

Conversation Guidelines for Community of Solitude (v. 1 March 2009) by Br. Leo, CoS

This is a short guide on conversations, especially email conversations, to be observed by all in the Community. It comes from my own painful failures in communication which I wish to help others avoid. If you have a better way of doing this let me know.

Communication

There are some levels of communication in which we all participate in on a daily basis. Roughly these are three: informal or trivial, formal or serious, and intimate.

In trivial conversations, such as chit-chatting or making a simple request, when we encounter a misunderstanding we usually address these quickly and simply: "I asked for ketchup not mustard", for example. What is common to all these conversations is the low emotional level as well as the low importance of the topic itself. Not much needs to be said about these.

The formal or serious conversations are those where there is a higher level of engagement on both parties. The emotional content of these can vary substantially from conversation to conversation, but any time you have two (or more) people putting a lot of attention into a subject it is a guarantee that there will be misunderstandings. These can escalate quickly and need to be monitored for potential breakdowns.

But even these are not at the level of most spiritual talk. Spiritual talk, as will be practiced in this Community, is of an intimate nature. People are talking about their hearts and from their hearts. The emotional content is VERY high, even if the words are measured and the tone is kept low.

What is critical to remember is that when talking spiritual matters we are entering into a sacred space. For there to be spiritual conversation, there has to be a willingness on both sides to be open, unguarded, defenseless. Without this 'nakedness' the conversation is at best formal.

One more thing to keep in mind: monastic life, and certainly participation in this Community, is about creating a safe space where people can explore God's calling in their lives. Safety is the operative word here. To be safe does not mean I have the best defenses. In the case of "spiritual safety" it is quite the opposite. A safe spiritual environment is one where I can lower all my defenses and be what God wants me to be.

To enter into a spiritual conversation with someone is to enter into very sacred work. It must be handled appropriately just as St. Benedict advises us to handle every instrument with as much love, reverence and respect as the sacred vessels of the altar. This applies sevenfold to email conversation.

Electronic Communication

It should not be necessary for me to remind anyone that emails can and will be misinterpreted as to tone, intention, meaning. All of it will be lost when you hit the Send button. Keep this in mind. The most

positive, encouraging, friendly email you can send could possibly be seen as a vicious, underhanded, cowardly attack by the receiver.

The use of smileys can help to convey some tone. But not much. They too can be misunderstood or simply overlooked.

Without the benefit of being there in person to ensure that the right words and ideas are emphasized by the use of gesture, tone, and facial expression, the recipient of the email will have to work to provide them. And if they have never met the other person then they will project their own emotions into your words.

Guidelines

Because 90% of the communication in the Community will be via email, and because we actively encourage constructive conversation, and because of the potential for disaster, here are some guidelines to be accepted, learned and lived by all of us.

On receiving an email

1) Pray. Before you go clicking and plunging into the email make sure you take a deep breath and say a prayer. You are potentially entering a period of prayer and discernment - take it seriously. Email correspondence can be prayer if you let it! And it almost always is discernment - you are trying to discern the writer's heart and your own motivations.

2) Read deliberately. As you recite the psalms, so too you should recite your email. Take your time. Absorb the words first. Read it at least three times. Read it once for the general context. Read it a second time slowly noticing the language. Read it a third time as if in lectio asking God to point out what you are supposed to learn from this.

3) Imagine the email is from God. This may be especially hard for emails which hit a nerve. But as contemplatives we should be able to be introspective enough to allow these nerves to be hit without hitting back in retaliation. There is hardly a more difficult spiritual discipline than turning the other cheek! But if you imagine this is a message from God you may be less inclined to strike back.

4) Walk away. Even in potentially happy, joyous, and otherwise positive emails, there is rarely a time when they need an immediate answer. In fact, the urgency of response is inversely proportional to the level of intimacy of the email. The trivial emails, instant messages and chats that tend to need an immediate response measure in seconds. The serious and professional emails tend to require responses measured in hours. Spiritual conversations do not have a maximum time limit, but there will never be a need for an immediate answer. Slow, deliberate conversations foster intimacy, trust and love. Quick, haphazard chats foster nothing but grumbling and gossip.

On sending email

1) Pray. Writing a spiritual email is a sacred activity. Pray before, during and after composition. Hold on to the composed draft and do lectio on it. Let the email be so full of your prayers that no matter how the words are misinterpreted the prayers will carry the message across.

2) Need versus want. Is this something that needs to be communicated? Or is it something you want to get off your chest? A need should be something filled with love and charity, gentleness and caring. A want is usually more forceful. If you want to get something off your chest a phone call may be better, especially a phone call with your formation master first. It can also foster a very fruitful conversation with your spiritual director. Be very watchful that you listen to these impulses so you can always be answering God's call.

3) Composition. The usage of more advanced writing techniques, such as puns or irony, can (and frequently will) be lost on email. It requires that both sides be at the same level of reading ability and expecting to read ironic words. The best course of action is to avoid them. Keep your words simple and direct.

4) Me, myself and I. Do not talk about "you," but always own up to your opinions and positions. Do not say "You are wrong," but rather "I see it differently"; do not say "Compared to you" - never compare. You have logs in your eyes you need to whittle before you are able to successfully clear the speck out of your brother's or sister's eyes. Talk about how you feel, how you see. Do not say "I feel you are wrong" - this is an old trick! Avoid it. Say "I do not understand," or "This makes me very sad."

5) Love. Write with love. This does not mean you ~~only~~ approve of everything. Stand your ground - in love. We cannot grow spiritually if we are not challenged. This is not a society for Yes Men and Women. But it is also not open season for bullying. Just state your case, openly, assuming responsibility, and then stop and let the other person have time to prayerfully respond.

It is very easy to hurt someone, but not so easy to repair a hurt. Try not to add to anyone's daily burdens and sorrows. Try to send the one email which someone will be eager to read, to be inspired, to grow, to learn, and to love.

Do these things above and you will develop deep, long-lasting and fruitful relationships.