

# **Fostering transformation: Engaging people in elevated conversations, even across great divides.**

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# Introduction

Public discourses often tend towards dysfunctional argumentation at cross purposes, which is fruitless.

Private conversations, however, are another matter. Rather than avoiding conflicting and difficult conversations, we hope to inspire people to willingly engage with others and take part in conversations that will potentially transform our thoughts, expand our intelligence and nurture relationships.

December 30, 2021 letter from the Universal House of Justice To  
the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

“The enkindled souls being raised up through the processes of  
the Plan...are focused on transcending differences, harmonizing  
perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation,  
they... foster fellow feeling even among groups who may  
traditionally have been hostile to one another.”

## Contributing to the discourses of society

“...is a capacity that will come into greater demand as closer association with a population, brought about through the work of expansion and consolidation, leads to increased consciousness of an area's prevailing social problems, as well as of the aspirations of its people to overcome them.”

# Guiding Questions

How do we know if we're creating or sustaining the type of dialogue that contributes well to the discourses of society?

How can we purposefully engage people in the elevation of these discourses?

What are the general norms and principles?

Are there skills that can be systematically learned and refined?

What is the role of the community in supporting these efforts?

# Questions that emerged during our Research

What characterizes a fruitful conversation?

Why is this so hard?

Why doesn't reason work?

How can intelligent people be blind to their own bias?

What insights are in our Writings and what insights can science give?

Who is working on this and what have they learned?

This session will focus on skill building that will help to initiate and sustain processes that elevate discourses.

- What is Transformative Dialogue?
- What are its Goals?
- What do Participants Gain?
- What do Participants Learn?

# Transformative Dialogue Is a Special Form of Dialog in Which Participants:

- Forego the ambition of persuading or instructing each other
- Reduce the tendency for rhetorical challenging and desire for psychological advantage
- Suspends debate and argumentation
- Learn a recognizable set of precepts and skillset
- Systematically develop, refine, and pass on to others what they learn

# Transformative Dialogue's Goals

- Contention and estrangement are transformed into shared understanding
- Out of deeper understanding new perspectives arise
- Dialogue is coupled with the building of vibrant local communities
- Communities have a stake in refining it, adopting it to local circumstances and foster its use.

# Participants Gain:

- Insights about biases, assumptions, perspectives, motivations for belief - self and other
- Knowledge of selves - fundamental to human relationships
- Surprising common ground and goals
- A better understanding of the other's views

# Participants Learn:

- To listen deeply to each other's values and ways of knowing
- To act as assistants to each other
- To cultivate an atmosphere of shared search for the truth

Some key  
insights on the  
path towards  
Transformative  
Dialogue



- Make contact
- Share experiences
- Practice deep listening
- Be curious
- Practice intellectual humility
- Find imaginary moments
- Leave the conversation on positive note

# We must make true contact:

We must engage with others in positive social interactions.

`Abdu'l-Bahá observed “See ye no strangers; rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness”

# Sharing Experiences:

The act of telling one's story or of hearing another's is a recognition of the source of each other's beliefs.

These occasions of sharing prompt deeper questions and more thoughtful listening skills.

# Deep Listening

Genuine listening is the most important skill to be developed.

It conveys that you are truly interested in the speaker. You may want to acknowledge that you are committed to practicing genuine listening skills

When engaged in listening, we find ourself holding a space for something new to be born.

It empowers us to explore commonalities, perspectives and appreciating each others values, motivations, and how they came to hold the views they do.

# Curiosity

Listen, consider the information and ask follow-up questions with a true desire to understand and potentially to have your own ideas transformed.

People mimic each other's language and conversational style – you want others to be curious too.

Formulate good questions to fill gaps in knowledge and to increase clarity.

Explore perceptions, motives, beliefs and strong biases

# Intellectual Humility

Helps foster openness and listening.

We admit that at least one or a few of our ideas are wrong or in need of improvement.

We often think we know more about a subject or the thoughts and feelings of another person than we actually do.

Certainty is a curiosity killer – it can halt progress.

Tease out and challenge the certainty level of the participants.

# Finding imaginary moments

Participants are encouraged to develop new visions of a reality they both can work towards.

These imaginary moments shift the position of the participants from combative to cooperative, or from them to us.

# Leave the Conversation on a positive note.

Re-frame the conversation in the most positive terms available.

Acknowledge common ground or shared values

Show respect and appreciation for each other's contributions

Admit ways you have learned/changed

Share feeling about the discussion.

Be open for another discussion or wish them well.

# Note About Othering

Using language of “us versus them” is divisive, prevents unity.

Dysfunctionalities can be entrenched in a discourse because of a reaction to each other's group.

People's identity is often shaped by a community of belief.  
Can stand in the way of knowledge generation

# Merits and limits of arguing the facts

- Reason has zero effect on some people in some contexts
- Positions sometimes harden in the face of facts that run counter to one's beliefs.
- Some accept evidence only if it confirms their prior beliefs
- Arguing with some people, especially in public would simply drive them deeper in their belief

# Would it be better not to argue at all?

- Research shows that providing facts or uncovering the rhetorical techniques had positive effects
- By speaking directly and privately, these conversations may become more fruitful
- Stumbling blocks are often minimized by keeping the focus on the values and motivations and justification for belief

# Breakout Rooms



Dialogue about the poll questions: Are dysfunctional discourses a problem?

What is your current attitude (or experiences) about difficult conversations with someone across a great divide?