



**Transcript of Em Griffin's interview with Leslie Baxter,  
creator of Relational Dialectics**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgLrYk7Aj-Y>

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Griffin: I am talking with Leslie Baxter from the University of Iowa. Leslie, along with Barbara Montgomery, has crafted the theory of Relational Dialectics. Leslie, what's the gist of Relational Dialectics?

Baxter: The gist, Em, is to recognize that all communication is the interplay of differences. And, so, I would say that differences is really the seat of the matter, and it's the interplay of those differences; and they're often competing, and they're often oppositional. That's probably the heart of it.

Griffin: Could you give an example of such a moment, maybe from your own life.

Baxter: Dawn Braithwaite and I a few years back published what to this day is my favorite study, in which we went and interviewed people who had been married fifty years and who had elected to renew their marriage vows; and what we realized is that that was a ritual and now I want to label that an aesthetic moment. And when we talked to people about that, it was just a lovely exemplar of the sort of seamlessness of these differences sort of coming together. The differences are there and the differences enabled the sort of sense of wholeness in the ceremony. So, in this one moment they would say that what was so nice about this renewal of marriage vows was when they uttered those words. It was to celebrate the fact that their marriage was the same as it was the day they got married; they loved each other the same. In fact, they even brought the same wedding dress, the same tuxedo – of course, they had to have them enlarged – but it was the same. But, then a few minutes later they'd be talking about how the ceremony was an opportunity for them to celebrate that their marriage wasn't the same as it was fifty years ago. That they had grown together, that now the meanings that they attributed to those vows were very different from what that meant fifty years ago. And, so, it was a lovely moment where, as all rituals are that are meaningful, you've got two oppositions – in this case there's the sense that our marriage is the same and then our marriage is different.

Griffin: Dialogue is something in our field that is almost the flavor of the month. A lot of people are talking about dialogue. What makes yours or Bahktin's so special?

Baxter: I think Bahktin doesn't use dialogue in the sense of a happy, pleasant experience. I think dialogue as he uses it has a rough edge, and dialogue as Bahktin envisions it a very

conflictual, tensional kind of experience that comes from the interplay of oppositions, whereas other people who use dialogue – I’ll use Buber as the contrast – he uses dialogue to really refer to what I think Bahktin would call an aesthetic moment.

Griffin: Well, if dialogue is not the solution to these opposing tendencies and tensions, what is?

Baxter: Implicit in your question is the assumption that the tensionality of differences is a problem, and I think I would not agree with that. But the position of relational dialectics would be that you’ve got to have that; that’s how relationships grow, is through difference. And that’s how individuals grow in relationships. That’s what keeps relationships from being boring, is that they’re changing. Now, where does that change come from? I think it comes from the interplay of differences. And does it mean relationship parties have to expend a lot of effort and keep on their toes? You betcha. But look what they get. They get change; they get creativity; they get spontaneity, as well as continuity. I mean, again, we would view the interplay of opposites as positive, not a problem to solve.

Griffin: What would you say to the person who says, “we know there are these dialectics, we experience them constantly; and we’re worn out. It’s tearing us apart. We long for the closeness of Social Penetration Theory or the Predictability of Uncertainty Reductions Theory or the openness through CMC of Social Information Processing.” What would you say to someone who is just worn out?

Baxter: I guess my first answer would be that we have been seduced into the discourse of romance to think that relating is easy; and I don’t think relating is easy. I think relating is effortful, and I don’t think the effort and investment work ever goes away. And that’s just part of relating with another human being. Rather than view that as sort of a glass half empty, I think I’d want to reframe it as the glass being half full and to say that the effort is well expended, because that’s how the relationship changes and becomes better and keeps alive and vibrant, is by investing the effort on an ongoing basis to cope with the interplay of these differences.

Griffin: What would you say to people who always want to be together and say, “every moment I can spend with my friend, I want to,” – or with my lover, or with my sister.

Baxter: It’s what I say to my daughter when we’ve been together for like 24 hours at a time. I say, “I can love you at a distance just as I can love you close up.” That distance celebrates the relationship as much as closeness and connection; and, that in fact, you’ve got to have both. Relationships are built on similarities and differences.

Griffin: But what if she says, “I don’t want to have both.”

Baxter: Well, actually she does. And I have yet to encounter a person in this individualistic culture who doesn’t want some distance and autonomy. In another culture the tensions might be quite different. But in this culture I have yet to encounter a relationship pair that doesn’t embrace autonomy. Whether the culture permits them to do so without invoking a discourse of guilt is another matter.

Griffin: What if you and I were close platonic friends, experiencing all the dialectical oppositions that you've talked about? What would be a typical healthy way for us to deal with that?

Baxter: I think the first thing I would say is to recognize that it isn't necessarily a warning sign about our relationship, and that ought to be of enormous relief to us. (Griffin's exaggerated sigh.) Okay, there's the sigh. It's not a warning sign; it's not an indicator that our relationship is in trouble; this is the way relating happens. I think the second thing I would say is to resist the monologue, to resist efforts to try and eliminate the tensionality and eliminate the interplay. But rituals, I think, are aesthetic moments; they are ways for parties to celebrate both. And, so, I think my advise to a relationship pair would be to reflect carefully on the rituals you do and don't have in the relationship, to see if you have enough aesthetic moments of the ritual kind.

Griffin: Leslie, I thank you so much for meeting with me.

Baxter: It's been a delightful conversation.