

# **Living Conversation: A Process of Deep Listening**

## **By Linda Courage and Heather-Jane Ozanne**

Many of us have had the privilege of taking part in conversations which are authentic, insightful and enriching. Sometimes they arise spontaneously but often they can occur in groups of people who follow a few simple guidelines. Indeed, they can become a nourishing spiritual practice in this time of change and evolving beliefs. Deeply listening to each other and ourselves help us to get our bearings in our life's unfolding and experience supportive bonds with others who wish to reflect in similar ways – though not always with the same answers!

“Living Conversations” differ from our day to day conversations, and need some practice and discipline before they will come naturally. For this reason, groups are wise to have a convenor who can gently point out when the conversation style drifts towards the day to day, rather than what can be settled into in a Living Conversation.

### **Living Conversation Groups**

A Living Conversation group is a place where we can be heard, perhaps even by ourselves, and where we can listen, without any need to try to make things better, or correct, or comment, or question the person who is speaking. We are there simply to be heard and to listen; we are free from any other obligations that might normally be our way of interacting.

For this to happen, it is good to meet in a place that is neutral and comfortable, rather than in someone's home. It is also good to have a way of taking turns to speak. If this becomes a difficulty, an object can be placed in the centre of the group, and taken and held by the person whose turn it is to speak.

At the first meeting, perhaps in response to an initial invitation, people might be invited to share why they have responded to the invitation. The convenor will have already reminded the group members of the simple structure and lack of agenda of Living Conversation, and people may like to buy themselves a drink. People will agree that anything said in the group is kept in the group – and that people don't comment or quiz others about what has been shared during more social conversation within or outside the group.

In some groups, people might find it really difficult to wait their turn, and a simple guideline of not talking again until everyone has spoken can help. There are likely to be silences as people gather their thoughts and wonder if it might be their turn to speak. Reminding members that this is normal and that they don't need to feel obliged to fill silences can help to settle people.

Two rounds of speaking and listening at each meeting will allow for some deepening and hearing of ones own and each other's self. Ideally, members will settle and share the essence of what they need to be heard, and taking turns will come naturally. If some

members tend to speak for longer than the meeting allows, the convenor can estimate how long each person has to speak, and point this out so that everyone has a turn. Using an egg timer might be useful for groups that take a while to get the timing right, and can be introduced if the purpose of future meetings drifts into a social event.

To sum up, Living Conversations involve a process of deep listening, which allows all voices to be heard. They are characterised by awareness, openness, and a sense of being guided by the questions rather than the solutions. As well as deepening personal connections these conversations become a tool for personal and social transformation and healing.

### **Guidance for new groups**

Through the Living Spirituality Connections website people can now access these guidelines and go about setting up a group in their own locality.

Example of a simple format for holding a Living Conversation:

1. First round: There is no set agenda and each person will be able to speak about what is current for them in their spiritual journey or their life without interruption and without people responding. (A rough maximum time will be given for each person).
2. Second round: each person can respond to what has been shared in the first round, not questioning others but sharing what has occurred to them through the sharing of the first round.
3. After the first two rounds people can speak more freely, but still observing some agreed guidelines\* aimed at ensuring that each person is given space. If necessary different ways of regulating the discussion can be used, e.g. passing a stone to the person who is going to speak, using a timer to make sure each person has a chance to share.

\* Suggested guidelines include-

- Speak personally always using 'I' rather than we. Using 'we' can assume agreement and include people in a statement who would not wish to be included.
- Do not offer solutions, advice or agreement.
- Do not question what someone is sharing except to ask for clarification.

It can take a while to get used to the framework but experience shows that when followed this framework allows potentially transforming and healing conversations of great depth and value to emerge.

**Linda Courage** comments from her experience:

“Generating the Living Conversations guidelines has been a very positive process that has reminded me, again and again, of those quality moments in my life when I have heard, and been heard.

How to replicate the conditions that might foster such hearing within groups has been fun and a challenge. The guidelines may look simple, and people might be tempted to put them aside, but they can free group members to attend the purpose of the gathering – to have a conversation rooted in the moment, and at times palpably alive.

I am not a natural convenor, but I've grown to rest on, and trust the guidelines without embarrassment. This has allowed me to be a group member, rather than a facilitator."



**Linda Courage** is a member of the Work and Discernment Group of Living Spirituality Connections, where she co-ordinates the Arts and Spirituality Special Interest Area, and is a member of the Abbey of the Arts.

She is coming to the end of a long, varied and interesting career in nursing; she is currently a bank Staff Nurse in the Outpatients Department of a local hospital. She helps to lead a contemplative service in a local church and runs contemplative and expressive art workshops. She is taking time to let new possibilities for the future ripen while enjoying life and this transition time. She lives in Selby, North Yorkshire, with her son Joel, and Millie, their cat.

**Heather-Jane Ozanne** writes: **to be added by early next week**

Xxxx



**Heather-Jane Ozanne** is Chief Executive of Spirit of Peace [www.spiritofpeace.co.uk](http://www.spiritofpeace.co.uk) and on the Living Spirituality Connections Working and Discernment Group. ....(have asked HJ if she wants to add to this)