

# Foreword

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*By Jane Ball*

I commend this book to you. As Peter says, it is not a ‘How to Do Dialogue’ book, but it is the most complete clarification of Dialogue, and what we have named Professional Dialogue, you will find. It is about learning and thinking, a thesis on a lifetime (or perhaps three-quarters of a lifetime) of research and first-hand learning. Anyone running an organisation should read this, whether they are in a governmental, commercial or community organisation. Drawing on an image Peter uses, his book shows the scaffolding that has supported successful organisational intervention and systemic change and has enabled the building of an integrated theory and practice of Dialogue. Meet the man through his life and his work, and you will understand his theory and practice. Notice your own response – the memories, thinking and feeling that emerge as you read – and you will learn about yourself and develop your work.

I was introduced to Peter on an autumn evening in 1999 by a colleague, Roger Bigland. Roger recommended I meet Peter on the basis that he thought we had a lot in common. Peter was working with Dialogue in three UK prisons at that time. I had never heard of dialogue but had worked in the social work and criminal justice sector for almost 10 years and had a master’s degree in criminology. “I want to change the criminal justice system”, I told Peter with the conviction and confidence of an experienced 32-year-old. “Well”, he replied with the wisdom of a man 19 years older, “I want to change the world”. I believed him as well. That was the beginning of a great business partnership and friendship. Up to that time, over the 14 years since leaving school, I had been to university twice and worked in five different roles in social justice. Each role and organisation had provided opportunities, but I outgrew them quickly. I did not imagine that any single working partnership would allow me to grow and develop and extend the scope of my work. Peter’s invitation to join him in Prison

Dialogue, and later to work for him and then partner with him in our consulting firm Dialogue Associates, opened a door to a different way of working and a different way of thinking about my work and my life. In this book Peter extends an invitation to the reader like the invitation he extended to me back in 1999. I recommend you accept that invitation.

Peter does not start by giving you ‘the answer’ and proving it, nor by a meta-analysis of what others have said about the subject. This is a unique and enjoyable narrative of the discovery of ideas through experience. If you take Peter’s advice and notice what you are thinking and feeling as you read, you will make your own discoveries and change along the way.

For me, talking and thinking with Peter over the last 20 years has been an extended enquiry into people (including ourselves), organisations, communities, and dialogue – into life and the world itself. As we have travelled and worked together, I have heard him share many compelling stories. He writes as he talks, so these 400+ pages are an easy and engaging read. Peter invites you into the flow of his thinking. Memories, personal and professional stories are intertwined with his current thinking and feeling, and with an emerging articulation of Dialogue theory and practice – back and forth, and between head, heart, and hands.

You may be surprised to find the narrative covers hunter-gatherers and farming, a vast geography – from Bulawayo to Berkshire, Trinidad to the Cotswolds (where Peter and his wife Jenny live, and where we have our office), to oil refineries, universities and maximum security prisons. Each location and situation is described from first-hand experience, with precise detail and a profound sense of perspective.

The intimacy of childhood and family relationships are as important to the narrative as the array of thought leaders and authors, of whom there are many. David Bohm (with whom Peter worked for eight years), David Kantor, Peter Senge, Bill Isaacs, Vaclav Havel’s brother, and others – colleagues and friends – appear regularly. But just as importantly, many more remarkable people you will never hear about anywhere else add their stories and wisdom. People like Jenny Garrett, Saral Bohm, a 15-year-old boy in Trinidad who was already known to have murdered five people, an Iraqi man who worked with Peter at a construction scaffolding site and Billie Humby, the South African midwife.

The book is beautifully coherent. The stories that first explore characters, content, and the process of discovery appear again in the Dialogic facilitation model that is

described later. Models are developed in ‘real time’ and connect to the narrative; they are not separate narratives.

*A New Kind of Dialogue* is a stimulating and important read – essential reading for anyone who is serious about the problems we are facing and creating as humankind. Working in our consulting practice, I have seen there is much more to be done than reform criminal justice. We face apparently intractable problems, and they are only multiplying as the fragmentation in human consciousness causes our best solutions to make things worse.

From chapter 15 the book offers a solid foundation for a new way to understand organisational theory, and an integrated model for applying Dialogue as a Mode, a Practice and a Process. This is a thorough and engaging explication, intertwined with narrative and story: experiences, reflections, insights, concepts and models are developed from first-hand experience. I have spent many hours with Peter in front of the four flip charts that hang permanently on the wall of our office meeting room, working through ideas, developing models and planning interventions. He is remarkably rigorous and patient, going over and over an idea, checking and refining the latest iteration, inviting support and challenge and including different perspectives until he is satisfied.

I recognise I might be biased. I would not have spent more than 20 years working alongside Peter if I did not share a sense of common purpose and values, if I did not learn with him or respect him as a great thinker and practitioner. My description may present Peter as a polymath or renaissance man. His power and authority, however, come from discovering one thing that is so important which is at the heart of this powerful story, the root cause of our problems and what can be done.