

Living Beautifully in an Age of Vitriol
Rev. Linda Simmons
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Omar Safi is Director of Duke University's Islamic Studies Center. In his online article, "How Can we Live more beautifully in an age of Vitriol"¹ he writes, "These are days of snark and bluster. How do we live better and communicate more beautifully? I spend a lot of my time wondering how to live a beautiful life in an age when the quickest way to get thousands of tweets and retweets is to post something filled with anger and vitriol, something that elicits a response from both avid fans of one side and rabid fans of the other side.

How do we live beautifully when so much of dialogue is "marketized" based on how many people we can arouse to one side, immediately capitalizing on division? When conversation seems based less on listening and nuance and more on scoring points and eviscerating the perceived virtual opposition? Where is not just the common ground but the *higher* ground? Safi asks, "Can we be better? Can we step away from a fight in which no one wins? Can we, as the Qur'an says, "repel (the darkness) with something that is lovelier?"²

His words inspired this sermon and led me to Krista Tippett's *Civil Conversations Project*. Krista Tippett is an American journalist and author. She created and hosts the public radio program and podcast *On Being*. In 2014, Tippett was awarded the National Humanities Medal by then President Barack Obama.

The mission of the Civil Conversation Project is:

*To speak together differently in order to live together differently. The Civil Conversations Project seeks to renew common life in a fractured and tender world. (It) is a conversation-based, virtues-based resource towards hospitable, trustworthy relationship with and across difference. It honors the power of asking better questions...to entrenched debates, and insist that the ruptures...do not tell the whole story of our time.*³

The first thing I came across on this very rich site, was Krista Tippett herself doing a live facebook feed in response to an email she received asking if conversations can really make a difference in this politically divisive, bitterly partisan environment in which we live. We know the source of this question within ourselves. I hear it among us and between us. Every day it seems another area of something so many of us hold as sacrosanct is being eroded: women's rights, education, the environment, gay rights, civil rights, voting rights, civil discourse, international law...the list goes on. And this erosion and the conversations around it affects our home environments, health, and personal relationships.

¹ <https://onbeing.org/blog/omid-safi-how-can-we-live-beautifully-in-an-age-of-vitriol/>

² Ibid.

³ <http://www.civilconversationsproject.org/>

I joined with the person who wrote a email to Tippet in asking: *Can conversation create new realities and if so how?*

The woman who wrote the email to Krista Tippet with this question, Shawnee, is a trained facilitator who is helping people have constructive conversations around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴

Shawnee was recently asked to speak at an event at which there were a lot of Trump supporters, about Hillary Clinton. After her talk, a man came up to her and told her that she simply hates Donald Trump quote, "Because he had said this and that about women." Shawnee told him this did trouble her. They went on to have a conversation about sexual harassment and she and her interlocutor had very different assessments of where those lines should be drawn.

Shawnee goes on, "I do not feel that we were holding equally valid parallel narratives of the way the world works...We were speaking in such different languages of thinking on so many fundamentals of living. We did not leave this conversation changed by each other.

"I cannot close the gap between me and Trump's America. I want to believe in your work because it matters and I want to change the world. But we all employ exclusive vocabularies and have formed our own echo chambers around them."⁵

I know that many of you share this concern, no matter which side of the aisle you sit on. You feel you cannot close the gap. There is no conversation that can make a difference. I hear many of you say that we are more polarized than ever, and that we are headed toward a dark place.

Krista Tippet answered Shawnee and all of us by saying, "Yes, I do believe in conversation, and not conversation for the sake of conversation. But speaking together differently is learning to live together differently. We have to create new ways to begin to speak to each other. We have to create new kind of spaces that don't have the same kind of assumptions of even why we are in the room together. We tend to go into spaces with the idea that we have to come out of any conversational space with a result, that we have convinced someone or we have not, that we have joined forces or we haven't."⁶

Tippet went on to say that we have all taken a long time developing our current positions, a lifetime, and that we have to learn how to nurture spaces in which we can have conversations and ask questions that are not based on our assumptions of one another and in which we do not expect that we can fundamentally change someone else's position. What if we were to learn something new about a person, share something in common with them,

⁴ <http://www.civilconversationsproject.org/resources/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

understand a doubt or fear we both held in relation to something? What might that allow to be birthed?

Anand Giridharadas is an American author and newspaper columnist. He has written for The New York Times and the International Herald Tribune. He and Whitney Kimball Coe who serves as coordinator of the National Rural Assembly, a rural movement made up of activities and partnerships geared toward building better policy and more opportunity across the country were interviewed by Krista Tippett on her On Being Radio Program.⁷ Giridharadas said:

“I think what’s happened to us is that we’re not committed to each other as a people, so it’s almost like we are in this situation where any disappointment that we encounter in our fellow citizens is like a reason to break up. And part of commitment as a citizen is embracing other people’s dysfunction, and embracing other people’s incompleteness, because you know you have your own. We’ve ended up in resistance to each other.”⁸

And in this resistance, we have decided that if we can’t bring someone else all the way to our side, then we have failed, and we turn away sure that the world and we all are doomed.

What if we could set up a space, a human space, maybe even a spiritual space or a space of what Giridharadas calls “civic spirituality” in which we could practice seeing each other in new ways, deciding we do not know everything about each other because of our religion or political stands? What if we could see our own doubts and flaws in one another more often, even in people we have decided are fundamentally different than we are? What might this practice offer us? What if we could risk walking in the uncertainties more often? Krista Tippett says that this is the work of hospitality, and I would add radical hospitality.

Whitney Kimball Coe, who was interviewed by Tippett with Giridharadas said: “I think sometimes, we have this blind spot where we think we need to be addressing these big, global issues, and we forget what is ours to do in the moment. What is yours to do does not necessarily have to be to bridge all divides across the country. What is yours to do could just be right in front of you. And in a small place, that is so much easier to see, sometimes.

“It really is all about — human connection is figuring out how to find out — to be curious about other people’s stories. And I think these categories...are sometimes false and red herrings, and they keep us from just really looking at the people in front of us, and our situations as they are, and they keep us from finding those bridges to one another.”⁹

⁷ <http://www.civilconversationsproject.org/transcript-for-the-call-to-community-in-a-changed-world-nov2017>

⁸ <http://www.civilconversationsproject.org/transcript-for-the-call-to-community-in-a-changed-world-nov2017>

⁹ <http://www.civilconversationsproject.org/transcript-for-the-call-to-community-in-a-changed-world-nov2017>

And I know that these bridges are not easy to find. There are real and deep differences afoot. This is true. *And*, we are not listening for humanity, our own or others. We are withdrawing too quickly, even from those who share our opinions. I am watching as more and more people are finding reasons to not stay in the room when it is their room, marriage, religion, affiliation, family, and conversation.

The other day I heard two people arguing and one of them said right in the middle, “When you just said that, I learned to see the situation in new way” and everything shifted. I could see the two people relax visibly. When we feel heard, we can listen too, we can risk vulnerability.

As Whitney Kimball Coe: “(I believe in) “staying within sight and sound of each other.” The more I spend time with people, the less I hurt.”

We are all so wired to debate our certainties, to come out right, to pull out all the facts that we can muster and prove that what we know is the truth. It calms us, affirms us, and holds our worlds in place, especially when our world is being thrown out of order by forces that are saying that facts are no longer facts and truths are no longer truths.

I am not knocking facts and truth. I am simply noting that arguing them with another who does not see facts and truth as you do, does not work.

What changes people is always the same. Leaving room for their humanity. Is that not what changes you?

I remember being part of the Public Conversations Project which was started to help those who were pro life and pro choice begin to have conversations with one another. We were not allowed to use the word YOU in our conversations. We had to talk about why we held our position, where in our stories we learned to take our stance and eventually we were able to talk about the gray areas and the questions we had about our position.

Some pro-choice folk were able to say that they were not sure about when life started. Others on the pro-life side were able to say that they were not comfortable with where it might lead that the government could decide what women could and could not do with their bodies.

What questions have we forgotten how to ask of each other? What answers are we not living into?

Anand Giridharadas again from his interview with Krista Tippett:

“I just think there is all this magic in the ordinariness of people and just how they think about their lives and their conflicts and their hypocrisies. I write a lot about hypocrisy, in a way, but not out of contempt for people but out of love for people, because if you’ve ever — if you own a mirror, you know a lot about hypocrisy. And so that’s what interests me in

other people, and the way in which we do have these elevated ideals, but it's very hard to live up to them, and people try."¹⁰

I think this is part of finding the way to civic spirituality. Realizing that we are all broken, all in need of healing and that we all have a story and a past and a reason to believe what we believe and that our humanity is precious to us all. When we can dig down into practicing community with a hope that we can and must go on, we can learn the art of allowing each other to flourish.

We become what we practice. Let's practice creating spaces where we can all become more alive, more capable of listening and asking compassionate questions, uplifted by the dignity and worth of others. Speaking together differently is learning to live together differently.

What makes you come alive? Where does your spirituality come from? Where in your story do your politics come from? How was your dream for America born?

Creating spaces to see each other in new ways, to be changed by one another in new ways, to invite those in that we do not yet know and to learn to be with those we do know with more open minds, even those who share our holiday dinner tables, is to live beautifully, is to participate in creating the country we dream of.

Let's begin right here.

Amen.

¹⁰ <http://www.civilconversationsproject.org/transcript-for-the-call-to-community-in-a-changed-world-nov2017>