

Listening Across Deep Divisions
Panel Contribution
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About one year ago, at a meeting very much like this one, I had the opportunity to talk about conflicts between faith and science, and about how we address them in Christian colleges. I had recently come from a program in Oxford, a program sponsored by the CCCU designed to explore and bridge this faith and science conflict. In Oxford, our conversations took place among the academic towers and religious spires and you could almost feel the centuries of intense exploration.

The other conversation took place across the world, with a dear member of our IAPCHE fellowship for whom these conversations were rather new. He asked a pained question. In our specific context, he said, almost all talk of science is discouraged. How do you even begin to address questions about climate change, human sexuality, energy, genetic modification, human origins? How do you even begin to address issues in faith and science without fearing that you might give up your faith?

Trying to understand, and to look for a place to start, I asked him – well, perhaps let's begin with medicine. How do you understand what heals? What do you think about the science behind medicine?

Ah, he replied, even there. We pray for healing. But we are discouraged from thinking about western medicine. Hospitals are suspect. Medicine is suspect. We are afraid of making God, and a supernatural view of the world, unnecessary.

That encounter has lived on in my mind this year. My gentle questioner had a real fear – what if, in the name of even a pragmatic science, we are asked to give up our view of the world – a view which has the divine present in every moment, in every miracle.

It was a privilege to listen – and to, in some small way, begin to understand his fear. I knew we needed to respect and hear each other. I also knew we were so far away in our understanding of science and its place in the world, and I wondered if any deep listening would ever get us much closer.

If you listen to this story, you will note that there are at least three kinds of divisions here – between faith and science, between hemispheres, and between practical and academic approaches to the topic of healing.

Tonight my goal is to reflect very briefly on the our theme of listening in the context of divisions, especially divisions in faith and science and across cultures. I want to mention a few things that stand in the way of listening, and then perhaps a few things that can help us. To use the metaphor we were given yesterday, I want to look at a few sticks in our individual ears - and perhaps in our brains as well. And then consider how might we address this in our colleges, and especially how and why should we do this when it comes to conflicts about faith and science.

I will start with several barriers to good listening from human science itself.

Here is the first one – it is simply time. Who has time for listening. Who has time to address conflict – we have work to do!

One of the famous studies in social psychology is the Princeton Seminary study. Seminarians were the subjects of this study – what personality, training, context – would get them to show compassion to a stranger? The seminarians studied the parable of the good Samaritan and were asked to go to a next building to take part in an exercise. But of course, they were actually in a social psychology experiment. What would differentiate those who stopped to help an obviously needy person and those who would walk right past? What would predict who would act as the good Samaritan?

Well it turns out that studying the good Samaritan – being devoted to the theory of the good Samaritan - was not enough. It was very easy to rush right past. Rather, those who were not hurried were the ones who stopped. The study has been repeated many times - the results are the same. The story, the research - tells us a story about listening as well.

Learning across divisions takes attentiveness, and attentiveness takes time. Our time and attention are today's most valuable currencies. Rush. Rush. Rush. Do. Do. Do.

We have many ways to describe our mission in higher education, but one way is that we are places devoted to deep listening – to the sages that have gone before us, to the intricacy of the cell, and financial statement, to the complexities of city and rural life, to the messages from deep space, to all the wonders and wisdom we study in college.

Entering the university means giving ourselves over to the time needed to learn the lessons that others teach, and to engage in mutual discovery together.

We know, of course, just how countercultural this kind of learning together is. But it is a purpose and discipline that we must protect at all costs. And that means of course, giving ourselves time.

So here is the first take home message –

As faculty members- we must honor the time it takes to listen to persons and texts and experiences and then teach our students to do the same. The time it takes to do good science and to think about science. The time it takes to nurture trust so that we can delve into controversial areas together.

As administrators – we must guard the time that is needed for this skill. Time for faculty as scholars, time for faculty as teachers, time to do the slow mentoring...

Faculty and administrators can provide the time and attention for deep listening through the ways that curriculum is structured and through special events on campus. At Calvin, I have been thankful that we have lectures on controversial topics – almost all the controversial topics in science, international perspectives.. We have small group book studies, time for research. These are structured parts of our day and our lives that afford us the time to listen.

Back to my conversations about healing – it gives me joy that we had several African scholars in the Oxford program asking just the kinds of questions. And I

recently heard about a grant to Joel's program that will support that kind of listening to precisely these questions. They are giving the gift of time – to listen to the wisdom across deep divisions.

2. Here is another barrier – Our thinking – and therefore our listening - is a hot mess.

It is hard to enough understand where our own perspectives come from, let alone the perspective of another. When we don't understand something of ourselves, it is hard to listen and learn.

The past few decades have seen a lot of work on predictable biases in the way that we think – in the ways that we make judgements. We like to think we are rational creatures, and that our critical thinking is built on informed logic. If only we could get our logic to line up, we might be able to reach a place to stand. If only we could all compare our logic, we could find the flaws. If only we could all reason together -

But no. Of course not.

Anthony Damasio in *Descartes's Error* demonstrated how our emotions contribute to our thinking and our actions, and how this happens in ways mostly unknown to us. The surprising theme of his book is that without a functioning emotional system, human beings make bad decisions. Good logic alone cannot save us.

In his work on cognitive bias, Daniel Kahneman won a Nobel Prize for his work on the errors we make in thinking. In *Thinking Fast and Slow*, he describes our system 1 and system 2. We use system 1 is our default way of responding, and it is based on pattern recognition, emotion and intuition. System 2 is slower, more logical, more analytical. Many times system 1 serves us well....we hone it over time, and we learn to recognize the patterns that matter to us.

But the book is filled with examples of times when it does not, leading to predictable errors in thinking.

And of course, Responding to conflict and disagreement is one of those times.

Our own convictions and interpretations arise from this complex mix of emotion and logic, passion and pattern, metaphor and map, intuition and analysis. How well do we actually know ourselves and our own way of looking at the world?

It turns out that our views – even of science – even within science – our views on controversial issues are related to a host of other values and commitments:

- Do we value order or complexity?
- Do we value purity or fairness?
- Do we value freedom or equality?
- Communal life or individuality?
- Personality or duty?
- Are we creative or do we keep things in the box.....
- Do we have democratic brain or a republican brain?

We are literally wired differently.

Often we hear through emotional and cognitive frames that lead us to mistakes. We hear what we want to hear, what we expect to hear. We listen – most often - to confirm our own ways of looking at the world.

And this is real, and powerful. It is not just laziness, bad intentions, or deliberate evil, or a property of the other political party or religion. And because our responses are often from the least examined parts of ourselves, they are harder to evaluate, and harder to change.

And faith and science quickly gets caught up in the culture wars.

Africa and Asia are establishing Christian colleges at a surprising pace, and science is on the curriculum. How will sciences be shaped in these emerging Christian institutions?

The danger is that these institutions may becoming battle grounds for some of the same polarization that has taken place in the American churches in

relationship to science. But perhaps it need not be this way, and these colleges can have lessons for us all.

A worldview less steeped in the enlightenment, more open to God's active presence in the world, might help: evolution is less likely to be seen as the threatening wedge of naturalism and more as one of the active ways that God is creating and upholding creation. Creation care is seen as pressing problem worthy of united work, not political posturing.

So what do we do with this hot mess that is our own emotional/rational/gut level way of being in the world?

Here too, I want to honor the work of higher education. I do not think that we all need perfect self knowledge before we begin to hear others. But the important work of college – even in the faith and science conversation – is to form thinkers and workers and doers who are wise.

Who know how to understand multiple ways of knowing – recognize them in themselves, and then listen for them in others. This kind of awareness leads to epistemological humility – knowing ourselves as flawed knowers – knowing that there are many ways to know.

We all have different ways of teaching this lesson – some of them have been explored at this conference. How is it done in science?

Some of us use specific study of human knowing and decision making. Some of us teach critical theory. An effective approach is through the history of a discipline – the history of science provides many lessons in humility if it is taught well. And many of us teach science in an international context.

We teach students to come to questions about faith and science with wonder, but also with Humility: And if we acknowledge both our fallenness and finiteness – different but both present, we know the limits of what we know. And related to humility, lament. There are so many ways we have fallen short, so many ways that we have misused our scientific knowledge, so many ways we have hidden our eyes out of fear. We don't know how sin came into this created world, but we

surely know that it did. We know that there is much to lament, and much that needs redeeming.

Practice good thinking. Resist playing a role in culture wars. Don't link this with political party, moral purity, being more true to the bible, being on the right side of history, being righteous, being pious, being more courageous, than any other side.

The aim here isn't to simply win an intellectual – or rhetorical – or popular - battle. It isn't to be on the right side of history. It is to do good academic work at both the micro and macro level. It is about trying to hear and - even love - every good argument, every interesting fact, every challenging theory. It is to provide a place for earnestly seeking people of faith. It is to be honest about the limits of our knowing.

In other words, it is to adopt the best of our identities as seekers, as colleagues, and as people of faith.

Barrier 3. We ask the wrong questions and we forget the role of love.

Several years ago I had the blessing of working with a group of young professors in India. These professors were mostly young women working in small colleges. I spent a week with them and we met every day. I was doing the same thing there I might do with students.... What is a worldview – what are its parts – how do you recognize it in cultural products, in scholarly writing – how do our theological convictions fit in...and so on.

But then, on Tuesday afternoon, they had the courage to speak to me.

“We are so interested in this version of integration. We thought you were saying integrity – we are more interested in that. Integrity in faith and learning.”

It was a shift in wording that took me a while to understand. These young women had very little power in their universities. They had little control

over their teaching conditions, and over the grades they were to give. Every day they faced challenges to their integrity.

Listening to them taught me a lot about their world.

But it also taught me about power and privilege and the ways that they play out in our faith and education conversations. I had wonderful answers – for questions they were not asking. I had assumed that the same questions I was asking about worldview and application were the questions for them.

For the rest of the week we explored what integrity would mean –
what their fears were, how their lives were shaped by their lack of power,
how they loved their discipline
and how their intellectual work was shaped by the love of their students.

Does our science arise from love? I have found the most generative conversations about the faith and science conflicts to be conversations rooted in love. First, love for students, who find their own faith challenged by what they are learning in physics, or biology, or neuroscience and turn to their professors to find out how to navigate the terrain. Some of you went to BioLogos this afternoon – an organization started out of love for those who felt their faith was a risk.... Much of our study of neuroscience and sexual identity and arises from love as well – can we learn enough to understand?

And second, love for the people and the earth. Some of you heard about Calvin's efforts in the local watershed – an effort that rose out of love for the planet. Caring for creation, loving this planet and the people on it gives rise to science as well, and the shared goal of care has the capacity to help us listen more carefully to wherever wisdom is found.

And third, love for the communities we serve.

The hard philosophical questions that we like to play with will arise, but they will arise from practice and be informed by practice.

4. Here is the last barrier for tonight. We sometimes lack the conviction that listening will get us anywhere. In other words, we forget our mission is in community.

In this North American context, I talk to many folks who are weary of conversations about climate change, sexual identity, human origins, food systems, health care, and so on. Where does this get us, they will say? Scientists especially can name this impatience. Just let us do our work.

Many of us sympathize. Listening is hard work.

And yet, and yet....

College and universities – all of us – must hold fast to the conviction that without listening, without every effort to hear each other, we are limited in our knowing the world and so we are impoverished in our knowing God.

I mentioned worldview before. It is old word with a rich history in Christian higher education and a bit out of favor. But here is what I have always liked it.

I love the fact that this idea uses the metaphor of vision. (So now we move from listening to vision.) We often have a static idea of vision – we see something and know what it is. We can name it and claim it.

But no. Even in its earliest stages, vision is a very dynamic process. It requires movement over the retina, and contrast within the brain – interaction in space and time. Vision is a miracle of understanding but it is a miracle that doesn't work well if you are standing still. If I never move, for example, I do not know that the person in front of me is actually the same size as the person back there. We do not get it right until we are on the move – acting in the world – and in relationship.

One of the influential articles in my life as a psychologist was in an early book on faith and learning integration. Bert Hodges wrote about this dynamic, ecological, communal nature of perception. We are blind and ignorant if we think one perspective - our own – is enough.

We have so much to learn from each other. From now until the world ends we will bring multiple views, multiple perspectives to the great picture of the world that we live in.

In this way of thinking – differences are vital, and a single perspective is never enough – a true understanding is a dance in space and time.

As faculty and community members, we must develop the skills of cultural and epistemological humility, even as we are called to do this intellectual scouting work. We must think about our own motives and our own partners. We must seek the wisdom of others, and tie ourselves in to a community of trust.

As administrators – you must guard the places where hard questions are being asked. You must accept that your faculty are scouting new intellectual territory – and what they see is not always safe. But the project needs them.

We can't listen only for the goal of reaching consensus on propositional truth or even with the goal of finding the one nugget of fair policy that will solve the next deep division. Frankly, I am not convinced that that will happen. We will not agree. Listening will not lead us to a unitary vision.

The faith and science conflicts that cause the most division are not the disinterested but intriguing ones, but those that demand an applied, definitive response. It is all very well to let wonder about God's good creation guide us, but what are we going to do about climate change? How will our colleges navigate questions about origins? How will respond to issues of medical interventions? Food source interventions? What policy will be proposed related to issues of human sexuality?

But here too, perhaps we can learn to allow ourselves a plurality of responses, calling ourselves to integrity but not unanimity. Calling each other to mutual respect, humility, discovery, and difference.

Social psychologists tell us that one approach to conflict is looking for superordinate goals – to find shared tasks that can serve to build a shared identity.

What are ours?

Loving God.

Loving the world God made.

Delighting in the gifts of thinking, feeling, knowing, acting.

Loving each other.

Loving God.