

Reaching Across Our Differences  
Sunday, September 10, 2023  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County  
Eustis, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snaveley

When I began my move from United Methodist ministry to Unitarian Universalist ministry, I received many long, teary letters from my mother. I was endangering my soul. She would be separated from me after death. I said I didn't believe a loving God was going to send me to hell. I didn't convince her, and she didn't convince me. But she was my mother, and I was her daughter. In order to maintain the relationship, we stopped talking about religion. I hate to say this, but sometimes that is the best we are going to be able to do.

One of the first things we have to figure out in reaching across our differences is when constructive criticism is possible and when it is not. My mother and I were not having a constructive conversation. We were having a debate. She was sure it needed to be a debate, because my soul was at risk.

As you decide whether constructive conversation is possible consider where both you and the other person are coming from. Are either of you so invested in your viewpoint and convincing the other person to come over to it that debate is the only form of conversation you are going to be able to have? If so, then decide whether this is a relationship you want to maintain, and, if, in order to do that, you need to both avoid this conversation. It may not feel like a wonderful option, but if you want to keep talking to your brother, sister, friend, child or whomever it may be your only option.

But as the video we saw earlier in the service shows, sometimes when no one is completely invested in convincing the other that they have the "right" view, constructive conversation is possible. If you remember, the A in the ABCs of constructive conversation was "ask questions." Why do you think that? In the video the whys turned out to be very personal. One person's family business was in trouble because of the COVID shutdowns. Someone else's grandmother was in the hospital. When the conversation becomes that personal, I think it is easier to reach across the differences. If the reason you are anti-abortion is because your mother forced you to have an abortion when you were pregnant at 16, and you have always wondered about what that baby would have been like, I can hear you. It is not likely to change my viewpoint on whether abortion should be legal, but I can hear the other person's story. I can even empathize with what happened to them. When I tell them my viewpoint, I might also try to make it personal. I had a co-worker who thought she would never have an abortion herself until a boy in college whom she thought was a friend date-raped her, and she became pregnant. She really struggled with what to do, but in the end, she decided on an abortion. I think that was her decision to make, and no government body should make it for her. Neither one of us is likely to change our views on laws on abortion access, but maybe we can hear each other. We can talk.

If I start turning the conversation into a debate, "You didn't want your mother deciding for you why do you want the government to decide for other people?" I may cut off the conversation. Perhaps I could say, "I'm sorry your mother made the decision for you. I feel like now the government is not letting people make the decision for themselves." That might come across differently. I am sharing my

feelings not making it a debate. I am on to the B section of the ABCs of constructive conversation. I am breaking down my own view as I share it with the other person.

I also need to use the C in constructive conversation, Check my understanding of the other's viewpoint. I have assumed the person was upset that her mother made the decision for her to have an abortion. But perhaps the person comes back to me with something like, "I don't think my mother should have made the decision for me, but mostly I feel like I murdered my baby. I can never forgive myself for that." What I had assumed bothered her most about this event in her life was her mother deciding for her, but that is not what bothers her most. I would not learn that if either she or I gave up on the conversation before we got to there. But I could still bring the conversation to a crashing halt. I could at this point turn it into a debate. I could say, "You are not a murderer. How could you believe such a thing?" Better to say, something more like, "That must be a very hard feeling to live with. What would you have done differently if you could have?"

The video spoke of the ABCs of constructive conversation, Ask Questions, Break Down Your View, and Check on your understanding of the other's view, but I think in order to reach across our differences, in order to have constructive conversations, the letter to remember most is E, E for empathy.

In the video the coworkers showed that for one another. They had a relationship from which to start. They cared about each other.

I believe that part of our problem today is that we have so segregated ourselves by our viewpoints that we often don't have the relationships with others with different views from ours that allows us to have constructive conversations.

I was grocery shopping the other week when I saw a man in a t-shirt with an American flag and the words "If you don't like it, leave." Part of me wanted to go up to him and say, "I'd rather stay and work to change it," but that is not the way to begin a conversation with a random stranger in the grocery store. Now if he and I were both sitting down with friends to dinner at the American Legion when I noticed his t-shirt then I might begin that conversation.

In reaching across our differences, we need to consider the who, what, when, where and why. Who. Do I have a relationship or some beginnings of a relationship with this person? I might begin a conversation with my neighbor about a bumper sticker on their car that I find offensive, but I might not with someone I don't know who happened to park next to me at Home Depot. What. I might decide I would like to have a conversation with someone about their views on climate change but that I don't want to have a conversation about the merits and deficits of their particular political candidate. Personally, I feel like I can learn something about someone from understanding their viewpoint on an issue, but I am not sure I can learn something about them by having a conversation about their candidate. When and where. After she has been committed to memory care may not be the time to have a conversation with your aunt on her views on race. As he is concentrating on a major computer problem at work may not be the best time to engage a coworker on his views on vaccinations. And why. Why do you want to have this conversation? If it is to debate, if it is to make the person come to your viewpoint, that is not making a concerted effort to reach across your differences. You need to be willing to hear the other person and why they think as they do. And, you need to believe that this is a person who will be willing to hear you out and listen as you share why you think as you do.

It can be easier to have these conversations when we are drawing from personal experience than when we are drawing from what others have told us. When I say Rachel Maddow said and the other person says Tucker Carlson said our conversation may not go very far. That does not necessarily mean that the conversation is doomed. Can we get below what someone told us to why what they said makes sense to us? My parents were election workers. I trust that they and most election workers are honest citizens giving of their time. I don't think there is much election fraud. Why do you think there is?

In an article on "How to Build Relationships Across Differences" for [Psychology Today](#) Allison McWilliams writes, "The next time you are in conversation with someone with whom you do not share much in common, try using the strategies below.

"Before you make assumptions, get to know them as a unique individual. We each bring a long list of assumptions into every interaction. We assume how someone is going to act or react. We assume we know everything there is to know about a situation because of our own experience. We assume that we know who this other person is, based on appearances, hearsay, or superficial interactions. Before you jump to conclusions based on unfounded assumptions, think of the person standing before you as a unique individual with worthwhile experiences and knowledge of their own. And then let them tell you their story.

"Ask questions. One of the ways you get past assumptions and get to know someone is to ask questions. Lots and lots of questions. Not in a 'you're here to defend your dissertation' sort of way but in an 'I'm genuinely interested and curious about you as a human being and just want to learn more' way. Use those old school, who, what, where, when, why, and how open-ended questions you learned when you were young. Before you jump in to prove a point or explain their situation, think: Is there another question I could ask first? Privilege learning over knowing.

"Listen to learn, grow, and build relationships of care. I firmly believe and will die on this hill that you can learn from everyone you meet, regardless of their political affiliation, faith tradition, level of education, race, ethnicity, or anything else, because learning is all about your openness, curiosity, and attitude. It has absolutely nothing to do with what the other person is willing or able to give you. So, when you ask those questions, truly listen to what the other person has to say. Don't listen to win or to come up with the next best response or even the next best question. Just listen. Give the other person your full attention. Because their story, whatever they are willing to give to you, is worthy of it.

"Offer and accept feedback with grace and humility. Feedback is a gift. It is one of the best tools we have for learning and growing because it allows us to see ourselves through someone else's eyes if we are open to it. Feedback challenges our deeply held assumptions and (leads) to thinking about things differently. And as we all know, feedback can be painful and can destroy relationships when not delivered well. So, when offering feedback to another person or accepting it from another person, always do so with the relationship in mind. Before you react, ask yourself: How important is this relationship to me? (Back to my mother, "How in the world could you believe a loving God will send me to hell? That's ridiculous." Not a great wording or tenor for feedback if I want to keep the relationship.)

"Set and uphold clear boundaries. Finally, while it may seem counterintuitive, we build effective relationships when we set, communicate, and uphold clear boundaries. Building a relationship across differences does not mean letting someone walk all over you. It does not mean diminishing yourself so that another person can feel powerful. It does not mean letting go of your beliefs, values, and moral

center to make someone else feel better. An effective relationship is always built on trust, and trust starts with clearly communicated and respected boundaries. If the other person is not willing to respect your boundaries, or if you are not willing to do the same for them, that relationship is destined for failure. (My mother did not change her views. I did not change mine. We both knew that and decided the relationship was more important than continuing a fight to get the other to come to our side.)

“The long and short of it is that connecting with people who are different from us—politically, socially, in terms of background or experiences, or a host of other items you could add to this list—is hard work. It’s always easier to take the path of least resistance. It’s easier to surround ourselves with people who always agree with us. And while not everything about life has to be difficult, no one ever said it wasn’t going to take work.

“Building effective relationships is no different. But the good news is, just like any other skill you want to develop, it will get easier with intentional practice. Is it going to solve our great political divide? Maybe not. But just maybe, one person at a time, with a bit more listening and a bit more openness to learning, we can get a little closer to this idea of unity we hold so dear,” [How to Build Relationships Across Differences | Psychology Today](#).

Even more important than the ABCs of constructive conversation is E, empathy. Care about the other person enough to listen. Choose someone to talk to who has some care for you. The point is not to win another person to your side. The point is to listen and learn.

As UU minister the Rev. Eric Cherry said,

“In prayer, we call to mind the peacemakers.

Neighbors of differing faiths  
with different histories  
with different politics  
with different emotions

“Who find room for each other  
in their hearts  
in their dreams  
and in their lives.”

May we be among them. Amen.