Igniting the Fire of Moral Conversation

In this chapter, we provide a rationale for the idea of moral conversation. We discuss its basic premises, and we point out its strengths and weaknesses in a general sense. More specifically, we give several examples of particular hot topics that we believe ought to receive a campuswide airing according to the principles of moral conversation. Finally, we summarize our basic philosophical assumptions regarding the theory and practice of moral conversation, and we identify a number of internal contradictions for those educators who wish to engage in moral conversation in order to "ignite the fire of conversation."

What does it mean to ignite the fire of conversation? How can all constituencies on college campuses experience the fire of robust and respectful conversation on the controversial topics that we will discuss in this book? Think of the various meanings of the word *fire*. Its Greek root, *pyra*, means "glowing embers." Fire entails both heat and light resulting from combustion. Although fire can be destructive and painful, it can also suggest brilliance, strength, and excitement, as in "setting the world on fire" with striking achievements. "Playing with fire" implies a willingness to do something risky. Being "on fire" conveys the state of being full of ardor and excitement. And "striking a fire" is to ignite something—as in sparking the imagination or the creative intellect.

Conversing about highly controversial topics can be threatening to people. The ordeal of talking openly about difficult topics in full public view, across a wide range of constituencies on a college campus, can be anxiety producing and, at times, very painful. Feelings can be hurt. Conversations about politics, religion, social class, and cultural difference can fray nerves and even destroy once amiable relationships. Anger, frustration, and self-righteous aggression can result. In this sense, the fire of conversation can burn terribly. It can destroy. But in the best sense, the fire of conversation can produce excitement. It can encourage risk taking and push us to our creative limits. It can ignite the passionate imagination that resides in each and every one of us.

A CULTURE OF CONVERSATION, NOT A CULTURE OF CONTESTATION

The fire of conversation that we are talking about is different in tone and intent from such terms as *discussion* and *dialogue*, although conversation shares some things in common with each of them. The Latin root of discussion (*discutere*) is revealing. It means to strike asunder, scatter, shake, beat, and quash. A *discussion* involves talking about an issue in a deliberative fashion so as to air a variety of conflicting opinions. The major objective of discussion is to settle an issue or to decide on a course of action. Often a discussion implies an *argument*, a putting forth of one point of view in order to refute another point of view. Sometimes an argument becomes a *debate* wherein debaters engage in public contests with opposing groups in order to win points for a particular belief or proposition. Arguments and debates have been known to devolve into angry and heated *disputes*, whereby disputants openly clash with those whose opinions are different.

Dialogue is closer to the meaning of conversation we are talking about here. Dialogue implies an open and frank talking together in

order to seek mutual understanding and harmony. The intention of most dialogue is exploration of an idea or problem with the objective of finding solutions. For example, diplomats of nations or blocs often set up dialogues with one another in order to exchange proposals that will lead to mutual understanding and agreement. Dialogue, in this case, is close to *discourse*, which is a long and formal treatment of some subject with the aim of imparting ideas and information in one-way communication. In discourse, there is little or no effort made to achieve a sense of mutual reciprocity or vulnerability.

Unfortunately, too many discussions of controversial topics in the American university tend to foster a *culture of contestation*, not a *culture of conversation*. All of us on college campuses are conditioned to think of communication as debate, not dialogue; as a win-lose contest; as a battle to be fought to the death, and may the best scholar win. In this more traditional case of academic discourse, the fire of contestation can leave people scorched and wounds raw. It is the academic game we have all learned to play so well, and we carry its lessons over to discussions on every conceivable topic, including, foremost, the ones mentioned in the sections to follow.

We are advocating for a different campus culture, a culture of *moral conversation*. Such a culture has the potential to ignite fires of conversation that, in theory, can transform people's lives. Although they may not always change people's minds, they do have the potential of opening their hearts. Although they may not always result in quick and tangible policy changes, they often do result in an empathic airing of mutual differences that could later pave the way to more collaborative and consensual decision making. Recall William Butler Yeats's famous aphorism: "Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire." How does this work? It starts, we submit, with understanding the theory and practice of moral conversation.

MORAL CONVERSATION

In our opinion, a college campus is a lot of things, but it should not simulate a rancorous legislative session in a state house. Neither ought it replicate a television station for predictable attack ads, blindly partisan debates, or dueling talking heads frothing at the mouth—the usual components of a heated political campaign coming down to the wire. Yes, we like what John Stuart Mill said in his essay *On Liberty* ([1859] 1982) about the importance of healthy disagreement in a democracy: in a democratic society, all opinions must be heard because some of them may be true; and those that aren't true must be vigorously contested. In either case, free people only stand to gain. Mill, in 1859, was actually articulating the rationale for a type of academic freedom in the university that would later be introduced by the American Association of University Professors in the twentieth century.

But make no mistake: we appreciate that Mill was, first and foremost, a gentleman and a reconciler. He encouraged healthy disagreement, to be sure, but a disagreement grounded in exquisite respect for the right of all human beings to be persuaded and convinced by rational argument. Mill took a strong stand against the name-calling, silencing, and tyrannizing of minority voices in those societies where a majority rules. Mill was, if nothing else, a champion of the individual voice in the ideological wilderness. Moreover, Mill's essay *On Liberty* is itself a model of the kind of intellectual restraint he called for in a secular, liberal democracy. Always polite and considerate, the essay strikes a nice balance between strong intellectual conviction and a genuine empathy for those who might reside outside the majority view. It is our hope that moral conversation can come close to the ideals of democratic dialogue described in Mill's masterpiece.

But we are also realistic. As a result of our mixed experiences leading difficult talks on college campuses throughout the United States, we know from firsthand involvement that we

must never underestimate the difficulties in promoting campuswide conversation on hot topics. Each of us, through the years, has failed often enough to stimulate moral conversation to understand the folly of being overly optimistic whenever it comes to advocating for something innovative in the campus academic culture.

However, we have also had our moments of success, owing to the tireless and enthusiastic assistance of others in helping us bring to campuses new ways of conversing about tough topics.

We are convinced that the American university can become a true culture of cross-campus conversation, along the lines of what Diana Eck (1993) describes as "a truth-seeking encounter. . . . [W]e do not enter into dialogue with the dreamy hope that we will all agree, for the truth is we probably will not. We do not enter into dialogue to produce an agreement, but to produce real relationship, even friendship, which is premised upon mutual understanding, not upon agreement. . . . [A] culture of dialogue creates a context of ongoing relatedness and trust in which self-criticism and mutual criticism are acceptable and valuable parts of the exchange" (pp. 197, 225).

So, what does the term *moral conversation* mean to us? Let us start immediately to correct a few of the obvious caricatures of conversation in higher education. We are not talking about the famous college "bull session" that is often nothing more than a heated series of one-way monologues, prominent for their outrageous opinions and biases. Neither are we talking about a social chit-chat session featuring a polite exchange of aimless chatter and "friendly noises." In contrast to bull sessions and chit-chat sessions, both of which do serve important purposes for young adults at a certain stage in their intellectual and moral development, we mean something far more substantial when we refer to conversation.

Listen to Martin E. Marty (1997): "If argument is impelled by the answers, conversation is moved and marked by the questions. Conversation does not have to be seen as soft, tolerant, muffled and

mumbling, wishy-washy, or nice. But it differs from argument in that it is more open to the use of stories to advance understanding" (p. 155). And here is David Tracy (1987): "A conversation is not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go" (p. 231). Tracy goes further: "Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other[;] . . . be willing to endure necessary conflict, and to change your mind if the evidence suggests it. . . . Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change" (p. 231).

The Greek and Latin etymologies of the word *moral* have to do with ethics, conventions, and customs that emphasize the fundamental worth and dignity of each and every person. The Latin etymology of the word *conversation* is to live with, to keep company with, to turn around, to shift perspective. Thus a moral conversation is literally a manner of living whereby people keep company with each other and talk together in good faith, in order to exchange sometimes agreeable, sometimes opposing, ideas. Above all, however, moral conversation is a mutual sharing of all those wonderful stories that give meaning to people's lives. In most cases, these stories are rich in religious, political, social class, ethnic, and cultural content. Moral conversation obligates each of the participants to listen actively and respectfully to the stories of others, both to understand and affirm them as well as to discover whatever "narrative overlap" might exist among them.

Moral conversation, therefore, starts with the premise that each of the college constituencies must learn how to talk respectfully and openly with one another if they are to avoid going to war with one another. Thus moral conversation begins with an assumption that there is nothing inherently erroneous or immoral about any initial presumption of a particular truth. What *is* erroneous is the attitude that one individual or group possesses *all* the truth, and that

those who disagree do so because they are in error or because there is something wrong with them. Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1997) puts it this way: "If a particular claim to an absolute truth is that which is manifestly obvious, self-evidently right, and intuitively and universally preunderstood, then how is it that its absolute truth and rightness elude the skeptic?" (p. 83). How, indeed! How often has the skeptic or the sincere questioner on college campuses been ridiculed, dismissed, or ignored as someone who is drastically deficient in matters of intellect, faith, politics, and character?

Moral conversation begins with an awareness of the wisdom in Michael Oakeshott's words: "Taste the mystery without the necessity of at once seeking a solution" (1950, p. 424). And David Bromwich's paradoxical words are also to the point: "The good of conversation is not truth, or right, or anything else that may come out at the end of it, but the activity itself in its constant relation to life" (1992, pp. 131–132). Both Oakeshott and Bromwich reinforce our assumption that moral conversation begins and ends in a fondness for mystery. It implies a commitment to cooperative story construction. Moral conversation is aimed at the tireless support of the other person's flourishing. It features an ethic of *do no harm* and *do much good*. It is rooted in an awareness that virtue and vice are social constructs that people must create and act on collectively, but always starting from a base of compassion. Most of all, though, moral conversation is grounded in a love of robust, honest, and respectful interchange for its own sake, absent all the usual off-putting, dialogue-stopping, ideological prerequisites.

Jonathan Sacks expresses our essential need to learn how to engage in difficult conversations. He says, "Bad things happen when the pace of change exceeds our ability to change, and events move faster than our understanding. It is then that we feel the loss of control over our lives. Anxiety creates fear, fear leads to anger, anger breeds violence, and violence—when combined with weapons of mass destruction—becomes a deadly reality. The greatest single antidote to violence is conversation, speaking our

fears, listening to the fears of others, and in that sharing of vulnerabilities discovering a genesis of hope" (2003, p. 2). Even though it is far from a panacea, moral conversation is our proposed antidote to intellectual, emotional, and even physical violence on college campuses. It is a way, albeit flawed and still evolving, to share vulnerabilities, to make connections, and to enlarge and deepen worldviews and perspectives. In our experience, it does indeed help people discover a genesis of hope.

Throughout our book, you will have ample opportunity to see how the theory and practice of moral conversation can lead to genuinely pluralistic, cross-campus dialogues on highly volatile topics. It is our contention that moral conversation is an excellent way to engage in dialogues about controversial topics because it forces participants to come face-to-face with the ubiquity of pluralism in all aspects of their lives. This is a fact of life in the world of the university and in the world at large. This is a condition that all of us in the twenty-first century must accept as a global reality, as the risks and benefits of pluralism grow increasingly apparent both in higher education and throughout the world.

It is necessary for us to acknowledge at this point that in no way do we intend to slight or ignore the vital importance of all types of pluralism that have found a place in the academy today. Issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and many others rightfully deserve the attention they have received on campuses throughout the United States. Often these differences are lumped together under the categories of diversity, cultural pluralism, or multiculturalism. As authors, however, we have decided, after much deliberation, to concentrate much of our attention on three types of pluralism—religion, social class, and politics—that have received considerably less time and space in the public square of higher education in this country. At times, we will certainly note the interplay of cultural pluralism with the three types of pluralism we are examining in our book, but our emphasis, because of space and focus limitations, will tend to be on differences of

religion, social class, and politics. What follows is a selective list of controversial issues focused on these three topics.

A SELECTIVE LIST OF HOT TOPICS
ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

A recent issue of the journal *Foreign Policy* listed what the editors thought were the "world's most dangerous ideas" (cited in "Dangerous Ideas," 2004, p. B2). The editors claimed that these ideas were particularly volatile because "if embraced, they would pose the greatest threat to the welfare of humanity." Here, in brief, are six of those ideas, some of which we will be discussing in the chapters ahead:

1. The "war on evil, based on the idea of evil as a unified entity," embodied in a particular group, nation, religion, or politics

2. "Undermining free will, based on the idea of science's gradual erosion of the concept of self" and, along with it, consciousness, mind, and individual responsibility

3. "Spreading democracy, based on the idea that Western-style democracy is a cure-all for the world's problems"

4. "Transhumanism," based on the idea that it is "bio-technology that will change the nature of the human species" during the next several decades, and there is nothing we can do about it

5. "Religious intolerance," based on the idea that religious differences will intensify during the twenty-first century, resulting in violence on a global level

6. "Hating America," based on the idea that internal and external critics have steadily increased the decibel level of their denunciations of American foreign and domestic policies, thus creating enemies everywhere, both in this country and abroad

It is our strong belief that each of these "world's most dangerous ideas" deserves to be taken out of the closet and discussed openly in honest, robust, and respectful conversation on every college campus in the United States. Why? The obvious academic reason is that any liberal education worth its salt ought to provide numerous opportunities for students everywhere to critically investigate a wide range of contrasting ideas, no matter how dangerous or controversial they might at first seem. All of us in higher education—students, faculty, student affairs professionals, staff, and administrators alike—need to do this in order to enlarge and enrich our understandings of differing points of view. In a rapidly expanding, unavoidably interdependent world, we need to explore more deeply our taken-for-granted assumptions on a variety of political, economic, religious, and cultural issues. What better place to do this than on a college campus protected by the principles of academic freedom and unbiased scholarly inquiry?

Moreover, all of us *together* must find ways to solve those persistent problems that arise out of contrasting, sometimes dramatically colliding, worldviews between and among individuals, groups, states, and nations. As a history of even the recent twenty-first century will confirm, we will need to learn new ways to engage with one another in conversations about the most volatile topics, or else we will inevitably end up doing physical violence to one another. Ignorance or apathy regarding what makes the "other" tick often leads to terrible acts of cruelty among peoples and nations.

How so? Misunderstandings and stereotypes tend to run wild. It is not long before we begin to caricature our opponents as "evil" by attacking their moralities, nationalities, religions, politics, and philosophies. They are evil because "they just do not think or act like us." The final stage in this downward spiral, as hate begets hate, is to wage war with the "enemy." We bomb their buildings, maim and kill their civilians, and, if necessary, plot to assassinate their leaders. We do all this in the name of "God's chosen people," "freedom fighters," "bearers of democracy," or "liberators."

Closer to home in the American university, what follows is a short list of some hot topics related directly or indirectly to the list of the "world's most dangerous ideas" that we have enumerated. These issues, covered almost weekly in such publications as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, have appeared front and center on college campuses throughout the United States during the last few years. The list is far from exhaustive. Each issue is ripe with the potential to become an incendiary, potentially divisive force in the academy, as well as in the world at large. Some of these issues already have split college campuses. However, in spite of the academy's benign neglect of many of them (understandable given the risks of confronting them openly in the face of competing interest groups in higher education), each of these topics, as well as a score of others, refuses to go away. We will be referring to many of these hot topics in the chapters to come, because the issues touch either directly or indirectly on matters of religion, social class, and politics, among others.

We believe that unless university administrators, staff, faculty, student affairs professionals, and students learn how to engage with one another in productive and civil campuswide conversation about just these types of controversies, we risk losing those precious learning opportunities that are always present in such key teachable moments. These are the moments, as disturbing, even terrifying, as they might seem initially, that often result in truly transformative learnings for all the diverse college groups involved. One advantage of learning how to talk *locally* with one another on college campuses about the divisive issues we cite here is to prepare all of us to talk *globally* with those who are different from us about the "world's most dangerous ideas." What follows are several controversial questions related to religion, politics, and social class that need to be openly talked about on college campuses. We frame our observations in the form of questions, not declarative statements, because it is only in the spirit of open-ended questioning that we have been able

to ignite moral conversations on some of these topics on college campuses throughout the United States.

Religion

Secularism

At what point should a secularist point of view accommodate, or give way to, a religious and spiritual emphasis both inside and outside the college classroom? Should a college education be as much a religious as a secular enterprise? Should we make room in a liberal education for the big metaphysical questions? In this regard, survey after survey of first-year college students (upwards of 70 percent) shows that religion and spirituality guide students' lives, even though many of these students remain conflicted and confused about their beliefs. On another note, is there a place for the scientific study of religion? For example, should neuroscientists on secular campuses who might be interested in such research be encouraged to explore whether or not there is something one might call a "God gene"?

More specifically, should biblical creationism and intelligent design receive equal treatment with evolution in the curricula of the sciences and social sciences? How, if at all, should the academy accommodate the religious concerns of evangelical Christians, orthodox Jews, and conservative Muslims, both inside and outside the college classroom? Is it possible to do this and still avoid what happened at the U.S. Air Force Academy, where fundamentalist-evangelical Christian officials were found to be openly proselytizing cadets to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior?

Moreover, ought observant female Muslim students be allowed to wear their burqas, hijabs, or head scarves without being branded by secular feminists as "oppressed" or "brainwashed" by Islamic men? In Turkey, the law prohibits any public expression of religious faith on college campuses, and, therefore, the head scarf is banned,

under the threat of expulsion. In reaction, many Muslim women in that country have gone to inventive extremes to act in defiance of what they consider to be a direct attack on their freedom to practice religion. These women have become highly adept at disguising their veils and head scarves whenever they enter "religion-free zones," such as cafeterias, classrooms, residence halls, and libraries. Will we one day face a similar scenario in the United States given the Islamophobia so rampant throughout the land?

God and Morality

Can a person be good without God? Is religious belief a precondition of, or a hindrance to, moral and ethical behavior? What role, if any, do evolution and sociobiology play in the formation of moral conscience? What moral status, if any, do animals and the natural environment possess? Is it possible to accommodate the variety of moral stances on such inflammatory issues as stem cell research, cloning, and abortion in the American university without stigmatizing any of the respective position holders? At what point does an embryo become a human being vested with rights, legal or sacred or both? From a moral perspective, are we "one nation under God" or "one nation crammed with many mansions of belief," including even the nonbelief known as atheism? Do politicians (and college presidents) need God (that is, need to be theists) in order to be elected to office in the United States, or in order to do good for their various constituencies?

Politics

Political Correctness

How can higher education avoid treating some students unfairly because of what outspoken social justice activists might consider their incorrect politics? Recently, a Republican lawmaker in Pennsylvania has begun to study whether higher education in his state is deliberately discriminating against certain students because of

their conservative political views. The conservative activist David Horowitz has gotten into the act by asking the lawmaker to help him construct an "academic bill of rights" that will make campuses in Pennsylvania more intellectually and politically diverse. A major opponent of the bill, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), rejects the assumption that the professorate needs watchdogs from outside to protect the rights of conservative students. They resent the infringement of their academic freedom.

This raises the question of whether a controversial, left-leaning professor at the University of Colorado, Ward Churchill (2005), has the academic right to publicly compare the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers to "little Eichmanns." Here is what he said: "They [those who worked in the Twin Towers] formed a technocratic corps at the very heart of America's global financial empire—the 'mighty engine of profit' to which the military dimension of U.S. policy has always been enslaved—and they did so both willingly and knowingly. . . . If there was a better, more effective, or, in fact, any other way of visiting some penalty befitting their participation upon the little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers, I'd really be interested in hearing about it."

A related, no less controversial, example involves the rights of students to bring Michael Moore, the anti–Bush administration filmmaker, to a politically conservative college in Utah. This caused quite an uproar among conservative students and alumni, resulting in a precipitous drop in alumni fundraising, a threat to block traffic on the day of Moore's scheduled appearance, bomb threats, and even anonymous death threats to the president of the college (Gravois, 2004). Another example concerns the right of some conservative scholars to advocate for nuclear proliferation as a way to make the world safer for democracy, while other scholars argue just the opposite.

Or, closer to home at our own state university here in Vermont, what ought to be the limits to which dissenters may go in order

to inhibit the free speech rights of such recent speakers on our campus as the political conservative Dinesh D'Souza and the utilitarian ethicist Peter Singer? While on our campus, D'Souza went on the attack against a number of so-called left-wing topics, such as gay marriage, abortion, environmental issues, feminism, and multiculturalism. Singer advocated the ethical case for animal rights, vegetarianism, and aborting a genetically damaged fetus, all the while inveighing against the prima facie Judeo-Christian granting of special moral privileges to human beings only. Upon arriving on campus, both speakers, because of their respective ideologies, were met with pickets, insults, and angry personal vilification by their opponents.

Are issues like these open or closed to academic inquiry because they are too ideological? Is there room in the academy, for example, for professors and students alike to challenge the wisdom of trying to plant our particular version of democracy in the very different cultural and historical contexts of Iraq and Afghanistan? Or is such critical inquiry considered, prima facie, to be un-American and unpatriotic?

One more example should suffice. As we write, the U.S. Senate is only one vote away from passing an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would make it a crime to desecrate the American flag. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is arguing that although no one likes to see our flag abused, it is nevertheless a worse crime to abuse the principles for which it stands: "liberty, justice, and freedom—freedom of conscience, freedom of speech and expression." These are the values declared and protected by our Constitution, "the very values that are threatened by this proposed amendment." Is this a blatant attempt, as the ACLU argues, to restrict our rights—our freedom of speech and expression? To what extent is there real academic freedom on college campuses, not just in the lecture halls and seminar rooms but in the faculty senate, offices of student life, residence halls, student newspapers, campus ministries, and even centers for judicial affairs?

Identity Politics

To what extent should academic subject matter be taught from the perspective of identity politics? Should group identity, whether of race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, or religion, continue to be the dominant, defining framework in the humanities and social sciences? Is it possible ever to get outside one's identity in order to study subject matter with any kind of nonpolitical objectivity? Or is this question itself proof positive of the existence of elitist, white, male, middle-class bias and intellectual privilege in the academy?

Or does it instead offer the opportunity to do some serious scholarly investigation regarding whether any subject matter might, in fact, be context independent, despite the protestations of postmodern scholars to the contrary? In other words, are such questions as these open or closed on their face? Is keeping the issue of the influence of gender identity closed, rather than open, to intellectual scrutiny, for example, likely to prevent the praiseworthy work of the three female chemists who have successfully challenged the hegemony of male-dominated chemistry departments in higher education? The outcome of their activism has been a court order to stop gender bias and provide for more gender equity in hiring practices, not just in chemistry departments but in all the scientific disciplines.

Social Class

Is the historical ideal of upward mobility for every single person in the United States a myth or a reality? Is social class still a powerful sorting force in American life? Is it ever really possible to have a genuine policy of equal access to higher education, given the reality of significant social class divisions that continue to exist in the United States? Is the notion of equal access simply another example of well-meaning, but unachievable, liberal rhetoric? To what extent is the concept of privilege in the United States influenced as much by social class background as by the impact of skin color, gender, sexual orientation, and religious and political affiliation?

Are social class differences still influential in how people vote, what religious groups they belong to, what schools they attend (kindergarten through college), what health care they receive, what jobs they hold, what recreational experiences they enjoy, how long they live, how they groom themselves and what they wear, where they live, who they marry and how they raise their children, and what products they consume? (See Correspondents of the *New York Times*, 2005.)

One issue that continues to plague higher education is this: Are race-exclusive admissions policies hurting or helping some students? Is affirmative action still a viable admissions policy in the academy? Do such policies unwittingly discriminate against poor, working-class students, whatever their color or ethnicity? For example, the recent lacrosse team scandal at Duke University raised as many social class questions as it did issues of race, gender inequity, and sexual violence on college campuses. (All charges in the case were ultimately dropped, the district attorney was fired, and the students were completely exonerated.) Duke is a predominantly middle- to upper-middle-class institution, wherein most sorority and fraternity members come from well-off social groups. The Duke culture is decidedly privileged. It is highly unlikely that a blue-collar, working-class student, of whatever color or ethnicity, would be playing on the Duke University lacrosse team, let alone even be a student there. Lacrosse is a middle- to upper-middle-class sport, and most urban public high schools across the country have no varsity lacrosse teams.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS WE MAKE ABOUT MORAL CONVERSATION

What follows are several pivotal assumptions that we make whenever we engage in moral conversation with our various campus constituencies.

  • *The best way to talk about controversial topics is to converse, not pontificate, about them*.

We have a choice regarding how we converse with others. We can *open* conversational spaces or we can *close* them. We can spend most or all of our time pontificating and lecturing at others, or we can spend our time connecting with them. We can teach or we can preach. In the words of William Butler Yeats we can "fill buckets" or we can "ignite a fire" under them. The best way to draw out participants is to engage in honest give-and-take conversation with them. A genuine conversation that ignites fires relies less on pontification and oratory and more on interchange that is open ended, inquiry based, and civil. Moreover, the outcome is never predetermined, but always up for grabs. Critical thinking, the imparting of information, even group consensus—though certainly desirable achievements in many instances—are not the ultimate proof of whether moral conversation has been effective.

Where religion, social class, politics, and a host of other, traditionally underrepresented topics on college campuses are concerned, the point is to avoid narrowing campus conversations to one-way declarations of our unassailable beliefs to others. It is to realize that no matter how different our views, what we all have in common is the fact that our beliefs are at once true and false, whole and partial, strong and weak, each in their own ways. Thus, we need to turn down the volume of self-righteousness and dogmatic certainty in our moral conversations by turning up our empathy rheostats. We need to practice the golden rule of moral conversation: listen to others as we would be listened to. We need to question and challenge others as we would be questioned and challenged. And, most of all, we must pontificate to others only under the condition that we want others to pontificate to us. One of the authors, Robert, sometimes tells his students that the best way to convince others that we have something important to offer them is by using our ears, not our mouths—by listening, not preaching, to them.

• ***No matter how "outrageous" a point of view might at first appear, we must always grant it the right to be heard and understood.***

Mark R. Schwehn (1993) proposes that four virtues in particular—humility, faith, self-denial, and charity—are necessary for respecting, rather than changing, the views of others.

The first quality is *humility*. This means that we must work hard to attribute the best motive to others, whenever they take the risk to express their thoughts in public. In the name of humility, then, we need to listen carefully to these publicly expressed beliefs and inquiries. We do this because tolerance and compassion begin with an assumption that we are not the only ones who possess wisdom and insight into truth. We, too, tend to stereotype and dismiss. We, too, hold fast to half-truths. We, too, are liable to understate and overstate, or worse, to misstate.

The second quality is *faith*. This means trusting that what we hear from another person is worthwhile in some way, if only and especially to the speaker. In fact, we need to go one step further. We must have confidence that what others have to offer about their particular understanding of a hot topic might even be valuable to us in some way. In the words of Schwehn (1993), we need to "believe what we are questioning, and at the same time question what we are believing" (p. 49). In any campuswide conversation about the hot topics, we maintain that success is measured by how well each of us is able to make the other person look good. To the extent that we try to make ourselves look good, and the other person look bad, then *we* look bad.

The third quality is *self-denial*. This suggests that, at some advanced point in any conversation about the hot topics, each of us will need to reexamine at least a few of the assumptions (and misassumptions) about these topics that we cherish. This includes, of course, our pet unchecked biases and uninformed stereotypes. Moreover, we will need to learn how to surrender ourselves to the possibility that what might be true to others could, at least

in theory, be true to us as well. Self-denial is the inclination to acknowledge that we are willing and able to search for the truth in what we oppose, and the error in what we espouse, at least initially. It means avoiding the opposites of self-denial—arrogance, unwavering certainty, and self-righteousness.

Finally, the fourth quality is *charity*. This is about attributing the best motive and looking for the good in others, especially including in what others are willing to fight and maybe even die for. Charity is about exercising generosity, graciousness, and even, in some instances, affection. This, of course, does not mean ignoring or excusing errors in judgment, faulty reasoning, or one-sided zealotry. Rather it means that any critique or correction must always come from a spirit of kindness and love, motivated always by a commitment to help and not to harm.

Charity is the willingness to build open, safe spaces on college campuses. We can do this by showing all of our constituencies that it is as important to *give* as it is to *take* from conversations about controversial ideas. It is also important to listen respectfully to the views of others, even when they might be in conflict with our own. Open, safe spaces are all about mutual perspective sharing and listening to understand rather than merely to critique or to denounce. With this goal in mind, the focus in campus conversations about difficult topics shifts from issuing edicts of right and wrong to asking genuinely open-ended, clarifying questions that reflect an honest interest in the meaning-making of others.

> • ***The golden rule of moral conversation is a willingness to find the truth in what we oppose and the error in what we espouse . . . at least initially.***

Every single person deserves a presumptive respect for any views expressed. The core responsibility of all participants in moral conversation is to find the truth in what they oppose and the error in what they espouse—before they go on the critical offensive. This means that we need to display empathy and understanding for

others at all times. Moral conversation begins with the resolution to see others as possible allies instead of enemies. It attempts to find common ground and overlapping middles in discussions rather than establishing irreconcilable dichotomies. It progresses from there to mutually constructive encounters. Unfortunately, the traditional model of communication in the academy, particularly in its scholarly publications, has been more adversarial and polemical than reconciling. In contrast, we stress the need to listen to and to read one another with generosity, trying always to attribute the best, not the worst, motives. This works best when people speak, not simply in the voice of an omniscient third person, but from the heart of what they personally believe—from their subjective I.

However, in the interest of intellectual integrity, we also need to listen to one another critically and, whenever appropriate, be willing to change or to modify our own previous positions on controversial topics, given the persuasive force of what we hear. Ethically, we need to commit ourselves to the principle of nonmaleficence (do no harm): at all times, we must refrain from going on the attack only for attack's sake. We must engage in spoken and written language always on the supposition that a genuine attempt to understand another's views is the prerequisite for active engagement with those views.

The ideal end of moral conversation is to reach a point where there are only conversation starters rather than conversation stoppers. At the very least, moral conversationalists must be able to have their say, and when it's time, leave the conversation with their dignity and integrity fully intact

• *What can "kill" moral conversation from the start is to approach a controversial issue with an either-or, all-or-nothing attitude*.

Either-or thinking oversimplifies complexity and dichotomizes diversity. Worse, when it dominates conversations about any of the controversial topics we've described, it frequently polarizes

opposing narratives. Cognitive-behavioral therapists call this either-or thinking, and it is a common characteristic among people who tend to see the world in black or white rather than in shades of gray. These people tend to engage in clear-cut, right or wrong thinking because they experience the world as a series of false dilemmas that are easily and quickly resolvable. They avoid complexity in their world views by attempting to cut through the confusion as if all the controversial issues can be resolved by a simple yes or no. This way, ambiguous intellectual dilemmas are manageable rather than overpowering.

John Stuart Mill, during the nineteenth century, believed that the temptation to become a member of the "moral police" squad was "one of the most universal of all human propensities." Nothing has changed today. There will always be True Believers on college campuses who are positive that they alone know the truth, and they are equally convinced beyond any doubt that their truth will set all the rest of us free if only we will accept their certainties. Such stringent, all-or-nothing views, in our opinion, endanger the future of a pluralistic democracy. Sincere and thoughtful people on all sides—not the extremists or the fanatics—will always have serious, deeply held differences of opinion over such important topics as politics, social class, religion, race, and ethnic diversity. We are advocating, in the words of Tivnan, that each of us try always to "imagine the world from the other side of the barricade" (1995, p. 250).

In our conversational spaces, we encourage our students to take nothing at face value. There will always be alternative interpretations of what is said when people engage in conversations about politics, religion, and social class. Narratives of meaning on each of these topics, as well as on a variety of other controversial issues, are tied closely to the unique experiences of each person. But the words that people use to describe those experiences are limited in number. In conversations about the hot topics, it is inevitable that the same words will take on different meanings for

different people with different narratives and worldviews. Think, for example, of these words: *God*, *church*, *spirituality*, *democracy*, *liberal*, *conservative*, *upper class*, *poverty*, *social justice*, and *wealth*. All of these words, and a host of others that we use in difficult campus conversations, are indeterminate. They carry many meanings, not one clear meaning, and they always insert a degree of inexactness, uncertainty, and vagueness into our conversations. In moral conversations about the hot topics, nothing is ever settled once and for all—but settling on one answer is not the point.

Conversations about pluralism are, by definition, open-ended. Because of that, we encourage students and others to be open-minded, but not so open-minded that nothing is ever challenged. In fact, we urge them to ask clarifying questions whenever the hot issues are being discussed. We urge people to question one another, to ask for more detail or depth of description. Our goal is to get as many people as possible engaged in cross-campus conversation. This helps keep the conversation as a whole fair and reciprocal, and it does not shy away from complexity and ambiguity.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said that the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two or more opposing ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function somewhat normally. We would go one step further. The test of a superior intelligence is to know that, on most political, social class, and religious issues, there are rarely clear and unequivocal opposites. There are only differences of degree and transitions. Looking for what Richard Rorty (1989) calls "shared premises" or "narrative overlaps" is often a better way to proceed in moral conversation about the most difficult and controversial topics. We can only add to Rorty's suggestion that discovering shared premises is impossible without a commitment to what we are calling moral conversation.

In a democracy, it is not by stricture or fiat that complicated social problems get addressed and resolved. It is through hard work, responsiveness, energy, constructing a case in behalf of a perspective, and reaching out to build bridges to others who do

not share that perspective. It is also through generosity, humility, and, above all, realizing that in a pluralistic world, visions of truth and reality are infinitely variable and interpretable and sometimes hopelessly incompatible.

• *On matters of truth about religion, social class, and politics, as in all the other controversial topics, we do not live in reality itself. We live in subjective stories that captivate us about these realities*.

It is self-evidently true, of course, that there is a material, "factual" world out there that all of us must consciously negotiate every day. There are red lights to stop our automobiles, street markers to keep us from getting lost, groceries to buy, faulty plumbing to fix, meals to prepare, houses to maintain, and so forth. There is also a naturalistic world out there that scientists have verified as factual. This world consists of the laws of gravity, quantum mechanics, combustion, natural selection, planetary motion, general relativity, and chemical composition. Yet it is also the case, as cognitive scientists and brain researchers have documented, that "believing is seeing." We are not cameras and tape recorders. About 85 percent of our perceptions of that "factual" world are determined by our mental models, our cognitive screens, built out of our prior experiences and anchored in our preexisting assumptions and values. Each of us experiences and reacts to that world in our own ways.

It does not follow that because there is a material world "out there" that therefore our *truths* are also "out there." Rather, they are our own creations. Truths about religion, social class, and politics are very far from being objectively verifiable—like life-threatening illnesses, crab grass, and black holes in the universe. These truths are not available to everyone in the same, unmediated way. They are largely a product of the way we were raised to think and feel about these topics, embedded as each of us is in our unique containers of contingent meanings.

The problem with trying to locate objective truths in our thinking about religion, social class, and politics is that if they even exist we cannot avoid distorting them with our unique perspectives and value filters. Scientists are able to make empirical truth claims that are based exclusively on a value-free observing, weighing, measuring, testing, replicating, and counting of data. But this is only one version of truth, the naturalistic version. There are several other versions of truth whenever the phenomena are as ambiguous and complex as religion, politics, and social class. The reality is that on these hot topics there is simply no objective, value-free, impartial truth that exists outside of our unique individual and group narratives. Thus, in moral conversation about the hot topics it is crucial to understand that people will often disagree because their truth narratives will be different. (See Appendix E for a more complete analysis of the difference between what one of the authors, Robert, calls *naturalistic* versus *narrativistic* truth criteria and their implications for moral conversation.)

The upshot for moral conversations about the difficult, explosive topics on college campuses, then, is not to give in to the temptations of skepticism or cynicism. Rather, it is to approach these interchanges with curiosity, modesty, humility, compassion, caution, and, when fitting, a sense of humor. It is to realize that nobody ever makes judgments outside a particular truth narrative. When all is said and done, every one of our worldview narratives will remain forever contestable, depending on our unique aesthetic and philosophical perspectives. Thus we need to learn how to engage in difficult conversations with an attitude about pluralism that says, "Let a thousand, even a million, alternative stories bloom. Maybe some of them will correct the deficiencies in my own story, even while confirming its richness."

Joseph Natoli (1997, p. 19) suggests several good questions that we might ask ourselves in our moral conversations about difficult

and controversial topics. In our own words, his questions take this form:

- What is the particular story that I am hearing the other tell about religion, politics, and social class?

- What are the key words that the speaker is using in order to make sense of these topics, and what do these words mean to the speaker?

- What is the best way for me to communicate effectively with people whose worldviews are so dissimilar from my own?

- What psychological variables are affecting the ways I'm hearing what others are saying, especially when I am feeling threatened or confused?

- Is there any way for me to connect with the worldviews and narratives of others when they are so different from mine?

- What exactly is unsettling about what I'm hearing?

In summary, then, we encourage all campus participants in the moral conversation to "find the story" of the other. We believe that whenever we locate the story of the other, we are most likely to find the person who lies behind the persona. Identify those stories that carry intellectual and emotional meaning for someone, and we have gone a long way to making an intimate connection with the other on the deepest level imaginable. Why? Because we are our stories. They define us. They enrich and deepen our meanings. They are the fuel for our fire. They make a passionate claim on our hearts and heads. We live in our stories in such an indelible way that their impact on our lives may very well be mostly unconscious.

This is why moral conversation, as we practice it, is all about evoking (calling forth), understanding (standing with and among),

and affirming (supporting, offering assurance, saying yes instead of no) those defining narratives of meaning that touch all of us. Before we can move on more robustly in the moral conversation to constructively challenge specific interpretations and help others to reveal nuances of meaning in these stories, it is crucial, first, to get the stories out on the floor in an environment free of intimidation.

INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS

We are not romantic idealists who are in complete denial when it comes to the downside of moral conversation. We know full well that our conception of moral conversation is not without its internal contradictions. Thus, we make every effort in our teaching, consulting, and administering to openly acknowledge these contradictions. Getting these out on the floor early (and often, whenever necessary) is a precondition for open, agenda-free interchange on the hot topics. What follows are two of the most glaring internal contradictions. We will speak of additional internal problems in the final chapter.

First, moral conversation is premised on a particular philosophical-political set of assumptions. This is a worldview that celebrates pluralism on postmodern liberal terms. It urges that we allow an indeterminate number of narratives, languages, perspectives, and points of view to flourish on equal standing in the cross-campus conversation. What bothers Stephen Carter (1993), a constitutional law professor and devout Christian, about this postmodern assumption is that it posits an apparent moral equivalence among the multiple takes on what constitutes truth. Also, it (wittingly or unwittingly) excludes strong personal beliefs and commitments from the mix, particularly those we do not share in common. It asks religious believers, for example, to act as if they were nonbelievers or, at the very least, religious nonpartisans. It requires that they bracket their deepest, self-defining faith convictions—remove from the public conversation the most distinguishing aspect of

themselves—in order to inhabit a religiously neutral piece of the conversational space that a liberal democracy requires. Unfortunately, Carter believes, this forced denial of the religious self ends up reinforcing the antiliberal stereotype that when it comes to political matters, liberals want religious faith to remain intensely private and miles removed from the public political process.

Although we hope for exactly the opposite outcome in cross-campus religio-spiritual dialogues, Carter's point is still well taken. We do not seek a denial of any aspect of the self in higher education. In fact, we are hoping that all aspects of the multiple selves that each of us possesses will get a hearing. Still, if we are being honest, we are talking about a moral conversation that celebrates pluralism on *postmodern liberal terms*. For postmodern liberals, truth is always plural. Moreover, it is contextual, conditional, and contingent. In short, truth, for postmodern liberals, is situational, not absolute.

However, for most strong religious believers, to take but one example, truth does have an irreproachable foundation. Although it may be accurate to say that interpretation, context, and preference always bias one's view of truth, this, for them, does not mean that everything is therefore up for grabs. There are morally correct positions to take, positions that rest on objective moorings such as the authority of prophets and messiahs, sacred scriptures, church traditions, time-tested rituals, and official magisterial teachings. These positions exist beyond the subjective reach of preference and perspective. A concept of moral conversation predicated on the assumption that multiple narratives need to circulate freely and that the most we can ever expect is to distill a small nugget of common truth from them misses the point completely. For these individuals, there needs to be a way to talk about difficult issues and topics that ultimately produces a conception of absolute truth on which we can all agree and act. Proponents of moral conversation must understand that to say truth is infinitely contestable and interpretable is to take sides ipso facto against all those who think just the opposite.

We empathize with those who have problems with the putative dominance of a liberal-postmodern worldview in cross-campus moral conversations. But we also know that, in principle, none of us can ever prove, once and for all, that our own favorite truth narratives will be the answer to everyone's problems. However, at a minimum, we can show the utmost respect for other narratives. We can go out of our way to understand them. We can practice empathy and restraint whenever we are tempted to ridicule them. Furthermore, when necessary, we can challenge them in a humble and nonviolent manner. On occasion, some of us might even embrace them. Moral conversation, when working well, can help fellow travelers inch a bit closer to some kind of mutually beneficial coexistence in the face of what can often be a fiercely contested terrain of worldview difference. It does this, not so that people can finally get to the bottom of things (because, on principle, who can determine what is finally the "bottom"), but so that they might find out what, if anything, they have in common.

Second, there is another way that moral conversation is politically biased, and this time the critique comes from the activist left. One of the authors, Robert, remembers a black student activist once saying to him that she found it impossible to relate to his notion of moral conversation because it was too white and too middle class. For her, the "civility movement" is "hung up" on a politics of politeness; thus it completely misses the need to attack at their source the basic social problems that plague America. Moral conversation, in her view, implies a kindness and empathy among opponents trying to deepen understanding of each other's perspective that is unrealistic in the face of tangible oppression and cruelty. Moral conversation is another example of the naiveté implicit in white privilege, she said, because often the only way that black Americans and other oppressed minorities can get heard is when they raise their voices in anger.

There are times, she said, that the enemy does indeed need to be demonized, that evils like racism, sexism, and homophobia must be

named for what they are, and that truth needs to speak harshly to corporate greed and vested interests. Voices need to be strident (for example, the Vietnam antiwar movement), and sometimes violent dissent (for example, an urban riot against racism) is often the only way out of dismal social arrangements. Holstein and Ellingson (1999) argue, "Civility is not the language of urgency. It is not the language of people struggling to put food on the table or to stop the violence in their communities. It is instead the language of relative privilege, available to people who can afford to wait until some common areas emerge from ongoing conversations" (p. 14). To the activist left, moral conversation is nothing more than a tool of those entrenched in power, and this is the group that sets the terms of civil dialogue. The rules of civil discourse privilege the well educated, such as professors, students, and college administrators, while penalizing those who do not care to speak empathically to their persecutors.

As proponents of moral conversation, we are highly sensitive to the charge that our conversational process runs the risk of "cooling out" and "coopting" dissent and righteous indignation. For one, talking and interacting with one another does not ensure that action to correct injustices will occur. It does not automatically follow that conversation will inevitably lead to significant structural changes in hierarchies of institutional oppression and victimization. Even though we are in basic agreement with the black activist's critique of moral conversation, at least as we are thinking about the process here, participants in moral conversation are more concerned with procedure than policy. Their goals are small. Their main agenda is to provide a dynamic educational setting whereby students with different narratives of meaning can come together to talk, to listen, to learn, to question, and, sometimes, to find common ground. Moral conversation can be transformative in the broadest sense of that term. When conversation about the hot topics goes well, it can change the usual forms of adversarial exchange in the academy—expressing self-righteousness, contempt, and

distrust—to new forms of cooperation—seeking common ground, sharing mutual, intellectual energy, and exhibiting compassion and understanding.

In the chapters to follow, we will explore in greater depth the hot-button social issues of religion, social class, and politics on college campuses. We will also suggest several ways to talk about these issues across a wide variety of college audiences and venues. Our goal is to ignite the fire of conversation about difficult topics so that every participant in the moral conversation leaves the experience both affirmed and informed.