

Creating Deeper Understanding

After I had been trained in the deliberative dialogue method, one of the local community groups, non-faith based, who self-identified as liberal and progressive, wanted to engage in a deliberative dialogue. They wanted to have a deliberative dialogue around the issue of immigration. As you could likely guess, most in the conversation shared the same perspective. They recognized that they gravitated toward one option over the others even before we started the discussion. I think that helped them process the other options in a more intentional way, seeking to lay aside their bias and evaluate the options for their own merits.

As we were discussing the pros and cons of a particular option, I could see a lightbulb go on for one of the members present. He shared that he could finally see validity in an argument that he had always discounted. In this particular issue, it was about the need to have laws and enforce them. He shared that the need to have laws resonated with him, and that he saw laws as the foundation of a healthy society, without which we would devolve into anarchy. He was so glad to have this insight and felt that he could connect with people who held this viewpoint now. Before he was always so upset with people's "limited thinking," and now he could see value in points that they were making, even if he did not totally agree with what was being advocated.

When I had the privilege of seeing him process this, I thought that this demonstrated the value of this process. Initially, I was disappointed that the conversation would be with such a one-sided group (and that this group would know that up front), as I thought that would stifle conversation. While that certainly could have happened, I was pleased to see this group intentionally try not to let this happen, and instead open themselves up to the process of the dialogue, which helped one person grow in their understanding and appreciation of those around them. I thought that if nothing else happened in the conversation, that alone was worthwhile. In a polarized environment it can often seem like those on the "other" side are so wrong that we cannot even begin to relate to them. I was glad to see some of that polarization overcome through this one conversation that helped one person view others differently. I think this spoke volumes about the value of the process that deliberative dialogue goes through, as I don't see a similar breakthrough happening without a process that walks through various options and has people evaluate them for their own merit.

While the group still gravitated toward similar actions at the end of our discussion that corresponded with their initial viewpoint, they were able to see value and strengths in all of the options. They themselves reported that the process of dialogue helped them deepen their appreciation for others' perspectives and more willing to engage people of differing viewpoints in a spirit of understanding. While this experience occurred outside of an explicitly faith context, it demonstrates the power of this process to help us come closer together instead of being driven further apart. This is so necessary for our faith communities as there is so much fear around the "division" difficult issues cause. This helps us remember that we can still join together and find value in each other even if we don't agree on everything.