

The Network for Peace through Dialogue
in cooperation with **Marymount Manhattan College**

Presents

Dialogue In/As Action
A Relational Mindful Awareness Practice (MAP)

Dr. Marvin Belzer

Marv first explained how MAPs grew out of meditation retreats that he runs for young people. He realized that it was nearly impossible to expect teenagers or college students to remain completely silent for an entire weekend or week (as is a common practice in meditation retreats). He thus interspersed two small group discussions into a daily meditation schedule. These small group discussions eventually developed into a variant of a “hot seat exercise.”

The hot seat exercise has 8-12 people in a circle with one facilitator, one person who answers any question posed to him or her, and all of the others can pose any question to the person in the hot seat (though they need not pose any questions if they do not want to). The person in the hot seat can decline to answer any question and can be silent for as long as he wishes before answering, and when the person who has posed the question feels that the question is answered to his or her satisfaction he simply says “Thank you” even if doing so interrupts the speaker. The facilitator calls on questioners and decides when the person in the hot seat comes out of the hot seat. These rules are made very clear ahead of time and everyone has to choose to engage based on informed consent, promising to keep confidential the information that emerges from the exercise. They are consciously sharing a space to be vulnerable. This exercise requires a great capacity for trust, and it is made clear that all involved are fully participating no matter what their role is (in the hot seat, questioner, or just a listener).

When asked what the purpose of this exercise is, Marv’s first response was that it’s fun (deeply enjoyable, in fact). He then gradually explained that it also cultivates awareness and kindness, and gets below the surface of what’s polite to talk about in a way that is a welcome release for all involved as they drop their social roles. Some participants also commented on how they could see this being useful in the dialogue process by people learning through MAPs how to listen to themselves so that they could be more self-aware and be better listeners to others.

What MAPs are NOT: not a party game, not group therapy, not manipulative or coercive, not suitable for reality television.

This is a mindful awareness practice in that it involves concentration (where attention is connected to a neutral anchor, e.g., breathing), there is experiential inquiry (in accepting the experience of the sensation being experienced, e.g., pain in a specific area), and open awareness occurs (where narratives unravel and one is not judgmental of one's present experience). There are deep analogies between solitary/individual MAPs and this relational MAP: the person in the hot seat is seen as a neutral anchor, there is experiential self-inquiry (every seat is warm), there is nonjudgmental acceptance of what is said (reducing "interpret" function), there is an unraveling of customary narratives, and decrease in separation from others.

There is some interesting experimental neuroscience (from Dan Siegel) about MAPs, but most of its success is from phenomenological self-reporting of the many who have now been involved in variations of this exercise. About half of the participants expressed great interest in participating in a hot seat exercise in order to experience its value, so they spontaneously planned a new alternate session to be held later in the afternoon.