



Beyond Categorical Thinking (Interrupting Bias)

Greenville UU Fellowship, Greenville, South Carolina

Covenant Group Session Plan

Written by Jim Hennigan December 2021

Welcome, Chalice Lighting: *Here we are, together in this space. By our love and by our covenant, we make this a holy place. We light the chalice of Unitarian Universalism in honor of the light that lives in each of us, the light that shines among us, and the light we bring into the world.*

Personal Check In: Briefly share something from your life since we last met and how you are feeling now.

Opening Words:

“A call in is actually a callout done with love and respect. Because you're really seeking to hold people accountable for the potential harm that they cause, but you're not going to lose sight of the fact that you're talking to another human being. And so you extend a hand of active love and active listening to help them maybe stop and think about what they said. And you can say, ‘I beg your pardon.’ Or, ‘When you said that, that didn't really land on me correctly. Can we talk about what's going on with you to make you do that?’ I mean, there's a whole bunch of things you could do other than say, ‘You should not say these things! You are using the wrong word. You're trash folk. You're a racist!’” — **Loretta Ross**, Black feminist, activist and scholar

Questions to prompt and guide discussion (alternately, you can explore the case studies after the readings):

1. Have you encountered situations where another person has openly revealed a bias to you or a group? How did you feel? How did you respond? Would you respond the same way now?
2. What are some obstacles that interfered with you responding to a past bias event? Are they external or internal? What might you do about removing those obstacles or lessening their impact?
3. Who do you hope to impact or what do you seek to achieve when you respond to bias events?
4. Can the way people confront bias affect the outcome? How so? What are some effective approaches?

Sitting in Silence (Reflect on questions just posed as you prepare to hear readings)

Readings - Words from the Common Bowl: Quotes/Readings - see below

Sharing - This is a time to speak without interruption and for deep listening. Deep listening means no interrupting, no fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight. Please share responses to one or more of the session questions. **(It may be useful to take a brief break before Open Discussion)**

Open Discussion - This is a time to respond to something another person said about the topic or to relate additional thoughts that may have occurred as others shared their thoughts on this topic. Continue to practice deep listening.

Closing reading:

We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. — **Elie Wiesel**, author, activist and Holocaust survivor

Announcements/Plans

Check out: As we close today, how are you feeling now?

Extinguish the Chalice

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Readings:

“When confronting conflict, it is the *ability to act with curiosity* that results in the intentional inquiry and appreciation of differing points of view and mindsets that inevitably results in healthy collaboration.” — **Edgar Papke**, author and organizational psychologist

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed, but when we are silent we are still afraid, so it is better to speak.” — **Audre Lorde**, self-described “Black lesbian feminist warrior mother” in *The Black Unicorn: Poems*

“Half of the time, the Holy Ghost tries to warn us about certain people that come into our life. The other half of the time he tries to tell us that the sick feeling we get in a situation is not the other person’s fault, rather it is our own hang-ups. A life filled with bias, hatred, judgment, insecurity, fear, delusion, and self-righteousness can cloud the soul of anyone you meet. Our job is never to assume. Instead it is to listen, communicate, ask questions then ask more, until we know the true depth of someone’s spirit.” — **Shannon L. Alder**, inspirational author

“Whenever one person stands up and says, ‘Wait a minute, this is wrong,’ it helps other people do the same.” — **Gloria Steinem**, writer, lecturer, political activist, and feminist organizer

“Sometimes [instead of the benefit of doubt] we’re actually giving the benefit of our overactive imagination and our difficulty in trusting ourselves. There’s no need to keep doubting and doling out benefits – the evidence is there.... People unfold and who each of us are is self-evident. When we give the benefit of the doubt, it’s not there to write off our boundaries; it is there to give ourselves and the other person the time and opportunity to see that we were right not to assume the other possibility and for them to show through the evidence of their subsequent behaviour and how they treat us, that continuing to trust / engage with them and to not assume or decide that they have shady intentions, was and is a good thing.” — **Natalie Lue**, blogger and inspirational coach

“There's a difference between positioning oneself as a hero or savior and making it clear that one is not okay with what's going on. When racism is in our midst, one of the hardest things for many BIPOC is seeing it normalized by the people around them. Silence is complicity. It speaks to group culture, or what 'we' tolerate here, how 'we' do things, and how it feels to be there.” — **Dr. Rebecca Eunmi Haslam**, founder of Seed the Way and college professor

“All our silences in the face of racist assault are acts of complicity.” — **bell hooks**, American author, professor, feminist, and social activist

The case studies that follow were created by the Transitions Office of the UUA and they are used here by permission. In formulating responses, participants may wish to consider possible responses suggested for Calling Out and for Calling In offered in the “Interrupting Bias” worksheet provided following the case studies. The “Interrupting Bias” worksheet is used here by permission of Seed The Way and Dr. Rebecca Eunmi Haslam

CASE STUDIES – Transitions Office of the UUA – FOR DISCUSSION

(You may choose to explore this topic by considering one or more of these case studies and discussing them instead of taking up the **Questions To Prompt and Guide Discussion.**)

Case Study A: Pronouns

A ministerial candidate has introduced themselves as gender nonbinary and has said they don't use he or she as a pronoun to describe themselves. At a meeting of members where the minister is not present, someone suggests that all name tags should ask people for their pronouns. Someone else gets frustrated and responds, "We shouldn't do that. We shouldn't change our name tags for one person." Someone else says, "I think this is going to upset some of our older people. I've heard some of these folks constantly get it wrong, and sometimes I think this is intentional."

- *How would you respond to this conversation if you were on the search committee?*

Case Study B: Accessibility of person using a scooter

A minister who uses a scooter to travel long distances is selected to be a candidate at your congregation.

Someone says, upon seeing the ministerial candidate, that "the minister will be too difficult for the congregation because the building isn't accessible. Besides, the minister will have an agenda to make this their only issue." The leader adds that "it will cost too much to make the building accessible for one person, and we can't afford that right now." The person adds that "while this undoubtedly sounds terrible, it is not something the congregation should be forced to deal with now." And the person then wonders if this person will have the stamina to do the job.

- *If some leader in the congregation told you this, how would you respond?*

Case Study C: Our minister won't look like us

Someone tells a search committee member, "We should not really be looking at a minister of color. They won't fit in here and stay long. Our congregation and community are so white. It would be unfair to the minister."

- *If you were on the search committee, how would you respond to this person?*

Case Study D: Responding in the moment

A minister of Native American/First Nations/Indigenous descent is meeting the social justice committee for the first time. People go around the room and introduce themselves. The last person to speak raises one hand and simply says, "How!" All the people in the room turn toward the minister to see how she will respond.

- *If you were in that room, what would you do next?*

Case Study E: Only certain ministers attract families

Upon hearing the new minister is [a person of color, lesbian, disabled, or a combination of these identities, for example] someone says to you, "But we need a minister who will attract families here!"

- *Whose problem is this and how should it be dealt with? How would you respond to this situation?*

Interrupting Bias: Calling Out vs. Calling In

Calling Out:

- When we need to let someone know that their words or actions are unacceptable and will not be tolerated
- When we need to interrupt in order to prevent further harm
- Will likely feel hard and uncomfortable, but necessary
- Allows us to hit the “pause” button and break the momentum

Wow. Nope. Ouch. I need to stop you right there.	That word/comment is really triggering and offensive. Be mindful and pick a different word.	I need to push back against that. I disagree. I don't see it that way.
Okay, I am having a strong reaction to that and I need to let you know why.	I don't find that funny. Tell me why that's funny to you.	I wonder if you've considered the impact of your words.
Hmmm.. maybe you want to think this one through a bit more and speak about it later.	I need you to know how your comment just landed on me.	That's not our culture here. Those aren't our values.
Is sex/gender/gender identity/gender expression/race/class/ethnicity/religion/ability/immigration status/ body type/ marital status/ age/ pregnancy relevant to your point? How?	It sounded like you just said _____. Is that really what you meant?	I feel obligated as your peer/colleague/co-worker /friend/supervisor to tell you that your comment wasn't okay.
It sounds like you're making some assumptions that we need to unpack a bit.	You may or may not realize this, but you're talking about me/my story/my identity markers.	I need to leave the room if the conversation is going to continue down this road.
Remember, it is a powerful thing for the target of oppression to hear these words from the mouth of an ally!		

Adapted from Oregon Center for Educational Equity: *What Did You Just Say? Responses to Racist Comments Collected from the Field*



rebecca@seedtheway.com | www.seedtheway.com

Calling In:

- When there is an opportunity to explore deeper, make meaning together, and find a mutual sense of understanding across difference
- When we are seeking to understand or learn more
- When we want to help imagine different perspectives, possibilities, or outcomes
- Provides for multiple perspectives and encourages paradigm shifts
- Focused on reflection, not reaction
- Is not just a suggestion with an uptick (Don't you think you should...?)

I'm curious. What was your intention when you said that?	How might the impact of your words/actions differ from your intent?	What sort of impact do you think your decision/comment/action might have?
How might someone else see this differently? Is it possible that someone might misinterpret your words/actions?	How might your own comfort level, assumptions, expectations, prior experiences be influencing your beliefs, decisions, process?	How is ___ different from ___? What is the connection between ___ and ___?
What criteria are you using to measure/assess etc?	How did you decide, determine, conclude...	What would have to change in order for ___?
What do you assume to be true about ___?	Why is this the best way to proceed? What other approaches have you considered?	What is making you the most fearful, nervous, uncomfortable or worried?
Why do you think that is the case? Why do you believe that to be true?	Why do you think others have/haven't moved in that direction?	How do you know it's working?
Why did the result or response cause a problem for you?	What would other stakeholders say/think/feel?	In your opinion, what is the best case scenario?
Think: How might we call out the behavior, while calling in the person?		

Adapted from the School Reform Initiative *Pocket Guide to Probing Questions*



rebecca@seedtheway.com | www.seedtheway.com