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# Cultivating Courageous Communities through the Practice and Power of Dialogue

Robert R. Stains

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**CULTIVATING COURAGEOUS COMMUNITIES  
THROUGH THE PRACTICE AND POWER OF DIALOGUE**

Robert R. Stains, Jr.

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*We need community to get things done.  
Community rests on relationships.  
Relationships grow from conversations.  
Conversations cultivate community.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

I've been a gardener for years; for most of them, with hit-or-miss results. Sometimes a pretty good yield, sometimes mostly weeds. That all changed a couple of years ago when a woman at work taught me about soil. The key to good growth, she said, is good soil: attention paid to creating the best soil and tending to it was the most important and powerful thing I could do to have a predictably fruitful garden. I was dubious but I followed her advice, sifting in mulch and manure in the spring, adding fertilizer and breaking the tough ground as needed throughout the season. I was astonished at how my efforts paid off: healthy plants, huge vegetables, massive yield.

I think of the work of dialogue much as I think of the cycle of my garden; how the time I spend in preparation and tending deeply affects the quality and the yield. Now (spring) is the time when I decide what I will grow. I sit with the seed catalogues or browse the racks at my local nursery. In past years, I skipped a step: I went ahead and decided what to plant without checking in with family and neighbors about what they'd like to eat at harvest time. The result was a lot of wasted effort and food. Zucchini for the masses! So a first question to ask when planning a public engagement meeting is: What does this community want and need? What do we want to grow here? It's astonishing how often this question is neglected.

Once I'm clear about what to plant, I concentrate on the soil: which mix of soil and fertilizer will be the best for this particular garden? Then I design my garden space for the coming year, figuring out which plants go well together and which I should keep separate. The rest is tending: watering, fertilizing, and weeding, much as I do as facilitator of a meeting or a series of meetings. The effort I invest at every step affects what's possible to realize.

Though each garden and community is different, much is the same. After many years of working with troubled communities, there are several things across contexts and times that I hear people longing for:

- Visibility: to be seen as they see themselves; to be known for who they are apart from labels.
- Connection with others.
- Agency: to know that they can affect other people and their community.
- Possibility: restored hope for a preferred future.

Unfortunately, many attempts to engage the public—whether in small or large meetings—fail to address these longings. In fact, the design of many sessions invites division, disconnection, disempowerment, impersonal communication, and ultimately despair.

At the Public Conversations Project, we are interested in helping communities develop the connections and resources that will enable people to have honest, heartfelt, courageous conversations that build connection and resilience in the midst of even the deepest of differences. Dialogue is a powerful means of bringing people together across chasms of division in many contexts and on many subjects.<sup>1</sup> Some examples from our work include:

- In Massachusetts, leaders of organizations involved in the abortion controversy agreed to meet for four sessions in the aftermath of a shooting at a local women’s reproductive health clinic. Their secret meetings stretched into five and a half years and resulted in a jointly written, three page op-ed in the *Boston Sunday Globe*<sup>2</sup> to inspire other opponents to engage in dialogue. Fifteen years later, they continue to speak in pro-life/pro-choice pairs about the power of their dialogue.
- In Montana, during dialogues about the currently volatile issue of guns,<sup>3</sup> 100% of pro- and anti-gun control partisans who participated agreed or strongly agreed that “I was able to listen to points different than my own.” And 91% either agreed or strongly agreed

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1. Robert R. Stains, Jr., *Repairing the Breach: The Power of Dialogue to Heal Relationships and Communities*, 10 J. PUB. DELIBERATION, Article 7, 1–4 (2014), <http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol10/iss1/art7>.

2. Anne Fowler et al., *Talking With the Enemy*, BOS. SUNDAY GLOBE, January 28, 2001, at F1.

3. Judity Oleson & Robert Stains, Jr., *Dialogues on Firearms in Montana: Rights, Responsibilities, and Community Safety* (June 30, 2016) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author).

that “I feel my views were heard.” The Montana facilitation team is now being called on to lead conversations on other controversial issues such as land use, a Confederate memorial in the state capitol, and Syrian refugees.

- In Minnesota, The Respectful Conversations Project,<sup>4</sup> adapting Reflective Structured Dialogue, sponsored successful, state-wide conversations about a pending marriage amendment to the state constitution in an effort to avoid the kinds of division that these amendment drives had caused in other states.

This paper will examine the challenges to constructive public engagement and vibrant community and will present one useful alternative: the Reflective Structured Dialogue approach of the Public Conversations Project.<sup>5</sup>

## II. CHALLENGES TO CONSTRUCTIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT<sup>6</sup>

During the 2015 Symposium on Advanced Issues in Dispute Resolution hosted by Hamline University, participants noted challenges to constructive public engagement in the Twin Cities and the state of Minnesota. Many of the challenges named in Minnesota are the same that we see in other parts of our country that could be reduced or eliminated with a more dialogic approach to community engagement.

“FEWER OPPORTUNITIES FOR HUMAN CONNECTION.” Robert Putnam<sup>7</sup> described the erosion of social capital as people have

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4. *Respectful Conversations Project*, MINN. COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, <http://www.mnchurches.org/respectfulcommunities/respectfulconversations.html> (last visited Aug. 11, 2016).

5. See PUB. CONVERSATIONS PROJECT, <http://www.publicconversations.org> (last visited May 20, 2016). There are many other models of dialogue that are useful in different contexts. The reader would do well to spend time on the web site of the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation to learn more. See NAT'L COAL. FOR DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION, <http://www.ncdd.org> (last visited Aug. 11, 2016).

6. DISPUTE RESOL. INST., Symposium, *Session One Notes, An Intentional Conversation About Public Engagement and Decision-Making: Moving from Dysfunction and Polarization to Dialogue and Understanding* 1–2, MITCHELL HAMLINE SCH. L. (Oct. 23–24, 2015), [http://open.mitchellhamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=dri\\_symposia](http://open.mitchellhamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=dri_symposia).

7. See generally ROBERT PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY* (2000).

pulled away from involvement in social, civic, and religious organizations in recent decades. David Blankenhorn,<sup>8</sup> Bill Bishop,<sup>9</sup> and others have noted the phenomenon of “ideological migration”: the physical movement of people toward those with similar identities and views, whether in a city or in the country as a whole. People move to be with their own, whether by changing churches or moving to a different part of the city or country. As these two processes have progressed, we have vanishing opportunities to engage others who are different from us in everyday, relational, and complex ways. When people do gather to wrestle with civic challenges, many do so as relative strangers. This raises barriers to clear communication, mutual understanding, trust, and willingness to collaborate.

“INCREASED PERCEPTION OF THREAT; FEAR DRIVES VIGILANCE FOR SIGNS OF DANGER, MISSING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFFILIATION.” Fear is a powerful motivator. Politicians have increasingly turned to fostering fear of “others”—portraying “them” as threats to identity, safety, way of life, etc., as a way of currying favor and consolidating votes. In this civic atmosphere and in the absence of multi-dimensional human connection—where those with different identities or perspectives are seen as threats to or even outside of “our community”—people are often left with thin, one-dimensional stories of “the other”: what they can glean from news reports and from their own circle. People may approach the prospect of engagement with fear. According to neuropsychologist Richard Hanson,<sup>10</sup> the brain is “Velcro for the bad; Teflon for the good.” It doesn’t take much of a fearful experience to leave a long-lasting aversion to the source.

“STRUCTURES FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT OF ISSUES ARE SET UP FOR CONFRONTATION.” The physical setup of a public gathering often invites splitting and confrontation. Having a stage/podium and an “audience” elevates “the experts” and may invite challenge from “the rest of us.” Seating people in rows and having a microphone on a stand in the audience reinforce this division and

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8. David Blankenhorn, *Why Polarization Matters*, THE AMERICAN INTEREST (Dec. 22, 2015), [www.the-american-interest.com/2015/12/22/why-polarization-matters/](http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/12/22/why-polarization-matters/).

9. BILL BISHOP, *THE BIG SORT: WHY THE CLUSTERING OF LIKE-MINDED AMERICA IS TEARING US APART* (2008).

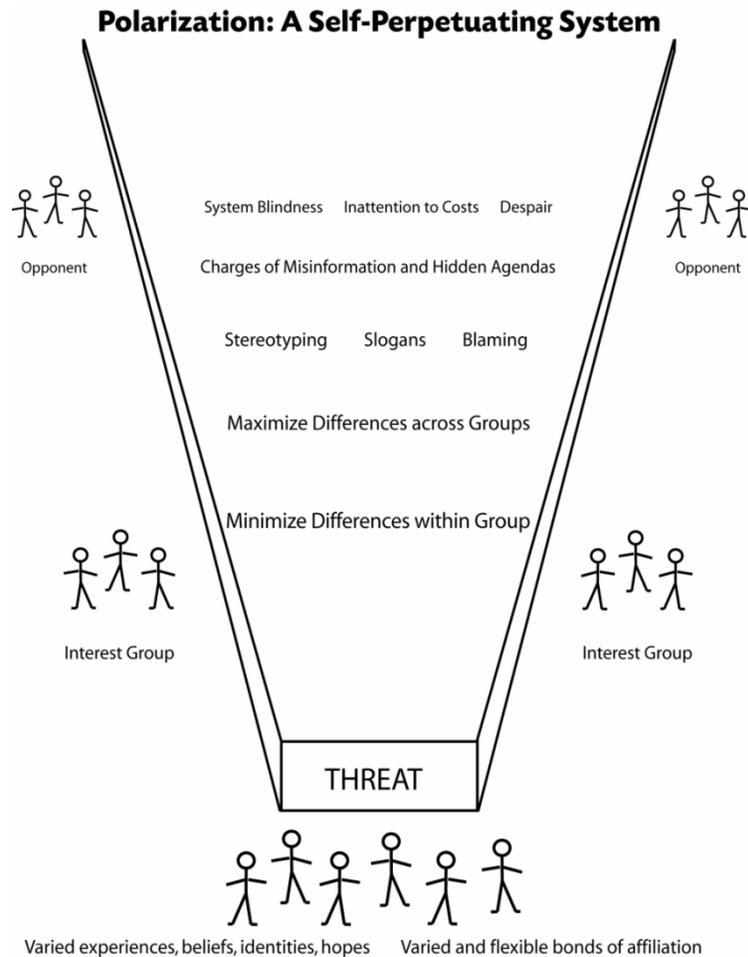
10. RICK R. HANSON, *HARDWIRING HAPPINESS: THE NEW BRAIN SCIENCE OF CONTENTMENT, CALM, AND CONFIDENCE* 19–31 (2013).

point people away from engaging with one another. The sense of division is furthered when partisans/advocates who will address the whole are seated opposite from, rather than next to, one another on stage or in the front of the room. The sequence of speakers, audience questions, speaker responses with few or no guidelines for comments, no interaction among audience members, etc., shape what kinds of speech are invited and discouraged. Finally, the meeting invitation and design, as well, can invite confrontation. One recent meeting intended for constructive engagement was advertised as “No holds barred!” It’s easy to imagine who showed up and what happened.

“POLARIZATION.” Many people in the symposium noted dynamics of destructive polarization that characterize public discussion of many of the thorny issues of our time. Maggie Herzig,<sup>11</sup> drawing on years of the Public Conversations Project’s experience of working with people who are polarized on public issues, represents the development of polarized patterns of communication this way:

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11. Maggie Herzig, *Polarization Graphic*, PUB. CONVERSATIONS PROJECT (2002).



In healthy daily community life, people are connected in a variety of ways in civic, social, religious, political, and other contexts. They're aware of how their values intertwine and overlap and they collaborate on shared interests as a matter of course. When, however, an issue or a development arises that raises threat—especially threats to cherished beliefs, commitments, or identities—people naturally want to feel safer, gathering with their own and separating from their opponents. They start to define themselves not just in terms of what they're for, but also who they are against.

In the process, their opponents are viewed in increasingly narrow, depersonalized, and negative ways. Communication is fueled by stereotypes, characterized by accusations and often takes

place only in public fora, competing letters to the editor, or in online comments. As positions harden, conflicts may erupt or simmer under the surface, fostering a polarization or fractionalization of a previously more unified community. The process sustains itself as participants become blind to the dynamics they are caught in and attend only to data that reinforce their ideas about “others,” missing the damage being caused. This can make collaboration difficult or even impossible.

There are huge costs to the polarization that so dominates our discourse and discourages people from participating actively in civic life. When members accede to group forces that push for stereotyping, demonization, and polarization, they are left divided and impoverished in their ability to make meaningful connections, work through differences, and carry out the missions of their organizations. They are separated from what is best in them and encouraged to offer the worst. In the thick of partisan acrimony, the first casualty is the humanity of the “other” and, eventually, one’s own. “Enemies” are stripped of their complexities and reduced to a one-dimensional identity rendered in a sound-bite: Baby-killer. Woman-hater. Radical. Obstructionist. People often argue from conclusions they have drawn without understanding the person and perspective of those whom they perceive to be the enemy. The loudest, most extreme voices dominate. Folks in the middle are drowned out and all parties lose as the focus turns to destroying the enemy or keeping one’s head down instead of seeking to understand difference. Everyone involved feels victimized and eventually demoralized as destructive interactions corrode a sense of community that may have been built up over years, even lifetimes.

One example is from a town in Massachusetts in which a charter school (independent schools that receive public funding) initiative separated citizens into proponents who saw charter schools as ways of better educating their children and opponents who viewed them as threats to the funding of public schools. In this town, the fight was vociferous and spilled over onto many other aspects of public life. People who had previously worked as allies viewed each other as enemies, refusing to collaborate on other local initiatives. Friendships were affected as people increasingly viewed their opponents as misguided, wrong-headed, or dangerous, and pulled away from one another. Even at a basic level of civic courtesy, citizens who would normally greet one another in the

supermarket instead chose another aisle. Getting other things done in town became much more difficult.

Out of this conflict a self-sustaining dialogue project was created which addressed the polarization and helped people to move forward and is now, two years later, being engaged to convene meetings on waterfront development and the siting of public art among other issues.<sup>12</sup>

David Blankenhorn, in his recent article on “Why Polarization Matters”<sup>13</sup> summarizes the costs in this way:

What self-government presupposes and fundamentally depends upon is precisely what polarization corrodes. Less trust in our political institutions and in each other. Less empathy. More separation. More inequality. More anger. Poorer thinking. Dumber public discourse. Stuck politics. Together, these fruits of American polarization reflect nothing less than the diminishment of our civic capacity. Few problems we face are more dangerous than this one.

### III. TRACING THE ROOTS OF POLARIZATION

#### A. *Neurophysiological Responses*

As noted above, polarized dynamics often begin when people feel threatened. Much has been written in the field of interpersonal neurobiology<sup>14</sup> about the ways that people react to threat—especially when they feel their identity may be at stake—with predictable neurobiological reactions and characteristic sequences of behavior toward the perceived source of the threat.<sup>15</sup> Hanson,<sup>16</sup> drawing on the work of Jaak Panskepp, Lucy Biven,<sup>17</sup> and others, states that our brains evolved three basic “operating systems”: avoid harm, approach rewards, and connect to others in order to meet

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12. GLOUCESTER CONVERSATIONS, <http://www.gloucesterconversations.org/> (last visited Aug. 11, 2016).

13. Blankenhorn, *supra* note 8, at 7–8.

14. DANIEL SIEGEL, POCKET GUIDE TO INTERPERSONAL NEUROBIOLOGY: AN INTEGRATIVE HANDBOOK OF THE MIND (2012).

15. David Rock, *SCARF: A Brain-Based Model for Collaborating With and Influencing Others*, 1 NEUROLEADERSHIP J. 1–9, (2008), <http://www.scarf360.com/files/SCARF-NeuroleadershipArticle.pdf>.

16. HANSON, *supra* note 10, at 34–35.

17. JAAK PANSKEPP & LUCY BIVEN, THE ARCHEOLOGY OF MIND: NEUROEVOLUTIONARY ORIGINS OF HUMAN EMOTIONS (2012).

the three core needs of safety, satisfaction, and connection. When people feel threatened, their bodies go into protective mode in which the amygdala becomes much more active than the prefrontal cortex. Individuals are flooded with adrenaline and have greater access to danger-sensing/harm-avoiding capabilities and a weaker hold on higher-order reasoning and the ability to connect with others not “of their tribe.”

We have observed, and research confirms,<sup>18</sup> that in meetings with opponents, peoples’ vigilance narrows their perception so that they scan for danger and may miss commonalities, overlapping values, or signs of affiliation. When they’re not freezing like a deer in the headlights or running away (in body or mind), they may become more likely to respond to the perceived source of the threat with attack or defense. In most cases, if the issue is a hot one and especially if identities are involved, their opponent will be experiencing the same internal process. In that environment, it only takes a word or phrase to trigger a sequence of vigilance/attack-defend which in turn triggers vigilance/attack-defend. This can quickly become a self-sustaining cycle that ripples out through a group session, public meeting, or a community as people observe and are vicariously affected or infected. Our challenge in creating spaces for public engagement is to reduce the fear of harm, enhance the reward experienced by participating, and enable people to connect with one another in meaningful ways.

David Rock<sup>19</sup> writes of the mistakes that can be made in the first few moments of a meeting. He sums up much of the research in social neuroscience and wraps it into practical ways to understand and address what people scan for when they enter a space with unfamiliar people. He names five “domains of human social experience.” We can have an “approach” or an “avoid” response to each of these domains. People rapidly label a situation “good” and draw closer, or “bad” and turn away. “The approach/avoid response is a survival mechanism designed to help people stay alive by quickly and easily remembering what is good and bad in the environment.”<sup>20</sup> It’s important to do as much as we can as meeting designers to prevent “avoid” responses—limbic

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18. DANIEL SIEGEL, *THE MINDFUL BRAIN: REFLECTION AND ATTUNEMENT IN THE CULTIVATION OF WELL-BEING* (2007).

19. Rock, *supra* note 15.

20. *Id.* at 2.

reactions to perceived threat which develop very quickly and are tenacious once begun (“Velcro for the bad . . .”)—and to enhance “approach” responses which engage more and higher levels of the brain. According to Rock, when entering social situations people scan for cues of danger or safety in five domains:<sup>21</sup>

- Status
- Certainty
- Autonomy
- Relatedness
- Fairness

I think of the questions people ask when they enter a new group situation that grow from these concerns: Will I be treated as an equal or less-than? What’s going to happen? Will there be tricks or surprises? Will I have choice, input, and control or will I be controlled? Will I be “in” or “out” in this group? Will I be treated fairly or will there be favorites? Leaders, facilitators, and meeting designers get into trouble by not addressing these domains before and at the beginning of a session. This paper will present a model for engagement that reduces “avoid” responses, invites “approach” responses, and cultivates connection.

#### B. *Dysfunctional Patterns Resistant to Change*<sup>22</sup>

Once set in motion and repeated, interactions growing from threat become patterns that are very resistant to change.<sup>23</sup> Our roots in family systems led us to see the similarities in patterns of polarized public discourse with dysfunctional family patterns. According to Richard Chasin and Maggie Herzig, co-founders of Public Conversations:

The cycles seemed to be composed of family patterns of thought, talk, and action that had become fixed and unvarying. Deviations from these routines were characteristically ignored or punished. It hardly mattered who introduced the deviation, whether it was a spontaneous utterance from a child, a common sense observation from a grown up, or a suggestion made by a

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21. *Id.* at 1.

22. STEPHEN W. LITTLEJOHN & KATHY DOMENICI, COMMUNICATION, CONFLICT, AND THE MANAGEMENT OF DIFFERENCE (2007).

23. Richard Chasin et al., *From Diatribe to Dialogue on Divisive Public Issues: Approaches Drawn from Family Therapy*, 13 MEDIATION QUARTERLY 323 (1996).

therapist. No area of family experience seemed exempt from this phenomenon. The tendency to suppress deviation applied to thoughts and beliefs, to tone and content of statements, and to actions.

The suppression of deviation perpetuated the cycles, allowing them to outlast whatever factors may have fostered their creation. These endless loops—even if anachronistic—became, in themselves, a major cause of protractedness. In the grip of these cycles, members of the family took sides and alliances and divisions became rigidified.<sup>24</sup>

We have applied this thinking to conflicts over public issues by working in advance with participants and through careful meeting design to prevent “old,” dysfunctional patterns and promoting fresh encounters and new rhythms of engagement.

### C. *Stories That Shape Attention, Define, and Imprison*

We draw from Narrative Therapy<sup>25</sup> and Narrative Mediation,<sup>26</sup> the idea that one way we fashion meaning out of our experiences is to weave them into coherent narratives: stories. Stories help us make sense of our own experience and also that of others. Told in groups, they can help us refine our identities.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, stories can also cause us to see each other in distorted ways. Stories about feared others can create a faceless “Them” that makes genuine speaking, listening, and understanding difficult to impossible.<sup>28</sup>

Because we cannot possibly know everything about another person, our stories of others are necessarily partial, colored by: our

24. Richard Chasin & Maggie Herzig, *Inviting Deviation from Divisive Patterns: Lessons from Work in the United States* (Pub. Conversations Working Paper, 2014). Contact authors for full access: rchasin@publicconversations.org and mherzig@publicconversations.org.

25. MICHAEL WHITE, *RE-AUTHORING LIVES: INTERVIEWS AND ESSAYS* (1995); Toran Hansen, *The Narrative Approach to Mediation*, 4 PEPP. DISP. RESOL. L.J. 2 (2004).

26. GERALD MONK & JOHN WINSLADE, *WHEN STORIES CLASH: ADDRESSING CONFLICT WITH NARRATIVE MEDIATION* (2013); Hansen, *supra* note 25, at 2.

27. Laura Black, *Deliberation, Storytelling, and Dialogic Moments*, 18 COMM. THEORY 93 (2008).

28. Dick Simon, *The Most Dangerous Four-Letter Word*, Address at TEDxBeaconStreet (Dec. 31, 2013), <http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/The-most-dangerous-four-letter-w>.

selection and interpretation of experiences and observations, our experience of threat, patterns of communication we may be governed by, and our narrow exposure to others with whom we may differ. The mental process we use to determine the data we include and exclude from our stories of “the other” and the ways we interpret what we attend to is described by Chris Argyris and colleagues at Action Design<sup>29</sup> through their “Ladder of Inference”: we pay the keenest attention to the information that best accords with ideas and conclusions that we already have, which have been influenced by our backgrounds, identities, values, and assumptions. We sift what we see into narratives that confirm conclusions we have already drawn. This process becomes especially acute when we are stressed or threatened, flooded with adrenaline, and our thinking processes have become less visible and less accessible to us. Narrow, rigid stories of a “feared other” become the screens through which subsequent encounters are viewed, information interpreted, and explanations for behavior fixed. These stories—which can become self-confirming and self-sustaining and marked by a sense of certainty about who “they” are—do little justice to the lived experiences and gradations of perspective that people bring; the stories can determine how those other people are treated and seen and how they think of themselves.<sup>30</sup> This in turn influences how they choose to show up in the presence of people who hold stories about them in which they may have had no input.

We seek ways of engagement that leave people safe enough to risk seeing beyond the narrow stories they carry about others and to share more of the complexity of their own lives.

#### IV. AN ALTERNATIVE VISION FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Symposium participants expressed desires—some reflected in the session notes and some gathered from my own listening—for a different kind of public engagement. Many of the desires and suggestions for realizing them are outside of the scope of this paper. Many of them, however, can be directly addressed through the practice of dialogue. Participants seek processes that are

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29. *The Ladder of Inference*, Action Design, <http://www.actiondesign.com/resources/readings/ladder-of-inference> (last visited Aug. 11, 2016).

30. Maggie Cary & Shona Russell, *Re-Authoring: Some Answers to Commonly Asked Questions*, INT’L J. NARRATIVE THERAPY AND COMMUNITY WORK, No. 3, 2003, at 1, <http://www.interchangecounseling.com/articles/Re-Authoring.pdf>.

characterized by greater depth of curiosity, trust, and conversation. They wish for a format that leaves room for introverts while building and enhancing relationships, a format that invites dialogue among people with extreme differences, and a place where people can understand the life experiences of others and how those experiences are connected to their perspectives. They seek to develop a culture of respect and empathy in which success is not necessarily “outcome” but improved relationships. To this end, they recommended processes that would support listening as well as speaking, that make space for the stories that underlie peoples’ beliefs, that rest on inquiry as a core component, and that include means to help people prepare themselves for constructive engagement.

David Blankenhorn concludes his article on polarization with a call to action:

First and foremost we must “think anew.” In our public conversation and in our public deeds, we must also “disenthrall” ourselves from the long-developing habits of heart and mind that now threaten our national experiment in ordered liberty. The success of that experiment may depend on it.<sup>31</sup>

A. *Meeting the Challenge Through Dialogue*

There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. Nobody like you has ever been born and no one like you will ever be born again—you are the only one. . . .

Now there is something in everybody that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in other people. And it is so easy to say that anybody who looks like him or her; anybody who acts as this person acts or the other simply there can’t be any sound of the genuine there. I must wait and listen for the sound of the genuine in you. I must wait. For if I cannot hear it, then in my scheme of things, you are not even present. And everybody wants to feel that everybody else knows that she is there.<sup>32</sup>

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31. Blankenhorn, *supra* note 8.

32. Howard Thurman, Baccalaureate Address at Spelman College (May 9, 1980), *reprinted in* UNIV. OF INDIANAPOLIS, THE CROSSING PROJECT: CROSSINGS REFLECTION #4 (2004) <http://eip.uindy.edu/crossings/publications/reflection4.pdf>.

These words of Howard Thurman in his famed baccalaureate address to the 1980 class at Spelman College express the longing that we have to express and encounter “the genuine” in ourselves and others. Yet rarely do our public fora invite or support genuine encounters. So many of our public meetings call out the worst in us: disrespect, accusations, attacks, and listening only to find and exploit weaknesses for the purpose of “winning.” From observing this, we learn that we had better arrive at a meeting on a challenging issue rhetorically armed and relationally defended; keep “the genuine” at home. As a consequence, many people choose to stay on the couch.

We propose a different space to engage: a meeting place where we can return to what’s best in us and where “the sound of the genuine” is invited and cultivated. What we invite people into, how we invite them, and what we ask them to do in advance all set the stage for fresh possibilities of constructive engagement. The rest of this paper will explore one method of achieving this end: the Reflective Structured Dialogue<sup>33</sup> (RSD) model of the Public Conversations Project. RSD was first created at the Family Institute of Cambridge as an experiment to see if the thinking and techniques for shifting deeply embedded dysfunctional patterns in families might be useful for creating better conversations about divisive public issues. Beginning with abortion in the late 80s, we have since worked on issues as diverse as gun policy, sexual orientation and religious faith, mental health, race, gender, environment, Christian/Muslim conflicts in Nigeria, and returning child soldiers in Liberia, among others, and in contexts where polarization has devastated educational organizations, churches, synagogues, religious denominations, cities, and countries around the world. The approach works for groups as small as six and as large as hundreds, within timeframes of one evening to many years, and it is adaptable to local contexts and customs. It is a useful means for brokering constructive engagement in the civic sphere, whether standing alone or as an adjunct to deliberative processes, making it possible to speak and hear “the sound of the genuine.”

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33. See MAGGIE HERZIG & LAURA CHASIN, *FOSTERING DIALOGUE ACROSS DIVIDES: A NUTS AND BOLTS GUIDE FROM THE PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS PROJECT* (2006), [http://www.publicconversations.org/sites/default/files/PCP\\_Fostering%20Dialogue%20Across%20Divides.pdf](http://www.publicconversations.org/sites/default/files/PCP_Fostering%20Dialogue%20Across%20Divides.pdf) (providing a very detailed, hands-on field manual complete with meeting designs, formats for participant preparation, and sample questions to stimulate constructive engagement).

To create a “journey into the new”<sup>34</sup> devoid of polarization and dysfunction, we create spaces where the experiences that inform beliefs can be spoken and where people who hold them can be recognized and understood as they wish to be. In order to do that, we must be clear about our purposes, who the people are that should be involved to accomplish those purposes, what we wish to prevent, what we wish to promote instead, and how we will prepare participants to “think anew.” We must design meetings that enable people to feel safe enough to be genuine and to move from certainty to curiosity about others, building the mutual regard and care that community rests on.

*B. Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD)*

“Dialogue” is a common word that can have many meanings, one of which is germane to our practice in highly conflicted contexts. To begin, let us say what dialogue—as we practice it—is not before we explore what it is. It is not simply discussion of a topic, as in a classroom or an informational forum. Dialogue is not problem-solving. We find, especially in more public meetings, that dialogue is confused with debate. Debate has a valuable place in public discourse but can also serve to deepen, rather than bridge, divisions.

“Dialogue” as we use it is a structured conversation: an encounter where something happens “in the between” that is more than the sum of speech acts. It adds color to people in conflicts who have been rendered black and white, it re-weaves the threads of community, it enables the kinds of respect and relational shifts that other forms of conflict resolution may not afford.<sup>35</sup> Dialogue denotes a conversation to enhance mutual understanding among people who differ deeply about treasured values, identities, and beliefs. It is accomplished in RSD through reflection on one’s own and others’ experiences, in a context that is guided by shared agreements, bounded by structured exchanges, and that offers opportunities for participants to follow their genuine interest in each other. The results are fresh experiences of being “heard” and understood by an opponent, in many cases for the first time; of coming to more deeply understand the life experiences that inform

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34. *Id.*

35. STEPHEN W. LITTLEJOHN & KATHY DOMENICI, ENGAGING COMMUNICATION IN CONFLICT 49 (2001).

others' perspectives; of hearing re-humanized, expanded, and nuanced stories of "the other"; of discovering or re-discovering shared values, enhanced capacity to communicate constructively over a divide, and greater interest in talking with people who differ; and finally, of greater mutual respect.

Dialogue breaks the sharp-edged cycles of dysfunctional communication that shred relationships and perpetuate division. One participant in a dialogue that transformed a multi-year, large-church conflict into renewed connection and shared vision, Lauren Cobb,<sup>36</sup> of Glendale Presbyterian Church, observed:

One of the outcomes of the dialogue that gives me hope for our church is the effect that it had on my views of others in the group. At the outset, I knew most of them only as acquaintances; a few I knew well. For each person, the view I had developed more fully, in the same way that a picture develops as color and shading are added to an outline. Not one of the participants represents a side, a position or a group to me; each is unique and complex, impossible to reduce to a category, and indisputably someone who offers something I don't already have.

Dialogue stands on its own and can also be used—in whole or in part—as an adjunct to other processes. In the example above, dialogue was used to open communication, restore trust, and rebuild connection before the community developed a shared vision for the future of the church and called a new pastor, a process which had been a source of ongoing division in the past. Many years later, the community remains intact.

Others have found a place for dialogue as a prelude to deliberation or other processes. Oliver Escobar,<sup>37</sup> in his "The Dialogic Turn: Dialogue for Deliberation," notes that:

[D]ialogue before deliberation can help to construct a safe space for relationship building in the group. . . . Such deliberative practices often require high quality of dialogic communication, where the participants feel safe to question their own assumptions and to be open to change.

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36. Lauren Cobb, Conversation-Dialogue Group, 18 Glendale Family News at 2 (2007) (discussing experience at Glendale Presbyterian Church in Glendale, CA).

37. Oliver Escobar, *The Dialogic Turn: Dialogue for Deliberation*, 4 IN-SPIRE J. L. POL. & SOCS., No. 2, December 2009, at 42, 62.

The early stage of a deliberative process is crucial. It seems appropriate to try to enrich its communication fabric by including alternative ways of producing collective learning and public reason.

Shawn Spano<sup>38</sup> and his colleagues in the Public Dialogue Consortium<sup>39</sup> have demonstrated in their work with the city of Cupertino the possibilities for shifting municipal civic culture by changing the form of public engagement, attending keenly to process and relationships by planning meetings with dialogic purposes in mind. Mediator Susan Podziba<sup>40</sup> integrates dialogue into her larger process of “Civic Fusion”: a combination of tools to build broad-based consensus that she used most prominently to help the bankrupt city of Chelsea, Massachusetts, move out of receivership and into effective self-governance. Jaako Siekkula and Tom Arnkil<sup>41</sup> have been doing fascinating work in Finland, using dialogue as a tool to leverage social networks to help people with psychoses and the agencies that serve them. Finally, Rabbi Amy Eilberg<sup>42</sup> is using dialogue in her work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation<sup>43</sup> provides many more examples of groups who are doing great things with dialogue and is a treasure-trove of resources for people doing public engagement work.

### *C. How Reflective Structured Dialogue Works to Meet the Challenge*

Once we’ve worked with a representative planning group to discover/articulate guiding purposes for the session, we begin by asking what kinds of feelings, behaviors, and dynamics to prevent and what to promote in order to realize the purposes. Although each context will yield somewhat different answers to these

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38. See generally SHAWN J. SPANO, PUBLIC DIALOGUE AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY: THE CUPERTINO COMMUNITY PROJECT (2001).

39. PUB. DIALOGUE CONSORTIUM, [www.publicdialogue.org](http://www.publicdialogue.org) (last visited Aug. 11, 2016).

40. SUSAN PODZIBA, CIVIC FUSION: MEDIATING POLARIZED PUBLIC DISPUTES (2012).

41. See JAAKO SEIKKULA & TOM ERIK ARNKIL, DIALOGICAL MEETINGS IN SOCIAL NETWORKS xi–xv (2006).

42. RABBI AMY EILBERG, FROM ENEMY TO FRIEND: JEWISH WISDOM AND THE PURSUIT OF PEACE (2014).

43. NAT’L COAL. FOR DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION, [www.ncdd.org](http://www.ncdd.org) (last visited Aug. 11, 2016).

questions, there are characteristics of dysfunctional, polarized conversations—and desires for something else instead—that show up in most contexts.

Generally, we want to prevent:

- High anxiety and “avoid” responses, especially at the beginning of a session (note SCARF).
- Verbal domination by some who may take up a lot of air time.
- Rapid-fire speaking and consequent reactivity.
- Ridicule, attack.
- Reacting against others rather than speaking for oneself.
- Language that could trigger a downward-spiraling exchange (gleaned from pre-session interviews or surveys or in-the-room preparatory work).

Instead, we want to promote:

- Listening to understand.
- Speaking to be understood.
- An experience of welcome and connection.
- People feeling safe enough to be genuine in their speaking and generous in their listening.
- Conversational resilience; people hanging in when it may be tough to listen.
- Democratized speaking.
- Curiosity about others and oneself.
- Responding intentionally.

## V. CORE PRACTICES

In order to realize the above, there are several core practices or processes that we employ: (1) collaboration, (2) participant preparation and reflection, (3) creating agreements, (4) slowing the process down, (5) structured exchanges, (6) inquiry for fresh stories, and (7) inviting curiosity.

### A. *Collaboration*

Especially in the midst of a deeply divisive conflict, many people are suspicious of dialogue, wondering if it’s a stealth tool to seduce, convince, appease, and silence. Many people also feel pushed around by the dynamics of the conflict that they’re in or

are anticipating. Advance collaboration with a representative planning group is crucial to the success of the endeavor. The collaborative process yields vital information about local needs and creates legitimacy and ownership of the process. Tasks of the group include: (1) articulating a shared purpose for the meeting; (2) creating means (e.g., interviews, invitations, reflective tasks) to help participants prepare themselves for a fresh encounter as free as possible from anxiety and previous limiting patterns; (3) designing or approving meeting designs; (4) drafting ground rules/communication agreements for the meeting; (5) identifying likely participants; (6) writing or editing invitations/promotion; and (7) designing and using evaluations.

*B. Helping Participants Prepare and Reflect*

About 80% of our work is done before a meeting ever takes place. Like cultivating the garden soil, preparation pays big dividends. Reflection and advance preparation change the ways that people participate in a meeting on a difficult issue. When people fear that their core identities or beliefs are threatened, they are often driven internally by their own anxiety and swept along externally into negative patterns of communication that are bigger than any individual. Responses tend to be rapid, defensive, predictable, and automatic. One way that we attempt to break this pattern is by offering dialogue participants opportunities to reflect before, during a single session, and between sessions in a series.<sup>44</sup> We ask people to think about what really matters to them, times when they may have had constructive conversations across divides on the issue, strengths/capacities they recognize in themselves that they want to call on, what they want to understand about their opponents, what they would like to have understood about themselves, hopes and concerns they have about participating, what they will want to restrain and bring out in themselves to realize their intentions, and any advice they have for the planners for addressing their hopes and concerns through ground rules or

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44. Robert R. Stains, Jr., *Reflection for Connection: Deepening Dialogue Through Reflective Processes*, 30 CONFLICT RESOL. Q. 41–48 (Fall 2012); Sallyann Roth, *The Uncertain Path to Dialogue: A Meditation*, in RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY: RESOURCES FOR SUSTAINABLE DIALOGUE 93–97 (Sheila McNamee & Kenneth Gergen eds., 1999).

meeting design. We invite reflection on one or more of these areas through:

- Pre-dialogue interviews<sup>45</sup> (preferred), e-mails or online surveys when necessary.
- Offering questions for participants to reflect on in advance of a meeting.
- Invitation to pause to collect one's thoughts before responding to questions posed to all in a meeting and to pause between speakers.
- Providing pad and pen to participants to encourage them to write down reactions, reflections, and questions as the dialogue progresses, to enable them to be less distracted and to support them in following their curiosity when they can ask one another questions.

### C. *Creating Agreements*

When we can, we prefer to work on agreements/ground rules with participants in advance of a meeting. That way when we convene, people are publicly reaffirming a commitment they've made privately to us in an interview and perhaps doing some tweaking of the agreements. The agreements serve to reduce anxiety, enhance the feeling of safety and respect, and give legitimacy to the interventions of a facilitator. They can insure voluntary participation ("pass" if not ready or unwilling to speak), level the playing field (share airtime), enhance the willingness to tell one's story (no interrupting, no attempts to persuade, no statements of judgment, keep confidentiality if possible given the setting), and discourage sweeping generalizations and globalized accusations (speak for yourself).

### D. *Slowing Things Down*

When the conversation turns to hot-button issues, escalating exchanges often ensue and perpetuate attack or defense patterns of response to threats. People observe or leave these exchanges having learned little about the actual people who hold another opinion, with cardboard caricatures reinforced, and preexisting opinions strengthened. Slowing the process down is a next step

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45. See HERZIG & CHASIN, GUIDE FROM THE PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS PROJECT, *supra* note 3, at 143 (providing a sample interview protocol).

forward in preventing “the old” destructive pattern of engagement and making space for something new to emerge. Reflective Structured Dialogue slows the process down in several ways:

- Advance planning for an intentional, not an automatic, conversation.
- Spending time at the beginning of a session to set the frame and intentions, review and secure assent to communication agreements, and preview the rest of the session.<sup>46</sup>
- Tightly structured meeting design starting with time-limited responses in go-round fashion to questions posed to all participants, turn-taking, pausing to compose a response, pauses between speakers, and holding questions of others until the end.

*E. Inquiry for Fresh Stories: Behind Every Belief Is a Story—Behind Every Story Is a Person*

Too often in public discourse, story and person are stripped from conversations about beliefs, values, and perspectives. This makes it easier for people to treat each other—as Martin Buber<sup>47</sup> said—as “It” rather than “Thou.” Returning stories, histories, and people to the conversation is a vital pillar of dialogue.

As noted above, we draw from Narrative Therapy and Narrative Mediation the idea that all stories are partial, colored by our selection and interpretation of experiences and observations, our experience of threat, patterns of communication we may be governed by, and our narrow exposure to others with whom we may differ. Stories held of opponents are often thin and certain, reflecting little if any of the complexity and nuance of life. One of our core tasks is to craft questions that invite thicker, more complex, and nuanced stories. It is in responding to these questions that participants have the opportunity to be seen as more fully-dimensional people, to understand their opponents at greater depth and breadth, and to discover areas of common experience, values, and concerns that would otherwise remain invisible. Once

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46. In addition to slowing the process down, this has the added benefit of addressing the concerns that participants often bring into a session. David Rock has outlined these in his “SCARF” model. *See generally* Rock, *supra* note 15.

47. MARTIN BUBER, I AND THOU 45 (Walter Kaufman trans., 1970) (“When I confront a human being as my You and speak the word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things.”).

discovered, they lead to curiosity, a deepened sense of the humanity of the other, enhanced trust, and, in many cases, the desire to collaborate on common concerns.

There are a variety of ways to call stories forth in dialogue. One is to use some variation of Richard Chasin's<sup>48</sup> "Stereotyping Exercise" in which participants are asked to list stereotypes they believe that others may hold of them and speak to the effects these stereotypes may have on communication choices and dynamics. The excerpt below was used with a campus faculty that was deeply divided and suspicious of one another. Through interviews, we knew that most felt "mis-characterized" by others, feeling that stories were being told of them that did not accord with who they construed themselves to be.

The experience of being characterized by others in ways that differ from our self-understanding is at the root of many communication difficulties. This exercise offers an opportunity to speak about the ways in which you have had assumptions, beliefs, or motivations attributed to you that you deem incorrect, and to note the effects.

How do you imagine that others on campus characterize you?

There is a work-sheet provided with a series of fill-in-the-blanks: "As a \_\_\_\_\_ I think I'm seen as \_\_\_\_\_," with invitations to fill in and mark what's most painful, inaccurate, and understandable. The responses will form the basis for conversation and re-authoring stories in the group.

#### *F. Conflict Narrows; Inquiry Expands*

Another way to invite story is via questions that are posed to all and responded to in a structured way: questions that open and make visible (1) experience, (2) perspective, and (3) struggle.

In a single or an initial session, a sequence of three kinds of questions is often asked:

- The first with the purpose of bringing in experiences that may have shaped the participants' perspective. In an abortion dialogue: "Can you tell us about a personal experience you have had that has helped shape your

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48. Richard Chasin & Maggie Herzig, *Creating Systemic Interventions for the Socio-Political Arena*, in *THE GLOBAL FAMILY THERAPIST: INTEGRATING THE PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL, AND POLITICAL* (B. Berger-Gould & D. Demuth eds., 1994).

perspective on abortion, or that would help us understand your perspective?” It is here that people begin to make a deeper connection with others. We all have experiences that inform us, and most of us can find within us resonance with the experiences of others even if they are not the same as our own. It was not uncommon in abortion dialogues, for instance, to hear two women describe unplanned pregnancies as the source of their perspectives, though the perspectives were totally opposite. The connection they made at the level of experience enabled them to be charitable with one another when talking about perspective.

- The second question is to give participants the opportunity to say what’s at the core of their perspective, free from fear of interruption, criticism, or attack. From a dialogue on homosexuality and Christian faith: “What’s the bedrock of your conviction about the right relationship of human sexuality and holiness?” or, in many other dialogues simply: “What’s at the heart of the matter for you with regard to \_\_\_\_\_?” In our experience, providing an opportunity for people to “plant their flag in the sand” reduces the fear that they will be manipulated in some way or that they are expected to keep their perspective to themselves. Once stated, this frees people up to listen more generously to others and to be open to speaking about places where they may have conflicts or gray areas, if they exist.
- The last question is to open the possibility of expressing the shading within a strong conviction that’s usually kept from an opponent—and often from others in one’s interest group—for fear of being seen as weak, wishy-washy, less-than-orthodox, or, worse, a traitor. From a dialogue among Jewish and Christian clergy in the wake of a public dispute about Israeli and Palestinian actions: “Are there any places within your overall perspective where there are areas of less certainty, where one value may rub up against another or where you feel pulled in different directions, either in feeling or because of relationships?” When people respond to this, it’s much harder for their opponents to see them as cardboard representations of a position, and much easier to see them as fellow humans

balancing their perspective with other values, feelings, and relationships.

### *G. Inviting Curiosity*

The more strongly people feel about their cherished perspectives, the more certainty they may have about the rightness of their views and the wrongness of those opposed. Polarized exchanges characterized by ridicule and attack only lead partisans to deeper degrees of certainty about the motives and the character of those with opposing views (“wrong”) and their own (“right”). The typical means of engagement (debate, online comments, public meetings, etc.) perpetuate the process. Reflective Structured Dialogue invites participants to move from certainty to caring through curiosity. Curiosity is fostered in several ways:

- Separating speaking from listening; supporting listening as well as speaking. Posing a question to all participants and asking them to pause and write their response before anyone speaks frees people up to listen to speakers instead of composing responses or worrying about needing to react to what was said.
- Providing pen and paper with encouragement to write down things people say that they want to learn more about supports listening with the intention to deepen understanding of particular people, what they think, and how they got there. It also prepares participants to ask “Questions of Genuine Interest.”
- Giving significant time for participants to ask one another questions. As noted above, we frame this as “Questions of Genuine Interest” with guidance about what that means: no rhetorical questions, questions as statements in disguise, questions as weapons, etc.; rather, questions that will invite the respondent to speak more deeply, widely, and with more nuance about their perspectives and experiences. It’s not uncommon in a dialogue for people to discover that they’ve had remarkably similar experiences, but have come to radically different perspectives. This section of a meeting allows them to pursue the curiosity that ensues: “How is it that you experienced the same thing as me but think so differently? What did you make of your experience?” Or, another example of a typical question, “You’ve said on the one hand, you believe

\_\_\_\_\_, while on the other, you think \_\_\_\_\_. How do you wrestle with that difference?”

#### *H. Closure and Ownership*

The experience of dialogue can be intense for participants, though it may not be apparent on the outside. It's helpful for the group to have a defined end to that intensity; a transition out of the bounded space of dialogue and back to regular life. It is also common for people in deep conflict to feel “done-to” by an opponent, a process, or a facilitator. In a closing, we offer each participant the chance to claim ownership, reflect on their experience, and say something about what they contributed to the session. A last question often posed to all is often: “Please tell us what have you done—or refrained from doing—that has contributed to this evening going as it has, and anything else that would bring a meaningful close to this experience for you.”

#### *I. Basic Format*

Though meetings can run from one session of a few hours to a series meetings over a period of a few years, there is a core format that can stand alone or serve as a basis for elaboration:

- 1) Start with a meal or social time with refreshments, no conversation about the issues at hand.
- 2) Move to the meeting space, get seated. If possible seat people in groups of 8–10, mixed by perspective.
- 3) Setting the frame: review purposes and agenda; make sure everyone's on board with both.
- 4) Agreements: present each with its purpose, secure commitment from all in the group.
- 5) Three “Opening Questions”:
  - a) Inquire about life experience that informs perspective. Pause after reading question for people to take notes for themselves, pause for a beat between speakers. No responding to others; no cross-talk. Pause after all have responded for listeners to review their notes and frame questions for later.
  - b) Inquire about “what's at the heart of the matter” for them. Process as above.
  - c) Inquire about any gray areas, mixed feelings, etc. Process as above.

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- 6) Questions of genuine interest: 30–40 minutes for people to follow their curiosity by asking each other questions that arose from their speaking and listening.
- 7) Closing. Final question to end the session and have people reflect on their contribution: 1–3 minutes each.

## VI. CONCLUSION

It is possible to cultivate a better environment within which our public conversations can grow. With focused intention, participant preparation, and collaborative, responsive design, it is possible to invite the stories that animate perspectives and beliefs and that leave people feeling seen, heard, hopeful, and willing to courageously engage in community life.

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[mitchellhamline.edu](http://mitchellhamline.edu)