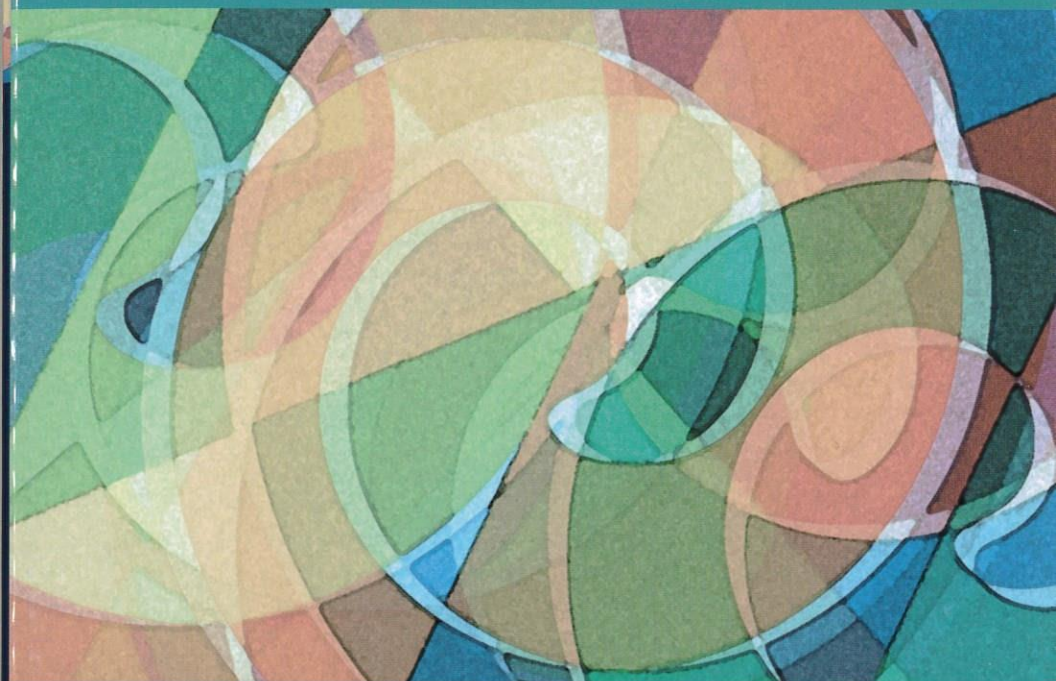


the art of spiritual living



Conversation

—the sacred art

Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction

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Conversation—The Sacred Art
Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction

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- Gaze upon an object or a person that delights you.
- Reflect upon an object or an event that disturbs you.

Rather than moving to the next activity, take some time to listen to the conversation in your heart at this moment in time:

- What are your heart's deepest yearnings?
- What is the prayer of your heart?
- What wisdom or guidance do you seek from your Inner Teacher?



ENCOUNTERING THE SACRED IN EACH OTHER

The wise see in every form the divine form; in every heart they see the divine light shining.

—Hazrat Inayat Khan,

The Complete Sayings of Hazrat Inayat Khan

N*amaste*. If I had to choose one word to capture the essence of the sacred art of conversation, it would be this Sanskrit greeting, which is often translated as “the divine in me greets the divine in you.”

As we practice the sacred art of conversation, we are invited to increase our awareness of the divine in ourselves and in one another. Like the wooden Russian dolls whose whole being is not revealed by merely looking at their outermost layer, each of us contains additional layers within. These dolls symbolize a great spiritual truth. Truly encountering others involves seeing beyond the exterior and attending to one another’s interior life. As we invite one another to open up and reveal our deeper layers, we discover a form that is at the very core of each one of

us—our heart. In our heart, our intellect, will, and emotions are one and united. In our heart, we encounter divine wisdom—an Inner Light.¹ As we engage in a conversation, we are invited to tend one another's Inner Light, to encourage each other to keep paying attention to this source of truth in our hearts.



Although it was back in July, 1999, I remember the first week of my spiritual direction training experience as if it occurred yesterday. I had spent the majority of my adult life in school learning how to reason, deliberate, analyze, and assess. I now found myself seated in a circle with six other persons, and the only thing I was allowed to do was listen. As each trainee shared the story of his or her faith journey, no cross-talk—that is, back-and-forth discussion—was permitted. Moreover, after each of us had finished talking, we were not allowed to say anything in response to what we had just heard. It's not that there wasn't anything to say. From my perspective, there was plenty to say, plenty to ask, plenty of observations to share as other persons relayed their stories of experiences of joy and pain, clarity and confusion, consolation and desolation in their lives. I just couldn't figure out the point of all this listening if we could not respond to what we were hearing.

LEARNING A NEW WAY OF BEING PRESENT WITH ONE ANOTHER

Communication seems to take place sometimes without words having been spoken. In the silence we received an unexpected commission to bear in loving intentness the spiritual need of another person sitting nearby. And that person goes away, uplifted and refreshed.

—Douglas Steere, Quaker Spirituality

Learning the art of spiritual direction introduced me to an entirely different way of listening and being present in a conversation. Before training in the art of spiritual direction, my primary approach to engaging others in conversation was through active listening. In active listening, we paraphrase back to one another the thoughts and feelings we hear each other expressing. We then ask for confirmation. For example, "I heard you say that you're really fed up with your work. You feel frustrated. Your impression is you are undervalued. Is that what's going on for you? What more would you like to add?" When done well, active listening offers the potential to increase our understanding of one another. When done poorly, it's just one more technique we can use to really annoy each other. Training in the art of spiritual direction challenged me to go beyond adding more techniques to my repertoire. It invited me to enter into a fundamentally new way of participating in a conversation.

The Hebrew Scriptures remind us that "there is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:7). Learning the art of spiritual direction underscored how imperative it is to keep silent and honor another's silence. Without a foundation of silence, it's hard to discern the source of our own and one another's words, to differentiate the voice of the Spirit from all the other voices clamoring for our attention. Cultivating silence may prove especially challenging for those of us who associate silence as a way of punishing one another or the inevitable silence in a conversation as an awkward moment to be avoided at all costs. We may find it hard to believe that sharing intentional silence can offer an experience to which we feel drawn. Quaker teacher Patricia Loring observes that silence is "not simply a running out of words, but is the fullness of awareness beyond words. It can become contemplation either of what is in the heart of the speaker or of the Loving Presence

in which both are held.”² Honoring the place of silence in our daily lives and in our conversation prepares us to attend to the deep stirrings within our own and one another’s heart.

Listening deeply, and nothing more, can cultivate the virtue of restraint. Rather than trying to figure out the right thing to say as another is talking, we begin to learn how to keep the voice of our all-knowing egos in check. Our egos relish the opportunity to show how much we know, to demonstrate how effectively we can relate to and solve one another’s problems, to try to be helpful. In sum, our egos like to pretend we are God—omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. Until we begin to recognize the difference between the voice of our ego and the voice of the Spirit within us, we cannot be fully present to one another in a conversation. As we grow in our capacity to practice restraint, to differentiate the voice of our egos from the voice in our hearts, we no longer have to just listen. We can then respond with words, as it is more likely that our words will come from the core of our being, our heart. When they do, our words will typically be framed as questions or observations, rather than assertions. Our questions and observations have the potential to encourage others to listen to the wisdom waiting to be revealed in their hearts.

ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER TO LISTEN WITHIN

God still lives and moves, works and guides, in vivid immediacy, within the hearts of men. For revelation is not static and complete, like a book, but dynamic and enlarging, as spring from a Life and Soul of all things.

—Thomas Kelly, Quaker Spirituality

We need each other’s help to learn how to listen within. Since spiritual truth is often ineffable, we tend to find it difficult to

put into words, to name, what it is we are hearing. In some cases, we need help gaining clarity about whether the voice we are hearing, which seems to be emerging from our heart, is in fact the voice of the Spirit—our Inner Teacher. At other times, we may be confident that the voice we are hearing is that of our Inner Teacher, yet remain unsure as to how to respond to what is being asked of us. And, truth be told, there are times when we know it is the voice of the Spirit speaking in our hearts, when we know how to respond to what is being asked of us, and yet resist doing so. For all these reasons, and more, it helps to have conversation partners to whom we can entrust our hearts, who can “listen” our souls into disclosure and discovery.



Reflection: Souls Who Have Made Us Wiser

We know in our heart of hearts when another person’s words are echoing our inner truth and we also know when another person’s words are violating it.

- Have you ever shared a conversation with someone whose soul made you feel wiser, someone who encouraged you to pay attention to the light within you, whose words seemed to echo your inner truth? Who was involved? What happened?
- What was it about that person’s way of being that made your encounter so memorable and gratifying: for example, “I felt loved, respected, and accepted”; “I felt as if I had the other’s undivided attention”; “I felt as if she was looking deep into my soul.”
- Select one characteristic she or he exemplified, and set your intention to practice that way of being in a future conversation.

Practice: Tending One Another's Light— Holding, Beholding, and Being Held

Quakers teach us to reach out to the light of God within all persons. Through our conversations, we can invite one another to get in touch with the Light that is within each of us. The following ritual invites us to viscerally experience what it is like to hold, behold, and be held as we tend the Light Within. If this ritual is shared in a small group, it helps to have a facilitator who can ring a chime to signal each movement.

- Decide who will go first.
- Begin by lighting a tea light or small candle jar and hold it in your cupped hands. Sit quietly and notice how you feel as you *hold this light*.
- As you hold your light, invite your conversation partner to *behold the light* you carry without and within.
- When you are ready, invite your conversation partner to place his or her hands around yours. Notice what it feels like to *be held*, that is, to have another person contemplatively hold your light in his or her hands.
- Reverse roles.

The practice of holding our light, beholding one another's light, and having our light be held by each other offers an image for the sacred art of conversation.



ENCOUNTERING THE SACRED BETWEEN US

God is present when I confront You. But if I look away from You, I ignore him. As long as I merely experience or use you, I deny God. But when I encounter You I encounter him.

—Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

There once was a topsy-turvy town that had no roads and whose homes had no windows. The townspeople needed help. They believed that if they could find God, God would help them. Two of the townspeople, a woman and a man, were sent out in search of God. The woman climbed a tall mountain and set sail on a ship. The man traveled to the desert and listened for God in the dark quiet of a cave. Eventually, they each became tired and decided to stop looking for God. Yet, they both hoped that the other had found God:

But when they met, the woman saw the man's drooping shoulders, and the man saw the woman's sad eyes. They knew that neither had found God. The woman put her cool hand on the man's sunburned arm, and the

man wrapped his blanket around the woman. It was a dark moonless night, and [they] could see nothing but each other. In soft, small voices they talked long into the evening. They told each other their stories.

They returned to their town and helped each other put windows in every room of their homes, cut weeds, fill holes, and clear the rocks to build a road. The townspeople were stunned and sought an explanation. The man and woman replied that after journeying hundreds of miles to find God, they had found each other.

"And we discovered God was with us," added the man.

"With you? Right here?" puzzled the townspeople.

"At home?"

"Wherever we are," answered the woman....

"But I can't see God anywhere," insisted one of the men of the town. "I just see you. If God is here, show us where."

"God is in the between," said the man and the woman. "In the between. In between us."¹



This story captures beautifully the way that transformation can occur when two or more people gather for conversation and share their stories with each other. This story helps introduce us to the ideas of one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, Martin Buber. Buber believed that we encounter the reality of God by meeting God in between—in our relationships with one another. Buber's philosophy provides some thoughts for us to consider as we try to practice the sacred art of conversation.

In his "philosophy of dialogue," Buber (1878–1965), an Austrian-born Jew, explores holiness in relationships, the potential for goodness in the individual, and the importance of the here and now. Buber believed that we find God by going out with our whole being to meet Thou—the sacredness within all beings. In his book, *I and Thou*, Buber proposed that there are two attitudes toward existence: I-It and I-Thou. In an *I-Thou* mode of relating, our intention is to *converse with* another in a fully personal manner. Buber believed that when we address another human being as someone made in the image and likeness of God, we encounter God. Conversely, in an *I-It* mode of relating, we speak to another in an impersonal manner as if she or he were an object. Because I treat you as less than human or don't recognize your full human dignity that reflects your being made in God's image, I ignore or deny God. Buber's understanding of relationships reminds us that every time we interact with another, we are offered an occasion to encounter the sacred. Buber calls our attention to a reality beyond the participants in a conversation that characterizes true dialogue—the realm of "between."²

Buber's invitation to encounter the realm of between can help us better understand distinctive characteristics of the sacred art of conversation:

- *To focus our intention on engaging with one another.* Conversation practiced as a sacred art is not a passive activity. In an I-Thou encounter, we participate in conversations by actively choosing to open our hearts to others. An I-Thou encounter requires self-awareness, a willingness to surrender control, and an investment of energy in getting to know another rather than a passive acceptance of someone else's

definition of our partner in conversation. We can't sit back and resort to existing definitions, categories, or concepts to define the other. In the Gospel of John (4:1–26), Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a local well. Jesus might have chosen not to talk to her because of her marginal status as woman and as a foreigner. However, he intentionally defied the norms of his culture and society in order to reach out and engage her in a conversation.

- *To keep the focus on what goes on between us.* In the sacred art of conversation, we try to shift our focus from me, myself, and I to what's going on between us. Of course, our worries and responsibilities, our desire to make a good impression on others, our caution, and fears about expressing our deepest truth tend to keep us focused on ourselves and from opening up. Devoting time to self-reflection before and after our conversations increases the likelihood that we will maintain more of a focus on us throughout our conversation.
- *To keep our focus on the here and now by improvising.* Improvising requires us to focus our attention on the here and now—to what is happening in the moment. Rather than clinging to a preconceived idea of how a conversation should go, how another person should engage with us, how our relationship should unfold, we pay attention to what is unfolding in real time and respond accordingly.



Jazz musicians are the maestros of improvisation. One of my favorite examples of this capacity to improvise was a story

Herbie Hancock told about a lesson he learned in his early twenties from his great collaborator and mentor, Miles Davis. He described how he and Davis began their performance at a concert in Europe:

We had the audience in the palm of our hands. And right as everything was really peaking, and Miles was soloing, I played this chord, and it was completely wrong. And Miles took a breath and then played some notes, and the notes made my chord right.... Somehow, what he chose to play fit my chords to the structure of the music.... What I learned from that is that Miles didn't hear the chord as being wrong. He just heard it as something new that happened. So, he didn't judge it. I learned the importance of being nonjudgmental, taking what happens and trying to make it work ... And it can lead you to other ideas, to something maybe you hadn't expressed before.³

In the sacred art of conversation, each of us discerns how to respond to the inevitable, though often unintentional, discordant chords that we and others play. When someone says something that conflicts with our values or offends us, what chord do we then play? Does another's discordant chord automatically hook us into playing a discordant chord of our own? Improvising requires us to focus our attention on the here and now—to what is happening in the moment. Rather than clinging to a preconceived idea of how a conversation should go, how another person should engage with us, how our relationship should unfold, we take what happens and try to make it work.



Reflection: Increasing Awareness of the Sacred Between Us

We can cultivate our capacity to honor the sacred between us by making a commitment to reflect upon the conversations we've shared, especially those that are significant to us.

- Was I willing to *look beyond appearances* in order to try to see your depth and uniqueness rather than looking at the role you occupy (e.g., neighbor) and the way I might categorize you (e.g., white male, blue collar, jock)?
- Was I willing to *focus on who you are in this moment and what you are talking about here and now* rather than being preoccupied with the things you've said in the past?
- Was I willing to *focus on what was emerging between us* rather than being overly concerned about your impression of me and what I was saying?
- Was I willing to *withhold judgment and improvise* when you said something that disturbed, disappointed, or defied my expectations?



is more than coincidence that the words *silent* and *listen* share the same letters. There is a profound relationship between intentional silence and our capacity to listen. It is only by getting quiet, really quiet, that we notice all the noise within, between, and around us as we interact with one another. Time in silence, both personal and collective, helps us to discern the sacred signals from all the other sounds in our lives. Silence is a foundational practice for any meaningful conversation and one that is particularly fitting for interfaith dialogue. Silence is a spiritual practice that transcends and can unite participants of varying faith traditions, cultures, and ways of life.

Parker Palmer, who specializes in creating the conditions for small group conversations he calls “circles of trust,” underscores the transformative power of silence:

The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient, and yet exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit silently for an hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge, and out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek.²

If we hope to have more soulful conversations with one another, we need to practice walking quietly, sitting silently, and waiting patiently.



CULTIVATING CONTEMPLATION AND COMPASSION IN COMMUNITY THROUGH JOURNEY CONVERSATIONS

Reach out to those you fear.

Touch the heart of complexity.

Imagine beyond what is seen.

Risk vulnerability one step at a time.

—Jean Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*

What is a journey conversation? A journey conversation creates an occasion to explore life's big questions in the company of others: What is sacred in my life? What's my purpose? What difference can I make? In a journey conversation participants are invited to slow down, turn off their electronic devices, and learn ways of listening within and listening to one another. Participants embark on a journey of mutual discovery

as they share their stories and encourage one another to notice and name what they hold sacred in the midst of the struggles, contradictions, and ambiguities of their lives. Sharing fundamental life stories helps participants see both the commonality in the midst of their diversity and the distinctive features of their common experiences. Participants also engage in a journey of discernment as they learn how to ask contemplative questions that help each other notice and name where they find meaning and purpose in their lives. In some communities, a journey conversation may also include time devoted to collective discernment as groups and teams reflect upon what gives their organization meaning and purpose. What is distinctive about this approach to dialogue is the emphasis it places on contemplative practices as the foundation for relational communication: practices of silence, stillness, and centering; sacred reading; storytelling; compassionate listening and responding.

This appendix will provide an overview of the processes and structures developed for hosting and facilitating journey conversations and describe the fruits of these conversations.

JOURNEY CONVERSATION FORMAT OVERVIEW

In a journey conversation participants are invited to turn from their conventional way of interacting and are introduced to contemplative practices and communication skills that help them listen deeply, speak from their heart, and respond compassionately. *Stillness and centering practices* encourage participants to listen within; *the practice of storytelling* invites them to listen to their lives; and *the practice of compassionate listening and responding* increases their capacity to listen and learn from one another.

The format and process of hosting a journey conversation is highly adaptable. The following format has been tested in a wide array of contexts with men and women of varying ages, faiths, and ethnic backgrounds.

nicely stated for CR/W

CENTERING PRACTICES

Contemplative practices, such as shared silence, stillness, and centering on the breath, prepare participants for conversation. Some groups find it helpful to place a glass container filled with water in the center of the circle. This transparent container of water symbolizes the group's purpose and commitment. Like the still water that reflects what it encounters, the group's aim is to create a contemplative container where participants can practice being so still that others can see the reflection of their deepest truths in one another's presence. Some groups also place a candle at the center of the circle to symbolize the light of the divine within and among those gathered.

The primary role of the facilitator is to cultivate this contemplative awareness and rhythm. Facilitators begin each gathering by inviting participants to take some time to quiet their minds and bodies, to remove any unnecessary distractions around them, and to turn their attention to their breathing. They lead the group through the practice of three deep breaths (see page 75) or centering on the breath (see page 76). Throughout the conversation, facilitators try to be mindful of the group's need to periodically pause in silence in order to maintain or regain attentive presence.

In addition, facilitators are responsible for minding the time so that every person has time to speak. They encourage those who find it difficult to speak to listen within for a spiritual nudge to speak; encourage those who feel compelled to speak to practice restraint if there are gaps in the conversation; and gently remind one and all to honor the transformative power of shared silence.

SACRED READING

Once participants have quieted themselves through centering practices, they are invited to listen deeply to wisdom literature including scriptures from the world's religious traditions,

contemporary prose and poetry. Listening to wisdom that is born from the lived experience of ancient and modern people and communities prepares the group to notice and welcome the wisdom that lives in each member of the group.

The facilitator introduces the contemplative practice of *lectio divina*. This approach to reading scripture was practiced by Benedict of Nursia (480–547 CE) who served as a founder of Western monasticism. The practice of *lectio divina* invites participants to *listen with the ear of their heart* as they encounter the transformative power of the written word.³

- The first time the text is read, the facilitator invites participants to listen for a word, a phrase, or an image that shimmers for them or captures their attention.
- After the first reading, each participant is invited to offer his or her word or phrase into the silence without comment.
- The second time the text is read, the facilitator invites participants to reflect upon what is being asked of them or offered to them by the text.
- After the second reading, participants are invited to briefly share their responses with the rest of the group.

STORYTELLING

When a group first forms, each participant is invited to reflect upon, construct, and share the story of his or her journey: the key events, persons, places, and experiences; their understanding of the sacred and how that has changed over the course of their lives; and their deepest hopes for their relationship with what they deem to be sacred in their lives. If a group continues to meet on a regular basis, participants may select or design additional themes for their storytelling (such as the conversation catalysts in appendix three). Perhaps the most

significant aspect of reflecting on one's story is the realization that our stories are always open to new interpretation. Each time we listen to our lives, we have the opportunity to discover, notice, and name more fully what we hold to be sacred. To help participants begin to construct a narrative of their journey, they are asked to reflect upon the following questions:

If my life were a book, I would title it _____.

The reasons I give my life this title are _____.

The chapters in the book of my life are _____.

The chapter I am in right now is _____.

As I imagine the next chapter on my journey,
I would name it _____.

To model the storytelling process, we ask group facilitators to share their stories first. As they do, we encourage them to describe to participants their process for reflecting upon and constructing their narrative.

COMPASSIONATE LISTENING AND RESPONDING

The primary aim in compassionate listening and responding, as the Quaker Douglas Steere emphasized, is to "listen each other's soul into disclosure and discovery."⁴ Following each person's story, participants are invited to offer the gift of contemplative questions. Instead of asking the first question that comes to mind, each participant is encouraged to discern carefully: What can I ask this person that will invite him or her to listen more deeply within?

The following diagram compares a conventional way of asking questions with a more contemplative stance:

Conventional Questions	Contemplative Questions
What do I want to say? (ego)	What wants to be said? (soul)
Often seek to fix, save, analyze, or advise another	Seek to understand and learn more about another
Closed-ended questions (can you, have you, would you, is there, etc.) that can be answered "yes," "no," or in a few words.	Open-ended questions that begin with: how, what, where, when or "in what ways ..."
Elicit reactions	Evoke reflection
May or may not resonate with another's experience	Resonate with another's experience
Often guided by the language you use	Are guided by the language another uses
Restrict another's arena of exploration	Expand another's arena of exploration
Allow for the exchange of information	Encourage another to keep noticing, naming, and nurturing his or her awareness of God/sacred

Facilitators remind participants that asking contemplative questions is often a new and countercultural skill. A journey conversation group offers the opportunity to practice and cultivate this skill, as we learn with and from one another. In some cases, we discern it is best to not ask another person a question, as our attentive silent presence is what seems to be most needed.

COLLECTIVE REFLECTION

Conversations conclude with some time for quiet to reflect upon what has been shared. Participants are then invited to notice and name what they have discovered in the course of the conversation.

Participants may find it helpful to reflect upon and respond to one or more of the following questions:

- What did you notice in today's conversation?
- What stirred you or moved you deeply?
- What did you learn about yourself or others in today's conversation?

Some groups may also choose to conclude the conversation with a closing prayer. Whether or not a prayer is used, all group gatherings conclude with time in shared silence. The facilitator may ring a chime to signal the close of the session. However, some participants may prefer to continue to sit in silence while others take leave.

JOURNEY CONVERSATION PARTICIPANT AGREEMENTS

The first session of every new group begins with an overview of the participant agreements. These provide the ground rules for the conversation. The facilitator's role is to model the following skills and attitudes and hold participants accountable to them.

As a participant:

- I will listen to others in a compassionate and non-judgmental way. I will also strive to *listen within*, noting my internal responses to what is being said.
- I will speak for myself, in the first person, as I relay my experiences, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (for example, "I feel ...," "I sensed that ...,"

"I wonder about ..."). I will speak the truth of my heart as I offer the insights, joys, struggles, and questions that are part of my journey.

- I will encourage and honor my own and others' questions. I recognize that it is not my responsibility to analyze, fix, save, or advise others in the group.
- I will observe time limits. I will arrive on time. I will limit my storytelling and sharing to the time allotted.
- I will feel free to remain silent and tell the group if I would like to pass.
- I will maintain "double confidentiality." What is shared in the group stays in the group. Moreover, I will not approach any of our group's participants with feedback or advice outside of our meeting times unless it is asked for.
- I will speak directly to a group participant if a conflict arises or if clarification about something s/he said is needed.

Facilitators ask participants if they have any questions about the agreements and invite them to name agreements they would like to add. Other agreements?

- _____
- _____
- _____

Some communities may invite participants to sign the agreement. Many facilitators return to the agreements at subsequent sessions in an effort to remind participants of the covenant they have made with one another.

Facilitators then invite participants to identify their hopes for the conversation (whether it's a one time meeting or an ongoing series). Through our conversations, we hope to:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Many groups have found it beneficial to return to their listed hopes periodically, to reflect upon their process, and to refine or refresh their stated hopes.

STARTING A JOURNEY CONVERSATION IN YOUR COMMUNITY: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT IS THE OPTIMAL SIZE FOR A JOURNEY CONVERSATION GROUP?

Five to seven participants in a small group seems to work best in most settings. However, in some settings, we have facilitated large groups of forty or more participants. In those situations, we gather the entire group for the centering practice and sacred reading, break into small groups of four to five participants for storytelling and contemplative questions, and reconvene in the larger circle for the concluding reflection.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU MEET AND WHAT IS THE OPTIMAL AMOUNT OF TIME TO MEET?

The format for a typical contemplative conversation group consisting of ninety minutes is featured below. A ninety-minute gathering allows enough time for two participants to share the stories of their journeys. However, in some retreat and workplace settings, groups may meet only once for a half or full day of conversation. Regardless of the number of participants or duration of the meeting time, the following time frames are the minimum we have found beneficial for each portion of a journey conversation gathering:

Centering Practice and Sacred Reading
(15–20 minutes)

Storytelling One (10–15 minutes)

Pause for Silent Reflection (2–3 minutes)

Compassionate Listening and Responding
(10–15 minutes)

Pause for Silent Reflection (2–3 minutes)

Storytelling Two (10–15 minutes)

Pause for Silent Reflection (2–3 minutes)

Compassionate Listening and Responding
(10–15 minutes)

Pause for Silent Reflection (2–3 minutes)

Collective Reflection (10 minutes)

WHERE DO I FIND TEXTS FOR THE SACRED READING?

Each community or small group selects texts that they find evocative and meaningful. In many groups, participants take turns selecting a text to share with the group. In others, the primary facilitator selects texts aligned with a group's hopes and interests. For example, interfaith groups often choose to reflect upon one sacred scripture from a different religious tradition at each gathering.

FRUITS OF JOURNEY CONVERSATIONS

Journey conversations create the conditions for a different kind of conversation by inviting participants to develop a deeper, interior awareness through contemplative practice in the company of others. Over the course of the past decade, a large part of my work has been devoted to facilitating and training facilitators for journey conversations. My work has also focused on evaluating the impact these conversations are having on participants.

Participants tell us that they place a great value on the contemplative practice of silence and a scheduled time and place to reflect; they no longer believe that a mature faith requires having everything figured out; they have learned a new way of being present to others; and they have experienced a different way of being together in relationship—a spiritual fellowship—through these groups. The following statements illustrate these themes:

- How important it is to slow down and take time for silence? In the past, I often knew this in the back of my head but never did it. Now, I want to incorporate these rhythms into my life to help me center myself.
- I used to think that I was the only one who didn't have it all figured out or who had questions, but I have discovered that I have many of the same doubts and thoughts as others. I have also become more confident with speaking about faith and religion and in the interfaith groups was comfortable discussing such touchy subjects with strangers.
- I'm trying to bring my spiritual thoughts and approaches to discussing spirituality to more of my interactions. Even if conversations and/or actions are not directly aimed at a "spiritual" topic, the skills, care, compassionate questions, and calmness can still be used in many interactions.
- Being able to articulate out loud to others some of my current thoughts, struggles, beliefs, questions, etc. This has helped me personally identify more about my own journey. Also, hearing and reflecting upon others' stories has allowed me to make connections with my group members in a way I normally wouldn't be able to and identify some of the similarities and differences in our journeys.

Although many group participants report feeling initially uncomfortable with, or resistant to, slowing down, getting quiet, and listening within, they describe that it really helps cultivate contemplative listening in the company of others.

It is clear that these conversations are having both a personal impact on participants and a community-building impact on the group. Moreover, many participants report that what they have learned and experienced in a journey conversation is bearing fruit outside of the group setting. Through these conversations, they are cultivating a peaceful listening presence that they try to bring into their everyday activities and relationships with friends, coworkers, and family members.

Gathering with others for a journey conversation cultivates habits, develops skills, and gives us a safe place to practice the sacred art of conversation. Together we are learning another way of talking about faith, meaning, and purpose in our lives. Deeply listening to another's accounts of faith and doubt, belief and skepticism, love and fear often inspires us to give voice to our own. As we reflect upon our journeys together, we often gain new insights and a deeper appreciation of what each person brings to the conversation. Taking the time to gather in silence, to notice and name our experience of the sacred in our lives increases the likelihood that we will enhance our capacity to notice and name even more. Listening to others share their experiences of the sacred nurtures our collective awareness of the sacredness of life, increases empathy and awareness of "others," and builds compassionate communities.



APPRECIATIVELY FOCUSED CONVERSATIONS AT HOME AND WORK

The glory of God is human being fully alive."

—Saint Irenaeus

One of the primary ways we engage one another in the sacred art of conversation is by inviting each other to pay attention to what enlivens us. Our primary aim is to invite one another to notice and name what we experience as life-giving rather than trying to eradicate that which drains us of life. In this Appendix we will consider a specific conversational approach—appreciative inquiry—used by practitioners in the field of organizational development and explore how we might draw upon this approach to enrich our everyday conversations.

In an appreciative inquiry conversation (commonly referred to as AI), participants are invited to focus on life-giving forces. Rather than starting with the problems people are having and trying to fix what's broken, AI practitioners believe that improvement stems from starting with what's