

Conversation: A Key to Relationship for Action

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Introduction

Conversations have the potential to change people. They can influence our perspective, inspire us to action, help us to love and be loved. When individuals have a chance to talk with others about what matters to them and opportunities are given to act on this, people and communities are transformed. This essay reflects upon the dynamic of conversation in making connections with others. It outlines a successful methodology for actually getting people into conversation about what matters to them. The second part of the essay summarises a process to move the interests identified through the conversations into action.

Conversation

There is much to be reflected upon when we have conversations with others. They can give us energy, connecting us to others in new or deeper ways, help us to become more authentic, ourselves, and even see the world in a new and life giving way. When we talk to others about what we care about, we can come alive. When someone listens carefully and critically to what matters to us, the world begins to change. Change happens when people talk together about things that matter to them. These conversations take place at the kitchen table, while out walking, in the pub, or leaning against a wall somewhere. It happens in some almost invisible ways. Change can begin with words such as 'Well, a few of us were talking ...' This is as true for both international movements as it is for the setting up of the local homework club. Change comes about when a few people begin to talk about what matters to them. True and authentic conversation builds the relationships with others that enable us to act

on what is cared about. David Tracy, an American theologian defines conversation this way:

Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it (Tracy, 19).

The dynamic of conversation is quite a complex one. It does not simply imply 'speaking with someone' or having a chat. Chats can be important as a prelude to conversation. Authentic conversation has more to do with the type of encounter that enlarges one's sense of connection and responsibility. At its best, it can forge a recognition of a shared capacity 'for the feelings that lie at the core of our essential humanity: fear, joy, yearning, delight, suffering, hope, love' (Parks, 70). When this happens, we have a connection with the other, one that is enlarging and energising. This kind of honest conversation is one that can transform the participants and energise them to work towards what is good for all in society. In the same book, the authors say that 'The single most important pattern we have found in the lives of people committed to the common good is what we have come to call a constructive, enlarging engagement with the other' (Ibid, 63). This is the kind of engagement that helps people move outside their own social location and see things from the perspective of another. This 'seeing' can help us realise that we only see partially, we do not ever see the full picture and so our actions are at best, always limited. We have all had the experience of talking to someone else and saying, 'Oh, my God, I never saw it like that ... I had no idea.' This enlarging can help us to realise that we need others in order to better understand our world and our place in it. Conversation is our way to the other and their perspective and experience.

Blocks to conversation

It is not easy to see things from the perspective of another. There is often some work to be done to do this. We need to become aware of our own beliefs and assumptions, which often reveal themselves in what we do. One has operative and stated beliefs and they may or may not always correspond with one another. There are beliefs that I am conscious of and am able to articulate when asked, these are my stated beliefs. Then there are my operative beliefs, which are often revealed through my actions. These are beliefs that I am not aware of but act out of them from time to time. I might like to think I am quite liberal minded. This is my stated belief about myself. When I hear a white, middle class conservative man speak on a topical moral issue, however, I can find myself reacting to whatever he says, regardless of the content or merit. My operative assumptions about such men are that they do not know that they are talking about, they are paternalistic and controlling, poorly informed, seeing things from a very narrow point of view. The effect of these unconscious assumptions is to hear nothing of what is being said. This is my operative stance. Or I might like to think of myself as a good Christian – my stated belief. When the local authority, however, reveal plans to build a halting site for members of the Traveller community not far from my house, I am quick to join with others in resisting this development. This is without wondering what my faith tradition has to say to this situation or what God is doing in and through this initiative. The resistance in myself is revealing of my operative stance. This stance curtails any desire for conversation with the local authority and even less with the Traveller community. We often contradict ourselves, saying one thing and doing the other. However, this is often not done in a deliberate way. We simply find ourselves doing the very things we would rather not do. Where these inherent contradictions between what is stated and what is operative go unexposed, we are not in a position to do anything about them. We continue on as before. When we do become aware of the dissonance, however, the space between what we really believe and what we think we

believe, we now have an opportunity to make a choice. This choice can help us become more consistent, less closed and more genuinely open to see and hear another.

Along with the *inherent contradictions* between what we say and do being an obstacle to conversation, our use of labels often gets in the way also. Being conscious of how we describe or label other people is critical to being in conversation with them, making them less of a stranger and beginning to see the world from their perspective. Appreciating the importance of context and the existence of multiple perspectives on things is one way to do this. We need to be conscious that our perception of another's skills or difficulties changes constantly, depending on our situation and social location. Such awareness prevents us from equating someone's difficulties with their identity. Instead of 'cripple' or 'homeless' or 'diabetic', we would see a man with a lame leg, a woman without adequate accommodation and a child with diabetes. The use of labels tends to influence every other judgement of, or reaction to, the person or community who have been so named.

To test the impact of labels, psychologists Robert Abelson and Ellen Langer (1974) designed an experiment using a videotape of a rather ordinary-looking man being interviewed. He and the interviewer spoke about work. The tape was shown to psychotherapists. For half of the therapists, the man being interviewed was called 'job applicant'. For the others, he was called a 'patient'. The researchers found that when the man on the tape was referred to as a 'job applicant', he was perceived as well adjusted. When he was labelled a 'patient', however, many of the therapists saw him as having serious psychological problems. On the strength of this study, psychologist Ellen Langer, fifteen years later, makes the point:

Because most of us grow up and spend our time with people like ourselves, we tend to assume uniformities and commonalities. When confronted with someone who is clearly different in one specific way, we drop that assumption and instead look for more differences. Often these perceived differences

bear no logical relations to the observable difference (Langer, 156).

She goes on to refer to the unusual gestures of a person with cerebral palsy, and in that case we might assume a difference in intelligence, which is clearly not the case. The point is the same for meeting people from different groups. We need to be careful when we name or label a person or community: homeless, immigrant, Traveller, married, gay or lesbian, disabled, Catholic etc, that this label does not become the only lens through which we see or meet another. Labels can be both accurate and misleading at the same time. When we are told that someone is a Traveller, it is true that they are a member or not a member of the Traveller community. The use of the label 'Traveller', however, is a term that evokes many feelings and images that are negative and off-putting for many members of the settled community. This is in spite the fact that very few settled people actually 'know' Travellers except for what we see on the television or meet at our doors or drive past on the road. So much of what the label is based upon is broad generalisation and negative stereotyping. There is a similar dynamic in operation when we label others. We can lose sight of the person under the label, hindering our ability or desire to engage in conversation with them.

Interpretation

Each of the previous points, which highlight the blocks to conversation, centre around the difficulty of not really seeing ourselves and others as we and they are. I think one thing about myself, while I act in a contradictory manner and sometimes label others in a narrow, generalised and misleading fashion. This is all a matter of interpretation. Before we are too hard on ourselves, we need to realise that in conversation, we are at all times engaged in interpreting and being interpreted. There is no unmediated access to the experience of the other and even of ourselves. All our perceptions of others are interpretations. Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, refers to this as our 'prejudices'; these are the pre-understandings we bring with us into

conversation. Based on these pre-understandings or pre-judgements we have perceptions of the people we meet and this affects how we converse with them. If I only use the label 'teacher' in understanding someone else and make assumptions about the particular individual based only on my previous experience and view of teachers, I will not see her for who she really is. It is just not possible, my experience is too limited. I need to realise that this label, 'teacher', is not the full picture and so remain open to new information and experience to enlarge my understanding. This requires a deliberate choice and is not easy.

As Gadamer says, 'It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked do we notice' (Gadamer, 299). So, possibly, when I get talking to this 'teacher', I might begin to see her in a new light, I might be surprised at her interest and passion for the GAA, exotic art, bungee jumping and travel. This experience can offer me the chance to enlarge how I think, feel and behave towards teachers. It fleshes out the label, and gives other descriptors that contribute to a more accurate and real picture of who this person is.

The poet David Whyte says, 'we should not emerge intact from a conversation.' A conversation requires the ability or willingness to be disturbed. It should at times challenge our beliefs and ideas about ourselves, others and the world. A good way to do this is to listen to what surprises, startles or disturbs us in our conversations with others. This is not easy to do. If we notice that we have been surprised, startled or disturbed, however, some of our invisible beliefs and assumptions are revealed to us. For when I am taken aback by what you say, I must have been assuming something else. Here is an opportunity for learning more about our own beliefs and gaining a deeper insight into ourselves. 'We are all biased; it is important to acknowledge bias as a condition for interpretation. There is no uninterpreted fact' (Cowan & Lee, 31). And so if we seek to improve the quality and capacity for genuine conversation with another, we must be open to the fact that untarnished objectivity is not a possibility

and that we bring much by the way of baggage to the conversation. In order to help people engage in conversation that gives life, Cowen and Lee suggest some commitments that are helpful:

- When I speak I will do it in a way that gives you the best chance at understanding exactly what I hold and why I hold it. I am speaking so that you will understand me, not in order to convince you.
- When I listen my sole intention is to hear you in order to understand you. I will have to let your words mean what they mean to you, not what they perhaps mean to me. I will not listen in order to refute, but to understand.
- I promise up front that I will not withdraw from the conversation, no matter how difficult it might become. I will not go away.
- It will be OK for us to disagree, to argue, and to challenge but not until our achievement of the first three points is accomplished (Ibid, 32).

It is through such guidelines and reflection on our own experience that we can move beyond fearful civility in our relationships with others into relationships that are enlarging and life giving.

Bringing people into conversation

In this section I will look at ways to bring much of what I have been explaining into practice. It is a methodology I have seen at work in parishes and organisations in Ireland, England and North America. It is influenced by the work of Saul Alinsky, a community organiser in North America and developed by the Industrial Areas Foundation, an organisation that seeks to help people find ways to 'translate their values and dreams for themselves and their communities into concrete reality.'

For the purpose of clarity, the following outline will be taken from the context of a parish. The process is also used in communities and organisations. The process is in two parts. Part I concentrates on organising people to have conversations with many

others, in pairs, over a given period of time around two questions: what do you care about? what are you doing about it? These questions are designed in such a way as to get someone to become intentional and mindful about what matters to them. The answers are not something that we have much opportunity to articulate, we just 'do' what we care about. We do not talk about it. And we do not give much time to listening to what it is that others care about either. The second question helps identify the congruence, or lack of it, between what we say and what we do in regard to what we care about. The use of these questions widens and builds relationships in a very non-threatening manner. Part II of the methodology outlines a process to move from identifying what is cared about to definite action carried out by the participants themselves. This is done following the *Open Space Technology* model as outlined by Harrison Owen.

Generating conversations

In the first part of the process, everyone in the parish was invited to come and commit themselves to a process that would widen and deepen relationships, generate energy and creativity, identify interests and provide a way to act strategically on these in an ongoing manner. In brief, people were asked to commit themselves to weekly meetings, lasting no more than an hour, over a given period of time. The key action of the meeting was for each participant to identify two other people they were to meet in the intervening week for a conversation. These conversations were to happen in pairs, and to last no more than an hour. The pair were asked to talk about the two questions referred to earlier: what do you care about? what are you doing about it? Depending on the level of the relationship, those involved were to discuss what they cared about at an appropriate level with the other person. When everyone arrived for the following meeting (which was open to all), there was no reporting back of what was said or heard. At this stage, the content was not as important as the conversation. Part II was to pick up the implications of the conversations. The following is an outline of the agenda for

some of these meetings, which tended to follow a certain pattern:

- welcome
- opening prayer
- round of introductions
- input on a topic, e.g. community, church, leadership etc.
- sharing experience of previous week's conversations
- selection of partners for coming week
- announcements
- volunteers to take responsibility for above tasks next week
- closing prayer

Initially, people are often unsure of 'how' to go about having a conversation with another person and so the weekly meetings provide a good space to talk about the experience and to get some 'tips' from others. Sometimes, they can get a little stuck in the conversations with another and just begin to use it as a space to 'give out' about all that is wrong with the world. This defeats the purpose of the exercise on a number of counts. It is hard to listen to, exhausting at times, it does not make connections, generate energy nor identify what is cared about in a straightforward manner. The conversations must deal with what the participants care about, what is it that someone has a passion for: one's children, work, a sick aunt or racism. When listening to someone talk about what matters to them, connections are made, energy is created and something new emerges between these two people. Along with looking at 'how' to have an appropriate conversation with others, the weekly meetings can provide a space to look at other pertinent issues for the parish community.

Something else that often crops up at these weekly meetings relates to 'outcomes'. Some will ask, what is the likely outcome of all these conversations, where are they going? Once a woman asked if more young people would be going to Mass as a result of this whole procedure? I replied, if that is what they care about, then it is likely that that would happen. I could not say, however, at this stage, nor was it something that was planned

for. She did not return to any more meetings. The process is organic and non prescriptive. People have a chance to identify what they care about and act on that at the end of the process. It is not about finding volunteers for projects or filling churches. It is not possible to set specific outcome like improvements in Mass attendance. It is about providing an opportunity and mechanism for people to identify what they care about through many conversations and helping them to act on it in a strategic manner. Also, it is not about people identifying work for others! We have all heard someone say at parish meetings, 'There should be something for young people in this parish.' They have no intention, however, of doing something about it themselves. The process that I have outlined, in broad strokes, helps prevent this sort of thing and promotes participation through intentional and mindful conversations.

As the weeks go by, energy begins to emerge from within the group (whose membership will hopefully be growing all the time). The conversations that take place between people connect them together in a new way. People are getting to know one another. The connections, along with a new sense of belonging and greater awareness of what others care about, give a new impetus that can be directed towards action.

Moving the interest to action

Once all the weekly meetings have taken place the participants have a choice. They must decide whether or not to continue. If they do they must meet again and identify things that need to be done in the parish and by the parish. Those who chose to move to action, have generally used a methodology based on the writing of Harrison Owen, as mentioned earlier. It outlines a method to link interests and action.

The process takes account of the conversations, the relationships that were built and deepened, and seeks to apply the energy generated in practical and useful ways for the good of the parish. It involves people meeting for a morning or a day, depending on the size of the group. There are the usual welcomes,

and introductions to one another and an outline of the day provided. The heart of the process centres on individuals identifying actions and ideas relating to what needs to be done. The ideas they suggest need to be ideas for which they are prepared to take some responsibility. This is not the time to think of good ideas for others!

At the meeting, all the ideas are recorded, written on large sheets of paper and hung on the wall. The names of those who bring up an idea are also recorded. When there are no more ideas, everyone is asked to put their name beside an idea that interests them and on which they are prepared to work. Most people will put their names beside two or three ideas. These groups then meet to talk about what attracted them about the idea and what they might do about it (the logistics of this are too detailed to go into here, but Harrison spells them out step by step in his book). This initial meeting has a number of functions: identify who will bring an idea forward; tease out the idea and set a date, time and place for another meeting. The planning day finishes after all these groups have met, many will have met simultaneously during the day. The kinds of ideas that have emerged from this sort of exercise concern: Bible study, social action for refugees, work with altar servers, promoting welcome in the parish, training for those who want to work with the bereaved, perpetual adoration, youth club, parish resource centre, information booklet for the parish listing local services, recycling and a film club.

Following the planning day, the information gathered is distributed throughout the parish. The ideas, dates and places of next meetings are all included. This is to keep the whole parish involved and informed. It also provides an opportunity for others to join at this stage. Some will not have become involved earlier because the process will have appeared a little too 'touchy, feely' for them. They are much more adept at rolling up their sleeves and doing something practical. Now is their time!

The individual groups will then move off and begin to make some plans around their ideas. They may need some help for

this; they need to identify clearly the issue they are engaging with, how they will answer it, who is going to do it, when this will happen and how they plan to evaluate their work. After the groups have met a few times, it is important that the organising group find a time to speak with the convenors of these new groups.

The establishment of these new groups and the strengthening of older ones, provide an opportunity for the leadership in the parish to identify, recruit and train future leaders. This methodology helps people to identify what they care about, join with others, work out a strategy and act together on particular initiatives. Its success rests on the quality of the relationships that have been built through the many conversations that began the process.

An example of success

In various places throughout North America, this method of organising intentional conversations between as many people as possible, identifying interests and acting on them together, has been used very successfully in various Christian communities across the denominations. These communities go through the process as outlined above individually. Then conversations are held between different communities. This was a very good way for groups from different denominational, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to build meaningful and inclusive relationships. The Greater Boston Interfaith Organisation (GBIO) grew out of this process. It is a coalition of various Christian communities, Jewish temples and other community groups. They have over 100 member groups. A number of years ago, the member organisations identified 'affordable housing' as a shared interest across the membership. A strategy was identified and in the following two years, the membership acted in a strategic and organised way on this issue. At the end of the campaign, they had raised \$100 million towards affordable housing. Their power came from their ability to mobilise thousands of people. This was an issue that people cared about and were pre-

pared to act on it. It was successful because of the relationships that were built through thousands of conversations that were held earlier.

Conclusion

I have seen the power of conversations, properly organised, to change groups of individuals with individual interests, into mindful, participative and active communities. When people take the time and are given a chance to talk about what they care about, they become more intentional about their own interests and mindful of those of others. And when they act successfully on what they care about, their confidence grows and their interests widen. The challenge now is to create the time and opportunity for courageous conversations between all sorts of people and communities.

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