

Unlikely Friends – Healthy or Harmful?

Heather Gerbsch Daugherty
University Minister
Belmont University

Abstract: This case study looks at a conversation that happened as a part of the university's Unlikely Friends programming. It questions how we make space for students to share deeply and also to make space for difference in the conversation.

Keywords: dialogue, difference, discomfort, conflict resolution, conversation

In Spring 2024, our office along with our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office, piloted a program called “Unlikely Friends.” This program brought together a cohort of 32 students over four weeks to explore two basic questions: How do students learn to live together and build community across meaningful difference without shedding their most basic beliefs? What conversations and skills can help them to maintain the mental and cultural space necessary to encounter others who believe and act very differently than they do? Unlikely Friends included shared meals as well as large and small group conversations to teach skills for active listening, building empathy, and relating to people from different backgrounds, belief systems, and lived experiences. The cohort experience culminated in a closing session where students were broken up into random groups and given topics to discuss such as “Race in America,” “Religion in America,” and “Gender Roles.” After an hour of discussion, the group came back into a large group to debrief their discussions.

One vocal student made a statement expressing their belief that many of the problems we face today in America and in the church are because of missionary work and the inherent colonization that comes with it. That statement sat in the middle of the room for almost a full minute of silence. My co-facilitator and I sat quietly not wanting to immediately interject and try to “fix” the tension. Eventually, another student spoke up quietly and timidly, sharing that their family are missionaries in Thailand where they were raised and that they hoped one day to return as a missionary to tell people the good news of Jesus. These two statements were the start of an intense discussion not often had at our Christian school about missionary work.

About 1/3 of the students in the cohort were from a non-Christian tradition or of no faith affiliation and several of them told of being the “object” of missionary work. One of these students asked the missionary student: what if what you are talking about isn't good news to me? The missionary student responded with their understanding of why it was okay: If one has this deep treasure that changes the course of their life now and for eternity and did not share it with others, what kind of friend would they be?

The conversation ended due to the time constraints of our meeting, but there was a palpable unease in the room as the group wondered whether or not they had been able to truly make space for all voices and beliefs in their conversation. My co-facilitator and I were not sure either and

ended this final session of our cohort wondering whether our program had created the brave space of belonging we had hoped to cultivate.

I was especially concerned about our missionary student as their viewpoint seemed to be in the minority in the discussion. I wondered if they felt hurt that I, the Christian chaplain, had not defended their point of view. My co-facilitator and I decided that I would send an email to check in. I wrote an email thanking them for their vulnerability and willingness to continue in a conversation that was obviously very personal and challenging. I also offered to meet if they wanted to talk about things more. I received a reply from them the same day telling me that the conversation had reminded [them] of the good news [God] has for [them] and had given them the chance to obey [God]. From this email and a quick personal interaction, it was affirmed that this student had appreciated the opportunity to have such a deep and difficult conversation and that though their viewpoint was not in the majority they had been able to stand up for themselves and share beliefs that were very important to them.

As I look back upon the discussion that evening I am left with two takeaways and one remaining question:

1. Students have the ability and desire to deal with deep complexity if given the space and context to do so.

The goal of Unlikely Friends is to create spaces in which students can take the time to wrestle with the complexity of another person's humanity. This is difficult to do in a single class session or event, but something that can happen over time when a culture of listening and empathy is created. We are so quick to jump to conclusions and make a firm statement as opposed to dealing with the complexity of the person in front of us. This particular situation made me ask if we can equip students to walk into all spaces in this way. What is required of those who create such spaces? How do we help students to see the value in this kind of interaction?

2. It is not our job to remove the discomfort students encounter in difficult conversations.

My initial instinct when things became tense was to rush in and smooth things over, trying to placate all of the students involved by finding some kind of happy medium on which we all could agree. However, the format of Unlikely Friends called for something different and ALL of us sat in the discomfort of that space. In the end, no one could say that they had "won" the conversation, but all people could say that they had the chance to hear the stories of another and to be heard by their cohort. We did not leave that evening with things solved and tied up in a bow, but we left having encountered difference in a real way. This is more realistic to our everyday interactions, and when we as the "adults" in the room move to immediately calm the discomfort, we are taking away experiences that will serve our students in their real-life encounters with difference.

3. Are there things on which we can't agree to disagree?

At the end of one of our Unlikely Friends sessions we ask this question and get very different answers. Are there issues, situations, and viewpoints that are incompatible and negate the opportunity for relationship? I simultaneously find myself answering yes and

no, considering issues of power and privilege. I wonder what it looks like to make space for people to learn, to grow, and to be changed by encountering someone who challenges their preconceived biases and notions about people with particular identities. I also wonder about the ethics of intentionally placing students in interactions with people who question their humanity and right to exist, particularly in matters of ethnicity, sexuality, and religion. Am I placing students in harm's way by putting them into these conversations or does the opportunity for students to be impacted by the thoughts and experiences of others warrant the risks we are taking?

Much of the work we do in higher education generally, and in chaplaincy specifically, is to help students to prepare for life after graduation and I believe that the work of Unlikely Friends should be seen in this same light. Students will inevitably come into contact with people every day who question their humanity and right to exist. In Unlikely Friends, students learn to express themselves, to listen well, and to discern when to speak and when to hold something in abeyance in a setting where there is support and guidance from trusted mentors. These skills will serve students well when they inevitably face challenging conversations and interactions in unsupported environments. Learning this during their time on our campuses will give them the confidence and resilience they will need to face difficult and uncomfortable situations in the future. Knowing this, I believe the risks taken in Unlikely Friends have benefits that will be evident long after a student's time in the program.

Heather Gerbsch Daugherty has served university communities for over two decades, most recently at Belmont University. University chaplaincy gives her the opportunity to journey with students as they explore issues of faith, vocation, and navigating the world with intention. She is a candidate for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Church.