

HOW DO WE DISAGREE?

ASK **BIG**
QUESTIONS

CONVERSATION GUIDE
FOR PARTICIPANTS

ASK

About Ask Big Questions:

Ask Big Questions is a project devoted to helping people understand themselves and each other, and strengthening our communities in the process. It's called Ask Big Questions because the questions we'll be talking through as a group are ones we believe matter to everyone and everyone can answer. They might be challenging questions, but they're not "hard;" they're not questions that require expertise to answer. They're questions we all have stories about, questions all of us share. We believe that asking and talking about Big Questions as a group helps us learn to genuinely hear one another. It helps us grow our ability to trust each other. It builds community.

Today's Schedule:

- ASK: We'll look at the question we're considering together and make some mutual agreements for our group conversation.
- SHARE: We'll do an opening activity connected to the Big Question of this conversation: How Do We Disagree?
- LEARN: We'll listen to and discuss a short audio clip.
- DO: We'll reflect on our conversation together and what we have learned about ourselves and one another.

Ask Big Questions Code of Mutual Responsibility:

In order to accomplish the goals we have for our conversation, we ask everyone to agree to a few guidelines that can help create a more responsible and safer space for this conversation. We agree that:

- What is said in this conversation stays in this conversation, and may not be repeated outside it.
- We will recognize each other's right to be human. This conversation may trigger strong emotions, and we may feel or think in a way that is inconsistent with other times we have talked about the subjects and issues that come up. These feelings are real and genuine, and we don't need to apologize for them.
- We will speak to be understood, not to convince. We will listen to understand, not to score points. We will disagree with respect, and with the goal of better understanding others and ourselves. We won't rush to fill the silence.

Finally, we recognize that Ask Big Questions builds community through conversations; it is not group therapy. While we hope that everyone here will feel safe in this space, we respect anyone's need to leave the conversation at any point. A list of campus resources can be found below, and we invite you to seek out conversation and counseling with these resources if you need support. Is there anything else the group would like to add to this list of agreements?

SHARE

- When was the last time you disagreed with someone? What happened?
- When have you had a productive disagreement with someone?
- Do you find it easy or hard to express disagreement?

LEARN

The 19th century British women's rights activist Annie Besant said, "Quick condemnation of views with which we disagree... is the sign of a narrow mind...The wise boy, who will become the wise man, tries to understand and to see truth in ideas with which he does not agree." Learning to disagree fruitfully, constructively, and respectfully is an essential skill, but it can be difficult, sometimes even impossible. In today's world, rhetoric in the media, online, and in person can devolve quickly into inflammatory statements and personal attacks that leave all parties feeling angry and frustrated. We don't have to agree, but can we find ways to disagree productively? That's the question we want to explore today.

To do that, we're going to examine a moment in music history—from 1962, at New York's Carnegie Hall. The American conductor Leonard Bernstein was leading the New York Philharmonic in a performance of the Brahms First Piano Concerto. What made this performance unusual was the soloist: Canadian pianist Glenn Gould. Gould was known for being an iconoclast, offering his own unique interpretations of classical works. And on this night, Gould planned on playing the concerto much more slowly, and with different dynamics, than was traditional. In the world of classical music, it constituted a scandal. Before the performance began, with the orchestra seated on stage, Bernstein came out and—quite unusually—spoke to the audience. Here's what he had to say: <https://youtu.be/SvWPM783TOE>

Transcript of Leonard Bernstein's Speech

Don't be frightened. Mr. Gould is here. He will appear in a moment. I'm not, as you know, in the habit of speaking on any concert except the Thursday night previews, but a curious situation has arisen, which merits, I think, a word or two. You are about to hear a rather, shall we say, unorthodox performance of the Brahms D Minor Concerto, a performance distinctly different from any I've ever heard, or even dreamt of for that matter, in its remarkably broad tempi and its frequent departures from Brahms' dynamic indications. I cannot say I am in total agreement with Mr. Gould's conception. And this raises the interesting question: "What am I doing conducting it?" I'm conducting it because Mr. Gould is so valid and serious an artist that I must take seriously anything he conceives in good faith and his conception is interesting enough so that I feel you should hear it, too.

But the age-old question still remains: In a concerto, who is the boss: the soloist or the conductor? The answer is, of course, sometimes one, sometimes the other, depending on the people involved. But almost always, the two manage to get together by persuasion, or charm, or even threats, to achieve a unified performance. I have only once before in my life had to submit to a soloist's wholly new and incompatible concept, and that was the last time I accompanied Mr. Gould. But, this time the discrepancies between our views are so great that I feel I must make this small disclaimer.

Then why, to repeat the question, am I conducting it? Why do I not make a minor scandal — get a substitute soloist, or let an assistant conduct? Because I am fascinated, glad to have the chance for a new look at this much-played work. Because, what's more, there are moments in Mr. Gould's performance that emerge with astonishing freshness and conviction. Thirdly, because we can all learn something from this extraordinary artist, who is a thinking performer. And finally because there is in music what Dimitri Mitropoulos used to call "the sportive element," that factor of curiosity, adventure, experiment, and I can assure you that it has been an adventure this week collaborating with Mr. Gould on this Brahms concerto. And it is in this spirit of adventure that we now present it to you.

Questions for Discussion:

What's happening in the speech?

- Why does Bernstein come out to address the audience before the performance?
- Why does he suggest that he is "submit[ting] to a soloist's wholly new and incompatible concept" in this performance?
- What is his answer to the question, "What am I doing conducting" this piece?

What's the speaker's intent?

- What other ways could Bernstein have chosen to deal with his disagreement with Gould?
- Why did he make the choice that he did?
- What kind of impact do you think his address to the audience had on their experience hearing the piece?
- What does Bernstein risk in conducting an interpretation of music with which he disagrees?
- What does he stand to gain?

How does it resonate with us?

- When was a time that you, despite disagreeing with someone, chose to continue engaging with them? How did you navigate that? What happened?

- When was a time that you disengaged with someone based on a disagreement? What happened?
- Do you think that Bernstein’s approach would be useful in your life? If so, in what situations? If not, why not?
- How do you hope to disagree with others? How do you hope that they will disagree with you?

DO

On the BLUE post-its, please write any and all insights about yourself that you gained during the course of this conversation. Did you notice something new about how you view the world, or yourself? Did you articulate clearly something notable about your own values?

On the YELLOW post-its, please write any and all insights you had about others. How did this conversation help you to better understand someone else in this room? How did this conversation change the way you regard the group as a whole, or people in general?

On the PINK post-its, please write any questions you still have. These can be questions that the conversation raised for you, or things that you came into the conversation wondering about and didn’t feel resolved about by the end.

CAMPUS RESOURCES



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Ask Big Questions fosters reflective conversations about life’s big questions, helping people of all backgrounds deepen their understanding of themselves and others. Discussions sparked by these questions increase understanding among students with diverse points of view, create connections and new collaborations, diffuse tensions, build resilience around possible crises, and strengthen the feeling of community on campus. Ask Big Questions welcomes students of all backgrounds and political opinions, and was developed, launched, and scaled by Hillel International.

FIRST-TIME PARTICIPANT SURVEY

(Please only fill out this survey if this is your first conversation in this series.)

Today's conversation allows us to reflect on our own experiences in the world around us. Surveys like this one provides measurable evidence that helps us to evaluate Ask Big Question's effectiveness and to track the change in campus climate over time. Sharing your answers to the questions below will help us to assess student interaction on campus.

Responses will never be published in connection with your name.

Today's Date: _____ Name: _____ Email: _____

Year you started college: _____

Please rate your agreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have found a community on campus.					
I have struggled to find a community.					
I feel connected to more than one community.					
I feel connected to the larger campus community.					

Imagine that your campus is the best campus community it can be. What does it look and feel like?

	Very distant	Distant	Neither close nor distant	Close	Very close
How close do you feel the campus is to this vision?					

Please give this survey to your facilitator. Thank you!