

Engaging Conservative Evangelicals and Liberal Arts Advocates in Difficult Dialogue
Transforming Fightin' Words to Freeing Speech

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I invite you to turn to your neighbor, and one of you ask the other a simple question: "Are you saved?" Now I invite the other to respond with this line: "Them's fightin' words." I don't know how many of you get witnessed to on your campus, but for some professors at Mars Hill College, the question of salvation is one they field on a fairly routine basis. It's a question that doesn't always generate meaningful or liberating dialogue, though, engendering instead a range of emotion from discomfort in not knowing how to answer, to offense at the intrusion on personal space, to absolute fury at the assumptions behind the question. They really are fighting words. The discomfort liberal educators have with evangelicals is also evident when you compare the relative ease in which we bring students into appreciative dialogue with practitioners of Santeria in Cuba and syncretistic Catholicism among the Mayans in southern Mexico, but don't relish the prospect of accompanying students to engage practitioners of praise and worship at local Baptist churches.

The impasse in dialogue between proponents of liberal arts and proponents of evangelical Christianity is due in part to the inherent contradiction of core values at play. The core democratic value of respect for different beliefs clashes with the core evangelical belief in converting the different. This conflict has long been a part of the fabric of Baptist life in America, represented by the respective work of John Leland and Humphrey Posey. Leland was an 18th century Virginia Baptist preacher who abhorred coerced faith and convinced Jefferson and Madison that the Constitution needed an amendment protecting the fundamental human right to practice any faith or no faith. Humphrey Posey was an early 19th century missionary who labored in the mountains of western North Carolina to convert the Scotch-Irish and Cherokee to Baptist faith.

To gain a deeper appreciation for why some interpret evangelical speech as "fightin' words," it's important to understand that Posey and many other missionaries of his time were working not only for the church, bringing the good news of Jesus, but were also working as agents of the United States Department of War, bringing the bad news of Secretary John C. Calhoun to the Cherokee and other native tribes. This historic coupling of violence with gospel proclamation left a residue that partially explains why many of us would rather hear someone say "go to hell" than listen to someone explain to us how to avoid hell. But even without the violence, many people still feel violated when someone confronts them with questions of faith, makes assumptions about deficits in their spiritual life, and invites them to a conversion experience.

Our Difficult Dialogues project at Mars Hill has included a faculty and staff seminar to expand our knowledge base around diversity issues and strengthen our skill sets for facilitating dialogue in and out of the classroom. But some of us are beginning to recognize that this particular impasse between liberal arts advocates and evangelical Christians is not going to be overcome solely through acquiring knowledge or mastering dialogue skills. As important as knowledge and skills are, I believe the impasse is a

function of disposition, the basic posture one brings to the conversation, a posture that serves to filter one's knowledge and guide one's skills toward pre-determined desired outcomes. The realization is emerging that we will not be able to engage in meaningful dialogue while maintaining dispositions of opposition. Some of the most powerful learning outcomes I have experienced in the Difficult Dialogues project involve efforts to shift our dispositions in ways that can allow rich dialogue to occur in the midst of the inherent contradictions and clashes present on our campus.

What have we learned that might help us move beyond the impasse and shift our disposition? First, postures shift when we begin to recognize the strong resemblance between liberal arts education and evangelical religion. (*Note: Right-wing groups out to bash higher education are not the only ones who see this resemblance; it comes from liberal educators within the academy as well*). Famed Harvard scientist and lapsed Baptist E.O. Wilson understands the similarity perhaps better than anyone, when he talks about his own tendency to "imbibe the emotions" of evangelical religion as he pursues consilience and seeks to save the planet through the unity of knowledge. There is a pr sign in the Asheville airport for a nearby liberal arts college, which claims that they are "Educating Leaders Who Create New Worlds." Does that not strike you as a pretty bold statement of faith? World religion expert Huston Smith and agrarian author Wendell Berry have also noted how liberal education embodies many of the characteristics of a religion, from the deification of the scientific method with attendant assumptions about how to make meaning of the world, to evangelical zeal based on unquestioned presuppositions that education can solve the world's problems, if not "save" it. Canon wars, sacred cows, and reform movements dot the landscape of campus life as well as church life in America.

Questions of whether or how much to allow religious speech into the classroom or matters of faith into the curriculum lose much of their force when we see the entire enterprise of liberal education, public and private alike, as one long series of religious testimony, with professor after professor professing faith in the mysteries of creative and critical thinking and giving witness to the virtues of rigorous research and knowledge production. This initial acknowledgement of resonance, identification, and even kinship between education and evangelism is essential to moving beyond opposition and fighting words toward the composition of freeing speech—liberating dialogue that frees us to see ourselves in the other and to live fully in the contradictions of democracy. It at least moves the conflict into the realm of sibling rivalry.

Second, if liberal education is akin to evangelical religion, it follows that liberal educators bear a strong resemblance to evangelical missionaries. The language may be different but the desired outcome is much the same—educators are out to save the world (or even create new worlds), converting one student or class of students at a time, offering a means of escape from the chains of ignorance and a way to avoid the perceived hells of farm, factory, or fast food work. And lo and behold, liberal educators often meet with the same kinds of resistance to conversion that evangelicals experience.

Consider this mirror image encounter: A professor at Mars Hill described an uncomfortable situation with a conservative Christian student who stubbornly resisted viewing a movie that was required for the class. No matter how hard she tried, the professor could not convince the student to watch the movie, because it had an R rating denoting material offensive to the student. Later, the same professor described another

uncomfortable encounter with a student who was trying to convince her to see “The Passion of the Christ.” No matter how hard the student tried, she couldn’t convince the professor to view it, because there was material in it that offended the professor.

Given this common experience of resistance to conversion, a third step in moving beyond the impasse is to deconstruct the dispositions of opposition at play in the encounters. Some interesting metaphors emerge when faculty and staff talk about their relationships with conservative evangelical students. Some talk about Plato’s cave and how we need to enlighten students who are staring at shadows on a wall. Some talk about the role of liberal arts in liberating students from captivity to narrow world views. Others talk about how some students come to them with their beliefs held tightly in clenched fists, and our job is to pry those fingers loose. Still others describe stages of faith and intellectual development and how our role is to help students let go of the security blankets of immature world views. And there are some who say that encountering a student who believes the Bible is the literal word of God is like having a student who believes that $2 + 2 = 5$, and we have a responsibility as educators to correct their erroneous thought.

What is consistent about all these metaphors is the assumption that conservative evangelical students are deficient in their world views, that their belief systems are faulty and in need of correction. These assumptions generate the same oppositional dispositions that well up in us when someone tries to convince us that we are lost, that we have a deficiency in our spiritual lives and are going to hell if we don’t find the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Our dispositions are largely determined by the metaphors we live by, and so the fourth step in moving beyond the impasse is to imagine some new metaphors that could guide and inform the relationships between liberal educators and conservative evangelical Christians. This exercise in imagination proved to be one of the most enriching experiences of our faculty and staff seminar, as we began constructing new and more appreciative metaphors that have the capacity to alter our dispositions and lead to more engaged dialogue with students.

One such metaphor that has worked to bring liberal arts advocates into meaningful dialogue with conservative evangelicals on our campus comes from a biblical story familiar to evangelical Christians—the Pentecost story. It is a story of people from all over the known world making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They converged at the sacred space, each speaking his or her native tongue. A miracle occurred when they began understanding each other, even though they were speaking different languages.

We used this metaphor in recruiting a diverse group of students (representing the unofficial GLBT support group, the Black Student Association, and various evangelical groups) to participate in an ongoing Difficult Dialogues project. I believe the metaphor has worked for two reasons: one, the story allows for the possibility that we are all on a common pilgrimage. Students of all stripes have found it possible to agree that they are on a common trek of discovering their lifework. Despite their differences, they are traveling together toward a sacred space of vocation, which Frederick Beuchner describes as the place where one’s deep joy meets the world’s deep hunger.

Second, the story gives permission for each person to speak his or her own language. This is very important to the evangelical students, for them to feel like their language of faith represents a legitimate way of being in the world of liberal arts. It is

also important for the more liberal students, to feel like their world views are legitimate in a Baptist-affiliated institution. It was important for each of them to feel that our invitation to come and be themselves and speak their language was sincere, that it was not a veiled attempt to convert them.

The result is a weekly café called “A Thousand Tongues and Groove.” The name plays on the Pentecost story, an old Baptist hymn, and a carpentry term referring to how different pieces of wood fit together. Over 50 students have participated in the weekly café, which involves food, drink, drumming, music, and difficult dialogue. Classic rock songs are coupled with Baptist hymns, contemporary pop songs with praise and worship choruses, with dialogue themes emerging from the lyrics. “We Are One in the Spirit” (*we will work with each other, we will work side by side; we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride*) is coupled with the Beatles’ “Come Together” and the lyrics prompt dialogue around how we could all work together on the One Campaign to end poverty. “This Little Light” is coupled with Collective Soul’s “Shine” and the lyrics prompt dialogue in which students shed light on what it’s like for them to be at Mars Hill and the respective challenges they face. “I Am Bound for the Promised Land” is coupled with Edgar Winter’s “Free Ride” (*the mountain is high, the valley is low, and you’re confused about which way to go, so I flew in to lend you a hand and lead you into the promised land*) and the lyrics prompt dialogue about the stormy banks they have stood on and what their visions are for a renewed community that could serve as a promised land for all manner of students at Mars Hill.

While we are a long way off from any promised land flowing with milk and honey, the conversations along the way are rich and are leading to new relationships being formed across lines of diversity. One evangelical student claimed that it truly was a miracle that she was talking with people she would never have dreamed of talking with before. I believe a genuine shift in dispositions is occurring, and a corresponding shift in communication postures, from dispositions of opposition to dispositions of composition. The clashing colors of liberal education and conservative evangelism are mixing on the canvas of democracy to form something stunningly beautiful, and the seemingly contradictory threads of respect and conversion are being woven together in ways that strengthen the fabric of democracy.

Are you saved? I invite you to imagine that question as freeing speech instead of fighting words. Envision it as a great question, an essential existential question we need not fear to embrace. Imagine being on pilgrimage with students traveling to the sacred space of vocation where our deep joy meets the world’s deep hunger. Imagine the question freeing us to employ all the resources of the liberal arts as well as conservative religion in a collaborative quest to find a good answer. Perhaps all those sources will provide us with a poetic answer, a lyrical answer miraculously understood no matter what tradition or what tongue we employ, an answer we can sing in harmony with our students, “saved, by a power divine, saved, to new life sublime—life now is sweet and my joy is complete, for I’m saved, saved, saved!”