

HOW TO HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

-Elizabeth Lesser

You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do. —Anne Lamott

A few years ago I organized a conference to explore the subject of women, power, and peace. I wanted to explore if women leaders were doing things differently—at home, at work, in the world. Were they being less divisive, and more inclusive? Less combative, and more communicative? I invited a variety of speakers, including most of the women Nobel Peace Prize laureates who traveled to the conference from hot-spots around the world.

I also invited a group of leaders from both sides of the abortion debate. These were twelve women from Boston who were heads of major pro-life and pro-choice organizations. They had started meeting secretly after an abortion clinic was bombed and several people were murdered. They knew that something was terribly wrong; neither group believed violence was the way to solve anything. They felt part of the problem, and they wanted to be part of a solution where well-meaning people stopped demonizing each other. And so they decided to meet informally—not so that anyone's mind would be changed on the subject of reproductive rights, but so that they could find a way to respect and even love each other. So that they could be part of the cessation of violence—in their own hearts, in their city, and in the world.

While the Nobel Peace Prize laureates represented the big, global issues of women, and power, and peace, the women from Boston brought the subject home and broke it down into something we all could do. The conference began with speeches from the Nobel laureates. They told thrilling stories about their work for peace in the world. Then the women from Boston sat on the stage and talked about how they had become friends. How although they all were still passionately involved in their causes, over the years they had developed deep and abiding love for each other, had helped each other through personal losses, had celebrated their children's graduations and weddings. They said they had put aside their differences as an alternative to the violence that

had wracked their city. They had done this through the simple act of patiently listening, working through their complex and conflicted feelings, and over time, humanizing each other.

Many women in the audience were moved by this conversation; others were not. Some could not understand how friendships between a few people could amount to real change. And others were angered by the tacit legitimacy given to a world-view that deeply offended them. I was genuinely surprised by those who rejected the premise of conversation as a way not to change minds, but to link hearts.

It seems obvious to me that differences of opinions will be with us forever—that the diversity of ideas is part of life, as normal and enriching as the diversity of race or religion or gender or age. Therefore, we must learn to live within a melting pot not only of people, but also of ideas. And to do this, we have to broaden our exposure to each other. We have to talk to each other, validate each other's right to an opinion, listen to and learn from each other. Ultimately, this is the antidote to what I call "otherising"—turning another person into someone not deserving of your curiosity and respect.

The women from Boston inspired me to work on my own propensity to otherise. I became aware of my knee-jerk reaction not only to groups of people with different political views or social values, but also with family members, colleagues, and friends. I decided to do what the women from Boston did on a smaller scale. I sought out people with whom I disagreed on a variety of subjects and I invited them to lunch. I began calling my experiment, "Take the Other to Lunch." I started with a person at work with whom I often disagreed, and I moved up the "other" ladder slowly: a neighbor who had signs posted in his yard for candidates I would never vote for; a relative who didn't believe in global climate change; a church leader who refused to marry gay people. My final challenge was lunch with a woman running for state office on the Tea Party ticket. These people were my "others." I was theirs. What brought us together was a willingness to meet in the field beyond unconscious reactivity.

Based on these experiences, I came up with guidelines for taking the other to lunch. I did [a TED talk about using these guidelines](#). You can use these guidelines to help you approach any difficult conversation—at home, or work, or in the bigger world.

Take The Other To Lunch

GOAL:

To better understand someone in your life with whom you disagree; to soften your stance toward a person with whom you are in conflict; or to get to know a person from a group you don't understand or have negatively stereotyped.

WHO TO INVITE:

Anyone you find yourself judging, rejecting, and speaking against because of beliefs that differ from yours, even if you barely know the person—especially if you barely know the person.

WHO NOT TO INVITE:

Don't choose extreme bigots, fundamentalists, or those espousing violence, and don't waste your time with someone who shows no interest in being even a little open minded. If you have to drag someone into the field with you, you probably shouldn't.

HOW TO BEGIN:

Explain that you'd like to get to know and understand the person better. Ask if they would like to do the same with you. Tell them that this is not an opportunity to argue, dominate, or prevail. Then, invite your "other" to lunch (and if he or she likes a Big Mac as opposed to an arugula salad, choose an other-friendly restaurant.) Before you begin your conversation, agree on the following ground rules and guidelines.

GROUND RULES:

- Don't persuade, defend, or interrupt.
- Don't leap to conclusions, use blanket statements, or rely on unfounded information.
- Be curious; be conversational; be real.
- Listen, listen, listen.

CONVERSATION GUIDELINES:

- Name a few issues that deeply concern you.
- Tell me something of your life experiences so that I might better understand your views.
- Ask me a question you have always wanted to ask someone from the "other side."

MEASURING YOUR SUCCESS:

What might happen at your lunch? Will the heavens open and "We Are the World" play over the restaurant's sound system? Probably not. Differences between people do not magically melt over lunch. Reaching across long-held beliefs is a slow and difficult process that takes time. A lunch is a first step. See if after a few lunches you can stop engaging in polarizing, "otherising", and uninformed talk that spreads divisiveness. Measure success by the increase in your ability to relate, compromise, and ultimately work with all sorts of people, near and far, to bring peace and justice to your corner of the world.