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Love as Dialogue: Finding Human Connection In Conversation

by

Iliámaris Rivera-Walter

A Dissertation Presented to the  
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences of Nova Southeastern University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
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2017

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by

Iliámaris Rivera-Walter

July 2017

**Nova Southeastern University**  
**College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences**

This dissertation was submitted by Iliámaris Rivera-Walter under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctorate of Philosophy in the Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Abstract

Dialogue is a conversation situated in a view of existence as relational (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970). As a result, it evokes love—love as the constant companion to human experience that allows for collaboration, co-existence, and evolution (Maturana & Verden-Zöller, 2008). Dialogue, and its potential to generate love, offers persons the ability to understand how love can be activated within relationships and in daily encounters as a result of dialogical engagement. It also holds implications for the field of family therapy, including the nature and purpose of therapy, as well as training and practice. In order to understand how love and dialogue evoke one another, each was explored as a concept. Dialogism, the foundational philosophy of dialogue as articulated by its principle contributors, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and Martin Buber (1970), provides a relational, ontological context for dialogue as a conversation. Love, as an experience of shared humanity—as a “bumping into” humanity’s “collective consciousness” (Gumbrecht, Maturana, & Poerksen, 2006), initiates, fuels, and emerges within dialogue. Love and dialogue are foundational to human existence and therefore cannot be separated. This recognition results in an acceptance of love-as-dialogue. Love-as-dialogue presents individuals with a way of living that orients them toward engagement. It also invites family therapists into a conversation about therapy as a meeting of human beings and therefore as being situated in love.

## CHAPTER 1: HISTORY AND PLAN

### The History of an Idea

Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an exchange of gifts.

—John Paul II (Chryssavgis, 2014)

Through dialogue, I have been gifted by many people. Starting with either my curiosity, or another's, a back-and-forth exchange would develop. Not a perfectly fair conversation during which we each shared the same amount of “time,” but one in which we knew that we were both needed for what was transpiring, and we trusted what we were creating together. Early in my life, many of these experiences were with people I already loved and trusted. It was easy to be vulnerable and honest in their presence, because I knew who they were, and who they were to me.

As I entered young adulthood, I was challenged to have tough conversations with family members, in which I shared my struggles in our relationship, and I asked for them to share their struggles. During these conversations, I experienced many emotions, including confusion, concern, curiosity, surprise, anxiety, and love. In retrospect, I think many of these feelings were a result of the engagement required in the conversation and the recognition that while I was being challenged by my loved ones, I was also challenging them. In particular, being in the position of challenging someone whom I saw as an authority figure gave me the rich experience of feeling complex emotions and being able to push through them for the benefit of connection.

Fortunately, my loved ones welcomed these conversations and not only listened, but also offered themselves through the sharing of their perspectives. I learned that connecting honestly with my significant others was a powerful force for creating new possibilities for the way we related to one another.

## **The Influence of Marriage and Family Therapy**

**Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST).** While my involvement in this type of conversation began when I was very young and can be attributed to my family members' styles of relating, at this point, I cannot separate my interest in this type of conversation from my training as a marriage and family therapist. In 2003, while I was a master's student, a professor, guided by Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) (Bowen, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), assigned students the task of interviewing family members over three generations on common family experiences, difficulties, and strengths. Being a novice at initiating conversations with my family members on topics that were not routine, I stuck to a script and completed formal interviews.

Surprisingly, as a result of this project, my family members began having conversations with me on a regular basis about their histories, losses, and relationship struggles. I also began talking openly with them about my view of our relationships. These conversations, and this level of openness, became part of our family culture. When we convened for holidays or events, we discussed our stories, and we learned about one another.

At this same time, I was learning about Contextual Therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1980) through my work with a clinical supervisor, and I became very interested in Martin Buber's ideas about dialogue (Buber, 1970; Krasner & Joyce, 1995). These approaches seemed to fit very well with my new experience in my family of origin (FOO), and they called me to a deeper level of conversation.

**An unexpected dialogue.** In 2009, several years after my initial family of origin interviews, I was gifted, once again, with the opportunity for dialogue. At the time, I was teaching a graduate-level course on gender and ethnicity, and I took the weekly class readings to

my in-laws' home for a Christmas visit. While I was reading an article on the use of racial terms in the names of United States sports teams, my father-in-law saw the title, and began a heated discussion on the subject.

*Some background.* At this point in my relationship with my in-laws, I had gathered enough information to know that their approach to my ethnicity could be summarized as the idea, "we are all the same." While I recognized that they saw me as an equal and didn't devalue me for being Latina, the "we're all the same" approach felt devaluing to me, because it erased my uniqueness and ignored our differences. I hadn't yet figured out how to engage with them on the subject, nor was I certain I wanted to, but it was a topic I raised periodically with my husband.

My understanding was that my father-in-law was the authority in his home, and no one questioned his opinions or his decisions. I had already observed this dynamic several times, and I obeyed it. I was aware that I was obeying it, and it was difficult at times, but I wasn't sure that I wanted to commit to a new way of interacting. As a result, I related to my in-laws in a detached manner. I wasn't sure I could be direct in my communication (which is my natural style); therefore, I allowed myself to stay in the background, unless I was addressed directly. The dialogue I will describe shortly was a process in which I gave myself permission to put myself into the conversation, lightly, as best I could. It was the first time I gave myself permission to do this, and after the dialogue, I was able to continue this process in my relationship with my father-in-law.

At the time of the dialogue, I had been married for three years. My husband, Jim, had been on a journey of his own, trying to reconcile his upbringing with the ways in which he now wanted to relate to his father. This dialogue, with my father-in-law, was also the first time I observed Jim disagree with his father in the presence of his family members. It was an



emotionally poignant moment for me, because I knew the significance of his choices during the conversation.

Initially, my mother-in-law read the article, and she attempted to discuss the author's position with her husband, Jim, and me. The four of us were sitting in the living room. While we were chatting, she handed the article back to me, and I laid it down next to me. At that point, my father-in-law saw it, and he said that he didn't understand why it was such a big deal. His wife mentioned that it was a good article, and she suggested he read it. He loudly responded that he wasn't interested in reading it. She got up and left the room; Jim followed her into the kitchen. I interpreted these actions as their automatic reaction in the face of their loved one's indignation. They peered in occasionally, Jim eventually returning and participating in the conversation.

In the beginning, I listened. I wasn't sure how to engage, and I was feeling nervous thinking about responding, although I physically knew that I would—that I had to. I could feel slight tremors of nervousness I had come to recognize as both fear and drive. His voiced frustration was to the fact that we as a nation were still discussing matters of race, when these topics continued to cause division. He believed that those that protest (in this case, Native Americans) needed to accept that there was no continued malice and that issues of discrimination and oppression were in the past. I, both as an individual and as a marriage and family therapist, felt strongly that it was this belief that kept people isolated, in pain, and unable to heal. There was a moment when he likened American slavery to indentured servitude, and at that point, Jim jumped into the conversation.

When I responded, I did so as an educator and therapist and not as a daughter-in-law. In retrospect, I think I responded from this identity because I didn't think of myself as a daughter-

in-law yet, and at the time, I somehow knew it was necessary to speak about the relevance of the article for the topic I was teaching, rather than engage in a conversation about our personal opinions. I remember explaining that the article was required reading in a marriage and family therapy course. I briefly mentioned that when people are hurting, what matters is that they feel safe sharing their experience, and that this experience must be accepted by the therapist. In the therapy room, it is not about right or wrong or arguing social causes; it is about the client's truth. This discussion went on for some time—at least an hour.

Once I talked about the relevance of the article and the topic to therapy, there was a noticeable change in the pace and volume of the conversation. My father-in-law stopped talking for a few minutes, then he said, “This is why I love you, Ili. You make me think.” He then retired to his bedroom for the evening. The next morning, we knelt next to each other at the church altar, and we took communion together.

*Looking back.* This was not a neat or orderly dialogue, but it was enlightening on many levels. I participated as a person, a professional, a wife, an ethnic minority, a learner, a teacher, and a woman with her own past cultural norms regarding male authority figures. My father-in-law was able and willing to share his views and emotions, perhaps out of comfort, perhaps due to an assumption that I would engage with him like so many others in his life. Whatever the reason, his engagement was a gift.

During our exchange, I felt intense anxiety but practiced staying calm and concentrating on both learning about my father-in-law and sharing my views with him. This experience was full of discomfort, moments of raised voices, and clear offense, but at its conclusion, I recall feeling a strong sense of connection and love for my conversation partner. Much of this feeling was a result of being grateful for his openness and his willingness to let me see his reality, in all

its complexity. I understood his context more from that conversation than any other past encounter. And, the experience changed our communication and the depth of our discussions. This was by no means an ideal dialogue. It was unexpected for us both; however, the result of the engagement was continued curiosity about one another.

### **Reflections on Dialogue**

Because this was now my preferred way of communicating, particularly if difference was the topic at hand, I did not engage in these conversations as an experiment, and oftentimes, they were not planned. Through continued opportunities for dialogue (with bosses, co-workers, clients, family members), I continued to learn dialogue's applicability and value. These talks kept me on the path of wanting to connect meaningfully with others. They engrained in me a way of relating that evolved and became more intimate over time.

In addition, as I continued learning and participating in these dialogues, I began to reflect upon how they were different from a typical conversation, and why they led to a deeper sense of connection. I also continued contemplating the resulting feeling of love after the dialogue with my father-in-law. I noted that this experience seemed to be consistent, whether I was talking with my husband, or with a client in therapy. I began to connect love with dialogue. I considered that it was possible that being present with another, bringing self into conversation, and allowing others to bring themselves, led to love between the parties (Buber, 1970). Not a love of infatuation or romance, but a love that comes from knowledge and shared humanity (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998).

As the years passed, I thought of these encounters often, because they touched a part of me that was out of reach in most every day acts and encounters. While contemplating this feeling of love for my conversation partners, I wondered if I was calling it "love" because the

participants were people for whom I already cared deeply. But then, I recalled instances when the result was the same when the participants were acquaintances, or strangers. I found myself fascinated by my experience, and by what was and could be created by a conversation.

### **Confirmations**

As I continued considering love and dialogue, their connection was confirmed through happenstance. These confirmations began to move me from contemplation to exploration; that is, they moved me from a passive stance of noticing moments when dialogue and love came together, to one of wanting to “figure out” the connection.

**Family therapy training.** While a family therapy doctoral student, I was exposed to postmodern ideas of dialogue, including those detailed in Narrative Therapy (White, 2014; White & Epston, 1990) and Collaborative Language Systems (Anderson, 2012; Anderson & Goolishian, 1988), not to mention ideas about experience, mindfulness, and language that began to solidify my beliefs about dialogue (Flemons, 2002; Varela, 1980).

**Public Conversations Project (PCP).** In March of 2013, I participated in a training by the Public Conversations Project (PCP) (now named Essential Partners), called The Power of Dialogue. Essential Partners (EP) (2016) “equip[s] communities to have the conversations about what is most essential to be able to move forward and create new ways of being together” (About Us section, para. 2). EP is an organization founded by a marriage and family therapist, and the type of dialogue its staff has designed over time—Reflective Structured Dialogue—“draws on strategies developed by family therapists to promote effective communication in the midst of painful differences” (2016, Our Method section, para. 2). During the training, the facilitators showed a video depicting events immediately following their first dialogues held in Boston, MA, on the topic of abortion. In a short segment, a participant of the dialogue was interviewed. She

said (I am paraphrasing) that she did not agree with the women on the other side of the issue, and she had nothing in common with them, but she *loved* them.

When I saw this clip and heard this woman's conclusion, I felt a sense of relief and validation. At this point, I had been playing with the connection between love and dialogue in my mind for several years and was considering it as a dissertation topic, but I did not have information to confirm my ideas (other than my experience). This short clip showed me that these ideas were worth exploring.

***Ender's Game.*** In his science fiction novel, *Ender's Game*, Orson Scott Card (1991) presents the story of Ender, a six year old gifted in military strategy. He is chosen as the commander to defeat the enemy alien race. Yet, as he learns about this race, rather than develop hate, he develops love. Ender explains:

In the moment when I truly understand my enemy, understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that very moment I also love him. I think it's impossible to really understand somebody, what they want, what they believe, and not love them the way they love themselves. (pp. 167-168)

When I first read this quote, I screamed. I was well into my dissertation research, and I screamed out of excitement, exhilaration, affirmation, hope. Card (1991) wrote about my idea before I had the idea! Someone else knew what I had only glimpsed. Of course, this filled me with determination to continue on this journey of connecting dialogue, understanding, and love. I wanted to know that I could understand the "enemy" to the point of love. I wanted to know that it was possible—that my experience was true—that understanding could lead to love.

Experience is a powerful thing, and, in my case, it sent me searching. I suppose I wanted to name my experience and understand it, so that I could grasp it somehow. And, perhaps, in

grasping it, I could explain it. To this end, Martin Buber (Agassi, 1999; Friedman, 2002) describes the difference between intellectual knowledge and experience-knowledge. He felt experience-knowledge in his body, as an awakening that could not be compartmentalized (Agassi, 1999; Friedman, 2002). My experience-knowledge of dialogue happened in the opposite order—I had an experience, a body-knowledge, that was then confirmed intellectually. Nevertheless, what Buber says perfectly describes my feeling when reading *Ender's Game* and moving toward writing my dissertation: “I had a decisive experience . . . and from now on, I had to give something more than just my inclination to exchange thoughts and feelings, and so on. I had to give the fruit of an experience” (as cited in Agassi, 1999, p. 250).

### **The Influence of Faith**

I am not sure how my own faith plays a role in how I see dialogue and the possibility for love between people, but I assume it does play a role. Raised as an Evangelical Christian that relies on conversation with God as the foundation for living, I understand that the struggle of relationship is the beauty of relationship. I talk through my struggles—I learned to do that in my relationship with God. I learned that the conversation itself can be a struggle, a back and forth, a process. Perhaps this is why I value dialogue.

Interestingly, Orson Scott Card identifies as Mormon. And, while our Christian traditions are not the same, I find it curious that he also sees the connection between understanding and love, and I wonder if his faith has made it possible. As he says, “It was an idea that rang true with me, perhaps in part because of my Mormon upbringing and beliefs: Human beings may be miserable specimens, in the main, but we can learn, and, through learning, become decent people” (Card, 1991, p. xii).

### **The Fruit of an Experience: A Vision**

If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors. With our imagination as well as our eyes, that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces but the life behind and within their faces. Here it is love that is the frame we see them in.

—Frederick Buechner (1993)

My personal experience with dialogue made me an observer. I began to notice stories of people who chose to connect through conversation, despite conflict, pain, confusion, and no potential for gain. These stories spoke of courage—not only the courage to face an “enemy,” but also the courage to communicate personal reality, often a vulnerable, aching reality (Glass, 2011, 2015). As an observer, I began to notice the transformational aspects of these engagements, in particular, transformation for the storyteller. Søren Kierkegaard (2003) says, “The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays” (p. 97). Perhaps the most powerful aspect of dialogue is not that participants can make a claim about what transpires for another, but that they can make a claim for how it impacts them. What the dialogue makes possible for the other dialogue participants may never be known, but the storyteller’s experience can be told.

Through my observations, I saw connection between dialogue, understanding, and resulting human connection. I began to wonder if there was a truth in these observations—a truth about verbal engagement’s potential for linking human beings despite all the reasons that exist for their division. I became curious about what happens in the emotional experience between dialogue participants that is beyond words, and also, if there is a point during a dialogue when it becomes an experience, a body-knowledge, rather than merely an exchange of words (Buber, 1999).

Clearly, there was much to be considered if there was a truth in these stories. As an observer, I wrestled with the idea that dialogue leading to love sounded simple and easily assumed, but as an academic, I realized that the idea was not simple, for to deconstruct it required me to evaluate not only the idea, but the components of the idea.

**My starting point.** I began this dissertation as a novice dialogue researcher with the experience of dialogue as an encounter that touches something that is beyond words and personal ideologies. I understood that through dialogue, activated in words, there is an opportunity for participants to see each other as human beings—as the same. Further, once this vision, or what Buber (1999) calls “imagining the real,” happens, then the experience of connection becomes prominent in the dialogical encounter. It is this experience of connection that is itself love.

**My path.** On this path of finding love in dialogue (and vice versa), I have gathered some sense of what dialogue is and isn't; I have studied human connection as it is felt and understood by dialogue participants, in an effort to find a shape to its occurrence, timing, experience, and name; and I have analyzed stories of when a relationship between dialogue, understanding, and human connection have been clear for their potential to illuminate a possible truth or path. My goal has been to understand and explain how love and dialogue are related. Through this process, I have offered a vision for relating that is centered on dialogue, and I've shown that dialogue and love are inseparable.

In order to explain how dialogue and love evoke one other, as well as why they matter for relational interactions, I present the following in this dissertation: In the next chapter, I explain the philosophy of dialogism based on its two principle founders, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and Martin Buber (1970). In Chapter 3, I explore love as it relates to human existence and relational interactions, as well as how it co-exists with dialogue. In Chapter 4, I share stories of when



dialogue has led to love as an encounter with common humanity for its participants. In Chapter 5, I detail the components of dialogue as well as the requirements for dialogue to unfold as an encounter of persons, in order to develop the premise that dialogue is always worthwhile. I then articulate my vision, love-as-dialogue. Finally, in Chapter 6, I apply love-as-dialogue to the therapeutic encounter and explore its implications for the field of marriage and family therapy.

## CHAPTER 2: DIALOGICAL BEING

The existence of beings presupposes Being, but Being needs beings so that it can show itself and have its presence affirmed. . . . Existence has the structure of a dialogue.

—Michael Hyde (2004)

Exploring love and dialogue is not as simple as learning about emotional experience within a conversation. While seeing the connection between love and dialogue may involve this step, it also, and first, must involve a consideration of the context within which dialogue occurs. For this reason, I will explain the philosophy of dialogue, or dialogism, and I will show how love is relevant to *being* and relational encounter. This will help me later lay the foundation for dialogue as a conversation and love as an experience of that conversation.

### Two Views of Dialogue

There are two main philosophies of dialogue, and the term “dialogue” is often used without users revealing their philosophical assumptions, leading to some confusion regarding the term (Sidorkin, 1999; White, 2014). One philosophy, the linguistic view, also known as dialectics, defines dialogue as a form of communication, created, fueled, and guided by language (Buber, 1970; Sidorkin, 1999; Vygotsky, 1987; White, 2014). The other philosophy, the ontological view, also known as dialogism, defines dialogue as existence (Hyde, 2004; Sidorkin, 1999; White, 2014). In this view, all action is created within a dialogical existence; therefore, being, including individuality, community, and language, is a result of this dialogical reality (Buber, 1970; Gergen, 2009; Sidorkin, 1999; White, 2014). Both perspectives of dialogue are rooted in the assumption of totality—that existence cannot be fully defined by its parts, nor can it be fully known (Bohm, 2014; Hanley, 2003).

### **Dialectics: Conflict, Response, and Resolution**

Dialectics is concerned with unity through the bridging of opposites; central to dialectical theory is the assumption of conflict (Lusk, 2008; White, 2014). Dialectics is founded on personal agency as the locus of action, both internal action through thought and external action through speech (Lusk, 2008; Vygotsky, 1987; White, 2014). Dialectics is therefore primarily concerned with how problems are identified, explained, and negotiated, as well as individual perspectives and opinions. As a result, dialectical dialogues are common in mediation and relationship conflict, as well as when understanding and resolution are of utmost importance (Giarmo, 1997; White, 2014).

### **Dialogism: Process, Struggle, and Lived Knowing (Holquist, 2002)**

Dialogism is founded on ideas of relationship, interaction, and process, while it rejects predetermined goals or the seeking of solutions; it is “an end in itself” (Friedman, 1998; Sidorkin, 1999; White, 2014). Dialogism is a view of existence as dialogical and encompassing a real relational realm that is present between beings (Buber, 1970; Hyde, 2004; Sidorkin, 1999). It is interacting in this realm that makes human beings *fully* human (Buber, 1970), because they are participating in relational reality. The dialogical realm is available to all, yet it is not experienced by all (Buber, 1970; Hyde, 2004; Sidorkin, 1999). Dialogism, then, is similar to what systems theorists refer to as mind, or wholeness; it is the relational reality of existence, whether or not it is acknowledged (Bateson, 1972; Flemons, 1991; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004; Varela, 1989).

### **Dialogism as Primary**

Interestingly, dialectics has been the dominant discourse influencing views on language, dialogue, and communication, leading dialogism to be subsumed within dialectics (White, 2014).

Ironically, it is dialogism that is able to subsume dialectics into its relational reality, because it offers a theory of existence that includes all human action, including dialectics (Sidorkin, 1999; White, 2014). As a result of the prominence of dialectics in the fields of language and communication, the potential of dialogism to offer new ways of relating has been largely ignored (Sidorkin, 1999; White, 2014). Whereas the term “dialogue” has often been used to refer to both dialectics and dialogism, my focus in this work is dialogism—a view of existence. I investigate dialogism and dialogue-as-conversation as an option for relating within it, for what they can offer toward relational honesty, shared knowledge, and love. Consequently, I subsume dialectics-as-action (communication, conflict, steps toward solutions, etc.) within dialogism as experience (the realm of relating that exists between people) (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970, 1999; Holquist, 2002).

### **Foundations of Dialogism**

Dialogism is best defined as a view of reality in which *being* is an ongoing process of event and response; in other words, reality and existence are dialogical (Holquist, 2002; Holquist & Clark, 1986; Sidorkin, 1999). Within the confines of a dialogical reality, human beings and their interactions with one another have specific functions and meanings. I will provide a brief summary of the concept and components of dialogism based on the philosophies of its main contributors, Martin Buber (1970) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) (Friedman, 2001; Holquist, 2002). These philosophers were contemporaries, and while much of their work overlaps, there are some differences in what they chose to emphasize in their writings (Friedman, 2001; Sidorkin, 1999).

## **Mikhail Bakhtin**

Known best for his view of dialogue as fundamental to existence, and the idea that nothing is anything “in itself,” Bakhtin (1981) offers a radically relational view of being (Holquist, 2002). He presents dialogism as both ontology and epistemology—dialogue is a principle of being as well as a way of learning about that principle (Holquist, 2002).

**Existence, the self, utterance, and reply.** For Bakhtin (1981), the self is an event that resides in a specific context, and existence is the larger dialogical principle that constantly “utters” messages to the self (Holquist, 2002; Holquist & Clark, 1986). These utterances are not speech, they are messages offered by nature, society, people, and/or systems, with or without spoken language (Holquist, 2002; Holquist & Clark, 1986). The self makes meaning from these utterances, through personal interpretation, based on its unique location in a particular place and time in the history of existence (Holquist, 2002; Holquist & Clark, 1986). But the self is not an encased entity—the self is an act of ongoing meaning-making, or interpretation, with the inherent responsibility to reply to the messages given by the larger existence (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 2002). The process of utterance and reply involves, at minimum, hearing, listening, making meaning, orienting to the message and/or the message-giver, repositioning, and response (Holquist & Clark, 1986). For Bakhtin, this ongoing process of utterance and reply is constant motion marked by struggle; the struggle is inherent in being a receiver of utterance as well as the process by which a reply is developed (Holquist, 2002). Therefore, the self, for Bakhtin, is not localized or static; it is an ongoing event in the dialogical process of message and response.

**Meeting and language.** In Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogism, the self does not exist individually, it exists only in relation; the self is dialogic (Holquist, 2002, p. 18). “Dialogic” refers not to a dyad, but to a point of meeting between a message and a reply; this meeting occurs

in a specific place and time (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 2002). The concepts of self and response, for Bakhtin, are tied to the moment of their unfolding, because the self will never exist again as it exists in the present meeting. The dialogic meeting may become a conversation (a language interaction), but it is not defined by the conversation. The meeting is the experience of relational existence, and the conversation is a function of the meeting. Holquist (2002) explains:

Dialogue is a manifold phenomenon, but for schematic purposes it can be reduced to a minimum of three elements. . . . A dialogue is composed of an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two. It is the relation that is the most important of the three, for without it the other two would have no meaning. (p. 36)

Holquist (2002) pinpoints the components in a dialogical reality and not a linguistic exchange; however, the same holds true during dialogue as a conversation—the relation is primary and foundational to other aspects of the meeting (Buber, 1970).

While language is a valuable tool for engagement, it is also a function of difference. It is a form of expression that creates separation, for a purpose (Holquist, 2002). For to use a set of terms in language is also to not use a set of terms. The use of language often requires the making of a distinction as “this” or “that”—a duality. Therefore, as Bakhtin (1981) discovered, language is insufficient for describing dialogue, for inherent in an attempt to describe the components of dialogue is the problem of attempting to describe a whole by describing its parts, which, ironically, is exactly what Bakhtin rejected in his dialogical philosophy. For example, the terms that exist for conceptualizing the participants in a dialogue are descriptive of opposition: “self” and “other”; however, Bakhtin believed that self and other exist mutually and simultaneously, not as separate entities (Holquist, 2002), because of the dialogic relation between them. Similarly, for Bakhtin, language in dialogue is one way in which the dialogical principle of

existence is honored, but not the only way; Holquist (2002) elaborates, “Although it is the most powerful, natural language is only one of several ways that dialogic relations manifest themselves in the larger dialogue that is the event of existence” (p. 40). Friedman (2001) further clarifies: “To Bakhtin, everything linguistic is only a means to an end of the extralinguistic, dialogic aspects of the utterance” (p. 33).

***Addressivity and answerability.*** Through his concepts of addressivity and answerability, Bakhtin (1981) explains the function of language in dialogue by linking reality as dialogic to the process of conversation; he explains both *being* and understanding as responsive. For Bakhtin, an address is offered to a recipient, and the address (not only the addresser) expects a response; an answer is offered to a recipient, and the answer (not only the answerer) anticipates a response. In this way, language, or discourse, is expression within a dialogical imperative, and it is joined with its context—moment, speaker, history, place, time, culture, and other qualities.

Additionally, Bakhtin (1981) explains a person’s effort toward meaning-making as a response to the message-giver. He says, “Any understanding of live speech . . . is inherently responsive” (Bakhtin, 1986). He emphasizes that the “internal dialogism of the world” is present in individual and relational encounters, whether linguistic or not, and that language emerges from this “internal dialogism” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 279). Consequently, he shows that the most basic step toward interpretation—the most basic step toward language—is participation in a dialogical reality.

***Polyphony.*** According to Bakhtin (1981, 1986) speech cannot be unique or individualized, because it is by nature “polyphonic,” or multi-voiced. That is, every use of a word carries with it the use of that word in history, with the many contexts and intentions of its use, as well as its speakers. As a result, when a word is used, it belongs to the speaker, but it

also, at the same time, belongs to all speakers that have used it (Bakhtin). The importance of polyphony for dialogism is that words are bound to their users and to their users' place and time—to the moment of their use. All of those moments are present in their next use. This allows for words to be dialogic—to be by nature grounded in specific conditions, and therefore needing of challenge (Holquist, 2002).

David Lodge (1990) explains polyphony as a place where “a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice” (p. 86). Polyphony is a defining concept for dialogism, because in a dialogical reality, utterance and reply are a process of existence, and are therefore without end, without limits, and without solution (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). They are a function of individual existence and relational encounters. Consequently, awareness of and participation in a dialogical reality means the recognition and acceptance of many “voices” or positions “within” and between persons (p. 86).

### **Martin Buber**

Buber (1970) presents a view of *being* that is rooted in relational encounter. His dialogical view of existence culminates in his description of the I-Thou relation. His focus on this relation appears to explain dialogical relations as a dyadic encounter, but in actuality, while he maintains the I-Thou as a true relation, he also employs it as a metaphor for expounding upon the complexity of what it means to be human in a world of relations and what it means to live dialogically (with the knowledge of the dialogical reality) (Buber, 1970; Friedman, 2001).

**Dyad as metaphor: The I-Thou relation.** For Buber (1970), existence is dialogical and occurs through either I-it or I-Thou relating (J. G. Scott, Scott, Miller, Stange, & Crabtree, 2009). I-it relating is necessary for day-to-day moments, but it is superficial, perfunctory relating,



characterized by materialism—the using of the other, and objectification—the viewing of the other as separate and as one that can be acted upon (Buber, 1970; J. G. Scott et al., 2009; Sidorkin, 1999). I-Thou relating is a “seeing” of others characterized by a recognition of their uniqueness and fullness, based on the fact of their existence; this existence makes them worthy of acceptance and acknowledgment (Buber, 1970, 1999).

***Genuine encounter.*** Buber (1970) describes “genuine encounter” as the exemplification of the I-Thou relation (p. 17). Genuine encounters, for Buber, exist apart from temporal ideas such as space and time. He describes these encounters as experience with the wholeness of existence; he believed that through meeting one with another, totality—the entirety of existence—and the eternal, is experienced (Buber, 1970).

Additionally, according to Buber (1999), one’s participation in a genuine encounter requires one’s whole being, or “presentness” (p. 64). This presentness is not a moment in time; it is an experience of wholeness when relation is honored through encounter (Buber, 1999; Friedman, 2001). It is the intensity and completeness that is felt (Friedman, 2001). Buber (1970) explains,

The *Thou* appears in time, but in that of a process that is fulfilled in itself—a process lived through not as a piece that is a part of a constant and organized sequence but in a “duration” whose purely intensive dimension can be determined only by starting from the *Thou*. (p. 30)

***Starting from the Thou.*** Genuine encounters speak to a sense that there is something greater than the encounter, the relationship, and the words used in a dialogue (Buber, 1970). They call for participants to recognize that although their sides are crucial to the relational encounter and must be included, heard, and “made present,” the encounter is not about them

(Buber, 1970; Friedman, 2001, p. 26). It is about the other side as well as what lies between and beyond both beings. Buber (1970) believed that genuine encounters recognize the transcendent aspects of individuals and existence.

*The self.* For Buber (1970), like Bakhtin (1981), the self is defined relationally, through moments of encounter, and in this way, the self is an articulation of experience (Atterton, Calarco, & Friedman, 2004; Friedman, 2001). The self, or the “I,” is bound with the world and with objects and beings in that world (Friedman, 2001). Buber emphasizes that to say “I” is to relate to the outside world, because the “I” cannot exist without its relation to the world—past, present, and future (Friedman, 2001). Additionally, the “I” is not a true, complete self until and unless it is “made present” by another in the genuine encounter that is the I-Thou relation (Buber, 1970; Stauffer, 2011). Buber (1999) explains this dialogical truth:

For the inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man’s relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other, between men, that is, preeminently in the mutuality of the making present—in the making present of another self and in the knowledge that one is made present in his own self by the other.  
(p. 15)

“Making present” for Buber (1970, p. 15) is the act of confirming another’s wholeness, completeness in their existence, while at the same time recognizing one’s own and the greater, larger whole of existence. “Making present” is possible through a relational stance characterized by moment-to-moment attentiveness and openness (i.e., presentness) toward another in a genuine encounter (Buber, p. 15). This stance, according to Buber (1970, 1999), can be enhanced through language, but is not reliant upon language. Language is only dialogical in so far as it is

able to function as a response to what is happening between people, in the moment (Friedman, 2001; Holquist, 2002).

***Language and confirmation.*** In summary, for Buber (1970), relational engagement is defined by presentness (p. 57), and he merges verbal engagement with this relational engagement only when it is a function of this dialogical way of being (Agassi, 1999; Buber, 1999). Friedman (1998) unravels this nuance in his explanation of Buber's concept of "confirmation," an aspect of making present:

The confirmation of the other must include an actual experiencing of the other side of the relationship, so that one can imagine quite concretely what another is thinking, feeling, and knowing. This *inclusion*, or imagining the real does not abolish the basic distance between oneself and the other. It is rather a bold swinging over into the life of the person one confronts, through which alone I can make that person present in his or her own wholeness, unity, and uniqueness. This experiencing of the other side is essential to the distinction that Buber makes between *dialogue*, in which I open myself to the otherness of the person I meet, and *monologue*, in which even when I converse with that person at length, I allow that person to exist only as a content of my experience. (p. 26)

Summarizing Buber's (1970) ideas, Friedman (1998) describes the relational components found in a genuine, dialogical encounter, including "experiencing" and "imagining" (p. 26), and he acknowledges that conversation cannot be dialogical unless it is a function of this active process. When language enhances genuine encounter, it serves to further the relation; when language is used as a tool, to confirm and affirm personal beliefs, or other affiliations brought to the encounter, then it is not dialogical, and there has been no encounter. Buber (1970) makes it clear that conversation, in and of itself, is not encounter, and in this way he honors a dialogical

reality—he presents conversation as a powerful option from within encounter, but it is never its equal.

***Recognizing what is present.*** For Buber (1970), being present, defined by “starting from the Thou” (p. 30), is required for the experience of a genuine encounter, and this surrendering, paradoxically, serves to affirm each side and makes the experience of the meeting more meaningful and powerful (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Friedman, 1998; Gordon, 2004). This is because rather than individuals receiving “confirmation” through self-confidence, requests, or demands, they receive it by virtue of another’s willingness to “meet”—it is offered by another’s *presence* (Buber, 1970).

### **A Summary of Dialogism**

Dialogism is a philosophy of reality that presents existence as dialogical: It is an ongoing process of message and response (Bakhtin, 1981; Sidorkin, 1999). This process is not rooted in spoken language, but is a back and forth that defines being alive (Buber, 1970, 1999; Holquist, 2002). For Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and Buber (1970, 1999), dialogical existence cannot be escaped, and even one’s internal ways of interpreting an event are dialogical processes. Essentially, Bakhtin (1981) and Buber (1970) present existence as relational, responsive, and shared—this is the reality of dialogical being.

With some grounding in dialogism, I now turn to the task of considering how love relates to a dialogical reality and to dialogical encounter. In the next chapter, I will present ideas regarding love’s relevance to dialogical encounter, including human connection and the recognition of shared humanity between people.

### **CHAPTER 3: LOVE IN DIALOGUE: CHOICE AND EXPERIENCE**

The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself.

—Paolo Freire (2000)

Dialogism as existence, as well as presentness as the way of genuine encounter, establish the preconditions for dialogue as a linguistic interaction (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970). It is as a result of these preconditions that language can emerge as a function of relating within a dialogical encounter. It is this language within the encounter that is *dialogue*. Before exploring examples of dialogue where human connection is recognized and experienced, I will first explain how love is present in a dialogical reality, and how it appears as an experience of dialogue.

#### **Love as Awakening**

Dialogical being offers a view of existence that is inherently mutual and responsible, because in the larger existence of message and response, utterance and reply, I and Thou, there is a call to participation. Because this call is larger than any individual, encounter, or conversation, living in this call allows for an experience of this larger existence. And, perhaps, it is this experience that provides a perspective for us, as humans, that we are all connected in this larger existence—that, in essence, we are all the same, even given our differences. It is this experience of sameness that is essential for human connection, and it is possible that it carries with it love. Love as a moment, a surprise, an awakening. Love, as it shows up unexpectedly and becomes a life-changer. It is beyond the scope of this work to address love in its many forms and applications; therefore, I will consider love as it has already been noticed in the pursuit of dialogue and dialogical being.

### **Love with Dialogue**

Love, depicted as a component and experience of dialogue, is a way of seeing and being, a source of knowing, as well as a felt, emotional experience (Buber, 1970; Buechner, 1993; Card, 1991; Freire, 2000; Maturana, 1978; Reichle, 2007; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005; West, 2013). These expansive accounts of connection and engagement display love as a conscious decision and an accidental destination—love is at times the call to dialogue, but it is also the requirement of participating in dialogue, as well as the felt connection that can come as a result of dialogue. This makes for an interesting conception of love. How can love be described as a motive, an ongoing act, and a result? Well, perhaps love is the only thing that can encompass the beginning, the journey, and the end.

### **Love as Consensual Living**

Humberto Maturana (1978) says, “The only transcendence of our individual loneliness we can experience arises through the consensual reality that we create with others, that is, through love” (pp. 62-63). A biologist and systems theorist, Maturana came to love-as-consent as a result of his work. He confirmed systemic ideas of circularity and second order cybernetics and offered new considerations for the continued implications of a connected world.

Maturana’s (1978) use of “consent” as central to love is striking. For although he denies the possibility of love existing where there is submission and domination, the word consent implies a *chosen* relinquishing (a process fundamentally different from submission and domination). Maturana and Verden-Zöllner (2008) emphasize that this chosen relinquishing is only possible where mutual trust and acceptance exist. They say, “we think that the fundament of human living is love, and that cooperation in humans arises through the pleasure of doing things together in mutual trust, not through the manipulation of relations” (p. 51). They further

claim that “it can be argued *biologically* [emphasis added] that we are the kind of beings that we are because love has been the emotion that has grounded the course of the evolutionary history that gave origin to us” (p. 51).

**Love as evolutionary.** The use of the word “emotion” to describe love implies that Maturana and Verden- Zöllner (2008) are presenting love as a feeling, but, in actuality, they are describing love as a constant companion in human existence rather than a sentiment. In fact, they confirm love as the way, the means, and the result of relational trust established through consensual living:

Relations of love generate freedom and collaboration, even when due to their uni-directionality they are lonely. As a result, love generates the conditions for love through the well being that it generates. . . . Love is visionary, not blind, and through the vision that it entails it brings forth the relational space of love. (p. 40)

Maturana and Verden-Zöllner (2008) establish that love, even in the context of consensual living, can be uni-directional, and that even when uni-directional, it is “visionary” (p. 40). In other words, love is relational faith, and this faith can be “carried” by one or by many. However it is “carried,” it generates love as the context of consensual living—it generates love *between* people. Consequently, it is possible that once love is “relational space,” it is felt and experienced by those that did not initially “carry” it (p. 40). In this way, love becomes an experience of encounter (Buber, 1970).

**Love and language.** Presenting love as the main “emotioning” by which human beings developed ways of living together consensually, Maturana and Verden-Zöllner (2008) situate love as not only a foundational emotion of human experience, but as a condition of living by which

humans evolved, developed, co-existed, and thrived (p. 62). Using language as an example of the development of human co-existence, they explain:

We think that [linguaging] began among our ancestors as a simple result of their living together in small groups as gatherers who shared food in love in the intimacy of tenderness and sensuality. . . . Moreover, we maintain that living in languaging arose not because it was necessary, or in any way advantageous, but merely as a result of this living together. (p. 62)

Interestingly, Maturana and Verden-Zöllner (2008) present language as a result of love. It seems that consensually living together, which according to Maturana and Verden-Zöllner is itself love, gave rise to verbal expression. Therefore, consensual living has been and can be a primary condition for not only continued human survival, but also for creativity and for finding new ways of communicating through and because of love. In this way, love is the foundation for continued consensual living, but also the motivation for new and more expansive ways of relating. For Maturana and Verden-Zöllner, love is a way of *being*.

### **Love as Wisdom**

Humberto Maturana's protégé, Francisco Varela (1989), a philosopher, biologist, and student of human consciousness, advises, "We have to distinguish between knowledge and wisdom. Science is a form of knowledge. Art is another form of knowledge, etc., etc. There is only one wisdom, on the other hand, which is based on love" (Reichle, 2007). Here, Varela is presenting love as the way to living wisely (Maturana & Varela, 1992).

In their 1992 collaboration, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, Maturana and Varela explain *how* love is wise living; they conclude:



Biology also shows us that we can expand our cognitive domain. This arises through a novel experience brought forth through reasoning, through the encounter with a stranger, or, more directly, through the expression of a biological interpersonal congruence that lets us *see* the other person and open up for him room for existence beside us. This act is called *love*, or, if we prefer a milder expression, the acceptance of the other person beside us in our daily living. This is the biological foundation of social phenomena: without love, without acceptance of others living beside us, there is no social process and, therefore, no humanness. (p. 246)

According to Maturana and Varela (1992), love-as-wisdom involves seeing ourselves as collaborative beings and as part of an ongoing collaborative process. And love-as-wisdom is found in a variety of ways, including individualistic and relational processes that are based on this seeing. For relational processes, they specify an “encounter” and “interpersonal congruence.” Additionally, they propose that daily life can be infused with love, and that, in fact, without love, we as humans cannot co-exist. More specifically, Maturana and Varela (1992) determine that love is the *only* path to co-creation and co-existence. In this way, recognizing our interconnection and interdependence is wisdom that generates love. They explain:

We have delved into a social dynamics which points up a basic ontological feature of our human condition that is no longer a mere assumption, that is, *we have only the world that we bring forth with others, and only love helps us bring it forth.* (p. 248)

***Love as a way of being.*** Explaining his views on mind, the self, and ethics, Francisco Varela contemplates living in love as *virtue*, as well as a call to action:

The virtuous have managed to experience and thus to comprehend in a very profound sense, that we are all one, that humankind possesses a collective consciousness. . . . If the experience of self-lessness deepens . . . then this may, in itself, eventually become an expression of the highest ethics, a manifestation of spontaneous, loving care. . . . They do not radiate this love for others because they have been thinking, nor because they have decided on love, but because their whole being *is* love. The experience of an absolute reality *is* love. It is immersed in love. (Gumbrecht, Maturana, & Poerksen, 2006)

Varela (Gumbrecht et al., 2006) explains that humanity is a “collective consciousness” and that this is an *absolute reality* (p. 51). He shares that an experience of this reality is itself love; the experience of and encounter with shared humanity *is love*. It is only through this experience, according to Varela, that encounter with “collective consciousness” is possible, but once it happens, love can become a *way of being* (p. 51).

### **Love as Freedom**

Paolo Freire (2000), an educator, human rights activist, and dialogue follower, describes love as the foundation of dialogue and as dialogue “itself” (p. 89). With this description, Freire pinpoints the elusive, yet visceral experience of the dialogical encounter, because it positions love as both a requirement for and an experience of dialogue.

Discussing the relationship between oppressors and the oppressed, as well as the plight of oppression and the struggle for freedom, Freire (2000) presents love as an automatic experience of a move toward humanization. He explains:

Yet it is—paradoxical though it may seem—precisely in the response of the oppressed to the violence of their oppressors that a gesture of love may be found. Consciously or unconsciously, the act of rebellion by the oppressed (an act which is always, or nearly

always, as violent as the initial violence of the oppressors) can initiate love. Whereas the violence of the oppressors prevents the oppressed from being fully human, the response of the latter to this violence is grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human. As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized. As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors' power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression. (p. 56)

Here, Freire (2000) equates a move toward humanity with love. What is most significant about his position is that he believes this is true even when the move toward humanization is violent and rebellious. Freire sees that *any* move toward claiming humanity is a gesture of love (love “carried” individually or collectively), and that this gesture can “initiate love” in the relational realm between people, as well as *for* others, regardless of the manner in which it is carried out (Maturana & Verden-Zöller, 2008).

Certainly, fighting for humanization in the same manner in which it was taken is not conducive for human connection, and options for “rebellion” that promote humanness exist; however, recognizing that *any* move toward humanization is an opening for love is significant for creating courage for action. Realistically, a move to claim one's humanity is always rebellious. For this reason, it's important to remember that perfect steps in relating do not exist, but, if steps are taken for the sake of humanity, one's or another's, Freire (2000) reminds us that they will land on fertile ground; they will begin a new, generative process.

### **Love as Faith**

Freire (2000) further explains, “Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. . . . And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical” (p. 89).

Love and dialogue, for Freire, are joined; they are, it seems, one and the same. Love is dialogical, and dialogue is loving. Freire presents love as desiring of dialogue, as marked by dialogue. Consequently, love for others may be the strongest possible pull toward dialoguing with them, because love is inherently interested in process, struggle, collaboration, and continuation, if not resolution.

Freire (2000) also notes:

Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all). Faith in people is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue; the “dialogical man” believes in others even before he meets them face to face. (pp. 91-92)

In summary, in order to “face” others, we must have faith, maybe not in them as people, but in them as human beings (p. 92). There is a faith that undergirds encounter that assures us that others are capable, that they are open, that they can be touched, reached, because *we* can—we can be touched and reached. There is faith that even if we don’t know how to touch and reach another, even if we try and don’t succeed, that it is possible. This is faith in humanity.

### **Love as “Cosmic Force”**

Martin Buber (1970) distinguishes between feelings that are called love, and love as an experience of encounter. He explains:

Feelings one “has”; love occurs. Feelings dwell in man, but man dwells in his love. This is no metaphor but actuality: love does not cling to an I, as if the You were merely its “content” or object; it is between I and You. Whoever does not know this, know this with his *being* [emphasis added], does not know love, even if he should ascribe to it the

feelings that he lives through, experiences, enjoys, and expresses. Love is a cosmic force. For those who stand in it and behold in it, men emerge from their entanglements in busy-ness . . . that is liberated, emerging into a unique confrontation. . . . Love is responsibility of an I for a You: in this consists what cannot consist in any feeling—the equality of all lovers, from the smallest to the greatest. (p. 67)

Buber (1970) describes love as an event—an experience, and within that event is a true encounter with another. It is an event that raises one’s awareness to the relational realm that is beyond daily routine, that is often unnoticed and unacknowledged. It is a unique encounter, one with another, in human equality. For Buber (1970), love is between, not within. In this sense, love is specific to each encounter, to those “facing” each other. Yet, it is also, for Buber, the “cosmic force” which makes encounter possible (1970). Love demands “responsibility”; it is an act of ongoing consideration of another (Buber, 1970). Buber presents love as an enveloping, of one, of many, of actions, of beings. In love, we dialogue.

### **Love in Dialogue**

As Buber (1970) reminds us, love may be present as a manifestation of encounter without the feelings of encounter being labeled as love. Therefore, within dialogue as encounter, there may be a variety of feelings, some of which may be labeled “love.” The lack of “love” as an identified feeling does not mean that love has not been present or experienced, it merely means that the dialogue participant has not labeled the experience as “love” or experienced love as a feeling. Love as an encounter with wholeness and a recognition of shared humanity is love as curiosity, faith, freedom, and consent; it is a meeting with—a bumping into—a truth; it is beyond feelings (Buber, 1970, p. 67; Maturana & Varela, 1992). That is the love that is encountered through dialogue (Maturana & Varela, 1992; Maturana & Verden-Zöllner, 2008). This love may

be identified and expressed in a variety of ways and with a variety of words. It is my claim that if a dialogue participant can point to an encounter with wholeness, an experience of shared humanity, then that participant has experienced love. To this end, I will consider how dialogue can be an encounter with love—how it can lead to an experience of and with human co-existence, how it is a conversation honoring of a dialogical reality, and how it is an encounter with wholeness (Buber, 1970; Maturana & Varela, 1992).

## CHAPTER 4: DIALOGICAL ENCOUNTER AS AN EXPERIENCE OF LOVE

### Dialogue as Conversation

Many have come to dialogue as a result of life-long work and contemplation in a variety of fields, including physics, communication, philosophy, psychiatry, family therapy, business, cybernetics, and education (Agassi, 1999; Bohm, 2014; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1980; Bowen, 1985; Buber, 1970; Card, 1991; Covey, 2004; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Freire, 2000, 2007; Isaacs, 1999; Lipari, 2014; von Foerster, 1990, October; White, 2014). As a result, the study and practice of dialogue is multi-disciplinary (Arnett, 2012; Bohm, 2014). Yet, all agree—dialogue is difficult to define due to its reliance on process and experience.

The term “dialogue” is often used to mean “conversation,” but despite this generic use, for dialogue practitioners and scholars, it is clear that to be called a “dialogue,” a conversation must have a special something (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). For many, that something is mystical and indefinable. For example, Isaacs (1999) describes dialogue as “a conversation with a center, not sides” (p. 19), and Ellinor and Gerard (1998) simply say that dialogue is “a different kind of listening and speaking” (p. xv). However, it is possible that the mystical experience that separates dialogue from a typical conversation is that it touches on the dialogical realm—it contains an experience of wholeness that includes an encounter with the existence that we, as human beings, share (Buber, 1970; (Maturana & Varela, 1992).

Given the assumption of a dialogical reality of existence, language, obviously, occurs within that reality. There is no formula for how a conversation becomes a dialogue; therefore, questions remain as to when and how a conversation becomes an experience of wholeness and

shared humanity (i.e., love) (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970). Perhaps, some examples of dialogue can help shape a sense of what is required for a conversation to become an experience of love.

### **Loved Ones, Enemies, and Monsters: Dialogue as Risk, Engagement, and Surprise**

The only thing that fights dehumanization is increased humanization.

—Lindy West (2013)

The following examples of dialogue are some I encountered as I was exploring dialogue as a path to love between people. They are stories that I found both poignant and relationally challenging. These examples present dialogue as a choice and a risk, yet ultimately worthwhile and mind-changing, because it is an experience with wholeness, human connection, and love.

### **The Story of Ender: Aliens as Enemies**

In his fictional work, *Ender's Game*, Orson Scott Card (1991) details the experience of the main character, Ender, as he embraces the task of defeating an alien enemy race. In the story, Ender struggles to understand his context and his identity. He is a child from a civilization that is at war with an alien civilization that once attacked Earth, and he is considered a military prodigy by his family, peers, and leaders. In time, Ender recognizes that this identity, and its inherent expectations, requires him to be at war with himself, his family, and his peers, due to the complexities it brings upon his relationships (Card).

As Ender begins to study the alien race, he encounters one member of this race through a virtual world. Through these encounters he practices how to defeat the alien, but the alien is also able to learn about Ender and reveal to Ender information about itself and its race. As Ender continues on his task to defeat the aliens, he begins to study the alien race through battle videos. He tries to learn about their weapons, strategies, make-up, values, along with other characteristics. Through this study, he gathers knowledge about the species in order to destroy it (Card, 1991).



Through most of Card's (1991) story, Ender's motive is understanding the enemy as part of military strategy, and this understanding allows him to succeed in his mission—he eventually, and unknowingly, commands the team that obliterates the aliens' planet. When Ender discovers his role in the destruction, he is profoundly affected, and he decides to relinquish his military role and go in search of the enemy race (Card).

In the end, Ender encounters the alien from the virtual world face-to-face, and the alien reveals that its species' attack on Earth was a terrible mistake. Yet Ender's species (human beings) had come to believe one central idea from the aliens' original attack: The aliens would attack again. This idea became the main organizing principle in their culture (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995), and the design of every system centered on being at war with and defeating the aliens. During his encounter with the alien, Ender learns that this idea is false. He regrets his contribution toward destroying the alien race and dedicates his future to reestablishing the alien species (Card, 1991).

Ender's ongoing dialogue with the alien is a complex dialogue. He begins the dialogue through a computer-simulated experience and has no knowledge that the enemy race has hacked the system and is, in actuality, interacting with him (Card, 1991). Also, Ender dialogues with himself as he studies the enemy race. Perhaps, he also enacts a dialogue with the aliens as he studies. Ender eventually meets the alien face-to-face, and learns about the alien, its species, and the terrible pain and regret it feels regarding the attack on Earth (Card, 1991).

The ongoing dialogue between Ender and the alien incorporates physical distance, one-sided communication, imagination, learning, and a variety of emotions. It is not a structured, face-to-face dialogue, because Ender does not, for most of the story, encounter the alien. But, it is a multifaceted dialogue that leads to understanding between Ender and the alien. Ender,

through study and, eventually, conversational interaction, is able to learn about the enemy, and he concludes that this learning, or understanding, has led him to love the species (Card, 1991). Ender concludes that true understanding means loving others “the way they love themselves” (p. 168).

**Dialoguing with our enemies: Understanding as an individual path.** Because for much of the time that Ender is studying the aliens he does not have access to them, as is often the case during war, Ender’s path to understanding is an individual path, marked by detailed attempts to understand the enemy. He struggles through the clues he can glean from old videos and stories from past commanders of Earth’s army (Card, 1991). Through these clues and relentless study, he is able to “imagine” (Agassi, 1999; Buber, 1970, 1999) the aliens’ world; he is able to “leap into” the aliens’ context (Friedman, 2001). Eventually, Ender comes face-to-face with a member of the alien species.

**Challenges of dialogue.** Before choosing to encounter the alien, Ender considers the risk involved in meeting with the alien face-to-face. He entertains the possibility that the alien wants to get revenge, but then he also considers that it might want to give him a message. He decides to take the risk; and, as a result, he has an experience:

There flashed through his mind a dozen images of human beings being killed by buggers [aliens], but with the image came a grief so powerful he could not bear it, and he wept their tears for them. (Card, 2010)

This example of experiencing the enemy’s pain also represents the possibility that through dialogue we may realize that our enemies are no enemies at all. To encounter our enemies means to risk that we may empathize, understand, or find commonality with them, and therefore leave dialogue with human connection, friendship, or, at the very least, without an

enemy. Through dialogue we may have to relinquish long-standing beliefs and organizing principles and therefore face a loss of structure and identity. But in this, of course, lies the possibility of a new way of being.

**Results of dialogue.** Ender's interaction with the alien is unique—it is one-sided, but through this individual path to understanding, Ender develops love for his enemy. This love leads him to a face-to-face encounter and to the new goal of restitution. Because Ender feels misled into destroying the aliens, and because he has understood the alien species' experience, he works to re-establish its existence. This latter motive is fueled by love (Card, 1991). Ender says, "I am the only one they know, and so they can talk to me, and through me" (Card, 1991, p. 224). The alien responds, "We are like you. . . . We did not mean to murder, and when we understood, we never came again" (p. 223). Ender begins a new mission.

**Lessons.** Ender's story presents love as a result of understanding. Initially, this understanding, for Ender, is gained individually, through study, and not through conversation. Ender's individual path to understanding, however, is honoring of a dialogical reality, because he immersed himself in another's reality (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970; Friedman, 2001).

Ender's story offers us a way to love that is not a face-to-face encounter. In some ways, Ender's story validates our hesitation and our fears about facing our "enemies." It shows us that we can honor a dialogical call genuinely and whole-heartedly, without relational encounter.

On the other hand, it is the relational, dialogical encounter that gives Ender an *experience* of shared humanity. Before the encounter, Ender's love was rational; after the encounter, it was lived. And, it is this encounter, this lived experience of shared humanity, that gives Ender a new mission. It is after he meets with the alien that he begins a journey to re-establish its species.

Ender's story shows clearly that with a rational experience of love (e.g., gaining understanding), we can remain detached; we can choose our original mission in spite of love. For example, Ender himself says, "And then, in that very moment when I love them . . . I destroy them" (p. 168). For Ender, at times, the mission of destruction is greater than the experience of love gained through understanding. Ender's story is the perfect example of the danger of approaching encounter from one's ideologies—it allows us to remain distant and to avoid the surrender required in true encounter (Buber, 1970; Senge et al., 2004; Sidorkin, 1999); subsequently, there is no encounter. Conversely, a lived experience of love changes our mission. We cannot remain the same.

### **Changing Postures: An Intergenerational Dialogue**

Murray Bowen (1985) pioneered the field of family therapy with his view of the family as an emotional system. He believed that individuals could "differentiate a self" from their families of origin, and that this self was epitomized in the ability to maintain an "I position," or an individual chosen perspective, in the midst of the family of origin's verbal and nonverbal pressure to behave according to a designated role or identity with which the family was familiar (p. 495). Individuals struggling to differentiate a self, according to Bowen, are continually pulled toward reverting to the relational "posture" that was typical for them, but differentiation is achieved by not falling into this old, comfortable relational stance (p. 469).

Despite using the term often in his theoretical writings, Bowen (1985) did not explicitly define his view of a "self"; however, his theory proposes that a person's path toward individuality must be achieved within a relational context. Bowen referred to the process of individuation as a "differentiating from" one's family of origin (p. 494). He recognized that the process of defining and subsequently describing a "self" could not be achieved in isolation, but

must be tested in relationship with one's family members (Bowen). This is exactly what he set out to do in his family of origin.

Bowen (1985) explains the process by which he began developing new relationships with his family members, in particular his parents:

A person-to-person relationship is conceived as an ideal in which two people can communicate freely about the full range of personal issues between them. Most people cannot tolerate more than a few minutes on a personal level. When either party becomes anxious, he begins talking about a third person (triangles in another person), or the communication becomes impersonal and they talk about things. My immediate goal was to work toward a person-to-person relationship with each parent. . . . In such an effort, one encounters every rejection, alliance, and resistance that are present in emotional systems everywhere. In disciplining the self to do this, one develops versatility and emotional courage in all relationships, one learns more about people than in most endeavors, and the family profits too. (p. 499)

Bowen (1985) describes a personal relational style in which two people can “communicate freely about the full range of personal issues between them,” and he mentions that initially, the move toward such a style can lead to anxiety, deflection (through triangulation), or what Buber (1970) calls I-it relating—the move from a posture of learning and sharing personal perspectives to one of superficiality. He also points to the benefits of this relational posture that extend beyond the dialogue, which include learning and courage. He describes this effort as one that both requires and develops discipline. He, based on his personal experience, implies that a person-to-person relational style can become a skill, and that therefore, individuals can choose a particular relational posture when verbally engaging with others.

Bowen (1985) details his efforts, from the most impersonal to the relational, toward engaging in “dialogue” with his parents (p. 501); they include writing letters, talking on the phone, engaging in conversation about shared interests, and spending time together. These efforts, according to him, did little to accomplish a person-to-person relational style. He describes the moments that made all the difference:

There were some special occasions when I made more progress on the person-to-person relationships than all other times together. Two of these occurred at times of sickness. The first occasion occurred when my father was in the hospital after a moderately severe heart attack. This occasion provided the opportunity to talk about his fears of death, his philosophy on life, and the life goals and aspirations he may not have expressed otherwise. Another occasion occurred when my mother had major elective surgery. There were days with her in the hospital and evenings with my father at home alone. It was there also that I discovered the value of past history as a subject for personal communication. Most people are eager to talk about their own early life experiences to those interested in listening. I was working on the multigenerational family history at that time and I was eager for all that could be remembered. (p. 501)

**Dialoguing with our parents.** What was counter-cultural at the time of Bowen’s (1985) theory development is still challenging today—we must define ourselves not individually, by chosen labels, as if in a vacuum, but relationally, through interaction, recognizing our identity is tied to our connections. Dialogue offers a relational path to relating differently with our parents; and Bowen recognized that it was the face-to-face dialogue that helped him make gains toward changing his relational “posture” (p. 469).

What is unique about Bowen's work in his family of origin is that he ties developing a "person-to-person relationship" through dialogue to the differentiation of self (p. 499). In this way, he makes it clear that it is engagement through dialogue that can lead to relational flexibility in one's most significant relationships. This seems paradoxical, because we often believe and assume that distance, individual choice, and carefully crafted personal images offer us the ability to be who we want to be when relating with our loved ones. In actuality, it is not what we do by ourselves that defines us as human beings and changes our relationships, it is our actions *within* those relationships.

***Challenges of dialogue.*** Bowen (1985) acknowledges his felt emotions while preparing for and engaging in dialogue with his parents. He mentions the experience of anxiety that can lead participants to move away from personal discussions. He emphasizes that maintaining the goal of discussing personal matters requires discipline; he admits that it is not an easy path, because it requires attention and dedication. Bowen normalizes the emotional "flight" response natural in engaging one's parents in dialogue, no matter the topic. But, he also presents the option of pushing through those emotions, in order to experience the dialogue as well as its benefits. He shows that attempts at developing a "person-to-person relationship" require persistence, and persistent actions toward changing a relational "posture" also demand patience (p. 499). His example is one that exemplifies the notion that changing a relational posture demands ongoing effort.

***Tips for dialogue.*** Bowen's (1985) goal through dialogue was to establish a "person-to-person relationship" (as opposed to a parent-to-child relationship) with his parents (p. 501). He mentions that in this type of relationship, parties are able to discuss issues between them. In essence, Bowen is describing a dialogical relationship—one that is welcoming of dialogue at any

time, and he proposes that establishing such a relationship is possible. He also explains that developing such a relationship with parents helps adults “grow up” in their parents’ as well as their own eyes. It helps parents and adult children see each other as people rather than as “parent” and “child.”

*Topics.* Bowen (1985) recognizes the value of another’s life history as a topic for opening dialogue, and he notes the importance of learning about his parents for developing a person-to-person relationship. He mentions that his goals in dialogue were to listen and gather his parents’ memories rather than to share his own stories. This doesn’t mean that he was absent from the dialogue or its impact—not at all; in fact, through learning about his parents, Bowen learned about himself. This is an assumed reality of significant relationships—that our individual context, and our understanding of it, is influenced by, and is in some ways dependent upon, the context of our significant others. In this way, understanding others and understanding ourselves are concurrent processes.

*Results of dialogue.* Bowen (1985) concludes that persistence in engaging one’s parents leads to “emotional courage” (p. 499), and he proposes that a “person-to-person” relational style in one’s family of origin leads to the transfer of relational skills in all relationships (p. 499). He also mentions that these steps lead to learning about one’s loved ones and that the benefits of this type of engagement extend beyond the individual to the entire family. In other words, he maintains that the skills required to dialogue with one’s parents are skills that seep outward into one’s other relationships; they are influential and replicable.

*Lessons.* Bowen (1985) offers a vision for adults wanting to change their relationships with their parents. He shows that relating differently, as equals, with one’s parents is not only possible, but beneficial, for the individual and the family unit. Bowen (1985) offers the potential



dialoguer his own experience as an example for courage and options. He provides the path by which he decided that face-to-face dialogue was the best option for communicating personally with one's parents.

Additionally, Bowen explains that personal history and personal issues are often the best topics for dialogue; that is, sharing one's perspective and learning about others are of value when dialoguing with parents, because they help to change relational "posture" (p. 469). He normalizes the emotional experience, or "flight" response inherent in wanting to change one's relationship with one's parents through dialogue. Furthermore, Bowen recognizes that dialoguing with one's parents can change one's way of relating overall. With these details, Bowen not only shares his experience, but he offers intergenerational dialogue as worthwhile for a variety of reasons.

### **The Twitter Troll Comes Clean**

Lindy West, a writer and comedienne, was the victim of online bullying (Glass, 2015). She refers to her bully as her "troll." Although as a person with a significant online presence she had grown accustomed to cruel comments directed at her, she was still surprised by the lengths to which her troll went to attack her personally:

One midsummer afternoon in 2013, I got a message on Twitter from my dead dad. I don't remember what it said exactly. And I didn't keep a copy for my scrapbook. But it was mean. . . . The person who made the . . . [Twitter] account clearly put some time into it. They'd researched my father and my family. They'd found out his name, and then they figured out which Paul West he was among all the Paul Wests on the Internet. They knew that I have a brother and sister. And if they knew all that, they must have known how recently we'd lost my dad. (Glass, 2015)

Confused about whether to engage the troll directly, or to ignore his comments (which was her usual strategy), West chose to “feed the troll” (Glass, 2015). In an article published online, she vulnerably and honestly portrayed the story of the troll’s actions as well as their emotional effect on her. After reading the article, the troll wrote to West:

Hey Lindy, I don’t know why or even when I started trolling you. . . . I think my anger towards you stems from your happiness with your own being. It offended me because it served to highlight my unhappiness with my own self. I have emailed you through two other Gmail accounts just to send you idiotic insults. I apologize for that. I created the [e-mail] account and Twitter account. I have deleted both. I can’t say sorry enough. It was the lowest thing I had ever done. When you included it in your latest . . . article, it finally hit me. There is a living, breathing human being who’s reading this shit. I’m attacking someone who never harmed me in any way and for no reason whatsoever. I’m done being a troll. Again, I apologize. I made a donation in memory to your dad. I wish you the best.

Dumbfounded, West responds to ensure the veracity of the e-mail, and the troll once again apologizes and includes his real name (Glass, 2015). Eighteen months later, West is still thinking about the “troll” every day and considering, “If I could get through to one troll, the meanest one I ever had, couldn’t I feasibly get through to any of them, all of them? Was he special? Or did I do something right? I wonder how he would tell me to respond to the people trolling me today” (Glass, 2015). These lingering questions compel her to talk with the troll. West describes her motivation at one point in the conversation:

We talked for over two hours, and I spent a lot of time trying to get him to walk me through his transgressions in detail—the actual physical and mental steps and how he

justified it all to himself. I felt like if I could just get the specifics, gather them up and hold them in my hands, then maybe I could start to understand all of the people who are still trolling me.

**Dialoguing with our trolls.** In West’s story, there are two dialogues—there is the dialogue she begins when she chooses to write about the troll who hijacked her father’s identity, and then there is the phone conversation she initiates with him. It is natural to see the phone conversation as the main dialogue between West and her troll. But, this would cut short a powerful interaction worthy of observation—that of West’s open and vulnerable admission in her writing, and the troll’s response.

*Challenges of dialogue.* West (2013) describes the conflict she felt while deciding whether to engage the troll by acknowledging his existence and his actions in her writing, and she explains that she ultimately decided to write about her experience, because

the expectation is that when you tell a woman to shut up, she should shut up. I reject that. I talk back because it’s fun, sometimes, to rip an abusive dummy to shreds with my friends. I talk back because *my* mental health is my priority—not some troll’s personal satisfaction. I talk back because it emboldens other women to talk back online and in real life. (West, 2013, para. 14)

West’s (2013) reasons for “talking back” are many, from the vengeful to the altruistic; several are fueled by her personal values, and it is clear that her personal values also empower her work as a writer.

It is this decision to “talk back” that begins the initial dialogue between West (2013) and her troll. And, West chooses to begin the dialogue by writing “sadly, candidly, angrily about how much it hurt, how much that troll had succeeded” (Glass, 2015). In fact, it is West’s

decision to write about her experience that represents the “hard part” of the dialogue; it contains the risk and the struggle found in making the decision to “face” our trolls. During this time, she must have felt the fear and uncertainty involved in revealing her truth. The phone conversation, as a subsequent invitation to her troll, seems a much easier engagement, even though the medium by which it occurred was more relational. This is because the purpose of the talk was for West to learn rather than for her to reveal personal pain. Perhaps it was West’s vulnerability that helped her troll recognize the impact of his actions and reach out to her with remorse.

*Experience of dialogue.* West (2013) is surprised at her troll’s apology, and he seems to awaken to the reality of his impact on her life after reading her article. His response is to stop his trolling and to communicate with West as a real person. Her response to his apology is confusion. She, at first, does not believe his e-mail to be authentic. Once she realizes it is, she becomes curious about the troll’s change, and she feels grateful for his repentance.

*Understanding and emotions.* West (2013) describes her goal for the phone conversation as wanting to understand online bullies and seeing her former troll as a representative of the group who could help her understand their motives. It seems that due to the former troll’s initial response, West felt comfortable engaging him more personally, in order to learn from him.

At the beginning of their phone conversation, both West and her former troll admit being nervous. West begins the talk as an interview—she wants to learn about him. But there is a point in the conversation when she begins asking him about how he made the decision to involve her family in his trolling, and at this point, the conversation becomes emotional for West. She begins to sob softly while speaking, and she describes her emotional pain. Both West and her former troll are open with one another about their emotional reactions to each other during the trolling days; they share their personal experiences and decisions within the context of their

online relationship. West admits that she has never heard of an instance of an online bully apologizing to his target, and she thanks her former troll for his apology (Glass, 2015).

*Results of dialogue.* West (2013) says it best:

It felt really easy, comfortable even, to talk to my troll. I liked him, and I didn't know what to do with that. It's frightening to discover that he's so normal. He has female coworkers who enjoy his company. He has a real, live girlfriend who loves him. . . .

If what he said is true, that he just needed to find some meaning in his life, then what a heartbreaking diagnosis for all of the people who are still at it. I can't give purpose and fulfillment to millions of anonymous strangers, but I can remember not to lose sight of their humanity the way that they lost sight of mine. Humans can be reached. I have proof. Empathy, boldness, kindness, those are things I learned from my dad, though he never knew how much I'd need them. Or maybe he did. (Glass, 2015)

It seems, from her concluding remarks, that West accomplished her goal—to gain some sense of why online bullies do what they do. It is also clear that she gained much more than that—she was reminded of the humanity of everyone, no matter what they do or are doing, and she gained a sense of hope that people can change.

*Lessons.* As Freire (2000) explains, a move to claim one's humanity can “initiate love”; and, as a result, through this move, we also humanize those that have dehumanized us (p. 56). West's (2013) story of dialogue shows that when we find the courage to engage with our trolls, when we choose to take the risk—to leap, participate, and see what happens—that which we feared tends to disappear. We usually have no regrets.

There is no shame in fearing the risk involved in dialogue and choosing to not engage in a dialogical encounter. This choice is often based on our belief that we are not dialogical

beings and that we can “carry on” in our own strength. We can isolate, use willpower, find purpose, and overcome on our own. On the other hand, if we can trust, however briefly, that in actuality we were born to interact, to question, to struggle, to engage, no matter how difficult, then we can see a glimpse of what might happen if we faced our parents, our monsters, our enemies—if not for them, then for us.

### **From Murder to Meeting: The Bogeyman is Human**

This time last year I was plotting to kill a man. This time last year I had a gun, and a silencer, and a plan. I had staked out the man’s tract home in the Denver suburbs. I had followed him to and from his job in a high tech office park. I was confident I would get away with murder because there was nothing in recent history to connect me to him.

Homicide investigators look for motive and mine was buried 25 years in the past.

The man I was going to kill was the one who raped me in 1978 when I was 7 years old.

(Glass, 2011)

So begins David Holthouse’s (2004) account of his plan to murder his rapist and the unexpected events that led him to surrender his rage. He had spent a great deal of time arranging and imagining the details of the murder and his escape (Glass, 2011), but, before he was able to take out revenge on his rapist, his parents found and read his diary from 1981, where he wrote the details of the rape. Taken off-guard by their discovery and subsequent questions, Holthouse admits the truth, and his parents reveal the event to the rapist’s parents. Consequently, Holthouse gives up his plan to kill the man that raped him. He explains:

If you have a secret you want to keep, never write it down. I know that now, but I didn’t when I was 10. . . . There between accounts of my grandfather dying and a game winning double I hit in little league is an account of my being raped three years before. I

concluded the entry by wondering what I would do if I ever met the man who had raped me on the street once I myself was a grown man. Will I smile and shake his hand and pretend nothing happened? I wrote. Or will I punch him in the face? . . . But now, because of my parents, I called off my plan. The truth was now out. (Glass, 2011)

Until the point when his secret was revealed, Holthouse (2004) describes being determined to inflict pain on his rapist and believing that the best way for the man to suffer was for Holthouse to kill him, violently. Holthouse was a man on a mission, seemingly without another choice. He also explains that through the revelation of his secret, he lost his mission and was left bound to a different choice: Because of his love for his parents and his sense of their suffering, as well as his now known connection to the rapist and its potential for unwanted consequences, he could no longer kill the man (Holthouse, 2004). Once Holthouse let go of his plan to commit murder, he considered what other options were available to him for dealing with his past, and he decided on a radically different course:

By then, I'd begun writing about how I was sexually assaulted as a child, all the while knowing that I would never get to the bottom of it and really understand what had happened if I did not at least try to confront the bogeyman. I was a lot more comfortable with the concept of shooting him in the head than I was with talking to him on the phone, let alone in person. (Glass, 2011)

Holthouse (2004) decides to write a letter to his rapist. He invites the man to meet in person, or to call him, as an alternative. Within 24 hours of receiving the letter, the man calls Holthouse; they speak on the phone, and they set up an in-person meeting. A lot is surprising, Holthouse explains, about the "bogeyman:"

There's a scene in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* where the gunfighter played by Eli Wallach righteously blows away a guy and then drops this pearl of murderous wisdom. "If you going to shoot, shoot. Don't talk. Because if you let them talk, you may not shoot." And sure enough, as soon as I exchanged a few sentences with him, I didn't want to shoot him at all. Because I saw him as a frightened, damaged man. He wasn't the bogeyman any more, he was real. He begged my forgiveness. He swore I was the only one. All the experts say he was almost certainly lying. But then, all the experts say it was extremely unusual for him to admit his crime to me, let alone his wife and parents. (Glass, 2011)

**Dialoguing with our monsters.** Holthouse's (2004) dialogue with the man that raped him is a shocking example of dialogue. Even at face value, it is unexpected, courageous, incomprehensible, and confusing. Why would Holthouse choose to meet his rapist after wanting to kill him? This seems like a huge leap. But, this is also what is so interesting and powerful about human beings—they can surprise you. They can choose dialogue over murder, even when it's the more difficult path.

**Understanding as motive.** Perhaps Holthouse (2004) came to the decision of meeting his rapist because he didn't know what else to do after losing his detailed plan for murder. Holthouse does not say that it was out of desperation or confusion that he chose to meet his rapist. He does say that he was motivated by the desire to understand. Maybe he was also motivated by a sense of integrity—if he did not confront the "bogeyman," he could not finish his story, and as a writer, that might have been an unacceptable conclusion. Holthouse admits that being able to answer the question "Why?" was his main motive for dialogue (Glass, 2011).



**Challenges of dialogue.** Holthouse (2004) reports that it was easier to consider murdering his rapist than it was to consider talking with him. It's possible that this is a natural human response—to run away, or choose an easier path—when faced with the option of confronting the “monster.” He also mentions being nervous and shaking before beginning the conversation with the man who raped him. He says, “We were afraid of one another” (Glass, 2011). The dialogue was marked by moments of vulnerability; the rapist admitted regretting his actions and being afraid that he had ruined Holthouse's life. Holthouse admitted being terrified of becoming a father for the possibility that he wouldn't be able to protect his child from people like his rapist.

**Results of dialogue.** Holthouse (2004) doesn't detail the range of feeling he experienced during the dialogue or toward his rapist, but he makes this point very clear: As a result of the dialogue, he realized that the rapist was only human (Glass, 2011). Holthouse's experience also stands as an example that through dialogue, there can be a recognition of another person's uniqueness. As Holthouse himself explains, the typical story of perpetrators of child sexual assault is one of repeated incidents and secrecy. It would have been easy for Holthouse to go on assuming that this was his rapist's reality. Certainly, however, this assumption about his rapist would have come with ties to his own life. If the assumption was accepted by Holthouse, then he would continue to be a character in the story starring the “bogyman.” Through dialogue, Holthouse comes to see that the man who raped him is an individual, with a specific story, and not a statistic.

**Lessons.** Holthouse (2004) offers the potential dialoguer a path to freedom—freedom from assumptions and beliefs that bind. He shows dialogue as an option for survivor and perpetrator, for potential murderer and potential victim. Holthouse details the presence of

vulnerability and understanding, not in perfect form, but as messy and defined by the individuals in the dialogue, and he shows how these relate to seeing humanity in the “bogeyman.”

Holthouse (2004) offers a story of bravery. He shows the human struggle of love and hate—hate for his rapist, love for his parents—and how the struggle merges and diverges and influences our actions. He invited his rapist to meet, and his rapist responded—he met Holthouse, and he dialogued with him. In many ways, the rapist offers potential dialoguers hope, because most are not waiting to meet with their rapist (although, of course, this exact example exists); most are considering dialogue with their mother, their sister, their boss, their friend. And, if a rapist is willing to meet and admit and apologize, then why not a mother, a sister, a boss, a friend? This story helps us see people outside of what they once did—outside of their mistakes.

### **The Open Dialogue Therapeutic Approach: Love as Embodiment**

Seikkula and Trimble (2005) present “dialogue as an embodiment of love” (p. 461), as they explain their network therapy approach to working with psychotic patients. Network therapy incorporates the significant members of a patient’s extended social networks, including doctors, teachers, mentors, among others, in an effort to actively engage members of the patient’s support system through the process of therapy and thereby increase chances for recovery (Speck, 1973).

The developers of the Open Dialogue approach incorporate the foundational assumptions of network therapy with Bakhtin’s (1981) concepts of utterance and reply in order to design a reflective facilitation process with patients and members of their significant social network. Practitioners offer a therapy style that is honoring and inviting of all network members and that is encouraging of ambiguity, moment-to-moment presence, and the slow pace required for

hearing and reflecting on the meaning generated and the emotional experience unique to members in each network meeting (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005).

**History of the approach.** The Open Dialogue approach began in Finland, at Keropudas Hospital (a state funded facility), with inpatient psychiatric patients, as a response to the limitations found within incorporating the established family therapy treatment approach during the early 1980s (Milan Systemic) in a public hospital setting (Seikkula & Olson, 2003). Initially, the treatment team began holding treatment meetings in addition to therapy sessions. As the team became more and more influenced by the emerging social constructionist ideas in family therapy, as well as dialogical and dialectical philosophies, these “open meetings” became “the main therapeutic forum itself” (Seikkula & Olson, 2003, p. 406). While hospital patients may participate in a variety of services, including psychotherapies and rehabilitation services, Seikkula and Trimble (2005) maintain, “The core of the treatment process is the ongoing conversation in treatment meetings among members of the team and network” (p. 462).

**The process of intervention.** Open Dialogue intervention begins after a family member or consulting professional contact the hospital on behalf of a potential patient. A crisis team from Keropudas Hospital organizes both a treatment team and an initial open meeting with potential patients and the members of their networks, preferably at their homes, within 24 hours of initial contact. The meeting is an open forum allowing for the verbal expression of all members; participants are seated in a circle. It is in this meeting that members decide whether or not a patient will be hospitalized; however, oftentimes, the initial meeting is a sufficient intervention. For example, Seikkula and Olson (2003) describe an initial meeting with a man with a history of psychosis, in the midst of a psychotic break. During the initial open meeting, his symptoms decreased, and eventually disappeared, as his speech coherence increased. Seven

years after this meeting, he had not re-experienced any psychotic symptoms (Seikkula & Olson). If a potential patient is hospitalized, open meetings are scheduled regularly throughout the patient's hospital stay.

**Open Dialogue and healing.** One of the assumptions of the Open Dialogue approach is that psychosis is a result of “internal” conflict that cannot be, or has not yet been, voiced (Seikkula & Olson, 2003; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). During open meetings, a team member invites dialogue with a question about what should be discussed. Subsequent questions are chosen based on answers to previous questions. The dialogue is intentionally slow, in order to build trust and safety. As the dialogue develops and the story of what has happened, or current concerns, are voiced by members of the network, patients are also able to give voice to their experience. They recognize their experience in the words of others, and can articulate what has not yet been expressed. Through expression, symptoms dissipate (Seikkula & Olson, 2003; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005).

**Therapists' participation in Open Dialogue meetings.** Open Dialogue practitioners honor dialogical engagement through every interaction with the network; they a) discuss their work in the network only within the network meeting, b) ensure that every utterance from network members receives a response, c) reflect on what they are hearing during each meeting, and c) facilitate staying in uncertainty in order to allow network members to find their relational resources as well as options for next steps that may not have yet been considered (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005).

***Therapist's dialogical participation.*** Therapists and treatment team members protect the integrity of the network and the therapeutic forum. They hold to the dialogical stance that “no conversations or treatment about the case are conducted outside the presence of the network”

(Seikkula & Trimble, 2005, p. 461). This is a radical stance that keeps therapists accountable to their words and actions outside the therapeutic meeting.

Therapists respond “authentically and transparently” to network members, voicing their own experiences and responses during meetings. Therapists are active contributors to meaning and emotions created and experienced in the meeting (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). Influenced by Andersen’s reflecting team (Seikkula & Olson, 2003), team members reflect what they hear to network members, and they also talk to one another in the presence of the network (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). The treatment team believes that reflection opens up possibilities for patients to voice their unvoiced, embodied experiences (Seikkula & Olson, 2003).

***Therapists’ presence.*** Seikkula and Trimble (2005) explain presence as of paramount importance for the treatment team:

As team members solicit the voices of all the participants in the meeting, they are constantly focused on what is taking place in the moment. Without attunement to the immediacy of the moment, the dialogical process can be inhibited. More important than any methodological rule is to be present in the moment, adapting their actions to what is taking place at every turn in the dialogue. (pp. 466-467)

Presence allows for the development of dialogue as a moment-to-moment interaction that incorporates all members and all voices within the meeting. Open Dialogue practitioners understand that all utterances must receive a reply, including unintelligible utterances flowing from psychosis (Bakhtin, 1981; Seikkula & Olson, 2003; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005), because it is the acknowledgement of response that makes change possible.

***Avoiding conclusions as benefiting clients.*** Team members avoid conclusions in order to foster clients’ ability to make use of “their own natural psychological resources” (Seikkula &

Trimble, 2005, p. 466). Team members do not plan for meetings or create treatment plans, because ambiguity and tolerance for uncertainty are believed to aid clients in accessing their own abilities to create new meanings and possibilities (Seikkula & Olson, 2003). Similarly, Open Dialogue practitioners help network members avoid decision-making in order to further dialogue and nurture all ideas for relevant action (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005).

***Sustaining painful experience.*** Rather than seeking to shift particular aspects of clients' voiced participation toward solutions or positive reframes, team members hold and expand client's opportunities for expressing distressing emotions, which allows "network members [to] learn that they can rely on the professionals to help them remain engaged in conversations about difficult and distressing matters that had not been successfully contained in conversation before" (p. 468). Practitioners, within the context of the network meeting, show members that it is possible to discuss painful experiences; in turn, members are able to take this knowledge and experience into their lives.

***Living through emotional experience as essential.*** Seikkula and Trimble (2005) conclude that living through emotional experience is essential to healing in their approach. In fact, they say, "It has been our experience that the heavier the experiences and emotions lived through together in the meeting, the more favorable the outcomes seem to be" (Seikkula & Trimble, p. 468). It's noteworthy that in this approach, the treatment team is included in the "living through," as they engage and voice their experiences in the meeting. Open Dialogue practitioners recognize that emotions accompany unvoiced experience, and that through dialogue, as views and voices emerge, so does emotion. Experiencing emotions together creates an environment of connection that allows for relational shifts for patients as well as members of the network (Seikkula & Trimble).

**Love in Open Dialogue.** Through their work, Seikkula and Trimble (2005) noticed healing in their clients, as it presented itself as patients' improved symptoms, increased ability to voice their experiences, and restoring of injured family ties (Seikkula & Olson, 2003; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005), and they searched for theoretical ideas and aspects of their work that could explain what they witnessed. They concluded that the trauma that often leads clients to seek assistance is carried in the body, and that clients often do not have words for these experiences. Through dialogue, and the "enduring" of often difficult emotions, clients are able to find words for their bodily feelings (p. 468).

Seikkula and Trimble (2005) describe dialogue as a recursive process, in which emotions are felt and shared and relational solidarity is experienced; this is often despite relational isolation between parties before the open dialogue meeting (p. 468). Solidarity and emotions work together to further each other, leading to relational and emotional "attunement" (p. 473). The authors emphasize that this recursive process, as part of their dialogue approach, is permeated with the recognition and prioritization of basic human values, as opposed to solutions or goals. The prioritization of human values creates a new, dialogical experience within the meeting for network members.

Describing their observations during dialogical network meetings, as well as how relational healing becomes an experience of the meeting, the authors explain that through the sharing of emotional experience as well as the development of trust and community among members,

participants' language and bodily gestures would begin to express strong emotions that, in the everyday language used in meetings, could best be described as an experience of

love. . . . Once the feelings became widely shared throughout the meeting, the experience of relational healing became palpable. (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005, p. 469)

Seikkula and Trimble (2005) tie the experience of love to relational healing. In this way they show dialogue as a way to relational re-connection, regardless of what has caused the disconnection. In their case, it is severe mental illness. Through dialogue, network members experience the reality that relational connection is possible in even the most dire of circumstances, wrought with fear and confusion. Further describing their experience of love, Seikkula and Trimble say:

The feelings of love that emerge in us during a network meeting are neither romantic nor erotic. They are our own embodied responses to participation in a shared world of meaning cocreated with people who trust each other and ourselves to be transparent, comprehensive beings with each other. (p. 473)

**Dialogue in the Open Dialogue approach.** Seikkula and Trimble (2005) present a dialogical process, based on Bakhtin's (1981) polyphony, as a necessary container for the holding of emotions found in human relating, and they further emphasize that emotional experience and holding are necessary components of healing. They also present dialogical engagement as a way to acknowledging utterances, and this acknowledgement as essential in allowing for the development of new relational realities.

**Lessons.** Seikkula and Trimble (2005) offer a guide for how dialogue and love intertwine. They view the individual emotional experience that is brought to and experienced within the network meeting as vital for the development of trust and community among members. They further warn against interpretation, rationalization, or decision-making for their ability to stifle relational engagement. They prioritize the acknowledgment of every utterance



within the meeting for the establishment of trust, invitation, and further participation of each member. And, they believe that being present in the moment is the path by which these steps are possible, so that dialogical engagement can manifest as relational healing, solidarity, and love (p. 466).

### **Dialogue as Experience**

These examples help illuminate dialogue as a genuine encounter. They encompass fictional, dramatic, and real dialogues, and their commonalities, across their differences, speak to the possibility of dialogue creating an experience with wholeness that is recognized and collaborative. Dialogue, as seen in these stories, is a powerful path for letting go of assumptions, humanizing the dehumanized, fostering understanding, as well as leading to a sense of human connection, ranging from the recognition of likeness (in our humanity, we are the same), to love. These accounts of dialogue convey the idea that dialoguing with others moves us to a new place. What this place is, how we recognize it, and how we live within it varies, of course, but it is fresh and freeing.

It is also clear from these examples that there are certain qualities to dialogue that prime the conversation to be an experience of wholeness. But these qualities are not qualities of dialogical awareness or knowledge—they are qualities of response. Mainly, in these examples, we see the recognition of the risk involved in dialogue through the experiencing of emotions such as fear, doubt, confusion, and anxiety, and the ability to “endure” these emotions in order to initiate and maintain dialogue through curiosity, faith, presence, and vulnerability (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005; Senge et al., 2004). These stories show that dialogue is a process that engages the entire being, and it calls for the emotional experience and personal thoughts existing within the encounter not only to be recognized, but also to be in service to the sustaining of dialogue. In

essence, dialogue is a conversation in which participants are attuned to their need and call to respond; dialogue relies on our moment-to-moment choice to engage (Buber, 1970; Senge et al., 2004). In this way, dialogue is a loving act.

## **CHAPTER 5: DIALOGUE AS LOVE IN ACTION**

Before continuing to explore the application of dialogue as love, as well as its limitations, I will sort through some concepts that are relevant to dialogue as a genuine encounter. These definitions will help to further clarify the realm of reality in which dialogue as a conversation occurs, as well as several nuances relevant to how dialogue as a conversation unfolds.

### **The Dialogical Encounter as Transcendent of Epistemology**

Bakhtin (1981) and Buber (1970) wrote during the modern age. Modernists proposed views of self as internal, including the mind as the center of decision-making, personal agency as the foundation of choice and ability, and the psyche as the source of memory and thought (Gergen, 2009; Wiley, 2012). With the move from the modern era to the postmodern era, assumptions about self, agency, knowing, and language shifted from ones of self-possession and determinism, to ones of co-creation and meaning-making (Anderson, 2012; Gergen, 2009; Wiley, 2012). Exploring Bakhtin (1981) and Buber (1970) in the light of postmodernism reveals that their ideas never truly fit into modernism, due to their relational focus. Their philosophies are beyond modernism, relevant to postmodernism, and contribute to views transcending the modern-postmodern divide (Cissna & Anderson, 1998; Hyde, 2004; Sidorkin, 1999; Wiley, 2012). Consequently, the philosophical shift to postmodernism, with its new views on the nature of individualism, language, and society, minimally impacted dialogism as a philosophy or its application.

While it is important to consider whether or not a dialogue is an interaction between two separately contained psyches, a linguistic interaction that creates narratives of the past and present, or something in between, the impact of these positions to the experience of dialogue is somewhat irrelevant (Bohm, 2014; Giarmo, 1997; Hanley, 2003). This is because Buber (1970)

and Bakhtin (1981) maintained that all of these concepts are situated within the dialogical realm, and are therefore defined by “meeting” (Gordon, 2004). Language and the self, as well as epistemologies, emerge from and are created by the dialogical, relational encounter (Bakhtin; Buber). Dialogue, therefore, is the way of self-creation and re-creation, and it is the path by which realities and worldviews are made (Hyde, 2004; Sidorkin, 1999). To Bakhtin (1981) and Buber (1970), dialogue is primary; it is a relation, a meeting. This meeting defines self, defines the encounter, and defines the relationship in the present and in the future.

In the following section, I explain some ideas relevant to dialogue as a genuine encounter. My goal is to clarify dialogue as a concept, an act, and a way of being, in order to present it as a path to relational openness that can impact persons and relationships in all spheres, through the experience of relational encounter; that is, through love.

### **The Dialogical Self**

The self, or individual existence, as a physical phenomenon, is an observable reality, given the biology and boundaries of the human body; however, for Bakhtin (1981) and Buber (1970), the self-as-identity can only come into full being within relationship, and more specifically, only through meeting—that is, the genuine encounter (Buber, 1970).

**Silent dialogue.** In order to understand the self from within dialogism, it is necessary to consider the relational nature of thinking, as well as the role of silent dialogue (also known as inner dialogue) on the definition of self (Gergen, 2009; Lipari, 2014). Within and without the genuine encounter, individual thought and deliberation is a somewhat constant process. Through this silent dialogue, we as individuals contemplate what others have said or are saying, our own views, what is “on our mind:” We question and struggle and, perhaps, decide. This is an important process to consider as it relates to the self, as well as to the dialogical encounter.

To this end, I present a view of silent dialogue as a fundamental response to relationship processes and the result of a dialogical existence (Bakhtin, 1981; Gergen, 2009; Sidorkin, 1999). This does not mean, however, that silent dialogue is considered a dialogical relation; it is not. Silent dialogue is a process of a dialogical existence, and participation within it, but it is not dialogical meeting or genuine encounter, because it is not occurring between people (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970, 1999). In a dialogical encounter, silent dialogue occurs for participants as a process of meeting in conversation. It is not a threat to dialogue or separate from dialogue. Silent dialogue is part of the participants' engagement in dialogue, and its inclusion in dialogue (through the verbal expression of personal experience) can serve to enhance the dialogic process.

Gergen (2009) presents a theory of the self grounded in collaborative action. He maintains that the self is a function of relationship, and that self identification, or what are commonly described as internal processes, such as thinking, remembering, feeling, and so on, are not only responses to others' actions, but ways of explaining part of a relational, shared process of being. He concludes: "Mental discourse is action within relationships" (p. 72). From this perspective, silent dialogue is a social process, without the listener (Gergen, 2009).

Summarizing Bakhtin's (1981) notion of polyphony as well as Buber's view of a genuine encounter (1970), Sidorkin (1999) presents the self as an unfinished, ever-unfolding position. The dialogical self, however, is not flighty or confused; rather, it is a multi-voiced, complex event where multiplicity of ideas and influences abide, without a move toward creating hierarchy between voices. Detailing the self as whole, Sidorkin writes:

Wholeness does not amount to choosing one part of the self as one's "true" voice, at the expense of shutting off other voices. To the contrary, the wholeness of the self means

keeping alive all the internal polyphony one can produce, even if some voices are less than acceptable. (p. 57)

Taylor (1992) proposes that an individual's identity is formed in "continuing conversation" with significant others, because it is they who offer us language for defining the self (as cited in Sidorkin, 1999). These continuing conversations often begin as face-to-face dialogues, but then become an ongoing voice in the individual life. Applying the concept of polyphony to the options offered to us by our significant others, Sidorkin (1999) recognizes that the voice of a significant other, once internalized, is capable of intelligent reasoning and of passionate persuasion. . . . An internal voice is not reducible to an ideology, since it is imbedded in the life context of the individual who gave it birth. An internal voice remains complex. (p. 48)

Despite Sidorkin's (1999) use of the word "internal" to describe a relational phenomenon, his position on the dialogues found in our relational histories and their impact on continued self-unfolding is profound. Gergen (2009) refers to this impact as one of "confluence" rather than "influence" (p. 58). This distinction moves the impact of significant others' voices from a cause-and-effect, linear conceptualization, to one of complexity and collaboration (p. 58). While we do not carry around these voices as possessions, our multi-voiced existence is always available to us. These voices can house our critics, our loved ones, and our many varied ideas and positions, as well as the comments of current conversation partners. Silent dialogue, then, is a response to the current situation and the voices of past, meaningful dialogues, as they present themselves to us in the dialogical encounter.

**Meeting (a face-to-face encounter).** At the heart of a dialogical encounter is difference. The dialogical meeting is a relation, and in this relation, difference is paramount (Bakhtin, 1981;

Buber, 1970; Sidorkin, 1999). Buber (1999) explains, “Genuine conversation, and therefore every actual fulfillment of relation between men, means acceptance of otherness” (p. 13). The dialogical encounter is a meeting with difference—the difference inherent in human existence—where this difference is not the focus, but the participants are the focus, despite their differences. Sidorkin explains, “Dialogue does not reduce plurality of human worlds and yet it connects . . . this plurality” (p. 18).

In dialogue, participants are of utmost importance to one another, not their chosen topics or shared views, not their location and time, not the reason for their meeting, but only what each of these offers their relation; they signify their participation and engagement in the dialogical meeting (Sidorkin, 1999). Topics and actions, as presented and represented by the participant, are a means to understanding and connection, but not “meeting” itself (Sidorkin, 1999). Cissna and Anderson (1998) beautifully explain this aspect of dialogue:

The basic character of such a dialogic moment, therefore, is the experience of inventive surprise shared by the dialogic partners as each “turns toward” the other and both mutually perceive the impact of each other’s turning. It is a brief interlude of focused awareness and acceptance of otherness and difference that somehow simultaneously transcends the perception of difference itself.

Paradoxically, while difference is the fundamental condition of dialogue, if it is honored, it is no longer perceived (Cissna & Anderson, 1998). What Cissna and Anderson (1998) are claiming is not that difference is no longer relevant to the two persons participating in dialogue, because to dialogue means to encounter difference (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970; Sidorkin, 1999). They are claiming that the *experience* of “turning toward” one another in a dialogical encounter takes precedence over distinctions and creates a connection *based on shared humanity*, and that

this is possible *because of* difference. It is this experience of shared humanity, no matter how brief, that allows for the honoring of difference *through* connection—through love.

**Equality.** Buber (1970) and Bakhtin (1981) explain the dialogical realm as beyond social life. It is not to say that a dialogical encounter, or human existence, is not in “confluence” with social life, but it surpasses social norms, expectations, and roles (Gergen, 2009; Gordon, 2004; Sidorkin, 1999). The dialogical relation is a relation of equality. It is not an advocating of social equality; rather, it is an encounter that is only possible by meeting as human beings. Social roles can be acknowledged and relevant, but genuine meeting cannot occur during a conversation in which social identities are defining the meeting (Buber, 1970). In this way, the dialogical relation transcends social definitions of self (Bakhtin; Buber).

**Presence.** Meeting genuinely within difference is a counter-cultural concept. Honoring difference, without prioritizing self-interest (being understood, solving, making meaning of difference within a particular ideology, etc.) can be challenging. Oftentimes, frameworks and ideologies interfere with genuine meeting, because we have difficulty seeing our “self” as existing beyond such affiliations; and, as a result, worldviews dictate and limit human connection (Bohm, 2014; Senge et al., 2004). Buber (1970) defines meeting genuinely in his description of dialogue *as* presence. He says:

The basic word I-You can be spoken only with one’s whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter. The relation to the You is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness. . . . Only where all means have



disintegrated encounters occur . . . but the actual and fulfilled present—exists only insofar as presentness, encounter, and relation exist. Only as the You becomes present does presence come into being. (pp. 62-63)

Buber (1970) is clear: The genuine meeting, the I-Thou relation, is direct and any “means” are secondary to the relation (p. 62). Means, such as language and meaning-making, can exist within the relation, so long as the relation remains direct and primary (Buber; Sidorkin, 1999). This direct relation, even among means, can be maintained through presence (Buber; Sidorkin, 1999). For Buber, presence is a recognition and acknowledgment that *being* transcends self-definition, because through meeting one is made and remade (p. 62).

*Awareness as presence.* Presence requires choice and action (Bohm, 2014; Hanley, 2003). It is impossible to be present, to participate fully in an encounter, without recognizing distraction, interpretation, challenges, and so on, that emerge in the “between-ness” or that are noted and deliberated in silent dialogue (Buber, 1970, p. 62). Therefore, a way to presence that is inclusive of these aspects of meeting is needed.

David Bohm offers the option of “hanging our assumptions in front of us” (as cited in Senge et al., 2004), in order to remain relationally active. Summarizing Bohm’s ideas, Rickles (2013) explains that such “hanging” “leads to an open-mindedness of alternatives; to the possibility that one’s own views are false: everything’s negotiable, nothing’s sacred” (Bohm, 2014, p. xiv). It’s not so much that presence requires the belief in “true” and “false,” but that it requires participation in difference—and through this participation, varied views are seen as a condition of humanity, as a necessary reality of having different contexts—and in this way, *everything* is sacred. Through “hanging,” dialogue participants can honor difference as a

condition of being human, which allows them to place their assumptions in context, welcome new ideas, be influenced, and perhaps, have an experience of shared humanity.

Senge et al. (2004) offer “suspension” as a process of presence (p. 29). Suspension is a way of “seeing our seeing” (p. 29). Furthermore,

in practice, suspension requires patience and a willingness not to impose preestablished frameworks or mental models on what we are seeing. If we can simply observe without forming conclusions as to what our observations mean and allow ourselves to sit with all the seemingly unrelated bits and pieces of information we see, fresh ways to understand a situation can eventually emerge. (p. 31)

Sidorkin’s (1999) explanation of polyphony is relevant to presence (Bakhtin, 1980). In addition to observing what we see without forming conclusions, it’s imperative that we hear and acknowledge our silent dialogue, embodied responses, and emotional experience (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). This acknowledgment allows for curiosity and for holding and sharing one’s views tentatively (Bohm, 2014; Buber, 1999; Senge et al., 2004). Without suspension encompassing this active process, there is no presence, because our assumptions and other personal identifications will lead our participation (Bohm, 2014; Senge et al., 2004). In essence, presence is the recognition of complexity, including one’s own, in the restraint and consideration of options for action.

Proposing a view of presence established in co-being and collaborative action, Gergen (2009) presents the concept of “relational flow” (2009, p. 46). He explains, “In the process of relational flow, we generate durable meaning together in our local conditions, but in doing so we continuously innovate in ways that are sensitive to the multiplicity of relationships in which we are engaged” (p. 46). Therefore, having a sensibility for the dialogical meeting is acknowledging

the contradictory positions and opinions in our silent dialogue as well as in our face-to-face encounter; it is also honoring enduring voices that we bring to the immediate encounter as well as maintaining sensitivity to our and others' varied relationships. To this end, Gergen concludes, "We stand each moment at a precious juncture, gathering our pasts, thrusting them forward, and in the conjunction creating the future" (p. 48).

### **A Path to Verbal Engagement**

In addition to considering *ways of being* relevant to dialogue as a genuine encounter, options for verbal engagement that are encompassing of these ways are necessary for cultivating dialogue as a conversation and as an experience of wholeness (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970). In addition, emotional phenomena that are present during dialogue must have a genuine outlet for expression that is considerate of encounter (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). Curiosity, vulnerability, and faith are options for this type of engagement, as well as decisions that can deepen the dialogical encounter, promote the sharing of emotional experience, and initiate connection and love between people (Freire, 1997; Holthouse, 2004; West, 2013).

**Meeting and emotion.** The opportunity to choose options for engagement from within emotional experience is not always discernable, and it certainly can get clouded, especially when feelings are powerful within dialogue. In these difficult moments of strong emotion, it is easy to allow emotional experience to lead engagement rather than allowing emotions to serve as information, and surrendering, instead, to a larger purpose (Freire, 1997; Sidorkin, 1999). In the case of the dialogical encounter, this larger purpose is meeting (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). To be able to experience challenging emotions, yet choose genuine meeting, is the greatest possible gift to dialogue and its participants (Buber, 1970; Krasner & Joyce, 1995). It is also a gift to the one making the choice—it offers learning, confidence, and

serenity; these are found in the knowledge that a new thing was accomplished, and it therefore can be accomplished again. In other words, it creates hope.

**Curiosity.** A posture of dialogue as well as a method of observation, interaction, and verbal engagement, curiosity leads the way to dialogue as a genuine encounter when it is employed from within presence, polyphony, and suspension (Bohm, 2014; Buber, 1970; Senge et al., 2004). According to Freire (1997), curiosity is a recognition that *being* is an ongoing, inconclusive enterprise; it is a “permanent search” for meaning, for consciousness (p. 93). He adds: “Consciousness about the world . . . is not limited to a rationalistic experience. This consciousness is a totality—reason, feelings, emotions, desires” (p. 94). Freire maintains that the consciousness that curiosity encompasses is that of the whole being, and that although curiosity is a method for interaction, it is also much more:

There is a fundamental element in *interaction*, which takes on greater complexity in *relationship*. I am referring to curiosity, some sort of openness to comprehending what is in the challenged being’s sensibility. It is this human disposition to be surprised before people, what they do, say, seem like, before facts and phenomena, before beauty and ugliness, this unrefrainable need to understand in order to explain, to seek the reason for being of facts. It is this desire, always alive, of feeling, living, realizing. (p. 94)

Freire (1997) explains curiosity as a human condition—a search for meaning, an understanding of one’s constant becoming. Furthermore, Freire (1998) outlines several curiosities relevant to *becoming* and to dialogue as a genuine encounter; they include unguarded curiosity, aesthetic curiosity, ingenious curiosity, and epistemological curiosity. Unguarded curiosity is found in everyday living; it leads to noticing and considering events or moments (Freire, 1997, p. 95). Aesthetic curiosity is drawn toward beauty and awe; it is a curiosity of

wonder (p. 95). Ingenious curiosity leads to knowledge based on personal experience; it leads to “common sense knowing” (Freire, 1998, p. 36). Epistemological curiosity is found within a “reflective-critical” stance (Freire, 1997, p. 96, 1998); the epistemologically curious observe in order to understand.

Rather than existing in isolation, each curiosity overlaps and can build on the other. Freire (1998) emphasizes this point by presenting epistemological curiosity as a process unfolding from unguarded, aesthetic, and ingenious curiosities. He notes that all curiosities can become self-critical and therefore become epistemological (p. 37).

*Curiosity in dialogue.* Curiosity is perfectly suited for dialogue, because both curiosity and dialogue are ways of being with another and in the world (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970). However, in order to understand curiosity’s importance and relevance to the dialogical encounter, some sense of how it overlaps, as well as how this process promotes or detracts from engagement is needed.

*Curiosities in continuity.* Epistemological curiosity—the ability to reflect on what is happening, or on an object, and observe it critically, can lead to disruption of the dialogical encounter if it is employed as a stance in dialogue rather than a temporary need. In dialogue, the interaction, the dialogue participants, one’s emotional reactions, language, and so on, can all be the subject of epistemological curiosity. But, if epistemological curiosity becomes the way by which participants engage in dialogue, then engagement ceases to be dialogical, because the dialogical encounter has become objectified, and is therefore no longer a moment of meeting (Buber, 1970; Freire, 1997, 1998). Dialogue has become an object to be understood rather than an encounter to be experienced.

Epistemological curiosity certainly has its place in the understanding of one's participation, as well as fueling understanding of dialogue participants and their experiences within the dialogue. But, it is a part of a *continuity* of curiosities that co-participate in the process of the dialogical encounter (Freire, 1998). Unguarded and aesthetic curiosity, spontaneity and surprise, reflection, and observation must all be allowed to have a voice within encounter, and in this way, encounter remains primary, because curiosity is flowing from the experience of dialogue (Buber, 1970).

*Curiosity as flow.* The dialogical encounter is a flow between unguarded, aesthetic, ingenious, and epistemological curiosity. It is a spontaneous movement of questioning, wondering, considering, offering, reflecting, restraining, holding, allowing, and other processes of verbal engagement that encompass awareness and participation (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Gergen, 2009; Holquist, 2002; Senge et al., 2004). It is also a flow between guarded and unguarded curiosity, as well as uninhibited surprise and caution. The complexity of dialogue as encounter and curiosity within it makes for a lovely example of relational flow (Gergen, 2009)—there is no map to follow for finding our way in dialogue, but our finding, our exploring, is our map.

*Curiosity as invitation.* Freire (1998) says, “the condition of becoming is the condition of being” (p. 39). Consequently, just as curiosity is a way of being in the world, it is also a way of becoming, and it honors dialogue participants' being and ways of becoming. Curiosity in interaction says, “you are a part of my becoming; who you are and what you have to offer helps me become.” Because curiosity is naturally affirming of relationship and interaction, it is invitation.

While explaining his dialogical process for developing a person-to-person relationship with his father, Bowen (1985) presents a time of dialogue during which his father was ill. He says, “This occasion provided the opportunity to talk about his fears of death, his philosophy on life, and the life goals and aspirations he may not have expressed otherwise” (pp. 501-502). It is the recognition of “may not have expressed otherwise” that presents the weight and responsibility of curiosity in interaction (pp. 501-502). Through curiosity, we invite our dialogue partners into dialogue. We also convey our interest in their life, their story, their perspective. Curiosity allows our dialogue partners to say, to consider, to find the things that they may never have said, and to communicate them to us, because we asked. Curiosity requires that we live relationally, pondering, “Who am I?” “Who is he?” “If I don’t ask, who will?”

**Vulnerability.** Choosing dialogue as a path to encounter and discovery requires risk and vulnerability. Risk, because we don’t know how our dialogue partners will respond to our invitation and engagement. If we ask, if we reveal, we may get shot down, belittled, or ignored. This is the risk inherent in sharing our truth—in choosing relationship over isolation. Brown (2012) says, “Experiencing vulnerability isn’t a choice—the only choice we have is how we’re going to respond when we are confronted with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (p. 45). We can respond by coping individually and trying to “get through it,” or we can respond relationally, by engaging, dialoguing, asking for help, rallying support. How we respond makes all the difference.

***Dialogue as response and vulnerability as process.*** Dialogue can be a response to an experience of vulnerability—we dialogue with the offender, a friend, a loved one, in order to understand, recover, and heal (Brown, 2012; Holthouse, 2004; West, 2013). And vulnerability is

a process of dialogue, because in order to tell our story, in order to explain our experiences, we must risk self-exposure (Brown, 2012).

Vulnerability involves and implies many emotions, including embarrassment, shame, guilt, fear, incompetence, doubt, courage, pride, desire, faith, and so forth. Inherent in vulnerability is the living through of emotional experience—the “enduring” of our discomfort, in order to engage (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). This engagement is an honoring of our truth. Being vulnerable is a worthy relational process, but it often begins with our deciding that we must speak up. It begins with an individual decision, and this decision leaves us open to injury. In fact, being open to injury is the very essence—the definition—of vulnerability (Brown, 2012).

*Vulnerability as humanization.* Lindy West’s (Glass, 2015; West, 2013) story is an example of how choosing to engage vulnerably in dialogue is both a claim of one’s humanity and an invitation to another’s. Once West (2013) chose to write about her experience as a troll victim, the troll reached out to her as a *human being*. West’s (2013) interaction with her troll offers several insights into the effects of vulnerable engagement. These insights include how our choice to dialogue or not is often led by our emotional discomfort with facing another, as well as how our facing invites response (Buber, 1970; Freire, 2000; West, 2013).

*Discomfort and invitation.* Oftentimes, our main obstacle to vulnerable engagement is its discomfort. We know that it’s going to feel “bad.” We know that it will leave us open to verbal attack or criticism. What we don’t typically realize is that our vulnerability increases the likelihood that we will be approached in kind (Brown, 2012; Isaacs, 1999; West, 2013). As Brown (2012) explains, “Vulnerability begets vulnerability; courage is contagious” (p. 54). It is precisely our vulnerability that primes our interaction, so that we receive responses that affirm us in some way, which is our deepest desire (Krasner & Joyce, 1995). We are typically not in



search of a storybook response, or a perfect moment; we only want to know that we've been heard and considered, that is, *affirmed* (Buber, 1970).

*Vulnerability as a way of being.* Dialogue as encounter offers us the opportunity to relate in new ways through trying “on new ways of being” (Brown, 2012, p. 53). These new ways of being include curiosity, love, and presence, as well as vulnerability (Brown, 2012). In dialogue, vulnerability appears as a sharing of our momentary thoughts and feelings, a willingness to respond to questioning, an admission, a request, an explanation, and so forth. Almost anything done in dialogue is vulnerable, because dialogue is itself an uncertain endeavor guided by participants willing to be mutually vulnerable and uncertain in the process of mutual discovery (D. Flemons, personal communication, March 8, 2016; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Senge et al., 2004).

*Vulnerability as acceptance.* Vulnerability is a way to dialogical engagement that honors our many voices; because of this, it is a move of and path to acceptance (Bakhtin, 1981; Sidorkin, 1999). In a vulnerable interaction, in addition to my words, I communicate my willingness to admit my current state (thoughts, feelings, etc.), whatever it is, as well as aspects of my life story, past and present. This willingness represents my acceptance of my state and my story, in this temporary moment and in the dialogical process.

Conversely, if I question myself with the voice of the critic, and I evaluate my current state based on “shoulds”—what I should be doing, saying, thinking—then it's likely that I will avoid vulnerability, because I believe that my momentary state is somehow “wrong.” This belief may keep me from choosing dialogue, and it may limit my interaction within dialogue. The possibility exists, however, that if I haven't found acceptance before dialogue, the dialogical process will invite my vulnerability and therefore begin a process of acceptance. If we can

accept ourselves and our experiences enough to express them, we can rest in their reality. We can *be*. Vulnerability is freedom.

*Vulnerability as healing.* Hiding our thoughts and feelings, or keeping our story hidden, is akin to keeping our most impactful, most significant life moments stuffed and locked in a secret box. They are safe, but in captivity they are kept from flourishing, and they may take on shame-making, judgment-ridden qualities. Offering an alternative, Brown (2012) explains, “If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can’t survive” (p. 75). Vulnerability is risky, but it is the only path out of shame and judgment; choosing vulnerability is also choosing to let our story out of the box and welcome acceptance, healing, and connection.

Vulnerability is dialogical because in it, I am claiming my humanity and yours, as I face you. I am open to injury and criticism, as well as empathy and consideration, just as you are, as we, together, find, discover, and see ourselves in one another. And, maybe, if we’re blessed, we walk away from dialogue with a thought such as one offered by Brown, (2012, p. 56): “It never dawned on me that adults could love each other like that, that I could be loved *for* [emphasis added] my vulnerabilities, not despite them.”

**Faith.** Faith is required for dialogue, because in order to choose dialogue, I must have faith in the one I will be facing, faith in myself, faith in the process. I must trust that no matter what happens, it will be okay—I will be okay. Faith is an intuitive process (Brown, 2012). It is a listening to the voices that push us toward or away from something, that tell us to stop, or to push through. These voices are otherwise known as intuition (Brown, 2012). Intuition is unique to the matter at hand and the circumstance, and it requires that we pay attention. It is this faith that leads us to and moves us within dialogue.

***Faith as uncertainty and risk.*** Brown (2010) explains that “what silences our intuitive voice is our need for certainty” (p. 88). Certainty is the antithesis of relational faith and hope. The need for certainty is often rooted in anxiety and struggle (Brown, 2012; Senge et al., 2004); for this reason, certainty is also the enemy of relational vitality. Sheahan (as cited in Brown, 2012) reminds us: “Fear leads to risk aversion. Risk aversion kills innovation” (p. 66). Applying this conclusion to the dialogical encounter and to relational engagement leads to the realization that avoiding risk in relating—relating to our many voices as well as relating to others—leads to relational stagnation. Relational stagnation is a sad effect of keeping our voices locked away and letting the voice of the critic, or the voice of fear, keep us from imagining what is possible in the dialogical encounter and in our daily living.

***Faith as possibility and hope.*** Freire (1997) claims that as human beings, “our historical inclination is not fate, but rather possibility” (p. 100). It is this inclination that is faith, and it pulls us to learn, find, and claim; it is fueled by hope and belief in you, in me, in something new. Faith does not let us settle for the story that fate has determined or the one that shame and judgment have threatened. No. Faith leads us to action, to dialogue, so that *we* can write the chapters of our story (Brown, 2012). Freire (1997) says, “I am in my faith, but because it does not immobilize me, being in faith means moving, engaging” (p. 104). For Freire, faith is the opposite of relational stagnation; it is an active, curious process that holds within it the ambiguity found in possibility.

***Faith in dialogue.*** Faith both leads to and fuels the dialogical encounter. It makes possible the enduring of difficult moments within dialogue through trust that they are temporary, trust in the humanity of the one(s) we face, trust that we can respond and we will be responded to, and trust that this process—the dialogical process—is worthwhile, even when we don’t know

why or how. Detailing the ways in which faith, struggle, curiosity, and possibility collide in relationship, Freire (1997) offers a story:

A friend asked me, as if he already knew the answer, how far my optimism would go. . . .

I realized that, in my hope, he was seeking support for his. What he may not have known is that I needed him as much as he needed me. The struggle for hope is permanent, and it becomes intensified when one realizes it is not a solitary struggle. (pp. 105-106)

Freire (1997), like Bowen (1985), likens the dialogical encounter to finding something that was hidden, unknown, or silent. Sure, facing another is uncomfortable and scary, but we must remember that we may not find our worst expectations; we may find the equivalent of relational immeasurable treasure.

### **Love, the Envelopment of Dialogue**

The qualities of dialogue as a genuine encounter and as a conversation lead me to the conclusion that not only is love an experience of human connection found in dialogue, but it is also what brings us into contemplation of dialogue, choosing dialogue, voicing our stories in dialogue, and inviting another's participation in dialogue. Love envelops all aspects of dialogue.

Here, I am referring to love as a choice and as a process of being human that leads to action. The love that leads to and infuses dialogue can be a love of self—of wanting to find answers, feel relief, offer forgiveness, and seek connection. It can also be the love of another, the one with whom we choose to dialogue. It can be a selfless love, one that finds itself immersed in another's experience—the love of connection found in the commonality of the human condition. It can also be a combination of the two, and many varieties in between.

Perhaps love shows itself in a relationship as discomfort, humor, or caution. Like intuition, love is many messages, different messages, based on our unique circumstance and

relationship. Dialogue calls us to follow this love to engagement and conversation. Dialogue invites us to “try on new ways of being” with one another (Brown, 2012, p. 53).

### **Why Dialogue is Always Worthwhile**

A useful question about answering dialogue’s invitation is “Why dialogue?” If it is difficult, uncomfortable, and requires risk and uncertainty, what’s the appeal? These are important questions that are worth considering. After all, if dialogical living is relevant and possible for everyone, then we must at least explore *why* in more concrete terms.

### **Stories of Dialogue**

One of my favorite stories of trying on new ways of being is Brené Brown’s (2010, 2012) story of thoughtful, courageous, and relentless pursuit of change. Brown is a licensed clinical social worker and professor, whose trust in her research led her to begin analyzing her way of being in light of what she was learning from her research participants (2010). She found that her modus operandi was drastically different from, and fell short of, what she was learning about vulnerability and risk, and their life-affirming effects. As a result, she went to see a therapist. Brown (2010) details the excruciating and rewarding experience of changing her ways in a TEDx talk and in her book, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Brown, 2010a, 2010b).

What I love about Brown’s (2010) story is that she had faith in her research and in her research participants. She saw a different way of living and loving in her research data, and she pursued it, until she could live it. Her path was one of knowledge that pursues experience. She made a choice to change; she did not yet know, as a personal experience, that this way of life was possible. She knew it because she believed others’ stories.

Brown (2010) was in dialogue with her research participants; she was in a relationship with them, which means she and they were in confluence (i.e., able to influence one another) (Gergen, 2009). This is the same dynamic that happens in our most significant relationships. Relationships, it turns out, are one of the most common and fastest influencers of change, because within a relationship, the testimony of a loved one (or a trusted one) is valued by virtue of the connection between the listener and the speaker. It is not only the testimony itself that changes individuals over time, it is the weight of the testimony because of its messenger. Brown's (2010) story is one that has offered hope and inspiration to millions. But in order to honestly and completely answer the question, "Why dialogue?" we must also explore a story of pain, confusion, and betrayal.

I have a friend (I'll call her Ana) who suffered emotional and physical abuse as a child. Ana's father disciplined her and her two siblings harshly. According to her, her father ruled the home, and his ways of disciplining and ruling could not be, and were not, questioned by his wife or his children. There came a point in Ana's life when she decided to talk to her dad about her childhood. She was married and had children, and she had established a very different family culture from that of her family of origin. Perhaps this was a motivator for reaching out to her father.

Ana went to her parents' home, and she began talking to her father about their past. Curiously, when confronted, her father denied the significant moments she relayed. Not only did he deny ever laying a hand on any of his children, he was seemingly insulted by the accusation. Ana left his home confused and guilt-ridden—how could she have accused her dad of something that never happened? In fact, she contacted her two siblings shortly thereafter and implored them to stop falsely accusing their father. Both of her siblings told her that she was not

imagining her childhood abuse; it happened, and her memories were consistent with their memories.

In addition to this interaction with her father, Ana described to me ways in which her father, over the years, had invented realities. He decided, when Ana was 17, that his birthday was two days earlier than his actual birth date, and he was hurt and incensed when his family did not wish him a happy birthday on the new, chosen date that year. Her mother's response to this antic was to let him believe what he wanted, and this is what she communicated to her children; this response to his view of reality continues in the family.

Ana's story is one of risking dialogical engagement and invitation and receiving a disaffirming, anti-dialogical response (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970). Her experience shows how this type of response from our significant others can rock our sense of reality and therefore, our sense of self. Because of her father's denial of her reality, my friend lives un-confirmed and unacknowledged by him (Buber, 1970). This is something that she has accepted over time, and it is no longer a source of pain; however, because of her father's inability to engage, affirm, and offer options for connection, my friend and her family members have chosen not to challenge his views—those that are related to their childhoods and those that are not. This is her father's lived consequence—the fact that his wife and his children pretend in his presence and in their relationship with him.

### **Possibility Over Fear**

Many of us imagine this type of experience when we consider dialoguing with our loved ones, our enemies, or our monsters. We imagine that our parents will engage with us from their roles and not as human beings, and not only that, but they will also rebuke us for attempting to engage with *them* as adults and not as children. We imagine that our offenders and our enemies

will reject our attempt and continue their bullying. This is our worst-case scenario, and sadly, it often keeps us from imagining and attempting new ways of being in these relationships (Brown, 2012).

Unfortunately, not attempting and not engaging also keeps us stuck, in many ways, in how we relate not only to our hoped-for dialogue partners, but to everyone in our lives, because dialogue is transformational; the dialogical experience carries to all relational realms (Brown, 2010; Buber, 1970; Krasner & Joyce, 1995). And this lack of experience, this lack of trusting possibility, also assumes that the purpose of dialogue is the response (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Freire, 2007) when, in fact, the purpose of dialogue is engagement (Buber, 1970; Friedman, 2002). Our engagement—our choice to engage and how we choose to interact—is enough.

**Disengagement as betrayal.** Brown (2012) details “the betrayal of disengagement” (p. 51), and this concept is essential to understanding what happens to us and in our relationships when we are met with a disaffirming response. This response is relational betrayal, and as is natural with betrayal, it colors all future interactions and becomes the lens through which we see the person and the relationship. Perhaps this colored vision is temporary, perhaps not. In Ana’s case, her continued choice to not dispute her father’s views is a response to betrayal. It is a wise response that takes into consideration the dynamic of message, response, invitation, betrayal. After answering dialogue’s call, after inviting, after receiving disengagement as a response, it is only natural that we would not want to re-experience betrayal—it is only natural that we would not invite dialogue again.

The ongoing choice to not invite dialogue after dialogical betrayal is a self-affirming response, as long as it is a dynamic process of honoring the many ongoing voices—disappointment, sadness, surprise, among others—that exist within the experience of considering



both the dialogical event and the remaining relationship. To engage with ourselves in our inner, silent dialogue and contend with our choice to engage, the relational rejection we received, as well as how we choose to integrate this information daily within the particular relationship, is a dialogical process.

On the other hand, if we have not yet relationally addressed our concern—if we have not offered an invitation to dialogue, Brown's (2012) "betrayal of disengagement" leaves us to contend with the fact that we are also guilty of betrayal, due to our silence (p. 51). Just as disengagement as a response is betrayal, disengagement as lack of invitation is also betrayal. If we have a need, or a relational wound, and it is not communicated relationally, then we are choosing to betray the relationship with our disengagement—with our choice to choose isolation over possibility.

Maybe, then, the most important lesson of dialogue is that it offers us a way to honor our many voices and our significant relationships by not remaining silent. Of course, if we have initiated dialogue and received betrayal as a response, continued risk may not be wise, as in Ana's case. However, Brown (2012) reminds us that disengagement is not altruistic or safe; it holds as much potential for relational injury and betrayal as engagement, and perhaps more. The betrayal found in our loved one's response is visible and experienced; it leaves us with concrete ideas for how to go on. Conversely, the betrayal existing in the relational realm as a result of our disengagement is unseen. It can lead us to believe that "all is well." It can numb us to relational potential.

Dialogue invites us to recognize that we do not have to choose disengagement as the way to avoid self or relational injury; we can see our disengagement *as* injury. Dialogue then becomes a way to engagement and relational vitality, and a way to honor our commitment and

love for one another. The choice to dialogue, no matter the response we receive, is a choice to honor a relational call toward someone, but it is first an honoring of our voice. This is why no matter the result, dialogue is worthwhile—it means that we have listened and acted. We can rest in knowing that with and in dialogue, we are not creating wounds, we are soothing our wounds with balm (Brown, 2012).

### **An Offering: Dialogue as Love in Action**

Now that I have considered dialogue's foundation, love as a human process, and dialogue as encounter and conversation, I will review how dialogue and love interact and how love becomes an experience of dialogue. I also offer a way of seeing and living that accepts dialogical engagement as flowing from a dialogical existence.

#### **Love as an Experience of Dialogue**

**The context of dialogue as a conversation.** The foundation of dialogue, as an encounter and a conversation, is a specific view of human nature—that human beings are relational, dialogical beings, existing within a larger dialogical context (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1970). In this context, we are complex beings considering, interpreting, and responding to ongoing messages inherent in our dialogical existence (Sidorkin, 1999; White, 2014). The process of message and response is the relational process of existing and living. Dialogical existence is also founded on love as a process of human interaction, survival, evolution, and mutual consideration (Buber, 1970; Gumbrecht et al., 2006; Maturana & Verden-Zöller, 2008). Love is, in essence, what keeps our relational natures and the process of message and response active. Therefore, the context of dialogue is a dialogical existence permeated by love as a condition of human interaction.

**Encounter within conversation.** Dialogue is an encounter of persons, facing one another, seeing each other fully, not as objects, but as beings (Buber, 1970). In this encounter, we are whole, and we do not exist for or because of another. We are not a role; we are full and complete (Buber, 1970). This encounter can precipitate conversation, and it can be experienced within conversation; in either instance, the conversation becomes dialogue by virtue of the

encounter. Language is not necessary for encounter, because it is in facing and meeting, in being present with another, that we offer ourselves and confirm another (Buber, 1970).

*Love as dialogue.* When conversation meets encounter, dialogue has begun. Dialogue prioritizes engagement and relationship over what is said, and in this way, conversation flows from encounter (Buber, 1970, 1999). It is this prioritizing of persons that makes way for human connection and allows dialogue participants to experience love within the conversation (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). Love becomes a felt experience of interacting with another in dialogue, because dialogue allows for and invites participants to be part of a process, a togetherness, that brings to the center of the meeting the reality that as human beings, we are the same. It is this sameness that transcends all differences; it is this sameness that is love (Buber, 1970; Gumbrecht et al., 2006; Maturana & Varela, 1992; Maturana & Verden-Zöllner, 2008).

### **Dialogical Living**

Now that I have considered important conditions for dialogue as encounter, ways to conversation that are honoring of that encounter, as well as dialogue's implications for relational engagement, I present the possibility of *dialogical living*. Dialogical living is living with the recognition and consideration of the dialogical structure of fundamental existence, its relational imperative, as well as honoring dialogue through relational living and engagement. I set dialogical living apart from language and interpretation, because I do not believe that being, or living, is solely rooted in linguistics, meaning-making, and social discourse (Buber, 1970; Bakhtin, 1980; Gergen, 2009). I pull from Joyce and Taylor (1990) when they remind us that it is through the constraint of relationship and movement within it that we are defined and alive. I align with Sidorkin (1999) in viewing existence as multi-voiced. I am mostly influenced by Bakhtin (1981) and Buber (1970) in their view of true being, and genuine living, as meeting.

Dialogical living is therefore the constraint and movement of relational participation, taking into consideration the struggle of silent dialogue, as well as the courage of meeting in dialogue-as-conversation.

Dialogical living is a choice found in our options for response and is therefore a recognition of the dialogical fact of human existence and participation in it. Certainly, as human beings, there are limitations to our awareness. For this reason, dialogical living need not be constant attention to our impact on everyone and everything around us. It merely requires our attention to the fact that we are participating in a relational existence, and that within it, there are options for engagement.

Dialogical living is by nature an ethical existence, because it means an interdependent existence, and to co-live, co-act, co-explore is to flow within relational movement *and* limitations (Buber, 1970; Gergen, 2009; Levinas, 1991; Sidorkin, 1999). Like a dance, the dialogical life is an event that requires sensitivity to the here and now, to each movement, posture, and frame, and to the larger whole of the performance. In a dialogical existence, we co-exist; we are all both utterance and reply (Bakhtin, 1981; Gergen, 2009; Sidorkin, 1999). Through dialogical living, we affirm this existence through action.

This way of living is difficult to comprehend and enact, because we are entrenched in a view of the self as individual and autonomous (Gergen, 2009; Taylor, 2012), which keeps us isolated. We experience the dichotomy of valuing our individual rights and desires (our freedom) while craving connection. We have no framework for an individuality that incorporates relational imperatives, let alone for relational being. Dialogical living shows us that true freedom has an ethical dimension; it has the structure of accountability (Friedman, 1976; Krasner & Joyce, 1995; Sidorkin, 1999). This accountability is not to a moral code. It is the

accountability inherent in a dialogical, relational existence, wherein one is compelled to respond, and that response is one's dialogical action and affirmation (Gergen, 2009; Sidorkin, 1999).

### **Living Dialogue**

“We have to be concerned, to be troubled, not about the other side but about our own side, not about grace but about will.”

—Martin Buber (1970)

The dialogical view of existence presents a dilemma—it reveals to us the challenge of choice. Will we live relationally, or will we live individualistically? If our human nature is grounded in relational realities, and we accept this view, then the individualistic choice, when taken, leaves us with a known conflict. Nevertheless, the choice is ours, because facing others and facing our own truths takes time and courage; it requires vulnerability and risk. For this reason, individuality is sometimes easier than connection. Rather than being a once-and-done decision, however, this dilemma presents itself to us in moments—it is in our spouse's glance, our child's silence, our own longing. If we choose dialogue, to live relationally, then we have chosen generosity and availability; it is in living this choice that we find the dialogical way.

### **The Dialogical Relation**

The dialogical relation, or the I-Thou relation, is an encounter, but it cannot be descriptive of an ongoing relationship, because the dialogical *relation* occurs in specific encounters within a relationship. Because relationships are comprised of ongoing interactions, only the interactions hold the potential for dialogue, and not all interactions can be dialogical. (Buber, 1970; Friedman, 1976, 1988, 2002). Using the concept of Buber's (1970) confirmation—the turning of one toward another—Friedman (1988) explains this aspect of relation:

Because confirmation is a reality of the between, no one can offer another a blanket of unconditional confirmation, regardless of what the other says, does, or is. Such a blanket confirmation would be valueless, for we need to be confirmed in our uniqueness as what we are, what we *can* become, and what we are called to become, and this can only be known in the give and take of living dialogue. (p. 128)

Our confirmation is offered in being present to moments; it is responsiveness. It is not only a response but *our* response that makes dialogue. It is a response found in our unique being, possible only as we bring ourselves into dialogue (Buber, 1970; Friedman, 1988).

The dialogical way guides us in how to be receptive to moments, and as we become more receptive, our receptivity and availability to dialogical moments becomes more sensitive; however, not every moment is dialogical, and not every moment with another leads to I-Thou relating (Buber, 1970). In this way, dialogue is a way of being, but it is not a way of life. The main ways of life are those of day-to-day functioning that require that we exist in our social roles and see others in their roles (i.e., I-it relating) (Buber, 1970). This is necessary so that we are productive and maintain social life. But, dialogical moments “break through” everyday life to give us encounter and allow us to have an experience of suspension—we suspend I-it relating, time and roles, productivity and purpose—and experience *being* with another (Buber, 1970; Glatzer, 1975; Senge et al., 2004). These experiences continue to cultivate our dialogical living, because we’ve chosen dialogue, not for another or for a relationship, but rather, for the sake of honoring connection, for the sake of being dialogical in the world.

### **Awakening**

Once we choose the dialogical way, we enter into a sort of awakening (Buber, 1970); it is as if this living has been with us all along, but without our noticing. This type of awakening is

mentioned by Buber in his experience with dialogue, as well as others on their dialogical journeys (Buber, 1970; Friedman, 2002; Sidorkin, 1999). Buber (2002b) described this awakening as a “pointing”: “I am no philosopher, prophet, or theologian,” he concluded, “but a man who has seen something and who goes to a window and points to what he has seen” (p. 9).

The process of dialogical living is an ever-deepening desire to be with Thou, to relate fully and completely whenever possible (Scott, 1983). It is not, however, a search for Thou, or a search for dialogical moments; on the contrary, it is a restful existence that notices what is unfolding and being revealed around it because of an encounter already experienced—because the possibility to encounter “the mystery of another being in the mystery of one’s own” is always present (Friedman, 1988, p. 128). Buber (1970) asserts that as we live dialogically, we also become more fully ourselves—we rest in our uniqueness. This combination of “becoming we and becoming me” is in confluence and continues to intertwine throughout our lives—as we live dialogically, we live *through* our being, and as a result, we live out our uniqueness (Friedman, 1988; Gergen, 2009).

Our uniqueness is essential to dialogical encounter and dialogical living. It is our uniqueness—our human existence as well as our human experience—that allows for the dialogical relation. As we engage from our uniqueness, we contribute to encounter, because we are now genuinely present and active in the relation; engaging in any other way prohibits genuine encounter (Buber, 1970; Senge et al., 2004). Friedman (1988) explains the importance of uniqueness for dialogue:

We can only confirm the other when we bring *ourselves* into the dialogue, even if that means opposing the other person. Our seeming compliance with the other’s demands is really a deception that injures the relationship as much as anything the other may do. To



meet others and to hold our ground when we meet them is one of the most difficult tasks in the world. We tend, as a result, to alternate between taking on other people's thoughts and feelings while losing our own ground or "protecting" our ground through closing ourselves off and holding others at arm's length. We cannot know the other's side of our mutual relationship without standing our ground because we can only know the other *as a person* in a relationship in which his or her uniqueness becomes manifest in coming up against our uniqueness. (p. 128).

Once dialogue has occurred, once our uniquenesses have encountered one another, then our relationship is forever changed. Buber (1970) believed that once a genuine encounter, an I-Thou relation, is experienced within a relationship, then it is always possible in that relationship. The relationship is now marked by dialogue, and its relational nature is full of dialogical possibility. Dialogue could happen again, at any moment.

Clearly, dialogical living is not a formula or a template, but it is a way of discovery and a way of being that lives within its ambiguity as well as in specific, unique moments. That is what is most exciting about living dialogue; it is full of surprises and potential.

## CHAPTER 6: LOVE-AS-DIALOGUE IN FAMILY THERAPY

As I've worked to develop a theory that explains how love and dialogue are connected, I've been inspired by multi-disciplinary ideas and stories of dialogue, as well as family therapy influences. In this chapter, I look to my training and identity as a family therapist. Because I believe that as therapists we cannot separate who we are from what we do, I recognize that my training has allowed me to see and value the connections between love and dialogue. Naturally, this has led to questions about how these ideas relate to how I practice therapy. Also, beyond my own practice, I continue to consider what love-as-dialogue reveals about the common thinking about therapy that we as family therapists espouse, and whether there is room in the field for love-as-dialogue to make a difference.

### Dialogical Practice

In the absence of our stories, we are free.

—Byron Katie (2016)

I'd always assumed that *in love* was some perfect storm of feelings that some couples were just lucky enough to have. But now I wonder, is love not a feeling but a place between two present people? A sacred place created when two people decide it's safe enough to let their real selves surface and touch each other? Is that why it's called *in love*? Because you have to visit there?

—Glennon Doyle Melton (2016)

### Therapy as Encounter

Based on love-as-dialogue, therapy becomes a place for meeting and responding (Bakhtin, 1981), as well as for encountering (Buber, 1970). These are foundational for dialogical practice—a practice of therapy that welcomes uncertainty and ambiguity, while honoring our human desire for connection. Several family therapists (Olson, Laitila, Rober, & Seikkula, 2012; Rober, 2005; Seikkula, 2002; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005) have written about ways in which message and response, based on Bakhtin's (1981) philosophy, can orient therapeutic practice;

however, current dialogical approaches in the family therapy field have not been influenced by Buber's I-Thou encounter (Anderson, 2012; J. Brown, 2015; Rober, 2005; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005).

Because I've come to see therapy, whether with couples, families, or individuals, to be based in *encounter*—in a process of confirmation and “making present,” as defined by Buber (1970), I present in this chapter some ideas related to how approaching therapy as a place for message, response, and encounter can make a difference for therapists, clients, and the therapeutic process, as well as for the field of family therapy.

**The boundaries of encounter.** Before describing the dialogical therapeutic process, it is important to establish the relational boundaries of encounter relevant to therapy-as-encounter. Buber (1970) defined the I-Thou encounter as founded on “mutuality.” Mutuality is a condition of encounter (and dialogue) that refers to the fact that all participants in an encounter are equally able to be influenced and *known*. According to Buber, mutuality is not possible between therapist and client, due to the nature of therapy, as well as the therapist's role (Cissna & Anderson, 1998). For example, clients reveal personal information to therapists; however, clients also choose what, when, and how they reveal information. Clients are, therefore, not *responsive in mutuality* with therapists as they would be with loved ones. In addition, therapists do not engage with clients as persons, in order to be known, due to the ethical requirements of the profession. As a consequence of these limitations on the process of engagement in therapy, mutuality is not a reality of the therapist-client relationship. Nevertheless, because family therapists often meet with dyads, families, and groups, they have the opportunity to *facilitate* encounter within client relationships where mutuality exists.

*Self and role in mutuality.* While identifying mutuality is not a clear-cut process, there are guidelines for recognizing when mutuality exists. If clients can participate in therapy with significant others as human beings as well as within particular roles, then mutuality is possible. For example, if a father is in therapy with his teenage son, both the father and son are capable of knowing each other as human beings. This does not mean that the father must cease to be in a position of authority over his son. The father can encounter his son as a person—be known as well as know his son differently through the process of therapy—and this may or may not influence how he chooses to parent; he can remain in his role of parent as he defines it. The same is true for the son; he can know his father as a person, learn his perspectives and more of his story, while remaining in the position of son in the relationship.

In this same scenario, if the son is five years old rather than a teenager, the possibility of mutuality no longer exists. The father can see the son as a human being—perhaps he learns how his son is integrating a traumatic experience, or he is able to connect his son's emotions to his behavior in a new way—but, the son, at his age, is not capable of seeing his father as a human being; he is only able to relate to him as a father.

*When self and role co-exist.* The example of a father and teenage son is an example of when self and role co-exist. Outside of the therapeutic context, self and role co-existing is the main relational reality of dialogical encounter. A boss and subordinate can experience a dialogical encounter and continue in their roles; a perpetrator and victim can experience a dialogical encounter and never speak again, and perhaps, let go of their roles; a father-in-law and daughter-in-law can experience a dialogical encounter, and it may or may not happen again. In these scenarios, the encounter is an experience of common humanity. The experience may influence how persons carry out their roles after the encounter, but it may not.

**Therapy as a place for mutual invitation.** Within the boundary of mutuality, and based in message, response, and encounter, therapy becomes a place for the struggle of dialogue (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998) rather than the search for solutions. This shift invites clients to honor their current relational realities together, in dialogue, while using their relational resources to find next steps (Krasner & Joyce, 1995; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005).

In the book *Love Warrior*, Glennon Doyle Melton (2016) tells the story of her marriage. She describes a therapeutic moment in which her husband, Craig, confesses a secret. She asks him why he chose *now* to tell her the truth. He says (to the therapist),

I've been watching Glennon. She writes and talks about her problems. She tells the truth about who she is. She says truth telling is how she got healthy. She leaves in all the bad stuff, and people still love her. I just want to know if maybe I can have that, too. I just need to know if she can really know me and still love me. (pp. 128-129)

Craig wanted to know if he was lovable, despite his mistakes. He had finally come to the moment when he no longer wanted to appear lovable, based on his ideas of what that meant. He stopped hiding. Like Craig, it's possible that clients carry the question, "Am I lovable?" with them into therapy. They experience the quandary that they cannot feel loved if they are not known—love must be based in knowledge (Buber, 1970; Melton, 2016), and knowledge is a result of encounter.

Craig's confession to Glennon was an invitation for her to dialogue with him. He asks her a question that requires vulnerability and invites intimacy. She does not accept his invitation (Melton, 2016). Such is the delicate nature of dialogue and relationships. Invitation to encounter may not be reciprocated. Nevertheless, since Craig was now facing his own truth and responding to his many messages (Bakhtin, 1981; Sidorkin, 1999), he had initiated dialogical

living whether or not Glennon accepted his invitation. If invitation is accepted, and a process of mutual invitation continues, then clients are in a dialogical encounter.

Therapy as a place for mutual invitation allows clients to say the difficult thing while facing their most significant relational partners. And, consequently, it welcomes a new way of describing therapy; it makes room for relational metaphors that define family therapy as a “reaching out” for one another—that centralize our need for connection, as we “live through” together, and search for and find one another (J. Brown, 2015; Friedman, 2005; Gordon, 2004; Rober, 2005)

**Therapy as a place for questioning.** Therapy-as-encounter invites a process of discovery and questioning, not for the purpose of finding answers, but for the purpose of cultivating an environment in which the loudest *and* the quietest questions are voiced (Sidorkin, 1999). It is a way to exploring the many possibilities, the many questions, the many sides, so that clients leave therapy with intimate knowledge of their many wonderings and can consider each before finding the answer—an answer. Perhaps clients don’t find an answer, and they learn to live in the questions, for a time. Perhaps, too, family therapists begin to talk about answers tentatively, in new ways, so that answers are the “answer for now,” or “today’s solution,” and in this way, they embed the process of questioning and multiple voices in therapy and in clients’ expectations for therapy and their living.

According to Buber (2002a), living is constant uncertainty, and he affirms that human beings struggle to remain in the inherent uncertainty of relationship. This explanation of what it means to be human has much to offer family therapy process. In allowing family therapy to become an environment that honors uncertainty, not as temporary, but as part of living, loving, and relating, therapists stand for a way of life—they stand for the dialogical. Standing for the

dialogical means knowing—*knowing* as the intersection of mind *and* experience—that healing is found not in agreement, certainty, or answers, but rather in being able to know one another within disagreement, uncertainty, and confusion (Brown, 2015; Rober, 2005; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005).

To demonstrate the role of uncertainty and disagreement, I offer a case example. I once worked with a mother and adult daughter who came to therapy due to ongoing conflict in their relationship. The mother (Jill) requested therapy because her 21-year-old daughter (Susan) had begun dating. Susan had spent the night at her boyfriend's home, without telling her parents she would be out all night (she lived with her parents). This caused a loud fight between Jill and Susan, and the next day, Jill called to schedule a therapy session.

Throughout therapy, it was clear that Jill struggled with accepting her daughter's life choices. Since adolescence, Susan had developed a pattern of shutting down around her parents. Confronting her and asking her questions led nowhere, which only furthered Jill's frustration.

Therapy centered on helping Susan voice opinions and decisions, as well as helping Jill hear and process her daughter's individuality. In addition, I invited Jill to express her values and why they mattered deeply to her so that she could feel heard and considered by Susan. After several months, Susan was able to say in therapy that she had different values from her mother. Jill was very disturbed by this assertion and referred to it as a breaking of her trust. Susan struggled a great deal with Jill's conclusion; she wanted to understand why, for her mother, it was an issue of *trust*.

Jill defined trustworthiness as the adoption of her values, and Susan was in the process of discovering new and different values. While both mother and daughter were clear on what was happening between them towards the end of therapy, there was no resolution to this issue of trust

and values. Jill could not offer acceptance to Susan, while disagreeing with her chosen path. In this case, the mother had expected (most likely for her daughter's entire life) that her daughter would adopt her values and live similarly, and she had not considered what might happen if her daughter's choices conflicted with her views.

Resolution is not a goal of dialogical practice; however, understanding and trusting our significant others can occur without agreement, and encounter is the basis of this possibility. In therapy-as-encounter, clients experience their differences as they lead to knowledge of one another. The outcome of this knowledge—how they choose to carry this knowledge into their relationship—cannot be known beforehand.

**Therapy as a place for facing difference.** This clinical example is one of many where I learned how difficult it can be for family members to accept each other's differences. They get stuck; they do not know how to honor difference and complexity. For Jill and Susan, knowing the differences did not create a relational shift while Jill and Susan were in therapy; Jill was not able to truly encounter her daughter by way of understanding and accepting her choices. Regardless of the result, the process of dialogical practice becomes an experience of a new way of being for clients—an experience of facing and naming differences *together*.

When therapy offers a new way of being to clients, it also opens up paths to healing via confidence and courage. Healing becomes the result of engaging in challenging—perhaps even traumatic—ways (Holthouse, 2004; Krasner & Joyce, 1995; Rober, 2005; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005), and knowing one survived, as well as finding the resources necessary to have relationally crucial, difficult conversations. These therapeutic experiences orient individuals toward one another, their loved ones, and the world in a way that is now touched by dialogue. This new orientation is a type of healing that manifests itself outside the therapy room through



responsiveness and perhaps the noticing of dialogical opportunities. It is this type of relational healing that also affirms family therapy's roots: the belief and conviction that problems and change arise from relational processes and not from within individuals.

*Facilitating difference.* In dialogical practice, family therapists facilitate difference. Family therapists, in fact, are uniquely trained to facilitate difference due to their systemic orientation. Flaska (2002) explains that empathy is the method of the individual therapist, but curiosity is the method of the family therapist. And curiosity is only possible within difference (as cited in Rober, 2005):

In trying to think about another's experience and reflect it back in words, the creative imagining of empathy uses an identification with the client—"putting yourself in the other's shoes." On the other hand, when one is listening from a position of curiosity, the creative imagining of curiosity is from a point of difference—even foreignness—that is held alongside an unswerving focus on trying to understand the other's experience. (p. 258)

Flaska (2002) is describing family therapists' curiosity—their guiding way in therapy—and how it is based in foreignness and defines their interaction with clients. This curiosity is also a skill that therapists can use to facilitate dialogue between clients. From the position of foreignness, family therapists know that it is possible to exist "outside" another's experience, yet at the same time, be committed to the process of understanding. This knowledge is a dialogical knowledge that allows for them to work within dialogical practice.

In therapy, foreigners (i.e., clients) encounter one another. But, because individuals, that is, *selves*, are always evolving, and relationships are comprised of evolving selves in co-evolution, the process of understanding from a place of foreignness is never finished within

relationships. Therapy-as-encounter allows persons and relationships to evolve together, within dialogical engagement, by accepting foreignness and letting it lead curiosity.

**Therapy as a context for creating relational meaning.** The stories we tell ourselves about who we are and who our loved ones are keep us alienated from both (Lively, 2016). They prevent encounter, because with them, we form conclusions based on our own interpretations (Bohm, 2014). Encounter in therapy, and encounter as a relational culture, requires that individual and automatic interpretations about others be tested verbally within the relationship. In this way, the relationship is prioritized over each individual's story. Encounter allows us to hold meaning tentatively in order to be in a continual process of becoming, with ourselves and within our relationships; this requires constant letting-go and redefining as the way of relational being (Gergen, 2009). A therapy that welcomes and facilitates a continual relational process of becoming is a therapy of love—love fostered through the facilitation of encounter and love activated through action in dialogue.

### **Love in Dialogical Practice**

Therapy-as-encounter honors invitation, questioning, and difference as processes central to relational engagement, and as a result, it is marked by choices found in love—love as responsive action. How love-as-dialogue can inform family therapy practice is still, for me, unfolding; I continue to be curious about how love—held by therapists, present between clients, and as a way of seeing and being, in general—influences relational interactions inside the therapy room as well as how it relates to therapists' theoretical orientations, therapists' belief in clients, and family therapy training.

## Theoretical Orientation

Dialogical practice centers on dialogical engagement as the necessary response to problems; dialogue is an intervention in itself (Seikkula, 2002). This requires a shift in thinking for therapists, if they view therapy as a place for solutions rather than engagement, but it also offers an opportunity: Because dialogue is an orientation rather than a set of techniques, therapists can practice dialogically within any theoretical model (Seikkula, 2002; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005).

For instance, Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) expert Elliott Connie recognizes love as a necessary component of therapist engagement and language use, as well as client change (E. Connie, personal communication, March 9, 2017). Regarding his role as a therapist, he says,

If I love someone, I am incapable of viewing them as a problem. . . . [If I'm working with a husband and a wife, and] if she calls him a jerk, and I love him, I'm not going to accept that label of jerk. I'm going to have to find a way to re-label him, while accepting that you're [the wife] experiencing him as a jerk. And, that's tough. That's really, really, tough. But, we have to be able to do that, because frankly, our clients deserve it.  
(personal communication, March 9, 2017)

Connie acknowledges the realities of love found in his role and his work while employing the techniques of SFBT (personal communication, March 9, 2017). While Connie isn't detailing an I-Thou encounter between therapist and client (Buber, 1970), he is explaining how his love for clients is brought into the therapeutic meeting and how it influences his thoughts and interactions with clients. In essence, Connie is creating a "relational space of love," as described by Maturana and Verden-Zöllner (2008, p. 40). By loving his clients, Connie "carries"

love into the therapeutic context and allows for therapy to take place within a space of love. This honoring of love as the constant companion of human beings (Maturana & Verden-Zöller, 2008) is one way that therapists can foster dialogical practice as well as dialogical encounter.

My preferred theoretical orientations are intergenerational, although my practice is largely based on dialogue. As a therapist, I facilitate dialogue within relationships in the therapy room, as well as invite clients to dialogue with significant others not participating in therapy, when relevant and welcomed by clients. For me, dialogue is not an imposition on clients, but a way in which I view wellness and healing; it orients my practice toward the wholeness found in the relational experience of dialogue as I work within a particular theoretical orientation as well as within clients' stated goals.

For the therapist informed by love-as-dialogue, facilitating invitation is the purpose of therapy. The therapist believes that encounter—because it is facing, knowing, and collaborating with our loved ones—is loving, is love, and, as a result, is healing (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005).

This invitation looks different with different clients, depending on their presenting problems. For example, with individual clients, perhaps therapists invite them to bring themselves forth in new ways into their relationships, through vulnerability or curiosity; maybe clients ask loved ones to join them in therapy or they hold a family-of-origin meeting (Framo, 1992). For couples, the therapist may facilitate mutual invitation by establishing therapy as a safe place for encounter, or helping partners improve their ability to be present through slowing down communication. For families, therapists can consider all voices to be of equal value in the therapy room, facilitate everyone's views as truth, and help family members contend with their differences as well as their family bonds. The techniques or approaches used in therapy do not

matter as much as the therapist's belief in love as a relational resource and a foundation for engagement.

### **Love And Language**

In addition to describing why love for clients is necessary on the part of therapists, Connie presents love as a catalyst for language. He references Janet Bavelas, a linguist and past researcher at the Mental Research Institute (MRI): "She would say that some people have an ear for language and some do not. . . . And I don't know that even she knows how to teach the people who don't have it how to develop it" (personal communication, March 9, 2017).

Furthermore, he details how this conclusion relates to therapists' education and training:

The *only* way I know how to teach it [i.e., language], is to convince you that love is more important than your technique. Love turns your senses on. So I don't think people have an inability to pick up language, I just think they don't love the person they're talking to enough to turn their senses all on. So my job, my mission in life, is to convince therapists, you have to turn your love on, so that you can turn all of your other senses on. (personal communication, March 9, 2017)

If I could, I would rephrase Connie's statement to ". . . they are not loving the person" from "they don't love the person." This is a subtle change, not at all meant to diminish the significance of Connie's statement, but rather to emphasize that love is always present and accessible to therapists and trainees. Furthermore, "loving," in the present tense, speaks to the fact that both in therapy and in life, love can be chosen at any moment, and maybe we are allowing distractions, including techniques, to take our "presentness" away from clients (Buber, 1970).

**Love as a skill.** If love is necessary for language, then love is a skill. Therapists and family therapy students can learn love as a skill through the principles of dialogue (i.e., curiosity, vulnerability, presence, suspension, etc.) that “turn their love on” (E. Connie, personal communication, March 9, 2017). In turn, they can help clients arouse love in their most significant relationships as well as operate in love as a way of engagement through these same active and practical ways of communicating within dialogue.

### **Love and Change**

Bohm says, “Love will go away if we can’t communicate and share meaning” (p. 54). Within therapy-as-encounter, family therapists help facilitate a process of communication and thereby the creation of shared meaning; as a result, they stir up love. This stirring up of love may be the groundwork of change, but Connie warns therapists: “If you don’t have hope, love, and care emanating in your words and very being, your client will not get better” (personal communication, March 9, 2017). If not accompanied by a therapist’s love for clients and all that it brings, love stirred between clients may not lead to change.

As family therapists, we know the influence of relational resources, of love, on the outcome of therapy. We understand that love is an essential component of our work, as well as necessary for change. Within our practice, we see love—how it moves us, how it fosters change, and how it is felt in the moment. We carry love-knowledge, whether or not we recognize it. For these reasons, we are well prepared to view family therapy practice in the light of love and to allow for our love to be turned on (E. Connie, personal communication, March 9, 2017).

**A systemic view of love.** Maturana and Verden-Zöller (2008) remind us that love is biological, evolutionary, and therefore a relational reality of human existence. Our work as family therapists is grounded in the relational, and perhaps this is why we see and experience

love within our practice. Additionally, we are uniquely suited, as systemic practitioners, to consider how love is inherent in human connection and relational interaction; our knowledge and experience of love can lead us to articulate a systemic view of love. Roffman (2014) notes:

One consequence of a systemic view of love is that it extends the boundaries of self to include the other (and others). Without this quality it is hard to imagine such a thing as a therapeutic relationship. And it is simply irreducible to technique; it must be truly felt. This kind of love fosters a sense of presence and represents the ground that good therapy both rests on and arises from. (p. 11)

If “good therapy both rests and arises” from a systemic view of love, then this points to the fact that therapy, before it is anything else, is a meeting of human beings, and as a result is taking place within love (Maturana & Verden-Zöller, 2008; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). This is foundational to dialogical practice. A systemic view of love calls family therapists to welcome the topic of love into conversations about theory, practice, and training, and to acknowledge love as a reality of therapy practice.

***Integrating love.*** If love is the larger system, the way of and for human existence and potential, the way of and for good therapy, then family therapy as a field is situated in love (Maturana & Verden-Zöller, 2008; Roffman, 2014). Not only family therapy, but all work. This explains why dialogue has been “stumbled upon” by professionals from many disciplines. And, this calls us as family therapists to allow ourselves to talk about love as a consistent phenomenon of our work; further, it calls us to stand for integration—the integration of the human experience and its commonality, and how therapy is an enactment of this experience—of love. Integration means starting with the human aspects of therapy in training and practice, rather than theoretical models. It means discussing love, connection, distraction, and presence as foundational not only

to therapeutic skill, but to healing and change. It means researching how love “shows up” in therapists’ behavior, and how it influences language. But first, it means entering a dialogue of and about love.

### **Final Thoughts on Love-As-Dialogue in Family Therapy**

Love-as-dialogue in family therapy holds that relationships are central to our personal and collective wellbeing, and that valuing relationships means participating in them through difficulty and pain. Love-as-dialogue is a way of viewing ourselves and our lives as a process of engagement; it leads us to consider that our conclusions are limited and they require perspective from others, so that we are living in tested truth. Therapy, when influenced by love-as-dialogue, becomes a context where clients can experience the realities of their situations, as well as question, invite, and wait, and in this way honor their relationships as primary to their sense of self and wellbeing.

### **Conclusion: The Calling of Love as Dialogue**

In this dissertation, I explained the foundations of dialogue as a philosophy and articulated how dialogue and love are partners in the human experience. I detailed the requirements for dialogue, as well as love as an experience of human connection, and through this, I offered a dialogical way of seeing and living that I call love-as-dialogue. I applied love-as-dialogue to relational interactions, both inside and outside the therapy room, and I provided ideas for how love and dialogue can invite new conversations in the field of family therapy.

Through the process of evaluating dialogue and love, I have come to understand that my experience with my father-in-law and with my loved ones is available to everyone. That love is “touchable” through conversation that moves us from our inner, silent dialogue to engagement, no matter how messy. I see love as radically relational, as something that can be generated



through connection, no matter how bleak the situation may seem. This, to me, provides hope that we as human beings can learn what love is and isn't—that we can find our way to living in love.

Dialogue as a conversation is one way to encounter the “collective consciousness” that is the experience of shared humanity (Gumbrecht et al., 2006, p. 51). Through dialogue, we are able to put ourselves in perspective and prioritize our relational existence, and that prioritization is never regrettable.

Additionally, dialogue is a call—an ethical stance. Once love-as-dialogue is encountered, it becomes a way of being. It is an “awakening” that confronts me, and all of us, with the untruths of how relationships and love are characterized in our society, as well as the truth of what is required for love. David Bohm (2014) summarizes a similar experience in his book, *On Dialogue*. Discussing dialogue, he says:

The question is really: do you see the necessity of this process? That's the key question. If you see that it is absolutely necessary, then you have to do something. And perhaps in dialogue, when we have this very high energy of coherence, it might bring us beyond just being a group that could solve social problems. Possibly it could make a new change in the individual and a change in the relation to the cosmic. Such an energy has been called “communion.” It is a kind of participation . . . — the idea of partaking of the whole and taking part in it. (p. 54)

Kneeling at the altar next to my father-in-law, taking communion, I never imagined that our dialogical encounter would come full circle to communion as a metaphor for our dialogue. It makes sense. After all, communion in the Christian tradition is a commemoration of radical, irreconcilable difference—the difference between God and His children. Communion shows us

that when difference—foreignness, even—between God and man, therapist and client, father-in-law and daughter-in-law—is not only acknowledged, but made central to the relationship, we discover the essence of relationship. Love reveals itself as both the way and result of communion.

My dialogue with my father-in-law reveals to me, at this place of new understanding, that there is a process of creation in dialogical encounter. Every decision made in service to the dialogue—every pause, question, verbal insertion of silent dialogue, and so on—brings to the encounter a previously unknown dimension for participants. This unknown dimension is one in which we can know our differences, but move within them in such a way that our co-movement, our togetherness, defines the process and the experience. As a result, our collective purpose of pursuing a topic or idea—our dialogue—places our differences within the context of our collaboration. This brings us to a recognition that we, together, are responsible for this moment of co-existence, and we alone understand it and each other from *inside* the dialogue. We struggle through it, together, and it reveals the fact that just as we share in this dialogical struggle, we are partners in the human struggle.

As in communion, when we gather with our loved ones around the table, our differences are not the obstacles, they are *the reason* for the gathering. They are what fosters love between us. Our gathering together is a commemoration of our differences, our sacrifices for one another, as well as a celebration of our relational offerings, both past and present. Dialogue, too, is a sacrifice, an offering—to ourselves and to others. That's why it is love.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Iliámaris Rivera Walter (Ili) is a licensed marriage and family therapist in Pennsylvania and Florida, as well as an AAMFT-Approved supervisor. Shortly after graduating with her Master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT), from Evangelical Theological Seminary in Myerstown, PA, Ili began teaching as an adjunct instructor in her discipline. This deepened her interest in systemic theory and practice, which led her to pursue a Ph.D. in Family Therapy.

Ili's background is diverse, both professionally and personally. She was born in Puerto Rico and grew up in a military household. Her experiences with change solidified for her the beauty found in difference. Ili has had the opportunity to apply her clinical skills in administrative roles as well as direct service in hospitals, church settings, agencies, private practice, and business consulting. She has also taught at the graduate level for both COAMFTE and CACREP accredited programs.

Ili teaches, writes, and consults on topics relevant to systems theory; her most important work is found in being a mom, wife, and student of life.