

Handling difficult conversations: Suggestions for Freethinkers



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

My older sister lives in Washington State so we don't see each other much. Having lost our parents many years ago, we no longer have a family home to return to. What we can return to is some memory of Mom and Dad and our early life in Washington. We can laugh, and get misty eyed, over life stories we share. The sibling relationship we cherish has endured all our differences in life choices and beliefs. She still holds tight to the faith I once held in common with her.

When she was visiting a few years ago, I invited my sister to bake oatmeal cookies with me. I value her baking experience and hoped I might finally learn to make a dessert that wasn't a disaster. The cookies were a bit of a flop, mainly because I insisted on my "imprecise" way of measuring (and added a few ingredients not called for in the recipe). The oven produced a lumpy, crumbly heap. This was cause for ribbing from the "real cook in the kitchen." We had a good laugh, a hug, and could forget our divergent beliefs while doing something collaborative and creative—at least potentially. We could simply be silly sister and bumbling brother.

For a summer course I taught on "Contemporary Freethinkers," I introduced the class to representative voices expressing humanist, atheist, agnostic, skeptical, scientific and various faith perspectives. From Nadya Dutchin, director of the American Humanist Association, to Leo Igwe, an African fighting against persecution of women accused of witchcraft, we looked full in the face of Freethought today. We heard from thinkers who live in India, Bangladesh,

Asia, Africa, as well as North and South America.

In our perceptive, honest class discussions, we heard our own stories of engaging in hard conversations with people holding very different beliefs. Each of us has a tale to tell, past and present, of struggling to converse with someone—friend, family member, neighbor, colleague or stranger—whose disagreement with some issue or topic brings a tense division to the surface.

Out of this class discussion, I laid out some suggestions and questions to consider.

Questions to ask ourselves:

1-How important is my relationship with this person?

2-Is this issue/subject/topic worth risking the relationship over? Could it potentially strengthen the relationship?

3-Is it more important for me to "make a point" or "win the argument" than it is to listen and seek to understand a different perspective?

4-Is the other person willing to listen, to consider an alternative viewpoint? Am I willing to do the same?

5-How emotionally invested am I in this? (Am I agitated and "amped up" to "convince and convert"? If so, maybe now is not the time or place? Cool off first)

6-Is there potential for mutual learning? If not, is it worth it? (if this is merely about arguing and debating, what's the point?)

7-What is the "end goal" of the conversation—what do I hope to accomplish?

Questions to ask the other person:

1-Can we have a serious conversation about [this issue] without being disrespectful; to disagree without being disagreeable?

2-Can we agree to listen to each other without interrupting?

3-Can we both seek for some "com-

mon ground" here? We may not agree, but can we keep foremost in mind that we value our relationship and we're committed to keeping communication open and honest?

Other considerations:

a) Is there perceived harm in the views of the other person (or yours)? Do anyone's opinions or beliefs potentially present very real-world harm to yourselves or others? This may obviously intensify the exchange of opinions.

b) Could this be a "teaching moment" for the other person, or for you?

c) What is my limit, my line in the sand, on this issue and in this conversation? Do we have a clear sense of when it crosses the line into disrespect (insulting, shouting, etc)?

d) The context might make a difference to the depth: Best: in person, face to face; Second best: video call; Third best: phone; Not so good: text or email; Worst: online, social media

e) If it gets overheated, take a break ... take a walk ... share dinner or drink ... (lots of deep breaths, checking in with emotions)

f) Circle back as often as needed to the value of the relationship

g) How often do you talk with this person? Is it the best use or the most constructive use of time to spend it arguing these things?

I'm curious if readers have other suggestions or guidance? After all is said and done—or left unsaid and undone—perhaps the most creative suggestion might be: bake cookies together. At least share some—if they're edible.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.