



BETTER CONVERSATIONS

A Starter Guide

Poetry is what you find
in the dirt in the corner,

overhear on the bus, God
in the details, the only way

to get from here to there.
Poetry (and now my voice is rising)

is not all love, love, love,
and I'm sorry the dog died.

Poetry (here I hear myself loudest)
is the human voice,

and are we not of interest to each other?

— ELIZABETH ALEXANDER



O
BEING

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An Invitation

from Krista Tippett

Our young century is awash with questions of meaning, of how we structure our common life, and who we are to each other. It seems we are more divided than ever before – unable to speak across the differences we must engage to create the world we want for ourselves and our children.

Yet you and I have it in us to be nourishers of discernment, fermenters of healing. We have the language, the tools, the virtues – and the calling, as human beings – to create hospitable spaces for taking up the hard questions of our time.

This calling is too important and life-giving to wait for politics or media at their worst to come around. We can discover how to calm fear and plant the seeds of the robust civil society we desire and that our age demands.

This is civic work and it is human, spiritual work – in the most expansive 21st century sense of that language. We can learn for our time what moral imagination, social healing, and civil discourse can look like and how they work.

The Civil Conversations Project is a collection of audio, video, writings, and resources for planting new conversations in families and communities. How do we speak the questions we don't know how to ask each other? Can we find ways to cross gulfs between us about politics and the meaning of community itself? How to engage our neighbors who have become strangers? Can we do that even while we continue to hold passionate disagreements on deep, contrasting convictions? How is technology playing into all this, and how can we shape it to human purposes? You will have your own questions – particular to your community and concerns – to add.

We insist on approaching civility as an adventure, not an exercise in niceness. It is a departure from ways of being and interacting that aren't serving our age of change. **This is a resource and reflection for beginning this adventure – creating new spaces for listening, conversation, and engagement.** We've created it as producers, but more urgently as citizens.

Public life is bigger than political life. We have narrowly equated the two in recent years, and we've impoverished ourselves in the process. Public life includes all of our disciplines and endeavors, including our selves as citizens and professional people and neighbors and parents and friends. The places we've looked for leadership and modeling have become some of the most broken in our midst. And so it is up to us, where we live, to start having the conversations we want to be hearing and creating the realities we want to inhabit.

I have seen that wisdom, in life and society, emerges precisely through those moments when we have to hold seemingly opposing realities in a creative tension and interplay: power and frailty, birth and death, pain and hope, beauty and brokenness, mystery and conviction, calm and fierceness, mine and yours.

Let's begin.

READ TOGETHER

Send this as part of your invitation, circulate it as a preparatory reading, or read it and the next page about Grounding Virtues together at the first meeting.

REFLECT TOGETHER

The quotations scattered throughout these pages can also serve as reflective readings either before gatherings or aloud when you're together.

Change comes about at the margins. People in the center are not going to be the big change makers. You've got to put yourself at the margins and be willing to risk in order to make change. But more importantly, you have got to approach differences with this notion that there is good in the other. That's it. And if we can't figure out how to do that – if there isn't the crack in the middle where there's some people on both sides who absolutely refuse to see the other as evil, this is going to continue.

– FRANCES KISSLING

For me, the question of democracy also opens up the question of what does it mean to be truly human. And it seems to me that we need to recognize that to develop the best humanity, the best spirit, the best community, there needs to be discipline, practices of exploring. How do you do that? How do we work together? How do we talk together in ways that will open up our best capacities and our best gifts?

– VINCENT HARDING

Grounding Virtues

How precious words are and how real speech is in its impact on the way people live and die.

— NELSON MANDELA

WORDS THAT MATTER

We are starved for fresh language to approach each other. We need what Elizabeth Alexander calls “words that shimmer” — words with power that convey real truth, which cannot be captured in mere fact. Words have the force of action and become virtues in and of themselves. The words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world, how we treat others. Words are one of our primary ways to reach across the mystery of each other. As technology reframes the meaning of basic human acts like making and leading and belonging, the world needs the most vivid and transformative universe of words we can muster.

HUMILITY

Humility is a companion to curiosity, surprise, and delight. Spiritual humility is not about getting small. It is about encouraging others to be big. It is not about debasing oneself, but about approaching everything and everyone with a readiness to be surprised and delighted. This is the humility of the child, which Jesus lauded. It is the humility in the spirituality of the scientist and the mystic — to be planted in what you know, while living expectantly for discoveries yet to come. The wisest people we’ve interviewed carry a humility that manifests as tenderness in a creative interplay with power.

GENEROUS LISTENING

Listening is an everyday art and virtue, but it’s an art we have lost and must learn anew. Listening is more than being quiet while others have their say. It is about presence as much as receiving; it is about connection more than observing. Real listening is powered by curiosity. It involves vulnerability — a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. It is never in “gotcha” mode. The generous listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one’s own best self and one’s own most generous words and questions.

PATIENCE

Like humility, patience is not to be mistaken for meekness and ineffectuality. It can be the fruit of a full-on reckoning with reality — a commitment to move through the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. A spiritual view of time is a long view of time — seasonal and cyclical, resistant to the illusion of time as a bully, time as a matter of deadlines. Human transformation takes time — longer than we want it to — but it is what is necessary for social transformation. A long, patient view of time will replenish our sense of our capacities and our hope for the world.

ADVENTUROUS CIVILITY

The adventure of civility for our time can’t be a mere matter of politeness or niceness. Adventurous civility honors the difficulty of what we face and the complexity of what it means to be human. It doesn’t celebrate diversity by putting it up on a pedestal and ignoring its messiness and its depths. The intimate and civilizational questions that perplex and divide us will not be resolved quickly. Civility, in our world of change, is about creating new possibilities for living forward while being different and even continuing to hold profound disagreement.

HOSPITALITY

Hospitality is a bridge to all the great virtues, but it is immediately accessible. You don’t have to love or forgive or feel compassion to extend hospitality. But it’s more than an invitation. It is the creation of a safe, inviting, trustworthy space — an atmosphere as much as a place. It shapes the experience to follow. It creates the intention, the spirit, and the boundaries for what is possible. As creatures, it seems, we imagine a homogeneity in other groups that we know not to be there in our own. But new social realities are brought into being over time by a quality of relationship between unlikely combinations of people. When in doubt, practice hospitality.

Shaping the Space: How to Begin

A conversation begins to unfold before any words are spoken — in the space that has been prepared, the welcome one receives.

PLAN THE SPACE

Where will your gathering take place? What are the physical cues that will establish it as inviting and trustworthy? Take stock of how this works in familiar parts of life — what are the elements of hospitality when you entertain people you know and love? There might be food and drink. Think about the care you will give to entrances, seating, lighting, and welcoming. This will set the tone for everything that happens next.

FRAME YOUR GUIDING INTENTION

What questions would you like to pose and hold with others in the period ahead? This inquiry in itself is critical, and it deserves time and care and cultivation. You might feel called to address a particular issue or challenge before your community. You might want to attend to nurturing courage and resilience for the life and work in which you and others are already engaged. You might feel called most urgently to address different others in your community on a human level — humanizing the issues or putting them to one side while coming to know each other as people. And of course all of these longings and aims can find expression in the same process over time.

We have created an adaptable framework to practice the virtues we've found to make new conversation and relationship possible; and to bring the wisdom from *On Being* interviews into your group as it forms the culture and spirit in which it will discern and act.

WHO TO INVITE

There are many ways to think about who to invite, and they're all good. Is this a gathering of kindred spirits? A group to take up difficult issues at play in your community? A drawing in of people you want to know, or to be in conversation with, but haven't known how to engage?

Decide who you know you want to be in the room. Then make a list of "bridge people" you'd love to reach out to — people of integrity who straddle kindred or disparate networks of interest to your own. Engage your core group of friends and community for ideas about intriguing "bridge people" out there and find someone who has a connection to extend a personal invitation. As you widen the circle, continue to surface names of people your group would like to be in conversation with, but haven't known how to meet. Include a generational mix. Invite someone younger who you know to be interested and articulate and invite them to bring an interested friend; and invite at least one elder you know to be wise.

LAY THE GROUNDWORK

At least a week before the meeting, send a personal welcome letter. You might share the names of all who will be attending. Attach a copy of this guide, as well as a link to an *On Being* episode. Propose that everyone listen, or read the transcript, before you meet, as a springboard for discussion about the care and concerns you have for life in your community. Propose the possibility that some in the group might set aside time to listen together before you meet.

ASK GENEROUS QUESTIONS

Questions are powerful things. Questions elicit answers in their likeness. It's hard to respond to a simplistic question with anything but a simplistic answer; It's hard to rise above a combative question. But it's hard to resist a generous question. We can ask questions that inspire dignity and honesty, and revelation.

Love the questions themselves, as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

— RAINER MARIA RILKE

Shaping the Space: How to Begin

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Here's a list of our podcasts from which you might choose as conversation starters for gatherings that might take place over six weeks or six months. Adapt and vary this for your group and your intentions, choosing programs you've found meaningful or relevant. Some of these can be watched as well as listened to, and all include transcripts for those who would rather read them.

VINCENT HARDING

[*Is America Possible?*](#)

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

[*Words That Shimmer*](#)

DAVID BROOKS +
E. J. DIONNE

[*Sinfulness, Hopefulness, and
the Possibility of Politics*](#)

PATRISSA CULLORS +
ROBERT ROSS

[*The Resilient World
We're Building Now*](#)

JOHN A. POWELL

[*Opening the Question of Race
To the Question of Belonging*](#)

JOHN PAUL LEDERACH

[*The Art of Peace*](#)

JOHN LEWIS

[*Love in Action*](#)

JONATHAN HAIDT

[*The Psychology Behind Morality*](#)

RUBY SALES

[*Where Does It Hurt?*](#)

FRANCES KISSLING

[*Listening Beyond Life and Choice*](#)

EBOO PATEL +
NATASHA TRETHEWEY

[*How to Live Beyond This Election*](#)

FRANCES KISSLING +
DAVID GUSHEE

[*Pro-Life, Pro-Choice, Pro-Dialogue*](#)

MAHZARIN BANAJI

[*The Mind Is a Difference-Seeking Machine*](#)

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

[*Sidling Up To Difference*](#)

SIMONE CAMPBELL

[*How To Be Spiritually Bold*](#)

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

[*Your Life Is a Poem*](#)

DAVID BLANKENHORN +
JONATHAN RAUCH

[*The Future of Marriage*](#)

Emphasize in your letter that the point of this gathering, at least initially, is not to reach any resolution or conclusions. It is about creating and renewing common life. No one will be advocating to bring others to see things their way. No one will feel pressured to give up the ground they stand on. Stating this very clearly can be disarming, a relief for people. All of our favored cultural modes of engaging difference drive to resolution — winning the debate, getting on the same page, taking a vote. But there is value in learning to speak together honestly and relate to each other with dignity, without rushing to common ground that would leave all the hard questions hanging. We learn to speak differently together in order to live together differently.

If you have that background of relationship between individuals and communities that is in that sense conversational, then when you have to talk about the things that do divide you, you have a better platform. You can begin with the assumption that you like and respect each other even though you don't agree about everything, and you can build on that. And you can know that, at the end of the conversation, it's quite likely that you'll both think something pretty close to what you both thought at the start. But you might at least have a deeper appreciation for the other person's point of view, and that turns out to make it easier to accept the outcome, whether it's the outcome you favor or the outcome the other person favors.

— KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

Gathering

1 SETTling IN AND SETTING INTENTION

You might want to begin with a moment of silence. At the first convening, you could read all or part of the welcome letter aloud, or ask someone else to do so.

2 PLANTING THE CONVERSATION

Every *On Being* interview begins with the question “was there a spiritual or religious background to your childhood?” Everyone — everyone — has a great story to tell along these lines. But the real reason for starting with these kinds of questions is about where they plant the conversation — in a place in us that is softer and more searching than we usually present to the world. It’s not a side of us that is usually invited into “important discussions.”

Our answers are allowed to have questions attached, and our certainties are leavened by experiences, by hopes, and by fears.

Reassure everyone that you have invited them to speak for themselves. No one is being asked to speak for their group, their position, their denomination or party, just for themselves. And insist on the confidentiality of what will happen. This is an essential practical part of creating a quiet, inviting, and trustworthy space — an environment, as Parker Palmer says, where the insights of the soul can come to the table.

Choose one of these questions and take it around the room. If you have a large gathering, you’ll want to break up into smaller groups for this part, depending on size. Allow 5-10 minutes for each person, again, depending on size.

- *Where do you trace the earliest roots of your passion for this conversation?*
- *Why are you here? What longing or curiosity made you say yes to this invitation?*
- *What hope and fear do you bring to this conversation?*

3 DELVING

Kick off the discussion with your own reactions to the *On Being* material. You might play a section that especially spoke to you, for those who may not have listened. Focus on these questions in your opening reflection, and invite them from others:

- *What I took from this.*
- *What challenged me.*
- *What felt relevant/helpful/revealing of where we are as a community.*

4 TOOLS FOR MODERATING

As the conversation gets going, and others bring forth their thoughts and react to those of others, keep an ear to helping people speak for themselves — not on behalf of a group, and not lapsing into the jargon of issues and advocacy. This is how we’ve been trained to speak in groups, in public, and getting out of this mode takes some practice. But there is a profound difference between hearing someone say, *This is the truth*, and hearing someone say, *This is my truth*. You can disagree with another person’s opinions; you can disagree with their doctrines; you can’t disagree with their experience.

*‘Am I responding in generosity?
Am I responding in selfishness?
Am I responding in a way that
builds up people around me, that
builds me up, that is respectful of
who I am?’ All of those questions
are at the heart of how we discern
best steps forward.*

— SIMONE CAMPBELL

*Our mission is to plant ourselves
at the gates of Hope — not the
prudent gates of Optimism, which
are somewhat narrower; nor the
stalwart, boring gates of Common
Sense; nor the strident gates of
Self-Righteousness, which creak
on shrill and angry hinges (people
cannot hear us there; they cannot
pass through); nor the cheerful,
flimsy garden gate of “Everything
is gonna be all right.” But a
different, sometimes lonely place,
the place of truth-telling, about
your own soul first of all and its
condition, the place of resistance
and defiance, the piece of ground
from which you see the world
both as it is and as it could be, as
it will be; the place from which
you glimpse not only struggle, but
joy in the struggle. And we stand
there, beckoning and calling,
telling people what we are seeing,
asking people what they see.*

— VICTORIA SAFFORD

Gathering

The opening question will help set a tone. But if and as people walk across the line between speaking for themselves and moving into abstractions and issues, you can gently coax them back with questions like these:

- *Tell me what you mean when you use that word.*
- *Put some bones on that idea for me.*
- *Can you tell a story to illustrate that?*

5 PRACTICE THE PAUSE

If things get tense or emotional, practice what Pema Chödrön calls “the pause” — three breaths, in and out — to settle and reset.

6 BE MINDFUL OF TIME

Set the meeting length in advance. 90 minutes is a good starting point. Begin and end on time. Build in time before and after the conversation to socialize. If people leave wanting more, that’s a good thing, as long as you leave them with an expectation of what will happen when you meet again.

7 CLOSING

In closing, formulate a question for everyone to carry out into the world — and, if you plan to meet again, to frame your next gathering. You might get there by asking people to share one of the following:

- *Something you’ve learned from someone else during the meeting.*
- *Something you’re still thinking about.*
- *Something you want to talk more about at the next gathering.*

People are looking for community right now, though we don’t have confidence in love. We have much more confidence in anger and hate. We believe anger is powerful. I think part of it is that we don’t have to imagine doing things one at a time. We claim life, our own and others. We celebrate and engage in life. And so, to me, the question is not, “how do we get there?” It’s “how do we live?”

— JOHN A. POWELL