

**“Re-Seeing the World:
Guiding Students Through Difficult Conversations”**

By Jonathan Callard

INTER, June 2018

Shifting the Lens

Two days after the 2016 presidential election, my composition class sat in wooden benches facing each other. The course met in the University of Pittsburgh’s English Nationality Room, modeled after England’s House of Commons where political opponents hold lively debates across the aisle.

But here, my students were quiet. They had just voted for the first time. Some had voted for Trump. Some had voted for Clinton. All seemed concerned about polarization, as many of their hallmates or family members or coworkers held varying views from their own. The campus itself roiled with dissent. Some students said they supported protesters’ right to speak out against Trump. Others confessed they felt ostracized for their conservative beliefs, scared that peers would discover they had voted for Trump. Everyone was on edge.

I asked them to write down their own first-person response to the election. When they looked at the campus unrest, what details did they notice, both in their body and their surroundings? Then, I asked them to start over and use the third-person perspective to witness their reaction. How did shifting the lens change how they saw those who perhaps

threatened them, or how they saw themselves? Some students read out loud what they had written. One woman said the exercise allowed her to step back from her hot emotions, to see her opponents as human. Now, we weren't just talking about sides, but also ways of seeing, the lenses we employed that shaped our hopes and fears.

Be Honest, Apply Hesitation

I've always considered myself a minister of words. But agenda can sometimes undermine authenticity. In my late twenties, I co-founded a young adult worship service at a cathedral in Boston. We wanted to reach out to people who didn't necessarily dig church, but who were curious about community. In our desire to attract newcomers, however, at times we bent over backward to not appear overly "churchy"—we met in the basement and stressed meditation and contemplation, food and socializing. One event: "Chai Tea and Tai Chi." While I appreciated our intent, it was like we were doing everything we could to *not* speak of Jesus, to hide our rich liturgy.

But in interreligious discourse, or any cross-cultural encounter, true communion can stem from each side first embracing its own identity, while at the same time acknowledging that it was only its "slice of the truth," that in sharing it was also opening a door to listen and receive, as the Pitt students did through the writing exercise. It can be dangerous to initially shut down who we are for fear of offending—better to own both one's darkness and light, triumphs and failures. Parts of us are always blind. French philosopher Simone Weil once suggested an "interval of hesitation" before speaking to someone else, allowing for their mystery.

A Covenant for Conversation

In any intentional gathering, I've found it helpful to establish a covenant for conversation. It creates a framework for trust. It invites participants to "claim your share of air time," taking responsibility for your own need to speak; at the same time, "do not dominate," respect others' contributions. It asks you not to give advice, or try to fix someone else's problem or view, but instead, practice deep listening: "Be present." It asks you to make concrete "I" statements, to speak only from your own experience, and stipulates that members keep what others disclose confidential. The covenant also states, "Silence is okay." Often there's this expectancy to just share and share and share, to fill the room with words, when often it's in the moments *between* the words where change can happen for speaker and listener. I used to be frightened of empty spaces as a teacher, when I asked a question and was met with silence. What had I done wrong? How could I avoid not being understood? But over time—as in that classroom following the election—I've come to see such silence as generative. Our minds are always working. Often, we don't know what we think. We have to pause. We have to stop, and this is hard, because then, we might have to feel, see what's in front of us, or what's missing. But it's this stopping and pausing—and for me and my students, writing—that can allow for the richest seeing, where we check in with our body and listen to what wants to be said or encountered.

The Difficult Dialogue

Once, one of my Pitt students wrote about race. It was in a service-learning composition class, where first-year students volunteered in the community and reflected on the experience. The assignment asked them to turn the camera lens on themselves, make

“productive use of uncertainty” to pursue a question about something that mattered to them; papers were meant to be read by everyone, not just me. While the group primarily consisted of white women from the suburbs, it also included an Arab-American woman identifying as Muslim, an African-American man, and someone we’ll call Hannah, a half-Asian, half-white woman from Hong Kong.

Hannah wrote about her deep fear of black men, a fear that she was ashamed of and wanted to investigate further. When she stepped back to examine herself from a distance, she saw an affluent woman in calfskin boots riding the bus to downtown Pittsburgh where she volunteered at a predominantly African-American school. As the bus took her farther and farther away from campus, she noticed the quizzical stares she got from other riders (why was she taking this bus, she imagined them thinking). She wrote about how she was treated differently by school staff when she walked into the building, as if now she was being judged in the same artificial manner in which she saw herself judging black men. She wondered how she could begin to shift the lens of her preconceived notions, how she might open herself up to receive something as well as give, despite her inherent privilege.

We discussed Hannah’s essay as a class. I chose it because, while it was just a first draft, it was brave, real, vulnerable—it exemplified the kind of writing I try to do myself and also celebrate in others. It also revealed someone struggling to verbalize her thoughts on race, limited perhaps by her own sheltered upbringing, so I hoped talking about it would widen awareness for her and everyone else. I tread a tightrope. On one hand, I had an agenda—I wanted us to get to Hannah’s spots of self-reflexivity, the vivid manner in which she opened her essay, the smooth way that she incorporated an outside source about African-American men being incarcerated at an alarmingly higher rate than anyone else;

on the other hand, I had to pay attention to what was happening right then and there, as some classmates clammed up to avoid saying anything that might offend anyone, while others allowed their emotions to cloud their tone, reacting viscerally to Hannah's admissions that understandably may have been hard to hear.

I tried to steer our thinking in a constructive direction, but after class ended, the discussions continued, beyond my view. I later learned from Hannah that a couple of students expressed offense to her after the class and later that evening in the dining hall, even after she apologized for anything that might have caused their anger. It was a volatile moment, but also valuable—people were airing things that had not been said, and others were responding—some less skillfully and mindfully than others. But it was out there. I was able to follow up individually with one of the students who had reacted to Hannah; we discussed what had come up for her, how she had voiced her reaction in class.

When Hannah and I met two days after the class, she said she felt shunned by two peers whom she had considered friends. She was angry—wondering why I chose her controversial writing to review when it produced such blowback, making her feel uncomfortable. I mostly listened to her, mirroring what she spoke to me. I reiterated what I specifically appreciated about her work. She said she was thinking of revising the piece for the final portfolio, that she wanted to articulate some of her words better, go back and go deeper, and I encouraged this. I also knew that this might have been the first time in her life when she had admitted some darker side of herself and had suffered the consequences—the first time, perhaps, that she realized the power of her words and the ways in which they could touch others, trigger their own darkness and wounds.

In the next class, I sat beside Hannah. At the start, I asked us to close our eyes, or rest them easily on something in the room. I led everyone through a mindfulness exercise, asking them to focus on their breath, on their feet, on the ground beneath them. We opened our eyes. I spoke about the importance of listening, of being present. I didn't mention specifically what had happened in the class before. I planned to bring Hannah's essay up when things had cooled down, when she had a chance to read over her classmates' written comments, see her draft in a fuller light.

The following week, hours before the long-awaited Ferguson verdict on the shooting death of Michael Brown by a policeman, I circled back to Hannah's piece, highlighting why I valued it. I reminded everyone of how our four course goals—opening critical inquiry, situating our views among those of others, writing with nuance, and “re-seeing” our work—applied not only to the essays they were revising but also to their daily relations with others—friends, enemies, and in-between—and their own divided selves.

I read to them from Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen. Writing about care and community, he wonders if our intense fascination with establishing our own uniqueness and separation from anyone else causes us to not see each other fully and “not even allow ourselves to lay down our heavy armor and come together in a mutual vulnerability.” He adds: “Maybe we are so full of our own ideas and convictions that we have no space to listen to the other and learn from him or her.” In what ways, I asked the class, have we allowed our own cups to fill with our own assumptions? How might we “empty” them, as Nouwen says, to receive something new from those who might at first alienate or disturb us?

In our last class, Hannah read a new version of her essay out loud. In addition to her own preconceptions, she now was also investigating how to *talk* about race, and why some people might not want to, and what that might mean to her as a college student, eager for new vistas. She received encouragement from her classmates—now, it seemed, the very thing that was so upsetting was freeing others up to recognize the strength in each other, in the power that each person had to not only tell their truths but also glimpse their limitations, places where they could grow.

Fire

Transformative talks ask us listen. They ask us to claim our own experience, to bare, with humility, our own thoughts, our many selves. They ask us to pay attention. What’s going on inside us, in our bodies? How are we perceiving others? They ask us to consider intention—when to stay silent, hesitating to judge or assume, and when to speak. They take time, and, like writing, many revisions. We need patience, a word stemming from the Latin *patior*, “to suffer”; patience also shares the same Latin root as passion, and we need that too, the fire to keep trying.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has said that religion “is fire—and, like fire, it warms, but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame.” This crucible of fire makes me think of difficult conversations, that, if not led by our conscious presence, can scorch the earth between us, but if tended right, can lighten our darkness and make our hearts burn with revelation.