David Bohm's Dialogue:
Wholeness and Fragmentation

We all find that the groups to which we belong function really well sometimes ... and then there are those other times, the ones when it's hard to see through the clashes or to avoid the landmines. Why do those clashes happen? How do we mend the tears in the fabric of our groups or societal world once they have been ripped?

Theoretical physicist, David Bohm, thought about that a lot. Why is it that inevitably we seem to get into such societal muddles? He worried - or as his biographer David Peat describes it - he agonized over the state of the world in conflict, feeling that as a scientist he had responsibility to help find the way to patch the world back together. The idea of wholeness became his mantra, his life search, whether in physics or in society.

In the realm of physics, Bohm had discovered the essential role that wholeness plays in the universe. His mind's eye pictured what this wholeness was like. In a vast space were many bubbles of light, each connected to the other and each reflecting back the image of the whole. So each was individual but each also contained the whole which had been reflected to him and which was then within him and re-reflected back out to all others.

That's rather astounding: We all contain the whole universe within us as well as being individual. We are both whole and part. While we are uniquely ourselves, we are also inseparable from the whole.

If that is so, then why is it that we tend to get into such muddles? There's a hint in something he once said. The universe is always coherent if we take a high enough view. The reason things appear to be fragmented is that we are looking too low; we fail to raise our sights to the level at which the fragmentation is only a part of a greater whole. As a result, we mistakenly see things as separate, as fragmented. In fact, we don't even realize that this level of wholeness exists.
Bohm delved further. Fragmentation, he said, is the loss of relationship between parts that belong within a whole. He used the example of smashing a watch which destroys the relationships among its working parts. Our world is much like a smashed watch in which essential relationships have been lost. Fragmentation becomes the basis of our thinking, of the underlying world view that guides our actions.

The idea that fragmentation becomes the basis of our thinking is important. Whatever our world view - either holistic or fragmented - it influences how we act in the world, and it also influences those around us. Our often times unrealized worldviews create the world around us. Because we believe that the world around us is broken, we react to it as if it were broken, and our behavior looks to others around us as evidence of the world's brokenness, and so they respond in kind. It's a never-ending repetition. And sadly, few recognize that they are participants in creating and maintaining the brokenness.

That's why many of our societal systems – family, workgroups, battle units, classes, dorm units, religious groups – lack coherence. The individual – you or me – needs support and belonging, but it’s not there. Real communication and relationship are hard to find. The whole has cracks. As Bohm liked to say, we may have some bad cultural cement.

Is there a way out of this deepening muddle? Bohm, and others from whom he learned, said yes! But we need some tools that are capable of digging below the surface. Just like the iceberg, the causes of our group dysfunctions lie far below, and so must the tools we use to shore up the underlying fragmentation.

We have a hint from our very language that points us in the direction we need to go. We prize the idea of discussion, and it forms the basis of most of our communication. Yet, look at its meaning. Discussion,
said Bohm, comes from the same Latin root (\textit{quatere}) as do the words percussion and concussion, both having the implication of striking, forcing, or shaking.

Discussion relies on processes like analysis, breaking things up into small enough pieces that they can be controlled or manipulated. Though essential in many ways, when overused or misused, the underlying dynamics of discussion lead to fragmentation, to the destruction of the relationships between the parts of a whole. Once we have taken something apart through analysis and discussion, we fail to see it within its original context. The split off parts conflict with each other, one winning and one losing.

On the other hand, continued Bohm, there is \textit{dialogue}. Coming from the Latin \textit{dia} and \textit{logos}, dialogue implies the flow of meaning moving through a group. It is a building process, reconnecting the fragments back into their essential wholeness, rebuilding the context from which the fragments had been extracted.

Bohm had learned from the work of two British psychiatrists, Michael Foulkes and Patrick DeMaré, who had done pioneering research during the Second World War on the problems of soldiers suffering from battle fatigue. Their finding was that a very significant portion of the impact of battle fatigue came from a breakdown in the soldier's unit. If the psychological wounding originated from the group, then, they reasoned, healing would likely come from the same source, from a group - but from a healthy one.

Though discovered in the midst of war, their findings weren't just about soldiers. Rather, they were findings about human nature at its core, findings about us and our human design specifications, so to speak. The well being of individuals was primarily a function of the well being of groups to which they belonged.

According to Foulkes, that which rebuilds wholeness is the sense of belonging, of participation, of being respected, of being an effective member of a group, of being able to share and participate, of feeling a part of constructive experiences of life, of being supported and accepted, and of being able to talk and being listened to even when one's expression is yet inarticulate and unpolished.

Foulkes considered these learnings to form a cardinal principal. Knitting back together the effects of fragmentation - whether within a
battle unit, a family, a workgroup, a social group or whatever other kind of group - came from a simple truth: *All of us need to be understood and to understand others.*

So then, the way of bridging the fragments back together is through participation in groups that are capable of offering this level of understanding and acceptance, of giving the individuals the safety necessary to risk authenticity, of talking about what really matters, and of offering honest impressions knowing that whether they are agreed to or not, respect and belonging are not in jeopardy. Few of us have experienced participation at this level.

To create groups of this nature was Bohm's intention. He called the process *dialogue*. Within the dialogue group, the context of wholeness shores up fragmentation so that we regain coherence, relationship, and so that we experience communication that *matters*. The field of dialogue changes us as we experience meaningful participation. Our growing toward wholeness becomes contagious, and as a result we then participate in our own external groups in a productive way. Through dialogue, we carry with us the ability to reknit the coherence of our everyday groups.