

DEEP RELATIONSHIPS

November 9, 2017
Klas Center, Hamline University



INTERFAITH
ACTION OF GREATER
SAINT PAUL
OPPORTUNITY SAINT PAUL

Introduction and Data

THE PRESENTATION

Opportunity St. Paul Director Zac Poxleitner began the evening by asking us to imagine a family (two working parents, two preschool-aged kids) living in St. Paul, and to consider the basic expenses they might expect to encounter over the course of the year: housing, food, health insurance, child care, etc.

Together, the father (Levi) and mother (Colby) Zac described made 63K a year. According to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's [Living Wage Calculator](#), the average family of four requires an annual income of \$70,077. (The Federal Poverty line for a family of four, Zac notes, is only 24K). So, assuming all goes well, Mom, Dad and the kids might find a way to scrape by. But then Zac tells us to think about what would happen if Levi, who loves basketball, got hurt in a pickup game and suddenly couldn't work for six months. Suddenly, the family is forced to move in with an uncle, cut basic expenses to the quick, and reconsider childcare. The stress mounts on the entire family, both physically and mentally, and manifests itself for the kids in school and the parents at home.

THE LESSONS

- The Federal Poverty Level, originally calculated in 1963 by multiplying a minimum food diet by three and adjusting for inflation, fails to take into account economic reality. (For more on this issue, see [“The Poverty Line is Too Damn Low”](#) at TalkPoverty.org.)
- People move in and out of poverty, which is often situational. Persistent, or more permanent poverty also exists for an array of unforeseeable and often unavoidable reasons. Both are damaging to mind, body, and spirit. (For more on this issue, see [“The Poverty Risk Calculator”](#) at ConfrontingPoverty.org)
- When volunteering, never assume you understand a person's circumstances. Stereotypes short-circuit meaningful exchange
- Learn to ask questions, listen, and exercise empathy.
- You are the intervention in many cases where the system fails or falls short.

Courageous Conversation Training

THE PRESENTATION

Javen Swanson, Associate Pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul conducted a session on how to conduct intentional, one-on-one conversations. When done with other volunteers, these intentional interactions can help put our values into action and build resolve when challenges arise. When done with the children and families we're volunteering to help, it can lead to a level of understanding that breaks down barriers, builds trust, and leads to more lasting connections.

([Click here](#) to learn more about Javen's background, as well as his personal and professional experiences with meaningful conversation.)

THE LESSONS

During the training, Javen described the key components of a successful, one-on-one conversation, which typically last between 30 and 45 minutes.

- Best-selling author Dr. Brené Brown, whose work influences conversational guides like Javen, notes that we are hard-wired for connection. It gives us purpose and meaning and, without it, there is suffering. (To read more about Brown’s thinking on the subject, check out her TED Talk, [“The Power of Vulnerability.”](#))
- In normal interactions we don’t normally go deep, or deeply listen.
- When conducting a one-on-one you should spend at least 70 percent of the time listening. The other 30 percent of the time you should be responding and reacting to what the person is saying—not to talk about yourself, but to further probe a person’s story.
- Don’t go into a one-on-one with a list of questions. Have a question or two prepared in advance and then listen and react in the moment.
- The goal is to figure out what makes a person tick: What gets them up in the morning and stays with them until they go to sleep?
- Listen for an invitation from the person you’re talking with to pursue a topic further. Oftentimes people “crack the door” open to see if you’ll walk through. An impactful exchange requires courage on both sides of the interaction.

Javen ended the evening by challenging us to think of two people we want to get to know better, call them up, and set-up a one-on-one. After a time, we can use what we learn experientially, along with the above directions, to begin teaching others how to do the same.

Interfaith Dialogue

THE PRESENTATION

Earl Schwartz, professor of religion at Hamline University, examined a series of texts from the Torah, which he hopes will help us consider what lessons are best to teach children within the family and outside the family.

THE LESSONS

- There is a distinction between “telling” and “teaching.” When working as a volunteer this is particularly important to understand, since you can tell absent a relationship, but only teach within a relationship.
- Listening and understanding a person’s story is the first-step in building the sort of relationship that engenders shared wisdom.
- You can teach a lot without telling anything. You can teach by who you are.
- Teachers teach best by learning.
- We don’t want to type a person, especially a child. We want to open doors, not close them.
- We’re given families. We make friends. We BUILD Deep Relationships.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you make of the underlying premise that there are certain lessons in life that are best taught within a family?
 - a. What might these particular lessons be?
 - b. What can make this educational responsibility very challenging?
2. Are there any lessons that are best learned *outside* the family?
3. When *is* it and when is it *not* educationally helpful to “type” learners?
4. Might a single child exemplify more than one “type” at the same time?

Video

<https://youtu.be/kH7X57bDAIE>

Discussion Questions

What stood out as most interesting about the video?

What stood out as most inspiring about the video?

Does it matter how we and/or public officials define poverty? Why or why not?

How might the stresses of poverty affect adults and children differently?

Do you think building relationships is an important step in making change in the community? Why or why not?

Aside from having courageous conversations, how else might we engage with others in our community in a deep and meaningful way?

In the video, Professor Schwartz said, "You can't teach absent a relationship; you can only teach within a relationship." What do you think he means by this? How does this relate to community change?

QUESTIONS FOR FAITH GROUPS

Did anything in the video or in our discussion thus far resonate with you as it relates to our/your faith tradition?

Is it important to engage with others outside of our own faith tradition? Why or why not?

What does our own faith tradition say about building relationships? What about building relationships with people we are hoping to help?