

## Bringing Peace Into the Room



Last night, April 29, we had Daniel Bowling speak to us on communication, in what was an inspiring conversation on conversation.

Daniel is a mediator and trainer for the Alternative Dispute Resolution Program of the US District Court for Northern California in San Francisco and is the co-author & co-editor of *Bringing Peace Into the Room* (<http://www.amazon.com/Bringing-Peace-Into-Room-Resolution/dp/0787968501/>). He has taught mediation at several law schools and, following his own graduation from Harvard Law School, was on the founding faculty of Antioch Law School in Washington, DC. He also teaches widely on the intersection of mediation and meditation. He has practiced meditation and yoga since 1976, and started teaching both in 1983.

Many of us view mediators and negotiators as neutral third parties who can help resolve conflict because they are not personally or emotionally involved in the dispute. As the business world often puts it “they have no skin in the game.”

The idealized of this type of negotiation would be something like this:

Party A: “I’ll give you \$50 for it.”

Party B: “Not a penny less than \$100!”

Negotiator: “How about we split the difference, and agree to \$75?”

A: “OK”

B: “OK”

Negotiator: “OK”

However, to truly bring peace into the room, the mediator must be deeply involved and committed to a skillful and satisfactory outcome for all participants.

Daniel and his co-author, David Hoffman, were called in to attempt rescue of a long-standing spiritual community that had begun to shatter violently from the inside out. The community members, who had entrusted its leaders with their souls and spiritual well-being, felt they had been betrayed. A complex, multiparty conflict, involving over 200 claims, erupted over charges of serious, repeated sexual abuse and abuse of power by the community’s spiritual leader.

Daniel and David realized that the standard “let’s split the difference” approach was wholly inadequate for a group in its death throes. Instead, they took an approach inspired by Gandhi.

*Gandhi is often quoted as saying, “We must be the change we want to see in the world.” Our immersion in the conflict that embroiled the spiritual community called upon us to embrace change within as a necessary means to fostering change in the community. Out of the painful, difficult, but ultimately successful struggles of that community towards resolution, we learned first-hand how life-altering our work could be not only for the parties but also for the dispute resolvers.*

Far from being a dispassionate, neutral third-party, a mediator can be a powerful agent for change. As Goethe’s observed:

*“I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis is escalated or de-escalated, and a person is humanized or de-humanized. If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.”*

The ability of our inner state to affect change is also addressed in the opening verses of the Dhammapada (1-5), tr. Fronsdal.

*All experience is preceded by mind,  
Led by mind,  
Made by mind.  
Speak or act with a corrupted mind,  
And suffering follows as  
As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.*

*All experience is preceded by mind,  
Led by mind,  
Made by mind.  
Speak or act with a peaceful mind,  
And happiness follows  
Like a never-departing shadow.*

*“He abused me, attacked me,  
Defeated me, robbed me”  
For those carrying on like this,  
Hatred does not end.*

*“She abused me, attacked me,  
Defeated me, robbed me”  
For those not carrying on like this,  
Hatred ends.*

*Hatred never ends through hatred.  
By non-hate alone does it end.  
This is an ancient truth.*

Communication that reflects our inner state, that echoes it undistorted, is “true communication” or “authentic communication.” True communication leaves us changed, different from whom we are right now.

The Sufi mystic Rumi, calls true conversation *sohbet*. “First there’s prayer, and a step up from that is meditation, and a step up from that is *sohbet*.”

True conversation is distinguished by substantive content. The Vinaya (instructions to monks and nuns), states that all conversations should be true conversations and purposeful. In Chapter 12 of the Parivara, the Appendix to the Vinaya:

*Abandoning idle chatter, one abstains from idle chatter. One speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, and the Vinaya. One speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.*

What other types of conversation are there? In her book *Discourse Analysis* (<http://www.amazon.com/Discourse-Analysis-Introducing-Linguistics-Johnstone/dp/1405144270/>), Barbara Johnstone reviews conversation content and change.

*In addition to conventions about who can speak when, conversationalists rely on conventions (of which they are usually unaware) about how topics are introduced, changed, and dropped. Oddly, one way for a speaker to signal that he or she is going to introduce a new topic is to announce the opposite, by saying something like “Not to change the subject, but...” More commonly, however, topics in spontaneous conversation are “chained,” one giving rise to the next.*

Daniel refers to these type of conversations as “associative” conversation, rather than intentional or authentic. Associative conversations are not true conversations – they do not change us. *Conversation* comes from the Latin *conversari*, to turn about with; from *con* or *com*, meaning *together* or *among*, and *versi*, meaning to turn. Conversation literally means the act of turning about together among others. Authentic Communication can be seen as a willingness to be turned about with another, such that we, who are engaged in the conversation, come at last to see and understand another’s worldview, and perhaps even to be turned about by that worldview.

This is the type of conversation that Rumi calls *sohbet*, and that the Buddha calls the ideal for mediators. It is the opposite of idle chatter. In Johnstone’s book, she gives an example of chained, or associative, talk, as one type (perhaps, the worst type) of idle chatter, citing columnist Dave Barry.

### ***Passengers flirt with death***

BY DAVE BARRY

*I’m in an airplane, strapped into my seat, no way to escape. For an hour we’ve been taxiing around Miami International Airport while lightning tries to hit us. Earlier I was hoping that the plane might at some point actually take off and fly to our intended destination, but now I’m starting to root for the lightning, because a direct strike might silence the two women sitting in front of me.*

*There’s only one empty seat between them, but they’re speaking at a decibel level that would be appropriate if one of them were in Cleveland. Also, they both have Blitherers Disease, which occurs when there is no filter attached to the brain, so that every thought the victim has, no matter how minor, comes blurting right out. This means the rest of us passengers are being treated to repartee such as this:*

***First Woman:*** *I prefer a window seat.*

***Second Woman:*** *Oh, not me. I always prefer an aisle seat.*

**First Woman:** *That's just like my son. He lives in New Jersey, and he always prefers an aisle seat also.*

**Second Woman:** *My sister-in-law works for a dentist in New Jersey. He's an excellent dentist but he can't pronounce his r's. He says, "I'm afwaid you need a woot canal."*

**First Woman:** *My brother-in-law just had that root canal. He was bleeding all over his new car, one of those Japanese ones, a whaddyacallem, Lexit.*

**Second Woman:** *I prefer a Buick, but let me tell you, this insurance, who can afford it?*

**First Woman:** *I have a brother in the insurance business, with angina. He prefers a window seat.*

**Second Woman:** *Oh, not me. I always prefer an aisle. Now my daughter...*

Several other irritating occurrences follow, and Barry dreams of revenge:

*I'd become a legendary outlaw flight attendant. I'd hide in the overhead luggage compartment and watch for problems, such as people flying with small children and making no effort to control them, people who think it's cute when their children shriek and pour salad dressing onto other passengers. When this happened – bang – the luggage compartment would burst open and out would leap: the Avenging Flight Attendant of Doom, his secret identity concealed by a mask made from a barf bag with holes in it. He'd snatch the child and say to the parents, very politely, "I'm sorry, but FAA regulations require me to have this child raised by somebody more civilized, such as wolves." If they tried to stop him, he'd pin them in their seats with dense, 200-pound airline omelets.*

*Insane? Yes I'm insane, and you would be, too, if you were listening to these two women.*

We conclude that idle chatter is not skillful conversation. Thomas Zeldin, a fellow and former Dean at Oxford writes:

*(T)alking does not necessarily change one's own or other people's feelings or ideas...The twenty-first century needs...to develop not talk but conversation, which does change people. Real conversation catches fire. It involves more than sending and receiving information... The kind of conversation I am interested in is one which you start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person. It is always an experiment, whose results are never guaranteed. It involves risk. It's an adventure in which we agree to cook the world together and make it taste less bitter.*

So what is the nature of this kind of conversation? How do we distinguish it from ordinary conversation such that we can begin to recognize it and ultimately begin to generate it ourselves?

There are seven characteristics of authentic conversation.

1. Belonging to the conversation (a question of motivation and intention). Taking on the intention to develop authentic communication gives rise to the development of those qualities that enable us to bring peace into the room. (Right Intention in the 8 Fold Noble Path). Intention is present in every moment of consciousness, regardless of whether we are aware of it. When we are mindful of our intention before we act, we have the freedom to choose our action.

2. Acknowledging our common humanity and accepting all of who we are. Philo of Alexandria said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." Practice compassion and the other Brahmaviharas: loving-kindness, sympathetic-joy, and equanimity.
3. Giving up certainty and exploring the unknown with curiosity. Concepts block us from direct experience. To whatever degree you're locked into your concepts about the conflict in front of you, how it should unfold, how the parties should resolve it, to that extent you will fail to experience the actual conflict. Letting go of the story we create ABOUT what is happening.
4. Listening deeply and emphatically for the underlying fundamental issues in the conflict that integrate, rather than separate. Perhaps the deepest human need is to be heard and honored as simply another human being. Golden Rule: one reason we are so hard on others, rather than following the Golden Rule is that we've Very Hard on ourselves. Our internal, self-directed conversation is quite negative, punishing, self-destructive. So the first place to begin listen is to what you say to yourself about yourself.
5. Allowing the truth to emerge among us, through a process of truthfulness, rather than affirming "my truth." "Let me tell you my truth" is an oxymoron. Truth is not in me and not in you. However, the willingness to be truthful is what allows truth to emerge. Truthfulness is a process of facing our fears of communicating, moving past those fears, allowing ourselves to surrender into the conversation, and listening deeply to the other - developing our ability to interpret our own subjective depths.
6. Thinking paradoxically by adopting a "both/and" rather than "either/or" worldview is the foundation for reliably generating authentic communication. This is the key to authentic communication – otherwise our model is my view versus your view. "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." – F. Scott Fitzgerald.
7. Being in development—intentionally and mindfully. The essence of the Eight Fold Path (wise view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration) is being in development. Walking the Eight Fold Path, not to get somewhere, rather to have the path itself as the destination, to learn to be present in right here and right now. Live the life we are given, rather than the one we want. Development is impossible, until we accept and choose fully to be exactly where we are.

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart  
and try to love the questions themselves ...  
Don't search for the answers,  
which could not be given to you now,  
because you would not be able to live them.  
And the point is, to live everything.  
Live the questions now.  
Perhaps then, someday far in the future,  
you will gradually, without even noticing it,  
live your way into the answer.

rainer maria rilke

