

A Connecting conversation

Conversations are opportunities to connect a little deeper with one another and learn more about ourselves, each other and God, writes Carmel Murphy Elliott.

Here's a practice which helps to cultivate a conversation that connects

Most human beings spend a lot of time in conversation. Many of these conversations are practical, much needed interactions that help us to get things done. But sometimes, amid seemingly 'ordinary moments', something profound happens. Some describe it an 'ah ha!' moment¹ when, in the course of conversation with another, something new is revealed to us, deepening connection with

one other and helping us to see the world in new ways. These moments are God-given gifts that enable us to stretch beyond our current perspectives into new thinking and potential ways of being, as we play with new ideas and seek to embody them in our lives.

Given the generative nature of these encounters, I have been curious about the possibility of curating such conversations and have been delighted to discover, particularly through my work as a Community Organiser, that there are a wealth of practices and tools we can draw on to help us cultivate these connecting conversations. One such approach is called the Four Fold Practice.

The Four Fold Practice is a framework that underpins 'The Art of Hosting'². It is simply an observation that great conversations happen when

people are present, when they participate, when they are hosted well and when they co-create something.

Being Present – Hosting yourself

'Hosting' is often connected with hospitality and making a welcome space for others. But have you ever thought about doing it for yourself? What would it mean to receive yourself in a warm, friendly and generous way, as you would a guest, and how might that help you to engage more fully in conversations?

This first 'fold' is an invitation to 'check in' with ourselves with kindness, to notice what and how we are feeling and to choose to show up and be present. It is not about being 'sorted' or even centred - although this fold may help us to become more so - it's

¹ *A Guide to Creative Conversations* by Anna Ruddick, Cathy Ross and Mike Pears, page 3 <https://churchmissionsociety.org/resources/guide-to-creative-conversations/>

² <http://artofhosting.org> - a growing community of practitioners supporting each other to enable creative learning and participatory engagement

simply about noticing what's going on for us, being mindful of what we are bringing to the space (including our privileges and marginalities) and coming to the conversation with curiosity. It's an opportunity to be reminded of God's presence and to ask for an awareness of the Spirit at work in our midst.

Participating – Being hosted

To participate in a conversation is often thought of as an opportunity to verbalise our views to others. However, if we are looking to have robust, deep, connecting conversations that have the potential to impact how we see the world, we need to pay as much attention (if not more!) to listening. How would the dynamics of conversations change if, particularly those with power and privilege, more readily arrived ready to listen?

This second 'fold' is an invitation to show up with humility and

the willingness to be a learner, trusting that our conversation partners are gifted by God and have wisdom to share that will challenge and illuminate. Krista Tippett explores this idea further saying: 'Listening is more than just being quiet while others have their say... Real listening is powered by curiosity. It involves vulnerability — a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The generous listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other and patiently summons one's own best self and one's own most generous words and questions.'³

Hosting others in conversation

Hosting a conversation is more than steering people through an agenda. It's about creating and holding space where people can listen and talk well and engage deeply with one another.

Sometimes as hosts we find security in the structure of an agenda but how can we move beyond that, have confidence in the art of conversation and trust the wisdom in the room?

This third 'fold' is an invitation to be courageous in initiating conversations that matter. Taking time to prepare well beforehand gives us confidence to do this, because it enables us to be clear on the purpose of the conversation, craft questions that will help participants to explore ideas openly, think through how the learning from the conversation will be captured and what will be done with it.

The Art of Hosting and *A Guide to Creative Conversations* both offer methods, tips and tools. During the discussion, courage is required to curate rather than control the conversation. This might mean sitting in an awkward silence, guarding against bias and/or resisting the urge to fix when problems are presented.

Being part of a hosting community – co-creating

Co-creating can be messy, and when we discover that others go about things differently, we might be tempted to think 'I could get this done quicker/better by myself'! But there are riches we receive when we shift our focus from outcomes to others, and choose to commit to communal ways of working - not least that outcomes generated via contributing to a collective effort are often more sustainable, as participating in the process encourages individual ownership! So, what might help us to be a more co-creating community?



This fourth 'fold' is an invitation for everyone to bring their gifts and fully participate, not only in the continued conversation, but in any actions that arise from the conversation. Sometimes this will require people to relinquish power and encourage others to collaborate. Other times it will require people to step up or step in, believing they have something valuable to contribute. To truly be a part of a co-creating community, we have to be clear about what we can contribute, and yet take delight in honouring the gifts of the other above our own. When we're able to do this, we create a trusting and supportive environment in which we can navigate complexities, learn and grow together.

? **CONVERSATION**

What would it mean to receive yourself in a generous way, as you would a guest?

How can we move beyond an agenda and trust the wisdom in the room?

What might help us to be a more co-creating community?

STARTERS



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