Steps on the Path of Dialogue
On Gentle Slopes and Through Tough Terrain

By Maggie Herzig, Public Conversations Project

Why bother to walk the path of dialogue with someone who has a different worldview, identity or religion? Or with someone in your own community who has a different view on a divisive issue?

Perhaps you’ve noticed a growing disconnection or polarization that is threatening a particular community that you care about deeply. Or threatening the global community.

Perhaps you have had several personal experiences in which you have felt stereotyped, mocked or even demonized.

Or maybe you haven’t. Maybe there’s something about your identity and the contexts in which you live that allows you to feel understood and affirmed in most circumstances. And you recognize that others don’t have that privilege. You understand that prejudice and disconnection affects all of us, even those who are less frequently the targets. Perhaps you feel that the path to true security is through connection and collaboration.

Maybe you have been guided toward dialogue through scripture, through the words and deeds of prophets and saints, or by the words of inspirational poets, orators or civic leaders. Or maybe you have simply taken to heart the Golden Rule, having seen that rule in the heart of all the world’s great religions and in humanism.

Whatever your sources of motivation or inspiration, these tips might offer some guidance as you embark on a journey of dialogue.

Leave home and show up.

The path to dialogue often starts on easy terrain, so the hardest part about starting the journey may be leaving your comfortable and familiar home. You may worry about what will happen. Or you may wonder if your companions will show up – literally and figuratively. Will you and they show up simply as attendees at an event or will you and they show up as open-hearted, curious and humble explorers of the unknown? If the latter, you and they will have taken the first courageous step of dialogue. How you show up will influence whether you and others make the commitment to walk together wherever your journey takes you, even through the rough spots.

Decide together about the journey.

Adopt a spirit of collaboration with your fellow travelers, and maintain it throughout the journey. Be clear with each other about your hopes, goals and expectations. If you want to focus on mutual understanding and set aside the urge to persuade, make that an explicit commitment. Make some simple communication agreements. For example, the group may want to agree to speak personally and to not expect anyone to represent or defend an entire group. Make reasonable time commitments that can be extended at a later date (e.g., to meet for three sessions then see where you want to go from there) rather than making indefinite or overly ambitious plans that can lead to awkward, unexplained departures and disappointment.
Invite personal connection.

Create a welcoming and relaxed environment. “Breaking bread” (or cookies!) can help! Consider starting with questions that everyone can answer personally – for example, questions that encourage people to speak about how their commitments, passions and concerns relate to their life experience. Sharing stories typically stimulates interest and curiosity whereas professions of truth and instructional speaking – particularly in the early phase of the journey – often raise defensiveness and create distance.

Support listening and inclusion.

Structure your dialogue to support reflection, inclusion and listening. For example, after a question is posed, take a couple minutes for everyone to gather his or her thoughts, then go around and hear from everyone who wishes to contribute before opening up a more informal exchange. If someone doesn't want to speak in the go-round, they can “pass.”

Be flexible and responsive.

Keep in mind that a journey of dialogue can include a variety of experiences in addition to talking and listening. Groups often go through phases in which they desire different formats and focal activities. Sharing rituals, like an iftar or seder, can begin to melt the boundaries between the familiar and the “foreign.” Watching a movie or reading a book together can provide a way to learn “side by side.” Doing humanitarian and social justice activities can build relationships while also helping those in need.

Venture with care into tough terrain.

If the “getting to know you” phase of a dialogue extends over time and hard issues are avoided, people may lose interest. On the other hand, rushing into tough terrain can lead to bruises and aborted journeys. If making agreements or setting ground rules seemed unnecessary at the beginning of the journey, you may find that they are crucial when you enter the tough terrain. Similarly, if having a skilled facilitator seemed unnecessary before, it may be necessary now. Why? Because when hard issues are addressed, we are sometimes blind to the gap between the intention of our speaking and the impact that it has on others. A skilled facilitator can hold the space for this part of the journey, remind participants about their purposes and agreements, and suggest processes for pursuing the group’s goals.

Back home, make your journey matter.

Finally, bring the lessons of your journey back home, into your personal relationships and into your most familiar communities (which are, of course, not immune from internal divisiveness and stereotyping!). Reflect on how you spoke and listened when you were at your best in the dialogue. Reflect on ways you were tempted to slip into polemics or defensiveness, and what you did to respond in a purposeful and intentional way. And bring your new understanding of “the other” into your life. Speak up as an ally when you hear others spreading misconceptions. Engage in social action and other acts of compassion with your dialogue partners. Demonstrate your unwillingness to cooperate with patterns of polarization.

Maggie Herzig is a Senior Associate and one of the founders of the Public Conversations Project in Watertown, MA. She is co-author with Laura Chasin of Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project. She can be reached at mherzig@publicconversations.org.

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