Constructive Conversations for Challenging Times: 
A Guide for Home and Community Dialogue

December 20, 2001

Dear Reader,

This Guide contains resources for those who want to convene and facilitate constructive conversations about what’s going on in the world.

It includes instructions for a two-hour structured dialogue focused on events related to the September 11th attacks and the changes that have occurred in their wake.

It also includes ideas about planning and conducting briefer or less formal conversations that have the spirit of a structured dialogue.

These resources can be adapted to other challenging or divisive issues by changing the questions that are addressed.

This is the first edition of this Guide. Your feedback will be greatly appreciated!

The Staff of the Public Conversations Project
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1. INTRODUCTION

Why We Developed This Guide

Since September 11th, Americans have been living in a time of change, sorrow, and fear. Many of us have strong feelings about what we hear on the news or in conversation. Some of us are questioning old assumptions and are searching for new understanding. Some of us have sought refuge in like-minded groups where we can feel understood, validated, and reassured. Some of us have kept our reactions and thoughts to ourselves, uncertain of what we want to say. Some have spoken up only to inadvertently offend others or feel painfully misunderstood. Others of us, erring on the side of silence, have experienced new and isolating distance in relationships that previously were open and trusting. Some of us have done all these things.

The Public Conversations Project developed this Guide for dialogue for people who share our view that it is more important than ever that we keep talking about what's going on in our shaken and ever changing post-9/11 world. It is written for those who want to encourage people in their networks to share what they think and feel, to speak about their convictions and their uncertainties, and to listen with care and compassion even when what is said is different, surprising, or upsetting.

We dedicate this guide to those who wish to make or maintain caring and enriching connections in challenging times—connections that can embrace conflicting worldviews and withstand fear, confusion and polarization.

What We Mean by “Dialogue”

“Dialogue” has different meanings for different people. For the Public Conversations Project (PCP), a dialogue is any conversation that is animated by a search for understanding rather than agreements or solutions. For us, dialogue is different from mediation and debate. We refer you to Appendix A which presents a table distinguishing dialogue from debate.

A good dialogue offers those who participate the opportunity to

- listen and be listened to in ways that enable all speakers to be heard;
- speak and be spoken to in a respectful manner;
- develop or deepen mutual understanding;
- reflect on one’s own views and learn about the perspectives of others.

Participants in dialogue often agree to follow communication guidelines to support these purposes. The more fundamental and passionate the differences among those involved, the more important it is to clearly articulate and commit to such agreements and to have a facilitator present who can remind participants to observe them.
Who This Guide is Intended to Serve

We developed this Guide to encourage group leaders and facilitators of all levels of experience—including novices—to bring people together in dialogue. It can be used with any group of people that is drawn to its purposes and willing to adopt communication agreements. Some examples of community groups we have had in mind are:

- a group of neighbors or friends;
- a civic group like the League of Women Voters or the Lions Club;
- a group from a church, temple, or mosque—an ad hoc group or a working group like a parish council or a board;
- an interfaith group that is already established or that you convene;
- a women’s group, men’s group, couples’ group, or any other group that meets regularly; or
- a group of teachers who want to explore their own views and feelings with other adults.

It also can be used with a group of family members. Our website (www.publicconversations.org) offers a version of these materials customized for use with families and other loved ones who gather over the holidays.

Different Ways to Use This Guide

While the “Plan” in Section 3 may be used “as is,” it can also serve as a source of ideas and methods for any dialogue you have. In fact, it may help you bring elements of dialogue into naturally occurring conversation.

First glance over the detailed Plan for a two-hour dialogue that is presented in Section 3 to get a sense of how one may design a carefully constructed Dialogue. Then, go through the Q&A’s in Section 2 which include many suggestions for planning and facilitating a dialogue.

Return to Section 3 and modify the Plan to better suit your particular group or to focus on a different topic.

Those who decide to vary the Plan format and/or its topic are encouraged to pay special attention to:

- the spirit and clarity of the invitation and orientation;
- the critical importance of explicit group agreements to support the conversation;
- the procedures for reflecting, speaking, and listening;
- the purpose of each segment in the format;
- the way that questions are crafted to serve those purposes;
- the reasons for, and manner of, facilitator intervention.
2. PLANNING THE DIALOGUE: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

2.1 Convening your group

Who should I invite?
That is up to you. This Guide was developed for the benefit of any group that wants to engage in a dialogue as previously defined (Section 1.2) and is willing to adopt some communication agreements. Some of the community groups that we have had in mind are listed in Section 1.3.

What's the ideal number of participants?
Five to eight people is an ideal size. Groups of seven or eight are likely to include a greater diversity of views. However, if you include more than six, you'll have to make adjustments to the times specified in the Guide. You'll either need to shrink the time that each person can take to respond to a question, reduce the number of questions, or extend the time beyond two hours. You also should factor in your comfort level in facilitating groups. A smaller group is generally easier to facilitate.

What if I want to convene a much larger group?
If you want to involve more than eight to ten people, we suggest that you subdivide the participants into two or more parallel facilitated small groups for the bulk of the time. You can welcome and orient the whole group and, as time permits, ask people to say their names and one sentence as a means of introduction. Then they can be divided into small, diverse groups, each with a facilitator. The facilitators can complete the welcoming process, including comments about his or her role, in the small groups.

There are a number of ways of subdividing groups. Some are random (e.g., “Count off by 3’s and all the 1’s go...”). Others try to connect people who know each other less well (e.g., “Stand next to someone you never met until tonight or rarely see... Then the two of you find another pair you know less well...”) If you notice that the resulting subgroups are unbalanced in some way, e.g., in terms of race, ethnicity, or gender, and better balance is possible and desirable, you can ask for volunteers to switch groups.

If time and numbers permit, the full group can re-convene after the small group dialogues. You can invite brief comments from participants about themes or threads they noticed in their conversation, how they experienced the dialogue (e.g., what they did or did not do to make it work as a dialogue rather than a debate), and/or what commitments, ideas, or questions they are taking with them.

If you do this, we recommend that you be clear about the kind of comment you want, the time parameters, and the need to be brief (e.g., “We’d like to take about 10 minutes to hear a little from people about their dialogue experience. We hope to hear from all the of groups, so please limit yourself to a sentence or two.”)
The group I have in mind might be hard to facilitate. Should I do it anyway?

There are a number of reasons a group can be hard to facilitate. They include: dislike of anything that smacks of "rules," complicated prior relationships, or strong differences in their views.

The greater the likelihood that conflict will emerge in the group, the more care and experience will be required to prepare for and facilitate the dialogue. If you’d like to work with such a group, we recommend that you first do a “test run” of the format with a group that feels a little less challenging, e.g., a group with established relationships of trust and respect, and one in which political and religious divides are not cavernous.

If you are new to dialogue facilitation and nervous about convening and facilitating a particular group, you may wish to partner with someone who is more experienced. If you aren’t sure where to start in your search for such a partner, contact us at PCP. We may have ideas; we may even know someone in your area who has taken one of our facilitator trainings.

In addition, if you want to brainstorm about ways to handle specific dilemmas, give us a call. We will be as helpful as our staff resources permit.

How should I invite people?

A phone call has the advantage of allowing you to hear the nuances of people’s responses and questions. A conversation also allows you to answer their questions, correct misunderstandings about what dialogue is, and make sure they want to participate in what you are offering.

On the other hand, written invitations take less time and have the advantage of ensuring that all those you invite have been oriented in exactly the same way.

What should I include in the invitation?

Include something about
- the spirit and purpose of the dialogue;
- the guidelines and structure (e.g., “Unlike many discussions, this one will be structured to promote careful listening and to discourage rebuttal and criticism.”);
- the starting and ending times;
- the idea that it is perfectly all right to decline the invitation. Dialogues work best when the people who show up want to be there.

See Appendix C for two sample invitations.

Suppose potential participants ask how this will differ from an ordinary conversation?

You can explain that the spirit of this dialogue may not be very different from some conversations they have had—respectful conversations that happened spontaneously in which no one dominated, real questions were asked, time was shared, and mutual listening and learning took place.
This dialogue will be more explicit in its purpose and spirit and more formal and than most “ordinary” conversations. Those who come will be asked to observe communication guidelines that foster an exploratory, respectful, and compassionate spirit. Some of these guidelines will feel a bit “unnatural” to many people.

Participants will be asked speak from the heart and listen with appreciation and resilience—keeping their ears open even when they don’t like what they hear. They will be asked to notice the assumptions they are making and then find a way to test them out by asking questions. Hardest of all—they will be asked to refrain from attempts to persuade and refute.

When the dialogue ends, participants probably won’t agree with all those they have been talking with—that’s not the goal of dialogue. However, they are likely to understand themselves and others better. They also are likely to feel enriched by different views and different ways of expressing fears, hopes, and deeply held values.

**Is it wise to convene an intergenerational group?**

An intergenerational group offers special rewards and poses special challenges. Teens and adults can benefit from grappling together with the uncertainties and confusions they are feeling. Younger children, however, may not fully appreciate the content of the discussion. In addition, the presence of younger children may inhibit some adults from expressing any anxieties and fears they might have pertaining to the situation in the world.

**Where should I hold the dialogue?**

Any place that is comfortable and free from distractions. When we have preceded dialogues with a dinner or another sort of social gathering, we’ve found it ideal to have two rooms. Physically entering a different, quiet space for the dialogue seems to help people to switch gears and prepare to have a slower, more reflective conversation.

**How long should the dialogue take?**

With six participants, the entire dialogue will take about two hours. In Section 3. “Flow of the Plan,” you can see how the time is divided among the different segments.

**What if I need to plan something shorter?**

There are various ways you can shorten the Plan in Section 3. One possibility is to ask the First Question and the Second Question together in one go-round (choosing one option from each set in Sections 3.2.4 and 3.2.5). If you do this, it might help participants to have the questions written on newsprint or a handout. If you pose the two questions together and participants seem to be forgetting about the second question you can remind them, e.g., “Would you like to also say something in response to the second question?” Other possibilities are to cut the facilitated discussion (Section 3.2.6) to 20 or 25 minutes, and/or cut the parting comments (Section 3.2.7) to 5 or 10 minutes.

**How should I set up the space?**

Participants should be comfortable and able to see and hear each other easily. A circular arrangement of chairs works best. Long narrow tables do not work well.
What supplies should I have on hand?

- Your customized Plan for the dialogue (see Section 3.2). You can prepare your own plan in one of three ways:
  1) print out the Plan and mark it with choices you have made;
  2) download the Plan and edit it to reflect your words and choices;
  3) use the Facilitator Worksheet that appears as Appendix D.
- Handouts or posted newsprint with
  1) suggested agreements (Section 3.2.2);
  2) optional: the schedule (Section 3.2.1);
  3) optional: guiding questions for the facilitated discussion (Section 3.2.6);
- Pads and pens or pencils for each participant for note-taking;
- A three-minute egg timer or a watch with an easily visible second hand;
- A box of tissues.

2.2 Preparing for your role

What will be my role as facilitator?

The main responsibilities of the facilitator are to

- welcome people and orient them to the event and its purpose;
- get agreement to a set of guidelines;
- remind people about their agreements if they forget them;
- move the group through the dialogue, keeping an eye on time.

How active you will need to be as a facilitator will depend on your group. Some groups or individual participants need a lot of time management; others do not. Some will need a reminder about the spirit of dialogue; others will not. If you’re not sure about what your group needs at a particular juncture, don’t feel that you need to read the participants’ minds. Ask them! For example, “We have about 45 minutes to go. Would you like to keep going, or take a 5-minute break?”

It has been our experience that, if the invitation is clear and the group agrees to follow the guidelines, the demands on the facilitator are minimal. The structure as defined by the guidelines and the Plan “holds” the conversation.
What do I need to do to prepare to facilitate?

- Familiarize yourself with the Plan and the choices it asks you to make as a facilitator.
- Make decisions about the questions you will ask. Base your choices on what you know about your group. Some of the factors that may influence your decisions are group size, time constraints, prior relationships among participants, and likelihood of polarized views.
- As indicated above, you can customize the Plan with decisions you've made by marking up a print out of Section 3.2, editing the downloaded document, or using the Facilitator Worksheet (Appendix D).

If you're uncertain, mark your preliminary choices but keep alternatives at hand. During the actual dialogue, you may want to alter your plan depending on what happens. (e.g., Is time running short? Have people already addressed a later question through responses to an earlier one? Does the group have views that are highly divergent or very similar?)

How closely should I follow the Plan?

The Plan provides many suggestions and many choices but it does not, and could not, anticipate your group’s needs and culture, or your preferred style as a facilitator. The Plan includes some scripted comments but these are only suggestions. The Plan also specifies the purposes of each section.

Some facilitators are comfortable with very clear directions and scripted comments. They will probably follow the Plan very closely. Other facilitators will use the plan to get an overall sense of the purpose of the gathering, the purpose of each segment in the sequence, and the tools available to them, then, they will feel comfortable improvising, drawing on well-honed intuitions. Such facilitators are encouraged to honor their intuitions and use the Plan only as a very general guide. (See Appendix E for a description of such stylistic differences. It’s entitled “A Tale of Two Grandmothers.”)

If I am facilitating, can I also participate?

Full participation by the facilitator is generally not advised unless the group is well established and has a high degree of trust and/or the facilitator is experienced and able to be highly attuned to the impact of his or her contributions on the group. Some other considerations are: Are you comfortable playing both roles? Are your views likely to be so controversial as to raise questions about your ability to be a fair facilitator? Might you be viewed as a privileged participant, less subject to intervention?

One possibility is to participate in the introductory and closing go-rounds, but “pass” in the body of the dialogue where the dual role is most likely to be a strain for you or a complicating factor for participants.

If you decide that you want to participate, you may wish to ask the participant group to share more responsibility for the quality of the conversation. If you anticipate doing this, you might send out the “Self Help Tools” presented in Appendix B with the invitation.
Once people sit down, what steps should I take?

Once people are seated in the circle, your first step will be to welcome participants (see the Welcome Section 3.2.1). Keeping the purposes of this section in mind, reword the opening comments in a manner that is natural for you. In addition, you may wish to consider whether your group has an honored way to gather together – with a prayer or lighting a candle, for example.

Can I add or replace questions?

Yes, but we strongly recommend that any questions you use

- encourage reflection;
- use very open language, free of “buzz words” and narrowing assumptions;
- do not reinforce stereotypes; and
- encourage people to speak from their own perspectives and experience, not as experts who make sweeping statements about what others think or what is “really” going on.

For example, consider the different effects of these two questions about displaying the American flag.

- What thoughts and feelings are stirred in you when you see a flag on a car or a house or a lapel? Or when you display one? What does it mean to you?
- What do you think of all the flag-waving that is going on out there?

The first question invites expression of the meaning that the listener attaches to this symbol. The second may invite the listener’s judgment about other people’s expressions and meanings.

If you replace the questions in sections 3.2.4 or 3.2.5, we recommend that you use questions that will achieve the purposes identified in those sections. If you want to add another question before the facilitated discussion (3.2.6), here are some suggestions:

- What has been most inspiring, confusing, or worrisome for you about the U.S. response to the September 11 attacks?
- In what ways have you seen yourself in a new light or seen the U.S. in a new light since September 11?
- What strengths or values do you find yourself drawing on to keep you going through this time?
2.3 Facilitation tips

What guidelines should I propose to the group?

In the Plan we offer the following set; you may have other ideas or alternative wording.

Regarding the spirit of our speaking and listening,

1) We will speak for ourselves and from our own experience.
2) We will not criticize the views of other participants or attempt to persuade them.
3) We will listen with resilience, “hanging in” when what is said is hard to hear.
4) We will honor any requests for confidentiality that are made.

Regarding the form of our speaking and listening,

5) We will participate within the time frames suggested by the facilitator.
6) We will not interrupt except to indicate that we cannot hear a speaker.
7) We will “pass” if we do not wish to speak.

How should I manage time?

There are two purposes of time management:

• to make sure that the dialogue can move through its phases to a satisfying end within the time period that participants have agreed to; and
• to ensure that all participants have an equal opportunity to be heard, free from “domination” or excessive long-windedness on the part of others.

Your job is to choose a way of attending to time that accomplishes these purposes, suits your style and your group’s style and culture, and doesn’t unduly distract you or the participants from listening. We strongly suggest that, when you pose a question to participants for a go-round, you give them a clear idea of the time frame, e.g., “Please take up to 3 minutes.”

If you are new to facilitating or if you are concerned about your ability to attend to time as well as other aspects of facilitation, ask for help with keeping time. You might seek a volunteer to use an egg timer. (If you use a sand-filled hourglass timer, have two on hand so that you can proceed easily if the sand from the last speaker’s time hasn’t finished falling.) Alternatively, you can ask the whole group to share responsibility for time management. For example, you can circulate a watch with an easily visible second hand. The watch follows the speaker. You ask the person who has just spoken to time the one who speaks next. Given the proximity of the speaker and the timer, this makes possible a gentle way of signaling to the person that time is up: simply handing the speaker the watch or placing a hand on his or her shoulder or arm.

Time management is straightforward in go-round sections of the dialogue. As part of the transition to the more organic conversation that follows, you can ask participants to share the limited air time fairly with others. You also can keep track of who speaks and create an opportunity for the more silent participants to join the conversation.
When the guideline about time is introduced, tell the group how you plan to manage the time and how you will signal when time is up. Indicate that a signal is a request to the participant to complete their thought or sentence and then stop.

If you intend a go-round to be quick, with each participant only taking one minute or saying just a few sentences, you can skip using the watch or timer and rely on your own sense of timing. Watches and egg timers are more useful and appropriate for monitoring 3-minute segments.

What's a “go-round”?
A “go-round” begins with the asking of a question by the facilitator. Going in turn around the circle, each participant responds to the question (or chooses to “pass” or “pass for now”). When a go-round has been completed, the facilitator checks back with those who passed to see if they would like to have a turn to speak at that point.

You can also invite people to respond “popcorn” style, meaning that participants take their turns to speak in no particular order, as they are ready. However, the basic guidelines stay in place: one person speaks at a time; there is no interrupting; and participants observe the time limit suggested for their response.

Can I skip the pauses before the go-rounds?
We recommend that you don’t. If people are trying to figure out their own responses while others are speaking, they cannot listen closely. If they haven’t had a chance to think about their own responses before they hear what other people say, they are less likely to offer their own responses to the question and more likely to speak in reaction to what others have said.

What if someone is overwhelmed with emotion?
Speaking and listening about the events of September 11, or other experiences related to terror and war, may be upsetting for some participants. Some may be stimulated to re-experience past pain. They may become tearful.

Groups of people who know each other well will probably know what to do if this happens. They may offer support, for example, by taking the person’s hand or making some other gesture of comfort.

In a group of people who are not well known to each other, it is harder to know what is appropriate. Our best advice is to keep your heart open and take your lead from the person who is upset. You can ask simply, “What would be most helpful for you now?” Or you may want to suggest that the group take a break, allowing everyone to breathe and stretch. During a break, the person who is upset may wish to be alone to calm him or herself. Or the person may accept supportive contact from others.

If the person who is upset has spoken about someone they lost on September 11 or in related circumstances (e.g., a plane crash or war), it may be appropriate for the group to take a moment of silence to honor that person’s memory.
What should I do if a participant forgets to observe the agreements?

The agreements are a key ingredient in the creation of a respectful and safe space for dialogue; they protect the spirit of dialogue. If a speaker has clearly forgotten to observe an agreement, you must intervene.

If I need to intervene, how should I do it?

With legitimacy and compassion.

What constitutes a “legitimate” intervention?

An intervention is legitimate (i.e., not guided by facilitator bias or whim) if a behavior violates agreements the participants made with each other.

Legitimacy is most clear in the case of an easily identifiable behavior like interrupting. In this case a simple intervention, with no need to explain, is often appropriate, e.g., “Excuse me, Mary, I want to see if John was finished.”

If a participant begins his statement with a judgment of another person’s response, he is violating the agreement about refraining from criticism. If he says, for example, “Well, Kelly, it’s not going to get us anywhere to just carry on about ...,” or “Kelly, I can’t believe you are so blind to ...” you can ask him to say what he cares about without passing judgement on Kelly’s contribution.

It may be difficult to tell whether an agreement is being violated. For example, you may be uncertain whether John is just expressing a strong feeling or trying to persuade Mary that her view is wrong. If you’re not sure, ask. For example, “John, I’m wondering if you’re trying to refute or criticize Mary’s viewpoint or if you are simply trying to help others understand your views.”

If someone responds to a question in a way that seems unrelated to the question, don’t assume it is unrelated. Ask. For example, “Joan, I’m having trouble connecting what you’re saying with the question. Can you help me make the connection?” Joan may say what the connection is or she may realize that she has lost track of the question. This is easy to do, especially toward the end of the go-round when one’s mind may be filled with thoughts and feelings related to what other people have said. In this case, she may ask to be reminded of the question or you can remind her.

What constitutes a “compassionate” intervention?

An intervention is compassionate when it serves the group’s needs, honors the spirit of the dialogue, and does not assign blame or induce shame. One way in which you can intervene with compassion is to be humble and inquire about what you notice, as opposed to making a quick judgement that may be based on a misreading of the situation. Another way is to include in your intervention an acknowledgment of what is valuable, appropriate, or understandable about what is going on.

Suppose John expresses passionate views in a way that strongly suggests (in your mind) that anyone who didn’t agree would be immoral or dangerously unrealistic. John hasn’t directly criticized another participant or what people offered when they spoke; nonetheless you’re feeling uncertain about whether the spirit of dialogue is in jeopardy.
There is a difference between jumping to a conclusion and saying, “John, you’re violating an agreement,” and expressing curiosity about the needs of the group by saying, “John, it sounds like you have really strong feelings about this. I wonder if those of you who have different views are listening with great resilience or if you may be feeling criticized.” In the latter case, you remain squarely in the role of servant to the group. You model genuine inquiry and resist the impulse to assume knowledge of John’s intentions and his impact on others.

**What if someone repeatedly neglects to observe the guidelines?**

You can propose that the group take a five-minute break. During the break, you can have a private conversation with the person who seems to be having trouble following the agreements and see if he or she wants to

- stay (with renewed commitment to the agreements);
- leave (perhaps with an opportunity to say some parting words to the group); or
- ask the group to re-negotiate the agreement that he or she finds hard to follow.

**Suppose several people are having difficulty maintaining the spirit of the dialogue?**

A direct and honest approach is best. Share your perception with the group and ask participants what they think. If they agree that there has been a mismatch between the agreements they made and the ways they are talking, you can ask what agreements would serve them best now. The group may re-commit to the original agreements or decide to modify them. Remember that your job is to help people honor their agreements. When there is a mismatch, either the agreements or the behavior can be adjusted.

**Is it my job to “champion” the dialogue process?**

No, your role is to help the participants have the kind of conversation they want to have. If you are unsure about what they want, ask them. If the kind of conversation they want to have is fundamentally different from the dialogue you are prepared to offer, you can offer to close the dialogue with a final go-round. You can then step out of the facilitator role, and the group can organize itself to have another kind of conversation.

**What if the dialogue doesn’t go well?**

Consider it to have been an experiment from which something can be learned and ask participants to join you in identifying the lessons learned. Written feedback has the advantage of allowing you to hear directly from all participants without having anyone’s views overshadowed by the views of others. (See the Feedback Forms, section 4.)

**How can my experience be helpful to others?**

By telling the staff at the Public Conversations Project about it! We are interested in learning what was difficult as well as what went smoothly. Some of our most important learning has come from what we felt at the time were “failures.”

We plan to continually refine this Guide with the help of people like you. So tell us what worked and what you would do differently next time using the feedback forms in Section 4.
3. THE PLAN

3.1 The Flow of the Plan

Welcome and orientation (5 minutes)

Agreements (10 minutes)

Introductions and hopes (10 minutes)

First question (20 minutes)

Second question (20 minutes)

Facilitated Discussion (35 minutes)

Parting words (15 minutes)

Note: Times indicated are for a group of six participants.
3.2 The Plan: Step by Step

3.2.1 WELCOME AND ORIENTATION

<table>
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<th>5 minutes</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Purposes:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• To welcome participants into the conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• To remind participants about the purpose and spirit of the dialogue</td>
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<td>• To say something about roles, schedule, etc., so people know what to expect</td>
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**Welcome and restatement of purpose**

*Say something like*

“Welcome. I am glad you decided to be part of this dialogue. I look forward to hearing from each of you.”

“It’s likely that each of us has been affected differently by the attacks of Sept. 11 and what has been happening in this country and in the world since then. Some of us will have been more directly affected than others. Some of us may have strongly held views. Some of us may vacillate in our views from day to day or feel torn when we watch the nightly news.

“I hope this will be a space in which all of you will feel fully welcome to speak about your experiences and your views. I hope that we will be able to hear beliefs and feelings that are different from and even opposed to our own. Perhaps we can even encourage the expression of these differences and commit to listening to each other with resilience. By taking in varied experiences and views, each of us may leave with richer and wider perspectives.”

“Before we get started …”

**Schedule and ending time**

*Say something like*

“Let me tell you a little bit about the flow of the dialogue.

*(Refer to a handout or posted newsprint if you have made them. See Section 3.1)*
"We’ll begin by making some agreements—that is we’ll agree on some communication guidelines for our time together.

Then we’ll have a quick go-round in which you can introduce yourselves and say something about what led you to participate or what you hope for.

Next we’ll have two structured go-rounds in which you will respond, if you feel ready, to two questions that I will pose.

Following the go-rounds, we’ll have at least a half an hour for less structured discussion in which we can make connections among the experiences and perspectives we’ve heard. Those connections might take the form of one person asking another person a question. Or they might take the form of simply noting similarities and differences among the experiences and viewpoints we’ve heard and exploring them a bit further.

Finally, we’ll take time at the end for each of you to say some parting words. We’ll aim to end by (time). Can everyone stay until then?"

If people have to leave early, determine how they will take their leave (e.g., by saying a few parting words or by just getting up to leave quietly) and how you will get their feedback.”

Pens and paper

_Say something like_

“I have made pens and paper available so that you can jot down notes. This is because two of the most important activities in our dialogue will be listening and making connections. The pads can help you to listen by giving you a place to hang on to the thoughts that come to you as others are speaking so you can readily return your full attention to listening. The pads also can support making connections if you use them to jot down themes, differences, or similarities or questions that you may want to explore further.”

Your role

_Say something like_

“In my role as facilitator, I will guide us through the dialogue and ensure that whatever agreements we make with each other are either followed or renegotiated. If I’ve asked you to speak no more than 3 minutes and you’ve gone over that time, I’ll signal you. That simply means that I’d like you to complete your thought, not that you need to stop mid-sentence!”
If you will participate in the content of the dialogue, say something like

"If I participate in the content of the dialogue, I would like you to intervene if I don’t follow the agreements. Knowing that you will do that will help me feel freer to participate."

Note: We do not advise that the facilitator participate in more than the first go-round unless the group is well established and/or the facilitator is experienced and able to be highly attuned to the probable impact of his or her contributions on the group.

"Finally, if at any point you have concerns about how things are going, please let me know and we’ll work together to figure out how to address those concerns. Can I count on that?"
3.2.2 AGREEMENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Purpose:**
To craft a set of communication agreements that everyone understands and agrees to that will serve the purposes of the dialogue.

"Let's now make some agreements about how we will communicate. Your handout (or a posted sheet) lists some guidelines that others have used to create an environment where people can speak openly and listen fully. Please take a moment to read them and then I'll check in with you to see if you'd like to adopt them as is, or revise them for our group."

*Read them aloud or have participants take turns, each reading one.*

**Regarding the spirit of our speaking and listening,**
1) We will speak for ourselves and from our own experience.
2) We will not criticize the views of other participants or attempt to persuade them.
3) We will listen with resilience, "hanging in" when what is said is hard to hear.
4) We will honor any requests for confidentiality that are made.

**Regarding the form of our speaking and listening,**
5) We will participate within the time frames suggested by the facilitator.
6) We will not interrupt except to indicate that we cannot hear a speaker.
7) We will "pass" if we do not wish to speak.

*After reading the guidelines, you can say something like*
"Are there any questions about what any of these guidelines mean?"
"Would you like to suggest any revisions or additions?"

*If suggestions are made and agreed to by all, write them on any posted list.*
"So is each of you prepared to follow these guidelines as best you can, and allow me to remind you if you forget?"

*Look for verbal and non-verbal responses.*
"OK, these will serve as our agreements."

"If at any point you feel that these agreements are not serving our purposes adequately, speak up and we'll see if it makes sense to revise them."
### 3.2.3 INTRODUCTIONS AND HOPES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To create a shared sense of people's hopes for the dialogue, what they bring to it and/or what they hope to experience during it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Say something like: “Let’s start by going around and saying your name and …”*

*(Facilitator chooses one or two of the following)*

- what led you to accept the invitation to join this dialogue.
  - *or-
- what you hope to experience or learn while you are here.
  - *or-
- what could happen in this conversation that would lead you to feel glad that you decided to participate.

*“Please say just a few sentences - not more than a minute or so. I’ll start, then we’ll go around.”*
### 3.2.4 FIRST QUESTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>20 minutes (Time for each response: 3 minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose:</strong> To invite participants to connect their response to the current situation with their own personal experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Now, I'd like to invite you to speak about your personal experience. Specifically, I'd like to ask each of you to take up to 3 minutes to respond to these questions:"

**(Facilitator chooses one set of questions)**

How have events related to September 11 and the war on terrorism affected you personally? Is there something you'd be willing to share about yourself or your life experiences that may relate to the ways you have responded to the attacks and/or the current situation in the world?

-or-

What thoughts and feelings are you sitting with as you reflect back on September 11 and all that has happened since? Would you be willing to say something about your life experiences prior to September 11 that may relate to your having those thoughts and feelings?

- **“First, a moment of silence to collect our thoughts.”**
- **After pause, repeat the questions.**
- **“Anyone can start when they are ready. Then we’ll go around. If we come to you before you are ready, you can pass and I’ll check in with you later to see if you’d like to speak.”**
- **Optional: “Remember, you may want to jot down key phrases, themes or connections to explore later.”**
### 3.2.5 SECOND QUESTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>20 minutes (Time for each response: 3 minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Purposes:**

To encourage participants to
- reflect on aspects of their own views that they may not express as readily as their usual views; and
- surface fresh information about complex thinking that may be fodder for connections across different views and new perspectives.

“Again, I’d like to pose a question and give each of you up to 3 minutes to respond. This question invites you to reflect upon and speak about what’s been surprising or uncertain in your own perspectives *(or, if the fourth choice is used)* what’s been hard to think through or communicate about.”

*(Facilitator chooses one or two of the following)*

Consider whether any of your usual assumptions or expectations about the world or life have shifted or whether you now sit with uncertainties about the views you have held. Please share, as you are willing, one or two shifting assumptions or uncertainties that you bring here.

*or*

What’s changed (if anything) in the way that you think or what you feel about your life, your relationships, the world, or our nation?

*or*

Among your views about what is happening in the world are there some areas of uncertainty, conflicting values, or dilemmas that you are willing to speak about?

*or*

Is there anything you have been finding difficult to sort out in your own mind or to speak about? If you don’t wish to say aloud what is difficult, can you say what makes this thought or experience difficult to bring up?

- “First, a moment of silence to collect our thoughts.”
- *After pause, repeat the questions.*
- “We’ll start with whoever is ready, then we’ll go around. If your turn comes before you are ready, you can pass and I’ll check in with you later to see if you’d like to speak.” *(Alternative: “Instead of going around this time we’ll hear from people in whatever order they feel ready to speak – ‘popcorn’ style.”)*
- *If participants are not using their pads:* “Remember that you can jot down key phrases or themes you’re hearing that might be interesting to explore later.”
### 3.2.6 FACILITATED DISCUSSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>35 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To allow participants to have a more interactive discussion that makes connections among others’ thoughts and feelings and their own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tone-setting comments</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We are now at the point in our time together when you can pursue themes you’ve heard, explore similarities and dissimilarities, ask questions, or comment on how what you’ve heard has been enriching or perhaps unsettling.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“As we move into this less structured time, it’s important to remember why we are here: not to debate or persuade but to speak with sincerity, to listen with open heartedness and resilience, to reflect on our own views, and to seek understanding of other views—views that may actually enrich our own perspectives or give us more clarity about our own thoughts and feelings. Optional: When you’d like to speak, please let me know by raising your hand.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guiding questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There is no single question that I will pose to launch this segment of the dialogue. Rather, I will put out four ways that you can contribute to the conversation. No matter which you choose, you will be making a link from what you have heard or noting a connection.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read and/or have the following written on a handout or posted:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NOTE A POINT OF LEARNING OR ENRICHMENT</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you heard something that stirred fresh thoughts or feelings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PICK UP AND WEAVE THREADS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has an interesting theme or idea emerged in what you have heard so far, that you’d like to note and add to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CLARIFY DIFFERENCES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you heard something you disagreed with? If so, first check to see if you understood it correctly. Then say what was unsettling to you about what you heard and why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASK A QUESTION FUELED BY GENUINE CURIOSITY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there something someone said that you’d like to understand better? If you ask a question, be sure it reflects genuine curiosity and it’s not a statement or challenge in disguise.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 3.2.7 PARTING WORDS

**15 minutes**

**Purposes**
- To encourage reflection about what participants learned or valued that might be brought out into their lives after the dialogue
- To invite participants to say something that will bring their participation to a meaningful close

"Our time here is coming to an end. Are there any parting words that you’d like to say to bring your participation to a close?

"You may want to simply comment on what the experience has been like for you. Or you may want to say…"

*(Facilitator chooses one or two of the following)*

- one idea, feeling, commitment or promising question that you are taking with you.

  - or -

- one thing you want to remember about this conversation

  - or -

- something about what came up for you here that you may want to share with a friend, family member, or co-worker, or take out into your life in some other way.

*After hearing from all who wish to speak, as facilitator, you*

- thank participants and
- elicit feedback. Indicate that you and the staff at the Public Conversations Project would like to learn from their feedback. A Participant Feedback Form can be found in Section 4, as well as two different versions of a Facilitator Feedback Form.
4. Feedback Forms

We are eager to learn from anything you do—whether you follow the Plan step by step or try something very different. We hope you will let us know what you did, what worked and what you learned. We are interested in the nuts and bolts as well as the headlines.

A very simple Participant Feedback form follows, as well as two versions of a Facilitator Feedback Form—one more detailed than the other. We hope you will share with us as much as you have the time and inclination to write. Future users of the Guide, as well as PCP, will benefit from the fruits of your experience.

If you have downloaded the Guide, just cut and paste the feedback forms into your own word processing program. Then you will be able to type in the spaces after the questions (the space will expand as you type) or create as much space as you want on your printed form. Please email or fax the form to us. If you have technical difficulties, give us a call.

If you'd like to arrange for a more convenient way to provide feedback, don't hesitate to call. We are eager to learn from your experience.

Web:  http://conversations.forms.sococo.org/49/
Email:  september11@publicconversations.org
Fax:  (617) 923-2757  Phone:  (617) 923-1216
Participant Feedback Form

1. What was most satisfying, enriching, or valuable about your experience in the dialogue?

2. What was less than satisfying, frustrating, or disappointing?

3. What advice or suggestions can you offer to people who want to plan and facilitate future dialogues like this?

4. Please share, if you are willing, something about what you are taking away from the experience?

5. Other comments?

Name: (optional)
Facilitator Feedback Form: Short Version

Facilitator’s Name:

E-Mail:

1. How did you go about setting up the dialogue? (Attach sample invitation if you are willing to share it.)

2. Who came? What was the range and intensity of their views?

3. What parts of the Plan did you use?

4. What questions did you ask the participants to address?

5. How did it go? What went especially well? What was difficult?

6. Did you use alternatives to the Plan that worked especially well?

7. What did participants value about the conversation?

8. What did they find difficult or disappointing?

9. What suggestions did they have for improvement?

10. What advice do you have for people planning to organize and facilitate a dialogue about challenging current events?

11. What changes or additions do you recommend PCP make to the next edition of this Guide?
Facilitator Feedback Form: Long Version

Facilitator’s Name:

E-Mail:

Who participated? How many? Their prior relationships, if any?

2. How did you invite them? (Attach sample invitation if you are willing to share it.)

3. How did you describe the purpose of the dialogue?

4. Where did the conversation take place?

5. What day of the week and time of day? How long did it last?

6. What happened between arrival and the start of the conversation?

7. Who facilitated? What was your/their prior experience leading or facilitating groups?

8. What unexpected challenges arose? How did you meet them?

9. In your view, which circumstances made a difference (positive or negative) in the way the conversation went?

10. How many members of the group had strongly held opinions? How broad a range of views did the participants have?

11. Did the group include a balanced distribution of views? Do you think anyone felt silenced or isolated?

(Page 1 of 2)
12. What questions did you ask the participants to address?

13. To what extent did you follow the Plan? What parts of what you followed worked especially well for you? What parts did not work well?

14. If you improvised, which of your improvisations worked especially well? Did any not work out well?

15. How did you elicit feedback from the participants?

16. What were the most satisfying elements for the participants?

17. What was less than satisfying for the participants?

18. How much difference was there among participants' views about the value of the conversation? Was the pattern of satisfaction/dissatisfaction related to participants' views? Other factors?

19. What was most satisfying for you, the facilitator?

20. What was less than satisfying for you, the facilitator?

21. What advice did the participants have, or do you have, for people considering organizing a dialogue about issues related to challenging current events?

22. What changes or additions do you recommend PCP make to the next edition of the Guide?
**Appendix A: Distinguishing Debate from Dialogue**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-meeting communication between sponsors and participants is minimal and largely irrelevant to what follows.</td>
<td>Pre-meeting contacts and preparation of participants are essential elements of the full process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants tend to be leaders known for propounding a carefully crafted position. The personas displayed in the debate are usually already familiar to the public. The behavior of the participants tends to conform to stereotypes.</td>
<td>Those chosen to participate are not necessarily outspoken &quot;leaders.&quot; Whoever they are, they speak as individuals whose own unique experiences differ in some respect from others on their &quot;side.&quot; Their behavior is likely to vary in some degree and along some dimensions from stereotypic images others may hold of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The atmosphere is threatening; attacks and interruptions are expected by participants and are usually permitted by moderators.</td>
<td>The atmosphere is one of safety; facilitators propose, get agreement on, and enforce clear ground rules to enhance safety and promote respectful exchange.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants speak as representatives of groups.</td>
<td>Participants speak as individuals, from their own unique experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants speak to their own constituents and, perhaps, to the undecided middle.</td>
<td>Participants speak to each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences within &quot;sides&quot; are denied or minimized.</td>
<td>Differences among participants on the same &quot;side&quot; are revealed, as individual and personal foundations of beliefs and values are explored.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants express unswerving commitment to a point of view, approach, or idea.</td>
<td>Participants express uncertainties, as well as deeply held beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants listen in order to refute the other side's data and to expose faulty logic in their arguments. Questions are asked from a position of certainty. These questions are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements. Statements are predictable and offer little new information.</td>
<td>Participants listen to understand and gain insight into the beliefs and concerns of the others. Questions are asked from a position of curiosity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New information surfaces.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success requires simple impassioned statements.</td>
<td>Success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue being discussed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debates operate within the constraints of the dominant public discourse. (The discourse defines the problem and the options for resolution. It assumes that fundamental needs and values are already clearly understood.)</td>
<td>Participants are encouraged to question the dominant public discourse, that is, to express fundamental needs that may or may not be reflected in the discourse and to explore various options for problem definition and resolution. Participants may discover inadequacies in the usual language and concepts used in the public debate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table contrasts debate as commonly seen on television with the kind of dialogue we aim to promote in dialogue sessions conducted by the Public Conversations Project.

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Appendix B: Self Help Tools for Participants

1. **If you feel cut off** say so or override the interruption. ("I'd like to finish...")

2. **If you feel misunderstood** clarify what you mean. ("Let me put this another way...")

3. **If you feel misheard** ask the listener to repeat what she heard you say and affirm or correct her statement.

4. **If you feel hurt or disrespected** say so. If possible, describe exactly what you heard or saw that evoked hurt feelings in you. ("When you said x, I felt y..." where "x" refers to specific language.) If it is hard to think of what to say, just say, "OUCH" to flag your reaction.

5. **If you feel angry** express the anger directly (e.g., "I felt angry when I heard you say x...") rather than expressing it or acting it out indirectly (e.g., by trashing another person’s statement or asking a sarcastic or rhetorical question.)

6. **If you feel confused** frame a question that seeks clarification or more information. You may prefer to paraphrase what you have heard. ("Are you saying that...?")

7. **If you feel uncomfortable** with the process, state your discomfort and check in with the group to see how others are experiencing what is happening. "I'm not comfortable with the tension I'm feeling in the room right now and I'm wondering how others are feeling." If others share your concerns and you have an idea about what would help, offer that idea. "How about taking a one-minute Time Out to reflect on what we are trying to do together?"

8. **If you feel the conversation is going off track** share your perception, and check in with others. "I thought we were going to discuss x before moving to y, but it seems that we bypassed x and are focussing on y. Is that right?" (If so) "I'd like to get back to x and hear from more people about it."

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Appendix C: Two Sample Invitations

Sample Invitation #1

Zoe Reinold and Daniel Lansing cordially invite you to participate in a

READING RESIDENTS' DIALOGUE
ABOUT SEPTEMBER 11 AND ALL THAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE

Friday, Feb. 22, 2002
7 to 9 PM
Town Hall conference room (first floor)

By dialogue, we mean a conversation with a particular spirit:
- we listen intently;
- we speak openly; and
- we seek simply to understand each other.

This dialogue also has structure:
- it is facilitated;
- we take turns responding to certain questions;
- we agree to observe communication guidelines; and
- we refrain from debating or refuting each other.

To learn more about our proposed dialogue go to www.publicconversations.org. It’s the website of the Public Conversations Project, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group that promotes dialogue about divisive issues. Click on “Constructive Conversations for Challenging Times: A Guide for Home and Community Dialogue.”

RSVP: Call Zoe Reinold, 555-1234, or email her at [zoe’s email address].
Dear Friends,

I'm writing to ask you to join me in an experiment in dialogue. The topic will be our responses to Sept. 11: from the events of that terrible day to the many changes, both global and personal, that have occurred in its wake.

By dialogue, I mean something more structured than casual talk. Those who agree to participate will take turns responding to certain questions. Our conversation will be facilitated (by me unless anyone else is interested in playing this role).

We will have communication guidelines, which we'll all consider and approve beforehand. Ideally, we'll include an agreement to refrain from debating or refuting each other. The reason to refrain from debating is to create a calm, welcoming place for thoughtful conversation—a place for speaking openly, listening carefully, and making connections among our experiences and perspectives.

It may be that many of us have experienced a range of feelings and opinions about this enormous event. We might hold very different opinions. Or we might feel uncertain. In the conversation I'm proposing, we'd all feel free to express disagreements, contradictions, vagueness and uncertainty. We'd seek to understand them, not to resolve or dismiss them.

I've gotten my ideas for this conversation from the Public Conversations Project (PCP), a nonprofit, nonpartisan group that promotes dialogue about divisive public issues. They have a guide that contains a suggested format and lots of stimulating questions. To check it out, go to www.publicconversations.org. and click on "Constructive Conversations for Challenging Times."

I'm proposing this dialogue because I personally feel the need for richer discussion of all that is going on. I suppose it's my way of combating the powerlessness I feel. I also feel a desperate desire not to succumb to the apathy of powerlessness. I want to stay awake, to stay engaged with current events. I also wish to stay connected to all of you.

Some of you may not feel inclined to have this kind of conversation right now. Please feel free to opt out. The dialogue only works if people really want to do it. I promise I won't mind a bit!

The dialogue will take place on Friday, Feb. 22, from 7 to 9 PM. If you can, please also join us for a light supper, which will start at 6. The location will be my home at 123 Main St., Westville.

Thanks for hearing me out. When you know whether or not you're interested in having such a dialogue, you can e-mail me a reply at [e-mail address] or call me at [phone number].

Hope to see you on Feb. 22.

Warm regards,

Jane B. Smith
Appendix D: Facilitator Worksheet

Welcome and Orientation (5 minutes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purposes:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To welcome participants into the conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To remind participants about the purpose and spirit of the dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To say something about roles, schedule, etc. so people know what to expect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your Notes:

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Agreements (10 minutes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To craft a set of agreements that everyone understands and agrees to that will serve the purposes of the dialogue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your Notes:

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Introductions and Hopes (10 minutes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To create a shared sense of participant’s hopes for the dialogue, what they bring to it and/or what they hope to experience during it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your Notes/Chosen Question:
**First Question (20 minutes)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Purpose:</strong></th>
<th>To invite people to connect their response to the current situation with their own personal experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Your Notes/Chosen Question:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Second Question (20 minutes)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Purposes:</strong></th>
<th>To encourage participants to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• reflect on aspects of their own views that they may not express as readily as their usual views</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• surface fresh information about complex thinking that may be fodder for connections across different views and new perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Your Notes/Chosen Question:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Facilitated Discussion (35 minutes)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To allow participants to have a more interactive discussion that makes connections among others’ thoughts and feelings and their own</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Notes:</th>
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<tbody>
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</table>

**Parting Words (15 minutes)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purposes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To encourage reflection about what participants learned or valued that might be brought into their lives after the dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To offer people an opportunity to say something that will bring their participation to a meaningful close</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Notes/Chosen Question:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Reminder: Ask for feedback*
Appendix E

A Tale of Two Grandmothers or,
There's More Than One Good Way to Facilitate Dialogue

by Bob Stains, PCP's Director of Training

When I think about how to apply the PCP approach, I'm reminded of the very different ways that my two grandmothers made pasta sauce. On the English side, my great-grandmother Elsie Stains was very clear about what it took to make sauce: a recipe. Six large, peeled tomatoes. One tablespoon of oregano. One-and-a-half teaspoons of salt. The ingredients were to be measured out, mixed, and heated in the prescribed manner. As a young boy, it was great to help Grandma Stains make sauce, because I always knew what to do.

Another approach was taken by my Italian grandmother, Luigina Miglioranzi (“Nonna”). Nonna held whatever recipes she had in her heart. She too would begin with tomatoes, but then was in constant conversation with the sauce-to-be. “What do you need?” she would say in broken English, as she tossed “just a pinch” of salt or oregano or cloves into the pot. Then a taste from the wooden spoon. Pause. Again, “What do you need?” She would continue on in this manner, interacting with the bubbling mixture, until it was “right;” until the correct balance of ingredients was achieved and they had “married;” until it could be pronounced “sauce.” I still carry the exquisite taste with me. It was harder to help Nonna because I didn’t go back with sauce as far as she did. As I’ve grown older, though, I’ve grown more adventurous. I’ve been in conversation with sauce for some years, sharing the taste with family and friends.

As you approach the adventure of dialogue, remember that there are different ways to make a marvelous sauce. It may be more fitting and comfortable for you to stick with the “recipe” approach, especially if you are new to facilitation. It’s good to be reminded about what ingredients are necessary for dialogue, and to be able to put them together in basic, tried-and-true ways. There are detailed resources in this Guide and other sections of this web site that will support you.

On the other hand, you may feel more comfortable relying on your own intuition. In this case, you’ll want to explore the variety of options offered in each section of the Guide. Perhaps you’ll use some of our suggested questions and formats; perhaps you’ll develop your own. Just stay attuned to the character and mood of your group. Be in conversation with the members about what’s working and be prepared to adjust to fit their needs.

Regardless of which approach you are more comfortable with, we hope that you carry the “spirit” of dialogue into your thinking, your planning and your facilitation. If you are rooted in this, whether you have followed a more structured or more fluid approach, participants will leave having tasted something new.