

Do You Have the Courage to Dialogue?

I have come to the conclusion that effective dialogue requires that participants have courage. Not overt heroic courage but the quiet, inner courage that it takes to learn about ourselves and others. The courage it takes to face the pain and discomfort that often comes with growth.

Dialoguing entails that we share at a deeper level than the mere superficial chit chat or factual level. It requires that we share our thoughts and our feelings about things. That we acknowledge when we don't know something or don't agree with another's point of view. When we do this, we take a stand for what we believe and we share what is important to us. In so doing, we reveal who we are and this can make us feel vulnerable and exposed.

Sharing at this deeper level is only one part of the dialogue process. Having shared, we also need to listen to others in the way we would have liked to be listened to when we shared. This takes a different form of courage because it requires that we be open to change, to the possibility that we could hear something that will cause us to change our opinions or beliefs. This means that we are prepared to get off any ego position we may have been holding and suspend our judgments so that we can incorporate what we are hearing and learning.

Dialogue is a learned skill, and in many ways it is an art. It is not something that automatically comes with the skill of speech.

My journey in learning to dialogue started at an early age. I had the good fortune to come from a large Italian family where dialogue, of a sort, took place every night at the dinner table. Dinner was the time when we would share about our day, express our opinions on current events or talk about just about any topic that anyone chose to bring up. We all had the opportunity to express our thoughts and opinions and we were often at odds with each other. We didn't always listen to or respond to each other in the most respectful way; however, what I did learn from these times was that it was okay to have a different opinion because at the end of the day I was still loved. I also learned to form more rounded opinions from listening to their different perspectives. I broadened my thinking as I gained more information and insight into things. As I grew older and was exposed to more beneficial ways of communicating, I improved my ability to listen and express myself more effectively. My ability to dialogue grows and is enriched each time I consciously enter a dialogue, The more I use it the better and more refined it becomes; it is an on-going process that requires continual practice. Each dialogue changes me, in small or momentous ways, forever.

When you think about dialogue in this way, it makes you realize how little time most of us spend in dialogue, particularly with those we work with. If we want to work in a healthy, productive environment that supports individuals to be their authentic selves, expressing their thoughts and ideas in an open respectful way without fear of reprisal, we need to create a sense of safety. This safety can only come with the courageous willingness on all our parts to dialogue.

