

Values to Guide Authentic Spiritual Conversation Groups

By Nelle Moffett and Rick Bowers

Most of us are familiar with traditional religious organizations with rituals and fixed structures, a fixed system of belief, and authoritative leadership. My guess is that people who are attracted to Authentic Spiritual Conversations groups have, to some degree, rejected this rigid structure and are looking for more flexibility, self-authority, and intimate sharing from this group. It is our intention to support this desire and to model a way of being that exemplifies these values.

There is a question, however, of how to support a variety of people, perspectives, personalities, and beliefs in a conversation that creates safety, mutual respect, and compassion. We believe that there is a huge need in our world for skillfulness in holding such an open space, especially within a context of inherent differences among the participants. In our experience, there is currently a lack of skill in this type of open conversation among the vast majority of people. This lack of skillfulness raises a significant challenge, at this point in time, for our development as human beings – even among those of us who are spiritually directed.

It seems to us that we need some transitional means to move us from the overly structured organization to the flowing Presence that many of us ultimately desire to achieve. We need to find a middle ground where we can include enough structure to support safety and authentic sharing without becoming too regulated, rigid, and imposing. It seems to us that we still need, at a minimum, to establish shared intention and values, as well as some flexible leadership, until we have all become experienced in being fully present in the flow of Now.

Intentions and Values. One way to accomplish such a middle ground process is to establish a group around shared intentions and values rather than rules, rituals, and doctrine. Some of the intentions and values that we bring into our facilitation of Authentic Spiritual Conversation meetings include:

- Safety to allow people to express their vulnerability, doubts, frustrations, beliefs without being given advice, preached at, condescended to, told how things should be, or made wrong in any way;
- A listening space where people can try on ideas, feelings, and forms of self-expression without being concerned about having to take care of the listener;
- Respect for the right of each person to be exactly where they are and to have their own perspectives, beliefs, and experiences;
- Self-Responsibility for our own actions, choices, development, and empowerment to meet our needs within the group and in our lives;
- Freedom to change our minds, choose our level of participation, and to decline any suggestion that does not fit for us;



- Taking Action in the world to apply our spiritual values, learn what we are here to learn, and develop the capacity to live in a way that is heart/mind congruent;
- Compassion for the challenges, difficulties, and seeming failures that we all face;
- Sharing what we have learned is an offering to each other when it comes from a sincere desire to share our learning with others and to celebrate the gifts we have received;
- Speaking our truth, for our own benefit, to heal and dissolve the internal barriers we have placed on ourselves in order to be safe and receive love, and to begin to allow the truth of who we are to show up in the world;
- Skillfulness developed through practicing authentic speaking, open listening, and compassionate holding in fellowship with others;
- Humility in thinking that we know the Truth, accepting that we have limited knowledge of other religions and other perspectives, letting go of arguments about our opinions and judgments of others, and giving up insistence on being right;
- Confidentiality as a way to create a safe space. We will not share what is said in the group with anyone else. We will not discuss the content of other people's sharing even with current or former members of the group. Further, we will not bring up the content of someone's sharing if we encounter them outside of the group unless that person brings it up first.

Becoming leader-full. We believe it is helpful to model skillful, values-based facilitation at the beginning of forming an Authentic Spiritual Conversations group. Ideally, after a start-up period, we envision each Authentic Spiritual Conversations group becoming a self-sustaining, self-regulating, leader-full group. A group may be ready to become a leader-full group when

- there is a sufficient regular core of members who have experienced a functioning group and have witnessed the kind of facilitation that encourages authenticity;
- the group has successfully incorporated new members into the values of the group;
- at least 3-5 of these core members have facilitated an Authentic Spiritual Conversations meeting under the guidance of a trained facilitator; and
- a majority of the core membership has embodied the values of the group.

What does this kind of group look like in action? In the groups we have created, we look for evidence of a sense of safety in the group by the depth and vulnerability that the members are willing to share. Of course, it tends to take some time when a group is first forming, or when people have first joined, to establish a sense of safety. People may put out a "trial balloon" to see what kind of response they get. As facilitators, we will step in to create a bubble of safety around a person who has expressed something sensitive. As facilitators, we may make a request of more experienced members to express themselves in ways that align with the values and intentions of the group, that they

- use different language (shift from "you" to "I"),
- speak from their personal experience (changing from conceptual to personal expression),
- ask permission ("Would you like to hear my ideas about that?"), or
- make a specific request (i.e., "I have something to share and I would really like someone in the group to reflect back to me what you hear").

In the tables below, we have provided some examples of common ways of speaking that might show up in a group. Some of these examples are consistent with the values of Authentic Spiritual Conversations and some of them are not, (in our opinion). You can check your understanding of the difference by guessing which category you would put them in and then checking our response.

1) A member shares something personal and deep. Here are some possible ways that members may respond.	
a) "What you need to do is..."	In our opinion, this response is not aligned with the Values. Telling someone, without permission, what they "need" to do falls in the category of giving advice. Giving advice without permission infringes on the Value of safety (and others).
b) "I experienced something similar in me. Would you like to hear how I got through it?"	We like this response because the speaker asks if the person would like to hear about a strategy that the speaker found to be successful before just offering it as advice. This feels more alive to us because it comes directly from personal experience and respectful of whether the person is willing to receive it.
c) Multiple people chime in offering what the person did wrong and what the person should do to fix the situation.	In our opinion, this response is not aligned with the Values. Multiple people jumping in can feel like "ganging up" on the vulnerable speaker. It can also turn into "let's fix Mary" which takes the "fixers" out of their authentic self. These behaviors infringe on the Values of safety and speaking our truth (and others).
d) Someone asks, "Do you have a request of what you would like from the group?"	We like this response because the question invites the member to step into self-responsibility for what kind of support they would like, if any.
e) "What I heard you say is Is that right?"	We like this response because it supports the listening space and leaves the focus on the member who shared.
f) Someone responds, "The same thing happened to me last week! My boyfriend actually had the nerve to tell me..."	In our opinion, this response is not aligned with the Values. One-upmanship infringes on the Value of safety (and others) and also diverts attention from the original member who shared, thus infringing on the Value of a listening space.
g) "What have you tried that doesn't work and what does work for you?"	We like this response because it supports the listening space and supports the member who shared in self-responsibility.
h) "I really enjoy what I am hearing you say because it aligns so well with my own experience."	We like this response because it supports the Value of sharing and still leaves the focus on the other person.

2) People from different spiritual paths in the group engage in a conversation about various spiritual practices they use.	
a) "Meditation has never worked for me, even though I have tried it for many years."	This response might be heard as either supporting or infringing on the Values, depending on the context. It could be heard as sharing from the person's personal experience or it could be heard as criticism of what a prior speaker has said.
b) "We all believe that... "	In our opinion, this response is not aligned with the Values. Statements like "we all," infringe on the Value of respect for different belief systems. Also the statement infringes on the Value of speaking our truth because "we all" is impersonal. We would prefer the words, "I believe that..."
c) "Anyone who doesn't obey the word of God is living in sin."	In our opinion, this response is not aligned with the Values. This statement infringes on the Value of respect for different belief systems. We would prefer the expression start with the words, "I believe that..."
d) "In my path, I believe in reincarnation."	We like this response because it supports the Value of respect and clearly owns this as the speaker's personal belief.
e) "All you have to do is pray for your husband and he'll come around."	In our opinion, this response is not aligned with the Values. Telling someone, without permission, what they "have to" or "should" do falls in the category of giving advice. Giving advice without permission infringes on the Value of safety. In the context of this conversation, this statement also assumes that the speaker's path and practices are appropriate for someone else thus infringing on the Value of respect. If permission has been granted, we would prefer the statement start with, "In my experience..."
f) "I can't believe that the Pope said!"	In our opinion, this response is not aligned with the Values. The statement could be heard as disparaging someone else's beliefs thus infringing on the Value of respect. It also is coming from opinion and judgment rather than speaking the truth of one's own inner need for healing. We would prefer the statement start with, "When I heard the Pope say 'xyz,' I felt..."

g) "The practice that I have found to be powerful for me in that situation is affirmations."	We like this response because it supports the Value of respect and clearly owns this as the speaker's personal belief.
h) "The Hindus are polytheistic because they worship more than a thousand Gods."	In our opinion, this response is not aligned with the Values. The statement could be heard as disparaging someone else's beliefs thus infringing on the Values of respect and humility. We would prefer the statement start with, "My understanding is"
i) "I grew up believing in xxx, but now I have doubts about how that could be true."	We like this response because it supports the Value of freedom and clearly owns this as the speaker's personal belief.
j) "On my path, we are supposed to do these practices. I don't do them regularly and I feel bad about that...like I am a bad person because I don't practice like I should."	We like this response because it supports the Value of a listening space and clearly owns this as the speaker's personal feelings.
k) "I have a hard time when I hear people in this group stating their opinions as if it is the truth. Would someone be willing to tell me how you feel when you hear me say this?"	We like this response because it supports the Values of a self-responsibility and skillfulness, and clearly owns this as the speaker's personal feelings.

It is very easy for everyone, including us, to slip into one of these patterns of expression in a group because these are common and accepted ways of speaking in other types of groups. When we slip into old patterns of speaking, it is not a reason to judge each other but rather an opportunity to practice the Value of compassion. The facilitator or a member of the group may choose to support the person in learning skillfulness by making a gentle request, depending on the ability to do this from compassion and holding a safe space. In our experience, the quality of the group will depend on the ability of members and facilitators alike to hold a safe space that supports everyone in showing up and speaking authentically.

About Us: We have developed our skills in facilitation through leading Nonviolent Communication practice groups, Inner Relationship Focusing partnerships, facilitating community meetings on difficult topics, and facilitating collaborative teams in the workplace, as well as training from multiple sources. We are the authors of the book *Beyond Robert's Rules: An Overview of Group Communication Models*. See a full bio at <http://www.cgifellowship.org/about-us/founders/>.