

## *Talking Across the Divide* by Justin Lee, (Penguin, 2018), 259 pp.

**S**elf-righteousness is the most desperate of motivations as it's internally sensed to be the least defensible. There's no limit to the ruthlessly irrational lengths to which many resort to rationalize their postured, sanctimonious rhetoric, resistance, rebellion and religiosity. Fueled by their fear and frustration, they selfishly and viciously vent vengeful violence as well as pout passive aggression. It's pushed in your face in 24/7 news and social media.

Studies now find that college students see free speech only in terms of "protected" or "tribal" categories; *not* according to rational discussion, but "based on *who the speaker is and what group is involved.*" Over 80 percent of students think that unwelcome words *per se* are "violent", and a third support *violence* against a speaker they label "offensive".

It's into this messy, metastasizing milieu that Justin Lee offers his refreshingly wise words of discernment and understanding in his new book on reaching out to others.

At 20, and coming to terms with his own commitment to Christ and his own same-sex attraction, he posted his story online and began to correspond with others in similar situations. Four years later, these dialogues led to his launching of the Gay Christian Network. For 16 years, he led GCN's ministry for the good of other evangelicals of same-sex orientation, including those committed to monogamous same-sex relationship and those committed to celibacy. Under his evangelical direction, GCN had a major impact in the lives of many thousands of evangelical Christians who sought integration.

However, in 2017, GCN announced that Lee was leaving the organization he'd founded "due to irreconcilable differences about [GCN's] direction and future". He's founded Nuance Ministries to continue his clear vision for evangelical integration of the issues.

*Nuance* could not be more necessary than it is nowadays when differences of opinion increasingly get mishandled with *anything but* respectfully informed discussion, sensitive dialogue and reasonable debate. Lee has long proved that he's up to the task of gracious dialogue with people across the divide and his skill is demonstrated again in this book.

He continues his "culturally bilingual" ministry, sharing what he's learned and implemented in helping folks over the years to leave their familiar, bias-confirming bubbles to *listen* and *hear* each other through *strategic listening* and *strategic dialogue*.

He notes that, "Everyone thinks they're right". At least that's what everyone *seems* to think. But many such folks *fear* that they might be *wrong*, so, by *claiming* that they're *right*, they try to assure themselves that they *are* right. Of course, it doesn't do it.

Lee's non-confrontational approach is strategic, for, in initiating space for dialogue, not forcing others to dig themselves deeper into defensiveness he helps dissolve their "need" for such defensiveness. He lets folks *hear, relate to and empathize with one another*.

Lee teaches people to *prepare* themselves for *strategic dialogue*. "Learn about the issues at stake. Research all sides of your issue." He counsels: "Decide on your goal." "Get to know your audience." "Get ready emotionally", because it "isn't always easy. It requires keeping your temper in check and being willing to hold your tongue when all you want to do is argue." Of course, one can well afford to keep one's temper and hold one's tongue only to the extent that one already has worked through and successfully resolved *one's own* issues. Then, says Lee: "Set the stage for productive dialogue", for "you may know what you have in mind, but they don't." Indeed, they *expect* to hear

what *they* expect *their* version of you has in mind – and that's *their* expectation that drives *their* opinions of what you'll have to say. Give them an opportunity for clarity.

One whole chapter is on, "Shut Up and Listen". Smart! Lee explains how to begin: "Always listen to them first before asking them to listen to you." After all, if one is distracting oneself with the frustration of *not being heard*, one won't find it easy to listen.

Throughout the book, Lee makes many useful pointers, such as this one, "Telling the story from an opposing team's perspective is good practice." Unless we can better relate to where the other team is coming from, we can't know how to listen to them or how to talk with them. So, we can't know *how* or *why* what we're saying is received or rejected. But this is the task most opposing teams have the most trouble with. Depriving *our* team of knowing where *we are* and where the *other team is*, trips *us* up and communication stalls.

Lee notes, too, that, "The best arguments are ones based in your opponents' values." Very true! And that doesn't mean that we forget our own values. But there are *human* values that are important to each side, and it's very useful for each side to be able to see that these common values are on each side. Here again, it's so important to *listen well*.

"The Power of Your Story" is well underscored by Lee, since folks' *personal stories* so much more readily resonate than do *abstract, impersonal* arguments. Again, it's about our common humanity. He observes: "Whatever the subject matter [of your story], the best stories have an emotional center to them." This is yet another good vote for *dialogue* instead of *debate*. And, unlike debate, dialogue can be a win-win at some level. As Lee sums it: "Emphasize the things you have in common with your audience and their team."

In pushing back against *misinformation* that's all too easily out there, getting in the way, Lee suggests getting ahead of the misinformation by bringing it up before the others bring it up. He rightly notes the other side's need to believe misinformation about *us* to confirm its *own* bias. But again, he observes that, "it's tough to dismiss an emotional, well-told story" that pushes back against the misinformation that others have about us.

Under the heading, "Making the Ask", Lee recognizes that, as he puts it, "You can't just ask people to uproot their tree." So, selecting something "specific and reasonable to ask for from the other person" is important. Again, *listen!* "Pay attention to the *reason* for their objection to your ask." He recognizes that one may need to compromise. "If you can't get anything significant at the end of the conversation, ask for a baby step: some small step forward, even though it's far less than you want." What's available? He says that even just asking "to continue the dialogue in the future" can be, indeed, helpful.

Lee concludes with this encouragement: "When you find yourself wanting to quit, convinced that nothing you do is making a bit of difference, don't give up. Keep going." He's surely experienced disappointment in his over 20 years in ministry – only to learn *later* that, oh, there *were good* results that I *didn't* know about. And there *were good* results he still *doesn't* know about. Never mind. That's how *good* works *work!*

