

RESPECTFUL CONVERSATIONS: WHAT, WHY AND HOW

I am appalled at the sad state of public discourse in contemporary society. The engagement between persons who disagree with one another is increasingly shrill and nasty.

As Exhibit A, I give you the political reports on MSNBC or FOX TV NEWS. Most of what you will see on these two cable channels will exemplify the brokenness of contemporary political discourse, elevating disrespect to the highest imaginable level.

But, sad to say, all too often public discourse in churches and educational institutions is also broken.

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.

A second characteristic of broken public discourse is **HOLDING TO FIXED POSITIONS.** I submit as Exhibit B 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).

A third characteristic of broken public discourse is **LISTENING ONLY TO AN ECHO OF YOURSELF.** In an opinion piece, titled "Talking to Ourselves," Susan Jacoby says 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.

WHAT IS RESPECTFUL CONVERSATION?

In stark contrast to this sad state of much contemporary public discourse, I will dare to propose for your consideration the following ideals that I believe are the tell-tale signs of a respectful conversation within any group of people, but especially a group of people who have strong disagreements about the issue being discussed. I present these ideals in terms of how I believe I should engage in respectful conversation, hoping that my conversation partners will also exemplify these ideals

- I will try to listen well, providing each person with a safe, 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 openness to the differing perspectives of others and with a non-coercive style that invites conversation
- 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, and we conclude that, at least for now, “we can only agree to disagree,” I will do so in a way that demonstrates respect for the other and concern for her well-being and lays the groundwork for ongoing conversations.
- In aspiring to these ideals for conversation, I will also aspire to be characterized by humility, courage, patience and love.

Well, that is the “what” of respectful conversations. How naïve is that? Public conversations guided by these ideals are almost extinct. Holding until later the question of “how” one can

orchestrate respectful conversations in our combative culture, let me first address the issue of “why” orchestrating such respectful conversations is of the **utmost importance**.

RESPECTFUL CONVERSATIONS AS HAVING BOTH INTRINSIC AND INSTRUMENTAL VALUE

For those who profess to be followers of Jesus, he summarized the law and the prophets in two brief love commandments: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... **You shall love your neighbor as yourself**’ (Matthew 22: 37-39).

Here is the fundamental reason why respectful conversation is of the utmost importance to those who profess to be followers of Jesus: **To create a safe, welcoming space for another person to express her views on an issue under discussion, to listen empathetically to her views, trying to see things from her perspective, and then to engage her in respectful conversation about your agreements and disagreements with the hope of learning from one another is a deep expression of what it means to love that person.**

In a nutshell, engaging in respectful conversation is a deep expression of what it means to love another person.

And to love another person in that deep way is not optional for Christians. That is how I should always engage with others; no “ifs, ands or buts” about it.

So, my attempts to orchestrate respectful conversations is not my just my trying to be a nice guy. It is my deep response to my calling as a Christian to love others.

Therefore, such respectful conversations are of “intrinsic value,” meaning that they are important in and of themselves, independent of what the results of such conversations may be. You should talk to others respectfully because it is ALWAYS the right thing to do if you aspire to be a follower of Jesus.

But here is a marvelous bonus; respectful conversations can also be of “instrumental” value; they can yield splendid results. Let me illustrate this potential in two areas; first in the area of doing scholarship; and, secondly, relative to providing leadership for a business or any other type of organization.

First, I believe that the purpose of doing scholarship, in organizational leadership or any other academic discipline is to seek a better understanding of the Truth (Truth with a capital “T”; that is Truth as only God fully understands it). As finite, fallible human beings we do not have direct access to God’s Truth. Each of us has only a partial glimpse of that Truth; a partial glimpse that is informed by our particularities, elements of our “social location” such as our personal biography, our gender, our socio-economic status, and the faith tradition, religious or secular, in which we are embedded. An aspect of the human condition is that “we see through a glass darkly” (I Corinthians 13:12).

Therefore, doing good scholarship is a communal task. Contrary to the pernicious tendencies of the rampant “individualism” of American culture, one does not do the best scholarship as a “Lone Ranger. The best scholarship is done when scholars bring their differing perspectives to the table, talking respectfully to one another about their agreements and disagreements, so that collectively they can gain a better understanding of God’s Truth. So, in addition to being the right thing to do, in light of Jesus’ call for us to love others, respectful conversation among scholars can yield splendid results; a clearer understanding of Truth as God only fully knows it.

But what are the benefits of respectful conversation for those of you who will not pursue careers in scholarship, but will rather provide leadership for businesses or other organizations? My response starts with my fundamental premise as to what it means to be a “leader.”

My fundamental premise is that a good leader “**empowers others to maximize the use of their gifts.**” I will elaborate by quoting Parker Palmer, from his book *The Active Life*.

Jesus exercises the only kind of leadership that can evoke authentic community- a leadership that risks failure (and even crucifixion) by **making space for other people to act.** When a leader takes up all the space and preempts all the action,

he or she may make something happen, but the something is not community. Nor is it abundance, because **the leader is only one person, and one person's resources invariably run out.** But, when a leader is willing to trust the abundance that people have and can generate together, willing to take the risk of inviting people to share from that abundance, then and only then may true community emerge (p. 138, emphases mine)

In my own words, if you, as the “boss” make all the decisions for your organization, those decisions will be only as good as you are; they will only reflect your particular gifts. But if you dare to open up the conversations about important decisions to all those associated with your organization, you open the potential for the final decision to be as good as your collective gifts; with each person providing insights that reflect his/her particular gifts. This calls for respectful conversations involving all persons associated with your organization.

So, the “why” for respectful conversations is that they are important, in and of themselves, as deep expressions of what it means to love another person, and, as an added bonus, they have great potential to foster the goal of doing the best scholarship or providing the best leadership for an organization for which you may be responsible.

But “how” does one orchestrate respectful conversations?

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND MUTUAL TRUST

I have a good friend who used to teach psychology at Whitworth University and now teaches at Keene State University in New Hampshire who has emerged as a leading scholar in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Jim once told me that earlier in his career when he presented a paper at a conference, and received some sharp criticisms he used to retreat to his hotel room and lick his wounds. But then he radically changed his approach.

He would seek out the scholar who was his most vocal critic and invite him out to dinner later in the day. Over good food, they would just get to know one another, talking about their families and sharing soccer coaching tips for their daughters. The main purpose of having dinner was to

build a relationship of mutual trust by taking the time to simply get to know one another on a personal level.

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 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 help to build bonds of mutual trust that may enable you to talk through difficult issues about which you may vehemently disagree.

But, as Jim once said to me, “schmoozing is not a substitute for a good scientific theory.” However, Jim found that by first building a relationship of mutual understanding and mutual trust, both he and his critic were more open to talk respectfully about their scientific disagreements.

You see, it is all too easy to demonize someone you really don’t know. Those political pundits on MSNBC or FOX TV NEWS who hurl grenades at each other don’t really know each other.

It is much harder to demonize someone who you have gotten to know at a personal level, because you now understand better the reasons they have for their point of view; you understand better the ways in which your respective particularities, your respective “social locations” inform your particular beliefs about the issue at hand.

Taking the time to build such a relationship of mutual understanding and mutual trust is a necessary first step that can open the door for a respectful conversation about your agreements and disagreements.

How can one apply this idea to the task of providing leadership for a business or other organization? Let me answer that question by telling you another true story, a portion of my story.

My transition in the fall of 1980 from 17 years of teaching mathematics at two colleges to becoming a Chief Academic Officer at a third college was very difficult. I knew how to teach but I didn't have a clue as to how to start being a good academic administrator. So, not knowing any better, I started by reading files left by my predecessor. That bored me to tears.

I then decided to have a face-to-face conversation with each of my faculty, somewhat over 50 in number. I came to their offices with no agenda. I simply wanted to listen to their perceptions of the status of the college, and their dreams for the future of the college and their dreams for their own work as a teachers and scholars. In these conversations I began to learn that you are a good listener when you can restate what the other has said to their satisfaction.

What happened as a result of those one-on-one meetings is that I built up a storehouse of mutual understanding and mutual trust. My faculty found out that I cared deeply about their growth as academics and persons; that I understood their dreams for themselves and the college.

I was able to draw on this storehouse when I later had to make some difficult decisions that not everyone agreed with. I remember in particular the face-to-face meetings I had with faculty to tell them they had not been granted promotion or tenure. They did not jump up and down for joy. But I remember one faculty member actually thanking me for being the first person who had the courage to tell him where he needed to improve. I think that was because he knew that I was not judging him from a perch of supposed superiority. Rather, he knew that I cared deeply for him as a person, and wanted him to become the best teacher/scholar that he was capable of becoming.

So, whatever your role in your business or organization, the best way to start orchestrating respectful conversations is to take the time to build relationships of mutual understanding and mutual trust with those who work with you or for you.

THE CURSE AND POTENTIAL OF ONLINE CONVERSATION

In your Ph. D. program in Organizational Leadership, much of your conversation takes place online. So, I will reflect for a few minutes on how what I have shared with you so far can be applied to online conversations

DON'T SAY IN A FEW WORDS WHAT YOU CAN SAY MORE RESPECTFULLY USING MORE WORDS

This word of advice is surely counter-cultural. In an age of texts and tweets, a premium is placed on brevity, even to the point of abbreviating single words.

After I send out an email taking a certain position on a given issue or question, it is not unusual for me to receive an email response that reads in its entirety as follows.

The position you have taken is wrong for the following reason ... Here is the correct position. ...

Bill

First of all Bill, I do have a name, it's Harold.

And, in stark contrast to the conversation-stopper that Bill just sent me, if I were responding to an email from Bill to express my disagreement with the position that he has taken on a given issue, I would send Bill an email that reads something like the following.

Dear Bill:

Thanks for your thoughtful reflections. I especially appreciated the insights you shared with me that helped me to think more carefully about my position. Here is where I find some common ground. ... However, it appears to me that we still disagree about the following ... In light of our remaining disagreements, here are some further questions about which I hope we can continue to correspond....

With best wishes, Harold

Bill's disrespectful email to me is a conversation-stopper. My more respectful email to Bill has the potential to continue the conversation.

Observing the protocols of courtesy and respect that many now consider to be quaint and outdated is a way to foster the mutual understanding and mutual respect that is the only hope for sustaining a respectful conversation.

IF YOU CREATE OR MAINTAIN A WEB SITE, MAKE IT A MODEL OF RESPECTFUL CONVERSATION

In January of 2012, at the suggestion of a friend of mine, who helped drag me, kicking and screaming into the 21st Century, I decided to create a web site to attempt to model, online, the kind of respectful conversation I was relentlessly advocating. In preparation for creating my own web site, I examined a number of other web sites, and was appalled at what I found.

I found that a given posting on a web site that took a particular position on a given issue typically elicited numerous comments from readers. So far, so good! But the nature of the comments left much to be desired. They were typically very cryptic comments, either applauding the original posting, or decimating it, in no uncertain terms, sometimes using the most crude and vitriolic language. I found nothing in these "hit-and-run" comments that did anything to sustain or advance the conversation on the issue at hand.

So, I was determined to create a web site that rejected this prevalent approach to electronic communication. That web site can be accessed at www.respectfulconversation.net, and on it I

have hosted two major online conversations (eCircles), one titled an “Alternative Political Conversation” (which led to the book *Evangelicals on Public Policy Issues: Sustaining a Respectful Political Conversation* – a few copies of which I believe are here in this room), and one on the topic of “American Evangelicalism” (on the basis of which I have just completed the first draft of a potential book tentatively titled *A Future for American Evangelicalism: Commitment, Openness and Conversation*). If you can find the time in your busy schedules to peruse my web site, I invite you to do so, and you can judge for yourself whether the postings on this web site do indeed model respectful conversation. I think they do, but I may be biased.

PRECONDITIONS FOR RESPECTFUL CONVERSATION

If respectful conversations have both intrinsic and instrumental value, as I have argued, why do we see so little of it displayed in public discourse? The reason is that there are certain preconditions for respectful conversations that are seldom met. And sad to say for those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus, a number of these preconditions are “Christian virtues” that we like to talk about much more than we like to put into practice.

The first precondition 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.

Although I am waiting patiently, I have yet to hear the following four words from any pundit on MSNBC or FOX TV NEWS: “I may be wrong.”

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 persons 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.”*

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 (Ephesians 4:15).

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. **Organizational courage** requires that an organization create safe spaces for all of its employees to freely disagree about important issues, within the framework of the organization’s mission and core beliefs, even if that will make some supporters of the organization unhappy.

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

The overarching precondition is **Love**—that enduring disposition of caring deeply for other persons, which includes providing a safe, 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.

It is my prayer that if you profess to be a follower of Jesus, you will also respond to that call.

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May 15, 2014