

“Facing One Another in This Place”

Using Moral Conversation To Talk about Controversial Topics

In College Settings

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Introduction: Taste the Mystery of Truth

I write as a college professor of four decades. In my opinion, what I say about practicing the art of moral conversation about hot topics as a classroom teacher holds true in all venues on a college campus. How do I know this? Because I have consulted, taught, practiced, and written about moral conversation throughout the country, and I have done this for a variety of higher education professionals, staff, and administrators, as well as with both undergraduate and graduate students. Moreover, our book, *How To Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation* (Nash, Bradley, & Chickering, 2008), has received wide acclaim from a variety of campus constituencies. It has already been adopted by many administrators and faculty throughout the country as a useful tool for talking about hot-button issues and controversies. Thus, even though I write as a career-long classroom teacher, I know from first-hand experience that what I say will have resonance for the entire campus community.

I begin with what some of my readers might think is an absurd presumption: The truth about Truth regarding any topic, no matter how “hot,” but especially religion and spirituality, is that it is bafflingly slippery, hardly objective, and, *mirabile dictu*, it always

manages to end up confirming the prejudices of those truth-holders currently in power, whether in politics, higher education, or the clergy. Rarely, in my experience as a philosopher and teacher, have I seen professorial minds radically (or even minimally) transformed as a result of so-called rigorous “scholarly interchanges,” the ones we’ve all been taught to practice in the college classroom. With only a few conspicuous exceptions, at the end of the day, conservatives tend to remain conservative, liberals remain liberal, postmodernists remain postmodernists, and skeptics remain skeptics.

I am becoming much more cautious and modest in my own painfully plodding, professorial journey about ever finding a once-and-for-all defensible truth for everyone, particularly in the areas of morality, ethics, and religion, three extremely controversial subject matters I have been teaching and writing about for almost four decades. The tool I have created to encourage safe, yet robust, verbal interchange in my classrooms is what I call moral conversation. Why? Let me sum up one of my basic beliefs about teaching and learning after being in this profession for what seems like forever: each student’s, professors’s, and administrator’s search for a usable and sustainable set of truths is always and everywhere an unpredictable, difficult, and challenging process. All our college constituencies, but especially our students, need our wise and sympathetic assistance, not our omniscient interference, in this demanding endeavor. Just the way we do, students, too, need to form their own sets of values in order to inform their own lives in their own best ways. In the most important sense, of course, this is the point of any and all education, and, truth to tell, in most respects, we educators are merely beside the point.

All of us, students, administrators, and teachers alike, are genuine seekers in the realm of values, ethics, religion, politics, and spirituality, to mention only a few of the hot topics that have split college communities. Few of us have made up our minds once and for all on these topics, and few of us ever will. Therefore, we need to treat each other with exquisite respect and sensitivity. Critique and feedback, when appropriate, ought always to come out of a framework of generosity and compassion, and always with an intention to make the other person look good. Spirited and candid conversations, aimed at getting to the heart of some sustainable truths, are more likely to occur when all of us on college campuses feel safe and supported enough to speak our truths-in-process to others. The receptive mode of listening and responding in a seminar, as well as in a campus-wide speaker's forum, is far more effective than the usual academic attack mode of adversarial discourse.

As a professor, trained in educational theory, academic philosophy, religious studies, and applied ethics, I am no longer interested in pitting students against one another in my classroom (or anywhere else on campus for that matter) as I used to. I am embarrassed to say that I did this with great relish. I was an expert. I got early tenure and promotion by building a reputation as a scholarly hard-ass. But I learned over many years that it was rare for any kind of genuine truth to emerge from such contestation in my seminars. I hated it whenever my classroom became a gladiator's arena where the winner was the best debater or orator left standing. I witnessed, indeed at times I encouraged, one too many intellectual executions in my seminars. I shudder whenever I think today of those students who sat silently in my classes week after week, either scared to death to

get involved in the fray, or completely uninterested in playing the academic games that, in truth, we all hate and fear but never openly acknowledge.

As I age, more graciously and compassionately, I hope, I grow to dislike more and more the empty charades of scholarly name-dropping, textual nit-picking, and tedious logic chopping that happen all the time in my own “public ivy,” Carnegie I, research university. At this time, I prefer, instead, to think of my classroom in the metaphor of what Deborah Tannen (1998) calls a “barn raising instead of a boxing match” In this image, my students and I become cooperative builders or co-truth seekers, not fighters. We work at constructing a meaning that binds all of us together in a common edifice called a community of scholars rather than a “boxing ring” that leaves us only bruised and battered.

The outcome of all of this, when it is working well, is that we end up creating together some important truths in our lives. One of these truths, in Michael Oakeshott’s (1950) words, is to learn to “taste the mystery without the necessity of at once seeking a solution.” Another truth, in David Bromwich’s (1992) paradoxical words, is this: “The good of conversation is not truth, or right, or anything else that may come out at the end of it, but the activity itself in its constant relation to life.” I think that Oakeshott and Bromwich are on to something: their insights, for me, lead precisely to where moral conversations should begin, and, ideally, where they ought to end: in a fondness for mystery; in a commitment to cooperative meaning-making; in the tireless support of the other person’s flourishing; in an ethic of do no harm and do much good; in an awareness that virtue and vice are constructs that people must decide, and act upon, collectively, but

always starting from a base of compassion; and in a love of conversation for its own sake, absent all the usual off-putting, dialogue-stopping, ideological prerequisites.

What Is Moral Conversation?

I have found the best atmosphere for establishing moral conversation to be grounded in the wonderful words of the poet, May Sarton (1999): “What do we know/ Except that we face/ One another in this place...” Sarton believes that we can only be sure of one thing—we face one another in this place, right now, right here, right away. The general goal of moral conversation can be stated in a nutshell: be here in this single hour, living now, right now, right away...with ourselves and with our students. I often say this to my students before we begin a seminar session: “not then...not when...Zen.” There is no past, no future, during our time together...there is only “now,” or “this,” which is the Chinese and Japanese meaning of the word “Zen.” It means to be attentive, open, and mindful of all that is happening in the Zen.

In moral conversation, we attempt to do this by *establishing a safe, yet invigorating, space for conversing about, very controversial issues*. This safe space includes, among others, such sites as seminar rooms, conference halls, campus offices, residential living buildings, and any other sites where teachers, administrators, and students might come together. These are places wherever people share ideas about highly provocative topics. Make no mistake, however. Creating an atmosphere of Zen in sites throughout the campus can be difficult; at times, in fact, it seems impossible. What

follows is an example of one of my recent failures to put May Sarton's inspiring words into practice.

A Real-World, Moral Conversation Breakdown

At this point, I want to share with my readers a real-world classroom incident that happened in a graduate course on "religious pluralism in the academy" that I taught a few years ago. I want to preface these comments by saying that, while it is easy to issue clear groundrules and high-sounding conceptual rationales for moral conversation, I find that actually putting these into practice in my teaching is the single, most difficult pedagogical activity I have ever conducted in a college classroom. It is just too easy to be the know-it-all expert who is paid to monologue and pontificate. I never had any formal training to do moral conversation, and I doubt whether many college professors have. What I have learned about how to foster moral conversations in my seminars has been by trial and error each and every week of each and every year that I face my students in the place we call our classroom.

The triggering incident for my real-world, moral conversation debacle was an angry outburst one day by an intensely observant Jew. Here, to the best of my recollection, is what he said to the rest of us:

"Let's face it, we Jews find our days numbered not just in the United States but throughout the world. Christianity is still the dominant religion in the United States, and, because Evangelical/Fundamentalist/Pentecostal forms of Christianity are experiencing such rapid growth throughout North America, the future viability of Judaism anywhere in

the West—even to maintain its current, relatively small religious presence—is very much up in the air. Movements such as ‘Jews for Jesus’ are scary examples of the subtractive effect the Evangelical Christian outreach movement is leaving on Jews everywhere. This type of active Christian proselytizing is even more intense in Europe and South America.

“ Also, it goes without saying that Christian stereotyping of Jews as ‘Jesus Killers’ gives serious pause to a younger generation of Jewish parents who are thinking of raising their children to be openly observant practitioners of their faith. Who, after all, wants to expose their children to the threat of physical or psychological violence precipitated by a groundless charge of deicide? It was not the Jews who crucified and killed Jesus; it was the Romans. Fortunately, during the 1960s Second Vatican Council, and even though it happened very late in its 2000-year history, the Roman Catholic Church came out and vigorously denounced claims accusing the Jews of being God killers.

“A terrible fact of life in the 21st century is that some people continue to hate Jews because they are a very visible minority who are sometimes labeled ‘non-Christians.’ This is often a code-word for ‘strange,’ or even ‘inferior.’ In some extremist cases, the synonym is likely to be ‘bad,’ or ‘evil.’ Until the reality, and worth, of religious pluralism is understood and accepted in this country, then those people who believe and worship differently from the dominant, Christian ethos will continue to be persecuted. Wasn’t it true that the majority of Nazis in World War II Germany were Catholic or Protestant Christians? Wasn’t Hitler’s ‘Final Solution’ really about Christians killing Jews once and for all?”

The resulting uproar over these comments was immediate. The more conservative Evangelical Christians, and Catholics, in the class grew very defensive both during, and after, this Jewish student's outburst. The non-believers used the occasion to critique the tendency of most organized religions to proselytize, and in some cases even to traumatize, those who believe differently. One atheist student even made the comment: "Religion poisons everything! We'd be better off without it!" The three Muslim students in the class felt similarly about what one of them called "Christian hegemony and stereotypical fear-mongering against Islam." One Buddhist student expressed her opinion that whenever a religion is weighted down with "doctrines, dogmas, and deities," then the result is always the same: "conflict and confusion." The youngest student in the class, fed up with the dogmatic proclamations of both believers and non-believers throughout the term, muttered out loud that "moral conversation sucks!"

It didn't take long for our class to fall apart, as the spirit of moral conversation deteriorated by the minute. Charge and counter-charge, attack and counter-attack, filled the academic air. Defensiveness and self-righteousness replaced conversational openness and humility. At times like these, when the moral conversation threatens to implode or explode, and students end up sniping at each other and assuming intractable positions, I try to remind everyone that the core content of the course is not the readings, or the mere acquisition of background knowledge about comparative religions. As important as these learnings are, it is the relational content of the course that is primary, and this must always manifest itself in the way that we converse with one another across our religious differences. I emphasize for students that good moral conversation, therefore, starts with an acute awareness of personal biases, and culminates in an open-mindedness about the

possibility of learning something from one another in fire-free zones of mutually compassionate interchange that attributes the best, not the worst, motives.

Furthermore, I point out to my students that the moral conversation is not to be construed as merely a "feel-good" activity. A few students each semester always hope to find a kind of therapeutic healing in the moral conversation whereby the bolstering of individual self-esteem becomes the ultimate group objective, and nobody leaves at the end of the semester any the worse for psychological wear. In contrast, David Tracy (1987) has helped me to understand the importance of insisting on an intellectually rigorous and demanding moral conversation: "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" (p. 19).

Revisiting the Groundrules of Moral Conversation

As the conversation I recount above grew into an exercise in angry contestation and name-calling, one of the quieter, older students asked for a time-out. He was obviously upset. He reminded us of how far off course we had gotten from our earlier, admirable efforts to practice moral conversation. He suggested that we take an immediate 15 minute break from class to get a snack, visit the bathroom, and cool off. When we returned, he then asked that we take the time to "revisit Zen." He counseled us to "breathe deeply," "be quiet," and respond in writing to the following question: What do we all need to do to exemplify the best qualities of moral conversation in the time that we

have left in this course? Here is what we all came up with during a lively hour-long, post-incident interchange (Nash & Baskette, 2008):

We will work hard to avoid the following conversation stoppers:

No name-calling

No predictable repetitions of the same old, same old, sharp (and dull) axes to grind

No making others look bad so you, the speaker, can shine

No bloviating, declaiming, denouncing, or arguing

No proselytizing, advertising, or evangelizing

No settling old (or new) scores

No looking for reasons why the course, or the seminar participants, aren't working well

(ask yourself why *you're* not working well)

No positioning oneself on the highest moral ground

No relegating others to the lowest moral ground

We will work hard to practice the following conversation starters and sustainers:

Explain, clarify, question, rephrase, respect, and affirm

Evoke, don't invoke, or provoke

Support without retort

Flow, glow, and let it go...don't fight or flee

Respond...knowing that you (and I) made it all up...everything

Be generous...at all times...without exception

Attribute the best motive

Look for the truth in what you oppose and the error in what you espouse

Speak always for yourself and not for some group

Come prepared, having done the background reading and writing

Help others to shine, while concealing your own brilliant light under the proverbial bushel

More of What I Learned about Moral Conversation

After considerable ex post facto, personal reflection on the real-world classroom episode I recount above, I came to the following conclusions about what constitutes good moral conversation about hot topics, both inside and outside college seminar spaces and lecture halls. I am continuing to find ways to improve my conversational style, approach, and strategies. Moral conversation, like law and medicine, is first and foremost a practice. The more I work on it, the better I get. Here are some further insights I have gained in order for me to be a better moral conversationalist whenever I am talking with students about the difficult issues of the day.

1. I need to work on identifying clear themes for conversations about the controversial topics. This is especially important in the religious pluralism course that I teach, as well in my other courses that deal with political, philosophical, and social class differences. Helping my students “unpack” the difficult issues in their own words, and express their honest perspectives about them is key. Another key is for me to encourage my students to continually rephrase in their own words each other's observations and interpretations in order to insure that moral conversationalists are genuinely listening to, and understanding, each other's ideas. Whatever its unanticipated benefits, the moral conversation is foremost a means to reach a particular end: a respectful listening to one

another, not to promulgate, or to discover, "absolute" truths, but to enlarge, deepen, enrich, and improve one's own truths.

2. Even the most exhaustively planned moral conversations can go awry, however. I need always to be prepared for the unpredictable "discussion bombs" that sometimes explode in a conversation: the dumb bomb; the hostility bomb; the self-interest bomb; the grievance bomb; the subversive bomb; the agenda-grabbing bomb; the self-serving humor bomb; the "totally off-base" bomb; the devil's advocate bomb, etc. No matter how fastidious my adherence to the principles of the moral conversation, certain students, wittingly or unwittingly, will usually end up attempting to sabotage the process at some point during the semester. Such is human nature. Thus, I need to use good judgment when attempting to "defuse" the bombs, because they can easily blow up in my face.

3. I need to remember that presence is the main staple of effectively facilitating moral conversation. My presence establishes or undermines the legitimacy of the process from the very first minute of the moral conversation. Presence is about projecting a sense of ease, unflappability, poise, and self-assurance. Effective conversational leaders have a special kind of personal bearing: They are dignified, informed, enthusiastic, and professional, without being intimidating. They are compelling without being controlling. They are superbly prepared on the controversies to be discussed, but they can also be spontaneous, even serendipitous, when new problems emerge. They are conspicuously in charge without being arrogant. The Zen of effective conversational leadership is just being present with others. It is also balancing self-confidence with humility, and rationality with intuition.

4. I must never forget that moral conversations must first be ethical conversations. My groups need to agree on an actual code of ethics -- a set of mutual rights and obligations to govern the conversational process. David A. Garvin (in Christensen, Garvin, and Sweet, 1991) is the first scholar I know who has attempted to develop a rationale for a code of ethics to be used in classroom conversations. Briefly, my code embodies some of his principles, in addition to my own: a.) Treat each person fairly, impartially, and equitably. b.) Whenever in doubt, always remember the principle of *primum non nocere* -- first, do no harm. c.) Treat each person in the group always as an end, and never as a means. d.) Abstain from gossip, *ad hominem* attacks, and ganging-up on individuals with unpopular views. e.) Avoid invading each other's privacy. f.) Keep confidences. What goes on in the seminar stays in the seminar. g.) Be truthful with others in the same way you want others to be truthful with you. h.) Seek informed consent in everything you do. i.) Keep promises.

5. No matter how "pure" my motives and reasons, I must avoid indoctrination. No antagonistic view is to be suppressed in the moral conversation because it goes against the party line. I must model the avoidance of ideological pigeon-holing—a pedagogical straightjacket that before long reduces conversations to agonizingly monotonous, head-nodding, yea-saying brainwashing sessions. I need always to maintain the element of ideological surprise. I must teach others to respond to questions and issues "out of political character," at least occasionally.

6. I need to trust the process in a moral conversation. At the outset, I must continually lay down some clearly defined, mutually understood and agreed-upon ground-rules; exercise prudent leadership by gently and persistently keeping people on

track; but get out of the way whenever possible. The first rule of conversational leadership is this: *Things will most likely go wrong before they go right.* During those heart-pounding, utterly perplexing conversational moments when the appropriate response is in doubt, I need to take a deep breath, or ask a question, or politely ignore a "bomb," or, when things are at their worst, mutter something incomprehensible. I need to avoid getting locked into power struggles with students, because, invariably, I will look like a bully, and I will end up the loser in a conversational setting. I need to learn to deal with the inevitability of uncertainty, and of occasionally looking like a fool. In the end, most of the time the process will correct itself, especially when all the conversationalists have made a fundamental, no-turning-back commitment to its principles, and when I can really and truly trust the process.

The second rule of conversational leadership is this: I must always be on guard to resist the benevolent professorial temptation to rescue members prematurely whenever they stray into uncharted conversational territory. I have to be careful not to exempt students from justifiable criticism when their behavior is unethical, or when their opinions need to be challenged on the grounds that they are illogical, incomplete, too sweeping, poorly defended, vague, etc. I have learned all too frequently that well-meaning rescue actions in the moral conversation frequently deliver the message that students are too brittle and unable to handle candor, challenge, or criticism. Correlatively, I myself need to encourage, and expect, challenges by students whenever appropriate.

The third rule of conversational leadership, and perhaps the most difficult challenge for me, is to be less preoccupied with teaching and telling, and more concerned

with listening and learning. I need to be attentive to how group members are interpreting what is going on. No matter how messy, I need to ask for feedback on the conversational process at strategic intervals. I must make a concerted effort to see the group through the conversationalists' eyes. I have to be a lot less reluctant, or even afraid, to hand over leadership of the moral conversation to various members of the group. I often wonder why, at times, it is so hard for me to cede control.

7. Finally, I can never forget the principle that asking good questions is the sine qua non for excellent moral conversation. The poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, asks us to "love the questions...I want to beg you, as much as I can, to be patient toward all that is unsolved. Try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer." (Rilke, 1954, pp. 34-35; quoted in Christensen, Garvin, and Sweet, 1991, p. 163)

I end my article on moral conversation with a quotation that I always share with my students. The quotation appears in the oldest, most sacred book in the world, the Hindu *Rig Veda*—*ekkam sat vipraha bahudha vadanti: Truth is one, but the wise call it by many names*. If this Hindu aphorism is accurate, and I believe with all my heart in its basic value, then each of us who is engaged in moral conversations is, at best, naming our truth with but one name. Therefore, who among us, I frequently remind my students, has the right, and the omniscience, to impose one name on all the rest of us?

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