

## Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

March 2022



### A Collaborative-dialogic Perspective on Dialogue as a Conversation Partnership

By Harlene Anderson, *The Taos Institute, Co-founder and Board Member*

A *dialogic process* can occur whether we call it dialogue, conversation, or chit-chat. Regardless of the occasion, it provides the opportunity and space for people to speak and listen to themselves and each other—perhaps as they have not been able to do before.

Dialogue invites the reflexive, intricately intra-twined actions of speaking, listening, hearing, and understanding with *genuine presence*. I speak to invite the other to speak so that I can listen to them attentively, carefully, and with interest and without interrupting. I respond to what is said with comments, questions, and bodily movements. I want my response to signal that I am curious and want to learn more. The other's response helps me know if I am hearing and understanding their meanings.

Dialogue invites responsive understanding—an interactive-emergent process. Understanding is not a passive activity. Its development involves checking to clarify if you have grasped or heard what the other hoped you heard. Checking is not paraphrasing or parroting back the other's words. We must use words for comparison and contrast to see if our understanding is close or not.

Dialogue requires trust, openness, and carefulness, especially to the other and their difference. This assumes that we, the professionals, can be questioned, critiqued, and not agreed with by the other.

Dialogue invites us to not presume we know what the other person means nor to fill in the blanks of their story. We want to understand from *their* sense-making or logic map, not ours, *as best we can*.

Dialogue entails asking *curious questions* to learn more, which invites the other to clarify, expand, and detour—or not. Questions are not asked to gather facts or data, but rather to invite a reflective-reflexive process that is part of both professional and client beginning to think and act differently. The process of learning more provides the opportunity for each to rethink and reflect, which is integral to the generative and transformational process of dialogue.

Dialogue invites and welcomes pauses and silences, providing time for all to be aware of their inner thoughts, to consider what they think they heard, and to contemplate their response.

Dialogue invites a *collaborative sensitivity* that informs *ways of being and becoming in the relationship and conversation* in which a sense of togetherness and equitability invites participating, contributing, and sharing ownership and responsibility.

Collaborative sensitivity invites *collaborative design*. Collaborative design is part of the *co-being* and *witness* process of co-generating the potential for newness in meaning, understanding, and action. Think of collaborative design like taking a walk with someone and together deciding where to go, when to pause, and when and where to detour.

Differences are part of everyday life. They introduce the tension of non-clarity, ambiguity, incoherency, uncertainty, and misunderstanding that naturally inhabit dialogue. Differences and their inherent tension are a resource for shared exploration of the conversation's focus. Dialogue is not necessarily harmonious or product producing. What is important is *dynamic sustainability*: a generative process is created that can endure outside the immediate conversation partnership.