

CAREFUL CONVERSATION FIELDWORK ASSIGNMENT

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ABOUT THIS ASSIGNMENT

The following assignment was developed by Dr. Sid Brown as a part of her Asian Religions course at Sewanee: The University of the South. The assignment works to push students' boundaries to have a careful discussion with someone whose religious understandings and practices are different from their own. In class, Dr. Brown takes a full 50 minutes to help students learn how to do deep listening and to understand the kind of conversation she is inviting before giving them the activity guidelines. The students then go out on their own to have a careful conversation with a person they think has different "religious inclinations" than they do, and write a short paper on that experience. The text below is an annotated version of the handout that Dr. Brown uses in her course, including some of the in-class exercises she uses; the annotations help describe how the students are prepared for the work.

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Dr. Brown notes: The class has done a temple visit earlier in the semester that trains them in this three-part form. Having done that fieldwork before, they are more likely to understand this conversation in those terms—as fieldwork. That helps.

The basic requirements of your fieldwork are these:

1. A two-page **pre-fieldwork reflection** about the conversation to come. What do you expect? What do you want to remember to do during the conversation? What are you most excited about? What are you most anxious about? In addition to those questions, please write about what **specifically** most interests, intrigues, delights you about the religions we've studied (specifically, for example, might mean Buddhist karmic theory, a particular Hindu deity—not something vague and ambiguous) or what one moment of learning about Asian religions really stands out for you. (To write this part of your two-page reflection, begin by reading all your class notes, all your notes from your reading, your fieldwork, and reflecting carefully: what has really made your heart sing related to this class? Was it a moment in conversation about a particular topic? Was it a particular concept that just wouldn't leave you in peace? A picture? A story? **This reflection is written before you have the conversation, step 2 below.**)
2. A **careful conversation using the guidelines below, on which notes are taken** immediately afterward.
3. A **four-page reflection on your use of this fieldwork as an opportunity for learning.** The kinds of questions you'll want to address are in this section are:
 - What made this careful conversation exercise worthwhile? How was it worthwhile? What will make it memorable for you in the future? What do you want to keep from it forever?
 - How does this careful conversation exercise relate to religious pluralism in the U.S. as you understand and experience it? (Thus you'll want to **wait** to write the **final** version of this section until we've viewed and read these works. I encourage you, however, to **write drafts as soon as you've had your careful conversation.**)
 - **Be sure to incorporate aspects of the conversation you had** into this write-up. While yes, you should protect your conversational partner's anonymity (so change his/her name in your paper), you also must weave facts and realizations from that conversation into your reflections. Concrete details are what make writing come alive.

THE CAREFUL CONVERSATION: GUIDELINES

Choose someone whose religious inclinations differ significantly from yours or about whose religious inclinations you do not know. Use this opportunity to **get to know someone who is very different from you** or to get to know someone in a different way.

Dr. Brown notes: I'm vague about religious "inclinations" on purpose—it allows their minds to fill in the blank. While I do answer students' questions about this, I also try to keep the ambiguity. Yes, if you're a certain kind of Christian, it's appropriate for you to choose someone who is an atheist or agnostic, as well as someone who is Hindu or Buddhist.... Yes, it's appropriate to talk with someone about whose religiosity you don't know; you can use this opportunity to get to know someone.

The **goals** of the careful conversation include:

- ▶ Very careful listening,
- ▶ Deep learning,
- ▶ Emotional connectedness (to yourself, to your conversational partner),
- ▶ Cultivation of empathy,
- ▶ Interesting exploration, and
- ▶ Awareness of body, emotions, patterns of thinking.

Here's how the conversation should go:

Ask the person you've chosen to help you with this class project about religion – tell them you need about an hour of their time. Make an appointment with him/her during a time and in a space where you will NOT be interrupted. The two of you need very much to focus on this exercise. Distractions are NOT welcome. (Turn off all cell phones, unplug all other phones; turn off computers – do not allow computers to make little noises indicating someone has received an e-mail...)

Read aloud the goals above to your partner. Then, read aloud the following instructions to your conversation partner:

Instructions for Listener/Speaker Roles

Listener:

This is NOT a time for intellectual argument or discussion. This is about listening, emotions, learning, connecting, being aware. The listener reads aloud a question clearly. The listener makes eye contact with that person, breathes from the diaphragm, relaxes, and lets go of any thoughts that come into his/her mind. **S/he gives the speaker at least three minutes to speak. S/he does not interrupt but rather encourages, through eye contact and your commitment to understanding and empathy, the speaker to speak honestly.**

(Whether you think what the person is saying is wrong, right, hateful, or weird, whether you think the person's experience is just like yours or completely different from yours, whether you feel enthusiastic or saddened, **your whole job as listener is to listen deeply and seek to understand and empathize, without interrupting. Though you will have emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations, just let them be.**) Even if the speaker only has 30 seconds worth of words, **continue giving him/her silent, encouraging attention.** And when your conversational partner is listening, that person's job is the same.

Dr. Brown notes: I discourage them from “fish face”—a weird staring and freezing of facial muscles that can come from trying not to show emotion. I ask them to give silent encouragement without over responsiveness.

Speaker:

Listen to the question. Breathe from the diaphragm. Be aware of your body and emotions. Speak as **truthfully** as you can. (Breathe, be aware of your body and emotions). Speak more or wait in silence. Try to answer with the **very first thing** that occurs to you. That's usually the thing that you should focus on, there's usually some real emotional truth to it. As speaker, your job is to speak truthfully, NOT to entertain or amuse. (If your listener isn't listening well, that's the listener's problem, not yours.)

NOTE: the speaker can, of course, refuse to answer any question. What questions that person answers and how s/he answers them are entirely up to that person!

True for Both Speaker and Listener:

All emotions, strong, weak, angry, loving, are fine. All bodily sensations are fine. All thoughts are fine. Just let them be. Waiting in silence, too, is fine.

Process for Careful Conversation

- ▶ Listener asks the first question and speaker has three minutes to answer.
- ▶ Then the speaker becomes the listener, s/he asks the first question and the new speaker has three minutes to answer.
- ▶ Then you do the same with each of the other questions. (So you ask question one and your conversational partner answers number 1, and then your conversational partner asks you question 1 and you answer, etc.)
- ▶ Do not read the whole list at once as you will lose the spontaneity that makes this exercise powerful.
- ▶ Additionally, do NOT read these questions before you conduct the interview, because if you read them before the interview, you will not be as spontaneously honest in the interview. Thus why I put them on another page—to help you resist reading them beforehand.
- ▶ While most find this structure works, some students have found it helpful for the person they're with to answer all of the questions one by one first before the student answers them all, one by one. This is fine – just do what's right for your situation

And remember that all emotions, strong, weak, angry, loving,...are fine! Similarly, bodily sensations and thoughts are fine. And that **the answers to these questions should come first from your emotions**, not your intellect.

NOTE: this exercise is almost always really awkward. Awkward is OK if awkward is in the service of learning, surely! A few moments of awkwardness, or even a whole hour of it, is not a big deal.

Classroom Practice: Mindfulness of Body and Emotions Exercise

Dr. Brown notes: In this exercise, I ask the students to sit comfortably and erect and close their eyes. I call their attention to their breathing and then to the whole of their bodies, sometimes incorporating a short systematic relaxing of their bodies from head to toe. I ask them to attend to their own responses to the questions I ask—inviting them to answer the questions in their minds with specifics and to keep returning their attention to their bodies and to their emotions, asking themselves “what bodily sensations do I have?” and “what emotions are arising?” Then I ask the following questions, one at a time, so that there are 2-3 minutes for each question. I periodically remind them to attend to their bodies and emotions.

Questions:

- ▶ What is your mother's maiden name?
- ▶ What is your favorite dessert or treat?
- ▶ Consider a time you've felt safe (recently?)—when you've felt safe and loved. Where were you? Who were you with? What happened?
- ▶ Consider a specific time (recently?) when you have been very angry or very hurt. Be specific—where were you? Who were you with? What happened?
- ▶ Consider the mode of transportation you usually use.
- ▶ Student pair-share (talk with a partner in the class): What did each of you notice during this exercise?

Dr. Brown notes: The purpose of this exercise is to help them be aware of how large and varied their own bodily and emotional responses to things can be and how being aware of these responses can allow one to listen to others more carefully....to be able to sit with one's own responses, note them, and not be swept away by them... to be able to repeatedly return to focus on what another is saying. Occasionally a student will notice that the emotions arose during one question did not utterly subside before the next question came, and they found that those earlier emotions seemed to inform their answers to the later question. This is an ideal comment as it demonstrates how much is likely to be going on at any particular time as one tries to attend to something.

Classroom Practice: Short Careful Conversation

Dr. Brown notes: For this part, I invite the students to pair up and I quickly assign who will be the first speaker and who the first listener ("whoever has the shortest hair or the darkest shirt is the first speaker"), and I tell them I will alert them when it's time to switch roles. I remind the students that sitting in silence is OK. Then I ask a question or two and give the person 2 minutes; then I stop them and have them switch roles and ask the question or two again. Then I stop them after 2-3 minutes and invite them to discuss in pairs what they noticed as they did this exercise—"What was that like for you?" Then we discuss the whole thing at the all-class level, and I answer questions. What question(s) I ask in this practice session very much depends on the group and how that group seems that day.

Questions to consider for classroom pair and share:

- ▶ Talk about the first time you became aware that the color of your skin was considered different from the color of someone else's.
- ▶ Talk about the first time you became aware of 'racial differences.' How did you feel? How do you feel now talking about it?
- ▶ What's your fondest early memory in relation to your [race/gender/ethnic group]?
- ▶ What's a painful early memory in relation to your [race/gender/ethnic group]?

Confidentiality

Dr. Brown notes: I emphasize to students that this assignment is a good opportunity to practice developing the virtue of trustworthiness, a virtue that is good for one's private life (friends, relatives) as well as in one's work life (colleagues, etc). I mention that being able to keep another person's confidence is an important part of being a good person. I also talk a bit about how we sometimes/often use what others tell us to get social credit...so I might use what someone told me in order to get the attention of someone or to amuse them, and I point out that that's not so good. It uses someone else's life in order to increase our social power. This careful conversation is an opportunity to be very careful about confidentiality—if the other person does not want anything about this to go anywhere, it shouldn't go anywhere. Yes, they have to write a 4-page paper, and yes, they have to include details in that paper, but I tell them to use a pseudonym for the person they interview.

What you and your conversational partner share together is confidential--as confidential as you each want it to be! You may and probably should use a pseudonym (fake name) for your partner when you do your write-up. You should each agree NOT to share what you hear with others or at the very least to be careful with what you share!

How to Handle Two Possible Problems that May Arise

Dr. Brown notes: It's a good thing to casually warn students about these problems. I also try to offer suggestions for how to respond.

Situation 1:

Occasionally (once in 50 interviews or so) a student interviews someone who values the opportunity to share his/her religious perspective more than he/she values the structure of this exercise. Such a person may refuse to allow the interviewer to speak. He/She might disregard some of the questions utterly. The interviewer may feel shut down, silenced, maybe even abused. (After all, they thought they'd both agreed to something and now that person is breaking the agreement.) If this happens, I suggest you try to get things on track once or twice, but if that doesn't work, *relax*. Relax and do everything you can to appreciate the person in front of you despite the challenges you are facing. *Relax*. It is (arguably, I guess) almost always more important to treat the person in front of you with love and respect than it is to do anything else. So love and respect this person. It may help you to relax if you focus on your breathing or remember something about this person that you admire.

Situation 2:

Only very very rarely (once in 100 interviews or more) a student interviews someone who simply does not open up and relax and enjoy the honest, careful conversation. The person may avoid eye contact, fidget, and not speak. Or they may seem to be lying or avoiding. The interviewer may feel anxious, frustrated, or annoyed (because, after all, the person agreed to be interviewed and the paper that comes from the interview is for a grade). If this happens, I suggest you try to get things back on track by saying something like, "I get the feeling you are anxious about this conversation. What's going on?" Often just listening (without interrupting!) to why the person is anxious can solve the problem. After the person explains, perhaps you can reassure the person – that the interview is confidential, that you are steadfastly working

to avoid judging the person, whatever reassurance you can offer that is true. You can then resume the interview. If, however, the interview remains exceedingly difficult and not productive, do what you can to appreciate what you have and the time you have together and end the interview (“I’m sorry, but I think its best if I end this interview now”). Schedule another interview with someone else.

CAREFUL CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

Dr. Brown notes: I advise students in general NOT to view the questions (which are located on the very back page of the instructional handout) before they have the conversation because then the questions are fresh for both participants—the situation is fair and the questions fresh. But I also tell them that if they are very anxious people and suspect the anxiety will get in the way of their conversation, they might be better off reading the questions before the conversation.

Remember to read aloud the goals on page one of this handout and the instructions on page two of this handout. Then each of you, beginning with your conversational partner, answers the following questions, one by one, with three minutes, at least, for each one. Even if your partner only has 30 seconds worth of words, **continue giving your partner silent, encouraging attention.** Breathe from the diaphragm, make eye contact, and wait. Don’t interrupt the silence prematurely! Don’t interrupt each other! Just listen when it’s your turn to listen. And breathe. And remember that all emotions, strong, weak, angry, loving... are to be honored! And **that the answers to these questions should come first from your emotions,** not your intellect.

In answering, try to answer with the very first thing that occurs to you. That’s usually the thing that you should focus on, there’s usually some real emotional truth to it.

- ▶ What’s your **fonddest and oldest memory related to your own religion or your secular ethics/values?** (For someone not been exposed to a religious tradition early, the phrasing (“secular ethics/values”) is hard. How about: What’s the first time you realized in a pleasant way that you had your own set of values or ethics?) Why is this such a fond memory?
- ▶ What’s your **most painful (and oldest?) memory** related to your own religion or your secular ethics/values? What makes this memory so painful?
- ▶ What does your religion or your secular values give you that you would not otherwise have?
- ▶ When was the **first time you remember learning there were other religions besides your own or other types of your own religion or secular ethics/values?** What happened to make you learn and how did that make you feel?
- ▶ **Of what in your own religion or secular ethics/values are you most proud, or what do you most like in your own religion or secular ethics/values?** (This can be a value, a story, a person, an historical incident or inclination....anything!)
- ▶ What would you like **never said again about your own religion or secular ethics/values?**
- ▶ What in a religion or secular value/ethics system **other than your own do you most like?** (For the student in this class, please include something about one of the Asian religions you’ve learned.)

Dr. Brown notes: I “require” students to use a timer (app on their phone these days) so that each person has at least a full 3 minutes to answer each question—nothing less. I usually demonstrate in class how awkward it can be for us to look into someone’s eyes and sit there in silence when a person has said what they think they want to say. I emphasize, however, that the silent encouragement we give another person as we allow for the full three minutes is an essential part of the exercise—people need to be allowed to find their way to an honest answer to each question and sometimes that takes time. I suggest that they will do more difficult things in their lives, so in comparison this is not such a big deal.

ACTIVITY ASSESSMENT

Dr. Brown notes: This exercise is rich; students remember it and learn a lot from it—it really gives them things to chew on. Assessing it is challenging because there can be a really serious and deflating disconnect between how much they learned (and how valuable they thought the exercise was) and a grade based on how well they wrote the experience up in 4 pages. I could simply explain that problem and invite them to that lifelong challenge, but what I usually do is be gentle on the grading of this assignment.