Transformative Dialogue: A Key to Elevating Discourse

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Abstract
The Bahá'í writings prescribe consultation "on all matters," and specify not only the broad shape of the consultative process, but the prerequisite attitudes of those seeking to consult. But what is to be done when these prerequisites are lacking—when, for instance, people seem unable or unwilling to even understand each other? A similar challenge confronts public discourses, many of which appear fundamentally dysfunctional. In this paper, we canvass current research to identify elements of a process that can facilitate understanding among dialogue partners. The resulting "Transformative Dialogue," which aims primarily at transforming relationships, can potentially lay the groundwork for true consultation. We argue that TD is a distinct mode of dialogue, embodying a recognizable set of precepts and processes, and can therefore be studied, systematically developed within local communities, and applied to specific problems within those communities.

Résumé
Les écrits bahá'ís prescrivent la consultation « sur tous les sujets » et précisent non seulement la forme générale du processus de consultation, mais aussi les attitudes que doivent avoir ceux qui cherchent à se consulter. Mais que faire lorsque ces conditions préalables font défaut – lorsqu'il semble, par exemple, que les gens ne peuvent pas ou ne veulent pas se comprendre? Le même défi se pose pour les discours publics, dont un grand nombre semblent fondamentalement dysfonctionnels. Cet article passe en revue les plus récentes recherches afin d'identifier les éléments d'un processus susceptible de faciliter la compréhension entre partenaires d'un dialogue. Le « dialogue transformateur » qui en résulte, et qui a pour principal objectif de transformer les relations, pourrait jeter les bases d'une véritable consultation. Nous soutenons que le dialogue transformateur est un mode de dialogue distinct, qui intègre un ensemble identifiable de préceptes et de processus, et qu'il peut donc être étudié, développé de manière systématique au sein de communautés locales, et appliqué à des problèmes concrets au sein de ces communautés.

Resumen
Los escritos Bahá'ís prescriben la consulta en "todos los asuntos" y especifican no solamente la forma amplia del proceso consultivo, sino las actitudes como condiciones previas para aquellos que buscan consultar. Pero, que hay que hacer cuando estas condiciones están ausentes-cuando, por ejemplo, la gente no parece estar en capacidad o tener deseo de ni siquiera entenderse uno al otro? Un reto similar se presenta en discursos públicos, muchos de los cuales parecen fundamentalmente no funcionales. En este artículo, examinamos la actual investigación para identificar los elementos de un proceso que puede facilitar el entendimiento entre los que buscan dialogar. El resultante "Diálogo Transformativo" que busca primariamente transfor-

mar las relaciones, puede potencialmente poner las bases para una verdadera consulta. Urgimos que el Diálogo Transformativo es un modo distinto de diálogo que abarca una serie de reconocibles preceptos y procesos y por ende puede ser estudiado, sistemáticamente desarrollado dentro de las comunidades locales, y aplicado a los problemas específicos dentro de las mismas comunidades.

Introduction: Transformative Dialogue and its role

The centrality of consultation to not only Bahá'í epistemology (Smith; Friberg), but to the conception of community that Bahá'ís are trying to learn about (White Kazemipour) can hardly be overstated. Much of the Bahá'í understanding of this practice comes from the writings, and the example, of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who explained:

> Man must consult on all matters, whether major or minor, so that he may become cognizant of what is good. Consultation giveth him insight into things and enableth him to delve into questions which are unknown. The light of truth shineth from the faces of those who engage in consultation. (qtd. in *Consultation* no. 14)

However, consultation, which "must have for its object the investigation of truth," seems to present a demanding set of prerequisites for those involved (*Consultation* no. 21). Not only must these share the goal of truth-seeking, but "[t]he members who are consulting. . . should behave in the utmost love, harmony and sincerity towards each other" (no. 14).[1] Intention, of course, matters more than perfection, and these attitudes and virtues can be progressively cultivated in a group of people sincerely committed to the consultative process (White Kazemipour). But what is to be done when these preconditions are lacking entirely—when, for instance, the differences in perspective or in desired outcomes are so great between people that they may, at first glance, seem unable or unwilling to even understand each other?

A similar question grows increasingly urgent in discourses in general, both public and private: how can we (re)build the bases of constructive dialogue in a seemingly polarized world? It is hardly controversial to observe that public discourses in particular, buried as they are in a flood of mistrust, misinformation, bias, and prejudice, undermine existing trust relationships and preclude the spontaneous development of new ones. Instead, they often

1 Similarly, the discursive processes of science implicitly require that participants commit to an ethical and empirical search for the truth, reason effectively, exercise intellectual humility (Resnick), develop a guarded trust in the process, and, indirectly, a measure of trust in each other. While we do not discuss science as a discourse at length in this process, we submit that Transformative Dialogue can remove barriers to the capacity of social groups to generate knowledge collectively—in effect, to become, in some measure, scientific communities.

lock people into patterns of belief and behavior that actively bar their participation in anything remotely resembling consultation. These corrosive influences stymie the independent investigation of truth, both individually and collaboratively.

In the North American context within which we are writing, the problems these questions point to seem, at times, overwhelming. We have found, nevertheless, that there are places we can look for answers, or at least the beginnings of answers. Those who take ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as an Exemplar can consider the way in which He interacted with those with whom He did not (yet) share the basis for consultation. Howard Colby Ives, who observed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during some of His travels in the United States, describes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s way of listening:

> How differently ‘Abdu’l-Bahá met the questioner, the conversationalist, the occasion: To the questioner He responded first with silence—an outward silence. His encouragement always was that the other should speak and He listen. There was never that eager tenseness, that restlessness so often met showing most plainly that the listener has the pat answer ready the moment he should have a chance to utter it. I have heard certain people described as “good listeners,” but never had I imagined such a “listener” as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. (193–94)

Ives recounts a story about a Unitarian minister who was interviewing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for an article on the Bahá’í Faith. He describes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as sitting quite silently throughout the interview, listening with unwearied attention to the long hypothetical questions of “the reverend doctor”:

> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá answered mainly in monosyllables. He never flagged in interest but it seemed to be more an interest in the questioner than in his questions. He sat perfectly relaxed. . . . He looked at the interviewer with that indescribable expression of understanding love which never failed. . . . The doctor talked on and on. I grew more and more impatient. I was ashamed of and for him. Why did not ‘Abdu’l-Bahá recognize the superficial nature underlying all these questions? . . . Why was not the interview cut short and the talker dismissed? But if others in the group grew impatient ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not. He encouraged the doctor to express himself fully. If the speaker flagged for a moment ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke briefly in reply to a question and then waited courteously for him to continue. (47–49)

What Ives describes here was not, it seems, consultation *per se*: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not follow the prescription He sets out for one who consults, to “express . . . with absolute freedom his own opinion and set . . . forth

his argument"—or at least, not yet (*Consultation* no. 9). Before the shared investigation of truth could be undertaken, the relationship between the discussants had to be addressed; thus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interest was "in the questioner [more] than in his questions" (Ives 47).

What seemed to come so naturally to the Perfect Exemplar of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings may, of course, require no small amount of reflection and practice for those who would follow in His footsteps to cultivate in their own approach to discourse. Complementing the insights to be gleaned from studying 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example, there is a growing body of experience and research, across a range of fields, that can help us uncover the elements of a successful approach to building the kinds of relationships within which consultation can flourish. These elements include the systematic development of skills and processes to bring bias to the surface, promote clarity of thinking, and develop the capacity of trust among potential discourse partners.

In this paper, we examine and consolidate some of this wide-ranging literature, correlating it to principles and insights found in the Bahá'í writings and guidance. We distill a process that we call, for shorthand purposes, Transformative Dialogue (TD).[2] We take TD to be a special form of dialogue, conducted among two or a very few people, with more time and care than casual conversation, in which the participants, temporarily and in a disciplined manner, forego the ambition of persuading or instructing each other for the sake of listening deeply to gain insight into their dialogue partner's values and ways of knowing. TD is not meant to be a rigid procedure or a set of steps; however, as will become clear in this paper, enough research exists to show that certain attitudes, approaches, and practices are a consistent hallmark of this kind of dialogue.

We will show that the skillsets and practices of TD are based on both scientific research and practical experience, and serve to clear out some of the barriers, not only to consultation within a group, but to the individual's independent investigation of the truth, and to both individual and collective participation in the discourses of society. Even though we view TD as quite distinct from these other processes, we see it as naturally assisting in their initiation, and thereafter playing a supporting role from time to time. TD is dialogue that opens up the possibility of transformation where it was formerly precluded by various social and spiritual disorders. And while TD cannot and should not in any way replace consultation, whose epistemic power it does not aspire to match, we hope that it may be found useful as a preparatory and complementary process. With

2 Although we cast the term in conscious recollection of Helen Longino's epistemological term "transformative interrogation," sometimes referred to as "transformative criticism," we mean to imply a much broader and more straightforward reading of the term.

its more humble goal—not the shared investigation of truth, but the establishment of the relational and attitudinal basis for such investigation—TD requires less preparation and discipline than consultation, and can serve to help clear the mental blocks that some might encounter on the road to full and robust participation in that important activity.

A final introductory note: while TD may be of use in establishing a basis for any number of different kinds of conversations, its particular relationship to conversations aimed at making a contribution to discourse is worth accentuating. We do not wish to overstate the problem of polarization, division, and dysfunctional ways of talking to each other. In the context of community-building at the grassroots of our neighborhoods, for instance, it may well be that the natural contact and friendships that develop act as a buffer against the forces of disintegration, and make it more likely than not that conversations will be based on mutual respect and a shared desire to grow in understanding. This may be an area in which it is relatively straightforward to answer the call from the Universal House of Justice for a "rise in the capacity of the individual believer, the local community, and the institutions of the Faith" to, among other things, "engage in conversations on spiritual themes" as we are "focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation" (30 December 2021).

At the same time, as the work of community building progresses, it will organically give rise to opportunities to contribute to discourses as well. "[I]n relation to the release of the society-building power of the Faith at the grassroots, [a capacity for contributing to the discourses of society] comes into greater demand as closer association with a population, brought about through the work of expansion and consolidation, leads to increased consciousness of an area's prevailing social problems, as well as of the aspirations of its people to overcome them" (30 December 2021). It may be here, as well as in efforts to contribute to discourses in broader public, professional or academic settings not directly connected to community-building efforts, that elements of dysfunction—polarization, dichotomization, and a tendency to Othering—seep in. If and when this occurs, we believe that TD can serve as a flexible tool that can be conducted in a manner tailored to the (local community) context. As such, we submit (though we do not argue it in detail in this paper) that TD possesses a natural synergy with the Bahá'í community's global project of releasing the society-building power of the Faith. Since TD ultimately aims to transform connections between people in direct conversation with each other, we believe that it can simultaneously set the stage for consultation and the elevation of discourses, and promote relationships that contribute to the revitalization of community life.

Insights into the Depth of the Problem: Why Is Discourse So Hard?

As the Bahá'í community focuses on "transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation," it will naturally have to overcome significant barriers to this project. Before exploring how TD may help in this endeavor, then, it will be important to provide an analytical look at those barriers. We focus here on three in particular: the impact of group identity on bias in human reason, the problem of dichotomization, and the limited ability of facts to sway us.

Bias and Group Identity

At the core of the challenge of discourse is the inherent difference in how we understand ourselves and others. In *The Introspection Illusion*, Emily Pronin analyzes a persistent and universal asymmetry between the ways in which we judge our own actions and those of others. We know all the special circumstances and mitigating factors, the nuances of inner dialogue and rationale, when we judge our own actions. But when it comes to judging others, about whom we may know very little, we have no direct access to their inner processes. As a consequence, her research shows, we readily perceive others as biased, and yet are very likely blind to our own biases, even when they are objectively measured and pointed out to us.[3]

Our more charitable view of our own reasoning will often extend to those in a group with which we identify, with the in-group serving as something of an intermediate case between self and other. We tend to use someone's group membership—whether they are part of our in-group or an out-group—as a tentative proxy for a host of beliefs, backed by supporting reasons and justification that are taken as understood.[4]

Becoming aware of biases of this kind is a "critical step in reducing one's prejudice and discrimination" (Perry et al. 64). However, the well-documented fact that many of our biases can be subconscious or unconscious makes it more difficult to cultivate this awareness.[5] One task of TD, then, will be

3 See also Espinosa.

4 The polarization that results from this tendency, once entrenched, can build on itself. Partisans "incorrectly believe that members of the other party dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with them about twice as much as they actually do" ("America's Divided Mind" 10). This erroneous perception can find expression in action, as "[p]eople's actions toward a competitive outgroup can be motivated not only by their perceptions of the outgroup, but also by how they think the outgroup perceives the ingroup (i.e. meta-perceptions)" (Moore-Berg et al. 14864).

5 Kurdi and Banaji, for instance, summarizing a broad range of research into the correlation of conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) attitudes about race, and found that "[i]mplicit measures often reveal higher levels of social group biases than their explicit counterparts, including in participants endorsing egalitarian values" (340).

to reveal the presence of unconscious bias as a near universal aspect of the human condition, in a manner that does not alienate participants.[6]

The Tendency to Dichotomize

Most of us have had the experience of trying to engage in a genuine discussion on a certain topic, only to find the conversation drowning in an ever-widening series of concerns, each of which seems to add difficulty rather than clarity. Many discourses, in other words, have come to be embedded in meta-discourses, born of our need to "divide the world into categories in thought and make distinctions within those categories. Though these categories are a natural mechanism to develop meaning, we have a tendency to become almost hypnotized by them" (Isaacs, *Taking Flight* 29). These categories are many, and all too easily develop into false dichotomies: science versus religion, rationalism versus dogma, theist versus atheist, materialism versus rational spiritualism, one political party versus its opposition, and the like. Indeed, these categories are typically framed by partisans, whose interests are served by dichotomization; the potentially innovative and productive middle ground is precluded by such framing altogether. When discourses are divided along lines of *political* partisanship, they can become particularly intractable.[7]

The tendency to dichotomize and the problem of bias towards out-groups are, of course, intimately connected, given the intertwined relationship between discourses, communities of practice, communities of belief, and personal identity. Dysfunctionalities can become entrenched in a discourse merely because two or more sub-communities form in reaction to each other. When they do so, they devote part of their community's practices and identity-shaping activities to the enumeration of the faults and foibles of the members of the "other" communities of belief. As Powell points out, Othering[8] of

6 This work does not fall on TD alone, of course. As Espinoza points out, the process of Bahá'í consultation can itself be seen as exerting a debiasing effect . The same could be said of transformative interrogation and the wider truth-seeking context of science. TD, as described below, simply begins this work in a more focused manner, and, importantly, offers ample time and space for the individual to explore the unique roots of their *individual* history and biases in a supportive environment, free from the need to make a collective decision or reach any particular shared understanding.

7 This is even before taking into account deliberate disinformation campaigns—aimed, for instance, at confusing public perception of the authority of science (Oreskes and Conway). Conspiracy narratives crafted to reinforce a dichotomized position rather than convey anything of empirical truth can exert a strongly distorting influence on public discourses, further contributing to polarization and Othering.

8 In this document we will follow the example of Powell and Menendian in capitalizing 'Othering' to help identify it as a distinct process at play within our world

this kind goes beyond an individual's reactive judgment of someone different from themselves:

> Othering is not about liking or disliking someone. It is based on the conscious or unconscious assumption that a certain identified group poses a threat to the favoured group. It is largely driven by politicians and the media, as opposed to personal contact. Overwhelmingly, people don't "know" those that they are Othering. (n.p.)

Othering can take quite extreme forms and be pervasive in its effects. Racism, for instance, carries so many entanglements (cultural, economic, geographic, and so on) that it should be considered a disease of the worldview. Amongst the kinds of bias TD must strive to uncover, those contributing to Othering are perhaps the most crucial.

Why Are Facts and Reason Not Enough?

For those who might hope that human reason, when exposed to "the facts," will naturally see through simplistic dichotomies and reject the biases just described, Journalist Will Storr provides a sobering assessment:

> As you can see, reason has zero effect on [some] people [in some contexts]. What I want to know is, why? Humans are rational beings. . . . But intelligence apparently isn't the forcefield against wrongness that I had once assumed. Reason is no magic bullet. (26–27)

The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance, first described under that name by Leon Festinger in 1957, can explain some of the psychology behind those cases where facts or reasoned argument do not change people's minds. Research has, in fact, confirmed that positions sometimes harden in the face of facts that run counter to one's beliefs. This is a characteristic of science denialism, for instance, as discussed in Schmid and Betsch's meta-analysis of studies related to the question of the effect of arguing the facts in public. Using the terms put forward by Diethelm and McKee, Schmid and Betsch carefully distinguish "science denialism" from "scepticism":

> [In] contrast to functional scepticism, science deniers accept evidence only if it confirms their prior beliefs—that usually contradict the scientific consensus. This dysfunctional scepticism is driven by how the denier would like things to be rather than what he has evidence for, making science denialism a motivated rejection of science. (931)

The implication here is that arguing with a science denier (for instance) will simply drive them deeper into denial.[9]

and within the dynamics of discourses.

9 This may be exacerbated in the

Argumentation, then, is not a promising methodology for TD.

Our Path to Transformative Dialogue, and Some Initial Considerations

Our own path to TD began with our personal experiences while trying to bridge divides we encountered in a wide-ranging variety of dysfunctional public discourses addressing topics where truth and facts *should* matter but are often lost in rhetorical squabbling. This included informal apologetic debates between ourselves (as theists) and others who could be characterized as atheists, materialists, and/or self-styled 'skeptics' who attacked religion as they conceived of or experienced it. One of us (Neyman) also studied the longstanding argumentation between advocates of creationism (in many forms) and exponents of the science of biological evolution, some of whom went well beyond the science to advocate scientism and other materialistic philosophies. Other discourses in which we engaged at various times were characterized by the defense of science and science-based public policy in the face of a host of tendencies ranging from ignorance and wishful thinking to structured campaigns of disinformation. Discourses in this category include, most prominently, those pertaining to pandemic response, vaccine hesitation, and climate change science and mitigation, as well as the phenomenon of flat-earthism as it has propagated on the internet. Because our efforts were always rooted in a deep appreciation of the intrinsic harmony of science and religion, a core Bahá'í teaching, as a reliable guide to the truth, we often found ourselves required to simultaneously defend science while attempting to call out and discourage scientism (Ridder et al.).

On every side and in many ways, public dialogue and discourse increasingly seemed to us to be intractably dysfunctional. Perhaps worst of all, we came to recognize that we, ourselves, were not immune from these discursive disorders, as we sometimes discovered after the fact that we had fallen into othering behavior, labeling, and badgering with facts in an attempt to persuade. We often proceeded without a plan for recognizing our own biases or building constructive dialogue.

Thus we began a search for insights, knowledge, and processes that might

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context of a *public* argument: public debaters have a stake in not 'losing' by conceding that they have misconstrued the facts. Schmid and Betsch's meta-analysis concludes that it is still important to argue in public for the sake of the audience: "[Not] responding to science deniers has a negative effect on attitudes towards behaviours favoured by science (for example, vaccination) and intentions to perform these behaviours," whereas "[p]roviding the facts about the topic or uncovering the rhetorical techniques typical for denialism had positive effects" (Schmid and Betsch 931). TD, being conducted in private and in a non-argumentative mode, between two or a few people, is not faced with this division of motivation.

serve to heal and elevate discourses. Certain questions came to dominate our thinking. Why should the process of discussion be so hard and fraught with pitfalls? Shouldn't common sense epistemology preclude endless argumentation about basic facts? How do intelligent people seemingly become so blind to their own biases? We found answers to some of these questions about the causes of dysfunction in the research cited earlier on the introspection illusion, group identity, dichotomization, and cognitive biases. But with the scope of the problem clarified, the crucial, practical questions remained: What questions, approaches, and attitudes, based on what theories and theoretical frameworks, have been shown to be effective in producing actual progress in dialogue and discourse? What characterizes a fruitful conversation? How do we know if we're creating or sustaining the type of dialogue that contributes well to the discourses of society? Which skills can be systematically learned and refined at the community level? What is the role of the community in supporting these efforts?

Grounded in the need for pragmatic insights and techniques, we continued our search in the form of a broad survey of published research ranging over several disciplinary and theoretical traditions, primarily sociology, philosophy, psychiatry, behavioral sciences, and developmental studies. We also drew on authors and journalists, who were practitioners themselves, and often the source of valuable leads to more detailed studies and research. We highlighted attempts to facilitate conversations that have achieved some level of pragmatic success in mending public discourses. Throughout, we took into consideration the writings of the Bahá'í Faith, and especially searched for resources that would touch on principles, practices, and goals central to the Bahá'í Faith. We found ourselves, in effect, almost burdened with an embarrassment of riches. The very flood of available literature stands as evidence that the problems confronting discourse are widely perceived and very concerning to many people. Individuals and communities are engaged in a search for insight and solutions, and there is widespread acknowledgement that no one has all the answers.

The literature exploring the problems afflicting discourse, which has been briefly reviewed in this paper, provides some initial clues about what effective TD will look like.

First, given the insidious nature of Othering, which can take on structural and un-proclaimed forms, practitioners of TD must be alert to the need to bring such elements to the surface by identifying them. As Isaacs states, dialogue is an avenue for us to step "back from the way of thinking produced by fragmentation and incorporat[e] another way of thinking. Dialogue is an attempt to perceive the world with new eyes, not merely to solve problems using the thought that created them in the first instance" (Isaacs, *Taking Flight* 30).

Second, the question of whether and when to argue the data requires

careful attention in the conduct of discourse, and will depend on the ground rules and basis of trust underlying the discussion. There are certainly contexts where disciplined argumentation is productive—in a process like Longino's transformative interrogation or in ongoing consultation as part of an iterative process of learning and application, for instance. What is crucial in these contexts is the existence of a trusting relationship. Where such a relationship does not exist, argumentation is unlikely to be productive. Such conditions indicate one of the primary use cases for TD. Thus, one descriptive characteristic of TD, particularly when it arises as part of an effort to heal dysfunctional discourses, is that it is a radical turning away from, or suspension of, debate and argumentation. It is an important way of going "beyond the culture of contest" (Karlberg, *Beyond*).

In arguing that TD requires its proponents to move away from the focused attempt to persuade, we are not *at all* advocating that they should suppress or disguise their inclinations, values, and beliefs. Far from it. To do so would be highly counter-productive, a form of dissimulation almost certain to breed suspicion. Nor should a participant in TD enter the process with all of their most fundamental beliefs held in suspension. A Bahá'í for instance, would not be open to the possibility that—contrary to Bahá'í belief—God does not exist, or that men and women are not equal. We are instead suggesting that participants should prioritize the more urgent quest for mutual understanding over any attempts to persuade, or even inform. This quest for deep understanding requires transparency as to how people arrive at their assumptions and opinions, provided dialogue has matured enough for such norms to be introduced and adopted. It involves the discovery or creation of shared values. It has the capacity to transform relationships among the dialogue participants at successively deeper and more powerful levels.

A useful illustration of this point can be found in the work of Katharine Hayhoe, a practicing climate scientist who has additionally taken on the role of public educator and advocate. She describes how she learned to subordinate presenting facts to focusing on working "to bring people together." Bombarding people with facts, data, and science "only engages their defenses, pushes them into self-justification, and leaves us more divided than when we began" (*Saving Us* xi–xii). She makes a point of emphasizing that the single most important thing that anyone can do is to bring people together by talking. By deliberately starting a conversation with something that unites instead of dividing us, we are starting at a place of mutual respect, agreement, and understanding. And as we truly listen, we are likely to discover more surprising points of agreement (xii).[10]

10 It is noteworthy that Hayhoe falls short of her own ideal, illustrating how subtle and pervasive such processes remain in spite of a conscientious effort. Applying the scientific label "Dismissives"

Third, awareness of the pervasiveness of cognitive bias requires that TD be approached with an attitude of intellectual humility. Journalist, author, and podcaster David McRaney, who has devoted his creative and research energies to understanding how humans succumb to cognitive bias, makes two critical observations about this virtue. On the one hand, he argues that the power to persuade a person ultimately rests with them, not with you, I, or anyone else:

> You can't persuade another person to change their mind if that person doesn't want to do so. . . . [I]n many ways, persuasion is mostly encouraging people to realize change is possible. All persuasion is self-persuasion. (xvii)

On the other hand, he emphasizes that entering into truly transformative dialogue implies that we are in a state of mind in which we may also have our own thinking changed. Acknowledging, along with Storr (8), that at least one or a few of our ideas are wrong or in need of improvement is an essential starting point for any true dialogue. Both common experience and research such as described in Kruger and Dunning suggests that we often think we know more about a subject or the thoughts and feelings of another person then we actually do, and that such misplaced confidence can have disastrous consequences. Perhaps the most damaging effect of overconfidence on dialogue is that it makes us certain that we are correct and uninterested in what other people think: "Certainty is a curiosity killer" (Marti, qtd. in Pappas).

Successful TD depends, therefore, on a conscious cultivation of intellectual humility—a quality that Bahá'ís, mindful of the guidance of the Universal House of Justice on the importance of "a humble attitude of learning," strive to embody in all they do (Universal House of Justice, Letter dated 28 Dec. 2010). In keeping with this principle, TD is structured to ensure that those involved have an opportunity to discover their own biases and the basis for their beliefs, and can act as assistants to each other in this process. As such, TD is not only about discovering what other people think; it is also a process of self-discovery. Significant time is therefore directed towards the reflection of understandings, clarification of terms, identification of values and feelings, and ensuring that such understandings are expressed clearly, and that the speaker has truly been understood.

Intellectual humility, again, does not require us to hold all of our beliefs as uncertain and negotiable. Yet we can have an ironclad conviction in certain truths while readily accepting that our understanding of these core beliefs is provisional, impartial, and open to improvement.[11] It is also foundational for

to seven percent of the US population, she herself dismisses this part of her potential audience as unreachable.

11 Indeed, this is arguably the precise attitude that Bahá'ís attempt to cultivate as

all true dialog, and, in particular, for participation in scientific discourses. In this spirit, participants in TD will tend to use open and provisional language rather than speaking in terms that are final and absolute, promoting refinement of understandings and conclusions. Participants additionally practice intellectual humility and receptivity to opposing views by avoiding the language of "us and them," being sensitive to the impact of labeling (particularly in non-science contexts), and scrupulously maintaining vigilance against the pernicious effects of Othering. The overall attitude is one of non-judgmental acceptance—if not of every idea another participant shares, of the fact that the person currently holds them—where each participant shows the others respect and uses language that conveys genuine care and concern.

The experiences of Lee McIntyre, a philosopher and historian of science, neatly encapsulate these foundational elements of Transformative Dialogue—avoiding (and challenging) Othering, resisting the temptation to argue, and practicing intellectual humility. In his book *How to Talk to a Science Denier*, McIntyre describes his initial goal: engaging science deniers in order to bring them to the point of changing their minds. However, in the process of pursuing this object, he underwent a profound change in perspective. In the book's epilogue he reflects on the lessons he learned about not Othering people on the basis of belief:

> To embrace the idea that someone who disagrees with us is still worth talking to is to make an investment in our fellow human beings and in our future together. While we are trying to get science deniers to enlarge their circle of concern, we must enlarge our own circle to include them. (185)

This same sentiment must characterize all TD. But to build from this sentiment, and these foundational ideas, to a practice of TD requires further examination of the varied literature on approaches that broadly meet its requirements.

Attitudes, Strategies, Principles, and Skills for TD and the Elevation of Discourses

With a picture emerging of the kinds of attitudes that will lead to effective, rather than divisive dialogue, the question becomes: how can these attitudes find expression in concrete practices? In this section we draw on research examining specific practices, strategies and skills to assist with healing dysfunctional argumentation, or mending relationships between people with opposing views.

Who Do We Speak to?

It may go without saying, but TD is often needed most in situations where people habitually avoid conversations out of complacency with the status

part of being in a learning mode (see Smith).

quo, or out of fear of conflict. It behooves those interested in moving past discursive dysfunctionality, towards understanding and unity, to seek out difficult conversations.

In her book, *I Never Thought of It That Way*, journalist Mónica Guzmán suggests observing and treasuring your "I Never Thought of It That Way" moments, and advises us, if we do not have such moments, to seek them out. Rather than fleeing from difficult conversations or the possibility of conflict, we should welcome them as opportunities to "put our curiosity to work," to help fill in gaps in what we know, and to collect knowledge that will inspire different questions (74). First, we must find some friction by putting ourselves in spaces where we can interact with people from outside of our comfortable belief silos. In those environments it is possible to explore the differences between two perspectives, and then, as Guzmán states, "get curious" (61). Curiosity, or the quest for understanding, involves enlarging our circle of concern to discover our gaps in knowledge, what each person's values mean to them and what that implies about our world. It requires absorbing interest, and deep listening as to how people arrive at their assumptions and opinions.

If the prospect of seeking out people who we disagree with in order to "get curious" sounds daunting, then we can find reassurance in the robust research confirming that when we enter such encounters with a genuine intent to see the "other" as a friend, genuine relationship is in fact possible. We should also call to mind the guidance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who counsels us: "See ye no strangers; rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness" (*Selections* 8:7).

Psychologist Gordon W. Allport's contact hypotheses, developed over sixty years ago, suggests that people from different groups must make true contact and engage with each other in positive social interactions—in short, cultivate friendship—to help eliminate inter-group prejudice (261–84). A review of fifty years of research on Allport's contact hypothesis concluded that it "no longer merits the modest title of 'hypothesis', but fully deserves acknowledgement as an integrated and influential theory" (Hewstone and Swart 374). Their metanalysis showed that contact with those in an out-group is specifically associated with increased trust, reduced threat response, and increased practice of forgiveness (Pettigrew and Tropp, qtd. in Hewstone and Swart 376). Remarkably, it has been shown that extended contact—in which one's friends or other members of one's in-group associate with members of an out-group—and even *imagined* contact—in which one merely goes through a process of visualizing an interaction with a member of the out-group — can have a similar impact, if somewhat reduced (Turner and Crisp 129–131).

How Do We Converse? Deeper Conversations: Intimate Sharing and Active Listening

TD will thus often occur between people who begin from a place of disagreement or difference. Crucially, the foundational attitude for anyone embarking on TD is to renounce any objective to persuade the other participant(s) of anything. This is not to say that minds cannot change; indeed, the evidence suggests that TD can powerfully set the stage for such change. Yet, just as in consultation, the goal is not to advance *one's own* agenda. Further, unlike in consultation, one cannot assume that the other participant(s) share the goal of transformation; indeed, as many of the examples at the end of this paper highlight, it is possible for one person to infuse a conversation with the spirit of TD even when other participants begin with an antagonistic attitude.

If the motive is not to persuade, then what is the goal? In a nutshell, it is to discover more about the other participant(s) and their views, as well as our own. Here we can look to the insights of Bohmian dialogue.[12] Dean Rickles, in the Foreword to Bohm's *On Dialogue*, explains that Bohm's approach sprang from his understanding of the need to uncover and question assumptions and biases to facilitate understanding:

> The key then is to expose the contingency in where thoughts and beliefs come from. . . .
>
> A large part of the motivation for Bohm's approach to dialogue comes from this "genealogy" of assumptions and opinions. The simple fact is that a large proportion of these assumptions and opinions that one reacts so strongly to . . . [have been] handed down by teachers, parents, TV, books, and suchlike. (xiv–xv)

We would extend this broad aim of uncovering the "genealogy" of assumptions and opinions to also include feelings and spiritual values. The resulting spirit of inquiry changes a discussion into what Bohm characterizes as true *communication*. As Bohm himself puts it:

> In a dialogue, however, nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is a different sort of spirit to it. In dialogue, there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view

12 Although David Bohm is perhaps best known as a theoretical physicist, his posthumously published work *On Dialogue* attempts to apply his philosophical principles to improve humankind's prospects. What has come to be known as "Bohmian dialogue" has "aroused a fair amount [of] interest among organization theorists . . . and some universities" (Pylkkänen 198). A range of researchers and practitioners have explicitly drawn and expanded on Bohmian dialogue; these include William N. Isaacs, director of the Dialogue Project at MIT's Organizational Learning Center, and Patricia Romney, Leadership Coach and Difficult Dialogues Facilitator.

> prevail. Rather, whenever any mistake is discovered on the part of anybody, everybody gains. . . . a dialogue is something more of a common participation in which we are not playing a game against each other, but with each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins. (7)

Where Bohm was primarily focused on the possible epistemic outcomes of this form of dialogue, TD emphasizes the complementary impact on the relationships and understanding among participants, and defers epistemic judgement. By suspending the motive to persuade and the constraints of a particular contentious topic, TD opens the door to a deeper connection, and can make it safe for participants to share much more openly. TD's transformative potential transcends particular issues; it is grounded in the deepest aspects of what makes us all human, which can emerge more readily in an atmosphere of *open, intimate sharing*.

Indeed, the creation of intimate sharing within a relationship can have such a profound impact that it may well become a central goal of, and a motivator for, TD in its own right. This is the spiritual basis on which the success of TD depends. It will likely help the TD process take on a life of its own, leading naturally to cycles of refinement composed of study, consultation, action and reflection.

To illustrate the transformative potential of deep conversation characterized by intimate sharing, we can consider a familiar component of Bahá'í culture: the fireside chat, which Shoghi Effendi describes as "the most powerful and effective teaching medium that has been found so far" (qtd. in *Teaching* 31).[13] Its power does not rest on the persuasiveness of a speaker, but on its atmosphere, which encourages open sharing by all. The fireside is, ideally, a "personal" and "informal" gathering conducted in the home" (29), where "intimate personal questions can be answered" (31).[14]

Of course, in contrast with the aims of TD, which are restricted to hearing and understanding beliefs and associated values, the aims of a fireside chat are likely to include the discussion of the teachings or other aspects of the Bahá'í Faith. It should also be clear, however, that because firesides are meant to engage "intimate personal questions" the fireside, as envisioned by Shoghi Effendi, is (at least sometimes) a much more intimate affair than mere fact sharing; it invites people to share their stories, even aspects of their lives involving struggle and distress. In such a setting, rather than remaining on an intellectual footing, the conversation is more likely to engage topics where the healing power of the Faith is most needed, and so also more likely to provide scope for the generative power of

13 See also Hiebert for a useful discussion of these points.

14 In the authors' experiences, many so-called "firesides" in North American communities are more accurately public talks that just happen to be given in a home. Such a venue has much less scope for this type of intimate encounter.

deep listening which we discuss next.

The intimacy and openness TD call for speak to the importance of setting. TD requires a private space, free from distracting interruptions. Depending on what is being discussed and what is shared, bearing in mind that TD may touch on sensitive topics, it may be helpful to give prior thought to making available resources supporting referral to skilled social and psychological support services.[15]

While the relationship of intimate sharing is the spiritual core of TD, its corollary, the practice of genuine *listening*, is perhaps the most important *skill* required for the performance of TD. One of the motivations for TD is the expectation that the participants, through a process of deep listening and reflection, may eventually find common ground and goals, perhaps in unexpected ways. By this means, differences of belief, that have given rise to contention and estrangement, or may have the potential to do so, are dissipated or transformed and absorbed into wider perspectives. At the very least, participants come away with a better understanding of each other's views, and a reduction in the tendency to frame those views too narrowly for rhetorical and psychological advantage.

The kind of listening required to understand a *person* goes beyond that which we use to attend to an *argument*. Psychologist Carl Rogers' hypothesis, developed over fifty years ago, posits that "the individual has within him or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering their own self-concept, basic attitudes, and his or her self-directed behavior" (Rogers 1). But these resources require activation, and it is dialogue, prompted by focused listening, that facilitates a deeper understanding of selves. It is through the processes of listening and reflection that attitudes and perspectives are transformed; but of primary interest for TD is listening's role in developing a trusting relationship between participants. Developing an attitude of sincere interest in a speaker is not an easy task. It requires us to be willing to risk seeing the world from the speaker's point of view. If we have a number of such experiences, they will shape an attitude that will allow us to be truly genuine in our interest in the speaker—and potentially broaden our minds to a multifaceted outlook about the topic.

The kind of listening required here is well described by the concept of "active listening," which is discussed and applied in a variety of

15 Other resources can be provided to support the growth of the newly awakened potentialities that are the desired outcome of TD. This includes such things as the tools and training for independent investigation of the truth and moving into social action. However much the principles of TD can be applied by a single individual, it is the need for this supportive environment, coupled with the consultative benefit of collective reflection on what issues and types of discussion work best in the local community, that convince us that TD is best when developed and supported in a community environment

contexts—psychology, counselling, life- and business coaching, mediation, and many more. Through active listening, we show unconditional regard for the speaker and affirm their experience, thereby creating rapport and building empathy and trust. Active listening is rare enough that it makes an impression when we experience it. As Minson et al. state:

> Most of us can readily recall a specific instance when a discussion partner with an opposing viewpoint listened to our arguments thoughtfully, seemingly considering the proffered information, and asked follow-up questions suggesting genuine curiosity and a desire to understand. Such experiences are memorable in part because they are rare. (5)

So, how do we listen actively? One group of social and behavioral scientists suggests that active listening is a trainable skill and that even brief training increases the use of active listening during conflictual interactions (Weger Jr. et al.). These researchers note that "nonverbal elements of active listening communicate care and concern more powerfully than specific verbal behaviors such as paraphrasing, questioning, giving advice, or reflecting emotional content of messages" (38). The indices of active listening can thus include, first, nonverbal elements of communication—showing acknowledgment of the speaker, for instance, through cues such as smiling, nodding in agreement, a concerned facial expression, and eye contact—and second, verbal acknowledgment.[16] While paraphrasing—restating in the listener's own words what the listener thinks the speaker is trying to say—is helpful to convey deep listening, Weger Jr. et al.'s data analysis indicates that this practice is not as important as a simple acknowledgement in response to what was just heard. However, as Minson et al. point out, actively expressing interest by any of these interactive means is more powerful than a general expression of interest at the outset. (852)

These same researchers also emphasize that a most effective component of active listening is asking questions to encourage the speaker to elaborate on his or her beliefs or feelings. Questions—especially follow-up questions like asking the speaker to elaborate on something just said—signal conversational receptiveness and generate rapport. It expresses the

16 Because dialogue tends to be influenced by non-verbal cues, face to face dialogue is, far and away, the best context for an authentic TD process. When two people share a common space, they can be attuned to each other in subliminal ways (Scott). Attempting to conduct TD in an online space, then, may be successful to some degree, but only in those contexts where personal experiences can be shared, personal growth fostered, and relationships encouraged. Even when conducted with care, such virtual dialogues miss the enriching follow-up afforded by less formal conversations in other shared social contexts.

"willingness to thoughtfully engage with opposing views" (Yeomans et al. 131). People who ask follow-up questions are perceived to be more trustworthy, reasonable, and objective, and are more likely to have future positive encounters with their interlocutors. Questions convey interest, and when people view someone as being interested in them, they behave more open-mindedly, and develop more favorable attitudes toward the opposing viewpoint and those who hold it. Asking one's conversational partner to elaborate on their point, rather than counterarguing or simply restating one's own views, can also help the partner process opposing ideas more objectively.[17] Behaving open-mindedly in general may make the other person perceive *themselves* as being more open-minded, therefore contributing to a more successful interaction (Chen et al.).[18]

Complementary to active listening, at the level of content, four simple conversation strategies have been found to lead to significantly higher levels of receptivity to a speaker's ideas, especially those with opposing views. These strategies make future collaboration more likely. These strategies are, first, to find any existing points of agreement; second, to employ hedging language—such as "somewhat," "might," "appear to be"—to soften conflicting claims; third, to explicitly acknowledge that one is committed to practicing genuine listening skills; and fourth, to re-frame the conversation in the most positive terms available. People who use these four strategies are more likely to have future positive encounters because, this research suggests, when people view someone as being interested they become hopeful that their viewpoint will be evaluated fairly and are more likely to participate

17 In addition to conveying interest and promoting collective learning, questions may be crucial for clarifying implicit assumptions. Different people may be using the same word in distinct ways, each assuming that the others share their meaning, leading to fundamental misunderstandings (Marti et al. "Certainty"). This diversity of meaning can lead to problems even in highly disciplined fields of science (Keller and Lloyd). This should be a strong motivator for us to incorporate curiosity into our dialogue practices and ask questions to clarify what is intended. Similarly, perceptions, particularly in ambiguous circumstances, often depend on unconscious factors which in turn are based on prior experience, leading us to "argue over subjective truth that feels like raw, unfiltered, unassailable truth" to each of us privately (McRaney 80ff, discussing the work of Pascal Wallisch). While these epistemic challenges ultimately point to the importance of consultative epistemology, as described by Karlberg and Smith, incorporating curiosity and questions about intended meanings and subjective perceptions is a relatively simple feature of TD that can address these concerns in part.

18 Indeed, research suggests that people tend to mimic each other's language and conversational style generally, such that the level of conversational receptiveness exhibited by one person affects the behavior of their counterpart (Yeomans et al.).

in further dialogue. They also claim that these strategies help to reduce negative stereotypes, resentment, and mistrust (Yeomans et al.).

Underlying these specific "techniques" of active listening must be a sincere intention. Philosopher and business team coach Otto Scharmer describes four levels of listening, each of which expresses a different intention. He urges the listener to move from listening for an opportunity to interrupt and respond, to actually listening to what is being said — even if it presents information disconfirming of our expectations and hopes, to a listening that sincerely attempts to understand the other's perspective, feelings and motivations, and finally to what he calls "generative listening." In this last stage, the listener finds himself "holding a space for something new to be born." By this shift in perspective, listening becomes an opportunity to empower both parties to explore commonalities, in a shared attitude of search suffused with a willingness to transform their perspectives and beliefs and generate new ideas to help shape a better future (Scharmer 47–48).

From Structure to Spontaneity

So far, then, we have described TD as involving conversations between people with different viewpoints, possibly on contentious topics, characterized by intimate sharing and active listening, which can be supported by specific skills, techniques, and intentions. To create a space capable of sustaining such conversations, is it enough to bring people together in a private, distraction-free space? Or is further structure required?

There is a number of groups and research labs—including Braver Angels, Essential Partners,[19] The Difficult Conversations Lab, and Living Room Conversations, that use structured dialogue approaches to connect people across divides fostered within our dysfunctional public discourses.[20] These structured dialogue approaches embody core aspects of TD, by fostering in participants the capacity to establish rapport, be curious, practice active or deep listening, seek common ground, and leave each session on a positive note. The structure provided in these approaches typically includes the use of a prepared format to guide a time-limited dialogue in which people (hopefully) come to a deeper appreciation of each other's perspectives. However, perhaps the most structured component of these approaches is that they typically begin with short educational workshops or courses to build participants' skills and understanding. During this guided process, participants practice by interacting with people with opposing views, but with an

19 Formerly known as The Public Conversations Project

20 One such structured dialogue, developed by Ryan Nakade under the auspices of the Oregon Mediation Society, actually bears the name "Transformative Dialogue" (not to be confused with our broader use of the term). The specifics of his approach can be found on his blog (Nakade).

explicit focus on skill-building. They learn greeting behaviors, what types of questions to ask, how to convey genuine listening, and how to clarify terms, show respect, suspend judgment, hold back the urge to criticize or persuade, and show appreciation for each other's contributions and the opportunity to learn from one another. The burgeoning membership of these groups is indicative of their growing popularity.

TD, as we envision it, aspires to an openness and spontaneity that allow it to be entered into whenever the need and opportunity present themselves, and without the need to depend on an elaborate structure.[21] However, jumping right in to the process of TD, particularly with people we have not yet formed strong friendships with, may not be possible: the instinct to avoid difficult conversations may first need to be relaxed. A structured, time-limited, and highly constrained dialogue process may be an easier first step, with its constraints providing reassurance that the dialogue will be kept within certain bounds. Where structured dialogues such as those mentioned, or similar ones prepared for local context, are available, they may serve an important function in initiating the process of TD and training a cohort to collaborate at the local level.

Another aspect of structure involves the size and composition of the group itself. Bohm, for example, as well as Isaacs and Romney who incorporate his ideas into their practice, are all concerned with dialogue at the group, organizational, and/or community level, with all the intra- and inter-group dynamics that involves (Isaacs "Process and Potential"; Romney). Bohm, in particular, observes that "a group of about twenty to forty is almost a microcosm of the whole society," and that "a group that is too small doesn't work very well." People in small groups, Bohm says, tend to fall into patterns of being "polite to each other and avoid the issues that may cause trouble." In larger groups "something different begins to happen. . . . the question of . . . collectively shared meaning . . . begins to come in." Bohm acknowledges that this is a very powerful force: "The collective thought is more powerful than the individual thought" (14–15).

Although he doesn't explicitly say so, it seems that Bohm aims to have a sufficient group size so that a variety of viewpoints and cultural backgrounds can come up, give rise to a measured amount of stress and friction, and thus serve as occasion for discovering the motivations, values, and assumptions behind beliefs, and give ample opportunity for bringing forward difficult topics as a learning opportunity.

In contrast, TD specifically and purposefully invites two, or at most a few, people to draw apart from these wider discourses, in part to temporarily diminish the inhibiting influence that group dynamics may have on the individual's journey of self-discovery of their own assumptions and motivations. The

21 As we describe elsewhere, this spontaneity, of course, may be tempered by proper consideration of participants' privacy and security.

difference between Bohmian dialogue and TD is best understood by considering that Bohmian dialogues are intended to train people in the art of dialogue per se, as well as (potentially) to advance shared understanding on important issues with a view to (eventually) making substantive progress on those issues. As such, Bohmian dialogue also has overlap with consultation, in that there is a definite emphasis on the nature of an epistemic process that can advance understanding. Conversely, we envision TD as being motivated by the crises and pain in participants' lives that stem from the already entrenched dysfunctionalities of extant public discourses. These are questions of degree more than absolute differences, but TD prioritizes intimacy over structure, and relationship-building over epistemic goals.

When and if it makes sense to strongly structure TD, or a TD-like process, will of course be contextual, and incorporating structuring elements is not an all or nothing game. An example of an element of structure that might be included in a relatively informal TD at the initiative of a participant emerges from The Difficult Conversations Lab at Columbia University, where researchers "intentionally generate the kind of discomfort that most people spend all of Thanksgiving trying to avoid" (Peter T. Coleman, qtd. in Ripley). The Lab's research demonstrates that offering a spectrum of opinions *before a discussion* can prime participants to ask more questions, propose higher quality ideas, be more willing to continue the conversation, and ultimately leave the lab more satisfied with their conversations (Ripley). We have observed that many practitioners attempt to overcome social polarization using this strategy.

A Broader Conception of Reason: Storytelling, the Arts, and Imagination

It should be clear from both the research on the surprisingly frequent inefficacy of facts in changing minds, and the description of the role of intimate sharing and active listening, that TD is not a *collective* exercise in applying clinical, detached reason, however much it may often require *individual* reasoning to practice active listening. Indeed, the conception of reason as an abstract, objective, value-neutral power is an outmoded one of little use to real life. The mind, viewed in its broad sense as "the power of the human spirit" (ʻAbdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 55:6), operates not through analytical logic alone; it fluidly integrates such logic with aesthetic appreciation, emotional understanding, intuition, and imagination. TD, then, must reflect the truth that, as one scholar of the role of the arts in civic dialogue puts it, "[d]ialogue is focused conversation . . . which engages the heart as well as the mind" (Romney 2).

Jonathan Gottschall describes humankind as "The Storytelling Animal": "*Homo fictus* (fiction man), the great ape with the storytelling mind" (60). The epigraph of this book quotes the

novelist Elie Wiesel: "God made Man because He loves stories" (34). With their unrivalled power to capture the imagination and bring people together, stories have an important part to play in fostering meaningful dialogue.

This centrality of storytelling to TD is already implicit in the role of intimate sharing discussed above. In sharing experiences—telling one's story—a speaker does more than simply assert a set of facts. Storytelling exposes the roots of belief; and in telling one's story the listener is invited to go beyond understanding whatever facts are being asserted, to appreciating values, motivations, and *how* the speaker came to hold their views. Thus, the mere act of telling one's own story, or of hearing another's, is an opportunity to be transformed.

The value of storytelling in fostering dialogue is attested by many practitioners and researchers in the field. Mónica Guzmán shares examples of how curiosity, listening and the sharing of experiences help build new, or mend broken, relationships. She states that we draw closer to a deeper understanding of each other by sharing the "paths people have walked to, where they are, and the things they've seen and done along the way." She argues well in her book that evidence shows that people on either side of the divide "respect moral beliefs more when they are supported by personal experiences, not facts" (Guzmán 160).

Storytelling—in the sense used so far of telling one's own story—emerges naturally in dialogue once a level of trust is established. There is a kind of art to telling one's own story; thus, storytelling can serve as an entry point for bringing the arts into TD. Indeed, our interactions with art can unlock possibilities for transformation.

When engaging in the process of TD, participants must be open to the experiences, ideas, and perspectives of others. What better way to explore the issues or roots of one's beliefs than through the arts, with their capacity to accommodate ambiguity and multiple perspectives, and to help us suspend logical (or moral) judgment in favor of considering what art might be trying to say on its own terms? In art, all of us have a role to play. Romney, drawing on Bohm's concept that each speaker in a true dialogue brings a part of the story, argues that art specifically can help us reach for multipartiality, the ability to see all sides and all parts of the whole. An art-infused space can support respectful conversations about differences, that can take "people both inward to self-reflection and outward to an exploration of the experiences and attitudes of their neighbors" (Romney 15).

Thus, we can ask ourselves how to use art and creativity to build an environment where participants are given an opportunity to embrace complexity, where nuances, contradiction and ambiguity are offered as a way of priming participants to be open to multifaceted perspectives. Whether in a structured or a spontaneous way, devoting time in TD to share and reflect on art can support participants' reflection, listening

and learning, and help them open their minds, without the immediate obligation to take a side or voice an opinion.

Ultimately, the incorporation of storytelling and the arts, and an openness to drawing on the powers of imagination, reflects the holism with which TD views its participants. Here again we find some resonance with Bohm, whose approach to dialogue was motivated by the desire to unlock "a more holistic operation of the mind, leading to more orderly action within the whole," reflective of Bohm's holistic view of reality itself (Pyelkkänen 45). TD, to be sure, for all that it remains a relatively modest and pragmatic process, is also conceived within a holistic metaphysical framework, albeit perhaps not as tightly integrated intellectually as Bohm's. In our conception of TD, inspired by our engagement with the Bahá'í Revelation, the holism of the human mind is itself integrated into the holism of the human species: a shared belief in the oneness of humankind as a metaphysical reality can empower the discovery of shared values which can heal dysfunctional discourses. We deem this insight but one aspect of a spiritual view of humankind, as illumined by Revelation (Lample).

Where storytelling allows each participant to contribute, and incorporation of the arts can provide a collective point of focused reflection, the human power of creativity and imagination can also be harnessed in TD to generate a collective understanding. We re-iterate that TD is primarily about transforming relationships; where this is achieved in some measure, TD is successful even if no rapprochement on questions of substance occurs, and the even further aim of generating shared understanding may often require the greater epistemic power of true consultation. However, as Otto Scharmer's "fourth level" listening highlights, listening can become an act of being "open to the future" (48) to expand the idea and practice of dialogue in the direction of collaborative construction of new realities and alternative points of view. Other authors suggest that we create "imaginary moments," in which participants join in developing new visions of a reality. These imaginary moments, they suggest, "sow the seeds for co-construction, but also shift the position of the participants from combative to cooperative" (Gergen et al. 13). They argue that antagonists may temporarily suspend their differences by imagining a reality they both can work towards. When the conversation becomes generative, the authors suggest, it redefines the participants' conceptions of each other, and lays the groundwork for a conception of "us."

Models of Transformative Dialogue

We conclude this paper by surveying a few models that may illuminate the process of TD. These examples show that processes akin to TD can occur through casual conversations or in the context of a structured project, and may result in outcomes ranging from the "mere" establishment of an openness

to relationship and sharing that was not previously there, to profound change in participants' understandings and perspectives. We hope that these descriptions give life to the features of TD discussed above and provide inspiring confirmation that dialogue can in fact be transformative.

Deep Canvassing and Street Epistemology

We begin with two relatively structured examples: Deep Canvassing and Street Epistemology. These tend to use an iterative process which includes planning, testing, reflection, and refinement before the next iteration of public facing dialogue is implemented. Both are discussed by McRaney.

The Deep Canvass Institute began as a door-to-door lobbying effort aimed at changing public policy, and gradually morphed into a much deeper and broader process where participants learned to talk to complete strangers, creating bonds of mutual understanding grounded in the sharing of lived experience. Instead of drawing a person into a debate or presenting talking points, canvassers asked questions and adopted a curious and non-judgmental stance towards the experiences of the people they encountered. This shift in approach frequently led people away from prejudice, stigma, or fear, and towards empathy and a willingness to consider solutions. As the canvassers (to some extent) backed off on the effort to persuade, they found that people often began changing their own minds about the topics being raised in the canvassing effort. One key advance came in the realization that inviting people to tell their own stories, and then listening carefully as the stories were told, would catalyze greater willingness on the part of the canvasee to take a broader point of view on the topics being discussed.

Street Epistemology is an interview process devised by Anthony Magnabosco, and now involving a community of practitioners, in which "you ask questions to explore a claim someone makes because they think it is true." Magnabosco asks participant volunteers, selected from passers-by, to "pick a claim that motivates you to behave," with the understanding that he will then "ask [them] questions in a respectful way" (McRaney 219). Magnabosco listens carefully and reflects back not just the cognitive content of what he hears but also the personal value and importance of the claim. He also, from time to time, shares his perspective, often to touch on common ground or similar experiences. Of particular note is the point at which a Street Epistemology interview is brought to a close:

> [Magnabosco] felt satisfied that together they had helped Delia discover her true reasons for continuing to believe [in God], and that he had helped her consider whether they justified her confidence. His job as a street epistemologist was done for now, and he wished her well. (221)

Magnabosco's approach to his

> dialogue partners is devoid of any attempt to persuade, even though he was originally motivated to undertake Street Epistemology dialogues because, being at one time "an angry atheist," he had wanted to confront "street preachers who stand in front yelling at people." "After six years and hundreds of conversations," McRaney observes, "Anthony said his anger had subsided." (224)

Derek Black

Derek Black's story exemplifies the importance of relationship building and friendship as the foundations of lasting transformation. Derek was raised as a white supremacist in the USA, is the child of Don Black, founder of the alt-right *Stormfront* online community, and the godchild of former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke. As such, Derek was to some extent seen as the heir apparent to the leadership of the entire white nationalist movement (Saslow 6). While on campus, attending college away from family, Derek started to befriend several Jewish people and others with a multicultural outlook and attended many Friday Jewish Shabbat (Sabbath) dinners over the course of two years. Derek recalls the conversation during those dinners:

> I would say, "This is what I believe about I.Q. differences, I have 12 different studies that have been published over the years, here's the journal that's put this stuff together, I believe that this is true, that race predicts I.Q. and that there were I.Q. differences in races." And they would come back with 150 more recent, more well researched studies and explain to me how statistics works and we would go back and forth until I would come to the end of that argument and I'd say, Yes that makes sense, that [old view of mine] does not hold together and I'll remove that from my ideological toolbox but everything else is still there. And we did that over a year or two on one thing after another until I got to a point where I didn't believe [the racist party line] anymore. ("Conversation")

Those friends helped Derek to develop trust, to explore their thoughts without seeking to shame them, even though they eventually argued the facts. The group managed to establish rapport and a safe space to converse, in order to continue those Friday night dinners over sufficient time to effect a transformation. We assume each session must have ended on a positive note, or they would not have agreed to meet again and again. In an interview with Krista Tippett, Derek Black stated something important about the rapport that was built during those two years: "It wasn't the first time that somebody had told me that racism is bad. It was just the first time that I'd been willing to listen to it." Derek's Jewish friend, Matthew Stevenson, highlighted a crucial point: "I think it's also worth

pointing out that over those two years, I was legitimately friends with Derek, even when I frankly didn't know exactly where he stood" (Tippett).

In this touching story, trust and rapport almost entirely *preceded* conscious agreement. We believe this exemplifies a fundamental truth about TD and the transformation of discourses.

Daryl Davis

Daryl Davis is an example of someone who knows the importance of not setting out to argue the other person into changing their mind or behavior, but rather simply seeking to find common ground, and allowing changes of heart and mind to spring naturally from that discovery.

Daryl is a rhythm and blues musician and activist whose efforts to fight racism have convinced a number of Klansmen to leave and denounce the Ku Klux Klan. As an African American who spent his early childhood abroad, Davis' first experience with the irrationality of blatant racism upon returning to the United States led him on a path of learning about the origins and basis for racist attitudes. He approached dialogue based on his sincere curiosity, openness to friendship, and a quest to find common ground. He stated, "once the friendship blossoms, the Klansmen realize that their hate may be misguided." He suggests, "If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy—it doesn't have to be about race, it could be about anything . . . you will find that you both have something in common. As you build upon those commonalities, you're forming a relationship and as you build that relationship, you're forming a friendship. That's what would happen. I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves" (Brown).

Even though he emphasizes that he doesn't "convert" anyone—a point that resonates with the insights of McRaney, and at a fundamental level with the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá—his methods certainly seem to be effective at helping them find room in their hearts to convert themselves.

The extraordinary power of Davis' example lies in his explicit and precise refusal to countenance Othering. He thus goes directly to the heart of the matter, and builds bridges to people who have othered him, who consider him their "worst enemy."

Megan Phelps-Roper

This story is about the importance of empathy, curiosity, and refraining from judgement of others. It is also about the use of framing questions, and patiently awaiting the answers, allowing others to find their own wisdom at their own pace.

Megan Phelps-Roper is the granddaughter of Fred Phelps, founder of the Westboro Baptist Church, and was once one of the church's loudest members. The church became infamous for protest picketing, including the use of offensive chants and signs, at events ranging from soldiers' funerals to LGBTQ pride parades. Megan was

active in the church starting at age five. Later, she helped with church outreach through online debates on Twitter and high-profile street picketing. It was therefore a surprise when she withdrew from the fellowship at the age of twenty-six. Megan credits several people as having influenced her leaving, and they all had one thing in common: they approached her with curiosity and humor, not hatred. When people approached her with genuine questions in this fashion, it enabled her to lower her guard. Gradually, as she continued hearing questions about the church's beliefs that she just couldn't answer, she came to perceive contradictions in the church's beliefs and practices (Eschler). Megan continues to share her journey. She speaks publicly about the value of empathy when speaking with others, and works with law enforcement to conduct anti-extremism workshops.

ʻAbdu'l-Bahá

There is much written about ʻAbdu'l-Bahá that is relevant to any discussion of TD, because of His masterful exercise of the powers of listening and reasoning. The eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh, ʻAbdu'l-Bahá is considered the Bahá'í Faith's perfect Exemplar. The Bahá'í writings affirm that "in the person of ʻAbdu'l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized" (Shoghi Effendi 134). ʻAbdu'l-Bahá's magnetic personality and His penetrating insights provide us with rich examples of His humility, kindness, generosity, concern for others, and dedication to service. One observer[22] reports Bahá'u'lláh's comments on the proper method of teaching the Bahá'í Faith, in which He offers ʻAbdu'l-Bahá as an example:

> [Teachers of the Cause of God should] not engage in disputation leading to and ending with obstinate refusal and hostility, because the other person would consider himself worsted and defeated. . . . One ought to say: right, admitted, but look at the matter in this other way, and judge for yourself whether it is true or false; of course it should be said with courtesy, with kindliness, with consideration. Then the other person will listen, will not seek to answer back and to marshal proofs in repudiation. He will agree, because he comes to realize that the purpose has not been to engage in verbal battle and to gain mastery over him. . . . [ʻAbdu'l-Bahá] gives a willing ear to any manner of senseless talk, to such an extent that the other person says to himself: He is trying to learn from me. Then, gradually, by such means as the other person cannot perceive, He gives him insight and understanding. (Balyuzi 27)

22 Hají Mirzá Haydar-ʻAlí, either quoting or closely paraphrasing Bahá'u'lláh, as quoted in Hasan M. Balyuzi, *ʻAbdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*.

Howard Colby Ives, whose account of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s meeting with a minister began this paper, further wrote of Him:

> In all of my many opportunities of meeting, of listening to and talking with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá I was impressed, and constantly more deeply impressed, with His method of teaching souls. . . . He did not attempt to reach the mind alone. He sought the soul . . . with an illuminating radiance which lifted the hearer to a higher plane of consciousness. . . . He never argued, of course. Nor did He press a point. He left one free. There was never an assumption of authority, rather He was ever the personification of humility. (39–40)

Throughout these stories, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is portrayed as a vibrant and dynamic personality Who, with the mingling of humility and majesty, wisdom, and detachment, always considered the needs of the other. Over and over stories are told of how He made people feel safe, loved, and listened to. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s dynamic personality can well serve as a model for those who are seeking to foster TD.

Conclusion

When the Universal House of Justice calls on Bahá’ís to “make meaningful contributions to various important discourses prevalent in society” and then to “elevate the discussion above the acrimony and contention that so often prevent discourses of society from progressing” (Letter dated 18 Jan. 2019), it is inviting us to enter into the very sinews of human civilization and work for its betterment. While a central goal for Bahá’ís in this area may be to help foster the spirit and practice of consultation into more and more discursive spaces, we believe that TD can often serve as a crucial tool for finding an entry point, and reforging relationships into a mold that can, in time, support true consultation.

We have argued that TD is a distinct, analyzable form of interaction that can be systematically developed and trained for, and can (and should) be sustained in a community setting. TD invites transformation in all its participants and is thus coupled to emotional, intellectual, and spiritual personal growth. It inherently offers the prospect of deepening existing relationships and fostering new ones, and thus enriches and strengthens personal and local community life.

A few moments of reflection show that it has never, to date, been possible for discourses to reach full maturity, and, thus, their full scope. This implies that full scope of TD also cannot be fully known or appreciated in the present day. For example: global discourses could not exist in a world where the horizon of most people’s lives implied ignorance of much of what went on elsewhere. A global vision was never truly feasible until the second half of the twentieth century when technology helped transcend global distances. TD

has its role to play in helping the development of a global vision take root, and thus deserves our focused attention, systematic development, and application in as many venues and social levels as possible. We see this activity as potentially being a great force for good in the world, canalizing forces of positive change.

While examples pointing in the direction of TD are not lacking, it is clear that this kind of dialogue needs to extend much further if our public discourses are to be cured of their dysfunctionalities. Further work, in the form of academic research and practical experience, is needed to support this extension. Among the areas of inquiry that merit further attention, the following stand out:

- Further specifying TD's properties and processes, and accumulating illustrative examples that clarify its nuances and offer guidance to practitioners at all skill levels.
- Elaborating on the synergy between TD and community building, and building networks of local communities to benefit from each other's experience, creativity, and learning in this area. TD can be consultatively developed, refined, and passed on to others through example and instruction. The global Bahá'í Community, organically interconnected through the Administrative Order, may be particularly well placed to contribute to this area of learning.
- Exploring what motivates people to enter into TD. The pain inflicted by dysfunctional public discourses is one obvious candidate: many of us have borne the costs of alienation at community and family gatherings, and may be motivated to find a way to talk to each other without quarreling. At a higher level, differences of perspective and opinion, promulgated by discursive dysfunctionalities, can paralyze local action or lead to poor decisions, resulting in the extreme cases in death or catastrophe. Research into how to generate motivation to participate in TD without the need for these painful catalysts is called for.
- Examining the relationship between TD and the elevation of discourses. Questions that might be investigated include: Are there distinct modalities of transformation? What works, and what

doesn't? How stable are the resulting changes? How often, and to what extent, do these changes result in the restructuring of a community or a discourse?

- Building out the philosophical context of TD, particularly focusing an epistemological analysis of discursive dysfunctionalities, and an ethical inquiry into our obligation to overcome them. Such an examination might draw on the works of Smith and Karlberg, already mentioned, as well as Peels on the ethical obligations underlying epistemology, and Dalmiya and Code on the foundational role of knowledge of self and other in a wider epistemology that concerns itself with a knowledge of things.

There is ample room for large numbers to contribute to learning in these and other areas. It is our hope that more and more individuals will draw on the characteristics of TD in both their day-to-day communication, and in their efforts to contribute to public discourses. While the strategies are relatively simple, the contribution those employing them can make is potentially profound: given how public discourses shape human activity, to elevate a discourse is to make a contribution, however humble, to the ongoing development of human civilization. It is one of the pressing concerns of the age in which we live.

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