

# HOW DO WE CONNECT?

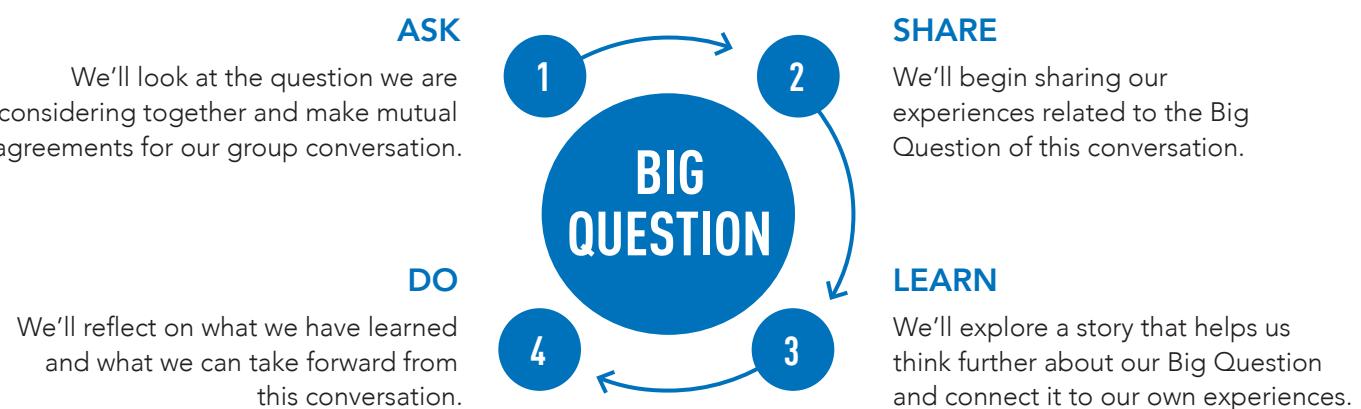


A GUIDED CONVERSATION

## WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATION IS THIS?

A Big Question conversation is one that helps us connect by discussing questions that matter to everyone, and everyone can answer. The questions we will talk about don't require expertise to answer. For our time together, we will share stories and explore questions instead of making arguments and debating issues. We'll focus on listening and reflecting together to understand and learn, instead of to convince or persuade others.

## CONVERSATION FLOW:



Our conversation today will follow these stages, and should last between 60 and 90 minutes. We'll use this written guide as a centering point, to help us have a shared discussion that stays focused and allows everyone to participate. Some parts of the conversation will include reading aloud by members of the group and at times we might break into pairs or small groups.\*

\*Conversation Leaders can find suggestions and support in our "Resources for Conversation Leaders" guide, available online.

## ASK

Before we ask each other to share our stories, we need to agree to some parameters to guide us. To create a more trustworthy space where we feel able to contribute openly, we will begin by asking each of us to agree that we have mutual responsibilities to each other and the group. We'll spend around 10 minutes in this section.

We will read our Agreement of Mutual Responsibility together, with volunteers taking turns reading items out loud. As we read, you can use the space provided before the items to mark them using the symbols shown below. You can put more than one symbol by an item if more than one applies.



Put a question mark by any items for which you need clarification



Put a check mark by items which feel easy or natural to you



Put an arrow pointing to items which will be challenging for you, where you will need to pay special attention



Put a star by items which are most important for you to receive from others in order to participate fully

After we read the Agreement items together, we'll review any that need clarification. Then, as we go through the conversation:

- be aware of those items you marked as challenging for yourself, and try to adjust when you find yourself not following an agreement;
- if you feel others are not observing agreements, especially those that you starred as most important to you, you can ask the conversation leader or the group as a whole to review an item and discuss what can help the group make adjustments;
- notice whether your assumptions about what would come easily or naturally to you were accurate, and whether in the future you might need to be more mindful about your tendencies in those areas than you anticipated.

# OUR AGREEMENT OF MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

 need  
clarification

 feels easy  
or natural

 will be  
challenging

 need from others in order  
to participate fully

## WE AGREE TO:

- \_\_\_\_\_ **1. Share the Air:** We will strive to share this time, space, and learning process equitably, so that all can participate and share in the benefit. We will not expect other individuals or groups to bear the responsibility of educating us.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **2. Uphold Confidentiality:** We will not share others' stories or identities outside this conversation, although we may share what we have learned from this experience.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **3. Maintain Respect:** We will treat others with respect. We will not shame, blame, demean, or attack others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **4. Allow for Silence:** We won't rush to fill silences, recognizing that we may need time to gather our thoughts or find our courage to speak.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **5. Listen to Understand:** We will acknowledge the limits of our own knowledge and open ourselves to what we can learn from the experiences and circumstances of others. We will listen to understand and to learn, not to debate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **6. Speak Only for Ourselves:** We will each speak from our own experience, not for others, not for entire groups. We will not expect others to speak for entire groups.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **7. Consider the Bigger Picture:** We will strive to recognize how our own and others' experiences and perspectives are influenced by heritage, cultural environments, social groups, our diverse identities, and social systems.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **8. Explore Disagreement:** We will strive to be open and curious about our disagreements, and to engage with disagreement even when it feels uncomfortable.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **9. Lean in to Discomfort:** We will be willing to grapple with challenging ideas and feelings, and examine our own reactions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **10. Practice Generosity:** We will recognize that we are all people in process and are more than we express in any one moment. We will give ourselves and each other permission to not know. We will respect each other's right to be fully human, including experiencing strong emotions, not knowing, and making mistakes.

*Please sign here as a symbol of your commitment to upholding our Agreement.*

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## SHARE

We want to enter into conversation by introducing ourselves and inviting everyone to reflect on our own experience, connecting our Big Question to our individual lives. We'll have up to 20 minutes for this activity.

Choose one of these questions to answer:

### WHAT COMES TO MIND?

- When was a time that you connected deeply with someone else despite very different worldviews or life experiences?
- Who is someone that you would like to feel more connected to despite very different worldviews or life experiences?

Take a moment to organize your thoughts; you can use this space to make some notes to yourself. Then we'll each introduce ourselves and share a brief answer.

## LEARN

This is the heart of our conversation; we'll spend up to 30 minutes in this portion. We are going to watch a video together, to help us think about our Big Question from a shared reference point.

### SETTING THE CONTEXT:

What do we mean when we say we "feel connected" to someone? In our ever more digital world, is a virtual connection to someone the same as an in-person connection? Does a feeling of connection require that we have something in common or that we agree? In the absence of commonality or agreement, what else might form a foundation for connection?

Julie Lindahl had uncovered the family secret that her grandfather had been a brutal Nazi officer during World War II. Rachael Cerrotti was retracing the steps of her grandmother, the sole survivor of her Jewish Czech family after the Holocaust. They had both spent years immersed in the same history. Rachael says, "Perhaps if somebody looked at our stories on paper, you couldn't think they'd be more further apart, right? A perpetrator and a victim."

Let's watch a story of what happened when they reached out to each other and started talking. [Link to video: <http://wbur.fm/2BYTLaJ>] A transcript of the video is included below to refer back to after we view the video.

## VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Julie and Rachel's Story: Reaching Beyond Sides

Rachael: My whole adult life has been guided by my grandmother's past. I will never know what she felt.

[Caption: Rachael Cerrotti's grandmother was a Holocaust survivor.]

Julie: I will never to the end of my days, I know, ever be able to answer the question of whether my grandmother felt any remorse or guilt. I keep looking for signs.

[Caption: Julie Lindahl's grandparents were Nazis.]

Julie: She combined in one personality the great enigma of human beings, which is how we can be extremely civilized and terribly barbaric all at the same time.

[Captions: Julie and Rachael are two women from different sides of history who found each other. During World War II, Julie's grandfather was an SS officer known for his brutality. Before the war, Rachael's grandmother was a Jewish teenager living in Prague. She was the only member of her family to survive the Holocaust.]

Rachael: Perhaps if somebody looked at our stories on paper, I don't think they'd be more further apart, right? A perpetrator and a victim. But when we start getting to talking, all of these themes that come out are just so universal, and it all of a sudden it feels much more connected. And I just kind of wish more people could do that.

[Caption: Both women have spent years researching the lives of their grandparents.]

Julie: In my case there was a taboo in the family and even after I had found the information out, you know in documentation from the archives about my grandparents, and my grandmother denied that they were in the SS and so on, so there were very big efforts to hide things.

Rachael: That's so different than my family's reaction to what I did. People thanked me, so this is pretty much the exact opposite of what you've received from your family, is because I'm keeping her story alive.

[Caption: In 2016, Rachael's husband heard Julie on the radio. He was struck by the similarities between Julie's and Rachael's work.]

## VIDEO TRANSCRIPT (CONT'D)

Julie: When we reached out to each other something very important happened.

Rachael: I remember the first time that we met in person. I remember sitting there in your kitchen and just saying, wow, it's really urgent our friendship and our work. We started with these stories in the past and, all of a sudden, they're seemingly very relevant.

[Caption: Julie and Rachael started looking for ways to tell their stories together.]

Julie: I often feel like the two of us are kind of like a couple of voices calling back from the future of today, saying, "Choose another path. We're telling you there's going to be suffering down the line. Not for one generation, or two generations -- at least three, maybe more." So I guess to me that's what the two of us are doing, we're kind of shouting back from the future.

Rachael: This is a time when we need to be having hard conversations, and we need to be getting out of our comfort zones, and we need to be talking about the things that that are difficult to talk about because we can't move forward unless we talk about it.

[Caption: Julie and Rachael see their friendship as a peace project. A way to face the past so as not to repeat it.]

Julie: Whenever I think of the portrayal of our Peace Project as two people from different sides of the Second World War, the Holocaust, I always object strongly, because your family were not on the side of the war. They were simply victims of terrible, terrible tragedy. But we're not on two sides and I think part of what we're trying to do is important for today, where there is this kind of perceived polarization that gets talked about endlessly. And I think what we're trying to say is that people can be on different facets of that Rubik's Cube, but we're all tied together. We're not on different sides at all.

Produced by Erika Lantz and Frannie Carr Toth. Published December 19, 2017, as the conclusion of a mini series produced with WBUR's Cognoscenti and Kind World: <http://wbur.fm/2BYTLaJ>.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

We won't necessarily discuss every question here, but we will discuss at least 1 or 2 from each section. As we discuss, you can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

**Clarifying:** What's happening in the video?

- Is there anything in the video that isn't clear to you?

**Interpreting:** How do people in the story feel and respond?

With these questions, we want to stay as close as possible to the actual content/action of the story, examining what is there and what we think it means.

- Rachael says that when she and Julie began talking, "all of these themes came out that are universal." What themes did you hear that connected their stories?
- What do you think Rachael meant when she said, "it's really urgent, our friendship and our work"?
- When rejecting the portrayal of their story "as two people from different sides of the Second World War, the Holocaust," Julie refers to the current "kind of perceived polarization that gets talked about endlessly." Why do you think she refers to this dynamic as "perceived polarization?"
- What do you think helped Julie and Rachael develop a sense of connection?

## WHAT COMES TO MIND?

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

**Reflecting:** How does this story resonate with us?

- What, if anything, from the video feels familiar to you or similar to something from your own life?
- Have you ever had an experience like the one in the video, where you found yourself feeling a sense of connection to someone who seemingly was “on a different side” than you? What happened to make it possible?
- What do you think it would take for more people to find connection with others whose stories seem so far apart, as Julie and Rachael’s seemed?
- Where in your own life does it feel really urgent to find connection with others?
- If you could be a voice from the future of today, calling back, what message would you want to give to your present self? To others?
- Do you see any issues happening today that you feel fit Julie’s idea of “perceived polarization” but where you see us as actually being “tied together” rather than on “different sides?”
- Do you think there are limits to Julie’s idea that we are not on different sides? Are there circumstances where finding connection feels in conflict with taking a stand?
- What lessons can we take from this story that might help us?

## WHAT COMES TO MIND?

# DO

To conclude our time together, we'll think and talk about some of the things that really struck us during the course of our conversation and what we can take forward from this experience.\*\*

\*\*Conversation Leaders can find suggested variations of the "Do" section in our "Resources for Conversation Leaders" guide, available online.



## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

First take a moment to reflect and respond briefly, in a phrase or sentence, to at least one of these questions:

- What insights did you have about our Big Question?
- What insights did you have about yourself, your own values, or how you view the world?
- What insights did you have about others -- whether other participants, someone whose story we discussed in the Learn section, or people in general?

## WHAT COMES TO MIND?

You can use the space to make some notes to yourself. After you've had a moment, we'll share some of our thoughts.

## WHAT WILL WE DO?

Now take a moment to reflect and respond to the questions below and choose one response you would like to share with the group. We'll finish with a final round of sharing.

1. Think again about our Agreement of Mutual Responsibility.  
What are some things you noticed in this conversation that you and others did – or didn't do – that created the space for a meaningful, respectful conversation? What is one thing you want to work on maintaining in other conversations you have?
2. We all know maintaining commitments can be hard. In anticipation of the times when maintaining your goal is a struggle, what is a strategy that you can use to help yourself in those moments?

## WHAT COMES TO MIND?

## CLOSING

Thank you for participating in this conversation. Educator John Westerhoff has said that "We are at our best when we make our lives and our search for meaning available as a resource for another's learning."

### SHARE YOUR FEEDBACK:

We'd like to hear about your conversation experience! Take our brief survey at [bit.ly/AskBigQs](http://bit.ly/AskBigQs).

### SHARE YOUR STORY:

Join the Ask Big Questions community online – connect with us and share your conversation story. Tag @AskBigQs (Twitter) and @AskBigQuestions (Facebook and Instagram)



## ABOUT ASK BIG QUESTIONS

Ask Big Questions is a project that seeks to deepen understanding and strengthen community through reflective conversations about questions that matter to everyone. No matter our background or perspective, we need opportunities to see and hear each other more deeply – not as labels but as human beings. Conversations that help us connect are essential building blocks for strong and inclusive communities. Big Question conversations support and strengthen civic habits of listening, civility, and engaging diverse perspectives, which are important steps toward better problem solving. Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel International.

## JOIN THE BIG QUESTIONS COMMUNITY!

Join our movement to build connection, trust, and community through better conversation! A good conversation changes us, and as those effects ripple outward, it can change the world. Visit [askbigquestions.org](http://askbigquestions.org) to find more Big Question conversation guides and resources to help you use our guides for better civic dialogue.

## USING ASK BIG QUESTIONS MATERIALS

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