

## **What is Dialogue?**

*by Teresa von Sommaruga Howard, September 2007*

Dialogue is a process for creating meaning. The word itself comes from the Greek: 'dia' 'logos' meaning through the word indicating that dialogue is a talking process through which meaning can be created. Dialogue contains all sorts of information, rational or real and as well as emotional and fantasy. The meaning that emerges does not come from the content but from piecing together everything that occurs in the group. The clue to this process is the format and the development of a trusting atmosphere in which the dialogue takes place.

### **Is dialogue more than conversation?**

Dialogue is invariably thought of as a conversation between two people. It is much more than that. Buber used 'dialogue' to describe something much more profound than ordinary conversation (Glatzer and Mendes - Flohr 1991:41). "Dialogue has to be learnt like a language" (de Maré 1991:17) 'Dialogue' means 'through the word' and its purpose is to create a setting where a group of people can maintain conscious collective mindfulness where thoughts flow like water in a stream. This multifaceted atmosphere cannot emerge in a pair relationship. To be effective, a large group of everybody remotely involved will need to gather. Most people will feel anxious but attending to this anxiety will contribute to a helpful outcome.

Isaacs in describing his work with dialogue groups emphasises the importance of learning to listen to oneself. "Some of the most powerful contributions come from people who have begun to listen to themselves in the new context of the group" (Senge 1994:375).

It takes time to establish dialogue. Generating a friendly, accepting atmosphere that acknowledges difference and does not try to mould everybody into one mind or allow people to form into opposing factions can be a slow grind. As dialogue develops, participants will notice that the 'climate' or 'atmosphere' is changing and gradually realise that it is their collective understanding that is changing it. Recognition of this dynamic is crucial because in it lies the ultimate power of dialogue transmitting the important idea that individuals have the power to change their situation if they speak.

### **What is a Median Group?**

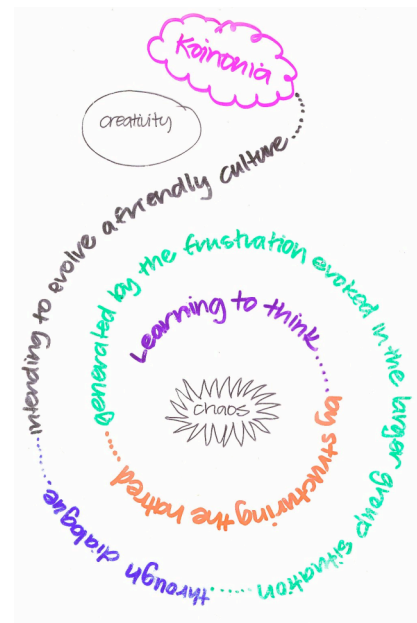
The Median Group was defined by Patrick de Maré to differentiate a group that is neither small nor large. Median means the space between and refers to groups where there is a space provided to talk about both our experiences in our family and our experiences in society. It is a place where new connections can be made and new meanings found about our place in the world beyond our family.

It is small enough for everyone to have their say yet large enough to evoke those often overwhelming experiences that arise from living in a society. It is this 'in between realm' that makes the Median Group so important. The combination of the intimacy

of the Small Group, combined with the often, overwhelming social forces of the Large Group, make it possible to face and critically think about the society we live in. In the Median Group new meanings can be found that link the personal, social and political.

Although many people identify a Median Group by the number of people in the room, 15 to 40 people, median does not mean medium. It might be more appropriate to think about a median group according to its physical size or the size of the circle in the centre. To give you an idea, picture a group sitting in a family living room. This would be a small group. Picture a group in a classroom. This would be a median group. A large group is anything beyond that.

What is attended to in a Median Group is more important than its size. For example a group that has ten people plus three empty chairs in a large room and attends to issues that concern members about their work organisations or politics has a particular 'feel' to it. A group of ten people with ten chairs in a small family sized room attending only to issues of the family has another. These different experiences differentiate a Median Group from a Small Group. The way a Median Group differs from a Large Group is more difficult to define. It is helpful to see the small group, the median group and the large group on a continuum of increasing complexity, frustration and difficulty that is directly related to time as well as size. The larger the group the more time is needed to work through issues to a new position. While a small group helps us to directly work through issues that derive from our family of origin, the median group enables us to relate these experiences to our community and in turn the large group makes it possible to relate all these issues to the context of our wider society. All these issues are available to be worked with in each setting but they will show themselves in quite different ways and intensities.



de Maré's description of the Median Group process is the structuring of hate, arising from the frustration inherent in any larger group setting, through dialogue. The group moves from initial CHAOS to a place of Koinonia, which he describes as a new micro culture of friendliness. This process is transformative. A consciousness or 'knowing with others' develops and an unexpected CREATIVITY becomes possible.

*"I have learned through bitter experience the one supreme lesson to conserve my anger, and as heat conserved is transmitted into energy, even so our anger controlled can be transmitted into a power that can move the world."*

-Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)

### **The Median Group through History**

The larger group has been an important method of survival for well over 60,000 years. People have used talking to each other in tribal groups of at least 40 people

around a focus of common concern. They would sit in a circle, without a theme, topic, direction or goal in the way that we might expect nowadays. They would talk until everyone had an opportunity to speak. These meetings would occur regularly and in some places would continue until it felt right to stop. In this way everyone understands their role in maintaining the survival of the group, their co-existence with each other and nature.