

Why Dialogue?

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This was the very question we were asking ourselves only a short while ago. We made our Marriage Encounter Weekend almost eight years ago and over the recent months our dialogue had been tough going and sporadic at best. We were actually embarrassed when we were approached and asked to share with you on this topic. We do hope the look we've had to take at our dialogue and the subsequent discoveries we've made may be helpful to you, if you, too, have asked, "WHY DIALOGUE?"

Just as in our relationship as a whole, we've found that we go through very definite stages relative to dialogue and our commitment to it. These stages also appear and disappear with no particular regularity or pattern, and they're the same stages we've found in our marriage: romance, disillusionment, and joy.

When we left our original Weekend, we were soaring like a pair of kites. We'd been given a gift to keep our newly found relationship shining and polished . . . the gift of daily dialogue. Before our Marriage Encounter, we'd been cynical about what could happen on one weekend to change people so much, but when we learned about daily dialogue, it put it all together. We mentally clutched the promise of daily dialogue the way the little elephant, Dumbo, clutched in his trunk the magic feather that allowed him to fly—and our dialogue was going to allow us to keep flying too.

Were we going to dialogue every day? Absolutely! We remember the feeling of anticipation we had when we talked of our commitment to our 10 and 10. It was as though our dialogue was a newborn child that needed caring and nourishment every day. It seemed almost like a fairy tale with the "happy ever after" ending for the prince and princess. Realistically, we knew there would be difficult times, but that through our dialogue, we would be together and could conquer them. We'd had a deeper glimpse of each other's beauty and goodness on our Weekend, and we viewed daily dialogue as a means to continue to discover ourselves and one another. It was with great joy that we looked ahead to a lifetime of learning about and loving one another.

Our dialogue opened many doors for us. We began to open our eyes and ears to each other. Most importantly, we were listening to each other with our minds and hearts. We began to delve into the image we had of ourselves, and to share them with the other. We were loving, gentle and persistent in those early days of discovery. We began to develop a new sense of who the other was—and a whole new sense of who we were, too. We were trusting and believing in the person our spouse was showing us to be, and setting aside our judgments about self. As we shared difficult feelings and became vulnerable to one another, we grew to understand what acceptance was. The bonds of loneliness began to break, and from them became forged the fulfillment of relationship

We did grow closer from our early dialogues, even though they may not have been technically perfect. As a matter of fact, they were full of (shudder) thoughts and judgments, and often could be called somewhat shallow as far as "digging" for feeling was concerned. In the same vein, there was a lot of explaining and justifying of where feelings came from. None of that really mattered though, because we were so much in love and had such an urgency and desire for our dialogue as a way to become more a part of each other.

As we continued to dialogue, our lives did slowly change. Our outlook on the future became more positive and hopeful; "keeping up with the Joneses" lost its importance, and we delighted more and more in each other's company. Our relationship was becoming something beautiful, and there was more laughter in our lives. God came into our life in a special way, too, and replaced indifference that had once dwelled there

During times of romance in our dialogue, it's like we were in Camelot: every day the sun shone brightly, the birds sang, and we were the fairy prince and princess. But, slowly, insidiously, the weeds in the royal garden would begin to sprout, and the crab grass in the royal lawn began to show; and we would begin to have fears and doubts about our dialogue and about us. Instead of being so open and sharing our deepest feelings, we realized there were some feelings we didn't wish to acknowledge, let alone share with each other. There were dry spells, too, when it was very difficult to find feelings to write about at all. At these times, dialogue became hard work and a staleness seemed to develop in our dialogue and our relationship. Sometimes dialogue seemed just one more pressure added to our busy days filled with jobs, kids and Marriage Encounter or parish activities. It became more difficult to believe that we were special.

We'd find times of mounting resentment toward each other, too, when one would write, but the other wouldn't, or when we judged one of us was more open with feelings than was the other. Sometimes these thoughts were voiced; worst times, they were not—but rather a silent question of, "Don't you care about me?" It sometimes seemed like just going through the motions, especially when one of us might write a lengthy love letter, but find little to say during the dialogue.

Underneath the anger and frustration, though, were some deeper concerns about our dialogue itself. Sometimes our 10 and 10 was our only means of communication, and it seems we expected it to carry our relationship single-handedly. We would go through periods when we wondered if we were doing it right. It was like having assembled a complex toy and, finding it not up to expectations, wondering if we had read the directions wrong or if the advertising claims were misleading. We'd try using all the input and helpful hints available, and get hung up on trying to dialogue "correctly," especially if one of us would judge that this was the only thing motivating the other.

The glow we had seemed to dim and our growth would seem stagnated. The little pettiness and discords easily crept back into our relationship, and sometimes we'd

criticize one another's love letters or subtly accuse the other of shallowness as we dialogued. Rather than being deep, loving outpourings, it was easy to pick only light questions that kept our dialogue on the surface. Our desire for dialogue seemed to wane with our desire for each other. We sometimes seemed on a treadmill, knowing we should be dialoguing, but having pangs of guilt because neither of us really wanted to.

This all took its toll on our relationship. At times, we didn't care if we reached out to each other in dialogue or not, either because of a distance in our relationship or just complacency. We questioned what effect it really had in our lives. We realized that, at times, we just didn't care what the other's deepest feelings were, nor about changing the way we were behaving that might have some bearing on those feelings. We might still be trying to grow closer, but not all that hard. The sense of urgency for each other just wasn't there. We'd rarely have a real disaster with a dialogue—or a really great one. We'd pinned so many hopes for our relationship on dialogue, but sometimes our dreams seemed faded and distant. At these times, we seemed like two children, wandering away from each other in the dark.

When we learned about dialogue on our Weekend, we saw it as a gift. We've come to realize that gift as a tool to help us grow in awareness of each other, to reach out to each other, and to reveal each other's lovableness. We've found, too, that one of the things that can lead to disillusionment is looking at dialogue as an end unto itself, rather than as a means to enhance our relationship. Actually, when our dialogue is at its best and is joy-filled, it represents a coming out of oneself and into the other. This calls, in turn, for a decision as to how our dialogue is used. Earlier, we mentioned the effect that dialogue had on us after our Weekend, and how we changed, often unawares. As we've grown closer through our dialogue, we've become aware of the need to change our behavior—not to just say, "This is the way I am and you must accept me." Granted, our *feelings are* to be accepted, and we don't talk of change in the dialogue proper, but that's where the process must lead if our love is to grow.

So this becomes a part of the answer for us to the question, "Why Dialogue?" We dialogue to change, but this fact in itself can be a hindrance to our dialogue and lead us down the spiral path of disillusionment. We are naturally resistant to change, and also easily frustrated when we're trying to change, with little evidence of success. Too often our attempts at change through dialogue have led to a reluctance to dialogue. We've realized, subconsciously, that over the years the easier changes have been made, the softer layers of selfishness stripped away, and that a weariness can develop when continually faced with the need to change.

We're realizing now that dialogue only to focus on sharing feeling and thus to be led to personal change is not enough to sustain growth in our relationship. We need to zero in on the kind of change we're being called to and that, indeed, the change that's required is to decrease in terms of self, so that the other may be built up. For us to desire to change in this way (as opposed to resisting it), demands that our individual senses of self-worth be expanding. As we grow more secure in our own person-hood,

through the love of the other, we can afford to give ourselves over to the other in this way.

So often our feelings (especially negative ones related to ourselves) portray a distortion of reality. Whereas, we need to accept one another's feelings, as revelation of a deep and tender part of us, we also are seeing a need to use those feelings to help discover the thought patterns that have produced the feeling. We realize that our thoughts, judgments, and attitudes can trigger our feelings and often the consequent behavior. Thus those attitudes, thoughts and judgments also have an important place in our communication, as we try to help the other pick out those distortions that are induced by the way we see reality in relation to ourselves. This is such a need in our role as husband and wife. We can't give one another a better self image and we don't want to "take away" the other's feelings, but this does provide a means to help the other develop their sense of self worth by reflecting to them a clearer and undistorted image of who they are.

As we see our call to give each other life in this way, it expands the importance of our dialogue. This is true because it reminds us that the purpose of conjugal dialogue is to move away from behavior that is self-oriented in order to come continually closer to one another; and this in turn links our dialogue way of life to the achievement of God's plan for us as revealed in the matrimonial model of Ephesians, Chapter V.

When we see the significance of dialogue in this light of mutual submissiveness leading to unity we are able to re-examine the question of "Why Dialogue?" not just in terms of emotional or intellectual values, but to see it as the way to discover the depth of married love and joy that our Father calls us to.

1. What is there about our dialogue that turns me off? HDIFAT?
2. How has our relationship changed because of the use of dialogue? HDIFAT?
3. At times you have really touched me through our dialogue. As I think about these moments, HDIFAT?
4. Romance enhances our dialogue. What one specific change could I make to be more romantic with you? HDIFAT?