

Courageous Conversations

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Meaningful conversations provide an outlet from isolationism and are important gateways into collaboration and community building. Once conversations begin and are sustained, we are in the zone to bridge the divide and harness the powers of collaboration far beyond those of competition.

Just a few months ago, in March 2021, I worked with two other Dignity Project Fellows to create a space for facilitating meaningful conversations, guided by our coordinator Shelton Oakley Hersey and our mentor Batya Ellinoy. My group and I chose to focus on leading a conversation amongst our high school peers about three social justice issues: Malak Ahmed focused on Islamophobia, Caroline Gannon addressed the stigma and prejudices surrounding mental illnesses, and I chose to draw attention to the importance of voting, the reality of voter suppression, and the preservation of our democracy. The purpose of this peer discussion was not only to increase awareness about these pressing societal issues, but also to encourage the desire to participate in these elevated and purposeful conversations where there may be hesitation or inexperience. Our gathering in March led to new knowledge, perspective, and relational bonds that we hoped would spur future action amongst our peers.

Oftentimes, we find ourselves in meaningless - and even harmful conversations - with the people around us. Backbiting and spreading lies about others has in some ways become the only alternative to completely isolating ourselves from the rest of the world. This results in the ongoing dwelling in our own stress, anxiety, and siloed perspective. The toll of these negative habits cannot be overstated, which can lead to physical and mental anguish as well as a lack of real collective progress.

In acknowledgement of these unhealthy habits and using the inspiration, positive energy, and transformative ideas I drew from my participation in the Dignity Project, I was led to implement something new in my own community. I created an all inclusive group for meaningful interactions and conversations, starting off with a few friends from school, with the hope to expand beyond my small town's confines. This space not only fosters discussion of important issues like those surrounding social justice, but also serves as a forum where friends can share any going-ons in their lives, any stress or anxiety they may feel, and anything that is important to them. Even casual conversations about genuine thoughts or ideas can be healing, relieving, and impactful. Everyone has a unique voice with ideas to be shared, and all deserve an attentive ear without responses that sully them with aggression and backbiting.

So what started as an invitation from the Dignity Project has allowed me and many of my peers to envision ourselves as active protagonists in the ongoing saga of transforming the world through collaboration, to mitigate the negative energies of anger and factionalism, and to celebrate the beauty in diversity. It is our time to supplant the old world structure through peaceful collaborative action, the seeds of which lie in meaningful conversations. We hold the future in our grasp.