

The Path of Contemplative Dialogue: Engaging Collective Awareness

Contemplative Dialogue

*The following guide is part one of a series of processes that accompany the Contemplative Dialogue Manual, **The Path of Contemplative Dialogue: Engaging Collective Awareness** developed by Steven Wirth, Founder of the Centre for Contemplative Dialogue.*

What is Contemplative Dialogue?

Contemplative Dialogue is a way of being not a program.

It 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 a far richer understanding.

Contemplative Dialogue is about awakening the collective spirit.

It is finding shared meaning out of deep understanding of the human person; how we respond to life's situations; how we come to a greater understanding of our community and ourselves. It helps create the quality of noticing that supports expanding both our personal and communal awareness and freedom.

As we explore this practice, it is helpful to focus on the meaning of both contemplative and dialogue. For many of us, contemplative implies living in a cloister, being separated from the world. For others, it is associated with the heights of mysticism. At its simplest, **contemplative** means taking "a long, loving look at the real." Sister Nancy Bauer, OSB from St. Benedict's Monastery breaks open contemplative by going back to its Latin derivation. She states, "The word contemplative: 'contemplare' means 'to look at,' 'to look hard at,' 'to regard,' 'to notice,' 'to observe,' 'to consider carefully.' A 'contemplator' is one who 'observes,' who 'studies,' who 'examines.' A contemplative is one who looks long and hard at something. The 'something' in Contemplative Dialogue is reality. The 'something' in Benedictine monastic life is also reality – the reality of God, the reality of one's self, the reality of each Sister in the community, and the reality of the world. In fact, I would describe monasticism as 'a lifelong loving look at reality' because it takes that long – it takes a lifetime to wade through the fog of fear to the sheer reality of God's love, to see through our self-pretenses to the awful and wonderful naked truth about ourselves, to see past our prejudices and preconceptions to the joyful mystery of each Sister, to see the whole sacred world as Benedict saw it, 'in a single ray of light.'"

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Dialogue means through the word. Finding shared meaning in lieu of discussion which comes from percussion, hitting against.

By embracing Contemplative Dialogue as a way of life, we choose to embark on a journey that is intentional, counter-cultural, and that clearly calls us to embrace inner transformation and conversion.

Starting the Journey

As a starting point, it is helpful to reflect on how we humans gather and store experiential information so we can then use it to make sense of things. Karl Rahner, SJ, a German Theologian, suggested that we have an amazing capacity to translate experience and store it as memory we can then pull on when needed. Rahner names this the 'objective pole of human awareness.'

An image that is helpful here is one of a file folder. For example, imagine creating a file folder on someone you have just met. You attach a snapshot of what the person looks like. You might get their name straight and add it to the folder. As you speak with the person, you add additional descriptive information, characteristics... 'She is intense, has sad eyes, is happy, tall/short, thin/heavy, quiet/shy, she talks a lot.' You meet the person the next day and you are able to access the file folder and remember key things about the person and their story. This is a tremendous gift.

We create and carry theoretical file folders (incarnational theology, family systems, capitalism, and new cosmology); we have folders on being Catholic; being monastic. We have practical file folders such as how to drive a car, cook a meal, and make a bed. We have emotional and relational file folders that guide how we respond in relationships.

These folders help us navigate through life, and this ability is powerful. Over time, we accumulate significant material and information that we carry in these folders.

This 'information' that we gather is actively created as we translate experience and in a sense transcribe it into these mental notes kept in our file folders. Rahner calls this objective awareness, because it consists of these 'mental objects'. **The power of objective awareness** resides in its capacity to inform and guide our actions. For example, driving a car; fixing a dinner; teaching a class, responding to a friend).

A danger of objective awareness is that we carry perceptions of others (file folders that hold information on self or others) that can be old, outdated or simply wrong. For example, impressions others formed of you as a young sister going through a rebellious time; a very different person than you are today perhaps. Limited by these outdated folders, we can misperceive others and ourselves. Worse yet, I may relate with my 'idea' of who you are rather than the real person. We put others and even ourselves in "boxes" without

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consciously choosing to do so. When this happens, I may begin to treat you as though I have you all figured out. In a sense I can deal with you as an 'object' I have 'captured' rather than the sacred free person you are. What Rahner describes as the 'Sacred Mystery' each human person truly is.

Objective awareness is a great capacity for us as humans; but used without awareness it can be dangerous in that some of the information is accurate while some is misperceptions and wrong judgments. For example, if I am walking down the hall and Patty passes me without speaking I might naturally feel ignored. I might think, 'who does she think she is? That's the second time she's done that to me.' My file folder on her adds a new message: Patty is rude and downright aloof.

Probably the largest file folder you have is your own. Pause for a second and think of the messages in your file folder. For example:

*Pause and sit in the quiet and touch into your essence
(The me of me) your authentic self—your sacred mystery.
Thank God for this awesome gift of SELF.*

1. How do you describe who you are?
2. How do you describe what you do?
3. What have people told you over the years about yourself?
4. How do you describe the kind of family you come from?
5. What is your description of your personality type?
6. What is your ministry or profession? How is it perceived in community?
7. What other information have others told you about yourself that you haven't filtered out but have taken in as 'truth'?

Look deep in your file folder – what have you put in it? Is there anything that needs to be taken out and dusted off, gotten rid of? Is there new information that you need to add?

As we all know, this is not the full reality of who we are. There is another place of our reality, a deeper and quieter place. Rahner calls this the **subjective pole of human awareness**. It is the self that is the true essence of a person. It is the true self that is more than just one's accidental qualities (objective descriptions). Here the person is full and free. It is the place within us where we are most alive and touched by the Spirit. It is the place of the noble self, the authentic self. This SELF is sacred mystery.

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An assumption about why contemplation is so critical is that without contemplation all of our acts risk being slightly off target and disconnected from what is most real. Without contemplation, we cannot accurately perceive what is real. Even our best choices miss the mark because they fail to see things as they truly are. They fail to perceive the whole. Without contemplation, we cannot notice the Spirit working within us.

To contemplate, to 'take a long, loving look at the real...' is to make a choice to see the more of whom you are.

Practice:

During the next few weeks, allow yourself to slow down and to notice who you have file folders on; what have you placed in those file folders; what is old, dusty information that needs to be discarded? Most especially take time to explore your own file folder and to clean it out.

We are blessed with the capacity and freedom to make choices. Yet the quality of our freedom is limited by our habitual ways of noticing, thinking, and behaving. We may sleepwalk through our day with little awareness of the choices we make. Even our perception of our choices can blind us to possibilities because we get trapped in our familiar and culturally ingrained ways of imagining them. Take this time to free yourself of unwanted, unwarranted, and old beliefs or perceptions about yourself and those with whom you live and work.

For more information on this foundational piece to Contemplative Dialogue read pages 1-11 in the Contemplative Dialogue manual.

The following is a poem that captures the essence of Contemplative Dialogue. It is by Dana Fauld.

One Soul

When we sit in a circle and grow still.
The energy of Spirit fills us.
Until we surrender to silence,
we stay on the choppy surface of the mind.
As the breath grows quiet, we go behind thought, beneath confusion, fear and doubt.
When we sit here in a circle and share truth, the mystery of speech
and listening transforms our separate energies into one being
-present and fulfilled