

Deep Dialogue - Saying What We Mean and Doing What We Say

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The problem of human conflict, wrote Jewish philosopher Martin Buber is that people do not say what they mean, nor do they do what they say. People are not usually consciously inconsistent. Instead, they act on a host of assumptions about which they themselves are often unaware. Paradoxically, conflict can provide an opportunity for developing greater insight and consistency.

Deep dialogue between parties in conflict can go a long way to helping bridge the gap between intentions, words and deeds. In the “Sayings of the Fathers” it is written that a hero is one who transforms an enemy into a friend. This is the art of peacemaking. Such transformation can occur in deep dialogue when conflicting sides’ are able to clearly state what is important to them and why and further, after careful listening, articulate the other side’s core values, hopes and fears as they have heard them. A rhetorically simple but potentially profoundly powerful question at the core of deep dialogue, ideally asked of participants to one another, is “Why do you care so much? Why does this matter to you so deeply?”

This kind of dialogical dynamic is nicely illustrated in a message for the Jewish New Year in 1988 placed by the Jewish Theological Seminary in *The New York Times*. The text appeared as follows:

“Things happened. We both experienced them. You saw them your way – colored by experiences of your past, or by resentment or impatience. I saw them my way – colored by fear, by pride, by the fact that I am myself and not you.

So our memories of what happened were very different from the start. And then, before we knew it, memories hardened into myths and myths into dogma. Now we find ourselves divided. We stare across the chasm, but we don’t see each other.

I’m tired of being alone on my side of the chasm. I’m using up so much energy fearing and resenting you. Sometimes I wish you and I could crack the dogma, peel away the mythology, and trade memories.

What would it be like if we could see each other's pictures of the history we share? If we could see each other? What we need here, you and I, is a little humility and a lot of house cleaning.

Humility: to say 'Only God sees history whole and knows the whole truth. All I have is my perception. It's valid, it's precious, but it's fragmentary. Maybe I ought to try seeing as God sees, from all angles.'

Housecleaning: Memory is selective, and I'm carrying around years of slanted, narrow memories. I can't see past them. It must be the same for you. What we need to do is let some of them go. Trade a few. Listen. Maybe, if I ask you how things look to you, between us we'll see something we never saw before."

The dialogical approach to conflict can provide disputants with the opportunity to both clarify their own deeply held needs and values and to the other as at least partially similar to themselves. It can help to "unfreeze" opponents' assumptions that the other is an eternal enemy to be destroyed at best, or at least forever constrained and contained. It enables parties to see that adversaries, like the self, are deeply motivated by shared human needs and values and that unless these are fulfilled, antagonism and even violence will be perpetuated.

Thus as disputants more clearly articulate what they mean and explore together how to act consistently, new possibilities for viewing their conflict in inclusive terms emerges as a rigid "us/them" split recedes. Parties may begin to see that "we" are in this conflict dynamic together and only together can we get out of it. Thus enemies may truly become allies and eventually friends.