

The Choice of Dialogue

by Louis W. McLeod, Ph.D.

Dialogue in its many varied forms breaks the symbiosis with which we all live. Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., founder of Imago Relationship Therapy, has acknowledged Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, as one of the sources of his thought. Buber saw dialogue at the heart of the I-Thou relationship or encounter. Paul Mendes-Flohr, writing about Buber's vision of how the I-Thou encounter could affect the hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians, describes Buber's vision of "a radically new mode of discourse." According to Mendes-Flor, Buber thought that the Jews and Palestinians must "tell their respective tales-relating their history, with all its woes and hopes . . . while acknowledging and compassionately confirming the tale of the other." This dialogue would acknowledge "that the other who confronts us, who 'encroaches' upon our life, also has a tale, a story perhaps no less compelling, certainly no less real, than one's own to tell." The process of the Jews and Palestinians together finding a way to live in the same region of the Middle East has begun with the two sides talking to each other, although the process of dialogue in Buber's meaning may take another century. Breaking the symbiotic bond is not easy in any situation!



Questions raised about the proper use of dialogue in solving differences between partners in a couple have caused me to consider the conditions under which dialogue will be effective:

1. There must be a certain level of safety for true dialogue to occur. Often this means that one "side" must bring down the level of confrontation unilaterally, as in a unilateral cease-fire in the Mid-East or when one partner begins to mirror. I believe that safety is necessary not only to quiet the Old Brain but also to provide a platform of stability from which to jump into the unknown terror of being truly intimate with another person.

This is the reason I do not see couples together in which there is presently or recently occurring physical violence. We suggest that the violent partner look at the issues of power, control and violence alone until a commitment to nonviolence can be made. We attempt to screen out physically violent couples from the couples workshop because the violent partner may participate and appear to be safe during the workshop but possess neither the internal controls nor the commitment to nonviolence necessary to safely generalize results to the home setting. We will later welcome these couples into conjoint therapy when they have a track record of physical safety.

2. Dialogue is enhanced when there are relatively equal levels of power between the parties. The power differential between the parties needs to be addressed whether it is an actual or perceived difference. In the long run of history, the Middle East conflict will not be settled as long as one party has the power and control over Holy places of another's religion. A couple in which one partner has vastly more real or perceived power will have to address that issue before they meet Buber's description of dialogue.

3. Dialogue is most likely to be effective with increased levels of commitment to the relationship. In the committed love relationship or in marriage, the potential exists for the greatest opportunity for dialogue to bring understanding and changes from which healing and wholeness occur. However, we live with many other relationships offering different levels of commitment in which dialogue is useful or essential. I have great commitment with my best friend or close colleagues to dialogue and work through differences. However, with other people I may decide not to continue the dialogue because it takes more time and energy than there is commitment. Sometimes couples decide to end the relationship because the payoff for healing is too far away or the possibility for growth is too little. It can be an ethical stance of integrity to say "no" to dialogue when this limit has been reached. Not all dialogue will lead to healing and wholeness, although it may lead to understanding and clarity.