

## **The Difficult Discussion**

### **How to have it.**

**By Michael Tyler**

#### **Each Other**

Conversations about the inequities, injustices, and inhumanity of discrimination are wrought by volatile emotions, vehement resistance, and virulent mistrust. Add to this the social ranking of identity, and any exchange can be provocatively weighted with existential consequence. This makes peer group engagement for resolution the most at risk for being unproductive and unchanging. As mentioned in “**Our Children**”, having an *operative mindset* and *conduct application* can facilitate more civil and constructive outcomes.

1. **Courage is the first step to progress.** Courage is the ability to act when confronted by fear. The deterring irony of it is that in order to get courage, you have to be willing to do the very thing you are afraid of. The potential dynamics and theatrics of a difficult conversation will discourage and dissuade most people with anxiety, apprehension, and hesitation. Until you commit to having one, your stagnation, like the complicit silence of others, will result in becoming an unintended collaborator to continuing that which you want to end. Just do it, really. Get the courage to become what you want to the world to be. Take that step.
2. **Be realistic.** The objective of having a constructive conversation is to remain constructive. Entering it with an adversarial disposition means you are more likely to listen to respond, rather than listen to hear. Also, engaging it with the expectation of effecting an ideological conversion can incite dramatic disappointment. Manage your expectation and you will manage the conversation. Initially, the primary goal of the conversation should be to generate an exposure between counterparts, which allows for a scope of examination that can lead to empathetic communication.
3. **Discern the difference between ignorance and stupidity.** Ignorance means having insufficient knowledge to make a rational judgment. If a child does not know that red coils on a stovetop indicate that it is hot, that child might touch the coils and receive the painful knowledge of the injury. Stupidity means having or having access to sufficient knowledge to make a rational judgment but dismissing it. Stupidity can be idiosyncratic, the peculiarity of someone’s capacity for judgment, or it can be intentional, the deliberate decision to reject knowledge or not seek it in favor of creating myths, stereotypes, and untruths to form an irrational judgment. When conversing with counterparts, assess them for both. Ignorance can be rectified by informing and is worthy of empathy. Stupidity cannot be remedied by reasoning and should be avoided for its reluctance.
4. **Develop coping strategies for triggers.** Accusations, blaming, insults and acrimonious emotions are frequently a part of difficult discussions. It is easy to allow them to derail the greater goal of fostering a humanistic perspective, to promote acceptance. To prevent this, you should study yourself, in context. Learn and recognize what words, comments, facial expressions and voice tones trigger you. Gain awareness of this happening, in real-time. Design a mental process that will give

you steps to quickly implement internally, to help you maintain emotional equilibrium. Train yourself, through role play with others, to become nonreactive during inflammatory moments. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) did this in preparation for sit-ins, by simulating racist encounters. While you should not subject yourself to verbal or physical abuse, you can condition yourself for the composure needed to preserve and operate from your intellectual integrity. Also, learn rules and processes for debate, to mentally train your mind to remain focused on presenting your perspective, exploiting every error and invalidity in the opposing contention, and prevent a descent into a personal attack. Ad hominem rebuttals signal defeat of the merits of your argument. Attack the issues, not the person.

5. **Realize the spectrum of indoctrination.** Racism is a pernicious and persistent part of America's society. Everyone in America, whether born here, immigrating to or visiting is exposed to the racial indoctrination of the nation. However, adherence to that indoctrination is not uniform. We exist along a gradient. I reason people to belong to three broad groups: the racially malignant, the racially benign and the racially reactive. Racially malignant people are the most blatant, intentional and odious with their bigotry. Racially benign people neither subscribe to or are influenced by the divisiveness of racism and are objectively humanitarian in their interactions with people. These two groups make up the smallest population in the country. The largest group, the racially reactive, are also the most problematic. They are the largest because most people indoctrinated by racism have a reaction to it --- and that's most people in America. They are the most problematic because while they do not consider themselves to be racists, they are guided by the tenets of racism, reasoning them to have some merit for self-preservation. Because their presence is so pervasive, racially reactive people are the reason racism is so systemic in our society. They exist at every level, in every sector, everywhere in the nation. However, the greatest potential for constructive conversation lies with outreach to this group. Many of them may have an aversion to caustic overt racism but are not willing to admit to the covert racism of their conduct. But many of them, to varying degrees, are capable of discussing conflicting perspectives, even the contradictions that exist within their perspectives. Mine this group for bridge-building across the racial divide.
6. **Don't pontificate, elucidate.** Oftentimes, it is nearly impossible to address bias without being biased. The polarity of realities that people live at creates impassioned perspectives that each side can feel driven to impose as the prevailing truth. The only result of this is more of the conflict and intransigence difficult conversations seek to mitigate and eliminate. Neither your perspective nor that of your counterpart is an orthodoxy of thought --- the only way. Direct your motives towards examination and explanation based on what is incontrovertibly true and authentically valid. Your greatest tool for adhering to this is inquiry. To think means to ask questions, and if no one is asking questions, no one is thinking at all. Questions are the forensics of thought and allow for the investigation of what people accurately feel and believe. When used strategically to expose moral inconsistencies and cognitive dissonance, questions can help create turning points in reasoning.
7. **Information without revelation does not lead to realization.** Knowledge is utilized information, which means that information doesn't become knowledge until it has utility. Information that is the byproduct of personal revelation can become the most useful knowledge of all. The "aha" moments of life yield help build an intellectual and behavioral guide interacting with others. Your best chance of

convincing someone of your perspective is to get them to have a moment when the information you present can be personally claimed as their realization. The more moments like this you can create, the better the likelihood the difficult discussion will become a constructive conversation.

8. **Hope is essential.** Hope is an emotional alignment to possibility. When someone sees no possibility, they will become hopeless, and hopelessness is the single greatest threat to mental stability and self-preservation. No matter how difficult the challenge you confront, when attempting to remedy society of its greatest pestilence you must always align yourself to the possibility that the outcome you seek can become a reality. Spread this understanding to as many people that you can. The more people who align themselves to the possibility of a just and equitable society, the greater likelihood we will create it.