

## **Dialogue in the Time of Corona**

By Dr. Terry Roberts, NPC Director

April 2020. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is two decades old, and vast portions of the developed world are locked down, “sheltering at home.” Internationally, schools are closed along with all but “essential” businesses, to keep the COVID-19 virus from spreading even further. On April 14<sup>th</sup>, an estimated 6,185 people died in the United States alone, and an estimated 10,761 people died worldwide. Furthermore, the world’s economy (not just that of the U.S.) teeters on the brink of a long-term depression that could easily affect hundreds of millions of people.

Historically, we haven’t experienced anything like the current pandemic in a hundred years, since 1918 when the “Spanish Flu” devastated the globe. For the record, the great influenza pandemic actually lasted from January 1918 to December 1920 and infected 500 million people – about a quarter of the world's population at the time. The death toll is estimated to have been anywhere from 17 million to 50 million, making it one of the deadliest pandemics in human history.

One hundred years ago, and social isolation became the global norm that eventually helped defeat the disease. Then as now, along with isolation came anxiety, alienation, and loneliness.

What did we learn then? And can our collective memory serve us now?

We learned that the human animal is a fundamentally social creature. We celebrate, we learn, we grow best ... together. Even the most introverted among us need communion and community. Not just the company of our families but also the social network of friends and companions that make life for so many of us worth living. And to generate and feed that sense of human connection, we need dialogue. Conversation in the truest sense of the word.

My first thought about the necessity of dialogue is that's how we resolve our differences. But in truth, it's more than that. It's how we articulate our differences and then render out of them insight and understanding greater than the sum of its parts. Shared dialogue is how we synthesize our varying ideas into something that is more valuable and more useful to you ... and to me. As Paideia educators, we often say that the smartest person in the room is always the room. Translated: that the synthesis of our ideas is more complex and more sophisticated than the original insights with which we came to the table. At the end of a true conversation, we all understand both ourselves and the world more fully. Imagine, then, that one outcome of the great Pandemic of 2020 could be increased understanding?

Synthesis requires creativity, however. To converse as equals, we must each be willing to open our minds and see the world differently. We must each sift through the opinions and insights of the other and weigh them impartially with our own. Ask different—and sometimes disturbing—questions in pursuit of wiser answers. And ultimately, be willing to share those answers without ego or possessiveness. We each grow in relation to the growth of others. In short, we grow together or not at all.

Teachers know all of this instinctively and yet, so much of this has been lost in the seclusion of the current crisis.

What does it mean to be educated? Not just schooled but genuinely educated? One of the clear attributes of an educated woman or man is the ability to talk with almost anyone about almost anything. When one of my heroes (and one of the original Paideia Group), Jacques Barzun, wrote that “the finest achievement of human society and one of its rarest pleasures is conversation,” he meant a mature and eager search for the truth, a shared quest for wisdom. Which we need now—in time of crisis—more than ever.

Viewed in another way, conversation is also the alpha and omega of true intimacy. It is a fundamental element in friendship, in marriage—in family and communal life of all kinds. We wither as individuals in a time of pandemic unless we can keep conversation alive, both within the house and between houses.

And finally, what role does conversation play in our teaching?

More than 400 years ago, the French philosopher and essayist, Michel de Montaigne wrote in “The Art of Conference” that, “the most fruitful and natural exercise of the mind...is conversation; I find the use of it more sweet than of any other action of life.” I always come back to that phrase: the exercise of the mind. What makes our minds broader and stronger, more supple and resilient? Conversation of course. And that’s why it’s a staple of any quality classroom—even a virtual one.

And so I challenge each of us in the time of Corona to keep conversation alive. In our personal lives? Yes. In our family lives? Most definitely. And in our virtual classrooms as well! So that the next generation may also benefit from the joy and creativity of dialogue despite the personal isolation necessitated by the time of Corona.

My personal quest is to continue to explore the nature and necessity of dialogue during our troubled times and to share what I discover with you. After all, this is a form of community as well, and it too will become a dialogue if you reply with thoughts of your own....