



PUBLIC DIALOGUE

Dialogue is a model of communication that promotes understanding, clarity, and plurality. Differences are seen as achieving a fuller vision of the whole. Dialogue, when grounded in the concept of *meeting* as it was understood by Martin Buber: to speak our truths and respect others--requires us to hold our ground *and* stay open to the influence of the other. We do not give up our own perspectives or experiences, but are asked to bring out assumptions, expand the inquiry, and suspend judgment. Choosing to participate in dialogue is to accept several principles that exemplify good will:

- ◆ Listen with respect, to all equally
- ◆ Speak for yourself truthfully
- ◆ Bring assumptions into the open
- ◆ Suspend judgment and reaction
- ◆ Expand the inquiry/ Ask questions

Hannah Arendt cites the work of Carl Jaspers in identifying “the good will to reveal and to listen as the primary condition for all human intercourse...” Dialogue, while it cannot fully equalize the roles we may play in our daily lives: parent, teacher, boss, counselor, child, student, employee, patient, etc., can offer a space to disengage from hierarchical patterns of relationship. Differences in our abilities to speak about our own experiences, thoughts, and feelings may evoke class, race, gender, ethnic, and age disparities. It is therefore necessary to have a reference point to determine whether or not to participate in dialogue. The decision to enter into dialogue depends on the presence of good will both in oneself and others. Dialogue built on good will allows the formation of what Buber called “a community of otherness” where a third alternative emerges (in addition to I-It and I-Thou). This alternative links the individual and the community--in essence, creating an I-We relationship in which each takes responsibility for the group.

As technology has evolved from the discovery of fire to the splitting of the atom, human beings have learned to divide and separate things. Shared assumptions or prejudices which we mistake for truths, are often passed down through the generations in our families and cultures. While we understand the inevitability of preferences and the need to catalogue and classify things, we can at the same time recognize that this form of knowledge has often severed connections to relationships and historical context. According to theoretical physicist David Bohm, suspending preconceptions does not require us to suppress reactions but instead to acknowledge them so that they can be seen by self and others.

Our education system (at its best) teaches us the skills for debate--to articulate and defend a position and persuade others of our point of view. It is the form of public discourse with which we are most familiar. Those successful in debate are often the spokespersons for social and economic organizations and government institutions. While debate supports the democratic ideal of free speech, dialogue promotes plurality, a collaborative exploration of issues in which each person is seen and heard. “Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction.” Hannah Arendt, *THE HUMAN CONDITION*, 1958.

“On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of the ‘between.’” Martin Buber, *THE WAY OF RESPONSE*, 1966.