

# WHAT DO WE CHOOSE TO IGNORE?

CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS

ASK **BIG**  
QUESTIONS

**Hillel**  
International

**Note for Facilitators:** This document is designed to be the centering point for a group conversation. You should plan for the conversation to last between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on group size. Most parts are meant to be read by members of the group, so you should plan to ask participants to take turns reading sections. Alternatively, you can choose the first reader of a section, and then that reader chooses the next reader. Additional guidelines and suggestions for planning and leading a successful conversation can be found at the end of this guide.

# WELCOME

Before we begin, we need to agree on a few things:

- In order for our conversation to be as rich as it can be, we need everyone to feel safe to really share and really listen. Therefore, what is said in this conversation stays in this conversation, and may not be repeated outside it.
- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

## Some Special Ground Rules For This Conversation Guide:

- The material in this conversation guide covers some particularly sensitive issues—sexual violence and the culture surrounding it. In order to try to make this space as conducive as possible to a conversation in which everyone can participate fully, we've added a few additional rules:
- Do not assume that there are no survivors of sexual violence in the room. 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men on campus are survivors of sexual violence of some kind. As you speak, please keep in mind the likelihood that someone in this room experiences these issues as very personal indeed.
- If someone has said something that offends you personally, say "ouch," to indicate this. If you have said something that came out sounding unintentionally hurtful, say "oops," as an acknowledgement and apology.
- Needless to say, you can choose to pass and not share or participate on a specific part of the conversation.
- Can we all agree to these things? If you feel, for whatever reason, that you cannot agree to these things, then please take this opportunity to exit. By staying in the circle, we all signify our intention to abide by these commitments.

# ASK & SHARE

Welcome to our conversation. Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please tell us your name and where you call home. Please also tell us about a time when you chose to notice something you might otherwise have ignored—whether or not you responded in an active way in the moment. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

**Note for Facilitators:** Give people a moment to organize their thoughts before you start asking for volunteers.

It may be helpful to model this introduction for participants, so consider introducing yourself first. Be sure everyone states their name. You don't need to go in order around a circle. Allow people to introduce themselves when the spirit moves them.

# LEARN

The decision to ignore or notice happens many times a day: we ignore (or don't ignore) emails, Facebook messages, tweets, phone calls, letters, even someone we know across the street. We choose whether to read the news, and what kind of news to read. We choose whether to pay attention to the natural world around us, to a distracting noise, to a friend's irritating quirks. Life would be impossible without this filtering. If we noticed everything, we'd go crazy. And if we notice nothing, it's meaningless.

Sometimes we actively ignore what's happening in the world, whether oceans away or on our street corner—whether it's because we feel overwhelmed by it, because we have “empathy fatigue,” because we don't feel that we can have an impact, or for some other reason. Sometimes we choose to ignore behavior around us that we know is wrong or in which someone is getting hurt because we're afraid to intervene or afraid to be unpopular, or because we assume that someone else will step in. These choices also have implications—for us, for those around us, and for the world we live in.

So the question is, what do we choose to ignore? And by extension, what do we choose to notice?

Last year, there was a fiery public discussion about whether it was appropriate for comedians to make jokes about sexual assault—and, if so, what kind. In the middle of this conversation, actor and comedian Patton Oswalt wrote an essay in which he shared about something he had chosen to ignore—and the moment when he decided to start noticing.

It's titled “A Closed Letter to Myself About Thievery, Heckling and Rape Jokes.” The full essay can be accessed here: <http://pattonoswalt.com/index.cfm?page=spew&id=167>

Please read the excerpt on the following pages out loud as a group.

The comedians I've known who joke about rape – and genocide, racism, serial killers, drug addiction and everything else in the Dark Subjects Suitcase – tend to be, internally and in action, anti-violence, anti-bigotry, and *decidedly* anti-rape. It's their way – at least, it's definitely my way – of dealing with the fact that all of this [horrible stuff] exists in the world. It's one of the ways I try to reduce the power and horror those subjects hold for me. And... I was secure in thinking my point of view was right. That "rape culture" was an illusion... I've never wanted to rape anyone. No one I know has ever expressed a desire to rape anyone. My viewpoint must be right. Right?

See if any of these sound familiar:

*There's no "evidence" of a "rape culture" in this country. I've never wanted to rape anyone, so why am I being lumped in as the enemy? If these bloggers and feminists make "rape jokes" taboo, or "rape" as a subject off-limits no matter what the approach, then it'll just lead to more censorship.*

They sure sound familiar to me because I, at various points, was saying them. Either out loud, or to myself, or to other comedian and non-comedian friends when we would argue about this. I had my viewpoint, and it was based on solid experience, and it...was...wrong.

Let's go backwards through those [faulty] conclusions, shall we? First off: *no one is trying to make rape, as a subject, off-limits. No one is talking about censorship.* In this past week of re-reading the blogs, going through the comment threads, and re-scrolling the Twitter arguments, I haven't once found a single statement, feminist or otherwise, saying that rape shouldn't be joked under any circumstance, regardless of context. Not one example of this.

In fact, every viewpoint I've read on this, *especially* from feminists, is simply asking to kick upward, to think twice about who is the target of the punchline, and make sure it isn't the victim.

Why, after all of my years of striving to write original material (and, at times, becoming annoyingly self-righteous about it) and struggling find new viewpoints or untried approaches to any subject, did I suddenly balk and protest when an articulate, intelligent and, at times, angry contingent of people were asking my to apply the same principles to the subject of rape? Any edgy or taboo subject can become just as hackneyed as an acceptable or non-controversial one if the *exact same approach* is made every time. But I wasn't willing to hear that.

And let's go back even *further*. I've never wanted to rape anyone. Never had the impulse. So why was I feeling like I was being lumped in with those who were, or who took a cavalier attitude about rape, or even made rape jokes to begin with? Why did I feel some massive, undeserved sense of injustice about my place in this whole controversy?

The answer to that is in the first incorrect assumption. The one that says there's no a "rape culture" in this country. How can there be? *I've* never wanted to rape anyone.

Do you see the illogic in that leap? I didn't at first. Missed it completely.

And just because I find rape disgusting, and have never had that impulse, doesn't mean I can make a leap into the minds of women and dismiss how they feel day to day, moment to moment, in ways both blatant and subtle, from other men, and the way the media represents the world they live in, and from what they hear in songs, see in movies, and witness on stage in a comedy club.

There is a collective consciousness that can detect the presence (and approach) of something good or bad, in society or the world, before any hard "evidence" exists. It's happening now with the concept of "rape culture." Which, by the way, isn't a concept. It's a reality. I'm just not the one who's going to bring it into focus. But I've read enough viewpoints, and spoken to enough of my female friends (comedians and non-comedians) to know it isn't some vaporous hysteria, some false meme or convenient catch-phrase.

I'm a comedian. I value and love what I do. And I value and love the fact that this sort of furious debate is going on about the art form I've decided to spend my life pursuing. And I don't want to be on the side of the debate that only argues from its own limited experience.

I'm a man. I get to be wrong. And I get to change.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

## Interpretive Questions

- What had Oswald chosen to ignore? What factors helped him to do so?
- What changed for him? What does that transformation look like?
- Do you agree with Oswald that “people only bring their own perceptions and experiences to bear when reacting to something....And, since they’re speaking honestly from their experience, they truly think they’re correct.... Dismissive, even...”? Why or why not?

## Reflective Questions

- Have you ever had a shift in perspective of the sort that Oswald describes?
- In what ways have ignoring or noticing rape culture impacted your life?
- How do we stop ignoring things that might be helpful for us to see?
- Are there times that it’s good or useful to ignore something? If so, how do we determine what those things are?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

**Note for Facilitators:** This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to prepare their thoughts. Then invite people to divide into pairs or triads and share their responses. Give them a good amount of time for this—10-20 minutes. It may be longer, depending on how much momentum they develop. Then reconvene in the large group and ask people to share from their small-group conversations.

A few tips on facilitation:

- The large-group debrief should take another 20-30 minutes.
- Begin by asking for a volunteer to share an insight from their conversation. You might begin by asking, “What came up?”
- When each person is done, thank them for their comment.
- Don’t feel a need to rush or to fill silences.
- If someone begins to monopolize the time, you might say, “I want to be sure that everyone has a chance to speak, so let’s try to make room for another person.”

For other ideas on facilitation, please refer to the AIR-IT guide at the end of this document. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its responses to these questions, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

## DO

The choice to ignore or to see is one we make dozens, even hundreds of times, every day. It can be about seeing someone's faults with a generous eye, or not focusing on certain demands on our time in order to have a moment of quiet. But it can also involve not paying attention to our own needs, or someone else's needs. It can be about complicity in a problematic situation or system. We have the responsibility to, at the very least, be thoughtful in our choices about what we ignore—and what we decide it's time to stop ignoring.

Hopefully our conversation today has helped us all to reflect on our practice of noticing and ignoring, and to understand ourselves and each other a little better.

Before we conclude the conversation, please choose a partner from this group. (If there's an odd number of people in the group, there can be one group of three.)

Here are a few final questions to consider:

- Picture your day tomorrow. What's one way that what we discussed today will change what you do or how you do it?
- What's one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
- How can you help create shifts in perspective around rape culture in your community or on your campus?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

After people share their answers to these questions and we conclude this conversation, please exchange contact info with your partner and set a time both to check in by phone, text or email in the next 24 hours, and to meet in person sometime in the next week. When you check in, discuss the changes you articulated wanting to make. How has that been going for you? What's been challenging? What do you need in order to integrate that change more fully into your life?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions, and then we'll do a final round of sharing.

**Note for Facilitators:** Give people a minute to reflect on the question. Then ask anyone who wants to share to do so. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its response to this question, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

# AIR-IT: A GUIDE TO FACILITATING CONVERSATION

## A: ASK BIG QUESTIONS.

BIG QUESTION	HARD QUESTION
<b>Anyone can answer it.</b> Example: "For whom are we responsible?"	<b>Experts will answer it best.</b> Example: "What's the best economic policy for the United States?"
<b>Focuses on wisdom and experience.</b> Example: "What's the best advice you've ever received?"	<b>Focuses on intelligence and skill.</b> Example: "Are human beings naturally good or evil?"
<b>Uses plain language.</b>	<b>Uses technical language.</b>
<b>Directed at a subject (me, you, us).</b> Example: "What could we sacrifice to change the world?"	<b>Directed at an object (it).</b> Example: "Is it better to cut spending or raise taxes to balance the federal budget?"
<b>Opens up space and invites people in as participants.</b>	<b>Closes space and leads people to feel like spectators.</b>
<b>Leads to sharing personal stories.</b>	<b>Leads to debates about truth claims.</b>
<b>Emphasizes a both/and approach.</b>	<b>Emphasizes an either/or approach.</b>

## I: INVITE PERSONAL STORIES.

Big questions lead to sharing personal stories. The facilitator acts to support this by:

- Creating the space (physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual) of trust in which these stories can be shared and honored.
- Weaving: Summarize, reflect back, and keep the stories and observations tethered to the big question. This helps the group to maintain integrity and not feel that it is fragmenting or fraying.

## R: REALLY LISTEN.

Ask Big Questions conversations are marked by real listening. The facilitator's reflecting back and weaving is crucial to this.

Participants should be able to answer questions like: "What did so-and-so say? What do you think they meant when they said it?

What did it evoke in you?"

## **IT: USE INTERPRETIVE THINGS.**

Ask Big Questions conversations often use a text, poem, artwork, song, natural object or other “interpretive thing” to help center the conversation and create a common point of access for all participants.

## **QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN PREPARING FOR A DISCUSSION**

### **Where?**

- Does the place where you’re having the conversation create a space in which people can feel safe?
- Is it a closed space? Does it have a door you can close to ensure privacy and confidentiality when needed?
- What can you do to make the space visually appealing or lovely? Does it have windows to let in light? Do you want to play some music?
- Can everyone sit comfortably in a circle?

### **When?**

- Are you scheduling the conversation at a time when everyone can be physically awake and present?
- Will people be hungry? Will you provide food or drink?
- Will they be tired or sleepy after a meal?
- How long will the conversation be?
- How will you break up the time if necessary?

### **Who and How?**

- How many people will participate? Will there be enough to sustain diverse conversation? Will there be too many to keep the conversation centered?
- How will you get the word out and then remind people?
- Do you need to make any special arrangements for people with special needs (i.e. physical disabilities)?
- Greetings – Who will welcome people to the conversation and how will they do it?
- How will you have everyone introduce themselves? (Big Questions are great for introductions!)
- How will you close the conversation?
- How will you follow up with people?
- How will you capture their contact information?

### **What About You?**

- What will you do to get yourself ready?

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