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We sometimes hear the word 'dialogue' used when two persons or 'sides' are trying to solve a problem or a disagreement. That process can be difficult; but some time ago I found a definition that, I think, is helpful in describing how each person or side can be guided in their thinking.

In his book, *The dialogical imperative*, David Lockhead wrote, "Dialogue is not a search for agreement. It is a search for understanding. I may come out of that dialogue still having to say that I believe there is a serious issue involved in another person's opinion."

But the dialogue issue is that I ought to be constantly striving to understand the other person's position, and not misrepresent it."

Christina Baldwin, in her book, *Storycatcher*, gives an example of how dialogue can work. The illustration is from the Public Conversations Project - a Boston-based, international, and non-profit organization whose aim is "to prevent and transform conflict driven by deep differences in identity, beliefs, or values - through dialogue."

As Baldwin writes, "(One particular project), greatly distressed over violence, and the growing polarity of opinion, invited ten people who were adamantly opposed to abortion together with ten people who were adamantly for the right of women to choose.

"They established basic ground rules for an ongoing conversation: no opinions, just story (or examples from an individual's experiences); no attempts to change minds, just listening. The group met for three years. No one changed her mind about the issue, but everyone changed his mind about the people involved in the other side of the issue."

"Tensions decreased and tolerance grew for each person's stance because that stance was embedded in story. This tolerance was carried into the larger community."

Baldwin adds that "...story has the power to open the heart, even if the mind does not change. Story is empathy in action between people."

In the same chapter, she quotes William Isaacs who wrote, "Dialogue is a conversation with a center, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people."

Thinking of our political system, particularly on the provincial and federal levels, it is difficult to imagine such dialogue taking place. In such settings, there seems to be little respect or desire to understand what opposing party members are saying.

But I believe there are many situations in life - whether between two individuals or among a group of individuals - where dialogue is possible. Even though we may differ in our points of view with another person(s), we can still seek to understand and respect them.

May it be so for us!

Harvie Barker is a retired United Church minister who resides in Penticton. This column appears every second Monday.