

What is a Dialogical Community?

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Imago theory has brought insights into the understanding of the modern, committed, intimate couple of whatever gender. Those same insights can be applied to communities that want to be dialogical. It is important to differentiate which insight applies to which structure.

The heart of being dialogical is containment and listening. Containment is where one stops reactivity (maximizing or minimizing) in order to be able to listen. Listening is very difficult work. One must quiet the need to either talk (maximize) or pull away (minimize) before one can really listen. Listening is when one decides to let in the perspective of the other and be impacted by what the other has to say. The degree to which one is willing and able to be impacted is the degree to which one will feel empathy. The listening needs to be done with the heart, not just mechanically, but with warmth and a deep desire to understand and let the meaning sink in. This containing one's reactivity and empathic listening to the other is fundamental to being dialogical.

What is the purpose of dialogue? The purpose of dialogue is not to solve problems, find agreement, or even to be happy. The purpose is to bring about two things: connection and differentiation.

First of all, the purpose of dialogue is to find connection. The problem between people is disconnection. The problem between parent and child is disconnection. The problem between an intimate couple is disconnection. The problem between colleagues in an organization is disconnection. The problem between nations between the East and the West, between an Arab and a Jew is disconnection.

The dialogue has the potential to put disconnected people back into connection. I think connection is often misunderstood. Connection certainly does not mean enmeshment. Connection does not mean agreement. It does not even mean that the two concerned like each other. But what we have discovered is that when two people are reconnected, they usually start liking each other. The behavior precedes the feeling. This is true of all psychological work. If one wants to change a feeling (which one does not have control over) one needs to change a behavior (which one does have control over). One can always decide to be dialogical. How does one go about it? By making a commitment to contain and listen. Both containment and listening are entirely within the control of an individual. You do not need someone to be cooperative with you to be dialogical. All you need to do is to be willing to contain your reactivity and to listen.

It is very attractive to be a non-reactive listener. People will lower their defenses and will become less reactive in your presence. They will feel connected with you. They will start liking you.

The second purpose of dialogue is differentiation. The reason why we are disconnected from others is that we need others to be like us. We need them to see the world the way we see it. We need them to believe in God like us. We need them to have the same politics as us. We need them to behave like us and to have the same values as we do. We need them to be us! This is what we call symbiosis. We tend to push and pull others so that they will be more like us. This is the antithesis of listening. The cure to symbiosis is differentiation, that is, where you can let someone else be different from you. You can let go of the need to make them like you, to think, behave, and believe like you. The only way to differentiate is to be dialogical, that is, to contain and listen and validate their perspective different as it might be from yours. The only reason why listening is so hard is because the person you are listening to is so different from you. It is easy to listen to someone who believes like you. But it is hard to listen to someone who has different ideas while holding them in high regard.

So, how can all of this help us define what is a dialogical community? It is a community where everyone is well-differentiated and feels connected. Why do they feel connected while being differentiated? Because they are listened to with respect and validated in their different positions. Listening and validation brings about connection and differentiation.

Can a family where parents have more control than the children be a dialogical community? Yes, if the parents empathically listen to the children and let them have different opinions.

Can a “for-profit” organization be a dialogical community? Yes, if the members empathically listen to each other and let themselves be impacted by each other with respect for differing opinions.

Can a “nonprofit” organization be a dialogical community? Yes, if the members empathically listen to each other and let themselves be impacted by one another.

So the key to the community becoming a “dialogical community” does not lie in the way it is structured, but in the way it behaves internally. It does not matter whether it is hierarchical or socialistic. It does not matter if the relationship is a marriage or a boss and employee. To be dialogical is to contain and listen with warmth and respect for differing opinions. And if you do that, you will have a dialogical community, meaning you will have connection and differentiation which will result in a well-functioning community.

A well-functioning community contains a mixture of advisory units and equal-say units within the context of a well-structured hierarchy. Hierarchy is necessary for efficiency and quality control and to know who is responsible for doing what. But regardless of the structure, it can always be dialogical.

The insight that Imago theory brought to us is that modern intimate couples are now equal members of a dyad and not in a hierarchy with each other. The intentional dialogue is the vehicle through which equality and differentiation are ensured, connection is made, and healing and growth are nurtured.

In a community, members have equal dignity and worth but are not necessarily equal in intelligence, insight, and skill. (Imago theory posits that within the intimate couple, there is equal intelligence, wounding, and desire to be on the journey. The unconscious selection process of romantic love ensures this.) From Imago theory it is important and even imperative that the community becomes a Dialogical Community.

How does the Imago Faculty get there? Does it need to agree first before it can succeed? I don't believe so.

If you want to become a Dialogical Community, only you, the reader of this paper, must decide to contain and listen - listening with your heart. It means to listen with respect and be willing to be impacted by the thinking of others and validate all different opinions.

Can the Imago Faculty become a Dialogical Community? Yes — — it can and it must.

This paper was written on November 27, 2001, while Bruce was Dean of the Master Trainers but was never dispersed. It was found in Helen's files in Feb. 2024. Bruce was the first Dean of the Imago Faculty from 2003 to 2005 and retired in 2017.

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