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GENERATIONS DIALOGUE WORKSHOP

A WEEKEND FOR ENCOUNTER, CONNECTION, AND GROWTH

CLAUDIA LUCIAK-DONSBERGER AND NINA-CELINE LUCIAK

“Over 12 years ago, when I was involved in an emotionally challenging conversation with my older daughter, my phone rang. It was Roland Bösel. As if he had felt our need, he said “We have space for one more pair in our Generations Dialogue Workshop tomorrow.” My daughter and I looked at each other and immediately said ‘yes’. It was one of the most important decisions of my life.”(Claudia)

“My older siblings spoke so positively about this workshop that I wanted to attend as soon as I was over 18. First, I attended with my father and 6 months later with my mother. Both encounters were very touching and very important for my future. Through

the workshop I was able to develop deep empathy and realized that, when it comes to the desire to be connected and to be seen, valued and respected, all of us are in the same boat.” (Nina-Celine)

Fulfilling our innate need for secure attachment is fundamental to personality development and relationship competency. “Having close ties with others is vital to every aspect of our health – mental, emotional, and physical.”(Johnson, p. 24). Our deepest longings and many of our difficulties in creating secure connection in intimate adult relationships are rooted in the quality of our attachments to our first caregivers. Positive as well as difficult feelings and experiences du-

ring our upbringing are often subconsciously passed on to the next generation. If hurtful interactions or misunderstandings persist, they prevent the closeness we crave as parents or as adult children. Empathy and connection can develop and grow when we are present, accessible, willing to listen with an open heart and emotionally responsive to one another (Johnson p. 49,50).

The Generations Dialogue Workshop was developed by psychotherapists Sabine and Roland Bösel in the mid-90s. The two work as Imago therapists and Imago couple workshop presenters and have often observed that many issues in couple relationships represent unresolved conflicts between the clients and



their parents. In the Imago Couples Workshop we become more aware of our „Imago“, the projection of some of our parents’ characteristics onto our partners (Hendrix 1988, 2008). The Generations Dialogue Workshop, however, offers a setting to focus on the relationship between parents and adult children in the here and now. In two and a half days, already strong relationships can be deepened, misunderstandings can be recognized and resolved, injuries can be made visible and forgiven. Old, often paralyzing family patterns become conscious, family secrets or dogmas liberatingly clarified.

James Framo, the author of *Family-of-Origin Therapy, An Intergenerational Approach*, has made it very clear how important it can be to involve members of the families of origin in a couples therapy. He emphasizes “one session of an adult with his/her parents and siblings... can have more beneficial therapeutic effects than the benefits derived from the entire length of a course of psychotherapy.” (Framo, 1992 p. 1)

Since 2014, Claudia and her husband Mikael have been leading the Generations Dialogue Workshop in Austria and abroad and have trained therapists in their home countries

for them to be able to present these workshops. Sons and daughters experience “post-childhood nurturing” from a parent, who in turn is being nurtured and supported by the team to help her/him be emotionally present and accessible for their sons and daughters. Thus, original attachment injuries can heal at their source, which, according to Bowlby, if they prevail, continue to influence our later attachment styles in couple relationships. As Framo states “The best way to eliminate stuck patterns in couples therapy is to include the family of origin.” (1992, p. 23). “Internalized conflicts from past family relationships are being lived through in the present marital relationship (Framo, 1970, 1992 p.2). After the Generations Dialogue Workshop, sons and daughters often experience the relationship with their mothers or fathers as safer and more trusting. This in turn may impact their other relationships, especially with partners and children.

During our 25 workshops worldwide, we have observed that relationships between adult sons and their fathers are often characterized by apparent emotional detachment or at least by avoiding to address deeper feelings. While many sons could not share freely with their dads before the workshop, their

feedback after the workshop is particularly touching, with comments such as these “The best, most connected weekend I’ve ever had with my father”, “Since the weekend with my dad I have become a loving and understanding daddy to my own little sons”, “This is the first time, my son as shared his inner world”, and “Frankly, I’ve never experienced a conversation of such depth and sensitivity between two men!” These statements confirm the deep meaning of our work and its capacity to nourish intimacy and empathy.

Parents often give us feedback that they feel healed and touched by the openness and newly gained closeness with their adult children, especially by their sons and daughters’ interest in their life stories, which for many parents of the war- and post-war generation was socially and politically traumatizing. Many speak for the first time about their past in the safe containment of this group. I experienced some of the most touching moments of my life, when I could deeply feel the empathy of my son and my daughters for my childhood story (Claudia).

It was only through the workshops, in combination with reading Sabine Bode’s writings on the impact of war on future generations,



Nina-Celine Luciak

studies Psychotherapy Sciences at the Sigmund Freud University in Vienna, Austria, where she is in training in Integrative Gestalt Therapy. She attended Generation Dialogue Workshops with both parents and a Sibling Workshop with her older sister. Over 10 times, she enthusiastically assisted various Generation Dialogue Workshop presenters in Austria, in the US and in South Africa.

luciak.nina@gmail.com



post-war children who seldom talked about painful experiences of my past, least of all to my children. As one mother put it “I had to turn eighty five to experience that opening up and trusting others feels so liberating.”

It is questionable whether a child can learn to talk about his/her feelings and experiences with honesty, if parents do not share their inner world. Generational dialogues introduce such an exchange as a kind of new tradition into the family. Anne Frank wrote about the importance of parents opening up to their children in her diary: “By the way, I can not put my trust in anyone who does not tell me much about himself, and because I know nothing about Pim [Otto], I will not be able to enter the path to confidentiality between us. I hid everything from father that touched me, never letting him share my ideals, and I alienated him with will and intention.” (p. 307, German Edition). And Otto Frank, after reading his daughter’s diaries after her death: “Although I had a good relationship with Anne, my conclusion is that most parents do not really know their children.”

Structure and theory supporting the workshop concept

Generations Dialogue Workshops are led by two experienced psychotherapists. Framo suggests that, ideally, a woman and a man, both with personal experience in having engaged in family-of-origin therapy, are best suited to lead this work. The workshop leaders are supported by a team of assistants, usually also psychotherapists, coaches, or psychology students, who ideally have also gained personal experience through their own participation in the workshop.

The first day is dedicated to building safety and trust. After some introductory didactics and experiential exercises, the older generation and the younger generation are divided into two small groups in order to explore their personal objectives for this inter-generational encounter and to prepare them for the three structured dialogues they will engage in during the workshop. Their commitment to confidentiality within these groups provides the safety needed to give brief insights into family histories and current life situations. The resulting connection between group members has proven to be essential for a successful outcome of this workshop. Sabine and Roland Bösel were inspired to include this format by their decade-long experience as facilitators of annual peer-groups.

During dialogues, as practiced in Imago Relationship Therapy, a method developed by Virginia Satir for couples and families is used, namely to sit across from one’s partner, to make an honest statement, which the partner then mirrors (repeats) verbatim and reconfirms if she/he has heard what was said. The sender confirms or adds. Then they reverse roles. Listening and looking requires ones full attention (Satir, 1972 p.48). The encounter takes place in an open, appreciative, empathic atmosphere, inspired by the humanistic psychotherapeutic approaches of Maslow and Rogers. Rogers and his students were able to demonstrate that interpersonal empathy arises from reciprocal, emotionally accessible encounters.

Dialogues are given structure and emotional depth through sentence stems, i.e. parents and sons and daughters intuitively complete offered sentence beginnings. This therapeutic method was developed by Rotter and Raftery in the 1950s and was shown to promote memories and associated feelings and became an integral part of Imago Dialogues.

Theme-specific dialogues

The first dialogue in the Generations Dialogue Workshop addresses the parent-child relationship during childhood and youth. It is inspired by the parent-child dialogue, developed by Maya Kollman and Bruce Wood for couples as an integral part of the Imago couples workshop. In this dialogue, partners assume the role of the parent. In the Generations Dialogue Workshop, the son or daughter addresses the actual parent. This process may lead to feeling the core emotions of his or her childhood. The structure of the dialogue helps to address both positive and painful experiences and feelings. Parents are given the opportunity to validate these experiences and feelings and to take responsibility instead of seeking justifications. I reaped the benefits of this dialogue during my first Generations Dialogue Workshop. A contentious issue that had escalated for years, fueled by my defensive justifications and lack of empathy, was suddenly resolved as I learned to listen with compassion and was able to validate my daughter’s pain. In 12 years since the workshop, this topic never again distanced us from each other (Claudia). Joshua Coleman, an expert in healing estranged parent-child re-



lationships, recognized that parents, who can hear and accept criticism, have a much better chance of having a connected and mutually appreciative relationship with their adult children than parents who justify or defend themselves (p.55). Of course, it hurts us parents to hear and to realize, how we were unable to respond to our children in ways they would have needed and deserved. Parents receive plenty of nurturing support for this courageous step from the team and usually earn gratitude, appreciation and respect from their children for engaging in this healing process. In the second dialogue, developed by Sabine and Roland Bösel, the parent talks about their own life story and their emotional heritage. Family patterns and loyalties passed down

from generation to generation become conscious and offer an option for change. It can be deeply touching to see how children and their parents share similar childhood wounds and to witness their acknowledgement of what has been unconsciously and unintentionally passed on to the next generation. An exchange about painful childhood experiences rarely takes place in everyday life. Most parents do not want to complain or overburden their children with their own baggage, sometimes out of fear or shame. However, when parents open up to their adult daughters and sons about formative childhood experiences, the younger generation will be able to comprehend why their parents might not have learned to be empathically present for them as young children. It is challenging to pass on what you have never received. As a result, the daughters and sons often get to know themselves a little better.

When I heard my mother speak about her childhood as the only child of a single mother in a small town in post-war Austria in the 1950s and ,60s, in a household of mourning adults, for the first time I could feel the incredible loneliness she must have experienced as a child. Her life and some of her behaviors became much more understandable, and I felt like I got to know a new person. I realized that many aspects of our family life had to do with the imprinting of her family of origin and not with me as a person, as I had assumed as a child. It touches me very deeply that my mother invites me to address our issues. I feel profound appreciation and respect for her courage, which both enhances my personal development and enables a mutually respectful relationship between the two of us (Nina).

The third dialogue, also developed by Sabine and Roland Bösel, is about creating a relationship between two adults at eye level to co-create a mutually satisfying relationship. Sons and daughters reflect on the parental relationship from an adult perspective. They focus on what they are grateful for as well as which family patterns they would like to liberate themselves of. Sometimes we introduce exercises from Gestalt therapy to facilitate letting go of limiting patterns. We also explore the extent of closeness and autonomy needed by both to experience healthy differentiation while staying connected. Sometimes, degrading or stifling mutual over-dependency gets in the way of real closeness. Nobody profits from a symbiotic relationship in which decisions (from wardrobe to partner choices) are only possible if sanctioned by a parent or by an adult child. Symbiosis and other con-

cepts are sometimes illustrated or deepened through physical exercises, which emphasize the expression of underlying feelings elicited by transgressions of personal boundaries. Sons and daughters are encouraged to formulate what they need from the attending parent in order to proceed in life with the self-confidence derived from connection and autonomy.

Over and over we witness the relief brought on by the resolution of a conflicted parent-adult child relationship. Framo says pointedly: "Death ends life, but it does not end a relationship which struggles on in the survivor's mind toward some kind of resolution, which it may never find"(1992, Preface). A workshop participant from San Francisco recently wrote: "My father (over 80) was recently diagnosed with cancer. I am so grateful that, for the first time in my life, I felt really close to him in the Generations Dialogue Workshop - precious memories that I will carry in my heart forever."

Our parents are usually the first and most important caregivers on whom we depend for survival. They are a part of us, we of them, and together we are part of our next generation. It's never too late to try to be the parent you wish you had been or to have the parent you always wanted. We are infinitely grateful to Sabine and Roland Bösel for this touching and sustainable peace work, which fosters mutually nurturing connection between generations.



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Claudia Luciak-Donsberger, PhD is a licensed psychotherapist, a certified Imago Advanced Clinician, and certified in Emotionally Focussed Therapy (EFT).

She completed her studies in Clinical Psychology and her training in Systemic Family Therapy in California. Together with her husband, Mikael Luciak, PhD, she leads Generation Dialogue Workshops in Europe and abroad, training therapists to become presenters in their home countries. In her private practice, she supports individuals, couples, generation and sibling pairs as well as families.

claudialuciakdonsberger@gmail.com
www.imagodialog.com



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Otto Frank: Video Installation Anne Frank House 2016: „And my conclusion is, since I had been in very good terms with Anne, that most parents don't really know their children“