FEATURE ARTICLE

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Finding a Shared Meaning:

An Interview wit

Linda Teurfs is an organizational consultant specializing in team building, interpersonal communication, and leadership. She has over 17 years of experience in corporate planning, marketing, and consulting. Her focus since 1991 has been the development and facilitation of dialogue, a group communication process based on the work of the late David Bohm (whose book **On Dialogue** *is reviewed in this issue of* **Seeds***). Dialogue can be useful in diversity work, organizational change efforts, visioning, problem solving, conflict resolution, community building, organizational learning, continuous process improvement and more.*

I interviewed Ms. Teurfs in the hope that her work and experience could help us all learn more about the communication process.

J: Linda, could you give us an idea of what dialogue is?

L: Let's look first at the Greek roots which may be helpful in discovering the meaning of dialogue. *Dia logos* means "through meaning." So dialogue is very much about creating meaning between us, which implies understanding. The Greek roots of discussion, in contrast, mean "to fragment." For instance, the same roots are in "concussion" and "percussion," meaning a breaking apart or fracturing. What we do in discussion is to break things down into pieces. You take one stand or one position and defend it rigorously. I take another stand or position and defend that rigorously. So we are all kind of holding our ground and battling it out. On the other hand, in dialogue, I might share the meaning I have about what we are talking about.

An analogy is that we create this pot of soup between us. I might put into the pot some carrots, and you might put in some chicken. Then you might put in some peas, and we cook this soup for a while. After we dialogue for some time, we come to share on very deep levels. We create what David Bohm called *collective meaning*. It is more holistic. What we have begun to create is a larger picture, instead of looking at tiny pieces. It is very much based on a systemic view of the world, a holistic view.

J: You mentioned David Bohm. Who was he?

L: David Bohm was a quantum physicist by profession, who in later years began to have dialogues with Krishnamurti, the great teacher and philosopher. They spent quite a bit of time together. David Bohm is known for his holographic view of the Universe in which an implicate and explicate order is conceived

Reflections on Dialogue

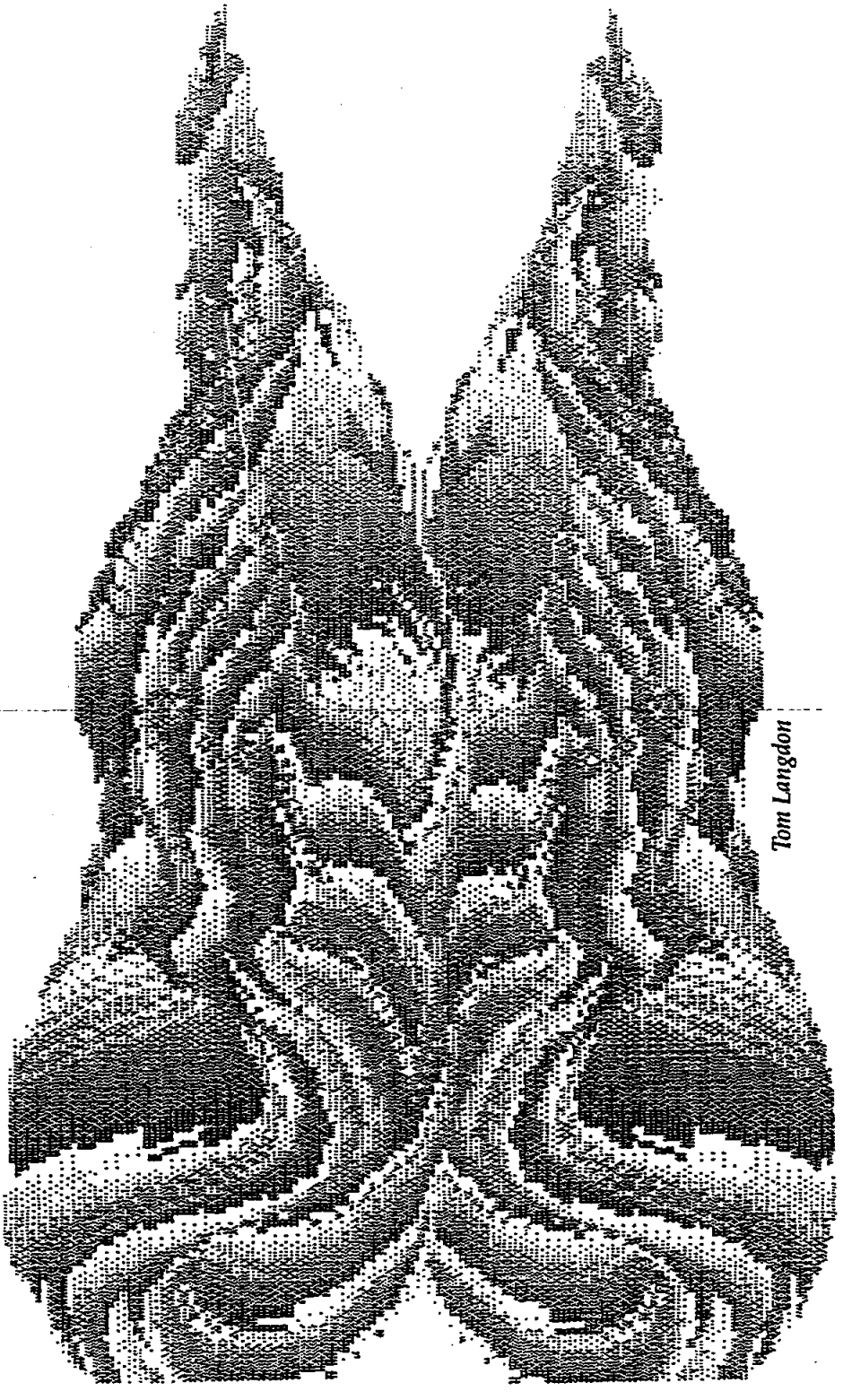
Linda Teurfs

by Jeanne Weiler

He explained, in the terms of western scientific culture, what many spiritual people believe about the Universe. There is a manifest and an unmanifest world. Through dialogue, we can help make a bridge; we can help make explicit what is implicit. Krishnamurti stimulated Bohm's thinking about dialogue, and there are several books published on their dialogues. In them Krishnamurti represents the spiritual viewpoint, while Bohm represents the scientific. It is very interesting.

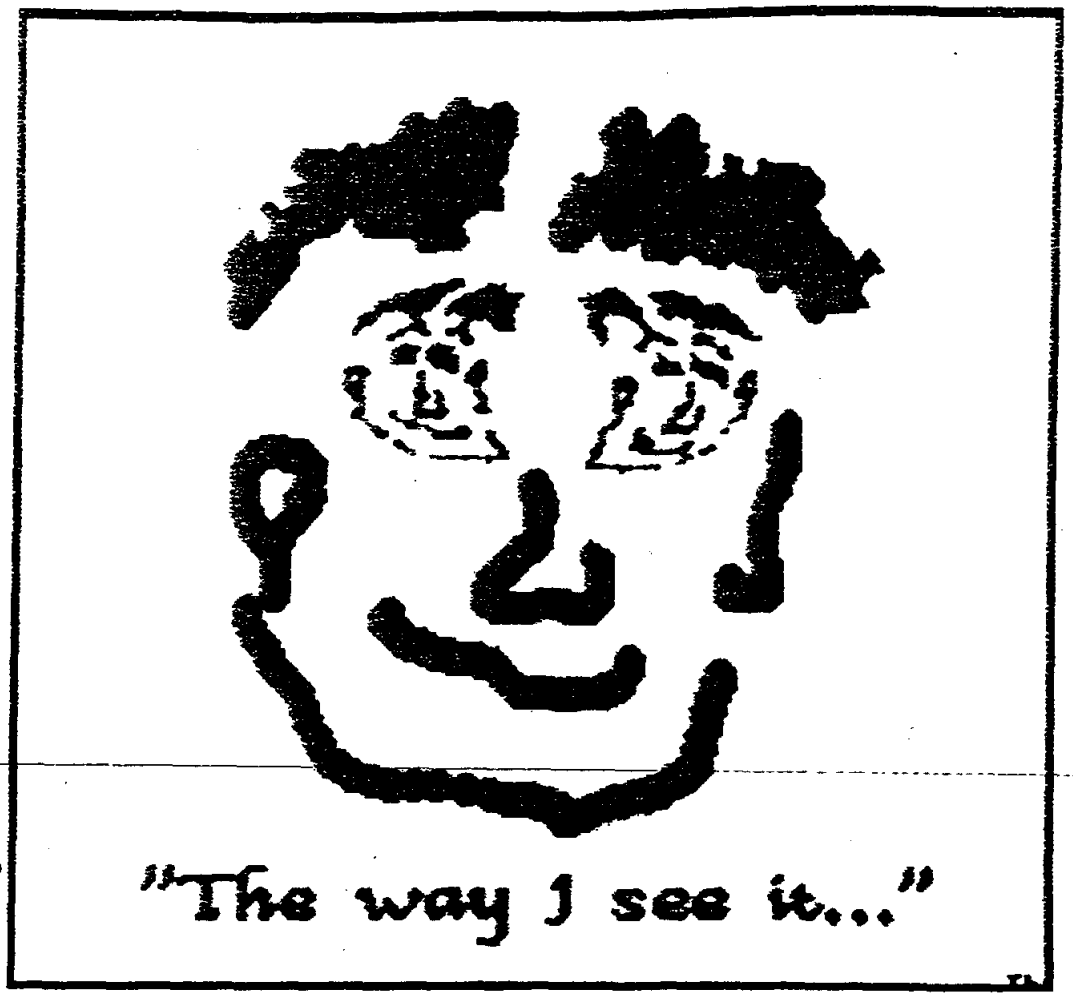
J: How did you get started, then, in your work with dialogue?

L: I've been an organizational consultant for about seven years. I do a lot of work with groups: team building and communication and leadership training. What I often find is that it is easy to make short-term improvements in how a team operates, but six months later, much of the improvement dissipates. People go back to old patterns of interaction. What drew me to dialogue was that it can be used in an ongoing way. This is what makes it completely different from other processes.



Tom Langdon

A short definition of dialogue is that it helps to create a collective meaning around what is trying to happen in the present moment.



Tom Langdon

J: Would you say that this helps people communicate better?

L: Yes. It serves a number of purposes. People learn better communication skills by practicing the guidelines for dialogue that we give them. Frequent dialoguing changes the attitudes we hold about one another. We come to respect individual differences more and to deepen our trust in each other. Dialogue stimulates the surfacing of issues. Often as a collective, we don't surface personal or sensitive issues. We don't come together routinely to handle group maintenance. Every group needs to handle its issues or they will come out eventually as gossip or full-blown crises. Dialogue helps to surface things early before they become problems.

Dialogue is also about self-facilitation. It is based on the concept that we are all leaders and that the role of the facilitator can shift. Once a group is trained in the skills and guidelines of dialogue, the consultant doesn't have to stay in the picture. The group members can facilitate themselves. All I do as a consultant is model the skills and guidelines. Once they feel comfortable using them, they no longer need me. They incorporate them into their own way of relating.

J: It sounds really useful to tap the resources of the people involved. You mentioned guidelines or skills. What do you actually teach to facilitate dialogue?

L: The skills are centered around four building blocks. One is *suspension of judgment*. We use a didactic model of the human thinking and communication process which shows why we get into habit patterns of speech. The ego identifies with the assumptions we hold which are expressed by these patterns of speech. But the habits of expressing ourselves can get us into trouble if we are identified with them. Our communication is based on how we think. Because we think in a fragmented way, we then talk in that way. We are attached to our thoughts and assumptions, and then we get into trouble. The concept of a witness is developed which allows us to suspend judgment. The concept of the witness helps us not to be so attached to what we are saying. Suspension of judgment is not saying that we can't judge, because we are always going to judge. That is how the mind works. But we are going to hold the judgment very softly, so that we can hear each other.

I am going to talk about each of the four building blocks, but you will notice how they all lead into each

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other. *Listening* is another building block. You can't listen deeply, unless you hold your assumptions and your judgments loosely. As a building block, listening is not just about listening, but is a deeper level of listening. It's making sure, by using certain techniques, that we have heard each other: paying attention, focusing on the moment, not getting lost in our own head trips. The training is about bringing awareness to these skill areas.

The next building block is about *identifying one's assumptions*. It can be thought of as peeling an onion. Because of the way the mind works, there are different levels of understanding, and we tend to make inferences and generalizations on skimpy evidence and then assume we are right. We don't hear each other. We get into problems with our communication. There is a wonderful technique developed by Chris Argyris from MIT called the Left-hand/Right-hand Column Technique. People focus on what they remember about a conversation that did not go well. They take a piece of paper and fold it in half. On the right-hand column they write as much as they can remember of the conversation: "He said this," and "I said this," and so forth. On the left-hand column, they put what they were thinking, feeling, wanting to say, but didn't say. What comes out of this is quite a revelation. Usually in the left-hand column are insults, judgments, accusations, and assumptions. Why do we hold them back? Usually it's due to fear. "I'm afraid how the other person would respond, how they would react." "It would be an insult." "The relationship would be shattered." What are the consequences? The consequences are that, I never clear these things up, I never have a meeting of the mind. I get stuck. I end up hating the person. Really looking at the consequences gives people a lot of motivation to change. It is a very powerful exercise.

J: Yes, if you can lay everything on the line, you are conscious.

L: It's incredible. Every time I have a misunderstanding I find I do make these mistakes. It's amazing all the things I was thinking that I didn't say. If I had just bothered to test a few of my assumptions, it probably would have cleared the whole thing up. Of course, it is one thing to reflect on it, and another to do it at the time. What the exercise does is to help you begin to change your belief system about the assumptions you hold. It's a learning process. People learning to dialogue aren't able to do it perfectly the first time.

J: And the fourth building block—what is it?

L: The final building block, *inquiry and reflection*, is a really important one. It means slowing down, giving yourself time to actually take something that has been said and do two levels of reflection on it. One is to do an inner reflection on it, to get clear what it means to you. And that simply takes time. The other level of reflection work is to actually come back out with a question to the other person based on your inner work. This might take the conversation to the next level. We can really make some incredible breakthroughs as a group, because dialogue is all about finding the next level of understanding. You can't do that if you are rutted in your fixed, reactive patterns. That is what usually happens in discussion, because you hold your ground relentlessly. It is a circle rather than being a spiral. We think of dialogue as being a spiral upwards and that's kind of where the unfolding comes in. Again, what we are trying to do through the inquiry and reflective process—which is where real creative breakthroughs can be made—is to bring in the implicit. We discover what's trying to happen here between us, so we can break new ground, so we don't keep seeing something the same old way. We are not able to get out of the chaos, unless we can put the whole thing together in a new way.

J: It sounds very encouraging for new solutions to old problems. Do you choose a specific topic on which to dialogue?

L: You can come together to dialogue about only one thing, and that can be a very rich dialogue. I've done many groups where there is a problem and we have dialogued about it. Pure Bohmian dialogue would not be restricted to one topic only. The thing that makes a dialogue a dialogue is that we can have a subject, but we cannot have a fixed outcome. The second you have the need for a fixed outcome, it's not a dialogue. The reason is that you have some manipulation of the communication process. The implicit cannot become explicit. We are trying to get to some decision or cover an agenda that has already been pre-established. That's the main distinction between dialogue and other forms of group communication.

J: If you don't come together to solve something, what is the purpose of dialogue—simply to experience communication?

L: The purpose of dialogue is to create shared meaning. A short definition of dialogue is that it helps to create a collective meaning around what is trying to happen in the present moment.

J: Are the people who dialogue different after learning how to do it? What do you feel would be the implications of more people being able to dialogue?

L: One of the biggest reasons I was drawn to dialogue was that I realized its transformative value. I don't think people who really make an effort to dialogue can leave unchanged by it. It's about being who we are with each other in a totally different way. In dialogue, we no longer come from a place of wanting to convince or inform. We come with the intention of understanding. This is very different.

J: Does everyone involved have to follow the rules to dialogue? Can you, for instance, go out and talk with anybody, even though they don't know about dialogue?

L: That's a good question. Personally, I know my experience with dialogue has changed how I interact with people. It's been quite useful. But I have found that people new to dialogue can become frustrated when interacting outside their dialogue group. Other people do not understand what the dialoguer is doing, and they respond in a way that the dialoguer does not expect. When you understand that not everyone else knows how to dialogue, the inquiry and reflection skills can still help you personally. They can help make your questions able to elicit the responses that lead to understanding.

J: How does dialogue differ from group therapy or a conversation between any group of people?

L: In group therapy, the intention is personal growth In dialogue personal growth may happen as a result of my simply sharing myself with you, and your sharing yourself with me. I may come away expanded personally in my own understanding of myself. The main intent in dialogue, however, is not about personal growth. It is to learn who we are as a collective and to develop collective understanding.

The Twelve-Step Programs, such as those found in A.A., for instance, are similar to dialogue. There is a suspension of judgment and people share at a very deep level. That's about the only place in society today that, in a formal way, one can participate in anything close to a dialogue.

J: It seems to be healing for the individual as well as the group.

L: It's very healing. We are used to having relationships, one-to-one relationships; we're used to being in the family unit; we may have groups of friends, but we really don't have collective forums for learning how to be together in any way other than the small, one-to-one relationships. We don't have any experience of being in community. Dialogue is about seeing our personal issues as part of the larger community in which we take part. Patrick de Maré, a British clinical therapist, likens dialogue to social therapy.

J: For you to solve your own thing, you also need to solve your relationship with everyone. In a group there are solutions.

L: That's right. Society in the West is hierarchical. In dialogue, our relationship is one of equals. We a able to examine our underlying cultural assumptio on how we operate collectively. We can remedy the abuses caused by the power of inequality and hiera chy. When I think you are better than I am becau you are in a higher role than I am, I get resentful. I build up hatred. I build up all kinds of things. In dialogue, we are able to step back and examine a lot what Bohm calls the cultural "incoherences" abo the way we are together. Then we take the shared understanding out and it transforms us, because w both see how crazy it is. Roles get in the way.

J: Dialogue is helpful in this case because everyone in the group can receive feedback from everyone else. The feedback opens the members of the grou to a deeper communication beyond the cultura points of separation. The shared guidelines of dialogue seem to help the group to work together. I that right?

L: Yes. Dialogue creates a double loop. We learn techniques which help us dialogue and this creates a kind of culture. As we dialogue, we examine how we are in th culture outside the dialogue. In this way, we can trans form our relationships and the external culture.

J: I can see how that could have an effect on people of different cultures coming together. When the get together in dialogue, they create a culture amon themselves, because they have a shared meaning. That could be useful.

L: Absolutely. Dialogue can be useful in handlin issues of diversity. Within organizations today, many issues revolve around diversity. Diversity is about learning to handle conflicts and about communicatin with understanding and sensitivity. Dialogue is perfec because it provides a field in which people can explore and understand their differences. They also learn som skills which can help them outside the dialogue.

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J: You work with groups of people to teach them to work together. Do all dialogues work? What d you do when a dialogue falls apart and turns into argument, or does that ever happen?

L: Sometimes a group might fall back into a discus sion. Someone becomes attached to his opinion an unconsciously starts to stand his ground. At any time during the dialogue, someone can say, "It seems you are very attached to your opinion. Is this true?" Or i the group seems to be falling into discussion, some one might ask to have a moment of silence. This slows the group down and usually helps them to sta in dialogue.

After an hour-long dialogue, we allow a ten to

twenty-minute period for reflection on the dialogue. During this reflection period, we ask questions like "Did this feel like dialogue?" "Did anyone notice if there were times in this session together that we weren't dialoguing?" "And why was that so?" "What happened?" So we learn as a group how to dialogue as we go along, recognizing that there will be times that we may fall out of it.

J.W.

At any time very intense personal and emotional matters might arise. Dialogue might feel like it is falling apart. Someone might start yelling because he or she is angry. We are beginning to explore ways in which we can work with the emotional states that certain conflicts bring by taking the people who are in conflict into the center of the dialogue circle. We allow them to have the conflict. We learn about and support each side. Then we go back into the dialogue and search for the larger meaning of the conflict. "What was the argument all about and what was its implicit meaning for the whole group?" We have found that to be a very powerful way of taking what could have been a yelling match and allowing it to come back into meaning by focusing on it.

J: It must help all people participating, not only the ones who are in the conflict.

L: Oh, it does. Usually what happens is that everyone comes to an understanding of both sides of the argument, because we all have both sides within us. It is not about winning, it's about learning.

J: What is the fundamental purpose of dialogue groups?

L: The purpose is the collective meaning which is created. We suggest that dialogue can be used for transforming the culture within an organization or a group. In organizational settings, it can be difficult to convince executives and managers that they should take the time necessary to dialogue. In a busy day, who has an hour or two to have free-flowing conversation with no purpose? It sounds terrible: the minute you say "no purpose," we all ask, "Why are we doing this?" In this Western culture, if we don't have an outcome, my God, what are we doing? The fact that we don't have an agenda doesn't mean that the dialogue doesn't have a purpose. What top managers are wanting to do right now is to create cultures, environments, climates within their organizations that empower people. Dialogue is extremely empowering.

I recognized the only way that you are going to make change in an organization is through some ongoing process. Dialogue does this by working at the behavioral and attitudinal level. It is ongoing, so as people do it, they are transformed over time.

First there must be an awareness of the need to change. Many organizations are not at that level where they know they need to make changes. Those organizations which are aware that their culture isn't working, that it's win/lose-oriented and destructive of their employees' morale and right livelihoods, are looking for something. They might try skills training or team building. Just as I was finding, this might be useful, but because it is not ongoing, the skills are not practiced and integrated. If you really want to change the culture in an organization, you have to combine skills with belief and attitude changes. You can only do this through a process approach, through recognizing over and over again that something is not working in our collective behavior. We are all social creatures. We do not form strongly held beliefs and attitudes alone. Usually they were handed down to us through the culture, so if we examine our cultural beliefs and assumptions together, we have a much greater possibility of changing them. That's the magic of dialogue.

J: That's beautiful. What, then, is the difference between dialogue and conflict resolution?

L: Conflict resolution, the traditional model, is where you look at both sides. It is discussion or debate oriented, more win/lose-oriented. I am trying to convince you I'm right, and you're trying to convince me you're right. It is pitting two fixed positions against the other with a mediator. The mediator tries to let both sides fully disclose their position so the common ground is worked out. Unfortunately, what happens is that a dependency on the mediator develops. For a common ground to be a lasting solution, the members need to do what the mediator is doing. That may take a little bit longer, so that is why people will use an outside mediator.

J: I can see how dialogue would be a technique that gives more opportunities to grow in real communication and understanding of others. At the same time, it can create new ways of being together. Does dialogue have any connection with democracy?

L: Yes, it has. A concept related to dialogue, coined by Arnold Mindell, a Jungian analyst, is called "deep democracy." Deep democracy is about allowing each of a group's parts to be expressed. Until that happens, we have an exclusive understanding or agreement. This means we are not including some role or some part of the whole. As long as those fractions are not included, we do not have a holistic solution. That is why the world is still so fragmented. Dialogue may take longer, but it develops deep democracy which is a more lasting approach to building political and social consensus. It is all inclusive.

The other notion about deep democracy is that it is in line with Bohm's idea of a holographic universe. You realize that each individual person represents the whole. You realize that while I may seem very different from you and you different from me, we are all an integral part of the whole. All you're doing is showing me another side of what is within me. The notion is fascinating. If I'm really annoyed with some aspect of you, I can then try to see how I have repressed that part of myself.

We were talking about what people do when they start to see how really different they are. As long as they have the old notion that difference is bad, then it is hard. If difference is bad, we don't want to see our differences. Our level of conversation is on the surface. We put on a happy face and ignore our conflicts and differences. But if I believe (through the dialogue experience) that our differences are going to help me become a more whole, more integrated person, then I start to look at them differently. I start honoring your uniqueness. I start to say, "Oh, that's in me too. I never knew that about me. How interesting." And it gets me more in touch with who I am and my wholeness which is in relationship with the group.

J: That's an expansive concept.

L: It's not an easy one to understand. When we have been taught something is good or bad all our lives, it is the hardest thing for us to think of the bad as good. In dialogue there really is no good or bad, it just is.

At some level we are like machines. We have stored memories and habit patterns that are really hard to break, such as the ones that say "this is good and this is bad." It can be frustrating until you realize that it is possible to make changes through a process approach such as dialogue.

J: The process is exciting.

L: It can be deeply satisfying if done consistently over time with the same groups. While I've worked for years on my own issues, I have felt alone. Change is hard. When you realize that everyone is working on change together, that it is shared, it doesn't seem so lonely.■

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