

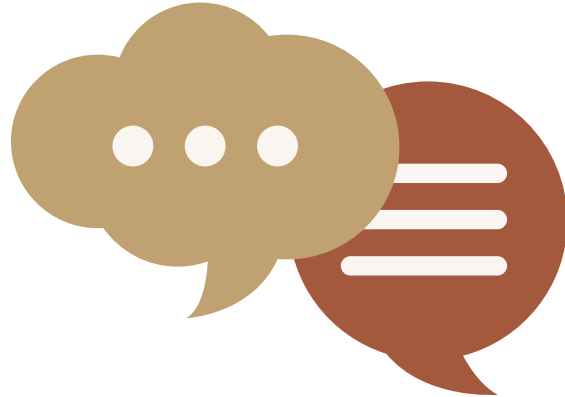


# Embracing Tension to Build Bridges of Understanding

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# Abstract

Polarization around the world is growing and becoming more hostile, preventing the development of a more just world. As we avoid the discomfort of tense conversations that can evoke strong emotions and opinions, our circles of discussing justice shrink and become similar to our own, continuing a cycle of greater polarization. In the Mercy World, we have the opportunity to embrace these tense conversations to build bridges of compassion, empathy, and understanding. This research from the wisdom of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy, principles and practices of Nonviolent Communication and Courageous Conversation, and the advocacy model of Revolutionary Love, aims to provide an approach to informal, tense or polarizing conversations with people we can encounter in our everyday lives. Based on my research, I provide a conversation and reflection guide to encourage and support intentional conversations so that we may continue to learn and grow as better listeners and storytellers.

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*"I am convinced that [people] hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other, and they don't know each other because they don't communicate with each other, and they don't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other."*

*Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

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# Introduction

Political and social tensions have grown throughout the world, especially in the United States of America. The United Nations 2023/2024 Human Development Report describes a global gridlock due to the growing polarization that impedes the ability to engage in global and personal interdependence. This impacts the collaboration to implement solutions that promote dignity and justice.

One specific cause of this polarization cannot be pinpointed; however, factors include identity attachment to ideologies, increased access to information and disinformation through digital media, and increased disrespect and mistrust between and among leaders and political parties. In every region of the world, governments are increasing the dissemination of false or misleading information and statistics. Additionally, figureheads have increased the use of charged and accusatory approaches to gain support. As digital media grows, the biased perspectives of increasing extremism spread quickly and are easily put in front of susceptible audiences.

In addition to our governments, educational, religious, and economic institutions are impacted by polarization and even adding to the bias and misinformation. While our institutions are failing us, we must take the initiative ourselves to build bridges across polarization; yet, it is most often culturally frowned upon to bring up topics that could cause tension among those we regularly interact with, especially if we have not confirmed that we already agree. Therefore, if we are only consuming information and media we agree with and engaging only with institutions and people we agree with, we create an insular experience of sharing perspectives. This affirms and hardens our perspectives, rather than making us more open and flexible. As we narrow our story sharing, we lose the understanding and compassion we could have for another's story that might differ. Then our beliefs, values, and approaches to cultivating justice come from our experiences or fears only. If we are unable to engage with thoughts and experiences different from our own, we are unable to find common ground and creative solutions that promote justice and liberation for all.

What if, instead of avoiding discomfort due to polarization, we embraced the opportunity to engage in conversations about justice and the issues we care most about? We could invite conversations that allow us to grow to a deeper sense of understanding, not necessarily to change opinions, but to include more perspectives in our solutions. Cambodia did this after the devastating effects of war and structural violence through the Win-Win Policy of 1998. Though it took many years and support from other countries

and the United Nations, the political leaders agreed that all parties, regardless of past atrocities, needed to be heard and included in the conversation for true peace for the country. This policy outlines the expectations that the more powerful party will reach out for negotiations, parties will be courageous in trusting the perceived enemy, recognizing the rights and needs of all, centering each one's dignity, and the need for patience and compassion to strengthen healing. The dignity of each individual and party is recognized and honored through this policy. Even with the enormity of the harm previously inflicted, peace and reconciliation have been made possible by the collaboration through this policy.

While we may not be able to bring peace to an entire country in our everyday lives, we can bring peace to our communities and everyday interactions through conversations with compassion. If we can be brave enough to embrace the tension of disagreements to seek understanding, we can find common goals and values that bring us together. There are many guides, curricula, and models for having structured conversations about equity and justice. However, they require extensive training or buy-in from all parties involved in the conversation or are designed for very specific topics. While useful in some situations, there is a need for support for the frequent, casual conversations for regular encounters with friends, family, coworkers, and even our leaders or power holders, such as the family member who makes a racist remark, the coworker who feels strongly about perpetuating violence, or the leader who introduces a policy othering and harming immigrants.





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# Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication is a formal process and practice of communication led by compassion and empathy to express and care for one another's needs. The founder, Marshall B. Rosenberg PhD, described Nonviolent Communication as an opportunity to respectfully understand another's experience rather than to provide advice, reassurance, or our perspective. Nonviolent Communication is particularly useful with interpersonal conflict as the focus is on feelings and needs; however, the principles are useful in our approach to tense conversations.

Throughout Nonviolent Communication, we are invited to be aware of our consciousness and presence in the conversation, recognize our thoughts and feelings, choose words and body language free of criticism and blame, and attend to the power dynamics at play. We must be connected to ourselves, especially as we engage in polarizing and tense conversations. If we are not aware of ourselves, we cannot be aware of and engaged in the conversation. This includes recognizing our thoughts and feelings before the conversation and as they emerge throughout the conversation. By recognizing our thoughts and feelings, we know what to communicate using precise language to express ourselves. Along with intentional language, we should consider our body language. Using nonviolent verbal and physical communication includes avoiding terms, tones, posture, or gestures that imply criticism, harm, guilt, shame, blame, or force. Rather than raising voices or pointing fingers, we use communication that shows empathy and compassion such as expressing perspectives with "I" statements and relaxed body language. Finally, Nonviolent Communication brings up the question of power dynamics as these can impact the content and style of our communication. The power dynamics can be influenced by the relationship between the participants, leadership positions, privileges, etc. While we cannot change the existing power dynamics, we can attend to them by inviting more input from those with less power, speaking our truth to

*"Peace requires something far more difficult than revenge or merely turning the other cheek; it requires empathizing with the fears and unmet needs that provide the impetus for people to attack each other. Being aware of these feelings and needs, people lose their desire to attack back because they can see the human ignorance leading to these attacks; instead, their goal becomes providing the empathic connection and education that will enable them to transcend their violence and engage in cooperative relationships."*

*Marshall B. Rosenberg*

power, and preparing for the potential of unfavorable outcomes.

These processes and principles of Nonviolent Communication practice can help to open the doors to a deeper understanding and space for compassion and empathy. While it is designed for the expression of needs, it is a helpful tool in understanding how we can move through conversations mindfully to preserve the inherent dignity of all those involved.

## Nonviolent Communication Process

The conversation structure provided by Nonviolent Communication begins with observations. We notice our internal narrative and bring awareness to our consciousness and presence in the conversation. We begin the conversation by stating our observations of another's actions using language that is free of criticism and blame. The sentence may begin with "I notice.." and finish with specific behaviors from our perspective.

Next, we move to sharing our feelings. It is important that we separate our thoughts from our feelings at this stage. Our thoughts are narratives that we form around the behaviors observed. Feelings are usually felt within the body and do not involve others, although they arise in response to others' actions. For example, adjectives such as "let down" or "rejected" include an assumed action rather than feelings that could be "heartbroken" or "frustrated." We communicate our feelings rather than thoughts to share our own experiences rather than assuming or projecting intent. A helpful phrase here is "I feel..." while avoiding "I feel that..."

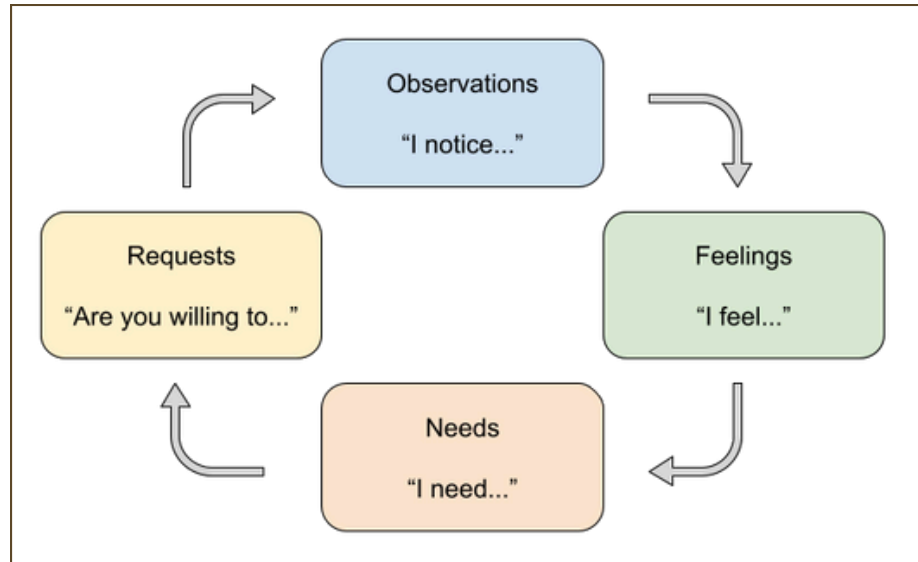
Then, we move to the expression of our needs. Nonviolent Communication proposes that each area of conflict arises due to a need that is not being met. We can clearly communicate our needs so that others can support us in meeting those needs. When communicating our needs, we simply state them rather than asking or demanding them to be met. We state them with an understanding that when our needs are met we can better meet others' needs in a reciprocal relationship. Stating your needs can be a continuation of the feelings sentence such as "I feel... because I need..."

In the last step of Nonviolent Communication, we make a request to help fulfill that need. This is done in the form of a question and should be specific and actionable. The request should be phrased positively and as a question rather than a demand. For example, "Are you willing to spend 5 minutes sharing about our days without our phones?" Making the request is a vulnerable experience because we must remain open to the possibility of "no." If we hear "no" or another answer that does not satisfy our needs, we can begin the Nonviolent Communication conversation process again with observations or allow the



other to share their perspective in the same way: sharing their observations, feelings, needs, and requests as visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Nonviolent Communication Process



## Nonviolent Communication Principles

Nonviolent Communication includes principles that form the attitudes towards our approach to engage in conversation that allows us to truly hear the perspective of another. At the core, is the recognition that all human beings have needs contributing to our experience of dignity. The categories of universal human needs identified by Nonviolent Communication are sustenance, safety, love, understanding or empathy, creativity, recreation, sense of belonging, autonomy, and meaning. When engaging in polarizing conversations, we can focus on understanding what the need is that the other person is communicating, even if it does not seem like the focus of the conversation. The lack of our needs being met or the fear that they will not be met is often the root cause of conflict. Finding the needs allows us to dig deeper into the tension and figure out the true reason for a disagreement. For example, when someone is describing their desire for rigidity in the immigration process, is there an underlying need that they have to feel safe or a sense of belonging?

Nonviolent Communication guides us to cultivate connection. Before attempting to problem solve, we must have a relationship in this conversation that provides a sense of trust. In the same example of someone describing immigration, we can find a connection to build trust. Maybe you have the same desire to feel a sense of belonging and can talk about an experience of finding belonging in a diverse space that includes immigrants even though you had a fear of not belonging. Additionally, we build connections by

contributing to others' needs because we recognize their dignity and extend empathy, allowing them to be seen and feel valued.

Recognizing our inherent interdependence is another key principle of Nonviolent Communication. When we can recognize and support other's needs, we develop a deeper sense of compassion and even a greater recognition of our own needs. We are connected to others not only in the sense that we need each other to function as a society with a variety of jobs, but also that the physical, emotional, and mental well-being impacts one another in a ripple effect. To take care of one another is to take care of ourselves.

While others share their needs, Nonviolent Communication invites us to avoid making judgments of right and wrong or good and bad. Rather, we are encouraged to use internal dialogue and conversational language in harmony with our values. For example, we might say "War is wrong," and instead we can say "I value peaceful conflict resolution." By removing judgment in our conversation, we are able to honor the stories and experiences of others, even if we disagree. This helps to diminish the potential of escalating from a conversation to an argument or shutting down in the conversation.

Finally, Nonviolent Communication invites us to protect the use of force to only be used when someone is compromising safety. It is not to be used for punishment or to cause suffering. Violence exacerbates harm and diminishes the key purposes of Nonviolent Communication: compassion and empathy.

## Nonviolent Communication Example

Mercy Volunteers, in partnership with the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, compassionately serve in the spirit of mutuality while growing spiritually and living simply in community with one another. While living together in community, Mercy Volunteers encountered conflict around how they were spending time together. The first volunteer, Emma, was frustrated that her community mate, Olivia, seemed to avoid spending time with her recently. Emma took some time to reflect on her frustration to bring awareness to her thoughts, feelings, and needs. She identified that she was feeling lonely and needed to spend time feeling more connected to her community. Emma invited Olivia to a private conversation to discuss her needs knowing that the power dynamic is balanced rather than having all community members together where it might feel that Olivia is outnumbered, shifting the power dynamic.

Emma said, "I noticed that we have not been spending time together this week. I feel lonely because I value our relationship and need to feel connected. Would you be willing to spend time together crafting and catching up about our weeks?" Emma made an

observation, stated her feelings, expressed her needs, and made a request. She used specific language that did not place blame or accusations and did not make assumptions about Olivia's intentions. She reminds herself to stay attentive to the conversation and prepare to accept whatever response she receives.

Olivia responded, "I would be glad to spend time with you. I have been spending more time alone this week. I feel burnt out from my service work and need to rest. Can we limit the crafting and catch-up time to 30 minutes so that I can still have time to be alone and rest?" Olivia responded by encouraging their connection and interdependence while also communicating her feelings, needs, and requests. She does not become defensive of her time with forceful verbal or body language.

Emma agreed that 30 minutes of crafts and talking would fulfill her need for connecting and would be able to help meet Olivia's need for time to rest alone. By using the Nonviolent Communication process and principles, Emma and Olivia were able to hear one another's feelings and develop a sense of compassion and empathy for each other's needs. Without engaging in defensive, accusatory, or argumentative conversation, they maintained the respect of one another's dignity.

### **Practices from Nonviolent Communication for the Conversation Guide**

- Presence throughout the conversation
- Avoid judgments of right and wrong communicated through body language and words
- Attend to power dynamics
- Listen and communicate the underlying needs to develop empathy and compassion
- Cultivate connection
- Recognize interdependence

### **Questions from Nonviolent Communication for the Reflection Guide**

In what ways was I present to the conversation? Where did my attention drift?

What thoughts or feelings did I notice within myself during and after this conversation?

Did I use words and body language that showed my desire to understand rather than judge?

What were the power dynamics of those involved in the conversation? How might that have impacted what was expressed or not?

What needs did I hear from the other person(s)? How did I express and connect to my values? How was I able to find and build connection and trust in this conversation?

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# Courageous Conversation

Courageous Conversation is a protocol developed by Glenn Singleton for engaging in interracial dialogue about persistent racial disparities within educational settings. These conversations encourage the uncovering of personal and institutional bias with the expectation of experiencing discomfort. Using agreements, conditions, and a conversation compass, it engages all participants, sustains the

*We need to Really Talk*

*"We need to really talk...  
As though no one is judging  
but everyone is listening....*

*Don't just like me, ask me, make me question....  
I am not saying we're going to move the world,  
but we can provoke a shift in our minds,  
Moving away from ignorance, discrimination,  
and the belief that  
we understand without experiencing."*

*Janaka Lagoo*

conversation through discomfort, and deepens the conversation for authentic understanding and meaningful actions. Courageous Conversation recognizes conversations as an opportunity for learning and growth. Although Courageous Conversation is designed to be planned conversations between those moving through the anti-racism training in school settings, the practices are useful in most conversations on tense and polarizing topics.

## Courageous Conversation Agreements

Courageous Conversation begins with four basic agreements where all participants agree to the foundations of the conversation to create a safe space where all can be authentic and heard. First, participants make the personal commitment to remaining intellectually, relationally, emotionally, and morally engaged regardless of the engagement of others. With tense conversations, especially around race, most people will naturally disconnect from the topic to avoid the discomfort. Engaging in the conversation is required to develop understanding.

Next, the participants agree to speak their truth. It requires courage and vulnerability to share your honest truth about your thoughts, feelings, stories, and perspectives. It can feel easier to stay silent or change our truth to maintain external peace; however, this

does not help us build bridges. It disrupts our internal peace and maintains the existing biases or polarized perspectives. This can be seen in the case of racial “color blindness,” which is the false narrative of “not seeing color” or not acknowledging race. By not addressing the truth of racial disparities, we erase the realities of the implications of racism and the cultural and personal identities related to race. Speaking our truth is the opportunity to bring unknown or ignored realities to the conversation.

Participants of Courageous Conversation agree to and expect to experience discomfort. Engaging in conversations about tense topics is uncomfortable. The discomfort is the beginning of the journey to healing, solutions, and bridges. An openness to discomfort is something we might even have to work through before engaging in a conversation with tension. If we can accept the discomfort and enter into a conversation prepared to embrace that feeling, we can work through the emotions and experience of the conversation itself. It is helpful to build courage for the conversation by revisiting the purpose, recalling that it is necessary, and recognizing that our societal polarization and conflict are not personal. Additionally, it is helpful to note that other participants in your conversations might not be prepared or have the capacity to be open to the discomfort. In this case, it would be worthwhile to revisit the conversation at a later time, as a conversation that avoids discomfort will not be fruitful in our goal to understand one another as participants can placate or shut down, thus preventing honest dialogue.

The last Agreement for participants of Courageous Conversation is to expect and accept non-closure. It is common in a tense conversation to not reach an agreement or find common ground. The challenge is to accept this. To do so, we can enter the conversation with the desire to understand more about others’ experiences, values, and opinions. We don’t have to understand fully, but striving to understand more will allow us to find more common ground and reduce polarization. We will not be able to solve injustices or inequities by coming to a solution in one conversation. Building bridges takes time, and multiple conversations including a variety of topics and many people may be required. We cannot find a quick solution, so we can be at peace knowing that this conversation most likely will not have closure.

These four Agreements allow us to establish a safe, honest, yet challenging conversation space. While Courageous Conversation requires all parties to engage in these Agreements, we might not be able to name these Agreements with those we encounter in our everyday lives; however, we can use them as an agreement with ourselves in our approach to tense conversations. We can choose to be engaged, speak our truth, embrace discomfort, and accept non-closure.

## Courageous Conversation Conditions

After establishing the Agreements, Courageous Conversation provides Conditions or an outline of a conversation. These are very specific to conversations about race; however, there are themes that will be helpful in our tense conversations for bridge building. The Conditions are provided in a specific order that moves the conversation through engagement, sustaining, and deepening.

To engage the conversation, the participants will establish a racial context that is personal, local, and immediate, and isolate race while acknowledging the diverse factors and conditions that contribute to the problem of racism. The Conditions of engagement connect the issue of racism to us personally. For our conversations to build bridges, we can direct our attention and conversation to focus on a specific topic of justice such as immigration, housing, water access, etc. Then, we focus on sharing our personal experiences and ask about others' experiences, beliefs, and feelings related to the focus of our conversation. As we share our experiences, we can use storytelling to provide authentic and meaningful experiences to the conversation. Storytelling engages people as they are more open and receptive to your personal experiences than the data or secondhand stories you might recite because they tend to sound like you are trying to convince them of something. Storytelling is an opportunity to share experiences and understand or relate to one another. This keeps the conversation purposeful and relevant to the participants.

Next, participants engage in a variety of racial perspectives and monitor the Agreements and Conditions to sustain the conversation. In engaging multiple perspectives, Courageous Conversation normalizes the social construction of knowledge, which impacts our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and actions. There is recognition that the knowledge, beliefs, and opinions we hold are constructed based on our socialization: our experiences and exposure. This means that each person has a unique perspective on the topics of conversation. We can mindfully inquire about the stories people hold to understand and engage them in conversation. Sometimes we might feel in a tense or polarized conversation a sense of having more information or more valuable input, which can cause us to dominate the conversation; however, it is crucial to maintain a balance of sharing perspectives. Not only is this more respectful, but it also allows us to hear the needs and concerns of the other and better connect with them in our stories. At the same time, we monitor the conversation to determine if it can continue as is or if it needs to shift, take a break, or end for now. Courageous Conversation uses a Compass to do this. The Compass monitors how we are engaged in the conversation morally, intellectually, emotionally, and relationally. The Compass is a tool we can use to be attentive to where the conversation is at any given point. If it leans heavily to one area, the conversation needs adjustment. We will further examine the Compass later on pages 11 and 12.

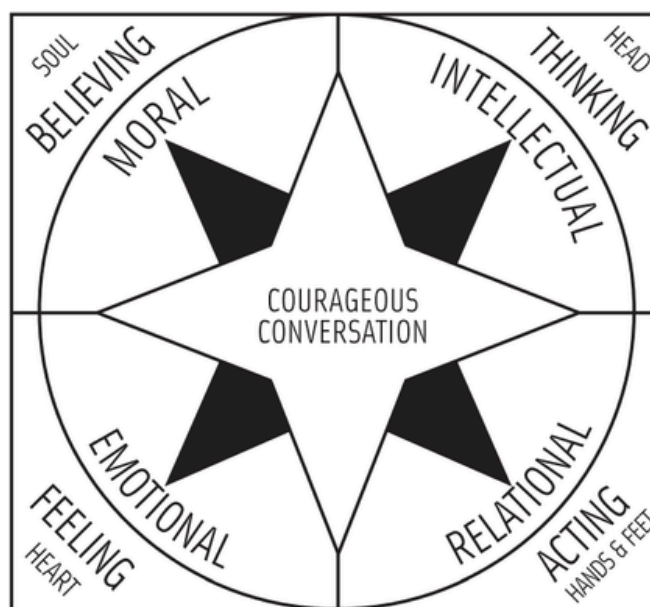


In the last of the Conditions, Courageous Conversation participants deepen the conversation by developing and agreeing to a working definition of race and then examine the white privilege to decenter whiteness from the institution. By naming and explaining the issues at hand, even when it is not race and white privilege, we deepen into the difficult pieces of the topics to understand and challenge our own and others' beliefs. If we are to build bridges of understanding, we must understand how our own experiences have influenced our beliefs. By allowing our perspectives to be challenged, we can reshape our perspectives to find avenues for building bridges or we can be affirmed to find a stronger call to justice.

## Courageous Conversation Compass

The Courageous Conversation Compass (Figure 2) is a tool to use during conversations to navigate and better understand the perspective of ourselves and participants. Each quadrant represents a direction in the way that we respond to and engage with information about racism, or other tense topics of polarization. In the moral quadrant, we are in touch with a deep-seated belief that we feel in our soul or gut. In this quadrant, it can be hard to justify or even communicate the "why" for the belief. In the intellectual quadrant, we are engaging with our thoughts and rationale. We search for or use data and statistics to understand the information and experiences of others. In the relational quadrant, we are action-oriented and connect with behaviors. We might share previous actions or offer actions as a solution. In the emotional quadrant, we are in touch with the feelings of the heart. Often these feelings generate a physical or internal sensation. Each quadrant helps us to see the direction each person, including ourselves, is coming from in conversations.

Figure 2: **Courageous Conversation Compass**



Courageous Conversation uses four steps in using the Compass to navigate conversations:

1. Find yourself: Where are you entering the conversation? In which quadrant do you experience this topic of conversation?
2. Get centered: What quadrants have you not yet experienced on this topic? How can you deepen your experience and understanding in this conversation to reach those quadrants?
3. Locate others: In which quadrant do I see those engaged in this conversation with me coming from?
4. Meet others where they are: As I share my stories to explain my perspective, how can I meet people in the quadrant where they are?

This Compass tool is especially useful when it seems that we don't understand each other in conversation. Maybe we are simply speaking in different quadrants that connect with different parts of our being. When we embrace tense topics, we can work to build bridges by meeting people where they are in the compass.

## Courageous Conversation Example

Loyola University of Chicago, in response to the call of Pope Francis for all to participate in the Synod on Synodality, has engaged in the Building Bridges Initiative. The initiative invites students from universities across the world to engage in facilitated conversations and discernment about concerns in their region. Students then choose representatives to share their thoughts with Pope Francis, who responds. Recently, during the meeting with Pope Francis and the representatives for the Asia Pacific region, the students showed a great deal of courage. While they were not engaged in a formal Courageous Conversation about race, their example contains insights into how Courageous Conversation's elements can be useful in other settings and conversations.

In this encounter with Pope Francis, a student from the Philippines named JLove expressed his community's concerns. He shared the discrimination his Muslim peers experience due to colonization, lack of education, sexism, and stereotypes. He vulnerably shared his own story of his mother who was not allowed to get divorced, his experience of harm as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and the limited access to mental healthcare. All of these have led to stigmatization and being outcast and bullied. JLove also bravely asked Pope Francis to allow divorce and to stop using offensive language against the LGBTQIA+ community. These requests were in relation to the Catholic Church's stance on divorce and Pope Francis' recent uses of a homophobic slur. Pope Francis responded to JLove, along with others, focusing on the gifts women bring, the need for healthcare systems that do not discriminate, and that discrimination can be eliminated by closeness and proximity to others.

In this brief encounter, JLove exhibited several characteristics of Courageous Conversation. He engaged Pope Francis by sharing true stories of the harm and impact of the Catholic Church in his region. Surely, there was discomfort in this exchange, which JLove continued through in sharing and listening to the response of Pope Francis. The Pope did not directly respond to the issues raised, but JLove remained engaged and showed receptive body language including nodding his head and smiling. Based on his body language, he was prepared for and accepting of the non-closure as with Courageous Conversation.

### **Practices from Courageous Conversation for the Conversation Guide**

- Create a safe space by maintaining engagement, speaking truth, expecting discomfort, and accepting non-closure
- Engage conversation through focused storytelling and mindful questions
- Sustain conversation through a variety of perspectives and monitoring conversation
- Deepen conversation by challenging own beliefs, feelings, and thoughts
- Meeting the other(s) where they are

### **Questions from Courageous Conversation for the Reflection Guide**

Was this conversation safe for all participating to share and be heard?

Did I remain engaged and speak my truth through storytelling?

Did I leave space and invite the other(s) to share their truth with thoughtful questions?

Was I open to experiencing discomfort and accepting non-closure through the tension and disagreements? Is this a conversation I can or should revisit with this person(s)?

How did I deepen my understanding of my own perspective by challenging my beliefs?

From what direction did I come to this conversation? How did I meet the other(s) where they were coming from?

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# Revolutionary Love

Having experienced and witnessed violence and discrimination due to her faith and race following the attacks of September 11th in the United States of America, Valarie Kaur developed an advocacy framework known as Revolutionary Love, which is a transformative way of being that centers our interconnectedness. The advocacy

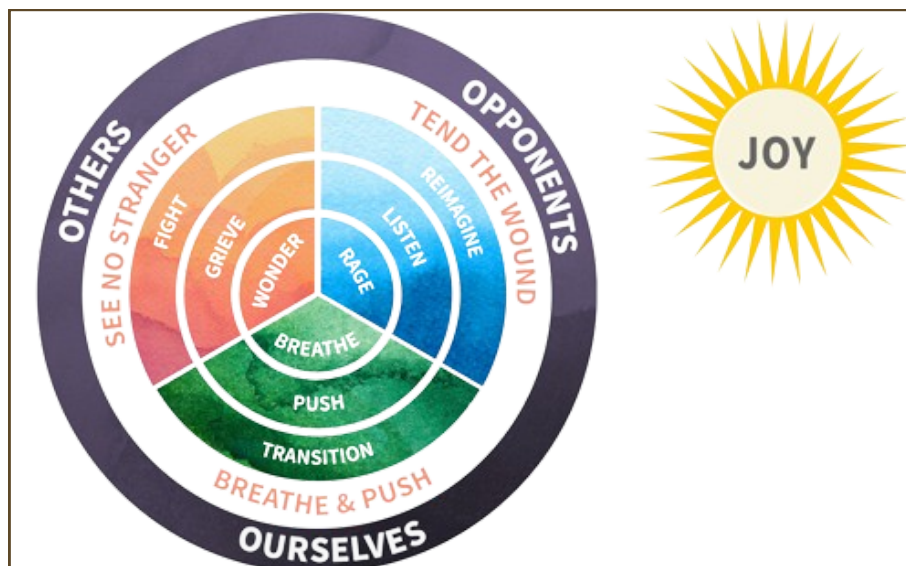
*"I think the inability to love is the central problem, because that inability masks a certain terror, and that terror is the terror of being touched. And if you can't be touched, you can't be changed. And if you can't be changed, you can't be alive."*

*James Baldwin*

framework has three parts including seeing no stranger in others, tending to the wounds of our opponents, and creating space for ourselves to build resilience. Each action stems from love and a desire to shift our cultural consciousness to caring for all beings.

The practices of Revolutionary Love are modeled on Valerie Kaur's Revolutionary Love Compass (Figure 3). The Compass is a tool for navigating advocacy and conversations with people. We can extend love to others by seeing no stranger, to opponents by tending to wounds, and to ourselves by breathing and pushing through challenges. The innermost ring is our internal work that transforms our approach through the work of the mind and body. The middle ring is external actions that we engage in relationships with others and ourselves. The outer ring contains the collaborative work with communities that invite us to a greater impact. Joy is the gift of the transformative power of Revolutionary Love.

Figure 3: **Revolutionary Love Compass**



## See No Stranger

Revolutionary Love invites us to see no stranger saying, "You are a part of me I do not yet know." This recognizes our interconnection rather than enforcing labels of "us" and "them." By seeing others as part of us, we experience a greater sense of empathy and wonder. If we are struggling to see others as part of us, we can practice humanizing people by naming their potential relationships, "Sibling, child, friend..." This practice can generate a spark of wonder for their story. Instead of judgment or fear, we can greet another with curiosity and the opportunity to find connection.

We listen to hear their pain and joys, and meet them with solidarity to share in their experiences. When we engage with others and their stories, we open ourselves to empathy and collective grief. To love a stranger is to grieve with and for them as we help them carry their grief. In our conversations, we use our sense of wonder to be open to and be present for the stories of suffering. The stories of suffering from injustices and fears touch us in a way that we can not ignore.

By loving the stranger and sharing their grief, we bring collaboration into our advocacy. Their stories give strength to the fight for justice, as Kaur says. Their stories can be our motivation to continue what we will call work instead of the violent word, fight. Our collaboration with others is the chance to be imaginative in our work and to bring more perspectives forward. We are then able to engage in moving in a way that includes theirs and our perspectives. Revolutionary Love leads to work for justice and equity, finding strength in one another.

## Tend to the Wound

Our opponents are identified by Revolutionary Love as people who have beliefs, actions, or words that cause violence, harm, or injustice. Revolutionary Love challenges us to tend to the wounds of our opponents. This first requires us to feel rage, our divine rage. Divine rage is formed from protecting that which is loved. It is anger that is not reactionary, but thoughtful, intentional, and out of love for those harmed and suffering. It is often expected, especially for women and Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color, that we suppress or tame our rage in response to injustice. However, rage can be informative and when processed, the energy that keeps us going in difficult conversations with our opponents.

Once we have felt and processed this divine rage, we can establish a sense of wonder for the opponent. Revolutionary Love holds the empathetic perspective that those who cause harm are doing so from fear or wound. To listen to the opponent with wonder is not to grant their harmful views legitimacy; rather, it is listening to understand the roots

of their harmful beliefs, actions, or words. However, the power dynamic of the relationship needs to be evaluated. If the opponent has used their power to harm us directly, we are not expected to listen to their rationale. We do this work in community with others, and others who are not directly harmed can take on the responsibility to hear and tend to their wounds if we are unable. When we are able to truly listen to and hear the opponents, we can uncover the hurt they have experienced that has led to hurting others.

If we can hear and begin to ease or heal those wounds, we can start reimagining the possibilities of caring for their wounds and reducing the violence, harm, and injustices caused. This is both a moral and strategic practice: we are caring for and loving others while also inviting the reimagining of a more equitable and just world. Each stage of tending to the wounds of our opponents requires us to dig deep into our sense of interconnectedness and see the Divine in them. This Revolutionary Love is the same we hear in Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

## Breathe & Push

We ourselves are a crucial part of Revolutionary Love as love for ourselves is necessary in sustaining the work for justice. Breathe and Push is used to draw parallels between the work for justice and the birthing process: you must pause for breath to recenter and continue forward and you must push through the pain and challenge. Although not birthing a child, we are bringing life to the conversations that bridge polarization. We use breathe and push to get through the challenges of engaging in tense conversations. First, we pause and take a breath to maintain our well-being. Breathing is literally what sustains our life, but focusing on our breath also sustains our presence. Breathwork is part of many wisdom and religious traditions as it is grounding. Mindful breathing is a centering practice physically, mentally, and spiritually, and an act of resistance to the conflict and pressures of the world. A breathing exercise to try is called box breathing. You breathe in for the count of four, hold your breath for the count of four, breathe out for a count of four, hold again for four, and begin again. More breathing practices can be found in Appendix B. Allowing a mindful, deep breath practice gives us the opportunity to care for ourselves and find restoration. Breath in Revolutionary Love is the beginning of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation for ourselves and others.

After we find grounding and attunement internally, we push forward. We continue forward through the challenges of engaging in difficult conversations and extending love, especially to those we disagree with. Revolutionary Love requires us to heal our own wounds as we did with the stranger. It is not easy work to uncover our wounds that we



have not addressed; however, it is crucial to understand our perspectives and tend to them so that we can continue forward, healed. We also push on to cultivate forgiveness. Forgiveness is not to forget, but to have agency over our experience and extend Revolutionary Love to the opponent. Forgiveness is a gift to ourselves to be free from hate. Even after forgiveness, we can continue to push through the challenge and find reconciliation. This requires the ownership of wrongdoing and accountability to the wronged. Again, this is not expected of some oppressed persons to extend to the oppressor. It is crucial that we recognize, discern, and honor which conversations are not emotionally or physically safe for us to engage with. If we are able to engage in and continue through this conversation, then true reconciliation happens, where the opponent becomes the fiercest ally, having undergone a significant transformation together.

With each moment of Revolutionary Love, or our conversations, we are learning if we reflect and allow ourselves to grow. This transitional practice is hard and painful, but it is necessary for transformation. After we've breathed and paused and pushed and persisted, our efforts begin to build bridges and allow transformation to new possibilities where justice and dignity prevail. As this happens, we move from one reality of suffering to another, noticing new areas where there is work to be done. We balance the celebration of one as we notice another growing gap or injustice that needs our Revolutionary Love.

## Example of Revolutionary Love

In Valarie Kaur's law school studies, she spent time in Guantanamo Bay, where the United States of America detained suspects of terrorism following the attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11). Most detainees were held without any evidence against them for years at a time. Kaur visited to attend and report on a military commissions hearing for Omar Khadr who was challenging his detention. Khadr was 15 years old when he was captured in Afghanistan on the accusation of throwing a bomb that killed a soldier. While detained, it is believed that he was tortured physically and mentally. While efforts were made for him to hold the rights of a child soldier, he was being tried as an adult now at the age of 23. Kaur described this hearing as "gazing into a dark hole where the law should have been" because there was no legal precedent, and the hearing was left unresolved. In witnessing Omar standing in the courtroom, although saying very little, Kaur saw the child in him and the pain he suffered. She grieved for the loss of his childhood years. With this, she wanted to beg the American public to listen to his story and to join her in the effort to restore his dignity.

Following the hearing, Kaur wrote notes on what she witnessed in a pub that was full of

soldiers. In her mind was only Omar's face as the world around her felt fictitious. A soldier approached her immediately sharing that the world doesn't see the professionalism and respect they give the detainees despite their retaliation. He described catering to the detainees saying, "They get more freedom than we do." Kaur felt rage rushing through her body. Although she wanted to leave, she took a breath and said to herself, "He has a story...He is part of me I do not yet know." Instead of allowing the rage to take over her, she processed and felt it, allowing it to be divine rage, which helped her continue the conversation to uncover the why and hear his underlying wounds. He then shared that the detainees say and get anything they want and the soldiers do not. She did not quite understand at first but paused and took a breath. Then she noticed the wound, he was lonely and grieving. He was only a child when 9/11 happened, he believed in his work for freedom, and he had watched friends die at war. He was a prisoner too, but of the institutions he was trained to serve.

Kaur was able to hold compassion for Khadr and the soldier even though they were in direct opposition of one another. While in these encounters Kaur could not engage in restoring Khadr's childhood and freedom or dismantle the justice system, she was able to reimagine- imagining a United States of America that is free from stripping human rights and maintaining entrapping systems, one in which detainees and soldiers experience the fullness of their dignity.

### Practices from Revolutionary Love for the Conversation Guide

- Sense of wonder about others
- Feeling divine rage
- Tending to wounds and fears of others
- Attending to power dynamics
- Pausing with breath and pushing through challenges
- Celebrating transformation while looking to the next place to love

### Questions from Revolutionary Love for the Reflection Guide

How did I enter this conversation with a sense of wonder? How did I feel divine rage?

What did I learn about the other's wounds? How was I able to tend to the wounds and invite reimagining?

What is the power dynamic of the relationship and how will that impact being able to engage in the conversation fully?

In what ways have I given myself a chance to breathe and challenged myself to push?

How have I been transformed by the conversation and reflection?

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# The Spirit of Mercy

While Catherine McAuley and Mercy World do not have a specific protocol or practice for embracing tense conversations of polarization, we can learn the values of the spirit of Mercy in the stories of Catherine and the recent work of the Sisters of Mercy and partners in ministry.

*"We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."*

*- Dorothy Day*

## Catherine McAuley

In the 1800's Catherine McAuley began the House of Mercy in Dublin, Ireland with a spirit of building bridges. She intentionally chose to cultivate a community of women and girls living in poverty in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of Dublin. Catherine saw this as an opportunity to support those in need through education, housing, and nearby employment. It was an opportunity to have trained employees nearby and to bring the suffering to the attention of the wealthy and to promote the dignity of these women and children. With multiple benefits to connecting the communities, Catherine began courageously building bridges. However, she was met with great resistance. In these times, Catholics faced discrimination in society. Additionally, the Catholic Church did not support the community of women living and working together without the protection or supervision of men, even being told by one clergyman, "the unlearned sex could do [nothing] but mischief by trying to assist the clergy." Through this opposition, Catherine entrusted God with the growth and support of the Mercy community, eventually, discerning to form the Sisters of Mercy to ensure the sustainability of the Mercy congregation.

We can learn to do similarly in our tense conversations to build bridges. Catherine's goal was to connect two communities that might not have otherwise connected. As we saw with Courageous Conversation, our goal is not to change the minds of others, but to be a presence and witness to the injustices and oppressive realities of the most vulnerable, and to share these realities. Catherine was able to bring the stories of the women and children to the attention of the wealthy. Then, we can trust in the Divine as Catherine did, to bring the heart of the other to compassion and empathy because we might not have closure, as Courageous Conversations reminds us. We can approach our conversations by following Catherine's example of being courageous and trusting in the Divine.

Another example of Catherine McAuley's approach to tense conversations can be found

in her Retreat Instructions and the Constitutions. It is described that relationships in community should reflect the unity in the love of the Holy Trinity. To be in unity with one another is to share our lives in heart and soul. Although not addressing polarization or conflict directly, Catherine invites charity to guide disagreements. Charity is the compassion and patience brought to relationships. She encourages us to speak the truth in love and with a gentleness of manner. With unity and charity, community relationships can build bridges because of the deep care and sense of interconnectedness to one another. While we might not live in community with others as these instructions were intended for, we can be in relationships with others that embrace a sense of unity and utilize charity in conversation. This is quite similar to the approaches of Nonviolent Communication and Revolutionary Love: the cultivation of compassion and recognition of interdependence to build greater understanding. In our conversations, we can follow Catherine's guidance to treat one another in unity with love and engage conflict with the compassion and patience of charity.

Catherine's faith and trust in community relationships continued through her final moments. She directed the Sisters of Mercy to preserve union and charity amongst each other to radiate joy and to share a good cup of tea in community. Catherine directed her sisters to be with one another through challenging times. She knew that those carrying out the works of Mercy, caring for the most vulnerable and advocating for justice, needed one another. To embrace tension we need to care for one another. To build bridges we need support. Our companions in building bridges are our strength and joy just as the community of Mercy has been from the opening of the House of Mercy.

## Mercy Today

The spirit of Mercy inspired by Catherine McAuley remains throughout the Mercy World. One such example of building bridges of understanding came from the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas' Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) work group. In response to the Institute's 2017 Chapter Commitment "to become better educated and to participate and engage dialogue on gender identity and sexual orientation," SOGI was formed to facilitate educational and dialogue opportunities. Part of this process was a series of conversations with LGBTQ+ members of the Mercy community including Sisters, Associates, Companions, Mercy Volunteer Corps alumni, and partners in mission. These conversations included story sharing of love, vulnerability, pain, and isolation. The conversations served as a space for LGBTQ+ persons to find community by sharing their experiences, gifts, challenges, and hopes for the Mercy community. While not intentionally structured by Nonviolent Communication, the conversations included observations of their experiences, sharing of feelings and needs, and requests for a greater sense of belonging and acceptance within the Mercy community. From these conversations, has come more education for the larger Mercy community, greater support and acceptance for LGBTQ+ members of the Mercy community, and a gradual

cultural shift to celebration and reverence in the dignity of each LGBTQ+ person. The work of SOGI is an example of how we can engage Nonviolent Communication to build bridges of understanding.

Mercy Global Action (MGA) leads our call to advocate for justice for the most vulnerable persons worldwide and is also an example of conversations for bridge building. In the publication "From Sparks to Fire: A Guide to Justice Advocacy for the Global Mercy Community," MGA and their collaborators emphasize the necessity of relationships in advocacy. Change will not and cannot happen overnight, so we must sustain relationships of trust that bridge our perspectives and form ongoing collaboration. Our conversations with individuals and small groups cause a ripple effect over time that will impact opinions and actions. We speak truth to power and truth in love just as Catherine did in forming the House of Mercy. Personal encounters and storytelling of truths are key in making issues of justice relevant and tangible to those we encounter as Courageous Conversations includes as well.

The example of Catherine McAuley and the ongoing work of the Mercy World, show the success of our collaborative work towards justice. There will be tension, conflict, and vulnerability, but our commitment to relationships grounded in the recognition of the dignity of each person will carry us forward.

### **Practices from Mercy for the Conversation Guide**

- Courage
- Trust in the Divine
- Unity and charity through conflict
- Community and Relationships

### **Questions from Mercy for the Reflection Guide**

Was I courageous in sharing injustices and oppression in the conversation?

Can I let go of the outcome and trust the Divine to continue the work beyond me?

Where did I feel a sense of unity or connection?

How did I extend charity through compassion and patience?

How was I able to work towards building community or ongoing relationships in this conversation?

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# Conclusion

As polarization continues to grow and inhibit collaboration for just and equitable actions, we can be agents of change. We can interrupt the cycle of growing polarization by reaching across divides with presence, awareness, wonder, and compassion. It would be easier to continue to avoid conflict and tension, but doing so would neglect the interconnection and need for community and collaboration.

Although not easy, Nonviolent Communication, Courageous Conversation, Revolutionary Love and the Mercy World have wisdom and guidance that support our ability to be open to embracing the tension and discomfort. Allowing ourselves to feel the divine rage and grief from suffering and injustice cultivates connection and compassion. We can hear the stories of others to more deeply understand their needs and wounds while also challenging our own perspectives. We might happen to find shared values, beliefs, and goals.

Our bridge-building conversations do not need to solve a problem or even find closure. Instead, we seek to find understanding and build relationships and community with the people we encounter. With ongoing relationships, we can revisit conversations, which decreases the tension and continues to build bridges. We can trust in God, Love, the Divine, or our interconnection to continue the work after our conversations.

To empower us in spur-of-the-moment conversations around tense or polarizing topics, a Conversation and Reflection Guide is provided based on the research (Appendix A). This tool is designed to be a quick overview of the approaches and values we can bring to our conversations. It offers a series of questions to ask ourselves after the conversations. With these, we can learn from our experiences to be better listeners and storytellers in order to build bridges of understanding. We can start small and easier with close friends and family, and as we become more comfortable we can grow to engage with people who share some of our perspectives, but not all. Eventually, we become more confident and engage with those we know we disagree with, even leaders and authority figures. This takes practice and kindness with oneself. The more we engage in challenging conversations, the more connections we make to exchange stories and find pathways to justice and equity together. May we continue to embrace tension and build bridges of understanding in all our circles of influence.



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# Appendix A



## Embracing Tension to Build Bridges of Understanding Conversation Guide

Based on the wisdom and practices of Nonviolent Communication, Courageous Conversation, Revolutionary Love, and the Mercy World, this Conversation Guide is intended to prepare for potentially tense and polarizing conversations that come up in our everyday lives.

### Before Conversation

- Strive for compassion based on our interdependence
- Recall the need for community and collaboration to cultivate a more just and equitable world
- Feel and process divine rage for the stories and issues you care about
- Enter the conversation with a sense of wonder and desire to understand others
- Expect discomfort and non-closure

### During Conversation

- Consider the power dynamics and safety of the conversation
- Maintain mindful awareness and presence throughout the conversation
- Listen and communicate feelings, needs, and wounds
- Engage through the storytelling of your truth
- Ask mindful questions with curiosity and wonder
- Avoid judgments of right and wrong communicated through body language and words
- Meet others where they are
- Maintain the balance of sharing a variety of perspectives
- Build connection, community, and relationship with empathy, compassion, and love
- Allow others to challenge your perspectives
- Accept the discomfort and push through challenges

### Conclusion of Conversation

- Accept non-closure
- Trust in the Divine
- Determine if the conversation can be revisited
- Pause and breathe to care for yourself
- Reflect on the conversation and allow transformation to occur
- Celebrate transformation while looking to the next place where conversations are needed

Andrea Haller  
Mercy Emerging Leaders Fellowship

# Appendix A



## Embracing Tension to Build Bridges of Understanding Reflection Guide

Based on the wisdom and practices of Nonviolent Communication, Courageous Conversation, Revolutionary Love, and the Mercy World, this Reflection Guide is intended for reflection after tense conversations around polarizing topics that come up in our everyday lives.

### Before Conversation

- How did I enter the conversation with a sense of wonder?
- How have I processed my divine rage to support me in the conversation?

### During Conversation

- How did I attend to the power dynamic of the conversation and maintain safety emotionally and physically?
- How did I leave space or invite all to share and be heard?
- Did I ask mindful questions to maintain and engage the conversation?
- Did I maintain my presence and engagement in this conversation? Where did my attention drift?
- How did I share my feelings, needs, and wounds and the realities of injustice and oppression in my life experience?
- What stories of truth did I share to engage others?
- In what ways was I able to build relationship, community, and a sense of connection?
- What did I learn about the other's feelings, needs, and wounds?
- How can I be attentive to their feelings, needs, and wounds?
- What invitations did I hear to challenge my own perspectives or include in my work for justice?
- How can I reimagine justice and equity?
- How did I push through the challenges and discomfort of the conversation?
- Where did I find connection to my values and beliefs?

### Now, After Conversation

- How can I let go of closure and trust the work of the Divine?
- Is this a conversation that I can or should revisit?
- Where did I feel divine rage? What can I do to process these feelings?

Overall, what went well?

How can I improve the next time I engage in a tense conversation?

Andrea Haller  
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# Appendix B

Learn more about the specific approaches to conversations and advocacy:

- [Nonviolent Communication](#)
- [Courageous Conversation](#) Academy
- The [Revolutionary Love](#) Project
- [Mercy](#) Global Action

Additional resources for conversations and bridge building:

- Emmanuel Acho: [Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man](#): video series and safe place for tense and polarizing conversations
- Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley: [Bridging Differences Playbook](#): bridgebuilding practices and skills that help people engage across deep divides
- Interfaith America: [Skills for Bridging the Gap](#): bridgebuilding practices and skills that help people engage across deep divides
- Leadership Conference of Women Religious: [Transforming Grace](#): transformative justice grounded in contemplation and collaborative discernment
- [Living Room Conversations](#): connecting people within communities and across differences through dialogue to build trust and understanding.
- Melissa Florer-Bixler: *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace*
- Mercy Care: [Breathing Practices](#): strategies provided by a Mercy Ministry
- On Being: [The Better Conversations Guide](#): a flexible roadmap intended to help ground and animate a gathering of friends or strangers in a conversation