowered, and the common pool is created, where people begin suspending their own opinions and listening to other people's—so everybody's opinion will be held by everybody. That's what I mean by a common pool of information.

At some point, people recognize that this common pool is more important than the separate pools. A state of high intelligence, social intelligence, unfolds from this; call it a kind of superconductive state. Just as superconductivity makes possible marvelous things such as trains that can move without friction, or circuits where electricity flows at incredible speed, so the intelligence that comes from dialogue may make it possible for some-

thing new to come into human relations.

Anthropologists who have studied hunter-gatherer groups say many of these people sit around in a circle without making decisions, and then they seem to know what to do. They don't have complete individualism, nor do they have collective pressure. It's a kind of life that doesn't lead to the stress we have now.

In dialogue we don't emphasize the parts. We don't have a means to an end. The dialogue does not work by saying that we are trying to manipulate each other to an end, or the group to an end. Rather, we're participating, talking together, exploring, creating. The end is not known.

Perhaps an individual can tap into a higher mind, but in addition we need this higher intelligence to operate socially, or else we're not going to survive. Most of our life is social. If we don't manage things socially, individual high intelligence is not going to make much difference.

No matter what we do in science or any other area, it will not help if we don't find a way to be related to each other at a deep level.

—David Bohm  
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