

RELATIONSHIP DIALOGUE DECALOGUE

Ground Rules for Dialogue

While the "Dialogue Decalogue" revised by Leonard Swidler on which this is based was originally written primarily to further inter-religious dialogue, **it has been adapted here to help people in relationships to overcome difficulties arising from the diverse perspectives and value systems they bring into them.** Its aim is to help build bridges and find common ground in which a healthy relationship might grow

The Relationship Dialogue Decalogue

Dialogue is a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that s/he can change and grow. This very definition of dialogue embodies the first commandment of dialogue.

If we approach another party to either defeat them or to learn about them so as to deal more effectively with her or him, or at best to negotiate with him or her. If we face each other at all in confrontation--sometimes more openly polemically, sometimes more subtly so, but always with the ultimate goal of defeating the other, because we are convinced that we alone have the absolute truth we are indulging in debate and not dialogue.

But dialogue is not debate. In dialogue each partner must listen to the other as openly and sympathetically as s/he can in an attempt to understand the other's position as precisely and, as it were, as much from within, as possible. Such an attitude automatically includes the assumption that at any point we might find the partner's position so persuasive that, if we would act with integrity, we would have to change, and change can be disturbing.

We are here, of course, speaking of a specific kind of dialogue, a relationship dialogue. To have such, it is not sufficient that the dialogue partners be in a relationship, that is, are married, living as married, engaged or simply dating. Rather, they must come to the dialogue as persons, significantly identified with the other but ready to put aside their own needs and wants, at least for a time. They must be ready to listen, without judgement, to the thoughts and feelings as expressed in words and body language by the other person in the relationship. They must be prepared to accept that healing the relationship may not necessarily lead to reconciliation, although that might occur, but will lead to both parties, through a better understanding of the others' needs and wants, to being able to live together in love or part company with love.

How, then, can we effectively engage in a relationship dialogue? The following are some basic ground rules, or "commandments," of relationship dialogue that must be observed if dialogue is actually to take place. These are

not theoretical rules, or commandments given from "on high," but ones that have been learned from hard experience.

FIRST COMMANDMENT: The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly. Minimally, the very fact that I learn that my dialogue partner believes "this" rather than "that" proportionally changes my attitude toward her/him; and a change in my attitude is a significant change in me. We enter into dialogue so that we can learn, change, and grow, not so we can force change on the other, as one hopes to do in debate--a hope realized in inverse proportion to the frequency and ferocity with which debate is entered into. On the other hand, because in dialogue each partner comes with the intention of learning and changing herself, one's partner in fact will also change. Thus the goal of debate, and much more, is accomplished far more effectively by dialogue.

SECOND COMMANDMENT: relationship-healing dialogue must be a two-sided project-within each relationship partner and between their immediate and wider families. Since the primary goal of dialogue is that each partner learn and change himself, it is also necessary that each participant enter into dialogue not only with his relationship partner -but also with his family to share with them the fruits of the relationship dialogue. Only thus can the whole family eventually learn and change, moving toward an ever more perceptive insight into reality. The dialogue with family would follow after the results of the relationship dialogue were realised by the significant partners in the relationship.

THIRD COMMANDMENT: Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity. It should be made clear in what direction the major and minor thrusts of their needs and wants are, what future shifts might be, and, if necessary, where each participant has difficulties with specifying or articulating their needs and wants. No false fronts have any place in dialogue.

Conversely--each participant must assume a similar complete honesty and sincerity in the other partners. Not only will the absence of sincerity prevent dialogue from happening, but the absence of the assumption of the partner's sincerity will do so as well. In brief: no trust, no dialogue.

FOURTH COMMANDMENT: In relationship dialogue we must not compare our ideals with our partner's practice, but rather our ideals with our partner's ideals, our practice with our partner's practice.

FIFTH COMMANDMENT: Each participant must attempt to and must be allowed to define him/herself in terms of feelings. Only a man/woman feeling downtrodden, for example, can define what it means to feel downtrodden. The other can only describe what it looks like from the outside. Moreover, because dialogue is a dynamic medium, as each participant learns, he will

change and hence continually deepen, expand, and modify his self-definition as a down trodden, being mindful to share the changing feelings with wider family. Thus it is mandatory that each dialogue partner define how they feel.

Conversely the other party must attempt and become able to recognise him/herself in the interpretation. For the sake of understanding, each dialogue participant will naturally attempt to express for herself what she thinks is the meaning of the other parties statement; the partner must be able to recognise him/herself in that expression.

SIXTH COMMANDMENT: Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are. Rather, each partner should not only listen to the other partner with openness and sympathy but also attempt to agree with the dialogue partner as far as is possible while still maintaining integrity with his own values. Where he/she absolutely can agree no further without violating his own integrity, precisely there is the real point of disagreement--which most often turns out to be different from the point of disagreement that was falsely assumed ahead of time.

SEVENTH COMMANDMENT: Dialogue can take place only between equals. Both must come to learn from each other. Therefore, if, for example, one party views the other as inferior, or if one party views the other as superior, there will be no dialogue. If authentic relationship dialogue is to occur between the parties, then both must come mainly to learn from each other; only then will it be "equal with equal,". This rule also indicates that there can be no such thing as a one-way dialogue.

EIGHTH COMMANDMENT: Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust, which must be built. A dialogue among persons can be built only on personal trust. Hence it is wise not to tackle the most difficult problems in the beginning, but rather to approach first those issues most likely to provide some common ground, thereby establishing the basis of trust. Then, gradually, as this personal trust deepens and expands, the more thorny matters can be undertaken. Thus, as in learning we move from the known to the unknown. So in dialogue we proceed from commonly held matters, which, given our mutual ignorance resulting from possibly years of misunderstanding and possibly hostility in the relationship, may take us quite some time to discover fully--to discuss matters of disagreement.

NINTH COMMANDMENT: Persons entering into relationship dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their wants and needs. A lack of such self-criticism implies that one already has all the correct answers. Such a righteous attitude makes dialogue not only unnecessary, but even impossible, since we enter into dialogue primarily so we can learn--which obviously is impossible if our belief is we have never made a misstep, if we think that we have all the right answers. To be sure, in relationship dialogue one must stand by personal values with integrity and

conviction, but such integrity and conviction must include, not exclude, a healthy self-criticism. Without it there can be no dialogue--and, indeed, no integrity.

TENTH COMMANDMENT: Each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner's perspective of reality "from within"; for the partner's perspective is not merely something of the head, but also of the spirit, heart, and "whole being," individual and communal. It is a "passing over" into another's life experience and then coming back enlightened, broadened, and deepened.

Areas of Operation

Relationship dialogue operates in three areas:

1. the practical, where we collaborate to help cope with the everyday problem arising from relationship breakdown e.g. child care;
2. the deep or "spiritual" dimension where we attempt to experience the partner's feelings "from within";
3. the cognitive, where we seek understanding and truth.

Phases

Relationship dialogue also has three phases.

Phase One - we unlearn misinformation about each other and begin to know each other as we truly are.

Phase Two - we begin to discern values in the partner's life perspective tradition and wish to appropriate them into our own. For example, by drawing on a partner's newly recognised gift for thinking things through the other partner might learn to be less impulsive. If we are serious, persistent, and sensitive enough in the dialogue, we may at times enter into phase three.

Phase Three - here we together begin to explore new areas of reality, of meaning, and of truth, of which neither of us had even been aware before. We are brought face to face with this new, as-yet-unknown-to-us dimension of reality only because of questions, insights, probings produced in the dialogue. We may thus dare to say that patiently pursued dialogue can become an instrument of new "re-velation," a further "un-veiling" of the reality of the relationship on which we must then act.

Differences in Phases

There is something radically different about phase one on the one hand and phases two and three on the other. In the latter we do not simply add on quantitatively another "truth" or value from the partner's tradition. Instead, as

we assimilate it within our own self-understanding, it will proportionately transform our self-understanding. Since our dialogue partner will be in a similar position, we will then be able to witness authentically to those elements of deep value in our own perspective that our partner's perspective may well be able to assimilate with self-transforming profit. All this of course will have to be done with complete integrity on each side **with each partner remaining authentically true to the vital core of his/her own values.** However, in significant ways that vital core will be perceived and experienced differently by the other under the influence of the dialogue. However, if the dialogue is carried on with both integrity and openness, **the result will be that, we each become more than we were,** whilst remaining essentially true to ourselves.