

# PURSUING TRUTH IN DIALOGUE

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The consulting firm for which I now work was founded by two members of the Harvard Negotiation Project – one of the world’s most elite groups of negotiators. Our founders have trained hostage negotiation specialists in the Middle East. They have worked with the Ethiopian Parliament, and helped mediate the Cyprus conflict between Greece and Turkey. They have worked with big banks and big business. Yet when one of our founders gets up to speak, she often begins by saying, “I was once locked in a room with six theologians for thirteen hours debating the nature of truth.”

She says this with a certain degree of pride, as if she wants to communicate, “Look what I survived.” Or maybe it is an attempt at solidarity, “See, whatever you’ve been thru, I understand.” But, *whatever* the reason, *whenever* she does this, it makes me roll my eyes and sigh. Because, you see, once upon a time, *I* was one of those theologians.

I imagine it might be disturbing for you to hear that the person you’ve invited to speak on the topic of meaningful dialogue about truth was – less than a decade ago – embroiled in such a tense conversation on the topic that it required calling in the Harvard Negotiation Project. Maybe those of you who are newer to the world of dialogue about matters of faith might be thinking, “What have I gotten myself in for? Is this going to involve lawyers?” And maybe those of you who’ve been around the block in this arena a number of times are thinking, “Hmm, this does *not* bode well for the reputation of our field.”

So, let me say upfront that there probably *aren’t* going to be lawyers involved in your own conversations. And for the sake of clarity, the dialogue I was involved in was not interreligious dialogue. The *primary* work of interreligious dialogue, as I understand it, is about looking for similarities or places of overlap between religious traditions. It is about seeking *common* experiences of the transcendent, not differences. It aims to explore the potential for collaboration, not conflict. If the relationships that you enter into with persons of other faiths begin with a focus on what differs and where you disagree, I imagine that would be a very bad sign. It would be a relationship that wouldn’t seem to hold much promise.

But at the same time, if the relationships that are formed in the context of interreligious dialogue are *never* able to go there – if differences and disagreements are repeatedly avoided and shied away from – I suspect that would also be problematic. If we don’t find a way to dialogue also about those things that mean a great deal to us, but upon which we hold radically different points of view, I suspect we will have interesting conversations, but not particularly transformative ones. And if we don’t find a way of acknowledging where we are uncomfortable with one another’s thinking and behavior – both at a professional and personal level – we will never taste the depths of relationship, understanding, and knowledge for which we truly hunger as human beings.

And so I beg your indulgence in letting me

start with a story from an intra-religious dialogue instead of interreligious, and about an area of painful difference rather than similarity, because while conflict is certainly not the *aim* of dialogue, we would be naïve to think that it is not an inevitable part of any sort of dialogue of depth that involves real, living human beings – whether of different faiths, cultures, personalities, or generations.

It is hard for me to know where to begin the story about how I came to be locked in a room for thirteen hours with five other theologians and a Harvard mediator, except to say that we were also colleagues in the same theologate and that the health and wellbeing of the school depended upon it. Four of the six of us were faculty members. Whenever there was a difference of opinion at a faculty meeting – be it over a theological stance, the choice of opening song for commencement, the advising of a challenging student, the question of who would preside at prayer – you can bet two or more of the four of us were somehow mixed up in it. We thought that we kept it pretty well hidden from our students, but apparently it was not so. As one of my own advisees said to me, “We can tell there is a lot of tension among you. That you disagree about everything and don’t seem to like working with one another.” Well, as people of any faith, *that* is hardly the sort of witness that you want to be sending out into the world, much less your own student body.

So being of the theological academic sort, we did the thing that theological academics do whenever they encounter an intractable issue they want to understand better: We applied to an arm of the Lilly Foundation for grant assistance. Over the course of a two-year period, we joined the general good will of us religious-sorts-of-people to the expertise of the Harvard Negotiation Project to see if we could make progress on the way we dialogued about differences among ourselves. In particular, the four-of-us-who-argued-the-most committed to talking amongst ourselves about our *most* neuralgic topic and then modeling, alongside two

of our upper-level students, what a good, healthy conversation on this topic would look like. And we would do it in front of the whole school body in a symposium.

The topic that we chose to talk about with one another was Truth. Now, I know that sounds peculiarly esoteric, but I promise you it is *the* most practical and pressing topic there is. *Whenever* you are struggling to talk with another about something that means a great deal to you, isn’t the question of truth somehow always what is involved?: What is “really real” here? How do we know? Who has the right to claim it and on what grounds? What difference do we think it makes if someone gets “what’s-really-real” wrong? Is it okay to “agree-to-disagree” on something if *your* belief about what’s true has real life consequences for *my* life? Can we honestly say that “it doesn’t matter what you believe; we can still be friends,” or are there times we can’t anymore? When is it acceptable to have a diversity of perspectives all claiming to be true on a topic and when is it not? I challenge you to think of any conversation you have had recently with someone who looks at the world differently than you do – be it on a religious belief, a political position, a community issue, a family decision – and consider, does it not have to do *ultimately* with one of those questions?

One of my mentors in theology is keen on saying to me, “A difference that doesn’t make a difference, isn’t really a difference.” The differences-that-don’t-really-make-a-difference are easy, intriguing, even fun to talk about. (I offer purgatory as an example here. I believe in it wholeheartedly, but I am not bothered that you have a different intuition about the afterlife and am curious to hear about it.) Most of us are pretty comfortable with the fact that people think different than we do on any variety of topics. Where it gets tough though is when another’s belief in something and their acting on that belief impacts our life or the lives of those we care about in a negative way. (To give another example: whether all children should have to be vaccinated before going

to school, especially if your own child has a compromised immune system.) Those kinds of differences-that-*do*-make-a-difference are rarely easy or fun to discuss with someone who holds otherwise.

The nature of truth was not merely a matter of intellectual curiosity for those of us involved in this dialogue. Our varied answers to the questions posed above were impacting our ability to work with each other in daily life. Differences-that-*make*-a-difference can make all of our professional academic training for objectivity and emotional distance evaporate.

Preparing for the symposium required a four-month process of talking and making decisions with one another. The day of the infamous thirteen hour practice conversation with the Harvard mediator, we were scheduled to meet for only seven hours, but we got so into the thick of it that we neglected to take even a bathroom break and finally emerged from the room after sunset to discover that the pizza delivered hours earlier had been burnt to a crisp.

And here is the thing I found most distressing at the end of that marathon day: after thirteen hours of talking, I felt like we had gotten “nowhere.” Even with the Harvard negotiator present, our positions – and our relationships to one another – seemed frozen in place. As the clock inched toward 10 p.m., I disagreed with one member of the group – who I will call “Dan” for the purposes of this talk - more vehemently than when the day began. I had really tried to listen to him and his reasoning still made no sense to me. When I had spoken, I felt attacked by Dan. It felt to me as if he was dissecting everything I said, parsing words in a way I found to be tedious. It was exhausting and made me not want to say any more at all.

And then the strangest thing happened. I don’t quite know how to describe it, because I’m not sure when it started exactly, but perhaps the best way to say it is that “the glacier began to move.” In the weeks

following our “fruitless” thirteen-hour conversation, I began to see that, although Dan’s reasoning did not make sense to me, I could understand why Dan’s reasoning made sense to *him*. Why it made sense given how his brain was wired, given the voices he considered most authoritative, given the education he had received and the social circles he ran in, given the family that had formed him and the culture in which he was rooted, given his understanding of history and how revelation works. And while I still didn’t agree with him, I had more compassion for him, and I could see how things would look from his shoes. I became ever so slightly more gentle with him and more understanding of his behavior.

Indeed, all of us were becoming more gentle with one another. Nothing big, but a smile in the communion line instead of a steely glare. Drip. A nod across the table at the committee meeting. Drip. An email receiving more timely response than accustomed. Drip. A gesture of personal concern asking about a sick parent. Drip. Drip. A river of ice moving at the speed of about six inches per year. We were not actually understanding each other’s stances, but we were understanding better how each person ticked to their own metronome. Drip.

It has been six years now since the semester of the Truth Symposium, yet I continue to think about that dialogue and feel its “dripping” in my life. I want to share three practices that I took away from the experience that I consider to undergird a healthy approach to deep dialogue about the things that matter – whether intra-religious or interreligious or even a-religious.

### **Seek truth**

From a Catholic worldview, there is such a thing as reality and truth is being in a state of alignment with reality. The classical definition of the term, aptly articulated by Thomas Aquinas and still mirrored in *Webster’s Dictionary* today, defines truth as “being in accordance with the actual state of

affairs; the body of real things, events, and facts." In Aquinas' own words: "*Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus.*"<sup>1</sup> It is not a body of knowledge that one possesses, but rather a state of knowing that is in right relationship with reality – in a similar way as justice is not something one "has" but a state of being in right relationship with others.

From the perspective of this tradition, reality exists whether we believe in it or not. I might not agree that there is such a thing as gravity, but if I step out of a third story window, I am just as likely as the next person to plummet to the ground. I may not believe in God, but whether God exists does not depend upon my belief. In that sense, what is true is never endangered by humans; reality is what it is. Humans, however, stand in peril without truth. We may not believe that there is such a thing as global warming, but if it exists, we are going to be impacted regardless of our belief. It is in our best interest as humans that our beliefs align with reality. Our flourishing, indeed our very existence, is at stake. The kinds of conversations that we engage as religious people are not just quaint, casual, of no import, as the wider world would sometimes make them out to be. There *are* differences that do make a difference. It is extremely important that we know what is real. The big, scary question is not whether reality exists, but rather can we *know* it?

On one hand, we humans *have* to trust our capacity to know reality lest we not be able to dive into daily business. Could our ancestors have planted crops if they didn't trust the patterns of the sun? Could they have navigated between islands if they couldn't count on the predictable movement of the stars in the night sky? At some level we *have* to trust our ability to know what is real lest we be paralyzed in our planning, unable to make any decisions. To use an example favored by the philosopher Wittgenstein, what would it be like if every morning when we woke up we had to wonder, "Do I really have two hands or is that just a figment of my imagination?" We are able to get on with life only because there are some

things we take as certain.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, we acknowledge that the horizon of knowable reality has always extended beyond what any one civilization, much less person, could master. The further we sail from the shore toward that horizon, the wider the view of the ocean of potential knowledge before us. And, the more we learn, the more we realize we do not know. Indeed, we often discover that what we thought we knew is – to use Aquinas' vocabulary – *not* "adequate" to the reality we encounter. We will think we've understood something such as gravity or the Divine or the earth's climate, and then realize we have barely skimmed the surface. Over and over again, we confront the realization that our minds are too small to grasp fully the expansiveness, diversity, and surprise of the universe, never mind what lies beyond its furthest edges. It is as if reality is a bazillion volt charge and our brains are sixty-watt bulbs.

When we make assertions about knowing the truth, we remember that while there *is* reality, and we *can* know it (indeed we stake our daily existence on being able to know it), *what* we know of it is always partial, and even potentially less reflective of the totality of what is true than it *is* reflective. For example, when I claim "God is good" – my understanding of what "good" means is like pinpoint in comparison to God's actual goodness. So, while it is true to say that God is good, it is also true that what I have in mind when I say "God is good" is less reflective of the totality of God's goodness than it is reflective. Humility is of the essence.

Such awareness raises another question: If we as humans are never going to really be able to grasp the whole picture, should we even bother trying to have conversations about these things? Is it worth it to invest so much of our time and energy on an unmasterable quest? Yes.

We will never know all that is to be known. And time may prove that what we think we



know is riddled with “inadequacies.” But, we don’t pursue truth with the assumption that someday we will possess truth, but rather the hope that someday Truth will possess us.<sup>3</sup> Every time that we humbly open ourselves to finding out more – be it about gravity or another’s faith or even the source of another’s disagreement with us – it is a gesture toward letting Truth (a.k.a. God) more and more into our lives.

Sometimes life will hand us puzzle pieces that do not seem to all fit together and indeed appear to contradict what we previously thought was real. Sometimes the best we can do is hold onto new insights like we hold onto the mystery screws and unlabeled keys kept in the kitchen drawer. We trust that *someday* it will become clear where everything goes, but for the time being, we must become comfortable with a degree of messiness. In the words of novelist Zora Neale Hurston, “There are years that ask questions and years that answer them.”<sup>4</sup> *Years*, she stresses, not hours. Pursuing truth is a life work, not meant for the faint of heart.

The fourteen-hundred-year-old Benedictine community has a remarkable way of expressing this commitment to always remain open to the ambiguous unknown in that (in addition to obedience and stability) each monk takes a vow of “*conversatio morum*” or “conversion of life.” Each monk makes a lifelong promise to keep changing and learning and growing, believing that ultimately the question marks that trouble our minds are not problems to be dismissed with a shrug nor threats to be feared, but rather the crooked finger of God beckoning us to draw nearer.

An important insight of the Benedictine tradition is that “*conversatio*” or conversion, as implied by the Latin root, most frequently happens through conversation. Critical insights into reality and especially ourselves most often arrive in the form of dialogue with others. The 20th century monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton was so intrigued by this idea, he titled one compila-

tion of his personal journals *A Vow of Conversation*. He knew that he *needed* the wisdom and the rub of dialogue partners who did not think like him in order to become ever more aligned with the real. Truth is not a solitary pursuit.

(FOR REFLECTION: How do you define the word “truth”? What role does interreligious dialogue play in your own pursuit to more fully grasp what’s “really real”?)

### Speak truthfully

It seems only natural that if we are going to speak about a “vow of conversation,” we will need to say something about speaking, and if that conversation is about a quest for truth, the conversations are going to need to be spoken truthfully. Perhaps at no other time in the world’s history has it been as clear as it is now that there must be a profound consonance between the *content* of our communication and *how* we say it. For example, we know there is something not quite right when a teacher instills quiet in a classroom by yelling, “Be quiet!!” Or when a rally for peace involves the destruction of property and the condemnation of particular people. There is a mismatch between message and medium.

Our commitment to pursue truth has certain implications for the very tenor of our speech. Often the first thing that comes to mind when we think about speaking truthfully is speaking honestly, not hiding things or holding them back. It is a very important marker of truthful speech, but there is more. The fact that truth is always bigger than what we can see means that our speech must always be marked by curiosity. We must always be asking, “What am I missing?” The fact that truth is always bigger than what we can grasp means that our speech must never be cocky. It is possible others have angles on reality that we don’t. And the fact that truth is ultimately another name for God poses many additional implications.

In the Christian scriptures, St. John says, God is love. We have to think about what such a claim means. Love, by its very nature, is not coercive. It cannot be forced. It always allows the other to freely respond. No one wants to be “loved” by someone who is being paid to do so. Hence, speaking truthfully implies absence of coercion or pressure. It leaves people space to explain themselves and change their mind if they want to. And it should open us to changing *our* minds if we are persuaded to do so. It even implies vulnerability—being open to the fact that the other might not respond as hoped and we do not get to control that.

I feel so strongly about this principle of consonance between message and method that, at this point in time, I keep the Bible and the book *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* right next to each other on my bookshelf. One tells me what I believe; the other gives me a way to communicate it curiously, humbly, lovingly – in essence, in a way that is most deeply compatible with what I believe.

*(FOR REFLECTION: If you are really committed to seeking truth, what are the implications for speech that you see? What does it mean to you to speak truthfully?)*

## Be true

There is one last practice that I want to mention if you want to have conversations about things that really matter, and perhaps this one is less obvious than the other two, but I suspect it is the most central of them all: If truth is ultimately not an object that one possesses, but a Subject to whom one relates, it makes sense that commitment to relationship is going to play a critical role in the quest for what is “really real”. Already in the 5th century, Augustine of Hippo postulated: *Nemo nisi per amicitiam cognoscitur.* – “No one learns except by friendship.”<sup>5</sup> Whether we are talking about astronomy or calculus or the intricacies of Arabic grammar or the writing of Maimonides or the woman in the office next door, we will nev-

er grasp what that subject has to reveal unless approached with the disposition with which one would approach a friend. If we wish to see a deer in the woods, the last thing we should do is go tromping loudly down the path demanding it show itself.<sup>6</sup> Subjects only reveal themselves fully when met with patient kindness.

To be serious about pursuing truth requires fidelity to relationships. It requires “hanging in there” with people, even after they’ve stopped being interesting. It means still being there even after their jokes seem stale and their laugh just a bit grating. It means still showing up, even when you can guess the next word that is going to come out of their mouth, and the story they are about to tell, and all of their issues are spectacularly clear to everyone, except themselves. And, you know they say the same thing about you.

From ancient times, friendship has been regarded as a “school of virtue” – a place where we can become better people precisely because it is a place we can feel safe enough to test out our ideas, and get feedback on them, and make mistakes, and still know ourselves as cared for. Because we are accepted exactly as we are, we can – ironically – actually become different persons. In essence, “*conversatio morum*” requires the capacity to “be true.”

I am not saying all of your dialogue relationships need to be this way. (That would be exhausting.) But I am saying at least some of your dialogue relationships need to be this way. If you are going to be serious about lifelong discovery and transformation, you have got to have – as the Benedictines figured out so long ago – some real stability of conversation partners to whom you bind your own journey.

Which is why – months after the actual symposium at the school took place – the six of us found ourselves again sitting around the dinner table engaged in the same kind of back-and-forth debating that had gotten us into this project in the first place. And it

was only then that the glacier “calved.” For the longest time I had experienced Dan’s persistence and intensity in conversation as disrespectful and degrading. But it was only when I had come to know him as a person that I suddenly saw him in another light:

“You,” I pointed at Dan across the table from me. “You have been disagreeing with me from the day you arrived. There is not one idea I’ve had that you’ve not opposed or quibbled about. But you aren’t doing this because you find me your intellectual inferior, but because you see me as your intellectual equal. You find it mentally fun to debate.” He shrugged like “Of course, what did you think?”

I had been reading Dan wrong. Because his behavior had impacted me badly, I had assumed that he’d meant to be difficult; that he’d meant to hurt me. But for Dan, debating someone was a sign of honor. It meant he found them a worthy conversation partner. Dan’s ideas did not change one iota during our remaining time as colleagues, but his behavior simply stopped irritating me after that night. When I could see his intent more clearly, his behavior stopped impacting me in the same way.

*(FOR REFLECTION: What role has “being true” played in your life in interreligious dialogue? What relationships have you been the most faithful to in dialogue? Which are the hardest to “be true” to?)*

So that is *my* version of the thirteen hour story. Maybe you are still trying to figure out what the Harvard negotiator found so memorable about the whole event? And, if *you* are in a quandary, imagine me writing the grant report: “After having spent \$20,000 of your dollars, we still don’t agree on anything, but I am happy to report that *one* of my colleagues no longer gets my goat.” But, let’s be honest, in our current world of tit for tat, of endless cycles of anger and offense and revenge, that is no small thing. What distinguishes “differences-that-don’t-make-a-difference” from those

that do, is that “differences-that-don’t-make-a-difference” aren’t all that hard on relationships. It is easy to still laugh and joke, and give and take, and do all those things that we’ve been trained to do as people committed to dialogue. But when we are personally impacted negatively by another’s stance, those capacities rapidly disappear.

In those situations – to paraphrase the thought of Roger Fisher, founder of the Harvard Negotiation Project – we often think we have only two options: We can take a “hard” (read: strong, principled) stance on the issue and hence be “hard” (read: demanding, aggressive) on the relationship *or* we can be “soft” (read: nice, accommodating, flexible) on the relationship and hence “soft” (read: wishy-washy, relativistic) on the issue. It is possible, though, Fisher thought, to be “hard” on the issue and “soft” on the relationship. It is possible to be a person of firm values and convictions and at the same time utterly committed to the wellbeing of the other and gentle with their person.<sup>7</sup> Or to use the image of the glacier again: it is possible to be both solid and rooted and moving at the exact same time. To the casual observer, it will look like nothing is happening. It will look that our conversations are going nowhere. But these “drips” are nevertheless carving mountains and sustaining rivers and changing the landscape with a might beyond our wildest imagination.

Which is the reason why, in a couple of weeks, at the height of a crazy summer, I will make a pit stop out at a cabin in the woods with – yes – some of the same people I told you about earlier. Long after our initial grant funding has ceased, a couple of us continue to practice the “vow of conversation” with each other. We don’t work with each other any more – having moved on to different positions, in different fields. We even live in different cities. But we still have a commitment to go away with each other two weekends each year, to continue to seek truth, speak truthfully, and be true to one another. We bring the hardest ques-

tions we are wrestling with in our current lives to get honest, but loving feedback from one another. And we still talk until the pizza burns. And then sometimes we call

our Harvard mediator and tell her how we are going at it again. And on the other end of the phone, I can almost feel her roll her eyes and hear her sigh back at us.

1. *Summa* I.16.1

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (New York: Harper, 1972), 245. Qtd in Scott Steinkerchner, *Beyond Agreement: Interreligious Dialogue Amid Persistent Differences*. (NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 42

3. This concept has a long history within Christianity and could be attributed to a number of sources, most recently including Benedict XVI, Christmas Address 2012 as cited in *Commonweal*, August 15, 2014 edition.

4. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 27.

5. Augustine of Hippo, *De Diversis* 83.71.5

6. This allusion is borrowed from Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 58-59.

7. The language of "hard" and "soft" vs. "principled" bargaining is used in Roger Fisher and William Ury, with Bruce Patton. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. 2nd ed. (NY: Penguin, 1991), see especially chapter 1.