

Sherif Girgis – Breakout session: The Art of One-on-One Conversation

Well thank you. Um, I hope to have this as a kind of family style conversation, not just in content but in style, uh, partly because I need to save some energy for the next talk I'm supposed to give. Uh, and partly because I figure that's more appropriate and more fruitful. I'm going to be speaking as if we're all getting advice or talking about practical tips for sharing traditional values. But I understand that not everybody here and not everybody at the conference in general shares those values. But I actually think that won't matter for these purposes because the tips for discussing difficult issues in a one-on-one context, I think are the same no matter which side of them you're on, and they're, and they're tips that we will be actually, we'll be able to make common cause in trying to share with each other. Because it's to everybody's benefit that these conversations go well and happen often. I think in fact that they're—they're where the action happens. I think most of the laws and the policies and the academic conferences and the student groups are for the sake of this kind of one-on-one influence which is the most effective and the most lasting.

I think you can understand the general framework of my tips by thinking about the following. Think back to a conversation you had, a difficult conversation you had more than, let's say two or three months ago, on some hot button topic. Could have been one of the sex and family ethics issues that we are talking about today; it could have been uh, the abortion issue, could have been euthanasia, surrogacy, um, prison reform, all kinds of things this could apply to. Now think of how many substantive points you remember from that discussion. You think you could map out the points that were made; we'll I made 'A' and the person made 'B' and then I said "well not be because of 'C'". Everybody is shaking their head. The answer is almost always no. Maybe if you're (2:04 audio cut out)

Was in a context where you then had to write a paper about it, you'll remember one or two. You'll remember the main gist of it. But you won't remember most of the content and neither will they. What will you remember? You do remember the tone. You remember the delivery. You remember the way you felt about that person. The way you thought they felt about you and about the topic. So the general, you could summarize my whole talk, you could walk out right now with all the value of what I'm about to say by keeping that basic fact in mind. It's not so much about the details, it's about the long view and the long view will have a lot more to do with style than with content, though both obviously are important. Because if the content was really crazy, then you're overriding impression a year later will be the person was really crazy. So, that, that still matters. And I think the basic upshot of that which I'll just be unpacking bit by bit, you guys missed the best part, it's really, it's a real shame. Uh, actually it is worth some, I said the main point of my talk is my first point. So I should summarize it. Which is just that after three months of a discussion, from a discussion on these hot button issues, the only thing you remember is the style and the delivery and the tone and the way they felt about you and the way they felt about the topic and the way you felt about both as well, and not so much the finer points and details, and that that's going to frame the whole um, all of the tips that I am giving today are with a view to making the best impression in those respects which I think will also have the most um, impact for the truth.

The—the most immediate upshot of all of that is that you should have above all, a kind of cheer and confidence and peace about the views that you're pushing; which is extra hard on these difficult issues. My main evidence for that is my own experience discussing the most hated conservative position on the most heated political issue at the most liberal law schools and universities in the country. Okay. I, it's, it's a kind of second day job for me. I've been trying to wind it down a little bit so I can get through my PhD. um, but I've been doing it for now three years and every time it's the same progression. In the lead up to the discussion and the lead up to the event, I'll get an email from my host

about a week and a half ahead a time. And they'll say 'I'm really worried.' 'There are Facebook protests that are threatening to glitter bomb you. You're going to be mooned, you're going to be flashed, you're going to be attacked, protested against, something bad is going to happen.' And I always say 'Okay, okay, that's fine.' And I show up and you can see the beginnings of that kind of attitude. You know, people are, you can tell by people's posture actually, whether they agree with you or not, it's a really remarkable thing. People who agree with you be, have a kind, leaning forward, and have this open face; and people who don't will be sort of slinked sideways and kind of have a slanted smile like 'what is this fool going to say?' And so the first thing that I do, I realize that it's in the first 30 seconds that I'm going to make or break the impression they will remember three years from then. So what do I do? I get up, and I try to smile and stay calm and just say 'I'm so happy to be here. I'm excited to share with you a set of ideas that will turn your world upside down. And I'm excited even more for you to turn mine upside down, to tell me where I'm going wrong. I'm going to pose some challenges to you. The great thing about being at a university is that you're going to get to pose challenges to me and I'm going to leave most of the time for Q & A and this going to be a great discussion.' And everybody's posture changes. I'm not saying everybody's view changes, everybody's posture changes and the conversation goes much better.

Well on a one-to-one basis, it's not going to be quite the same. You don't have, there's a little element of bravado in any kind of public performance. You don't want that. But you do want a kind of cheerful and peaceful confidence; and the way to have that is to believe what you're saying and to feel comfortable saying it. The—the cheer actually does make, have another affect. I mean the fixing of peoples posture is really an indication that they're moving from a spirit of dismissal to a spirit of curiosity. I had a really stark example of this once actually in a one-on-one conversation; it was the beginning of law school and I had missed one day of a class the previous Thursday, because I was at, actually my first debate. And so during the break in one of our con-law classes, a friend of mine, a very good friend, really dear person, said, uh, though we weren't good friends then, we just didn't know each other then. She said 'So I noticed you were gone on Thursday'; and I said 'yeah', she said 'Well where were you?' 'Oh' (laughter). This is Yale law school okay. 'I-I was at uh, a debate'. She said 'About what?' and I said 'Marriage'. She said 'What about marriage?' I said 'Uh, you know, whether we should recognize same sex relationships as marriages'. She said 'What side were you on?' kind of like let's get through that formality. And I kind of bit my lip and I thought can I evade without lying. And I just went for it. So I just smiled and I said 'Against'. And she paused, she paused and I could see her thinking and she said 'Was it one of those debates where you go and they just assign you a position?' (laughter) I had to say 'No'. But, but, from there her posture shifted. And it was like 'How'd you get into this? And what were the kind of arguments you were making and could you send me the article you're talking about, and can we talk from there'. And we ended up co-leading, co-organizing and leading a reading group, a full semester long course at Yale on marriage law, together. And it was a really, with a lesbian mom of two, a lesbian married mom of two and with a self-described sex positive queer activist. Fantastic people, a fantastic conversation, that began with a little bit of cheerful confidence which shifted the other person's tone from dismissal to genuine curiosity.

The other thing to keep in mind is that a lot of this isn't just a matter of flipping a switch on or off. It comes with time and with practice. Uh, in my own case as recently as kind of the middle of undergrad. I was deeply;—I still am, deep down, adverse to conflict. I really hated conflict, I still kind of do. Uh, and um, I mean, it-it was so stark that there was one time when a friend of mine, a very good friend of mine, a kind of hall mate who I ended up drawing rooms with for the next four, three years together. He was in my room and he said to me, actually I think this was sophomore year so it was two. He said, he started picking a fight with me about surrogacy. Okay, and I thought, okay there are maybe, there are some moral issues with surrogacy that we really haven't explored and he's just running

roughshod over them. But I didn't want to talk about it because it was a hot button issue and I wasn't comfortable with conflict. And I ended up literally driving him out of my room and, because I didn't want to have the conversation. And a couple years later, I was debating law professors about gay marriage on national T.V. Why do I say that? Well first to brag. And, just kidding. And, but really to, to get across that it doesn't matter where you're starting. I was more conflict adverse than anybody in my class at Princeton and deep down my temperament is basically the same today. But having the conversations, with friends and with friends who disagreed with me, so that my ego wouldn't be at stake and then with acquaintances who disagreed with me, and then with mentors and people who I saw as intellectual superiors, eventually made me more and more comfortable having the discussion. So, the kind of confidence and cheer I'm talking about comes with practice. My attitude, my fear had always been 'They already know what I'm going to say and they've already got an objection ready to it.' And the only way to learn that that's not true is to do it and find that it's not.

Another thing to keep in mind is—sounds simple and obvious—but it's honesty. In the most heated debates our tendency, no matter what view you have, is to not concede anything. If you give ground, you're giving ground on a basic principle, whether it's basic justice in support of same sex marriage, if that's your view or the sanctity of marriage as a certain kind of union, oriented towards a certain kind of good on the other hand. But that's a bad instinct. The reason is that what we should both be caring about is the truth. And if the truth is that some things point in one direction but on balance you think they point in another direction, then that's what you should say. To make this concrete, in the same sex marriage debate, people often, the most prominent arguments for, focus on the simple question of whether giving a particular benefit to a particular household or couple is going to be a useful thing or not to them. And almost always the answer is yes, it will be; yes, giving people a tax break is better than not giving them a tax break, for them. Yes, may-you know, giving an education grant, if there's a house-child being raised in the household it's going to help the child. It doesn't suddenly become useless; money doesn't lose its value because it enters a household led by same sex couple. Make the concessions where concessions are to be made and then with equal, honesty and forthrightness, say where you think where the balance of reasons points otherwise. And in that particular example I think it's always when you zoom out, when you ask not about the effects on a particular household but about what kind of overall policy will be best for society, what vision of marriage to enshrine in the law, which is something—it's a whole set of causes and effects that you completely lose sight of when you're just zoomed in on a particular beneficiary of a particular legal incident. So that's one example of the kind of thing that we can give into which is the sense if the values behind the debate are sacred then saying anything that sounds like a point for the other side is a—loss but it's not. If what you say is for the truth than it's a gain or whatever is true. And that's—that's something we have no fear of and we should have no fear of. Because at the end of the day the truth can't contradict itself.

I also think that there's a certain kind of, um, there's a need to be proactive in these discussions in a certain way, which is just this, you should know both sides of the argument well enough to know what the strongest arguments for it are and to think ahead of time of how you would address them. And it seems again like a very simple point but so often we are so focused on kind of explaining in, ourselves and building this view up that we lose sight of the fact that there are again powerful arguments to be addressed and so you want to go in there and you want to know the arguments better than the other person does, and I think that's especially true if you're in a social context where you're going to be starting at a disadvantage; where the atmosphere is one that's filled with the assumptions that decide the issue in the other direction. Because it's going to look like you're arguing for the counter intuitive thing to begin with and that's going to be true no matter what ideology we're talking about.

Um, again, I already alluded to this, but I think rehearsing is really valuable. Rehearsing with

friends who agree and then with friends who disagree and then with acquaintances in a one-on-one context. The other thing this does is it gives you a deeper understanding of the issue. It's not just a strategic thing, like oh; you'll be less embarrassed if you do this first. I mean, my discussions one-on-one with people who disagreed with me on this whole range of issues, is the source of the book in the article that Robbie, and Ryan and I wrote. I can go through the book and I can point you out paragraphs and tell you which booth at the Kings Arms Pub in Oxford on Holliwell Street, that paragraph came out of. And I can tell you how many times my friend and interlocutor pounded his fist on the table before I got to that point or saw that insight or saw the value and the force and the power of the objection well enough to really understand it and understand the right response to it. There is no substitute, in that sense, for rehearsal. Not just for being prepared for the next debate but for really understanding the issue better which is itself again, something that will serve the truth.

Let me go back a little bit to this idea of dealing with double standards. Um, if you're in a place like Stanford, or Princeton, or Oxford or any of these places, most university settings, except for a few private or religiously affiliated ones, you're going to be operating in a world again where the background assumptions are against you and that can make it look like you're just an outlier and it becomes—here's what happens, that means that bad arguments for the view you oppose get accepted and good arguments for the view you hold get rejected. The thresholds are just different. It's not because people are being deliberately unfair, it's just because of the environment. And so you have to, you have to take precautions against that. One way of taking precautions against that is to point it out. It's a very simple thing; but I often, at the beginning of a talk at um, in a, an environment where I know I'm going to be probably the only person who holds the view that I hold—and there are many where that's true. I've had 60 minute Q&As where I get not a single question that's allied. They're all against. Right. So the first thing I'll say is I'll say, "I am going to"—as I begin I said "I'm going to give you an argument that would upset your whole vision of sex in marriage. That's a very hard thing to hear, it's a very hard thing to take seriously. But I'm going to do it in a way that leaves it open to exact, to-to, leaves it perfectly clear where you will disagree with me so that you can come back at me with those arguments and then we can have a discussion at that level. I'm going to invite you to a game of reason, to a conversation where we exchange reasons." And once you appeal to people's intellectual self-respect or pride, already a little bit of that double standard is removed if you tell them, 'You know, I know that we're operating here in a set, in a world where your assumptions are the starting assumptions and I'm okay with that, I'm not complaining about it, I'm just pointing it out so that the quality of our conversation is better.' That already makes a big difference.

I think the other thing that's useful is, I mean, so, remember if this is a setting where bad arguments for their view get accepted and good ones for your view get rejected; then whenever you can show that their bad arguments might work against their view, then you can leverage the very double standard that's a problem for you. What do I mean by that? Well, let me make it concrete. In the marriage (inaudible 18:39) Ryan alluded to some of this. Ryan and I have exactly the same spiel wherever we go, so uh, if you find me wading into some of the waters that he splashed around in this morning, that's because we're the same person when it comes to this stuff. Okay. So um, one of his points was that a certain kind of argument for the recognition of same sex relationships as marriages would work for any consensual relationship and nobody thinks that we should recognize just any consensual relationship; therefore the arguments must be bad. So he's starting in a world where those arguments are just taken for granted as perfectly valid; he's applying them almost verbatim to a case where nobody would follow them to the conclusion and so he's waking people up to the quality of their argument. So the, the argument that, I mean the basic form of the argument for recognizing same sex relationships, look here are two people who are committed to each other, love each other, who are sharing all the burdens and benefits of common life, committed for the long haul, possibly raising a

child. They don't want to be stigmatized, they don't want their kids stigmatized, it is the cause of love that you oppose. And the same thing in exactly the same words can be said of the "throuple" of the deliberately sexually open or deliberately temporary relationship, of the relationship that's not even sexual but that is just platonic where they share all the same, they face the world as a unit. They share all their largest personal victories and defeats with each other. And the fact that that's true shows that whatever this argument is capturing, it's not capturing marriage. It might be capturing something of great personal value, but it's not capturing marriage. It wakes people up. They gain some critical distance from the argument and some of the difficulties of working with a double standard are overcome.

The other thing is don't allow yourself to have a different task from your interlocutor. Again in a world where there's a double standard in an atmosphere where their view is taken for granted, here's the natural way of the game. You will have to defend from the ground up a comprehensive view of the particular issue and they will just have to find one hole in it somewhere. And as soon as that's the setup, it's over, it's over. It doesn't matter how good you are, it doesn't matter how powerful your view is, it's over. Because it's always easier, this is a famous, this is a truism about rational arguments; is that it's much easier to tear down than to build up. That's not a problem with them or with you, it's just a feature of the argument. So if you're having a debate about what relationship should be recognized as marriages, to stick with the example we've been using, then that should be the question that both sides have to answer. If we know that they think that, you know that people on the other side of the same sex marriage debate will think that same sex relationships should be in whatever marriage is, it isn't inherently sexually complimentary. Okay fine, but what is it? Where would you draw the lines? Where the relationship falls outside the lines you would draw, why would you not include it? And so on. If you're just stuck answering the same old objections to the traditional or the conjugal view and all they have to do is repeat those objections, then it's not just that at a strategic or tactical level, there is a, an unfairness at play. There's also that you're not going to learn as much and neither are they. If the point of the discussion is really to get to the truth of the matter then you want to make sure that you're both answering the same question and in fact in many cases I think if you really are operating with a double standard you want to work on the order in which you share your points.

I start with in the, the structure of the book, is the structure that we found over time was the most effective in shaking people out of assumptions that they hadn't even examined and shaking people out of the situation that creates the double standard. The first chapter is challenges of the opposing view as sharply and carefully as we can put them, assuming the most sympathetic and coherent alternative view by the way, when we're sharpening those objections to it. But trying to show what the sharpest objections are. So trying to start out by saying you think that your view is just obvious and it's the immediate consequence of reason and enlightenment and peace and justice and the American way. Well, I don't think that's true and here are internal contradictions in your view that we have made to audience after audience and never heard a single response to. A little bit of boldness, a little bit of directness not to embarrass somebody but to shake them out of complacency of assuming that they've got the default. That's the first thing. Then we make our positive view. We say, these problems and difficulties that the revisionist view can't explain, here's a view that can explain them. And then we do, we do the hard work that we've laid for the other side. We're saying they need to answer the question of what is marriage, well we better show up with an answer ourselves and so that's what we do in the second chapter. And then we go on to discuss objections to our side. Why? Because when you've got the problems that any view has to answer on the table first, and then you see the ways that one view, the traditional or conjugal view in this case, answers those problems, then you really have the tools you need. You have a kind of level plank and then you can add on the objections and see how the scales tip. Right? But if you just start by trying to answer the objections, you don't even have the whole view that

you're trying to save the objections from on the table. You don't even have the alternative objections to their own view, that, it's just a bad structure.

Another thing you should do is be careful about defense vs. offense. Um, if you spend an hour long conversation trying to explain why you're not a bigot, something's gone wrong, okay? Um, I think that the, look, it's important, it's important to address those. It's important to address where your interlocutor is starting, wherever that is. But you need to think about how much to address it as opposed to making the positive points you think are important. And you need to think about not being in a defensive posture where you're protesting too much and you basically, it's a very, it's very hard to convince people that you've got anything like the truth when all you are busy doing is explaining why it's not radically evil and unjust. And that's again, it's not just a kind of selfish tactic to like-like let's avoid getting stuck. It's really serving the point, the most noble point that you could have for a debate with a friend which is getting at the truth of the thing. Again, here I think turning people's arguments around can often be useful and I think is often an available move. Some of the most powerful arguments for um the revisionist views of these issues are I think, arguments that work in the other direction. So for example, the, the uh, one of the most basic motivations for support for same sex marriage is a fear of loneliness. I think your rank and file, non-academic, just kind of ordinary folks who have day jobs, but also gay friends but what brings them into this debate or makes them go for the recognition of same sex marriage is the sense that you know what; otherwise people are just going to have to settle for less. They're going to face the prospect of loneliness, especially in adulthood. And that's inhumane. That's the argument for humanity and it's an argument we have to take seriously. But I think actually that a very similar point works in the other direction. It's only because they are already thinking of marriage primarily as a matter of degree. Is your number one relationship, as Ryan said in exactly the same words. Uh, it's already because they're thinking this is just the maximum of social and personal fulfillment. That to them, to say that some people will not get married means that they settle for less, less than the maximum of social and personal fulfillment. So the very substantive disagreement on the table is feeding into their sense that this is an inhumane view and actually I think in some ways, that idea, that equation of genuine love and intimacy with marriage and only marriage is itself in some ways inhumane. It has an oppressive element to it. It's a very sad and dark view of our social relationships, of the value of friendship and companionship more broadly. Of the possibilities and of the value and of the acceptability of seeking vulnerability and advice and a two way victory out of every personal victory and so on with people who are not a spouse. For people who can't find spouses or haven't found one yet or who have other obligations that keep them from marrying or anything like that. So there's a point of deep humanism that favors the conjugal view. When the very, almost the same point, just slightly shifted, seem to be an argument against. I think that any time that you can take advantage of the most powerful points to try to show people in a loving way that it might point in the other direction, you're making some progress. I think you can also, you also, if you're starting with the minority view in the social context, you also, you want, you'll be more motivated to take advantage of common ground. Let's talk about a different issue, let's talk about promiscuity, right? The idea that, uh, or, more broadly, the idea of not being uh, you have reserving sex for marriage for example, right? That's not going to be common ground at a place like Stanford, but something else might be. So most people at Stanford I would venture to say would still think that sex is different from tennis right? You can show up, you could, nobody would think twice if you had a habit of showing up to the gym every day, or I guess basketball is the more natural example. Picking up the basketball and just playing pickup basketball with whoever shows up right? Almost nobody at Stanford would think that would be a healthy way to proceed with sex. We can just ask the simple question, there is a very small, small, tiny point of common ground and you can start there and say why? Why is sex different? And just explore in a kind of open way. Just hear people out on why sex is different and see if that produces something that you can work with. See if their stable ground between sex as tennis and sex as reserved for the total

commitment is really a stable ground at all. See if the reasons that push them a little bit towards the middle aren't also reasons that would point more towards the traditional view. Draw out common ground that's going to be something more important, the more your minor-your view is uh, a minority. Same thing with the idea, with the marriage debate; the-the most common view across the board with rank and file opponents and proponents of same sex marriage all the way up to the most academic and queer theory oriented folks is that whatever marriage is it has something to do with sex; maybe not complementarity, maybe not two persons, maybe not permanence or exclusivity but definitely sex. And they say why? What is it about sexual activity that makes it specially connected to marriage? It's not just the—the most natural response by the way will be that it fosters and expresses affection. That's the common ground that almost at a place like Stanford will accept. But that answer can't explain why sex is uniquely connected to marriage. Other activities can promote vulnerability; emotional intimacy can foster and express affection. What's special about sex? So now you've got people thinking. You don't just have them on the defensive, you don't just have them on their heels, you don't just have them ready to fight back with the nearest tool. You have them actually thinking. And when they're thinking, they're going to be most receptive to a positive alternative. Maybe what sex makes possible is a real bodily union. Maybe a real bodily union if it's not just about expressing affection which other things besides sex can do, maybe it requires something like a kind of coordination towards a single bodily end of the whole that makes me one flesh, all the parts of me one flesh. It could make a man and a woman one flesh, but that isn't possible in other forms of sexual activity. And they'll say no, no, no it can't be that, that's way too elaborate, it's too fancy, it's metaphysical. I'll say okay, well let's go back to the first question, what is it then that makes sex special? You should try this sometime. I-I do it in some, um, public context where I have a room full of 300 people, I have no idea, it's like a magician's trick. Right, like give me a number, any number right? I have no idea what anybody's going to say but I'm confident from experience if nothing else that they won't have a cogent answer. And then you have people thinking, the whole audience thinking, or in these cases you have your friend thinking.

But, I've given you some more aggressive-leaning tips; now, let me temper that with mercy. Uh, in what sense? Well, I don't think you should ever have it as your goal to convince someone on the spot. Why? Well first it's extremely ineffective, um, and if that is your goal you're going to be going about it in ways that make it even less likely that it would ever happen. It's one of those paradoxes. You just—the way to be happy is not to try to be happy, like that's the quickest way to be a depressed person, well, the way to convince someone is not to try to convince them on the spot. I think you should orient everything you say and the way you say it to trying to plant seeds that will grow and maybe lead to a change of heart and mind a year down the line. Think to yourself how would I be talking to this person if I wanted to help them get on a trajectory to have a change of mind a year from now? Why is that? Well what does that mean if you're trying to get them to change their mind a year from now? It means a couple things. On the one hand you are going to give them reasons and evidence and for your views. You're going to give them objections to their own views. You're going to try to answer their objections to your own. So all the same things will still apply but it will be much more a matter of illuminating the landscape for them then of trying to get them to move then and there across that landscape. Why? Well one thing is that you have to have respect for the dignity and the legitimate pride and self-respect of your interlocutor. And there's something very humiliating to all of us. It's, it's hard enough to say I'm sorry after a moral mistake, it's even harder in some ways to say I'm wrong about an intellectual mistake. You want out of decency and charity and self-respect, you want to leave your friend the space to do that in the privacy of their own home on their own time and in their own way. And to do it in such a way that when they come back to you and say I agree, it's not going to feel to them or to you like a victory for you and a loss for them. It's going to feel like a natural development of something that we're both trying to get towards together which is the truth right? And the, and ever-I think that's, you know, what does that mean? One thing it means it's not, you're not going to have

zingers. There will be no place for zingers in your conversation. If you ever are justified in using a zinger and it's an open question to me, whether you are, it is not for the person you are talking to; it would only be because of the value in terms of third parties. So if you're in a Twitter debate, I don't, I have a Twitter account, but I haven't updated it since 2009 and the last update said it has been a month since I last updated this. So, so I'm, I don't do Twitter. But if you are going to have a zinger on Twitter, the only justification I can imagine is that you think there is no hope that I'm going to convince this person but a thousand followers are watching and I better make them think, I better say something that can make them think. If you're in a one-on-one conversation, the art of which this discussion is about, you want no room for zingers, you want to build credibility and trust, you want to be open, you want to be honest, you want to acknowledge the value of the objections they're saying. You want to share wherever it's true that yeah, you were thinking through the exact same issue actually for your own view and then here's how you came out thinking about it, right? Think about how much easier it will be for that person to then say, oh yeah, I see what you are saying, right? Because you've given them permission to do it without declaring a defeat, without having to wave any white flag; and you want to motivate them. I actually think this is one of the hardest things to do in a discussion. It's not the what people-what motivates people to get into a debate, is not what will motivate them to change their mind on it if you think you've given them a reason to. Most people, most of us most of the time are motivated into a debate by either the thrill of it or being forced into it or a certain kind of pride or it's just sort of passionate, a passion that borders on stubbornness. Okay. Obviously none of those motivations will move people then. So you have to give them a new set of motivations in the course of the debate and the way to do that is to show them why you care about the issue; whether that means a personal story or a set of figures about the costs and real lives, um, and real well-being of the issues that you're talking about. You want to have—give them a set of motivations. And, think about what all of these things point to. You want the—our natural tendency in a debate as in the rest of life is towards confirmation bias. We're going to read everything in the way that most supports what we already think and we're going to read our opponents in the least charitable interpretation possible. We are going to be mis-trusting of the other person's motives if they're coming in as an opponent and we're going to lack the natural motivation to come to their side of the issue if we think that's where the arguments lie. Confirmation bias, lack of trust, lack of motivation.

So now we want to think about ways to counter that. You're going to naturally try to think of cases where someone is most likely to have their confirmation bias if anything work in your favor. They're most likely to read between two different interpretations of what you said; they're going to naturally pick the more charitable one and they're going to have the motivations to agree with you. What set of people is that true of? Your friends. Your friends. And so I think at the end of the day the only truly fruitful discussions happen not between people who agree with each other but between people who whether they agree or disagree are genuine friends. One of the requirements of not being—of being a genuine friend is not being a conditional friend. And so the most important thing is that the other person never catches the slightest hint that your affection and commitments to them depend on how this conversation goes. I think for people today who have a conservative sex ethic, that's going to be most true of friends who come out to you. I had a friend, uh, a guy I've been friends with since 4th grade, um, you know, he never dated, and so people had questions in their backs of their minds but it wasn't uh, it wasn't a central thing at all, um, and we were very good friends, in Doverdell where there's nothing to do but to hang out with people and so that's what we did. And it took him to the age of I think 25, to come out to me. And we had still been in close touch and we still are, everything's great, but the first thing I noticed about for a year after he came out is that he was always on the lookout for a sign that things had changed. That the friendship all along was conditional; and I think in a nonchalant, calm, totally collected, unselfconscious way, you have to reassure people, whether it's that issue or any other that they're wrong. It's not conditional. You're a friend first and an interlocutor second and because it

promotes and builds up the friendship even where it's a debate through disagreement. If you're really sharing a goal and a good goal which is the truth and you're building up the friendship even if you don't come out agreeing. But as soon as that's not the spirit of the thing, then not only will you lose the benefits for the debate of being genuine friends, like confirmation bias working in your favor, like the trust being there and the motivation being there to hear out what you say, the motivation is love. Not only will you lose those benefits but you'll lose the thing that matters more than the agreement itself which is the friendship. I think the only other thing uh, I'm going to say is that, which I'm going to build a little bit in the next talk is that you should be —joyful. The point that I started with, you should be joyful and you should be relaxed and if you find debates and discussions with one-on-one or otherwise stealing your joy then you better take a break. You're not helping the other person, you're not helping yourself and you're not helping the cause that you're trying to serve. And figure out why you are losing your keel. If you're really in a discussion to find the truth of the matter and it's in the context of, of budding or actual friendship then a bad mood should never be a lasting effect of it. So bad moods I think are a kind of indicator to step back and figure out what we're doing wrong. Figure out in what ways we're not actually after friendship and the truth and the greater cause but ourselves a little too much. Thanks.

A: Right so the question, since, uh, some of this is on tape and that mic doesn't work. The question is it, and your probably helped by the fact that you don't like confrontation, what about those of us who love it? Uh, and how can we avoid getting too angry in the course of the discussion, just blowing the whole thing up and having a truce, an ongoing truce with our friends never to actually discuss politics or religion or anything like that.

Well you have to find the context I think. I think the context makes a big difference. So I am, I have very natural motivation to avoid the thing escalating. This is also true in my relationship, you should ask my fiancée. Uh, so what does that mean concretely? You know, so I already have that so it's going to apply in every context. But you can find context where it will apply for you. I think letter writing is one possibility. Not just any written context, because Facebook posts are written context and we know there the worst place to conduct a fight. Uh, but writing letters to each other. Why? Well because of a couple things. One is when you see the handwriting, as opposed to typing you still get kind of whether realistically or not we have the impression that we're getting a little bit of the person's tone and so you don't lose all the valuable signals that you do lose in typing. But on the other hand unlike phone conversations or in person conversations, you do gain some of the benefits of distance, of time to cool down, of time to think about what you're going to say in response, the ability to scrap what you first said and replace it with something nicer, and so on. So I think it's mostly a matter of finding a context where you think people can um, can lose the passion and the ego.

A: Yeah, do you find, do you find that you get the same arguments over and over is the question.

Yes. Uh, I have, I don't think it will come across as bragging and certainly shouldn't to say that I haven't heard a new argument in approximately a year and a half and um the reason is not because oh, I've, I'm so good at like canvassing the landscape, but just because these debates are often because they're so polarized, they're really shallow. It doesn't take that long to plumb them. That means on the other hand as a benefit that if you do plumb them two or three times, you've pretty much got a lay of the land. You're already at an advantage in helping people think through the issue even if they're never going to agree with you. Because you can just anticipate; and this actually also helps some of the, lower the temperature of the debate. You can anticipate for them and then paint more beautifully than they could paint the whole landscape including the parts that they want to occupy and um, and that's great.

A: So the question is what do you do when the other person personalizes it too quickly? And in particular the way that, that, the form that that usually takes is that they, they claim that any argument you're making is a personal attack on—and then they name specific people; usually themselves, often a sibling or a cousin.

I think if you can set, if you're in a context where you can set ground rules to the discussion, you, that should be one of the ground rules. You should point out first of all that this is not something that people on the more progressive side of these issues have a monopoly on. We can all do it and the reason it's unfair is that it's obviously a conversation stopper. It's the, it does the opposite of what a debate is supposed to do, right? It makes it harder for you to say what you're actually thinking. And the reason it does this is because you're a decent person and you don't want to insult the people and you believe in the equal dignity of everybody including their cousin or their self or their... And so I think if you can get someone to see that ahead of time, and see that it doesn't serve the cause that you're both after if you're trying to have a serious discussion, um, that's of great value. Another reason is that it, it often buys into another idea that's very harmful to the progress of an intellectual discussion; which is the idea that your identity determines the validity of your arguments, right? That's a really poisonous idea I think for any kind of civil discourse. Um, the end of the day though, if it's being pushed on you, you're in the context, there's nothing else to say. I mean I think one of two things; one is often the particular point that they are making will turn on features of a situation that you don't know anything about because while they, while it sounds like you're both arguing about a general and policy or moral or political principle, they are really saying something about a particular effect in a particular context where you don't have the information and it's perfectly sound to say that that's the case. Say you know, I don't have anything in particular to say about you and your boyfriend or about your mother or whatever, because I don't know them. Um, and then the second thing is, look, if the view you're defending is worth defending and if what there is saying is true and at the bottom at the end of the day there isn't a deep conflict. There is some way that you can acknowledge whatever is true, and valid and just in the thing that they're saying, and then zoom out and say something similar. And one way I try to do this is to point out to people is how their own view would have the same implications for a different set of people. Every time somebody tells me, the reason we should recognize same sex marriage is that there are lots of kids being raised in same sex parented households and we know, we know that two parents are better than one and by the way your idea that a mom and a dad are necessary stigmatizes all these same sex parented households, including my own, or my brother's. Okay? Do you already see the contradiction there? The contradiction isn't saying, we know that two parents are better than one and by the way don't say anything about what parenting arrangements are better because you're stigmatizing people. But what about the single mom, have you just stigmatized the single mom? No, no, no, I mean what she is doing is heroic in a way, because it's so hard, it's an uphill battle and that's why we need two parents. And we could say the same about the need as an ideal to push the idea of kids needing a connection to their own mom and dad. So if you're really pressed, there's almost always another case you can point to that shows in a vivid way for them the unfairness of appealing to that kind of argument.

A: Great, so how do you handle the accusation of bigotry? Which sometimes is leveled maliciously but very often is leveled in a sincere way or out of fear; how do you handle it without making the fear worse? That's the question.

And it's a very important question and the form of the question already points out part of the answer; which is first you have to figure out what's going on as best as you can in the leveling of the accusation. If it's really just a debaters trick as it would be if you're for example doing a debate with people and it's coming from the person of equal strength in the social context, then you can just, I mean

I often say, okay, let's assume that you're right. I'm a bigot okay? I'm motivated by malice, as soon as I get off the stage you should make sure I never get in here again. Fine. Now, tell me where the argument goes wrong. In fact, if anything, it should be easier for you to tell me where the argument goes wrong. And by the way, here's why it won't be easier. Because on this particular issue and it's usually brought up in the same sex marriage context, we had cultures recognizing opposite sex relationships as marriage way before we had the concept of gay identity, in cultures that were favorable towards the morality of same sex sexual relationships in general where they happened all across the board across society; in contexts where they had no concept of a class of people of against whom to have animus. So it is historically impossible that this view originated in bigotry and even if I'm a bigot, you still have an issue to answer for that reason; right? It would be as if we had anti-miscegenation laws in a culture that had no concept of race, right? It's impossible. It's impossible that that would have happened because anti- miscegenation laws really do arise out of race based bigotry, but, okay. This is the first thing, so if it's really just a trick, you fight back with force; if it's not and that's the much more interesting and more difficult case. Then first of all, all the other non-propositional cues that we're talking about are going to matter a lot more and so the answer to that question and to that fear will have already begun being made or not by how you met the person, by whether you're looking them in the eye, by your demeanor and your body language and that, those become much more important in that context. Um, I think the second thing is sometimes it's as simple as assuring them of a simple fact. I once had a debate about abortion with a close friend and at, and at some point I relied on the premise that all human beings are equal and basic rights and you can't explain that if you don't draw the line at consent. Okay, in total sincerity, he stopped me at the end and he said, but you said that you were relying on the idea that all human beings are equal, and I said yeah. He said I thought you can't believe that? I was like what? He said because of your view on marriage. As if not just as a matter of fact my view was inconsistent with equality, but that in my own head, it was like well yeah, I mean, I definitely can't believe in equality, because there's the gay marriage thing. Um, so sometimes it's as simple as clarifying to people what should be obvious which is that you believe in the inherent and equal dignity of every human being. I mean the other thing is that the reason, the most common reason people have this sense of fear, the sense that it's motivated by bigotry or by a kind of bad gut reaction to them is that again because they've already bought into the idea that marriage is the main way of expressing love and that expressing love at the end of the day is the most important thing anyone can be called to do and they think you don't have, they think that you think that they don't have a call to that. So I like to start as a Catholic by pointing out that I think as a matter of faith and everyday practice that everybody's most basic identity is not as gay or straight, married or single, member of this or that family or household, but son or daughter of God, made in his image, destined for his household, no matter what's going on here and now and for a lifetime in the meantime of adding to the world's sums of beauty and love; of answering a particular call that only they can answer. It will make the world better off in ways that no one else can. And if it's clear that that's how you're thinking of this and then you think that somehow that you can fit your crazy views about marriage into that world view, they're going to be much less likely to be afraid and more likely to be genuinely curious.

A: Yeah okay so what if it's not just that there bringing up the personal argument but that it is personal because they are a cousin or the friend who's in this situation.

I think there's very little to do, within the debate or the discussion, that can prepare anywhere nearly as much as what's, what you're doing for the months and weeks and days and the lead up and afterward. I think it depends much more on those things than it does on how the discussion goes. And in the discussion I think you should make all the same reminders and caveats and explanations. You should point, you should make sure that they know that whether you're right or wrong, you're genuinely motivated by their own good. They don't have to believe that your view is promoting their good to

believe that that's what's motivating you. And I think you should make it a kind of, a matter of basic respect for you, that they understand and agree that that's where you're coming from and if they don't I don't think that you should have the conversation because it has no hope of helping but also because it's only going to hurt in this particular way. It's going to hurt them and it's going to hurt you. It can be just a matter of personal respect, self-respect to demand that they grant that point before going down that path.

I will see you in two minutes in the other room. Thank you.