



***Speaking, Listening, Responding, Hearing & Understanding:  
An Orientation to the Intra-actions of Dialogue<sup>1</sup>***

“Speak little, listen to much and keep your aims in mind.”

“Listen to the other side.”

Part I

Thank you for joining me in these uncertain, unjust, unsettling, and unusual times. My aim is to inspire you to have a sense of hope for our futures and for the world, and to consider how you might contribute through thoughtful, careful and respectful dialogue.

One summer on a trip to Italy I visited the ancient 12th century Court Chancellery in the small Italian town of Lucignano. The Chancellery was where justices made decisions about the town and people’s lives. Upon entering through an arched doorway, I noticed it was a special place – it had a stunning vaulted ceiling and frescos on the walls. I walked across the room to where the justices would have been seated and turned to look back at the arched entrance. My eyes immediately went to above the arch, and ‘wow’, on each side was a wall sculpture of two white angels blowing a trumpet, with Latin words flowing from them. The words were intended to remind the justices of their role,<sup>2</sup>: on one side, “*Speak little, listen to much and keep your aims in mind*” and on the other, “*Listen to the other side.*” These historical references to dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> My brief presentation at the International Summer Institute (ISI) 2020 Zoom, June 21, 2020. The ISI began in 1978 in Galveston, Texas as a weeklong intensive study workshop that Harry Goolishian and I hosted for 12-15 people. Each day we had several live therapy sessions and time for talking about concepts, and of course, lots to eat and drink at the end of each day. We soon began to host it in Houston, Texas. I continued the summer tradition after Harry died. In 1993, Sylvia London and her Grupo Campos Colleagues, Elena Fernandez and Margarita Tarragona, brought several people from Mexico to Houston. The idea to have the ISI in Mexico grew out of participants’ curiosity about Mexico. With one exception, the ISI has convened in Mexico for over 20 years.

<sup>2</sup> As translated in the visitor information pamphlet from Latin to Italian to English.

are as fitting today as they were then – as they called attention to speaking, listening, and intention. The words fit with my experiences of dialogic process.

Today, I will focus on what I think of as the generative aspect of dialogic process: the *intra*-related actions of speaking, listening, responding, hearing & understanding (Anderson, 2016). I want to speak to invite the other person to speak so I can listen to their story and respond to what I think I heard, and to understand what they want me to understand -- as best I can since I can never fully understand another person.

Importantly, I find these *intra*-actions of dialogic process can provide people the opportunity to speak and to listen to themselves -- uninterrupted, without judgment – perhaps as they haven't been able to do before. Nowhere is dialogue and acceptance of the other is more important than today in this incredibly sensitive and uncertain time - with the intense visibility of the tragic stories of inhumane racism and violence.

Dialogue refers to any means by which we communicate, express, articulate our meanings -- to understand our conversation partners and ourselves (Anderson, 2007). I want to engage *with* others in a mutual inquiry – carefully and thoughtfully inquiring with them into their story about a subject matter that is important for them. In mutual inquiry, we want to be spontaneously responsive to them as they tell their story, and not ask pre-structured questions, nor deliberately search for a solution or resolution, but together figure out something for consideration that they have been a part of creating, for instance, a satisfactory new meaning or a possible next step. Newness does not need to be big or dramatic, but that the other has participated in its creation and thus has a sense of ownership.

Our *ways of being* and *becoming* are critical to inviting dialogue that is more rather than less generative. This requires attention to things like presence, attitude, tone, timing, patience, carefulness, spontaneity, flexibility, not-knowing, uncertainty, mutuality, openness, relatedness, and appreciating and valuing difference.

The five (5) *intra*-actions in my title -- speaking, listening, responding, hearing, and understanding *intra*-weave to support an *ethical position of participation with* the other person. As John Shotter suggested, *intra* emphasizes that nothing (no thing) exists in separation from anything else, but exists *in relation to*. Or, as Gail Simon at the University of Bedfordshire suggests with the name of her publishing company *Everything is connected*.

As I said a moment ago: I want to speak to invite the other person to speak so I can listen to their story and respond to what I think I've heard and to understand as best I can. This is the way I participate in their storytelling and re-telling, and it is the process from which “newness” emerges. In other words, I must be an attentive and receptive conversation or dialogue partner. Combined, these *intra*-actions invite the other's presence, a sense of their feeling respected, and worthy of having a story to tell, being listened to, and heard. This begins to create a sense of *we*.

## Part II

### *Things that Matter*

For those who are familiar with my presentations and writings may have noticed that I have referred to “things to consider.” Recently, I decided that “consider” was too tentative and that “matter” is more declarative, thus fitting for what I want to convey – of critical importance.

I will first state a word, and then follow it with questions I ask myself. This is not a list of steps to follow, nor in any sequence. They are intra-twined *things that matter*—always present features of ways of being--when the aim is to create a relational and conversational space and process that is more rather than less collaborative and dialogical.

- **Aim:** Can *I* keep my aim in mind (as the Angels reminded the justices)? What do I want to accomplish? What is my intention? What do I want to say, why do I want to say it, what is my intent, and if I say it, what is the best time and way to say it? I want to carefully consider these questions because I want to offer a space of hospitality that is welcoming and respectful, and that signals I am a safe stranger who values them.
- **Knowing:** Can *I* avoid knowing, avoid feeling pressure to solve something, to change someone’s mind, or to have them agree with me? What does knowing risk? Knowing risks: that I will never have an adequate understanding of the other and their experience; putting me in a position of power; mistakenly, validating my own assumptions; and taking an evaluative stance regarding the story or person – e.g., is it true or not, are they lying or not. Most important, knowing risks stopping my conversation partner from feeling I value their story and from being able to continue tell it as fully as they might otherwise, and in their preferred manner. Shotter (2009) suggests that we cannot give another person a piece of information without insulting them until we have set up what he calls an *information giving* (I would say *information giving-receiving*) relationship with each other (p.31). Shotter also suggests, citing Gould (1998, pp. 79-80) that when we work from theories that produce methods for what we should do and say, we are being ventriloquists (p. 42).
- **Experience:** Can *I* avoid being haunted by the ghosts of my previous experiences (and knowing)? Can *I* be aware of when they are knocking on the door? Can *I* keep these ghosts from coming in the conversation?
- **Outcome:** Can *I* let go of focusing on and trying to control the outcome? Can *I* resist trying to persuade the other person to agree with me or to take the path I think they should take?
- **Interruption:** Can *I* let the other person speak without interrupting them? Can *I* resist comments and questions which veer them off their preferred storytelling path and continue to accompany them as they take the path they prefer?
- **Silence:** Can *I* permit and live with silence? Can there be time and opportunity for inner talk – *pauses* for each person, including me, to think about what we’ve heard, and consider a response?

- **Otherness**: Can *I* be open to the “otherness” – the difference – of the other? Can *I* be curious about the unfamiliar, but not in a judgmental, critical, or interrogative manner?
- **Imagine**: Can *I* imagine how the other person might hear my words, and experience and interpret my actions (for instance, my gaze, body movements, sighs)?
- **Attuned**: Can *I* be sensitive to the atmosphere my response creates. Can I not judge their response as something other than what I have invited, for instance, my tone, choice of words, attitude, or gestures?
- **Curious**: Can *I* avoid pre-structured questions in anticipation of pre-structured responses, or looking for certain answers? This connects with the tendency and risk of knowing which can prematurely close off unique understandings and future possibilities for both the other person and me.
- **Facts and details**: Can *I* pay attention to the other person’s lived experience and avoid needing facts and details that pre-knowing requires to categorize the other person and access an already made solution? In other words, the story’s content is not as important as its telling and re-telling with a conversation partner who listens with attention and interest and responds without judgment. In other words, moving from a focus on content, facts, and details to a focus on meaning.
- **Us/We**: Can *I* create a sense of *us* – a sense of *we* are doing this together? Can *I* think in terms of co-participants, conversation partners, or collaborators, and use collective/inclusive language?
- **Being present**: Can *I* be fully attentive, attuned, and appreciative? Can *I* allow the other person to be present? I want to keep in mind that they have something important they want to say, that they want me to hear and understand.
- **Caring**: Can *I* sincerely and honestly care about the other person as a valuable human being? Can *I* not think of them as the person *I* want, think, or judge them to be?

For me, what I have said today suggests dialogue as an *ethical position*. Of being engaged in the mutual inquiry of trying to understand the other person and their story, to signal the importance of their story, to allow it to make an impression on me, and to touch me--as together we gain a sense of what they want to move forward toward and how.

Anders Lindseth (in press) refers to it as understanding “*what is at stake in the other’s narrative*”--that newness emerges when the other can freely, without judgment, tell their story, their narrative--and allow them and me to be moved by it as they speak, and hear themselves talking out loud.

When we meet someone, they are taking a risk by meeting with us, a chance to be exposed or dismissed, accepted and valued. *I* say, in response to Anders’s question: What is at stake in the other’s narrative? – I think what is at stake are our *ethics*. Nowhere is this more visible than in the inhumaneness of racism and violence, and may I add politics, that we are experiencing in our world today. *As members of our professional communities and as citizens of the world, we must address this inhumaneness through dialogue.*

I thank you for joining me in these uncertain, unjust, unsettling, and unusual times. Please take with you my wish for a better, safer, and more humane world and the futures we each hope to have. And, please think about how you might help us move toward this.

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