

# Dialogue For Life – Stop Playing Games

by Denie & Dee Stemmler  
(Excerpted from Fall, 1995 *Matrimony* magazine)

Have you ever wondered, “why am I bothering with this?” as you started to write your dialogue letter? Or am I really better off for the few minutes I've just spent talking about feelings? Are we just going through the motions, and our dialogue seems to have lost its soul?

You aren't alone in wondering about these things. Most of us wonder sometimes if dialogue is all that we make it out to be on the M.E. Weekend. Why do most people coming off the weekend dialogue only for four to six weeks, and then don't bother with it any more?

We are not going to try to answer those questions in this article. All we know is that our own dialogue usually does what we want it to do – namely, help us to evolve with one another rather than despite one another. We're calling it "confiding dialogue" these days because our real goal is to get better and better at being each other's confidants. And we have serious plans to still be confiding through our dialogue when we reach 85 or 90 (assuming one of our kids has the good sense to stick us in an old folk's home together.)

## Why Bother?

Let us tell you how our goal of confiding dialogue came about. When we made our Weekend, we were like most couples - cross, crabby, and exhausted. Somewhere in our previous nine years of marriage, in our efforts to try and stretch the money, keep up with the job demands, and be the world's best parents, we had lost the closeness, the intensity, and unquestioning trust in one another that had been the heart of our five year courtship. Somewhere in the sea of dirty diapers, climbing the ladder at work, and fighting off the crabgrass, we had lost the essence of "us". We both knew that going into our Weekend - we just never talked about it. We just didn't want to go through another stupid fault-finding argument.

We came off of our Weekend stone cold sober. On the way home, we promised each other that we would do whatever it took to recapture the intimacy and trust we had sacrificed to the gods of self-fulfillment and keeping up appearances. Dialogue was our path back to each other. We knew we could use our dialogue to explore topics that up to that point had been touchy subjects - like career and our different styles of parenting. The formula was so simple it was elegant: don't focus on the issues, beliefs, or opinions; but rather, find each other in the feelings behind those things.

Our love letters weren't exactly textbook examples. We did our fair share of dumping and blaming, but this didn't stop us from writing and dialoguing every day. Over the years, we broadened the subjects we tackled in our dialogue, we took risks and trusted each other even with feelings we felt embarrassed about having, and we started daring to believe that it was OK to be me during these 20 minutes.

There was always the temptation to expect our dialogue to help make our lives more harmonious. But, we've had periods of harmony in the past, and we know we could remain isolated in the midst of harmony. What we were really after in our dialogue was to put the passion back into the way we belonged to each other. Yet we also had a vague dissatisfaction with what our dialogue was doing for us. We wanted more from it. We wanted to let each other into the deepest parts of our souls, our emotions, and our thoughts. We wanted to be able to trust each other absolutely.

We wanted to get ourselves to the point where we could tell each other anything - thought or feeling - inside or outside of dialogue - knowing that the other would listen with an open mind. Eventually it sank in: all we really wanted from our dialogue was to become each other's confidants.

### **Becoming Confidants**

In our minds, there was a difference between just being a dialoguing couple and being a confidant. In dialogue, we were trying to make an emotional connection with each other because we wanted to know how the other was feeling. But as confidants, we needed to take an additional step and make an emotional investment in the other person. We wanted to learn to celebrate one another... to become world class appreciators of one another. We wanted to be able to accept each other's version of reality - even when we didn't agree with it. For us, the intention behind using our dialogue to confide in one another was to give each other empathy and compassion, rather than trying to change, control or put up with each other.

It sounds like we were after perfection. But we kept telling ourselves that if we didn't aim for the stars for ourselves, nobody would do it for us.

We wish we could say that becoming confidants simply involves making a decision, like the decision to love or the decision to risk. Unfortunately, we have much too much baggage for it to be that simple. In a sense, learning to confide is turning into a lifelong process of dealing with our baggage.

### **Baggage #1: Moving Beyond the Best Friends Stage**

Being a confidant is different than being a best friend. We have been each others best friends since we were fourteen. But being a best friend did not stop us from trying to use our dialogue to make the other feel guilty for a feeling we didn't like having. It didn't stop us from garbage dumping. Nor did it stop us from trying to get the other to change behavior or see things differently - sometimes through a carefully worded love letter that didn't violate any of the ground rules, but in reality was a subtle attempt at manipulation. Being best friends did not stop us from believing that "If you listen to me, then you must be agreeing with me." Before we could start to become each others confidants, we had to agree to break these bad habits.

But bad habits are tenacious. For example, we had to look at how we act when we were having a disagreement. For most of our lives when we were at odds with one another, we would give each other space. That's what best friends do. This "space" really boiled down to mutual permission to "detach" from one another's pain and upset. In our dialogue, this detachment took the form of using the rules of dialogue to keep the distance in place. Since the rules said we should each be responsible for our own feelings, we would imply the equivalent of "I understand how you feel, but I didn't cause it. So it's your problem." That left us detached.

But when we decided to work on becoming each other's confidants, we realized these games would have to stop. If we were going to really be confidants, then we were going to have to support each other no matter what – in the same "space".

### **Baggage #2: No more Fluffballs**

Trying to live out "confiding dialoguing" has taught us many things. We saw early on that we need to focus our dialogue questions on important things that really affect how we interact with one another. Doing the equivalent of a five-step dialogue on "the first day of spring" or "watching the

sunset over the lake" often gave us more of an opportunity to be superficial than to bare our souls. So, the "fluffball questions" had to go.

### **Baggage #3: The Log in My Eye, Versus the Speck in Yours**

Our commitment to tackle the serious questions meant we had to learn to phrase our questions so that each of us could examine only our own feelings and perspectives on our topic, and not try to dissect the other person. Our love letters are an opportunity to share our uniqueness with each other. But we have to have the security of knowing that our uniqueness will be accepted. Whenever we wrote about each other rather than ourselves in our love letters it was almost impossible for the other person not to get defensive. We had to learn to stop trying to change each other, and start celebrating our differences. And especially - start appreciating our differences. Our differences were part of what attracted us to each other in the first place.

### **Baggage #4: What are our Motives?**

We looked at the types of questions we were selecting each day. It occurred to us that our motives behind our questions changed from day to day. These different motives answer the question "Why are we going to dialogue today?" or "What are we shooting for in our dialogue today?" We have identified four different motives. Our dialogue is best when we have a healthy mix of these motives, rather than a steady diet of any one of them.

### **Commitment Level**

The first motive is: "Because we promised each other we would dialogue each day," or the Commitment Level. When we use this motive, the question isn't as important as the simple act of writing each other. Some days, especially when our dialogue has been rather dry for a while, our only motive to keep on doing it is because we promised each other we would. So, we pick a question off the calendar or off someone else's list so we have something to write about. Having this motive gets us through the dry spells until we can get ourselves back into something more meaningful.

### **Tune-In Level**

The second motive is: "Because I don't want us to be strangers today," or the Tune-In Level. When we use this motive, our question focuses only on what's really brewing inside me right now. Typically, the form of the question is general: what is (or has been) my strongest feeling today. This level serves us well on days when we know in advance that our lives will be chaotic, and we won't have many opportunities to connect with each other. We travel out of town to visit our families between Christmas and New Years. We know in advance that the days will be full of catching up with people we haven't seen for a year, attending to the needs of the kids, being gracious guests at our parent's homes, etc. We know that we won't have much time to spend just with each other. So sometime during the day, each of us will sneak off for ten minutes and write a letter describing just what's happening inside us - thoughts feelings, opinions, reactions, etc. Then we typically will exchange those letters and dialogue before we even get out of bed the next day. It's our way of making sure that we don't come home as strangers to each other. This level is also appropriate when one of us has to be away on a business trip.

### **Discovery Level**

The third motive for dialogue is: "Because I want to see how I can get better at being your spouse," or the Discovery Level. At this level, we pick questions that enable us to explore and discover what makes us tick. We try to get in touch with our attitudes, how those attitudes affect our partner, how our programming and the influences from our childhood affect the way we see things, how our "vision of reality" might be filtered or distorted because of these influences, and

most importantly, how these things limit my ability to be the kind of spouse the Lord has called me to be. We explore questions like "What attitudes affect the way I discipline the children? How does it affect you and our relationship?", "How is my mask [personality style] opposite from your mask and how does that affect you?"

For the past four weeks, we've been dialoguing on the topic "How do I behave when I am under stress?" We sometimes will read books together - such as Richard Rohr's *Discovering the Enneagram*, or John Powell's *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* – and select our questions from the text as we go along. Fr. Chuck Gallagher's list of questions presented at the recent convention (printed at the end of this article) are mostly questions that belong in the Discovery level.

### **Growth Level**

And the fourth motive for dialogue is to call ourselves to change, or the Growth Level. We discovered long ago that we have a file drawer full of awarenesses. Eventually we have to go the next step and ask "What am I going to do about it?" We knew that if we didn't grow and change because of our dialogue, we would eventually stop doing it. One way we have used this fourth level in the past is to use the same question every Saturday: "How am I better as your husband or wife because of my discoveries in our dialogue this week?" Some Saturdays, we couldn't think of any ways we had changed. That was like a red flag to show us that we were drifting. Theoretically, if we are using the five step dialogue, we should be doing this each day. But, sometimes we just don't have adequate (time to answer the fifth question (What are my options?). Sometimes, we need to devote a whole letter asking what am I going to do about what I have discovered. Somewhere along the way, we discovered a little gem of truth: my only real motive to change comes not from what I write, but from what I read – in what you've written. Our real changes rarely come from guilt, or because we tell ourselves we ought to change. Our real changes happen only when we want to change - when - because we have been trying to confide in each other - we can read each other's love letters and finally grasp the effects of our behavior on each other.

### **How to Read a Love Letter**

At first, when we exchanged and read each other's love letters, we hoped only to learn about each other's feelings. Gradually we learned to "read between the lines" - and there is where we discovered a bit of both of us: how you are, and how I have affected you.

Our most significant changes have come when we read each other's letters wanting to know "What's it like being married to me?" or "What's it like being on the receiving end of me?" In the talks on the weekend, we use words like "standing in your shoes, and seeing the world through your eyes," or "acceptance." In a confiding relationship, there is no better way to say I love you than to say "I want to know what it's like to be you." When we start off by thinking that way, it certainly affects the way we read and listen to one another, regardless of the topic. It is the key step in replacing defensive listening with empathetic listening.

When we read and listen with that mind set, sometimes what we hear is shocking. Dee once told Denie in a dialogue that she had never believed that anyone in her lifetime had ever wanted her to feel cherished. When Denie heard this, his instinct was to protest and get defensive. But, instead of protesting or telling her she was obviously exaggerating, Denie asked her to "tell me more." He tried to imagine what it felt like to believe that no one had ever wanted you feel cherished in your lifetime. It was only then that he could begin to see how all his years of well meaning good advice to Dee had been coming across as rejection. It was only then that he could see the effects of his Teutonic programming that made him stingy with compliments because they only gave people big

heads. It was only when he tried his best to see what it was like to "be on the receiving end of me" that he was able to start to change the way he loved Dee. And to recognize how much she needed to be affirmed instead of advised.

Neither of us can think of a time when we refused to change after seeing how the other was hurting because of our behavior. I change because I can finally see the effects of my behavior on the one I love. And I can only see that when I listen as a confidant - with a mentality that tells my partner that he/she can tell me anything, and I will just want to know what it's like to be him or her. When I do this, then I change myself because I want to, not because I ought to. That's probably the thing that keeps us dialoguing - a steady mix of the commitment, tune-in, discovery and growth levels - and trying to read each letter with a mind set of "what is it like being you, and married to me?"

Have we reached our goal of being consistently able to tell each other anything in and out of dialogue and be certain it will be listened to with an open mind? Well, not exactly. We're maybe 50% of the way there. Some days we still ask ourselves as we sit down to write "Why am I bothering to do this?" But as we get closer to our goal of becoming each other's confidants, we find ourselves asking that question far less often.

Has working toward confiding dialogue been worth the effort? Maybe the best way to answer is to reflect on what's happening in our lives right now. We are currently going through one of those "Years from Hell." Seven years ago - which was the last time we had a year this bad - when we dialogued, we dumped, we fought, and we got no place fast. This past year, we've supported and sustained one another - and we haven't lost "us" along the way.

We can't guarantee that confiding dialogue will work for you - but it might. "What am I shooting for in our dialogue" might make an interesting question for tomorrow night's dialogue.

In his address on Friday evening of the [1995] National Convention in Denver, Fr. Chuck Gallagher put forth the challenge to live a passionate relationship. He suggested these 14 questions as a start. If these don't produce quite a few more questions for further exploration, we are not digging deep enough!

1. What do I most owe you, my beloved? HDIFAT?
2. What grudges do I hold? HDIFAT?
3. What makes it hardest for you to live with me? HDIFAT?
4. Where do I trust others more than you? HDIFAT?
5. What would you most like me to change? HDIFAMA?
6. Where do I tiptoe around you? HDIFAT?
7. When are we most likely to fight? What, about? Is it ever going to change? HDIFAMA?
8. What most, turns the two of us on sexually? How much do we use it? HDIFAT?
9. How would our children describe me as a husband (wife)? HDIFAMA?
10. What tricks do I use to get my way? HDIFAMA?
11. Who controls the mood in the house? Who has the emotional thermostat? Who controls the conversation? Who controls the bed? (HDIFAMA these could actually be four separate questions.)
12. Where do I most take you for granted? HDIFAT?
13. Where do I feel superior to you? HDIFAT?
14. What will I say about you at your wake? What will I miss the most? HDIFAT?