



Untangling Conversations

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One day I called a friend in my congregation just to chat and see how she was doing. When I hung up the phone, my brow was in a knit. The call started out fine, but by the end I was bothered and did not know why. Not wanting to carry this vague feeling of uneasiness into my day, I decided to take a closer look at where things took a down turn, and I had a revelation. We were not having a conversation, but several conversations at the same time, and neither of us knew it. I drew a picture to explain this discovery and scheduled to meet my friend for lunch.

This is what I learned. When people speak with each other, they react to the ideas and experiences that they are sharing, while also holding on to their own feelings and thoughts. If we examine the conversation, we can see that it is taking place on more than one level, and as we begin to untangle it, the communication becomes more effective and we open ourselves to growth and deeper understanding.

There are usually three conversations underlying our communication with each other. One is a conversation about what we observe and experience. This conversation is relatively objective, it is oriented around actions and environment, and it is not emotionally charged. Another level of conversation is about our hopes and satisfactions. This is the source from which we project our aspirations and positive feelings. Then there is a level of conversation that comes from our fears and frustrations. From here we project our doubts, apprehensions, and negative feelings into the mix.

What we say to each other is often a response to how we feel about the subject, but our words may not indicate that we are speaking from our feelings. Instead, if we are reflecting on our feelings, they can sound as though they are facts, and if we are speaking from fears and frustration they can and often do negate the entire conversation. In the end, folks go away without clarity and without the words to express what just happened.

When we look at conversations this way, it becomes apparent that people often speak from their fears and frustrations, when they either want or don't want the environment around them to change. This is an important insight for Unitarian Universalists who are trying to live out their values in a changing world: or as simply put by John Welwood, "The most powerful agent of growth and transformation is ... a change of heart."

To get to a change of heart, there are two more conversations that are important for us to have with ourselves. What lessons are we learning from being aware of our reactions to the discussion? And where are we being asked to stretch? I often "journal through" the different aspects of a specific conversation. Using this tool always transforms my point of view and provides insights into how to build bridges with others. This has become a spiritual practice for me. When I am feeling uncertain or anxious, it helps me to feel grounded, to stay connected, and to be supportive of others.

While this practice can be helpful in any aspect of our lives, I call on you to use it to help Unitarian Universalists to become more effective in expanding our horizons and growing more culturally diverse. Too often our leaders lead from unexamined fear and frustration. We need to lead from our hopes as embodied in the vision of the Beloved Community.

So the next time that you end a conversation or meeting feeling yucky or blah, take out a piece of paper and divide it into four squares. Write at the top of the squares: Experiences & Observations; Hopes & Satisfactions; Fears & Frustrations; and Lessons Learned. Then briefly write 3-5 sentences of reflection in each box. You can do more if you desire. Reread your lists, then ask yourself: Where am I being asked to stretch? How can I demand a little more from myself? This is your growing edge. It is also the point where your heart can be open to deeper understanding and change. You will have become an agent for change.

When you talk with others, take responsibility for which conversation you are in; say "I am speaking about my frustrations, or my hopes, or what I have experienced or learned." You will become a better bridge builder.

I met my friend for lunch and told her that our phone call had left me feeling pretty down. Then I shared these insights with her. She told me the explanation was helpful. Since then numerous people have told

me this practice has helped them to work through challenges. I encourage you to check it out and share it with others.

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