

# Preconditions for Conscious Conversation

**Marilyn Smith**

I walked out of a meeting today that felt skittish and pinched. A fellow attendee stopped me on the way out and said, “That meeting didn’t feel good.” For me, that was a conscious conversation. In that moment, the tense vibe of the previous hour dissolved. It was a moment of humor, levity and ease without a lot of words.

To me, having a conscious conversation means that I am physically, emotionally and mentally awake. It rarely seems to happen for more than a few minutes at a time, and I often find words and concepts to be an impediment to conscious conversation.

I care about strengthening our justice system and being a good citizen. I aspire to have professional, personal and political conversations that are strategic, pragmatic and focused on outcomes I desire. Some moments in these conversations are conscious, and some are formulaic and choreographed. It seems that when I am self-aware and accountable, I can quickly tell the difference and pivot from one type of conversation to the other. When I’m in a conscious conversation I can get to the heart of the matter quickly and I have more access to my own creativity and innovation. When I’m distracted, resisting, controlling or pushing away the conversation in front of me, I don’t have much access to my own creativity. A willingness to be uncomfortable and vulnerable seems like a pre-condition for my conscious conversations.

I have a colleague and friend who holds much different political views than I do. Many days during the 2016 presidential election we tried to have conscious conversations about the candidates and the political choices we were being asked to make. I reminded myself that it was ok that we held different views; that we didn’t need to see things the same way or make the same choices. Our conversations see-sawed back and forth between feeling like a threat or an authentic desire to grow and learn. Sometimes it felt like a ‘chutes and ladders’ game – one moment we were in a conscious exchange and in the next moment, we were triggered and off to the moon.

Most conversations I observe occur to me as a form of acrobatics – split between the dominators jumping in, beating their chest and demanding

attention - and the victims sitting paralyzed, collapsed and fixated on feeding the dominators with their silence and nods. No matter what the subject, the dance of “normal” conversations feels familiar in my body – especially in my throat, chest and stomach. Often my throat closes when I’m in an unconscious conversation, as I watch myself move between being a victim and a dominator in the same conversation.

I frequently feel trapped in conversations and I assume they’re not conscious. When I notice that moment of being trapped, I have more immediate access to pivot towards a conscious conversation. I don’t sense that I have conscious conversations when I’m feeling trapped.

For many years my dad would regularly ask me to write or speak or contribute to his work. I would jump at that opportunity, would feel important and wouldn’t consider saying no. I wanted my dad’s attention and approval, and conversation seemed like a way to get that. I wanted him to notice how smart I was and to see me as someone with something worthwhile to say. I would manufacture work product or strive for an interesting conversation in response to his invitations. Along with my efforts would come a strong sense of pressure and tightly coiled urgency: my conversations needed to flow, be interesting, bold, compelling, adventurous, transformative, spiritual and deep.

Underneath these efforts was a disorienting current of seething. As much as I wanted the approval and attention, I would feel trapped inside these conversations, searching for the exit, dancing around pretending to be interesting or interested. Now my dad rarely reaches out to talk or collaborate. When I reach out to him it’s rarely with a desire for collaboration, coaching or work – it’s mostly to connect, hear his voice, and share a moment of love.

I know my dad loves me and he knows I love him. That’s a conscious conversation that doesn’t need words. I know there are days when he feels that I’ve abandoned him and his mission, and there are days when I feel that he’s abandoned me. I know we’ve tried for years to have a conscious conversation about men, women, love and marriage. While we rarely get there, my curiosity and desire to mine this landscape remains. I know the truth of the matter is the love we share – always a conscious conversation waiting around the corner.

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