

Sensing the dialogic field

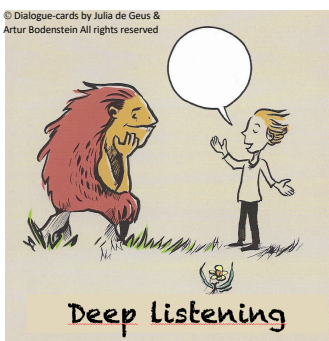
Eelco de Geus

Not knowing is nearest...
(Zen saying)

Dialogue means, to engage in relationship and finding new meaning through it. Be it in relationship with ourselves, our inner parts, in relationship to other people, or in relationship to our environment. When we open up, listen to what is being spoken, and authentically bring in our own voice, we enter a field of resonance. It is a field, that is not you, it is not me. It is not me or that... it is a field, that holds and includes us both, that arises in the space between you and me and between us and our environment. We are part of this field, you, me and the environment. Something arises between us, that is unique and new, and when we open up and allow ourselves to be touched by this 'in between', it affects us. As soon as we enter this dialogic field, we are changed by it, and it moves us, like a wave of the sea moves us when we surrender to it. Or like a piece of music that moves our heart. And in the same way this dialogic field is changed by us. The voice we bring in, the song we sing, with our whole being, shapes the dialogic field and changes all the parts in it. As Eugene Gendlin (Focusing) expresses so beautifully:

*„How you are when you affect me is already affected by me.
 And not by me as I usually am, but by me as I occur with you”*

Getting access



We access this field of resonance, in which new meaning can occur, through dialogue: when we slow down, when we listen carefully, when we are being heard, when we can speak from our hearts. We open the space between us, when we suspend our judgements and respect and hold the different positions in the field. Holding that space together, that dialogical field, with all its diversity, creates a field of resonance, that affects and moves us together.

Pregnant

When we engage into dialogue, we cannot know in advance how this field will feel or look like. It differs from moment to moment, from person to person, from group to group. It depends on the place where we are, the themes we are addressing and what we want to get done together. It depends on the timeframe we have, the pressure we might be under, on how we can count on our relationships or how fragile they are. It depends on the way our personal intentions merge into a common intention and to which extent we are able to get that intention clear. It depends on how free we feel to express ourselves, how alive we can

be, to which extend we trust each other and the field we are in. But when we get together, there is always a potential for that specific field, to move in a certain direction; something that wants to happen, that wants to evolve or wants to become clear. From that perspective a field is always 'pregnant', waiting for something to be born, to become possible. It is a moving field, that has a natural tendency to carry itself forward, and when we keep it open, the movement, the next step will surface, sooner or later.

When we are sensing the field, we consciously open up for this implicit potential of this specific field; What wants to happen here? What is implicitly wanting to become possible here?

Sensing the field

Of course, we are always part of many fields and sensing into them automatically, because we are an undivided part of it. We cannot do something else, for we are relational beings, not only outward, but also inward; our own body is a field of elements interacting with each other, and how we feel is a direct expression of that. So, sensing the fields, inward and outward, is an ongoing, mostly unconscious process.

If we want to move freely in relational fields, it helps to raise our awareness about it. And if we want to facilitate and lead groups it helps when we find words for it, name it, so that we can share our experience and help group process get more aware about itself. Then the implicit potential, that what wants to happen in this field, can show itself, become explicit and carry the dialogue forward.



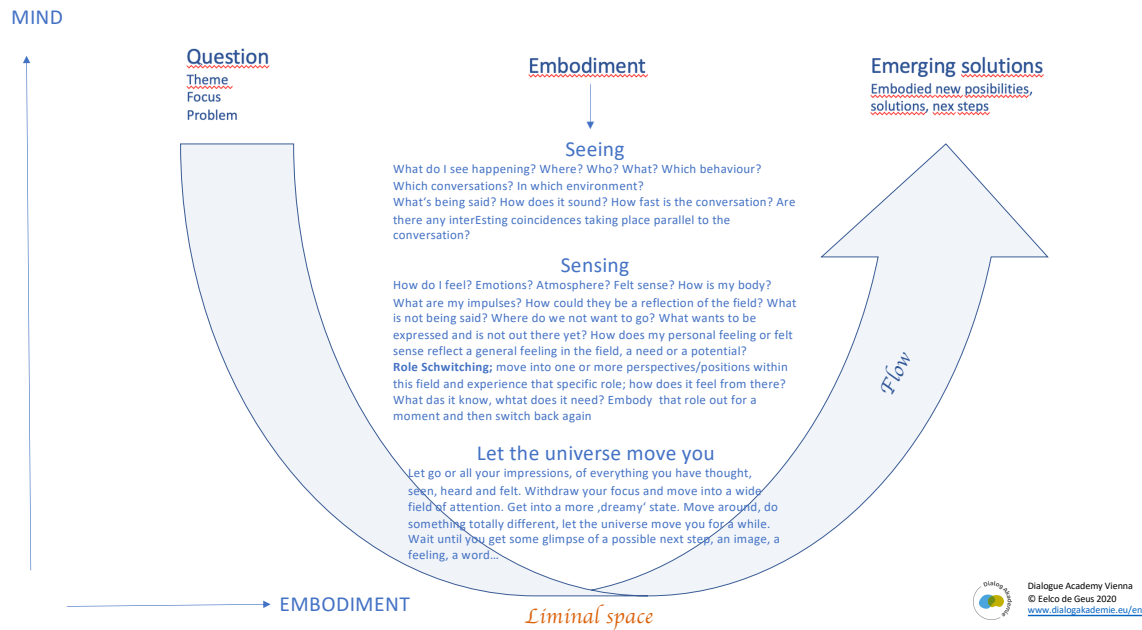
Flowing through

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Using your body as an instrument

Although we perceive our body's more less as being separated from its environment, we are all part of it all the time. We sense the field through our body, because our body is the field. Eugene Gendlin formulates this beautifully in his 'process model':

The body IS an interaction process with the environment and therefore the body IS its situations. The body isn't just a sealed thing here, with an external situation over there, which it merely interprets. Rather, even before we think and speak, the living body is already one interaction process with its situation. The situation is not out there, nor inside. The external 'things' and the subjective 'entities' are derived from one single life-interaction process.



Seeing

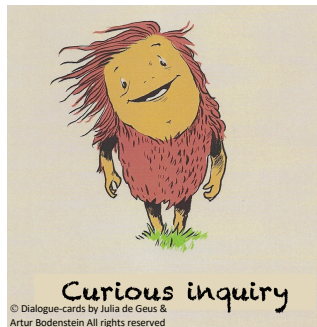
With our eyes and ears, we notice and register what is happening concretely in the field: We notice ourselves and others, the environment, things, colors, the themes we talk about, the words that are being spoken. We see how the dialogue is being facilitated, the characteristics of the people, the history of the group, the rules we are following, the steps that are taken, etcetera. We see the different positions and perspectives in the group. We can also see why we are together, what the intention for our gathering is. It is an important information-gathering aspect of our sensing into the field process.

Sensing

Especially with our body, we feel the atmosphere in the group, we may have personal feelings, are touched by some words more than other. We feel into how other people might feel, what we avoid talking about, what is being expressed and being withheld. We sense emotions, wishes, needs, that are part of this group and part of this field. And though they might be our very personal feelings and emotions too, we can also trust, that most of the time they reflect also something important within the group. It can be something that wants to be seen, something that cannot be integrated or respected, or it can also be something that wants to be recognized, like a hope, a vision or a certain power to move.

Switching Roles

In this dialogic field, which is an energetic relational field, we all have or roles and positions. Maybe we have a specific and explicit role, that puts us in a position (like the role of a facilitator, or the role of the leader). Or maybe, or I should better say probably, we embody one or more implicit roles, that can be more or less unconscious for ourselves and for the group. Like the role of the elder, the role of the newcomer, the role of the one who keeps the history alive, or a role that represents somebody missing, a voice missing, the role of the counterpart (opposer), the role of the one who keeps the harmony, the role of the one who uncovers what is not being spoken about, etcetera. We all have our roles, that are more or less fixed, or they might also change during the dialogue, or change from context to context.



Roles that are unconscious, are like spirits or ghosts in our conversation (*Arnold Mindell, Process oriented Psychology*); we cannot see them, we cannot grasp them, but we feel them. We have some kind of felt sense for those roles. When we sense into the field, we might identify our roles, find words for them, name them, or express them more explicitly.

When we are confronted with roles of others we cannot understand, that irritate us, go against our deepest values and challenge our perspective, we find our selves quickly being fixated in our own mental positions and judgements. To find our way back to the flow of dialogue, we need to open up for the values and perspectives of the other one, however difficult they may be. We need to practice getting into the position that is opposing our reality and experience the world from that perspective. We can consciously imagine we are that role, and feel how it is to feel, to gesture, to speak from there. Thus, we allow that position in ourselves to become alive, to become a place in ourselves, to maybe be recognized as some repressed part, which we are criticizing within our self. In doing that, we open up for the unknown and the unwanted, we find some heart for it. We leave our mental fixation and return into the flow of dialogue again. Identifying roles and switching back and forth to them, is therefore an important human ability. For facilitators of dialogue something that can be practiced explicitly, so that it becomes a natural response to difficult moments in a dialogical field, where we seem to get stuck and are struggling to find our way into some carrying forward again. Sometimes role switching can even be done as an explicit intervention with the whole group, by having the different roles being named, played out, and people are being invited to switch from one position into the other, thus experiencing the group- field from different perspectives.

Let the universe move you

It is my experience, that most of the time, after consciously seeing, sensing and maybe role switching, it is not so, that we have an immediate sense of what is needed or what is wanting to happen here. I am often not immediately clear about myself, or about the group process and what might be a helpful intervention or step in the group process. Generally,



I enter some space that Eugene Gendlin would call 'a murky edge'; a space in between what is and what wants to become.

It can be a place that is unclear, fuzzy or foggy, sometimes inconvenient, it can be a place of silence, where are no names yet, cannot be defined in anyway. Dwelling in this liminal space is an opportunity for something new and creative to surface. We enter this liminal space by dropping what we have seen, and we have felt, and let go of it. We just move our experience in a dreamier state, loosen and soften our focus, move out of our thinking, go out in nature, meditate, or just do something completely different. Sleeping things over is a wonderful way to dwell fully in liminal spaces, and to surrender to what wants to become clear, what wants to happen. Sooner or later a next step, an idea, a possibility, will come forth out of it, sometimes in the most unexpected ways.

*The liminal space is the space
that lies between the known and the unknown
It is a transitional space of heightened intensity
that we experience when we cross
the threshold into the creative unknown*

Flow

A field of relationships has a natural tendency to carry forward, to move and to change ongoingly, unfolding itself in unpredicted ways, when we have the ability to be present in that field with all our senses. With our eyes and ears, with our hearts and feelings, with our mind, with our whole-body perception. Then we become a permeable body of resonance, that is more or less one with that field and flows with it, we flow in a river of constantly changing meaning. There, new possibilities and next steps unfold easy and by itself. To access that flow of dialogue, to return there or to stay there, we need to flow with our merely bodily perceptions and practice to let go of our mental fixations. We need to have the courage to sense into the field, to be with what is, to speak from our hearts, and to be true to our 'felt sense'. When we can feed that back into the dialogic field we are part of, we contribute tremendously to its unfoldment into its full potential.