

## ON DIALOGUE: AN ABSTRACT

Joan Michel

Penn State University

### *Major theme*

Writing in *On Dialogue* (Bohm, 1996), theoretical physicist David Bohm posits that deliberate, free-form dialogue has the potential to transform the world and ensure the survival of the human species. In fact, Bohm suggests that dialogue can transform even the nature of consciousness, both individual and collective. This transformation of consciousness is necessary for humanity to solve the current planetary problems that we face.

### *Logical development of the theme*

Bohm says that “thought” and humanity’s penchant for assuming thoughts are reality is the first place we go astray. Thought filtered through a person’s culture becomes opinion or assumption, which we consider “truths.” We become identified with our assumptions or truths – they become part of our identity, which when challenged produces an emotional response. These emotional responses to attack – e.g. love or hate – contributes to a societal incoherence. This incoherence creates problems such as war and environmental threats and renders us unable to create solutions to large-scale problems. Figure 1 illustrates the path from thought to problem.

*Figure 1: Path from Thought to Problem*



The solution, Bohm argues, is to break the bond we have to thought and its relationship to “truth.” We do this in a group setting so that we have the opportunity to practice suspending our assumptions about others’ thoughts as well as our own. Dialogue is the tool we use to then help us understand our two selves – the one who is doing the thinking and the one who is observing

the thinking. As we pay attention to the process of thinking, a new common or tacit understanding can arise between people who are in dialogue. Dialogue then produces a forum where people are building on each other's ideas without being attached to their own, giving birth to a common mind. In this way, we form a new consciousness that is capable of creating solutions to, for instance, save the planet. Figure 2 traces the path from dialogue to solution.

*Figure 2: Path from Dialogue to Solution*



### **Implications, inferences, or conclusions**

Implicit in the path from dialogue to solution is the willingness of the individual to let go of assumptions and to see thoughts as somehow separate from themselves. There are several spiritual practices that teach this concept. Meditation, for example, is a practice during which practitioners are taught to “watch” their thoughts float by like clouds. During this meditation session, if done in a group, the participants are “sharing a common content” (Bohm, 1996, p. 26) and opening to a new collective consciousness. A Course in Miracles (Anonymous, 2007) offers lessons in freeing yourself from identification with thought. The first lesson in the A Course in Miracles Workbook for Students (Anonymous, 2007, p. 3) provides readers a mantra to disassociate meaning from objects. “Nothing I see in this room [on this street, from this window, in this place] means anything. I have given everything I see in this room all the meaning that it has for me.” Lesson 10 concludes, “My thoughts do not mean anything.” These exercises help foster proprioception, by separating the thinker from the thoughts, and thus creating conditions for a person to suspend perceptions, feelings, judgments, and impulses during dialogue.

In the section Difficulties in Dialogue (Bohm, 1996, p. 29), Bohm writes about how the image of self can get in the way of dialogue. Their self-image, built by assumptions and opinions, leads them to adopt certain roles in a group – aggressor, subordinate, etc. that interrupt the flow of dialogue. This set of assumptions is similar to the “ego” as described by Eckhart Tolle (Tolle, 2005), “The central core of all your mind activity consists of certain repetitive and persistent thoughts, emotions, and reactive patterns that you identify with most strongly. This entity is the ego itself.” The ego, Tolle asserts, feeds itself on separation and by creating an “us and them” mentality. This dynamic is deadly to the process of dialogue that Bohm advocates. Because the ego lives either in the past or the future, the only escape from ego is the present moment, says Tolle. This “presence” in the moment underlies Bohm’s concept of dialogue, “We must have an empty space where we are not obliged to do anything, nor to come to any conclusions, nor to say anything or not say anything. It’s empty and free.” (Bohm, 1996, p. 17).

All of these writers, including Bohm, are describing what today we call spiritual practices. As a culture, we traditionally keep spiritual practices far away from the board room. To apply Bohm’s philosophies in a corporate or secular setting is to cross a line that we’ve drawn in the sand. In her bid for the presidency, author Marianne Williamson is crossing this line, blending the spiritual with the secular.

“America is not just having problems with what is happening to our economy, our environment, our educational system and so forth. We have a problem with the psychological fabric of our country, as a low level emotional civil war has begun in too many ways to rip us apart. In order to deal with that, we must address it on the level of our internal being. We don’t normally associate politics with a deep level of our internal existence, but this is the 21st Century now and all of that needs to change” (Williamson, 2019). Cory Booker, another presidential

candidate, also proposes a spiritual solution to our country's problems in a message of unity that he brands as a "new civic gospel" in numerous interviews. If he were still alive, Bohm likely would agree with these candidates – that our species needs to evolve to a new level of consciousness in order to survive. "This notion of dialogue and common consciousness suggests that there is some way out of our collective difficulties. And we have to begin at the grass roots..." (Bohm, 1996, p. 36). And there enters the process consultant.

The process consultant can employ dialogue, suspension, and proprioception in the course of facilitating groups as they conduct their normal course of work. By teaching the skills of dialogue, suspension, and proprioception, the process consultant continues the work of Bohm by creating an appreciation in each member of a group she facilitates of feeling heard, of building a common understanding in the group, and of ultimately creating new-minded solutions.

Using dialogue tools may be particularly effective when groups are made up of people with opposite viewpoints. For instance, I am currently facilitating a group that is composed of human service workers and employers in equal numbers. These subgroups see human capital in two opposing ways – a human that needs help or a commodity. Neither view is completely "true." Traditional discussion is not likely to result in a consensus for a group like this. But dialogue may create an environment where a common understanding of human capital can emerge and as a result the group can develop transformative solutions instead of traditional ones.

**References:**

Bohm, D. (1996). *On Dialogue* [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://courses.worldcampus.psu.edu>

Anonymous. (2007). *A Course in Miracles* (combined edition). Mill Valley, CA: Foundation for Inner Peace.

Tolle, E. (2005). *A new earth: Awakening to your life's purpose*. New York, N.Y.: Dutton/Penguin Group.

Williamson, M. (2019). The Issues Aren't Always the Issue. Retrieved from: <https://www.marianne2020.com/issues>