

Dialogue Amidst Cacophony

(Le dialogue au milieu de la cacophonie)

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We live in an age of easy and rapid communication over a plethora of channels and devices. For someone who came to adulthood when telephones all had long wires connected to wall outlets, fax machines were just being introduced, and documents were still being typed with carbon paper on IBM Selectric typewriters, I am amazed by the volume and the velocity of communication today. While the quantity of our talk today is unprecedented, I am deeply concerned about the quality of our talk, particularly in view of the many complicated problems we face as a society. From text messages to Facebook posts to radio and TV talk shows to sophisticated marketing messages selling products and politicians, far too much of our talk appears to be meaningless, manipulative, or destructive. But that is not the whole story, for across the world over the past several years, an increasing number of people are engaging in conversations with a different quality- dialogue.

The story I want to tell involves a group of men. Five Jews and four¹ Muslims began meeting monthly in early 2007 to find common ground and build bridges of understanding. After a few months, the organizer and facilitator of the group decided that he would rather be a participant, so he invited me to serve as the facilitator. I happen to be a Christian, although my religious affiliation had nothing to do with my being selected as the facilitator.

Over the course of the next year, the group met almost monthly, including one overnight retreat away from the distractions of the city. Over time the men began to move from an intellectual discussion of issues to a more personal level of conversation. They began to open up with each other, sharing more of their personality as well as their strong beliefs. Their willingness to be vulnerable allowed each of us to see who they were as human beings. They described the moral values by which they lived their lives and in the process discovered their common ground. I remember the day when one of the members said aloud what most, if not all, had been feeling for some time. He told the others that, while he never would have thought it possible before the group began meeting, he now saw the other men in the group as real friends. The others quickly agreed that they had indeed formed strong bonds of friendship across a divide most all had thought impossible to bridge. There was a sense of celebration in the room. Then I said, "You have become good friends. That is clear. But the test of your friendship will be the next time violent conflict breaks out between the Israelis and the Palestinians."

That test came just a few months later, when heavy fighting broke out between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza on December 28, 2008. Our next meeting had already been scheduled

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¹ The group was initially balanced with five Jews and five Muslims but one of the Muslim men was transferred to a different city by his company

and occurred in early January as the fighting continued. As the members of the group assembled for a breakfast meeting at the home of one of the members, I felt the thick tension in the room.

As we sat down at the table, I started our conversation with an assignment. I said, "I know you guys don't particularly like the touchy-feely stuff, but I am going to ask you to do something." There was some nervous laughter and I continued, "I want you to sit in silence for two or three minutes and I want you to think about what you have come to appreciate about each of the men around this table. Then I want you to tell them." They did what I asked. One of the Muslim gentlemen started. He literally spoke to each man at the table, one by one, and described a positive character trait that each had displayed over the course of our many conversations and for which he was very grateful. Then the other men followed his lead. As they each spoke, I felt the positive energy in the room increase and the tension ease.

When they finished, I said, "Thank you. We are going to talk about what is happening today in Gaza but before we do, I have another question. How can we talk about it in such a way that we strengthen the fabric of the fellowship of this group?" One of the Jewish men immediately replied, "I don't understand the question." As I started to repeat the question, he interrupted, "No, Randy, I heard the question. I don't understand why you are you saying strengthen the fellowship. It is already strong." Then he turned to the other men, especially the Muslim men, and said, "I mean it. There is nothing you can say to me today about what is happening in Gaza that will make me quit being your friend." Other members of the group quickly affirmed what he said, although one of the men said, "I agree that our friendship is strong. But I think we should take Randy's question seriously."

He suggested that the Jews share their own narratives about why Israel is so important to them and that the Muslims share their narratives about the Palestinians. And they did. The Jews spoke, sometimes with great emotion of what the state of Israel means to them, even though none of them live there. The Muslims, none of whom are Palestinians, then shared their understanding of the Palestinian perspective on the conflict. After several had spoken, I told them that one of the keys to conflict resolution is to work to put yourself into the shoes of the other. I spoke of trying to see conflicts and other situations through the eyes of the other and attempting to feel what they feel. When I stopped, one of the Jewish men said, "I want to try to tell both narratives." And he did. He began with Israel from his own perspective. Then he began to describe the situation from what he thought might be the Palestinian perspective. When he finished, one of the Muslim men complimented him saying, "You got it right. There is nothing I would change in your Palestinian narrative."

Before the meeting concluded that day, the men talked about what had happened in the room that morning. They talked about the importance of stepping into someone else's shoes. They talked about how there had been a breakthrough that morning in their understanding of each other in reference to one of the most contentious issues in the world. A conversation about a very difficult subject that could have busted up the group had instead strengthened friendships.

I want to identify some of the qualities in their conversations that made this breakthrough possible. Their conversations were characterized by qualities of intention, attention, and connection of and between the participants that are not often present in the majority of our talk today. Let's break that down, starting with their intention.

The men of the Jewish-Muslim Dialogue Group did not come to the conversation with the intention to win; they came to seek, and even create, understanding. They came motivated less by self-interest and more by a positive intention to serve the common good. As they

began to talk to each other that intention, led to development of a deepening respect for each other not as Jews or Muslims, but as human beings.

Their positive intention and their growing respect led them to a different quality of attention. In most conversations about subjects that really matter, the participants listen only long enough to confirm their preconceived ideas about the others and their positions. We all do this. Once our biases are confirmed we quit listening and begin formulating our rebuttal. Over time, the men in the group began to pay more attention to what others in the group were expressing. They developed the capacity to listen and then responded with questions intended to help them understand the reasoning that led the others to their positions. This does not mean that they abandoned their convictions.

With practice, participants in dialogue become adept at holding their convictions in dynamic tension with other views long enough to create deeper understanding of the issues. Dialogue, therefore, reflects an unusual balance between advocacy and inquiry.² But dialogue is made more effective when the participants engage in a different, deeper kind of conversation, instead of always focusing on and talking about issues.

In generative dialogue, new connections are forged when people share their personal stories or narratives instead of only talking about the issues that may divide them. This happened for the men in the dialogue group. They said so that morning in January 2009 when they met as the violent conflict in Gaza was ongoing. They learned that they could be friends even if they disagreed on important issues.

As a facilitator and peacemaker, I have watched and listened as former enemies shared personal stories of their formative experiences and of their desires for a better future for those they love. As the stories are told, those who listen experience empathy with the speaker. Empathy is not sympathy or even compassion. Empathy is feeling the pain, the happiness, the emotions of the storyteller relived as he tells his story. The experience of empathy creates a connection between the listener and the storyteller.

As the storyteller perceives that the listener is empathetic, he realizes that the listener is now part of his story. If the listener also tells her own story, both have the opportunity to experience empathy with the other. Having joined each other's stories, they realize that they are both part of the same story. As such, they have the opportunity to write the next chapters of their story together. Whether they write a bad story or a good story is their choice but dialogue increases the probability that it will be a good story.

Dialogue that begins with shared narratives makes very thoughtful and respectful consideration of issues easier. As diverse perspectives are shared and deeper understanding is developed (over what is usually a series of dialogues), the imagination of the participants is activated and they envision the better future they would like to create. Having seen and described their preferred future, they can begin building it together.

Albert Einstein once said, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it." Today, we are faced by a plethora of large-scale problems. However, the vast majority of our talk reflects the same level of consciousness that created the problems. We need people to come together to engage in a form of conversation that has the potential of elevating our consciousness. We need to enable more people to come together

² This observation about balancing advocacy and inquiry is confirmed by Williams Isaacs, in his seminal work on dialogue, "Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together" (USA: Doubleday 1999).

with the intention, attention, and connection essential to activating their moral imaginations to envision and create a better future.

How to cite this paper

Electronic reference

Randall Butler, J.D., « Dialogue Amidst Cacophony », *Educatio* [En ligne], 4 | 2015. URL : <http://revue-educatio.eu>

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