

JOIN A WAVE OF FRESH AIR: CONVERSATIONS FOR CONNECTION

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Differences and similarities. Differences enliven and generate, similarities soften and connect. Relationships thrive on a balance of both. When differences become or seem to become more extreme and polarizing, similarities seem to disappear. Then we avoid interacting or we provoke.

How often I hear from friends and family: *We just don't talk about it. That's it. That's the only way to manage. The political gulf is too big and provocative. I can't imagine talking about it without getting triggered.*

This divisiveness cuts through and separates families, workplaces, communities, faith groups, races, city from country. And it is painful and perilous. Here's one action you can take that will reduce the separation and the escalating anxiety: talk about similarities and differences.

When we over-focus on differences, we begin to make the "others" the enemy: unacceptable, unloveable, inhuman, or evil. Limiting ourselves to groups and people who share many similarities, we become self-righteous, naive, unrealistic. The more we ignore differences or similarities, the more fearful and dangerous our personal and collective relationships become and the more we seek protection from each other.

When it is "us versus them," what we most desperately need is to talk to each other without getting judgmental, self-righteous or provocative.

Being able to name differences, hold differences, talk about differences and even be resourced and connected through differences is crucial for the family, community and national healing that is needed.

We need to re-humanize each other.

Here's one approach to conversing that can reduce anger, anxiety, and separation: have a brave conversation about similarities and differences. Practice first with friends. Then invite a conversation with someone with whom you have a strong or political difference.

Step One: Practice naming similarities and differences with friends.

Examples: We both like people, but I'm an extrovert and you're an introvert. We both like nice clothes, but I like form-fitting ones and you like loose-fitting ones. We both like being outdoors, but you exercise by running and I by walking. We both like to get things done, but you just do one thing at a time and I do several. We both are good leaders, and your leadership style is directive and mine is receptive.

Comments: *Wow, I found it harder to think of the similarities than the differences. I noticed how good it felt to hear about a similarity. It made it less threatening to hear about the difference. Just naming these things brought our relationship more into the present and how we are with each other. It was enlivening.*

Step Two: Practice naming differences non-judgmentally.

Before trying this with a partner with whom you have a difference you haven't been able to talk about, practice on your own (or with a friend) naming and linking similarities and strong or potentially provocative differences non-judgmentally.

Examples: *We both love our country, and a difference is that I want to open the borders and you want to close them. A similarity is that we are both afraid. A difference is I am afraid of global warming and you are afraid of Muslims. We are both glad. But you're glad to have a President who will shake things up, and I'm glad about the vast number of people who are marching and standing up for what they believe in. A way we are alike is that we both need affordable health care, and a difference is that I think the federal government can do it the best and you think that competition will bring the best prices and services and that no one should be forced to get health insurance.*

Comments: *I am so accustomed to thinking of differences as good and bad. It surprised me how difficult it was to remove the judgment and say it in a neutral way. A good practice. I wasn't even having a conversation yet, but I see that just cultivating the ability to take the judgment out will change my perspective.*

Step Three: Engage in a brave conversation.

Ask your partner if they are willing to engage in an experiment with you about similarities and differences between you. If they are willing, explain the purpose and the agreements. Then you go first in identifying a similarity and then naming a difference. Ask your partner to let you know what they heard and clarify that you accurately named the difference. Feel free to go off on brief "riffs" but keep returning to naming a similarity. This will keep the conversation from escalating. Go on with this as long as you wish. **The goal** is to have a conversation about a difference that is not a dispute and to connect or reconnect with each other through your similarities.

FOUR AGREEMENTS

- 1) Let the other person know you understood them. Reflect back what you heard. Ask if your statement of a difference was accurate and clarify if needed.
- 2) Restrain yourself from attempts to prove or persuade. Back up if you need to and stop before things get heated.
- 3) Find a way to express the difference you notice in a non-judgmental way. You might have to make several tries. This is okay.

4) Stop if the conversation gets divisive (preferably before it gets divisive). It's a success simply if you connect or reconnect with each other as human beings.

Example: (A condensation of a 20 minute conversation.) *I'll start. A similarity I see is that we both care about our country. We have a difference in how much government we need and for what.*

(Reflecting back) A similarity is that we both care about our country. A difference is how much government we need. That sounds true to me. A similarity I see is that we both want our government to be effective and a difference is that you think it is doing just fine and I don't think so.

(Reflecting back) The similarity you see is that we both want our government to work and the difference is that you think I think it is working fine as it is and you think it is really, really messed up. Is that what you mean? Well, I agree about the wanting government to work part, but actually I'm kind of on the same page with you about how well it's working. I agree that there are some changes that need to be made. So there is a similarity in our difference.

Okay, we both feel that some changes need to be made and the difference is in what kind of changes.

So how is it going so far? We are actually giving words to things we have had to be silent about because we were afraid of getting into an argument. I notice I feel relieved to be able to talk about it and also more connected to you and more appreciative of your point of view. I want to stop here. Would you like to do this again sometime?

Comments: • The idea of owning and holding my difference is very refreshing and empowering. It seems like I either try to listen and go silent about my views and feelings OR I get triggered and launch right into an argument that gets ugly and damages the relationship. So it feels like I have to make a choice between fighting for myself or silencing myself. • As soon as I would say or hear a similarity, I felt myself soften and feel my human connection again. • This is a compassion practice. But it is also calls on my courage because I have to actually name a difference and that has felt like a taboo. And I have to name it in a way that is non-judgmental and I have to know that acknowledging the difference doesn't mean that I believe it. • Our differences can co-exist. What a relief to be able to be curious and not desperate to make my person change their mind! • This is a new idea: moving back and forth between similarities and differences. They can build on each other. Finding similarities in the differences and differences in the similarities was fascinating and productive. • I definitely felt closer to my partner and the relationship felt real and kind of whole again because we were no longer ignoring very major differences. I thought this would be impossible.

Join the wave of reconnection. Let's create a groundswell of mended connections and common ground that includes our differences. Individually and together we can begin healing our rifts and move toward peace and right uses of power that promote the well-being of all. Talking to each other without fighting is a foundation for all the other good things we can also do.

Some Background and Longer Conversational Examples

This process was developed collaboratively with my Hakomi Trainer colleague, Lorena Monda. It is based on an idea expressed by Yvonne Agazarian, a group process leader. She says: "*Maturity is the ability to find the differences in the apparently similar and the similarities in the apparently different. The goal is to differentiate and then integrate these differences.*" This is a strong and remarkable goal. My hope is that similarities and differences conversations can move us a bit toward this healing and uniting goal.

This kind of conversation is remarkably deep so I recommend practicing it a few times with friends and colleagues at the neutral or medium level before attempting brave conversations about strong and emotional differences.

Differences lie on a continuum of from mild or neutral to strong or potentially divisive. They can be about likes or dislikes, feelings, perceptions, convictions, strategies, world-views. Here's an example of differences that go from neutral to strong. It takes skill and practice to learn to be able to state a difference with equanimity, especially when you are passionately sure that you are right and the other is wrong.

Neutral:

- A similarity is that we appreciate good food. I think that a difference is that my favorite is sushi and yours is Mexican.
- We both love clothes and a difference is that I wear tight fitting ones and you wear loose ones. Does that sound accurate?
- We both work and a difference is that I'm retired and you are gainfully employed.

Stronger/braver:

- A similarity is that we both want to get the job done. My idea of a difference between us is that you want to just get on with it and I want to bring in feelings even if it slows things down.
- A similarity is that we both believe in God. A difference is that you see God's purpose as bringing Christianity to the world and I believe God's purpose is for us to learn how to take care of each other and the earth. Does that sound right to you?
- We both believe that our educational system needs to be improved. I think we differ in that you want to focus just on reading, writing, arithmetic and test scores, and I think we need to educate children to be good human beings.
- We both get triggered in political conversations. A difference I notice is that I shut down when it starts to get into an argument and you get more pushy about your opinions. Does that sound accurate?

Brave Conversations

Story 1: Here's a medium level example in which I tried the process out with a friend about a formerly intractable issue:

A similarity between us is that we both like talking with people. A difference is how we talk with people. You ask about where they were born, where they went to school, what

nationality they are, and so on, and I talk about what's current, what they do for work, what's on their mind, what they like to do, a movie they liked, and so on.

(Reflecting) Yep, sounds right. I start at the surface and you go deep. A similarity I notice is that we both ask questions and listen, and a difference is that with my way, I can talk with anyone for any amount of time while what you want to talk about doesn't work with anyone and can stop abruptly. It's therapist kind of stuff.

(Reflecting) Yes, you can talk with anyone and I can talk deeply with a few. Building on that, similarity--we both have safe and comfortable ways to engage with people. Difference, and here's the truth that's difficult for me to say--I think your way is shallow and a waste of my time and mine is deep and valuable.

Hmm. My difficult truth--your way is off-putting to a lot of people and keeps you just talking with people who are like you, whereas my way is universal and gives me connections with a wide variety of people.

Got it. What a relief to say the truth and not feel so criticized and like I need to change. And I understand something new. I understand that we both need a context for meeting someone. It's just that the context is different and there is value to both.

Right. So I see that we could actually work as a team in conversations. I could keep things going and you could help us go deeper.

My friend and I had talked about this issue many times before but this was the first time we came up with respect for the value of each other's way rather than a new plan for making the conflict less irritating. We had, in fact, said some hard truths and then differentiated and integrated the difference in our relational styles.

Story 2: A colleague and I had a long-standing experience of unintentionally triggering each other. *Are you willing to try talking about this through the lens of similarities and differences?" "Sure."* (I will condense this twenty-minute conversation to a couple of paragraphs.)

A similarity is that we were both upset about the process we used to let go of an employee. A difference is that I thought you wanted to not let him go until all feelings were addressed and everyone was happy about it, and I believed it was impossible for everyone to be happy about this and it was causing more harm to delay the decision.

Basically, you have my difference right. But I see a new similarity now. We both wanted to get it handled. I didn't want to delay until everyone was happy. Our difference is that I want to take care of feelings and you want to avoid them. And that's being bluntly truthful.

So you think I am against feelings and I think you are against getting things done, in a nutshell. Is that right?

Yes, I see how it looks that way as a big difference but I think actually the similarity is that we are both afraid. The difference is that I'm afraid there won't be room for feelings and you're afraid that we won't get the job done.

Okay, this is interesting, I see now that when you start to advocate for feelings, I can interrupt my fear response and connect with your feelings knowing that you also are committed to getting the job done.

Very Brave Conversations

I recommend either suggesting a topic to talk about or making a short list of issues you think you may have a mild or strong difference about and then choosing what to begin with together. The list might include, for example (political issues), immigration, health care, abortion, minimum wage, ethics regulations, guns, news feeds and veracity, welfare. Some of these are likely to be more provocative than others.

Story 3: (A condensation of a 20 minute conversation.)

I'll start. A similarity I see is that we both care about our country. We have a difference in how much government we need and for what.

(Reflecting back) A similarity is that we both care about our country. A difference is how much government we need. That sounds true to me. A similarity I see is that we both want our government to be effective and a difference is that you think it is doing just fine and I don't think so.

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So how is it going so far? We are actually giving words to things we have had to be silent about because we were afraid of getting into an argument. I notice I feel relieved to be able to talk about it and also more connected to you and more appreciative of your point of view. I want to stop here. Would you like to do this again sometime?

Story 4: (A condensation of a half-hour conversation.)

Hey, I'm calling you because I know we have really strong differences politically that we have just not talked about in order to preserve our friendship. But our beloved country is really divided right now and I believe we can only heal if we can talk to each other about these difficult things. Would you be willing to try an experiment where we talk about similarities and differences without trying to persuade each other to change? So, since you just sent me an email about how right you think the Muslim ban is, could we bravely start with that?"

Sure.

Thank you for your willingness to try this with me. I think a similarity between us is that we both love our country. Would you agree?"

Yes. (I hear a softening of his voice.)

And a difference would be that you want to close America off and I want to keep it open. Would that be right?

Yes, but the closing is to protect us from Muslim terrorists and only a temporary ban. (I restrain my impulse to argue here.)

So, your turn, now you name a similarity and a difference. Well, we both know love is good, but a difference is that you are willing to be more vulnerable than me. You do total surrender. You love vulnerability. I know love hurts and so I put up lots of guards to protect

me from hurt. I was in the army in the war and if I was vulnerable and open to love, I would get killed.

That's really insightful. I feel really seen. Thank you. (Now I am softening up and relaxing.) Actually, there's a similarity in this difference you name. Perhaps you don't know this, but I also have guards to protect me from hurt. I may take more risks than you, but I have quite a range of how vulnerable I am. If we go back to immigration, I'm imagining you think that I would want the President to just have completely open borders. Is that right? "Yep." And I'm thinking that you want completely closed borders forever.

So, now I'm thinking about this. I don't want completely closed borders forever, really. It's just the terrorists. Do you want terrorists coming in?"

No, of course I don't. But I think we close our borders at our peril.

And I think we close our borders for our protection.

Yes, this is clearly a difference that we are each holding.

As I'm thinking about it now, there is a continuum of openness and protectiveness. I think Trump will only be as willing to expose our country as he is willing to be open himself. (I restrain myself from asking how he thinks Trump is doing.)

Thanks so much. How are you feeling about this conversation?

I'd like to do more. I've told you things I've never said to anyone, ever. And I think we aren't really as different as I thought. It's more about, what would be the word, strategy. It was really important that we checked with each other about understanding each other. Mostly when I talk with people I just go on and on without checking.

Why Brave Conversations Matter

In the times I have tried this process, a number of things have happened.

- When I start by naming a similarity, I immediately feel more connected and I see my partner's demeanor soften. This shift in itself is powerful. Similarities invariably humanize us with each other. When we see and acknowledge similarities, we can no longer see each other as evil and we reduce the chances of being at war.
- The challenge of naming a difference in a descriptive, neutral, non-judgmental way shifts my attitude toward openness and interest. Learning to think about possible differences non-judgmentally is very good relationship practice.
- By searching for similarities in the differences and differences in the similarities new information and understandings emerge and the perceived difference no longer seems so extreme.
- I am able to hold and honor my difference in the conversation without either just listening and silencing my own feelings and opinions or trying to persuade my partner to change his or her mind.
- Some new understanding or integrative insight invariably comes out of the conversation and I feel warmer, more truthful, and in deeper relationship.

Give this a try--start difficult conversations with similarities and identify differences. You can open up new relationship territory and closer connections--maybe by one step, maybe by many steps. Maybe by one-step toward healing and coming together, maybe by many steps. One step or many, it is worth the effort.