

The Path of Contemplative Dialogue: Engaging Collective Awareness

Contemplative Dialogue: Assumptions

*The following guide is part two 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.*

Part Two: Assumptions

Part One of this Contemplative Dialogue Series explored how we as humans gather and store information. The image of a 'file folder' illustrated how we gather objective data on another person or situation and how we can miss the sacred mystery of the other by not seeing their essence. Part Two focuses on how we can 'clear out' our file folders, update them – move with greater truth. To do this we need to understand how we humans process our experiences.

As humans, we make judgments, draw conclusions, and make assumptions a thousand times each day. For example:

- *I assume when I get out of bed the floor will support me.*
- *I assume from the smell emanating from the kitchen that someone is making coffee.*
- *I assume from the look on your face you are: angry, bored or surprised.*

Pause for a moment and ask yourself: What are you assuming right now?

Exploring Assumptions

To understand assumptions and their power, Chris Argyris, an organizational consultant, explains how we make inferences from our realities or make meaning of them.

It goes like this:

I make a judgment or an assumption about a perceived reality/situation in my life. “ I’m walking down the hall and I pass the Prioress and she acts as if she doesn’t even see me or she doesn’t make any connection...I tell myself that she is angry. What comes to mind is our last Chapter meeting. What happened? Well she really didn’t like my comment about the budget. In fact, she hasn’t talked to me since the meeting. I feel like I’m getting the cold shoulder; my

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feelings are hurt so I tell myself she doesn't want advice she just says she does, so I cut a wide berth around her.

Pause for a second and consider:

1. What am I assuming?
2. What am I associating this feeling with?
3. What meaning did I apply to this encounter?

If I checked out my assumption with her, what could be a different explanation?

1. She's late for a meeting.
2. She had to go to the bathroom. She had diarrhea.
3. She was pre-occupied.

When we don't check out our assumptions, we make judgments and then we act on them as if they are the truth. "I'll continually look for situations where I'm sure the Prioress is going to ignore me even if she isn't."

What are assumptions?

Assumptions are the stories we tell ourselves about a situation. They are habitual and instinctual. They are impacted by the filters that we put on situations and eventually they become our beliefs which aren't always true. Acting out of false assumptions negatively impacts ourselves, our work, and those who are meaningful to us.

Pause for a few minutes. If you have access to a computer:

- Go to the Internet
- Google: Youtube
- Search: Susan Boyle
- Click on: Susan Boyle – Singer – Britain's Got Talent 2009 (7:03 minutes)

Practice:

Watch the video clipping. Notice your assumptions about Susan Boyle and the judges as you watch the clipping. Pay attention to what you are feeling about her and the judges. Ask yourself, what triggered your assumptions? Where are they rooted within you? This is a prime example of what assumptions look like in a real situation.

Let's continue exploring assumption by using the *Ladder of Inference* developed by Chris Argyris. (See Handout)

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At the base of the ladder, we tap into a situation, an experience. Look around the room where you are. What do you see? What do you notice? What sounds are you detecting? There is a lot of stimulation in the room. Our minds can't handle it all so we select something to focus on.

Stop for a second, what in the room has captured your attention? When we zero in on something, we will add a personal or cultural meaning to the situation. These meanings serve as filters to what we see. We learn them at home, at school, in Church, during formation. We run our experiences through them.

A friend shared this story about a belief she has held over the years. Her mother told her that good, responsible, hard working women make their beds every day. Her roommate at college didn't make her bed at all. She actually assumed her roommate was a slob. Application of the filter... We can put this value on another person and not even know we are doing it if we don't slow down enough to see what is going on.

In this situation my friend drew a conclusion about her roommate. Because she didn't make her bed, my friend believed her roommate was a slob. That became her belief and she started to look for other situations about her roommate to confirm this belief. This is selective noticing.

Stop for a second, and ask yourself, what assumptions do you hold about your monastic community, about your family of origins, about being a member of the Catholic Church? Where are these assumptions rooted within you? Are they true?

Assumption work is important in our contemplative dialogue work. We all make assumptions about life, events and each other. We all have different perceptions as to what is going on. These assumptions can be true or not true. They can form a wedge between us keeping us from hearing each other let alone understanding each other. Assumptions happen in an instant. We need to slow down and take a long loving look at our reality in order to notice them. We need to ask ourselves where these are rooted and if they are still true. ***This is a good way to clean out those bulging file folders.***

Creating a Practice

During the next month, connect several times with two-three other people and form a practice group. As a group, take time to notice your assumptions about your life together in community. Share your assumptions with one another. Practice uncovering where you are on the Ladder of Inference.

- a. Have you drawn a conclusion about someone; about the community? Have you made a judgment about them?
- b. What triggered that judgment? Did something specific come to mind? (Name a concrete situation.)
- c. Where is that judgment rooted? Where did the judgment come from? (What personal or cultural meaning did you apply to the situation?)
- d. Check out your assumption for truth. This yields freedom.

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Meeting consistently over time for about an hour to share assumptions and to explore together what you are learning about yourself and your beliefs is rewarding. You slow down and live with more awareness.

Conclusion:

Remember – you have to slow down in order to notice assumptions and to become aware of your filters or biases. This awareness enables you to know your authentic SELF more clearly and to experience transcendent human freedom. In this place of freedom, you can choose who you want to be; how you want to function; the type of world you want to create. When you slow down, attend to the other and check out your assumptions and biases, you will be more open to see the sacred mystery in the other person instead of relating to their objective self. Relating to the other person's objective self can cause you to be violent; ignore the other; turn them off; and miss who they truly are.

For more information on this foundational piece to Contemplative Dialogue read pages 12-15: *The Ladder of Inference: Noticing our mind's rush past reality* in the Contemplative Dialogue Manual.

As the close of your gathering end with Dana Fauld's poem, One Soul, as a reminder of what Contemplative Dialogue is all about.

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

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Ladder of Inference

