

The Conversations of a Self-Governing People

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f the American experiment is to succeed, we must improve the quality of our conversations—our political, academic, and civic conversations.

I can appreciate the skepticism with which this assertion will be met. As I write, the country is in the throes of a global pandemic, unemployment has soared to heights not reached since the Great Depression, and communities are reeling in the wake of police violence. Improving the way we listen and speak to one another may seem to be a low priority right now. But consider what comes next.

Ahead of us is the challenge of how to balance public health concerns against the devastating human costs of a prolonged economic downturn. We have to soberly assess what we did right in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, what we did wrong, and figure out the best way forward. We have to break down the structural barriers that impede economic opportunity. We have to fundamentally rethink our systems of education, policing, and criminal justice. We have to bridge the divides and heal the wounds that these systems have created.

In short, we are faced with a very American question: How do we govern ourselves as equal citizens? This is *the* question that the American experiment poses. It's well understood that a liberal democratic order requires specific formal arrangements: constitutional guarantees that constrain authority and protect a robust private sphere. But alongside these formal arrangements are informal sensibilities that govern much of the day-to-day interaction in which we, as a diverse, independent, interconnected people, engage. Human conversation is the medium through which this informal governance unfolds.

How we talk to one another sets the stage for how we treat one another. The better the quality of our conversations—the more good conversations we have than bad ones—the easier it is to recognize the humanity in one another and the more likely we are to succeed in governing ourselves as equal citizens.

The Power of Naming What We Already Know

A “good conversation” is easier to identify than to define. At a minimum, good conversations allow us to manage our affairs with others peacefully. Better still, they leave us with the sense that something new has been created or discovered. They leave us feeling challenged and curious in ways that lead to new conversations. Ultimately, all good conversations are about connection, a connection in which one mind meets another.

While we know what it feels like to be part of a good conversation, we seem to be having a hard time getting our conversations right. Particularly since the 2016 presidential election, we have seen habits of civility and thoughtful debate replaced by the new norms of vitriol, ad hominem attacks,

moral grandstanding, contempt, and a flagrant disregard for the truth. A Knight Foundation/Gallup report finds that while social media constitutes the primary public forum for university students to discuss ideas, only 29 percent believe that online discourse is usually civil, down significantly from 41 percent in 2016.¹

The consequences of our diminished ability to engage in productive civil discourse are serious. According to the Pew Research Center, 71 percent of Americans believe the country is sharply divided along political lines.² This is up from 47 percent in 2012. Pew also finds that social trust is in serious decline, making it harder to build the civic capital required to solve social problems together.³ Ultimately, our inability to engage in civil and productive conversation means losing our ability to see one another as partners in the self-governance project, putting the future success of the American experiment in doubt.

An important step in getting our conversations right is to develop a common language so that we can identify the essential requirements—the “design principles”—of a good conversation, principles that have long been known at a tacit level, but infrequently named.

Seven of these principles are described below. Though most will sound familiar, my goal is not to recapture some idealized past. Arguably, social media and a charged political climate have merely exposed and amplified weaknesses within our public discourse that were always there. If that's the case, we have an opportunity to see those flaws more clearly and identify the principles that can fortify our conversations going forward. Over time, through deliberate practice, we can coach ourselves and one another to do better.

This discussion is intended to be a starting point. My hope is that it will inspire others to contribute their own insights and direct resources toward advancing conversations that tap into and extend our humanity.

Presumption of Dignified Equals

Good conversations begin with a mutual recognition that we are one another's dignified equals. Either of us may possess greater expertise on a given subject, but we both have equal standing in the broader social world.

In 1838, Angelina Grimké addressed the Massachusetts legislature. Before turning to the matter at hand—20,000 Massachusetts women petitioning to overturn slavery—she first had to justify her presence. This was the first time a woman had addressed an American legislative body. And because slavery was political, she noted, “It has often been tauntingly said that woman has nothing to do with it.” Grimké countered:

Are we aliens, because we are women? Are we bereft of citizenship, because we are the mothers, wives, and daughters of a mighty people? Have women no country—no interests staked in public weal—no liabilities in common peril—no partnership in a nation's guilt and shame? . . . [W]e are citizens of this republic and as such our honor, happiness, and well being are bound up in its politics and government and laws.⁴

Grimké knew, in other words, that if she were to have any influence, she would have to overcome the presumed default that she was not the dignified equal of the men who comprised the Massachusetts legislature.

Today, overt and sweeping denials of human dignity strike most of us as morally obnoxious. Nonetheless, examples abound. In his role as president, Donald Trump has adopted this rhetorical habit as a signature brand, describing immigrants as criminals and rapists, journalists as liars, Democrats—particularly women of color—as enemies of the country. Disturbingly, extremist hate groups, which have become more emboldened on social media and in the public square, provide further examples.

But if our scrutiny extends only to those who are at the ideological and behavioral extremes, we run the risk of taking ourselves off the hook too easily. When we find ourselves ignoring an argument because it comes from a Gen-Z social justice warrior or a boomer or a cis-gender white male, we are letting a rhetorical cheat slip in. We're telling ourselves that we do not have to do the difficult work of listening carefully and thinking through the other person's argument because of who he or she is. If we respect our conversation partner as our dignified equal, such cheats are off the table.

Knowledge-Seeking Humility

Humility opens the cognitive space we need to learn from one another. A knowledge-seeking posture puts that humility to work by actively aiming our curiosity in the direction of collaborative discovery.

Imagine a giant mirror. It's a magical mirror given to us by the gods. With it, we can see all that is knowable in the world. But as the mirror descends from the heavens, something goes wrong. It slips, falls to the ground, and shatters, its shards scattering across the peoples of the world. Each of us holds a shard that allows us to glimpse a bit of what is knowable. But it's only a glimpse. The knowledge we acquire is always partial and always from a particular angle.⁵

Scientific expertise gets us only so far. Direct experience gets us only so far. We need others if we are to extend our cognitive reach beyond what we can know through formal training or direct experience. We need others if we are to see the same world from different perspectives and gain access to the local knowledge that can come only from lived experiences we haven't lived.

Further, if we are to foster good conversations, it's not enough to simply acknowledge our cognitive limits. We need to transform passive humility into an active knowledge-seeking curiosity. The best way to do this is to ask sincere questions that tap into the insight of others. We need to ask others to help us see what they see in their piece of the mirror. In doing so, we turn our conversation partners into collaborators in pursuit of discovery.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the intellectual habit of setting aside one's prejudices—including one's prejudgments, intellectual biases, and preferred conclusions—to create space for reasoned and open inquiry.

One of my favorite children's stories is "The Emperor's New Clothes," not so much the Hans Christian Andersen version,⁶ but the one that sits in my memory. In Andersen's rendering, the emperor's vanity is exposed by a child's innocence. The boy doesn't know any better, so he cries out, "But he hasn't got anything on!" My mother—a Unitarian turned Quaker—has always had a healthy skepticism when it comes to authority, especially when it comes to pompous men in robes. It must have been her telling of this story that made me see the kid not as an innocent, but as a badass, a fearless call-bullshit-what-it-is hero. He knew exactly what the swindlers were up to. He knew he'd get into trouble if he said what was, to him, obviously true. And he said it anyway. Others doubted the evidence right in front of them. But our hero was a critical thinker. He possessed a liberated mind.

This is the heavy lift that critical thinking offers—it sets the mind free from dogma and prejudice. It allows us to weigh evidence, interrogate what we've been told, what we know, and what we think we know. Further, as I imagine the boy in my version of the story knew, critical thinking is a check on tyranny. Critical thinking checks authority by taking "because I said so" off the table as a reasonable response to the question, "Why?"

Critical thinking can also be playful, especially when accompanied by an actively curious humility. When we rely on critical thinking as the go-to process before committing firmly to a conclusion, we develop a sort of playful confidence in the exchange of ideas. We invite not only the scrutiny of the question, "How do you know you're right?" We also invite the playfulness of the question, "What if my foundational assumptions are all wrong?" We let critical thinking take us wherever it leads. And we awaken the creative response inspired by the question, "What if?"

Assumption (and Practice) of Good Faith

Assuming good faith means that, unless we have good reason to believe otherwise, we assume that others enter the conversation with a sincere desire to understand our point of view and to deal honestly with us in advancing their own. Practicing good faith means that we enter the conversation with the same sincere intentions.⁷

The first twenty years of my career were spent teaching economics at a small liberal arts college in Wisconsin. Beloit College is a marvelously quirky place that draws students from around the world, from across the country, and from its own backyard. Some students arrive sophisticated, fully equipped with the cultural capital they need to feel confident participating in difficult conversations, such as those about race, gender, sexual identity, and class. Some arrive without these tools. During my time at Beloit, I had a tender spot in my heart for the well-meaning but inexperienced students who, predictably, would trip up and betray their naivete about such matters. Ironically, the lack of sophistication was often connected to some aspect of diversity. International students, for example, were often perplexed by progressive American attitudes about sex and gender. The poor white kid from rural Wisconsin, whose family scrimped, saved, and incurred debt to get him there, had a hard time wrapping his head around the notion that his whiteness meant that he had reaped the benefits of unearned privilege. These students were not willfully ignorant. They had sincere questions but lacked the language to pose them elegantly.

What happened next made all the difference. More times than I can count, I saw a naive student betray his or her naivete in the company of a patient interlocutor—sometimes a faculty member, sometimes a fellow student—who saw past the fumbling expression to engage the sincere question. These moments were magical. Learning was happening.

I wish I could say that we always got it right. We didn't. When we failed to assume good faith, it was often because we didn't maintain the vigilance required to listen for the sincere question that lay beneath the clumsy phrasing. Practicing good faith requires a similar sort of sustained effort. Entering into a conversation in good faith requires that we listen sympathetically, that is, make a sincere effort to understand the other person's argument and perspective. Listening sympathetically means suspending judgment long enough to understand how it is that another sincere and intelligent human being looking at the same world draws a different conclusion.

When we exercise the good faith principle, we listen more and engage in moral grandstanding less. We are better able to see nuanced positions that rest between ideological poles. Conversation partners who proceed in good faith can draw attention to errors without accusations of moral turpitude. We can explain why someone's talk offends without assuming that it was the person's intent to offend.

Courage with Civility; Civility with Courage

Courage in conversation seeks truth and resists pressure to do otherwise. Civility in conversation is the demonstration of respect. Most conversations benefit when both virtues—truth-seeking courage and respectful civility—are present.

On July 4, 1852, abolitionist Frederick Douglass addressed a crowd in Rochester, New York. Leading citizens in the Rochester community had invited him to speak at the Independence Day celebration. Douglass knew he was meant to laud the ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Instead, he spoke of the hypocrisy of celebrating American liberty while four million Black Americans remained in chains. Rather than celebrating the country's liberty, he described the nation's conduct, past and present, as "hideous and revolting."

Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity, which is outraged, in the name of liberty, which is fettered, in the name of the Constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America!⁸

Was Douglass's speech courageous? Perhaps not in the usual sense. As an experienced public speaker, it likely took little emotional effort to say things he knew to be true. But in another way, it took great courage to say those words—on that platform on that day—as he risked losing the support of influential political moderates for the abolitionist cause.

Was Douglass's speech civil? Some might say no, because if one's aim is to be civil, one does not insult one's audience. But this judgment, in my view, conflates civility with politeness. Civility is not about conforming to expectations of polite society. Civility is about demonstrating respect. And we demonstrate respect by holding one another to our mutually shared moral standards. If the people in the crowd truly valued liberty, then they should not celebrate until liberty had been extended to every human being in the country. Seen in that light, Douglass's speech demonstrates the height of civility.

Great orators such as Douglass are great, in part, because they are practiced at summoning courage and civility simultaneously.

Honesty

Honesty is a commitment to truth-telling and fair dealing in conversation. These commitments inform and govern what we say to others. Just as importantly, they inform and govern what we tell ourselves.⁹

The honesty design principle is implicated in each of the foregoing principles. For example, if we genuinely recognize that we are all dignified equals, then we have a moral duty to speak truth and to deal fairly. Similarly, truth-telling is essential if we are to practice good faith. If, in the course of a conversation, we realize that the other person has the better argument or if the conversation has given us reason to doubt our prior position, practicing good faith requires that we exercise the honesty, as well as the humility, civility, and courage, to acknowledge these realizations.

Honesty, in other words, is the connective tissue that allows the individual principles to work together as a system.

Contestability

Good conversations require an environment of openness in which ideas and points of view can compete with one another freely, in a spirit of fearless inquiry.

I have reserved the contestability design principle for last because it is somewhat different from the others. Rather than describing a personal practice, it describes the institutional environment—the rules of the game—in which our conversations take place. The First Amendment to the US Constitution, for example, provides the arena in which ideas are permitted to compete freely with one another in the public square.

That said, most of our conversations take place outside the public square, in our living rooms, classrooms, workplaces, and professional communities. Parents, teachers, employers, and experts in a given field curate these conversational spaces to achieve specific goals. A university professor, for example, sets parameters around the topic and the readings she and her students will discuss in a given gathering, and appropriately so. These limits help to achieve the goals of teaching and learning.

The trick, though, is to not limit the conversational space to the point that ideas can no longer be challenged. It would be inappropriate for the university professor to insist that only her preferred point of view be considered in a given discussion. And it would be inappropriate for her to insist that other professors should be banned from discussing topics that she does not personally approve. Both these violations of the contestability principle undermine the very

purpose of the university.

More generally, the contestability principle is the institutional analogue to the humility principle. Given the fundamentally dispersed nature of knowledge, we need rules of the game that make it possible to openly test, challenge, and improve ideas, whether those ideas represent the frontier of new knowledge or well-worn, accepted wisdom.

Good Conversations and the Just Society

In his book *Talking to Strangers*, Malcolm Gladwell explains the concept of “truth default”—the phenomenon that, most of the time, most people assume that others are telling them the truth.¹⁰ This default can be problematic, of course, as it lets liars and cheats take advantage. But he also notes what a great deal this defaulting to truth is for human society. For the price of an occasional deception, we reap the dizzying benefits of social cooperation. Conversely, when we lose the default to truth, Gladwell warns, the consequences can be devastating. He makes this point by telling the story of Sandra Bland.

In one version of the story, the salient facts are these: On the afternoon of July 10, 2015, Bland was pulled over by Texas State Trooper Brian Encinia for failing to signal a lane change. After a heated exchange, Encinia ordered Bland to get out of her vehicle, which she refused to do. They struggled. Encinia called for backup and placed Bland under arrest. She was taken into custody on felony assault charges. Three days later, Bland was found hanging in her jail cell. Though there was much speculation that Bland had been murdered, the investigation into Bland's death concluded that her death was a suicide.

Gladwell's retelling focuses our attention not on the arrest or the events that followed, but on the conversation that led up to the arrest. It was in that conversation, Gladwell contends, where the trouble began.

It's worth reading Gladwell's account in its entirety, but the key takeaway is this: The conversation between Bland and Encinia went horribly wrong not because Encinia failed to do what he was trained to do. “It was the opposite,” Gladwell concludes. “It was because he did exactly what he was trained to do.” Encinia had the truth default trained out of him.

Encinia was working from a particular playbook: stop-and-search police tactics developed in the 1990s at the height of the US-led global “war on drugs” campaign. According to Charles Remsberg, author of *Tactics for Criminal Patrol*, these tactics could turn ordinary traffic stops into major felony arrests.¹¹ Stop the motorist for a minor infraction, a broken taillight, say. Or nudge the motorist toward an infraction. In Bland's case, Encinia accelerated toward her from behind, causing her to change lanes abruptly—too abruptly. She forgot to signal, giving Encinia the

justification he needed for the traffic stop. Once the motorist is pulled over, the police officer looks for clues—physical and behavioral “tells”—of criminal activity. For the protocol to work, a police officer has to suspect the worst of every motorist he or she stops. The smallest detail that seems out of place or the slightest note of agitation warrants interrogation and escalation. Stop-and-search policing, in other words, is *designed* to create bad conversations, and that design flaw can easily lead to injustice.¹²

Bland, we can hear in the audio, is irritated. She’s upset that she moved quickly to get out of the way of a fast-approaching police vehicle only to be pulled over. With the default to truth trained out of Encinia, he reads Bland’s agitation as a clear sign that something’s amiss. After checking Bland’s license and registration from his patrol car, he returns to Bland’s vehicle. She lights a cigarette. Encinia escalates the encounter by asking her, in a tone that is more demand than request, to put it out. She refuses. She has the right to smoke in her own car, she says. Another tell, he is trained to believe. He orders Bland out of the car. She refuses, insisting that she does not have to get out of the car if she is not under arrest. Another tell. Yelling now, pointing his taser at her, Encinia orders her again, “Get out of the car! I will light you up!”

What of good faith? Stop-and-search tactical training first trains the officer to act in bad faith—provoke an infraction—and then *assume* bad faith, to read a motorist’s agitation and need for a cigarette as signs of criminal intent. The Sandra Bland case illustrates the point that how we speak to one another sets the stage for how we treat one another.

In the wake of George Floyd’s death, Gladwell’s insights about policing protocols take on even greater weight. Understandably, when we examine the videos that capture the encounter between Floyd and four members of the Minneapolis Police Department, we focus on the eight minutes and forty-six seconds in which the police have Floyd pinned to the ground.¹³ In these nine minutes we hear Floyd’s agonizing cries of “I can’t breathe” as Derek Chauvin continues to press his knee on Floyd’s neck, as officers J. Alexander Kueng and Thomas Lane pin down the rest of Floyd’s body, and as officer Tou Thao stands guard while the assembling crowd implores Chauvin to release him.

With Gladwell’s insight in mind, our attention should also be drawn to the first minute in which officers Lane and Kueng confront George Floyd. Like Encinia, they were primed for a confrontation. A store clerk called 911 when he suspected that Floyd had used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill to pay for a pack of cigarettes. Let’s assume that the bill was counterfeit. If you had counterfeit bills in your wallet, would you know? Probably not. It’s the perfect moment when defaulting to truth, when assuming good faith would be completely appropriate. “Sir, you may have unknowingly used a counterfeit bill at the market just now. Would you mind waiting while we check out the situation?”

We don’t know what was actually said in the initial encounter. We have the visual record only from a bystander’s video. But it’s clear that, within seconds, the exchange became confrontational. The conversation was designed to go wrong, right from the start.

This volume is dedicated to advancing a deeper understanding of the liberal democratic ideal, one that represents a pluralistic and just society in which people of different cultural backgrounds,

religious traditions, political beliefs, and life experience live peacefully and productively together. Our conversations weave their way through the social fabric. We cannot have a good society if our conversations are, by design, bad conversations.

At this moment in our country's history, we are understandably focused on the content of the conversations we need to have. But if we are to achieve a good society, we also need to focus on the quality of those conversations, both individually and institutionally. A great many American institutions, from universities to police departments, depend on the collaborative, often contentious exchange of words and ideas. Advancing work that improves the quality of our academic, political, and civic conversations is fertile ground for philanthropic leaders interested in supporting the health of liberal democracy.

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Notes

1. "The First Amendment on Campus 2020 Report: College Students' Views of Free Expression," Knight Foundation/Gallup, May 5, 2020, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/the-first-amendment-on-campus-2020-report-college-students-views-of-free-expression/>.
2. Katherine Schaeffer, "Far More Americans See 'Very Strong' Partisan Conflicts Now Than in the Last Two Presidential Election Years," Pew Research Center, March 4, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/04/far-more-americans-see-very-strong-partisan-conflicts-now-than-in-the-last-two-presidential-election-years/>.
3. Lee Rainie, Scott Keeter, and Andrew Perrin, "Trust and Distrust in America," Pew Research Center, July 22, 2019, <https://www.people-press.org/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/>.
4. "(1838) Angela Grimke Address to the Massachusetts Legislature," Blackpast, November 3, 2011, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1838-angelina-grimke-address-massachusetts-legislature/>.
5. I first encountered the shattered mirror metaphor in Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Penguin Books, 2007). Appiah credits Sir Richard Francis Burton, Victorian-era traveler, translator, and writer, with offering it first.
6. Hans Christian Andersen, "The Emperor's New Clothes," trans. Jean Hersholt, Hans Christian Andersen Centre, last modified September 19, 2019, https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html.
7. If our conversation partner has demonstrated gratuitous disregard for the truth or the dignity of others, in my view, we are under no moral obligation to assume good faith. That said, there may be tactical reasons to "perform" as if we believe our interlocutor is acting in good faith so that we might better engage the minds of onlookers.
8. Frederick Douglass, "The Hypocrisy of American Slavery," Frederick Douglass Heritage, <http://www.frederick-douglass-heritage.org/speech-the-hypocrisy-of-american-slavery/>.
9. Philosophers from Plato to Hugo Grotius to John Stuart Mill have offered instances when dishonesty may be morally justified, such as lying to prevent someone's murder. With these exceptions in mind, it's helpful to think of the honesty design principle as a standard default that may be overridden in some cases.
10. Malcolm Gladwell, *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know* (New York: Hachette, 2019).
11. Charles Remsberg, *Tactics for Criminal Patrol: Vehicle Stops, Drug Discovery and Officer Survival* (Northbrook, IL: Calibre Press, 1995).

12. It may be objected that police interactions with the public are not civic conversations and, therefore, do not share the same design principles. The work of Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom suggests otherwise. Ostrom and her colleagues argue that effective policing is coproduced by professional law enforcement officers and members of the community in which they work. Effective communication and the trust that it builds are essential to the success of this collaborative effort. See Elinor Ostrom, Roger Parks, and Gordon Whitaker, *Patterns of Metropolitan Policing* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing, 1978).
13. Evan Hill, Ainara Tiefenthäler, Christiaan Triebert, Drew Jordan, Haley Willis, and Robin Stein, "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," *New York Times*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000007159353/george-floyd-arrest-death-video.html>.