The future of America is uncertain at best. With the possibility of war looming, the rift in our society steadily grows wider. We, as a people, are split down the middle on almost every social issue, from the morality of war to women’s rights to the environment. The fragmentation that exits in the political arena is mirrored on every level within our society. It is reflected in our communities, our institutions and businesses, and in our families and marriages. Where is America headed? We can continue down the same road that has led us here, or turn aside and explore another path: the path of dialogue. We are standing at the crossroads: our future lies before us. The choice is ours.

Dialogue is being presented as the cure for the ills of our post-modern world, offering us the solution for healing the fragmentation that exists in our world, our society, our families, and in ourselves. The importance of dialogue and its possibilities is growing, like a ground swell approaching the shore. The idea of dialogue has moved into the mainstream with magazines and talk shows proclaiming its wonders. Dialogue has become the latest catchword in the pop-psychology self-help culture. Dialogue, as a concept, is getting a lot of play; it has captured the attention of people as a possible solution to the conflicts that confront them in all areas of life. Dialogue, as a communication style, is now embraced and espoused by scholars in many different fields, from psychology to physics, from marketing to management. In theory, dialogue is being heralded as the “salvation” for a troubled world. Given all that, why is the theory so rarely seen in practice?

Until recently I thought the answer could be found in the one dialogue characteristic that defines our very humanness: our power of choice.

William Isaacs, in his book, Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together (1999) makes it clear that the possibility for dialogue requires a choice. He believes, along with many others, that we can consciously choose to move into a space where dialogue is possible by suspending our judgments and certainties, respecting and listening to each other without resistance, in a safe, supportive environment that encourages each of us to speak from our hearts. When people can come together with that spirit of trust, respect, and caring they can create a new way of seeing and thinking together that taps into a deeper intelligence. The spirit of dialogue allows a magical thing to happen: new understanding, solutions, and insights spring forth from the fertile ground of “collective intelligence.” The communication scholars have laid out the ground rules for dialogue; they have described the necessary attitudes and behavior, defined the characteristics of dialogue, and emphasized its potential. It sounds wonderful and easy enough. But the truth is, it’s not easy at all. Although we can learn all the theories, techniques, and characteristics, we cannot force it to happen. We cannot will it into existence. Dialogue, as an event, is illusive.

I’ve come to believe that true dialogue is much more than we’ve heard, and it requires more of us than we had imagined. It requires a fundamental shift at the deepest core of our being, and it is that change that is reflected in our attitude, in our way of seeing, thinking, and feeling about each other, the world, and ourselves. The academic writers on dialogue all agree that the foundation of this dialogic spirit or attitude is found in Martin Buber’s philosophy of the I-Thou relationship. This has been defined as seeing every person as completely unique, valuable, irreplaceable individuals, with immeasurable aspects, who are constantly growing and changing. This philosophy is one of honor and deep respect for human free will and choice. It is this philosophy—this spirit—that is necessary to move us into a place where dialogue turns to magic.

In the past weeks I’ve been troubled...by the fate of the world on the brink of war, by the state of our society, and by my own reflections on my past failures, my conflicts, my shortcomings, my own inner turmoil. Learning about dialogue, with all its possibilities and potential, left me feeling anxious and uncomfortable. I know that sounds like a contradiction, but I’ll try to explain. What was troubling me was the awareness that dialogue really can change the world, and yet, it is so very rare. I’ve been thinking a lot about why that is, and about my role, the part I play, in changing that.

I turned back to Buber’s I and Thou (1970) in my search for answers. What I found was startling, offering me hope, inspiration, and a sense of urgency. For Buber, the I-Thou philosophy is grounded in the unwavering belief in the existence and “beingness” of God. I-Thou is the term he uses to express the sacredness of man’s relationship to, and with, God. It is with that same I-Thou attitude of sacredness that he encountered every human. For Buber, human to human relationships are the centrality of human life. He holds that the life force inherent in all beings is God, and thus deserving of our recognition and respect. His philosophy is clear: “God is present when I confront You. But if I look away from You, I ignore Him. As long as I merely experience or use you, I deny God. But when I encounter You, I encounter Him” (Buber, 1970, p. 28). Buber uses the Hebrew name for God, which translates: “HE IS PRESENT.” It is this, more than anything, that explains his philosophy of the sacredness of the here and now in human encounters. He goes on to tell us that the direct relationship between God and man is established and experienced each time the same direct relationship can be established between persons (p. 181). I think it is this connection, at the most basic human level, that best describes the spirit of dialogue.
This “spirit” of dialogue is not just an attitude; it is not something to be learned and practiced, nor is it something you can just choose to do. It is something that you search for in the core of your being, and then experience...from the inside out. It is an awareness that you live. Carl Rogers’ life and work stands as an example of the spirit of dialogue. And like him, we must embrace it as a new “Way of Being” to bring about the change. If we can change the world, it starts here. One person at a time.

I’ve come to believe that dialogue is not only a communication style. It is a spiritual awakening. It is the full and undeniable awareness of the sacredness of human relationship. It is the knowledge that we are spiritual beings, connected to each other at the most fundamental level. It is the belief that every human encounter offers you an experience with the Divine. There are many different spiritual practices and paths to God, and I now believe that dialogue is one of them.

I should make it clear that am not completely discounting dialogue as a communication style that can be learned and practiced to good advantage to solve conflict and find solutions. What I am proposing is that the true potential of dialogue offers much more than that. It has the power to change lives. It is rather like the difference between attending a church service and having a direct experience of God. In one you come away with new insight, and in the other you come away changed.

So why is dialogue as a communication style so rare? Because it requires a certain fundamental change in attitude that is extremely hard to achieve and maintain without a fundamental change at the very core of your being. To find and embrace the I-Thou awareness allows that change to take place. When dialogue becomes a spiritual path, the way you see and experience others changes, because who you are changes.

I’ve had glimpses of the transformative power of the I-Thou experience over the years. I’ve experienced it with many people, from lovers to strangers. It is the overwhelming awareness that you are looking into, and with, the eyes of God. And in those encounters, there is no choice to be made: we simply exist in the present moment.

Thinking about it now, I realize that the characteristics of dialogue were present in each experience: warmth, empathy, genuineness, immediacy, vulnerability, mutual equality, curiosity, and something I can only describe as expanded awareness and a complete absence of ego. The point is that these feelings come automatically with the experience, we do not choose them. The experience of complete unity with another human is perhaps the real meaning of our existence on earth, it is the recognition that we are not separate from each other. Certainly, Buber though that was true, and I think he is right. The real power of the I-Thou attitude is that of transformation. When I can look at you with that spiritual awareness, it changes you. It changes who you think you are, because who we think we are comes first from the way we see others seeing us. Buber puts it more eloquently, but in essence he says that you can awaken the I-Thou relationship in others by embracing them in that awareness. By seeing them as a Thou, they can begin to see that in themselves. The truth of the saying, “you can never give what you do not have” is very evident here. Dialogue, as a communication event, can come to life when both partners recognize the potential of the encounter.

Dialogue, as I said, is magic. It is like a captivating magician’s show. Beyond our illusions, something very real awaits you. You watch spellbound, as things vanish into thin air. Stand in awe as new things appear from out of nowhere. Real magic. It is here that you learn that there is a river of awareness flowing gently within you. And if you are really lucky, a dam breaks loose and it gushes forth in a mighty torrent, flooding the banks and drenching the barren, isolated wastelands of your heart, growing a garden of vivid wildflowers, so glorious and unexpected it takes your breath away. And changes you. Forever.

EDITOR’S NOTE: This is a term paper that was written for Communication 400, Seminar in Human Dialog.