



## **2008 Summer forum: "Insurmountable Changes"**

### **Description and evaluation of this on-line forum**

The **Network for Peace through Dialogue** has been engaged in an on-line dialogue since the autumn of 2006. The summer 2008 dialogue was the 4th since the inception of the Shaping Our Future program, which is an attempt to broaden the conversations that occur through the Network for Peace through Dialogue's in-person Living Room Dialogues. Participation is open to anyone who is interested and recruitment has taken place in the weeks leading up to a new dialogue session to get new individuals involved. Participants use GoogleGroups, a free online message board, to respond to one another.

The initial online dialogue in the fall of 2006 took place over three months. At the end of this first session, it was determined that two months was a better timeframe for the dialogue sessions and that future sessions would take place over an 8-week period. However, the actual length of the dialogue has varied with each session, depending on interest in the topic and external factors (such as holidays, etc.) affecting participation. This dialogue session began in early May 2008 and ended two months later, in early July 2008. However, it is somewhat misleading to describe this as a two-month session, since almost all of the contributions were made prior to mid-June 2008. In fact, only one group member contributed to the dialogue after June 21st, 2008.

After what seemed like lack of interest in the previous dialogue session topic (focused on how to engage individuals in dialogue), Shaping Our Future took a different approach to this session. Thus, we began by asking members to share topics of interest to them. The first topic brought up, based on a news article read by one of the group members, focused on the inner fortitude needed to deal with seemingly insurmountable challenges. This topic led to a dialogue about handling responses to difficult situations that lasted through the remainder of the session.

### **Participants and Participation**

As in the previous dialogue session, no attempt was made before the start of this session to recruit additional group members to the Shaping Our Future Dialogue program. However, in contrast with the previous session, this dialogue drew contributions from a wider range of group members, as well as multiple contributions from each participant.

## Engagement in High Quality Dialogue

One of the tenets of Shaping Our Future is our commitment to High Quality Dialogue as defined by Network for Peace through Dialogue Executive Director Virginia Dorgan. High Quality Dialogue requires active participation (our request to participants was that they would commit to two contributions per month) and includes the following components:

I. Responses which show an honest expression of one's own opinion

1A. Participants express their own opinion rather than talking about "them" or in universal truths.

1B. Participants relate a similar feeling or story to what has been said.

1C. Participants state different opinions in a non-threatening way.

II. Responses which show empathetic and attentive listening

II A. Participants paraphrase the others point of view.

II B. Participants ask clarifying questions

II C. Participants make statements recognizing the feelings of the other.

III. Responses which show an effort to understand the other

III A. Participants respond to others insights with questions, agreements or respectful disagreement.

III B. Participants do not try to convince others to change their point of view.

IV. Responses which show willingness to be transformed by the experience

IV A. Participants state what they have learned from others.

IV B. Participants acknowledge changes in their points of view.

IV C. Participants search for and acknowledge their own hidden assumptions

## Other Elements of the Dialogue

This dialogue stood out among recent Shaping Our Future sessions for the depth of participants' contributions and their adherence to High Quality Dialogue tenets. As stated above, the main topic of dialogue during the session focused upon responses to seemingly insurmountable challenges and, related to this, individuals' ability to deal with situations causing anger and outrage. Perhaps the quality of this dialogue session was thereby due to the fact that this topic is one that most individuals can relate to at many different levels - many of the responses reflected personal experiences (**Element I of High Quality Dialogue**). For example:

"It occurs to me that sometimes the initial heat of anger (for me at least) is one way through which I understand the importance of an issue - - if something really makes me furious, it's a sign that it's something worth acting upon, perhaps. On the other hand, acting through that anger isn't particularly useful - it helps for me to express the anger or "cool down" (literally or figuratively) in some way, and then think more rationally, as Peggy put it, how to act" (Karen, June 21, 2008)

Participants in this dialogue were also particularly inclined to acknowledge one another's points of view in their responses to the group (**Elements II, III and IV of High Quality Dialogue**). This can be seen through the many statements reflecting upon or explicitly addressing contributions made by others. For example:

"I agree with Karen's assessment, but I would also add that the situation demands at least a little bit of outrage" (Courtney, May 28, 2008)