

Finding the Freedom of Conversation

The problems with our talking together do not stem from an absence of words. We have an inflationary glut of words: more words, less and less meaning. Five-hundred-channel television services, millions of Web sites, and an endless stream of opinion from every media source about the latest political or social scandal race their way to you in a frenzied contest for your attention. Given so many different perspectives, we lose sight of any “common sense” we might make of it all. As a result, whatever “gold standard” of commonly held and deeply shared meaning that might have lain beneath our words is scattered and lost.

Our world is filled with piles of words, many of which are full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Perhaps more critically, we find it very hard to say what the gold standard of meaning is, or how we might restore it. Dialogue can give us a way to regain that gold standard. It does this by helping to create an atmosphere in which we can perceive what really matters to most to us, and to one another. Doing so gives us access to a much finer and subtler kind of intelligence than we might ordinarily encounter. **To listen respectfully to others, to cultivate and speak your own voice, to suspend your opinions about others**— these bring out the intelligence that lives at the very center of ourselves— the intelligence that exists when we are alert to possibilities around us and thinking freshly.

This has been called the “intelligence of the heart.” Through Dialogue we learn how to engage our hearts. This does not mean wallowing in sentimentality. It refers, instead, to cultivating a mature range of perception and sensibility that is largely discounted or simply missing from most professional contexts. Daniel Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, has documented extensively the dysfunction that emerges due to emotional immaturities and stunted emotional development. People easily regress into reactive states, and intelligence gets thrown out of the window.

Dialogue provides a means by which we can learn to maintain our equilibrium. It lets us reconnect and revitalize our emotional capacity because it compels us to suspend our habitual reactions and frozen thoughts. It requires that we learn to include and take into account opinions different from our own. **Dialogue requires that we take responsibility for thinking, not merely reacting, lifting us into a more conscious state. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote of this as “the high freedom of great conversation.”**

Isaacs, William. *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together* (pp. 47-48). The Crown Publishing Group.