

Civil Conversations Transcript

Krista Tippet and Amanda Ripley

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<https://onbeing.org/programs/amanda-ripley-stepping-out-of-the-zombie-dance-were-in-and-into-good-conflict-that-is-in-fact-life-giving/>

Tippet: Right. And then here's, here's also the terrible result of that, which you also write about in such a compelling way. Fear doesn't — when people feel vulnerable or humiliated or all the things one feels — it doesn't, nobody says, very rarely, "I feel scared. I'm afraid."

Ripley: Yeah.

Tippet: No, we get mad because that feels like a strong thing and that gets rewarded. And I really, you often — you're doing such complicated research and then you also do, you're always applying this, and I think this is a lesson for all of us, to, again, to what's happening close to home. Like you notice — I saw you telling a story about your son — and you notice you understand in a way that I don't think I did with my children at home — that when they're afraid, it shows up looking like anger. Being mad.

Ripley: At least with my son it does. I don't know if that's true for everyone.

Tippet: No, it makes so much sense. But it's interesting that this is something that we all do routinely and are so lacking in self-awareness about it. And now, I mean, it's such a crisis for our life together.

Ripley: Yeah. Yeah. And I do this too, to be honest. I — that maybe that's where he learned it. But I, when **I'm frightened, I just, without thinking I get angry, you know?** I'm trying to undo that programming, but, because it's super unhelpful. It's an interesting thing. How are all of our visceral assumptions about what will work when we feel threatened, when we want to persuade, all of those are wrong. And this is the lesson that I relearn every day. **In high conflict, any intuitive thing you do to get out of the conflict will almost certainly make things worse.** So now I try, don't always succeed, to take my first intuition. and just ask myself, just ask, "could I do the opposite? What would that look like?" Because that's how you step out of that dance. But it's very unintuitive.

Tippet: How much of the time does that work?

Ripley: It takes a lot of practice. It takes a lot of practice in low-stake settings.

Tippet: That's worth practicing.

Ripley: Totally. Totally. So for me, I talk in the book about looping as a listening technique, and there's other ones out there, but —

Tippet: Yeah, talk about looping.

Ripley: Okay. So looping is something I learned from Gary Friedman, who's a conflict expert, who's in the book, who also gets sucked into high conflict, as soon as he runs for office in California. But then extracts himself out of it, to his credit. Anyway, he teaches this to mediators, and I've now taught it to a lot of journalists because it's totally transformed how I interview people and how I talk to friends and family. But it's basically **you're listening for the most, the thing that seems most important to the other person who's talking, what's most important to them, not to me, which was hard, for, I'm embarrassed to admit, took me a while to make that switch. And then I try to play it back to**

them, not robotically repeating the words, but distilling it into the most elegant language I can muster. And then, also easy to forget, then I check to see, “Is that right?” Because when you do this?

Tippett: You ask them.

Ripley: I literally ask them.

Tippett: Yeah.

Ripley: Is that right? Because they can tell even if you're wrong, which is way more than I'd like to admit, they can tell you're really trying. So it's sort of injecting a little humility. Because there's that old saying, **the only mistake in communication is thinking it happened.** We think we understand each other and we think we're saying the thing. And actually it's much more iterative than that. It's very hard to get to the real thing on the first go-round without some back and forth.

Tippett: This is also about how there's so much going on in a conversation that's happening that's not in the words.

Ripley: Yes.

Tippett: Right. And also that you can ask a curious sounding question. I mean, this happens in journalism all the time, but the other person at an animal level knows whether you're actually curious or not, and they're going to respond to their animal level experience of you.

Ripley: Yeah. There was some really good research on this, where they tried to see if people could tell if other people were listening, based on the obvious cues. So I used to think it was listening if I was nodding and smiling at the right moments and came prepared with my questions and furrowed my brow and all those things. It turns out that's not listening. **People can tell when you're really listening.** And it's usually — not always — based on what you say next.

Tippett: No. Yeah.

Ripley: Are you actually hearing what I'm saying? I mean, you've been interviewed by reporters, you know this feeling of you say something that feels really revealing and to you important and you actually want to say more about it, and they immediately go to something else, you know, and you're just like, “oh.”

Tippett: Yeah, it's about them.

Ripley: Yeah.

Tippett: Kind of following on this wonderful place we got, which is things we can do, things we can practice. I kept a couple of pages of notes of places in your writing where you share the power of a better question. A question is such a powerful thing. And so, if a question — The way I think about it is that answers rise or fall to the questions they meet. So if a question is combative, it's just very hard not to be combative back. And if it's simplistic, it's really, as you say, even if you really have something you want to say, somebody asks you a simplistic question, it's really hard to transcend that and say something complex.

And you've talked about specific questions that have been found to be useful in different settings. And these were, these are suggestions for reporters: **What is oversimplified about this issue? How has this conflict affected your life? What do you think the other side wants? What's the question nobody is asking? What do you and your supporters need to learn about the other side in order to understand them better?**

Here's another one working with a newsroom: What do you want the other community to know about you? What do you want to know about the other community?

A couple that in my life, one that was really important to me early on was with an evangelical philosopher Richard Mouw, who said, he was talking actually about the issue of gay marriage, which is interesting to remember. And he said, "I just wish we could stop the suspicion and we could just start the conversations about saying, **'What are the hopes and fears you bring to this?'**"

And Francis Kissling, who I actually talked to in this space, and we had a conversation about abortion and vowed — with two people on the two sides — and vowed not to use the words pro-life or pro-choice, which you can actually do. And she talked about this question she's used asking — and this is something you have to get to because it's a vulnerable question — but if people can get to a place to say: **What in my own position or group causes me discomfort? And what do I admire in the position of the other?**

Ripley: I'm so glad you shared these because I was dying to ask you what questions you like to ask to get to this because I'm constantly adding to that list. [audience laughs]

Tippett: Yeah.

Ripley: This is great. One of the questions that we got from Jay Rosen was along those lines.

Tippett: And he's a kind of journalistic sage.

Ripley: Yeah, a thinker. And his question was: Where do you feel torn? Right along those lines. And then the other one I'm really into right now, which comes from actually family therapy, which is: If you woke up tomorrow and this problem was solved the way you want it to be solved, how would you know? Walk me through that day? Because people very rarely get to talk about, or even think about what a better future would be like. And it's just a way to get out of our old grooves on this, on whatever the subject is, and try to be filled with wonder and curiosity again.

Tippett: And you've talked about how you've experienced people who get to that other side and how life-giving that is.

Ripley: Yeah. I think this is the thing that's hardest to talk about because people don't believe you typically, but — [laughs] When you actually are in the presence of good conflict with people you really profoundly disagree with. When there are enough guardrails and connective tissue, there's something euphoric about it. You want more of it. So I actually ended the book with a woman named Martha Acklesberg who lives in New York City and went on this very unusual, three-day homestay exchange to visit conservatives in Michigan. And she said to me: I want to be the way I showed up there all the time in my life: open, curious, able to be surprised.

And this is someone who's very partisan and she was visiting someone who was very partisan on the other side. So it was, it was not an easy experience. And I think somehow it's easy to sort of gloss over

that. It was upsetting at times, frightening at times, angering at times, and also exquisite, and something that very few of us get to do anymore.

Tippett: It's just a, it's a manifestation of what you said, the qualities of good conflict. That it is movement. Right? It's growth.

Ripley: Right. And you feel it in yourself.