

Dialogue, A Tender Trap?

By Fr. Chuck Gallagher, S.J.

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It might be a good idea for us to take a close look at our dialogue. After all, the dialogue is such a precious tool to each and every one of us. We've paid a big price to get it into our lives; it hasn't been easy. We've had to make a lot of decisions to love over the months and years since our original Weekend.

It could be helpful to look at our dialogue from the point of view of the principles that we learned in *Marriage in the Modern World* and see how they apply to our experience of dialogue and the way we're following through on it.

The first thing we learned is that the world has a plan for our marriage. We noted that the plan was not a bad one; it wasn't for the couple to get divorced. It was for them to get along well with one another. But one of the problems with the whole thing is that we were living up to what other people expected of us, rather than facing into one another. Could we be doing the same thing with our dialogue?

It could be the Encounter world has a plan for our dialogue. It's not a bad one, of course, but maybe we're paying too much attention to what is expected of us and we're looking over our shoulders too much instead of looking into each other's eyes. Is dialogue more for the sake of the Encounter and more a ticket of admission for us than it is a couple thing? This isn't implying that community support and the help of other dialoguing couples isn't important and essential to all of us. But it can't take our eyes off one another. It can't be the prime motivation for our dialogue.

I wonder if we shouldn't replace the typical Encounter greeting with one another, which at the moment is "How's your dialogue?" with something that focuses much more directly on what the dialogue is aiming at, and that is coupleness.

The difficulty with the question "How's your dialogue," is that it tends to focus on the mechanics of it, or how the dialogue is going as an activity. We should talk to one another in terms of the latest great experience of closeness that you've had, or have you had a moment lately when you really understood one another. Or even more simply, what is the nicest moment that you two have had recently?

One of the magnificent things about the Encounter is that it helps us take our norm of judgment and evaluation of our marriage off the things we do for one another.

The modern world very definitely rates husbands and wives in terms of the wifely and husbandly things they do. We tend to go into the Encounter rating our marriage as a good one because we're doing the right things in those lines and therefore, it's a good marriage.

We can fall into the same trap in the Encounter, except that we change the things that are the basis of that evaluation from being provider, companion, handyman or housekeeper, mother, cook, to the things of dialogue.

The smashing realization that comes across on our Weekend when we become aware of the world's plan for marriage is that we have been living as married singles. Maybe we have to recognize that talking about the things of dialogue and practicing dialogue as an event can lead to the same conclusion and the same practice in our lives. Isn't it also true that sometimes we can dialogue everyday, but it doesn't really affect the rest of our day?

We think dialogue is a very sacred time (which it is) but then the rest of the time we're normal. Yes, it has its impact on the rest of the day, but we're satisfied with that. We don't really work as hard on the rest of our day as we work on our dialogue. So what we settle for is at best a 10-minute marriage and a 23-hour and 50-minute married singleness.

It's like the couple on the original Weekend who says they are not married singles because they talk to one another. So we can say the same thing; we're not married singles because we dialogue with one another, or we're different because at least we talk the feelings out about the married singleness and we have a greater understanding of it. But we don't work very hard at changing the married singleness that exists in the other 23 hours.

The truth is we can get muscle-bound on dialogue if that's the only area of our relationship that we consistently and deliberately develop. This isn't to suggest that we should be any less committed to dialogue or reduce the fervor of our practice of it. It is suggesting that we apply some of that enthusiasm and energy to the other aspects of our relationship.

While it is certainly true that feelings are an essential element to be shared in any husband-wife relationship and if that isn't done the relationship is going to be crippled, it's equally true that unless we share values and really work on developing values and have a common vision and make efforts to create the environment in which those things can be lived out, so too, our relationship is going to be crippled.

The wife (before Marriage Encounter) who works hard at being an excellent cook and housekeeper, and a husband who works strenuously at providing all the necessities for his wife and children really want to make their life a good one. By those very efforts there was a spillover on their communication and it had to help. But as we know from the Encounter, it wasn't enough.

So too, if we put all our efforts into the love letter and the question and the exchange and reading and the dialogue and then think it's going to carry-over and take care of all aspects of our relationship, we're as much in delusion about that as we were about our activities when we first came to the Encounter. The truth is that dialogue can (if we don't watch it) become just as much an activity as anything we did before Encounter.

The only valid reason for dialogue is what it does for us. Sometimes we can take that for granted. We're so convinced of dialogue and are so sure of its automatic effects that we concentrate only on doing it right, not on what its effect is on us and how we are becoming more aware of one another.

We know it's a great difficulty on the Weekend. Many couples are so concerned about following the instructions we give for dialogue that they miss the whole Encounter with one

another, which is to become aware of one another. We can do the same thing after the Weekend. The point of the Encounter is the Weekend; the point of the continuing Encounter expressed primarily through the daily dialogue is to be a couple.

As we have well learned from our past experience, an awful lot of good things we do for one another have been covers to excuse us to be married singles. The handy chores around the house can be done for her sake, but it also excuses him from having to talk to her. The care of the children is certainly necessary and a real gift to a husband, but it can also be a way for a wife to avoid really being fully involved with him. We have to recognize that sometimes the dialogue can be used the same way. If we dialogued about something, we don't have to talk about it.

It's easy for us to delude ourselves on this. We say we know all these things; in fact we've talked about them ourselves at dialogue workshops or rookie night of renewals or in our community. The fact that we've talked about them and that we're aware that they're there doesn't necessarily eliminate the possibility that we may be practicing them. So we really have to be honest with ourselves and ask ourselves when we talk to one another, when we talk with other Encounter couples about dialogue, does the focus pretty much stay on dialogue and the technique, or does the coupleness come out?

How much do we really talk about what has happened to us as a result of dialogue and how much do we talk about the success of dialogue or the problems of dialogue or the technique of dialogue. Just the word commitment. We often hear the phrase "being committed to dialogue." The truth is we can't be committed to a thing; we can only be committed to a person. That should be our concentration, to be committed to one another. We're resolved to practice this specific technique, which we call dialogue, in order to express our commitment to one another.

The sad truth is that we cannot only be dialoguing married singles; we can be dialoguing in order to be married singles. Obviously the solution to that problem is not to drop dialogue. The practice is not the problem; it's the focus of the practice and the purpose of it. We should try to perfect all the skills we have at our command in order to dialogue better - yes. But it has to go beyond that. We have to really be aware that what we're about is our consciousness of one another, our involvement with one another, and our responsiveness to one another. That is the test of our dialogue.

Dialogue is an aspect leading to coupleness. It's a tool that we can use that can help sharpen all the other tools we have at our disposal, such as service to one another, sexual communication, discussion, touching and so on. But it is not an end in itself.

The Weekend teaches us that everybody has a stake in our marriage. We certainly can say that everyone in the Encounter has a stake in our dialogue. For that matter, everyone outside the Encounter has a stake in our dialogue. But that is only true if we recognize that the stake comes from the coupleness that is created by the dialogue.

On the original Weekend we use the practices of others in their marriage to excuse us from being whole in our own. There is a perfect example of that possibility existing here in dialogue, that we can excuse a poor performance in dialogue on the basis that nobody has

great dialogues everyday. Or we can explain away the fact that yes, we dialogue but the rest of our day was miserable on the basis that so many other Encounter couples have the same experience. Therefore, it makes it all right for us. Other couples don't dialogue at all, or they garbage dump or they're not deep, or whatever. Therefore, what we're doing isn't so bad.

We have to recognize that there is no objective norm of dialogue. The only question we have to ask ourselves about dialogue is what does it do for us? How are we as a result of dialogue? Therefore, what happens to other couples is no permission for us to do less than our best in being a couple.

Sometimes it works the other way. We take our eyes off us and see other people we think are great and we know their dialogue is super. We keep trying to perform up to them. Again, that is missing the whole point of what our dialogue is all about! We're not called to be another couple; we're called to be us.

Part of the difficulty here is the shorthand that we use in the Encounter. The statement really should not be "Everybody has a stake in everybody else's dialogue." That is correct but incomplete. Everybody has a stake in everybody else's dialogue because everybody has a stake in everybody else's coupleness. That is the full statement. This is a perfect example of how, because we shorthand things, we get ourselves into trouble and miss the whole point. It's the call to coupleness that we look for so much from others and that is so necessary for all of us to give everyone.

Yes, dialogue is an essential tool, but if we just talk about dialogue and not what it leads to, it's like talking about shovels and not the gold that it turned up. We've simply got to talk about coupleness more in the Encounter family. First, in our own homes among ourselves; secondly, with all others of equal determination and dedication.

Interestingly enough, the romance section of the Modern World talk is very brief. Yet it's a very key part of the whole Encounter experience. We're reminding them of what they have already experienced with one another and how magnificent it was. We get them to dream along; we want them to relive (even for a few moments) their first meeting, the dates, the first kiss, engagement and early years of marriage. We want to show them that what we're holding out to them is not impossible, that it's something that they already have had. We're going to point out to them later on; that actually, they were right in the first place, that this is God's plan for them. After marriage they accumulated all sorts of other things and were distracted from what they originally were seeking, which was one another.

So too, we have to recognize the same thing as far as our dialogue is concerned: We had it on our first Weekend. Maybe there are a lot of things we look back on now and smile, just as we look back and smile about our first dates and our fumbling and our insecurity with one another. But the fact is, in those early days we did have it all together. Maybe it was in raw form and there is so much more we've learned about one another. But we have to look back on those days of romance to learn how to live together now.

The same thing is true about our original Weekend. Very frequently we do with our original Weekend what we've done with our romance; we forget it or just use it as an occasion of nostalgia, instead of really trying to relive it and make it come alive on a day-to-day basis.

We have to recognize that the continuing Encounter, the daily dialogue, is just that—a renewal of our Encounter Weekend, not something different. It's trying to live out on a daily basis the way we were with one another on that Weekend. We can forget that; as a matter of fact, we can think that we're beyond that. But we're really not, and as a matter of fact, if we were to do that it would be tragic. Maybe we didn't have it in the right form and maybe there was garbage dumping and problem solving. But one thing we really did have on that original Weekend by the time we came to Sunday afternoon, was an intense absorption in one another.

The real test of coupleness is whether you can look into each other's eyes at any given time. Certainly, on Sunday afternoon there was no difficulty with that. The real reevaluation that has to take place on any given day is to discern just by looking into each other's eyes, whether you're a Friday couple or a Sunday couple. All other re-evaluations are minor compared to that one.

The eye test very simply and very clearly helps us to decide whether we're couples or whether we're married singles. That is really the basic question, isn't it? We may discover that when we look into each other's eyes we have to break it by giggling or looking over each other's shoulders or by talking. Then we have to ask ourselves why we can't look into each other's eyes? How come we're not that much of a couple? How come we're a Friday or a Saturday couple instead of a Sunday couple? What do we have to do about us?

It isn't the externals so much that keep us out of this; it's the lack of concentration and absorption in one another. Of course, one of the first places that we have to look is in our dialogue but we have to look in all sorts of other areas of our lives to see what is distracting us from one another.

It's this absorption in one another that is the call that we received on our Encounter Weekend. We all know that the dialogue is the best way to keep reminding ourselves just what the call is and how to achieve it. But if we just dialogue for its own sake and don't really hear the call, then to what purpose?

One of the important things that we should be doing is to keep going back to our original Weekend, to keep re-experiencing it and re-experiencing the dialogue that we had on that original Weekend, but most especially to re-experience the "one another" that we had on that Weekend.

All of us know that in any human relationship, disillusionment creeps in. The disillusionment comes because other things become more important than us. We get careless with one another; we become self-centered rather than other centered. We look for our satisfaction and personal growth in other areas than our relationship.

The same thing is true as far as dialogue is concerned. I discover I'm not who I thought I was in dialogue and that my husband/wife is not who I thought he/she was and dialogue is

not what it's cracked up to be. What happens then is the same thing that we describe on the Weekend as far as marriage is concerned. We lose our sense of wonder in one another and lose sight of the hopes and plans we once had. So too, with dialogue when we're in disillusionment with it. We look for the other person to change or blame dialogue itself, or allow ourself the luxury of an acute attack of self-image and throw up our hands and don't try as hard anymore because it's not our cup of tea, or we're not good at it.

Worse, we settle down into our dialogue. We take it for granted and let our dialogue be something that we get along with. The real reason for that is confidence. Confidence is still the key to dialogue—we keep forgetting that lesson we learned on our Weekend. This is what really gives the spice and the fullness and the joy of dialogue. We tend to believe that we got all our confidences out. Or we look for the other person to do something about the confidences we have revealed and if they don't take them away from us and make us feel better or make us believe that they really understand, then it's almost as if it doesn't count for us.

We look for "biggies" all the time; actually some of the great confidences are the little ones. Confidence has to be in terms of what is important to us and to our love for one another and to our awareness of each other, rather than just what is going on inside me. All too often, we can paralyze our dialogue with constant turning inward with revelations about feelings about self and look for the partner to give me my self-image. We know that we have to see ourselves reflected in our beloved's eyes, but we keep forgetting that it's our decision.

Dialogue is not a decision-making process. Most of those feelings that we share in the dialogue about our self-image are based on judgments. Judgments are much more overriding and much more deep seated than the feelings. Consequently, we're really not dialoguing, we're discussing with one another in dialogue format and we're interfering with the possibilities of both as a process in building us closer to one another.

Our disillusionment often comes from the demands that we place on dialogue. We make it the universal form of our communication with one another. So, {or example, if we're out of sorts with one another, our healing should take place before the dialogue because healing is a decision. A decision on both sides—to be healed and to heal. Dialogue can fuel that decision, and can bring it to a head.

A cure for disillusionment that we were given on our Weekend was the revelation that "love is a decision" and therefore we're always in control, we always have the possibility to create our responsiveness to one another. We're never defeated, we never have to say "I can't" when it comes to love of one another

The same thing is true as far as our dialogue is concerned. Certainly the facts of dialogue are a decision. We choose to or we choose not to. We choose to do it with our hearts or without our hearts. So that is completely within our control.

There is something even more important about dialogue being a decision. That is, how much we allow dialogue to affect our day. We can choose to let dialogue be a very

important part of our day, one that we would never miss and one that we do to the best of our ability. When it's over, then that's it and we're going to do it the next day.

Or we can choose to really create the atmosphere ahead of time in which the dialogue will be most meaningful and then bring out the experience we had of one another during that dialogue period throughout the rest of our evening.

Yes, dialogue does concentrate on feelings. But the effect of sharing those feelings is not a feeling in itself. It's a new insight into the other person. It's a new commitment to really belong to one another. It's a new determination and a deeper one to be truly married tonight. Unfortunately, we restrict it to the feelings that we experience during the dialogue, most especially the most positive ones and the ones that are most meaningful to us. We just leave it up to the length of those feelings to determine how long our dialogue lasts. In a way, we're using dialogue the way we use sex; as a celebration of a relationship that already exists, instead of a creator of a new and deeper one.

Yes, all of us have a long way to go when it comes to dialogue and we have to look into ourselves and constantly examine and refine and fine-tune our dialogue. We have to develop our potential for coupleness to the greatest of our ability. Nonetheless, we must also recall the one ultimate rule of dialogue is to do it. Any dialogue, even at its worst, is beautiful. Anything that gives us 10 minutes with one another, anything that gets us to think about one another during the day and to sit down and write to each other has got to be super!

Just the very fact of dialogue and its existence in our life says something magnificent about us. It means we really do care for one another very tenderly and we're willing to pay quite a price. We're perfectly determined to make an honest attempt to put each other #1 every day. Sure, there could be more, maybe we could do better and sure, we make mistakes. But just the honest fact that we can say "We are dialoguing" really says something about our coupleness in itself. That should be a cause of joy to us, a real opportunity for celebration. As long as we're dialoguing there is always hope for more, there is always a basic commitment that provides a peace, security, serenity. No one else can make that statement!!