

CREATING A WELCOMING SPACE FOR RESPECTFUL CONVERSATION AT NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE

I am appalled at the sad state of public discourse in contemporary society, including the realm of politics, the media, churches and educational institutions. The engagement between persons who disagree with one another is increasingly shrill and nasty. Let me note three characteristics of this pernicious state of contemporary discourse.

DEMONIZING BY NAME-CALLING: Rather than respectfully engaging someone who disagrees with us, it is all too common for us to dismiss, or even demonize the other by calling him or her a name: he's a crazy conservative; a wild-eyed liberal; a free-market nut; a socialist, a homophobe, a baby-killer; a liar. To call someone a name is not a good way to start a conversation. In fact, we resort to such crudeness precisely because we don't want to engage in conversation.

And, it isn't just secularists who resort to name-calling. Ignoring our calling not to conform to the ways of the world, we Christians all too often copy the secularists by calling each other names: he's a fighting fundamentalist, or a raving theological liberal, or a postmodernist, or a multiculturalist. By putting those who disagree with us into such simplistic boxes, we not only eliminate the possibility of constructive conversation, but we also ignore the many nuances that can often legitimately be associated with such facile labels.

For example, there is no one simple entity that can be described as "postmodernism." There are many differing postmodern positions, some of which are antithetical to the Christian faith, and some of which can enrich our understanding of the Christian faith. To simply dismiss someone as a "postmodernist" is to ignore those differences and to foreclose the possibility of both of you learning from one another by talking to one another (more about postmodernism this afternoon).

A second characteristic of broken public discourse is **HOLDING TO FIXED POSITIONS:** One manifestation of this "fixed positions" model for discourse is the case

where you can manage to get persons who disagree with one another into the same room. I submit as Exhibit A the typical TV talk show where pundits line up on diametrically opposed sides of a given issue. Each pundit argues from a “fixed position.” With each pundit believing that he (she) has captured the “whole truth, and nothing but the truth” on the issue at hand, each is impervious to the possibility of learning anything from the position of the other. Rather, each hopes to *demolish* the position of the other, to *win* the argument (all metaphors more appropriate to fighting a war than to having a genuine conversation).

Such a confrontational, fixed positions approach to engaging others in public discourse is not limited to TV talk shows. It is raging in the realm of politics. It is rampant in discussions on homosexuality that are tearing some Christian denominations apart. It is not uncommon in meetings of scholarly societies. It may even take place in some faculty meetings at Christian colleges, or during some conversations on your campus

But, there is another manifestation of the “fixed positions” model that is equally insidious, the case where you can’t get people who disagree with one another into the same room. I call this third characteristic of broken public discourse LISTENING ONLY TO AN ECHO OF YOURSELF. In an opinion piece in the April 20, 2008 issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, titled “Talking to Ourselves,” Susan Jacoby tells of her experience of delivering a lecture on the history of America secularism at Eastern Kentucky University. Concurrent with her lecture, the Campus Crusade for Christ organization on campus had scheduled a competing lecture, reflecting their stated strategy to “counter-program secular lectures on college campuses.” As a result, both lectures were attended almost exclusively by persons who already agreed with the speaker. Jacoby’s conclusion is that “Americans today have become a people in search of validation for opinions that they already hold,” demonstrating a strong reluctance “to give a fair hearing – or any hearing at all – to opposing points of view,” wanting to hear only an “echo” of themselves.

The internet and cable TV have surely magnified this tendency to only listen to an echo of yourself. Whatever your opinion about a given issue, you can go online and find

volumes of support for your position. And, if you find enough people online who agree with your viewpoint, it too easily serves to confirm your fixed position, and you are tempted to believe that your position must be true, even if it is blatantly false. And, the same listening only to an echo of yourself takes place if you get your cable news exclusively from FOX News or MSNBC. An exclusive diet of either Glenn Beck or Keith Olberman will never lead you to entertain the possibility that your point of view on the issue at hand may be wrong, and that you may actually learn something by listening to someone who disagrees with you.

The fixed positions model for discourse lies at one end of a spectrum. It is inhabited by those who generally want to get to the “truth” of the matter, which is commendable, but who are so convinced that they have captured that truth that they are not open to the possibility that they could be wrong about a few things, and could learn from those who disagree with them.

But, at the other end of the spectrum are those who don’t believe there is any “truth” relative to the matter at hand. As Charles Colson once said in a commencement address at Gordon College, these are those whose epistemology is captured in one word, “whatever.”— a crass form of relativism in which any point of view on the issue at hand is judged to be as good as any other point of view. You have your beliefs, I have mine, there is really nothing to talk about.

My dream for you at NWC, and for all CCCU schools, is that your institution will become a beacon of light in this prevailing darkness of unacceptable extremes. My dream is that NWC and all CCCU schools will provide welcoming places that model a third way in-between the unacceptable extremes of “fixed positions” and relativism. My dream is that NWC and all CCCU schools will model being welcoming places for respectful face-to-face conversation among those who disagree with one another.

But, how can an institution like NWC model such a third way between “fixed positions” and relativism? For the remainder of my presentation this morning, I will propose a “third

way” strategy and then suggest some pre-conditions for there to be any hope of that strategy bearing redemptive fruit.

In stark contrast to the “fixed positions” model for discourse, I propose a strategy that I call a “dialogic model for discourse” that has three sequential steps.

The Place to Start: Getting to Know the Person who Disagrees with You

The political pundits who bash each other on TV talk shows probably do not know each other very well on a personal level. And it is all too easy to demonize a person you hardly know, or to simply dismiss him as stupid, biased or evil (more name-calling). We may not be so quick to demonize others once we get to know them personally.

I have a friend who after making a presentation at a scholarly conference with which an attendee vehemently disagreed would take that person out to dinner to get to know him better. In that more casual setting, they not only talked about their differences about the topic at hand, but they also shared war stories about campus politics and soccer coaching tips for their children. They left the dinner table with differing perspectives on each other that opened the door for the second step in this dialogical model for discourse.

Try to Understand Why Someone who Disagrees with You Takes a Position that You Believe to be Wrong.

The better you get to know someone, the better chance there is for you to come to understand why she believes as she does, as you uncover the experiences and the other various aspects of her social location that inform her beliefs on the issue at hand. She has reasons for her position that you need to understand, and, likewise, she needs to understand your reasons for your position. You need to get to know her well enough so that you can put empathize with “where she is coming from” (as they say) by putting yourself in her shoes. That doesn’t mean that you have to agree with her beliefs. But, is it possible that because of what she has experienced in her personal pilgrimage, she is

seeing something that you have missed? And, likewise, is there something you see that she is missing? The chances of a fruitful conversation with her will be greatly enhanced if you adequately understand the basis for her beliefs, and, likewise, if she understands the basis for your beliefs by her getting to know you. Such mutual understanding can even help to build bonds of mutual trust that may enable you to talk through difficult issues about which you may vehemently disagree.

Seek for Mutual Treasures by Means of Respectful Conversation

Dr. Michael King, a Mennonite pastor and scholar, who has just moved into the position of Dean at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg Virginia, has proposed a provocative definition of “genuine conversation”: “genuine conversation involves a mutual quest for *treasures* in our own and the other’s viewpoint. The first move is to make as clear as I can why I hold this position...and why you might find in it *treasure* to value in your own quest for truth. The second move is to see the value in the other’s view...and to grow in my own understandings by incorporating as much of the other’s perspective as I can without losing the integrity of my own convictions.”

Note carefully what King is and is not saying. After genuine conversation, you may conclude that there is very little, if any, treasure in the other person’s position. But, then again, you may find some unexpected treasures in the other person’s position. You cannot tell until you talk. ***You cannot predict beforehand the results of a genuine conversation.***

As an aside, let me suggest a self-test that we can all give ourselves: When you are about to engage a person about an issue concerning which you have some vehement disagreements, is your mindset to say that “I am going to seek for treasures in what that person has to say?” That is a rigorous test, one that I have flunked many times.

Another Mennonite scholar, Carolyn Shrock-Shenk suggests that for extremely controversial topics, King’s ideal for genuine conversation is unrealistic. In seeking an

answer to the question “What makes dialogue genuine?” she first asks “Does one need to be open to changing one’s perspective or conviction about an issue?” In her view, “that readiness is the ideal but it is rarely realistic” when dealing with highly charged issues. Rather, she believes that *a minimum requirement for genuine conversation* is a readiness to change or modify one’s perspective about *the person or persons* holding the opposite point of view.

Note carefully what Schrock-Shenk is suggesting. The “ideal” is still the “genuine conversation” that Michael King hopes for: that through conversation, persons would be open to refining their perspective on the issue at hand in light of the *treasures* they discover in the perspectives of others. But, given the current state of the debate among Christians regarding some highly controversial issues, that ideal may be unrealistic at this time. However, it is no small thing if, at a minimum, those taking opposing sides in debating controversial issues will at least modify their perspectives on those who disagree with them as a result of dialogue with them. To be more specific, within the Christian community, those Christians taking opposite sides on a volatile issue may come to see that many of those on the other side are also deeply committed Christians, and that they also hold to biblical authority, but differ in their interpretations of pertinent biblical passages. If they can see that, they will hopefully conclude that they can have Christian fellowship together, despite their disagreements. Attaining that sort of “unity in fellowship” (not uniformity in beliefs) would be no small accomplishment in our Christian churches, denominations and colleges (more about this idea this afternoon).

Well, how naïve can I be? All of what I have just said sounds like “pie-in-the sky” wishful thinking. Is a dialogic model for discourse even thinkable in our brutish real world of discourse that is dominated by the fixed positions model? Yes! I can even point to some examples where Christians who have engaged in dialogic discourse with those who disagree with them has had a significant redemptive influence. Eight such examples are reported in a book that Michael King and I edited, titled *Mutual Treasure: Seeking Better Ways for Christians and Culture to Converse*. This book presents case studies written by Christian scholars and practitioners in areas as diverse as politics, the academy, film-

making, inter-faith dialogue, environmental issues, the criminal justice system, and church debates (please forgive me for shamelessly plugging this book).

But such dialogic discourse is viable only if certain pre-conditions are met, preconditions that, interestingly enough, reflect some Christian virtues (which we Christians talk about much more than we practice). Before enumerating these preconditions, let me tell you a true, painful story.

Not many years ago, a faculty member left another CCCU school under the cloud of a nasty theological dispute. His transgression was that he held to a theological position that, while *not in contradiction with the core beliefs of the institution*, led to a lot of unwanted bad publicity for the school. Listen now to his description of the disrespect that he experienced: “There are some people [at the college and the supporting denomination] who are upset with some of my views.... The most vociferous among them do not even want to discuss matters. They know they are right, that I am therefore a ‘heretic,’ and that settles it. Some go so far as to claim that I am not even a Christian. What troubles me is not that people disagree with some (not all) of my views. Rather, it is their lack of Christian virtue in carrying out their crusade. The innuendo, gossip, hearsay evidence, and even outright distortion of my views, coupled with political power plays made to ensure their victory, leave me wondering whether there is any place for thoughtful people in evangelical theology.” These are strong words, but they are not spoken in the abstract.

Note especially his grief over the “lack of Christian virtue” that he experienced. This leads me to propose some preconditions for there to be any hope of the dialogic model for discourse to be fruitful at NWC and elsewhere.

The first is **humility** -- the conviction that as a finite, fallible human being, I do not fully understand Truth as God knows it, and I can therefore learn from conversation with others, Christians or non-Christians, who disagree with me.

Such humility distinguishes between “Truth” (with a capital T) and “truth” (with a lower case t), with “Truth” referring to the actual nature of things as God fully knows it, and “truth” referring to the partial glimpse that a finite, fallible human being can grasp of the “Truth.” At the same time that I believe there is “Truth,” I don’t believe I typically have direct, unmediated access to that “Truth.” At best, I can aspire to grasp a partial glimpse, for an aspect of the human condition is that “we see through a glass darkly” (I Corinthians 13:12).

It is my experience that such humility is in short supply in the intellectual community. As David Claerbault has dared to propose: “There is something about being intelligent that seems to breed a sense of superiority” [Claerbault 2004, p. 165].

Such humility is not compromise. In respectful conversations, I will seek to express my *commitment* to certain “truths” with clarity and conviction. At the same time, I must be characterized by *openness* to the possibility that I am all wrongheaded about some of my present beliefs and need correction from others. In the process of give-and-take with those who disagree with me, I will try to present a persuasive case for the truth of my beliefs. But I must be open to the possibility that any aspect of my partial understanding of the Truth needs refinement.

Another way of saying this is that scholars working out of a Christian faith perspective must embrace both poles of a rare combination pointed to by Ian Barbour in his definition of “religious maturity”: ***“It is by no means easy to hold beliefs for which you would be willing to die, and yet to remain open to new insights; but it is precisely such a combination of commitment and inquiry that constitutes religious maturity.”***

If you believe, as I do, that being open to listening to the beliefs of someone who disagrees with you is a deep expression of “loving” that person, then Barbour’s insight fits nicely with the exhortation in Ephesians 4: 15 to “speak the truth in love.” But, if you agree with me, and you don’t have to, that there may be a difference between Truth (with a capital T) as God fully understands it, and truth (with a little t) as I understand it, then

the “truth” that I am called to speak in love is my finite and fallible understanding of that Truth that God fully knows. One of the hardest words for any human being to say is “I may be wrong” about my present understanding of Truth (as God fully knows it). But true humility requires that we be willing to utter that phrase.

The combination of commitment and openness that Barbour points to is a rare combination. Openness to the beliefs of others without commitment to your own beliefs too easily leads to sheer relativism. Commitment without openness too easily leads to fanaticism, even terrorism (as C. S. Lewis has observed, to which recent world events tragically testify, “Those who are readiest to die for a cause may easily become those who are readiest to kill for it”). One of the most pressing needs in our world today is for all human beings, including scholars, to embrace, and hold in tension, both commitment and openness, speaking the truth, as we understand it, in love.

So, to summarize, the first pre-condition for respectful conversation is humility, which finds expression in a dual embracing of both commitment and openness, even to the point of entering into a conversation with someone who disagrees with you with the rare attitude of wanting to seek for “treasures” in what the other person has to say (hoping, of course, that he/she will find treasures in what you have to say). But, there are a few other pre-conditions, expressible in terms of some other Christian virtues.

The commitment pole of that rare combination of commitment and openness also points to the need for the virtue of courage – the boldness to accept risks associated with honest advocacy of one’s position. **Individual courage** requires the strength to freely speak one’s convictions even when one’s opinions may be unpopular. **Institutional courage** requires that a college create safe spaces for faculty and administrators to freely disagree about important issues, within the framework of the college’s core beliefs, even if the college’s supporting constituency is unhappy about that.

Another precondition is **patience** -- the hope that through ongoing respectful conversations, greater understanding will gradually emerge as a gift.

Chris K. Huebner beautifully captures the essence of such patience in his observations about the “nonviolent epistemology” of the late, distinguished Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. Huebner suggests that “theology operates according to a violent logic of speed whenever it is unwilling to risk the possibility that truthfulness is the outcome of ongoing, timeful, open conversation.” In contrast “Yoder’s nonviolent epistemology...assumes that truthfulness is an utterly contingent gift that can only be given and received and that it emerges at the site of vulnerable interchange with the other.” We must overcome our propensity to want quick answers to complex questions. Patience and humility need to be further complemented by love.

Love—that enduring disposition of caring deeply for other persons, which includes providing a welcoming space for them to freely express their points of view.

As I Corinthians 13:2 states, “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” Jesus Christ has called all Christians to love others. My commitment to orchestrating respectful conversation with others is my deep-rooted response to that call.

If members of the NWC community make a common commitment to aspire to be characterized by these virtues when you engage those with whom you disagree, then there is hope for the strategy of dialogic discourse to lead to a rich redemptive harvest within your community by means of numerous respectful conversations that would facilitate your learning from those with whom you disagree.

Let me assert emphatically what I have already hinted at: what I have shared with you this morning is not peripheral to my understanding of my Christian faith. It is a centerpiece of how I believe I am called to live out my Christian faith. For, Jesus has called me to love others. And, my commitment to engaging those who disagree with me in dialogic

discourse, exhibiting the preconditions of humility, courage, patience, and love, is a deep expression of my response to that call.

Lest this all seem too theoretical and abstract, let me close by making a concrete suggestion for a possible venue for you at NWC to orchestrate respectful conversations.

Design a Student-Initiated College-Wide Conversation on an Important Issue

I am a great believer in the pedagogy of posing a good question as a way to initiate a respectful conversation. But, not just any kind of question. Since Christian colleges are committed to the “integration of faith & learning,” at least one aspect of which is seeking for connections between biblical & theological understanding and knowledge in the academic disciplines, I favor the posing of what I call “integrative questions.” By that I mean questions that cannot adequately be addressed without drawing deeply from both one’s biblical & theological understanding and knowledge in the academic disciplines.

As I read your Doctrinal Statement at NWC, which I assume is a framework that all faculty and staff at NWC have subscribed to, two types of integrative questions come to mind. First, questions that seek for elaboration on positions that you take in your Doctrinal Statement. Second, questions that deal with issues about which your Doctrinal Statement is silent. The example I will now present is in the first category (I will save a thorny question from the more difficult second category for this afternoon).

Your Doctrinal Statement says, “We believe that human betterment and social improvement are essential products of the gospel.” For me, that affirmation, with which I enthusiastically agree, cries out for elaboration relative to the “how” question. How can human betterment and social improvements be essential products of the gospel?” A host of sub-questions come to mind:

- Is human betterment and social improvement possible only if people get right with God?

- Or, are their obstacles to human betterment and social improvement that reflect not only “personal evil,” but also “systemic evil,” evil that is inherent in the very structures of society?
- And, if there is such a thing as “systemic evil,” how is such evil addressed and by whom? – is that a role for individual Christians, or for churches, or for government, or for some of each?
- Is there any room for churches and government to collaborate in seeking for human betterment and social improvement? Or, does your later doctrinal position on the separation of church and state (as having different “functions”) preclude such collaboration?
- If church and state are to be separated as to “function,” does that mean that one’s religious views should not inform one’s politics? Or, is it inevitable that one’s religious views will inform one’s politics?

These are all thorny questions, and they are all integrative questions, because they cannot be adequately addressed without drawing deeply from biblical & theological understanding and knowledge in such academic disciplines as economics, politics and sociology. Given the very urgent and timely nature of these questions, and the fact that they flow from a position you have already taken in your Doctrinal Statement, I believe you need to create venues for grappling with these questions. But, what is the best venue for such conversations?

The first answer that comes to mind is the classroom. And, that is true, up to a point. But, with all due respect to the teaching faculty, I believe that to limit conversations on such important questions to the classroom is short sighted, primarily because these questions do not fit neatly into the departmental sub-divisions of knowledge that typically characterize the college curriculum. These pressing questions are interdisciplinary in nature.

The next answer that comes to mind is an out-of class venue to which all faculty, staff and students are invited. And, it is my understanding that you already have at least two

such venues in your Faith & Thought Lecture Series and your Scholarship Symposium, for which you are to be commended.

Now, that may be more than enough to keep all of you busy outside of the classroom. You may not want to add another campus-wide out-of-class venue, at least at this time. But, I want to at least plant a seed for a rather radical campus-wide out-of-class venue, a venue for campus-wide conversation to be designed and implemented by your students.

Lest you think I have absolutely lost my mind when I make this suggestion that you entrust your students with the responsibility to design a campus-wide conversation on an important issue, let me give you a real example of where that has worked to an admirable degree.

In 1998, the Center for Christian Studies at Gordon College, which I used to direct, inaugurated an annual Gordon College Symposium, for which classes were cancelled for a day, and campus-wide conversations were orchestrated around an important interdisciplinary, with participation in these conversations being mostly voluntary (although some chapel credits could be obtained for a limited number of events).

It didn't start well, for two reasons. First, all the planning for the first symposium was top-down, carried out by faculty and a few co-curricular staff members. Second, on the first day of such cancelled classes, it was a beautiful sunny 85 degree day in April and Gordon College is only a mile and a half from a splendid beach on the Atlantic Ocean.

A new idea then occurred to us. After an interdisciplinary theme is announced for a given year, turn the students loose to design symposium sessions that they judge to be pertinent to the given theme. The enthusiastic student response has been overwhelming. The sessions students have come up with over the past 12 years have included lecture type presentations (with students at the lectern and some faculty sitting in the student chairs), poetry readings, a panel of students from a given class dealing with the interdisciplinary issue as it relates to the course material for that class, musical compositions, art exhibits,

and other venues as varied as the imaginations of students (including a pig roast on the quad one year).

This Symposium has now expanded from just one full day of concurrent events in a given week, to include events planned for each evening of that week. This annual event has featured as many as 70 student initiated projects over the one week period, with conversations about the materials presented expected as part of each design. Total student attendance for the week has exceeded 3000, for a student body of about 1500. The total cost for this week of events is minimal, since it typically involves no outside speakers. It is a co-curricular vehicle for students to take more responsibility for their own learning, and for making students, co-curricular staff, and faculty equal co-participants in the educational process.

If you decide to try out his wild idea, a good initial interdisciplinary theme might be “Human Betterment and Social Improvement: How can Christians be agents toward that end in ways that are true to the Gospel?” But, whatever topics you choose for discussion and whatever venues you decide upon for such conversations, I would strongly recommend that you publish up-front a manifesto as to the guidelines that should govern such discussions, to promote respectful conversations. In light of what I have shared with you this morning, if I were writing such a manifesto, It would read something like the following (your own version of which may even be appropriate as an addition to your “Statement of Unity at Northwestern,” hoping that I am not being too presumptuous in suggesting that possibility)

The Northwestern Ideal for Conversation with Others

- I will try to listen well, providing each person with a welcoming space to express her perspective on the issue at hand
- I will seek to empathetically understand the reasons another person has for her perspective

- I will express my perspective, and my reasons for holding that perspective, with commitment and conviction, but with a non-coercive style that invites conversation with a person who disagrees with me
- In my conversation with a person who disagrees with me, I will explore whether we can find some common ground that can further the conversation. But, if we cannot find common ground, I will conclude that “we can only agree to disagree;” yet I will do so in a way that demonstrates respect for the other and concern for her well-being and does not foreclose the possibility of future conversations.
- In aspiring to these ideals for conversation, I will also aspire, by the grace of God, to be characterized by humility, courage, patience and love

Harold Heie

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