



ANDY FLUKE

CAN WE TALK?

Choosing Dialogue

A N N E A D A M S

A dynamic, national movement called “Let’s Talk America” addresses the powerful possibilities available when citizens from all points on the political spectrum choose to talk together. Their website (www.letstalkamerica.org) states, “We need to talk. We believe the time is ripe for a national dialogue on the state of our democracy.” The Let’s Talk dialogue sessions promise an environment of inclusion, respect, nonpartisanship and a new quality of thinking together. People listen, speak, ask, and learn without being manipulated to agree, change, or withhold thoughts or feelings. The format is most often meeting in small groups followed by a collective sharing of insights, topics, feedback, and possible action steps.

The purpose of this group is to bring people together to converse about our country, freedom, unity, equality, and our vision for the future. For example, what does “by, for and of the people” really mean to each of us? Let’s Talk America invites us to participate in shifting from diatribe to a dialogue—“an open and frank interchange, as in seeking mutual understanding and harmony.”

Philosopher John Dewey, a staunch advocate of education for a democracy, reminded us that “democracy begins in conversation.”

Great changes begin in conversations. And today we need more open conversation and dialogue to move us from fragmented and divisive positions to a deeper mutual understanding and appreciation of divergent perspectives. The Let’s Talk America movement offers a renewed education in democracy by having us practice together “of, by, and for the people.” As their website asserts: “Democracy takes guts. It is a process, not a given. It is a nationwide activity, not a spectator sport. It requires keeping an open mind, and honest, respectful listening and speaking . . . like working out for healthy bodies, conversation works our ‘democracy muscles’.”

I have participated in the Let’s Talk America sessions, and believe they create an opening for a different kind of future for the United States and the world. It is very difficult to openly listen to, and be listened to by, another without being influenced by him or her. Let’s Talk creates the opening . . . and then it is up to us as individuals to step in and engage the question, “Can we talk?” The process is nonconfrontational. However, we need to be willing to



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RESOURCES

Public Conversations Project:
<http://www.publicconversations.org>

Civic Practices Network:
<http://www.cpn.org>

Collective Wisdom Initiative:
<http://www.collectivewisdominitiative.org>

David Bohm on Dialogue:
<http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue>

Conversation Cafés:
<http://www.conversationcafe.org>

National Coalition of Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD):
<http://www.thataway.org>

World Café
<http://www.utne.com/com>

Noetic Café
<http://cafe.noeticnetworks.org>

confront our own internal prejudices and biases when others ask: “What if that which unites us is more than we realize, and if that which divides us is less than we fear?”

Communication for a New World

Modern science and its offshoot, modern technology, has been motivated by an ideal of domination and control of the natural world. I contend that our way of talking with one another in the US mainstream—politically and otherwise—is rooted in this paradigm, even if we have never read a science text. For the most part, our education trains us to marshal facts, to build strong arguments, to

We the People

Visionary and activist Mark Satin, author of the book *Radical Middle* (Westview Press, 2004), chronicles a weekend conference co-sponsored by Let's Talk America and the Democracy in America Project last June at the Fetzer Institute. Early on, Satin resolved some of his initial misgivings about attending yet another well-intentioned but potentially ineffective meeting of thinkers and activists. Reflecting on the event, he notes:

"Before leaving, we all signed our names to a document titled 'We the People'. Many of us signed with flourishes, as if we were signing something akin to the Declaration of Independence. Here are the key passages:

'We respect our differences and recognize America needs every one of our viewpoints, ideas, and passions—even those we don't agree with—to keep our democracy vital and alive;

'We recognize that meeting here and across our land for dialogues across differences builds trust, understanding, respect, and empowerment—the conditions necessary for freedom and democracy to live in us and around us;

'And, therefore, each still grounded in our own considered views (conscience and convictions), we commit ourselves and our communities of interest to foster dialogue across the many divides in America, in large and small groups, to build trust, insight, and inspired action toward the more perfect union we all desire.'

"Will the efforts of Let's Talk America and Democracy in America Project bear fruit? I do not know. But for the first time in many years, I feel enthusiastic enough about an incipient political movement to want to put my shoulder to the wheel."

For more on Mark Satin and *Radical Middle*, see www.radicalmiddle.com

dominate the end result of important conversations, to *win*.

Our culture's long lineage of debate has guided our ways of speaking and listening to one another. In debate or discussion, there is a winner—he or she who is most convincing, the dominator; and there is a loser, the one who failed to convince, the dominated. We witness other examples in television interviews. Speakers often seem to press their own "on" button in an effort to dominate and avoid being controlled by others as they relate mechanically to the topic. Rarely is there any genuine and sincere communication occurring.

The complex social and political dynamics of today's world call for something very different. Our divisive and fragmented "either/or" world is giving way to more inclusive and healthy "both/and" sets of possibilities

("health" and "whole" have the same etymological root). And integral to this paradigm shift is a transformation in our styles of communicating. The art of conversation through *dialogue* ("to talk among") allows people to learn what it means to create together.

Physicist and philosopher David Bohm contributed powerfully to our understanding and experience of dialogue as a profound, nonconventional, mode of inquiry and exchange of ideas and perspectives. As a physicist, he had a particular definition of dialogue: "Through the meaning of the word, a stream of meaning flows among, through us, and between us." Bohm related to dialogue as a "multi-faceted process that explores an unusually wide range of human experiences: our closely-held values, the nature and intensity of emotions, the patterns of our thought processes, the function of memory, the import of inherited cultural myths, and the manner in which our neurophysiology structures moment-to-moment experience."

Bohm presents unique distinctions in the area of thought, which, as a physicist, he viewed as a more fluid medium than the accepted "objective representation of reality" that so many people hold as truth. For him, engaging in dialogue meant observing how "thought is generated and sustained at the collective level." This kind of inquiry, he said, "calls into question deeply-held assumptions regarding culture, meaning, and identity. Dialogue is an invitation to test the viability of traditional definitions of what it means to be human, and collectively to explore the prospect of an enhanced humanity."

Dialogue can be one of the most powerful possibilities that human beings have to learn about ourselves and others. How and why we think the way we do—where our beliefs and interpretations come from; their impact on us; the quality of our lives and the lives of others; how and why people from different ethnic, cultural, economic, political, educational, or religious backgrounds think and act the way they do—are all areas of inquiry where dialogue can bring clarity and insight.



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