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Let's Find a Way to Make the Dialogue Work

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Let's Find a Way to Make the Dialogue Work

By Bruce Janz

UCF Forum columnist

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There is a breaking point for many people around the neighborhood and around the country, as has been seen this month.

These are lines in the sand, points past which people have said they will not pass. They are, in essence, breakdowns of dialogue.

In most situations, we think of dialogue as being what will save us. It is fragile, to be sure, but always what must be rebuilt.

Is that true, though?

Will dialogue save us — if we can only get it to work? Perhaps, but that last qualifier is the hard part. What happens when we do not trust our dialogue partners, and there is no “referee” or disinterested third party that can be trusted?

Dialogue has, at times, been used to delay action on a pressing issue. It has been improperly structured such that there might seem to be two equal and opposite sides to an issue, when in fact there might be more. And, it can be seen as completely odious in some cases — do we really want to, for instance, treat perpetrators of violence as mere “dialogue partners,” as if none of what had happened before tilted the scale or raised the threat level?

What is clear is that it is a short step from thinking that “I am right” and the other person merely holds a different opinion, to thinking that the other person has some mental or moral deficiency. We can see this in many intractable struggles — very quickly, dialogue breaks down into the worst possible depictions of the other side.

Can these breakdowns be avoided?

Clearly it is not easy, or it would happen all the time. We tend to think of these large-scale questions as simply being extensions of our individual relationships with each other, but often they are not. Evidence shows that having a personal relationship with someone different from oneself softens hostility and opens people up to difference.

Large-scale breaking points depend on stereotypes – “those people,” whoever they are, can be vilified. They are irredeemably bad, corrupt, and wrong. But listening to one person, away from places where we feel like we have to defend our intellectual and moral territory, is perhaps the only place that can forestall these breakings points.

There’s no guarantee. It’s still possible to think that our friend is “one of the few good ones,” but everyone else is bad.

But what’s the alternative? Does anyone really want to live in a world of breaking points? Will things really be better when those we disagree with are finally vanquished, humiliated, and sent packing?

Is the movie over at that point, and we all get smiles, ice cream and jet flyovers? The fact is that the movie is never over. There is never a point when one idea wins for all time, or another idea is vanquished, never to be heard from again. The differences never go away, and proceeding as if one side has won and can march triumphantly into the future is an illusion.

Dialogue is often inadequate, frequently suspect and too prone to be used against us. And yet, we don’t have a lot of other options.

Let’s find a way to make it work. Resist making an echo chamber.

Find the person you don’t agree with but can still talk to. And listen to them, not with a view to how to respond, but with a view to understanding why a belief or position makes sense to someone else.

That’s how it all starts. It’s all we’ve got.