The Path of Contemplative Dialogue: Engaging Collective Awareness

Steven Wirth

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Preface

What we refer to as the practice of Contemplative Dialogue is a synthesis of the work of many people from many fields. Taken together, this mix of theory, skills, and values produces new possibilities for understanding and engaging relationships, communities and organizations with depth, compassion, and effectiveness.

This manual is a work in progress. It is intended to be a descriptive tool for those learning this work. It describes some of the basic elements that undergird Active Engagement, and brings them together in what we hope is a distilled yet accurate way.

We attempt to clearly identify theoretical sources when we base elements on the material of others. We choose to describe the approaches of those who clearly capture particularly important details. Even though we identify particular source thinkers, in most cases there are others who point to the same realities using the language and theory of their different professional or cultural fields. The fact of this ‘redundancy’ is an assurance that what is being described here has a universal quality that is not limited to a particular profession or belief system.

We think it points to a common wisdom and experience of what it means to be human and to seek to live together mindfully.
**Seeing the Group Mind**

Contemplative Dialogue has effectively assisted both groups and individual leaders in engaging the ‘Collective Mind’ of their organizations. It has also been effectively used in working with informal groups and creating a deep experience of community where division or separation may have been the felt starting point.

Insofar as the process of Contemplative Dialogue works with what is most essential about the human person, it requires no explicit language or particular belief system to be effective. It makes no effort to ‘change’ or ‘fix’ participants. Rather it assists them in touching what is most central and trustworthy in their human experience, and speaking of it with deep integrity.

From this common ground, groups and individuals both find new awareness and freedom to create the lives and organizations they aspire to.

*Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals that can go it alone [from Never Eat Alone].*

- Margaret J. Wheatley

*I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles; but today it means getting along with people.*

- Mohandas K. Gandhi
The Practice of Contemplative Dialogue  
An Experiential Introduction

What is Contemplative Dialogue, and what real use does it have?

Recall for a moment the experience of waking up this morning. If you were at home, perhaps you looked around a familiar room and maybe even recognized a familiar person sleeping next to you. You went through your morning routine, perhaps making breakfast, checking your e-mail, showering, and dressing for your day. If you left your home, you began to see familiar neighborhood and maybe even neighbors that you know. If you used your car, you drove on familiar roads past familiar scenes. Depending on how long you’ve lived in the area, it may seem as well known to you as the proverbial back of your hand.

But look at that experience with fresh eyes. As you moved through your home in the morning, think of all the ways in which you are interacting with complex realities that you may or may not understand well. Not to be mysterious here, but most of us depend on a local power company to provide the energy that heats, cools, and powers our homes. Others maintained and provided complicated energy systems that allowed your light switch to react in a familiar way when your fingers found it. The coffee or tea you may have prepared had been grown, shipped, processed, packaged, and touched in hundreds of ways you may never even think of.

This ‘blindness of the familiar’ doesn’t just affect you. It affects all of us humans. The family members we awaken to may be such long-standing companions that they have become taken for granted, familiar to the point of having lost their mystery.

Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it. 
- Ferris Bueller

How many of our close friends or family members know us that well? While being known and understood may be part of our intimate relationships, we may still recognize places in our lives where we remain a mystery to ourselves. Alternatively, we may feel that those around us have limited their understanding of us in ways that miss what feels essential about whom we are.

Despite the familiar visual aspect of the neighborhood outside our door, we literally plunge into an unknown universe almost the moment the door opens. How many of us have physically even been inside the homes of our neighbors? Do you really have any idea what life may be like beneath its external appearances for those around us? Think of how often we are surprised to hear of difficulties we never imagined happening in the lives of people we thought we knew well. Imagine for just a moment the incredible diversity of family, culture, relational practices, concerns, hopes and dreams that lie hidden in the people we pass every day.

With every step we take, or distance we drive, the mystery and the unknown reality grow in magnitude. As we cross invisible lines of economic, ethnic, and regional differences, the mystery expands to mind-boggling proportions. The comfortable habit of feeling that we 'know' the people and things that surround us may even make it impossible to consider the preceding
questions with much felt seriousness. Yet we personally experience the depth of misunderstanding that exists in our world whenever we read a newspaper, listen to accounts of life at work or church, or hear friends describe their closest relationships. Most of us know the deep longing we have to be understood deeply and fully without fear of ridicule or judgment.

Richer awareness is not merely an individual exercise or some philosophical flight of mind. Most of us don’t need another theory in our lives, what we need are concrete ways to communicate and to live more effectively with the people around us. Contemplative Dialogue is an attitude and practice of being attentive and open to the mystery of life around us in a way that allows us to know it more intimately, more productively, and with far richer understanding. It is a way of being in relationship to the ordinary reality about us that makes available not just the visible and material qualities, but also the less tangible depths that lie hidden beneath mundane appearances.

![The worst is not death but being blind, blind to the fact that everything about life is in the nature of the miraculous. - Henry Miller](image)

The challenge both individually and organizationally is to first awaken awareness, and secondly to cultivate it so that we can increasingly draw on this power. There are many starting points and the situation and application will suggest how best to engage this process.
The Stance of Contemplative Dialogue

Contemplative Dialogue consists of three interrelated ‘stances’ or ‘practices.’

I. Contemplative Noticing or Mindfulness

What we do not notice, we cannot freely respond to or choose to engage. Developing clearer awareness and understanding of personal mental and perceptual filters is a foundational starting point in this work. A variety of tools and frameworks for clarifying both interior and exterior perceptions are presented in this text.

What is essential in this practice is that we discover more of the Real, not merely as I define or interpret it. This stance requires a humble quality of inquiry and openness to ‘see more’ and be open to being informed by new or further understanding, information or awareness.

**Contemplative Noticing:** “To take a long, compassionate look at the real.”

II. The Nondefended Learning Stance

We naturally and necessarily learn ways to fit in, protect and advance our interests, and get along in the human community. Some of these learned ways of engaging are, we assume, ‘defended’ social and individual strategies insofar as they limit our freedom of decision and choice as individuals and groups. When defended stances are at play, our ability to productively, efficiently, peacefully work with others is hindered.

The Nondefended Learning Stance is a way of thinking about, acting and engaging others in ways that support individuals and groups to overcome these powerful limiting behaviors. The core of this stance is a commitment to support free and informed choice, a commitment to the truth and collective commitment to the common good.

III. Nonviolent Engagement

At its highest level, Contemplative Dialogue develops a consistent ability to relate with and to the collective mind of a group. The regular practice and discipline of this stance will assist groups and their members in working toward the common good while achieving the quality of group safety that allows fundamental problems to be solved. This stance provides the commitment to authentic presence that deep group freedom and learning require.

Nonviolent Engagement assumes that we are deeply interdependent, and have an effect on one another. It assumes that in organizations and communities actions that undercut or damage portions of the organization have a detrimental effect on the full capacity of the system to perform well and achieve their missions.
Freedom and Awareness

The practice of Contemplative Dialogue is based on a particular understanding of the way in which human consciousness develops. This developmental pattern is seen both in individuals and groups. A first assumption is that being human is more than just the sum total of the details of our daily lives. The distinctive element of human consciousness is that despite our finite limitations we nonetheless have the ability to make choices that create the person we are to become.

We as humans are painfully aware of the many limitations we experience every day. Yet if we stop and reflect, we may recognize that each and every day we make choices that shape who we are and who we will become. Although we don't always recognize it, we have a good deal of freedom. In a surprising number of ways we are free to make choices about how we respond, whom we relate with and the way in which we do the things we do.

Subjectively, we may not feel very free. We feel like we "have to go to work" or "have to take care of the kids". We may feel like our emotional reactions are largely beyond our control. We become used to responding in particular ways to particular situations. Cut off in traffic, I may habitually respond with anger. Yet beneath the comfortable and familiar responses we often work out of, most of us know we actually have choices about the ways in which we respond.

And though the relative degree of freedom we choose with may be limited by individual factors such as intelligence, psychological profile, and by cultural and educational factors, the possibility of choosing to respond in slightly different ways is a freedom that we possess. Even the addict, who may have little control over his or her addictive behavior, can nonetheless choose to recognize the very powerlessness of their situation. The choice to recognize that reality is itself an act of freedom.

The quality of our freedom is also limited by our habitual ways of noticing, thinking, and behaving. We may sleepwalk through our day, with little awareness of the choices we're making. Even the way in which we think about those free choices may blind us to the possibilities. In U.S. culture, we persistently hear free choice defined as making a consumer choice. So our understanding of freedom may become focused on whether I drive an SUV or a smaller car, or dress conservatively or more trendy.

Explicitly, we use the framework described by German thinker, Karl Rahner. Rahner distinguishes between two realities or poles of our consciousness. The first he calls the subjective pole, and describes this as the ever present sense of "I," the moment to moment experience of myself as conscious person or subject. The second he calls the objective pole. This objective pole consists of our collective self-descriptions, categorizations, and our self-judgments. This pole consists of any conscious or unconscious attempt to capture or define the elusive reality of present centered awareness that is the subjective pole. No matter the limitations or judgments we objectively make, he nonetheless points out that it is the subjective person who in the very act of naming limitations already demonstrates an awareness that exceeds those finite limits.

Rahner goes on to suggest that this continual self-transcendence and ability to create ourselves in our accumulated free choices demonstrates the reality of the human spirit. Other philosophical approaches use different language, but still point to a similar reality.

It is this common ground or collective awareness that Contemplative Dialogue seeks to engage and make manifest. This collective mind is accessible in any moment and via any person. It does not depend on the use of particular language or belief systems, but rather on a
process that engages the depth and capacity of any human person or group. It can therefore be used appropriately in the workplace, on the street, or in any relational setting.

Rahner’s Understanding of the Human Person

Collective mind or awareness reflects not merely, the sum of the individuals gathered, but the deep conscious and unconscious wisdom and tradition of the group. It consists of both that which is articulated, unarticulated, and that tacit or unknown reality which nonetheless is present. By maintaining a focus on the collective mind of the group, dialogue is able to draw on the strength and resiliency of a group's common ground. This stance reflects a deep awareness of the reality of our interconnectedness across distance, across time, and across perceived divisions.

Although it is not necessary to hold spiritual or philosophical beliefs to be part of the Contemplative Dialogue process, the practice nonetheless is grounded in the assumption that all humans share a common ground. That despite the finite limitations of intelligence, education, and cultural influences, human persons have the capacity, by their intentional exercise of free
choices, to create who they become, what values they contribute to the world, and thereby together the future reality that the world will consist of. Even at a completely concrete level, we recognize that the choice between acting with violence or compassion implies vastly different possibilities of future outcomes and responses on the parts of others. Hence the remarkable power of the nonviolent U.S. civil rights movement, which mobilized a nation to overcome tremendous obstacles and resistance to the basic practices of integrated society. How very different our current reality would be had those many choices been for violent resistance. Perhaps we see the difference in the current state of Israel and Palestine.

The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another and all involved in one another.

- Thomas Merton

Process Values

What distinguishes Contemplative Dialogue from other contemporary approaches is melding the ancient Contemplative traditions of awareness and attention to the real, with current theory on dialogue. This synthesis in practice adds a depth and consistent ability to touch the collective mind of a group, or more to the point our collective human awareness.

Group members are often able to touch the collective mind of the group because of the process values that undergird the Contemplative Dialogue practice. Focus on these process values is another way to support combining theory with action in real time.

- Trust in the basic unity of human people and all life.
  A foundational process value and assumption is the fundamental unity of all humanity. We assume that while differences and divisions are real at many levels, the deepest reality is of a common unity and ground that connects the human family.

- Gandhian Nonviolence: Nonviolence in presence, word, and action.
  Contemplative Dialogue accepts the message of Gandhi and King that while violence and force may be quicker, in the end they fail to fundamentally resolve problems. Only solutions that respect all parties, and invite them into the solution are capable of long-term and lasting resolution.
  We further assume that the practice of true nonviolence (in thought, word and presence) creates a dynamic openness in communities and systems that is both creative and deeply healing. This spirit of Gandhian nonviolence overcomes the fundamental dualities of human thought that doom efforts at 'good communication' that demand no change in the participant. Nonviolence has great power provided it really witnesses to truth and not just to self-righteousness.

- Commitment to seeking truth with compassion and humility.
  We assume that each of us witnesses to the truth as best we are able. We point to truth 'where' and 'as' we've experienced it. If a particular philosophy or religion has led me to a
deep experience of truth in my life, I may likely assume that others will find truth in the same place and fashion. My attachment to particular language, imagery, or descriptive ideas may blind me to others' attempts to describe what may be common in our experiences.

• Commitment to speaking truth with compassion and humility. My ardent desire to share truth as I've experienced it may unintentionally lead me to forcefully attempt to convert others to 'my experience.' My insistence on 'preaching' a good value, motivated by my deep love and concern, may do more to harden others in positions of opposition.

Telling the truth with compassion challenges me to first recognize what the core experiential values or truths are behind my ardent positions. It then requires me to speak to that meaning, and then trust that the common truth in what I share will eventually touch others and connect with the truth within them.

The practice of 'telling the truth with compassion' is an act that has profound consequences for those attempting to do so as well as those who hear it. This form of truth telling has nothing in common with the safer practice of 'telling the truth politely.' Politeness leads to avoidance, white lies, and defensive work-arounds. Compassion on the other hand, is an act of deep solidarity and commitment to others even though at times it can feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

*The truth never hurts a just cause.*

– M. Gandhi

• Respect and support for participants' freedom and self-determination. This value demands that the process reflect and embody a commitment to participants' freedom of choice and self-determination. It assumes that anything less is coercive and will fail to honor the sacred being and becoming that each of us is.

Beyond mere tolerance or individualism, this commitment demands a mutuality and involvement, a willingness to engage so that free choice is informed and enhanced by intentional relationship.

• Willingness to risk suspending the rush to action. The stance of Contemplative Noticing, 'taking a long, compassionate look at the real,' trusts that without this 'watchful suspension of action' we are doomed to sustain past patterns of interaction. The power of looking with a 'beginner's mind' creates the necessary openness and possibility of true freedom and mindful action.