

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

Conversation Starters

When do we act

as public people

and when as

private people?

A National Conversation

ON AMERICAN
PLURALISM AND
IDENTITY

Where do we
belong?

Where do we as
Americans belong
in the world?

Metaphors for American Society

- 1 How do we talk to each other?
- 2 When do we act as public people and when as private people?
- 3 Where do we belong?
- 4 How equal are Americans?
- 5 What do we share as Americans?
- 6 Where do we as Americans belong in the world?

This conversation starter asks participants to think of metaphors or images that best describe the America they know.



Theodore H. White
“The American Idea”
1986

America has been described as a melting pot or necklace of varied stones. Another metaphor is a jazz ensemble, with each member improvising as an individual but having to play together under the agreed-on framework of a song. Some people like to define America in terms of sports metaphors, such as baseball.

- Do you find any of these metaphors relevant today?

In an article he was writing for The New York Times Magazine at the time of his death, Theodore White saw America as an idea.

The idea was there at the very beginning, well before Thomas Jefferson put it into words — and the idea rang the call.

Jefferson himself could not have imagined the reach of his call across the world in time to come when he wrote:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

But over the next two centuries the call would reach the potato patches of Ireland, the ghettos of Europe, the paddyfields of China, stirring farmers to leave their lands and townsmen their trades and thus unsettling all traditional civilizations.

It is the call from Thomas Jefferson, embodied in the great statue that looks down the Narrows of New York Harbor, and in the immigrants who answered the call, that we now celebrate.

Some of the first European Americans had come to the new continent to worship God in their own way, others to seek their fortunes. But over a century-and-a-half, the new world changes those Europeans, above all the Englishmen who had come to North America. . . .

But what is most important is the story of the idea that made them into a nation, the idea that had an explosive power undreamed of in 1776.

All other nations had come into being among people whose families had lived for time out of mind on the same land where they were born. Englishmen are English, Frenchmen are French, Chinese are Chinese, while their governments come and go; their national states can be torn apart and remade without losing their nationhood. But Americans are a nation born of an idea; not the place, but the idea, created the United States Government.

- What metaphors can you suggest for America? Why do they work for you?



Variation: Read Diane Ravitch in the Scholars' Essays.

Diane Ravitch offers several metaphors for America. Do you find her views compelling?

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One Nation of Many Heritages

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This conversation starter asks participants to share their backgrounds and explore how our different heritages have enriched life in the United States.

Each participant brings a photograph of an older member of his or her family, tribe, or community who has influenced the participant. The photograph can be from any time in that person's life.

The participants then take turns talking about the person in the photograph and what this person means to him or her.

Some questions you might address:

- Where did the person come from? What was his or her way of life when young? How has this way of life changed over the years? What values has this person shared with you? Did such sharing affect your values?



Participants might make an informal exhibit of the photographs or objects in a community center or library. A photograph of the exhibit could be published in a community newspaper or magazine.

Photographs (clockwise from upper left) courtesy U.S. Department of Agriculture, Betty Singletary, Angela Iovino, R. Rowe Collection/Japanese American National Museum.



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Pictures of America

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In this conversation starter, participants discuss the images that represent their America.

The pictures on these pages are some of the traditional representations of America.



Photographs (clockwise from left) courtesy Smithsonian Institution, Library of Congress, Library of Congress.



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Striving for Equality

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This conversation starter asks participants to examine statements of American beliefs about equality made over the course of time and from different perspectives.

Read the excerpts below.

- What American ideals do the statements invoke?
- How do these statements differ?
- If you were writing these documents, would you change them in any way?
- How far do you think we have come in achieving these ideals?



Excerpt from Declaration
of Independence
July 4, 1776

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.



Abraham Lincoln
The Gettysburg Address
November 19, 1863

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battle field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.



Do We See Ourselves As Others See Us?

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This conversation starter asks participants to compare how people in other countries see us with how we see ourselves.



St. Jean de Crèvecoeur
*Letters From an
American Farmer*
1782

Many immigrants to America have recorded their impressions of what they believe to be a unique American character. One early observation is this excerpt from the writing of a French settler when the nation was still young.

What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European, or the descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.

Crèvecoeur seems particularly struck that eighteenth-century Americans were not one nationality but a mixture of them, although he speaks only of European immigrants.

- Which features, if any, of his observations hold true today? Have the changes in society since his time changed how others perceive us? Or are generalizations about the American character impossible?

Although diversity has always been a characteristic of American society, many foreign observers have seen Americans as possessing a distinctive national character, usually made up of some combination of the following characteristics: friendly, naive, fast-paced, aggressive and arrogant, frank and direct, and self-reliant and independent.

- Does this seem right? Or does such labeling amount to useless stereotyping and overgeneralizing? Do we do the same about people from other countries?
- Do you think that there is an “American character”? If so, do you think that it is the same as in Crèvecoeur’s day, or has it been changed by contributions of successive generations and racial, ethnic, and cultural groups?
- If you feel that it is useless or worse to define “the American character,” or that such a portrait would exclude many Americans, do you believe that Americans do share some common culture? Some common values? What might these be?

Sharing Family Traditions

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In this conversation starter, participants share some of their most cherished traditions and discover what they share as Americans.



Leroy V. Quintana
"A Fairy Tale"
1980

Here are some suggestions for sharing some of your special family traditions, from your grandmother's recipe for cherry pie, to bedtime rituals with children, to the way you celebrate Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanzaa, or another holiday.

STORYTELLING

In this poem, the author writes of the worldwide tradition of a bedtime story, blending both Spanish and English elements.

Bedtime, I tell stories, tales
of Robert Rattlesnake, Bennie Beaver,
Yolanda Panda Bear, Jerry Giraffe
and Danny the Dog.
And then it's Elisa's turn. She begins
"Once upanza time . . ."
"¡Panza!" I say. "It's not upanza,
it's *once upon* a time. This is a panza,"
and grab her stomach, tickle her
until she can laugh no more.
"Once upanza time . . ."
"No No No No No!" I scream,
"It's *once upon* a time, not *upanza time*.
This is a panza," and I grab her stomach,
tickle her again until she's weak from laughter.
"Please tell me a real story," I plead,
"and please don't say panza."
"Once upanza time . . ." she begins.
"O.K.," I say, resigned. "You can say panza."
"Once upanza time
there lived a panza
and it lived happily ever after.
Good night, Daddy."

- Does your family have a storytelling tradition?
- Did your tradition originate in this country or come from another country?



- Do you know if the tradition has undergone a change from one generation to the next?
- Does the discussion you are having say anything about how American culture changes?

FOOD

Bring in a food to share that is special to your heritage. Be ready to discuss how the food is prepared, where the ingredients come from, the place and meaning of the food in your tradition and family customs, and whether the food has been generally adopted by American culture at large.

Other participants can then discuss whether or when they have had this food before, if they consider the food part of their culture now, and if other foods play similar roles in their traditions.

MUSIC

Bring in some music that is meaningful to your heritage and that can be played on records, tape, or CD, or performed live. Explain why you like the music and why it is important to you. Has the music been adopted by others in the United States? If so, has it been changed?

CELEBRATIONS

Bring in one object (it could be a food) that represents a holiday or celebration important to your family. Discuss how it is used or eaten, and its meaning.

Other participants can discuss whether they have similar celebrations, holidays, or traditions. Or all can discuss how they mark the milestones of life, for example, births, weddings, and deaths.

AMERICAN HOLIDAYS

Most people celebrate American holidays with their own special customs, preparations, food, activities, and guest lists. Share your traditions with the other participants and discuss the significance of the traditions. You can then explore whether Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, or other American holidays have the same meaning for all or if these holidays have special meaning to some people.

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Your Place in the American Landscape

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This conversation starter examines how our identities are frequently entwined with the landscape.



Carl Sandburg
"Prairie"
Cornhuskers
1918



The collage on the pages of this conversation starter contains several images of American landscapes—wilderness, rural, urban, and suburban.

- What images would you add to make this collage more complete? Do any of these images represent home to you? If you have moved from another region or country, are the images of your first landscapes different from the ones you see now? Which seem more like home?

Many songs and poems celebrate the American landscape, from "God Bless America" to "This Land Is Your Land" to this excerpt from a poem by Carl Sandburg.

*I was born on the prairie and the milk of its wheat, the red of its clover,
the eyes of its women, gave me a song and a slogan.*

*Here the water went down, the icebergs slid with gravel, the gaps and
the valleys hissed, and the black loam came, and the yellow sandy loam.*

*Here between the sheds of the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians,
here now a morning star fixes a fire sign over the timber claims and
cow pastures, the corn belt, the cotton belt, the cattle ranches.*

*Here the gray geese go five hundred miles and back with a wind under
their wings honking the cry for a new home.*

*Here I know I will hanker after nothing so much as one more sunrise or a
sky moon of fire doubled to a river moon of water.*

*The prairie sings to me in the forenoon and I know in the night I rest easy
in the prairie arms, on the prairie heart.*

...

*After the sunburn of the day
handling a pitchfork at a hayrack,
after the eggs and biscuit and coffee,
the pearl-gray haystacks
in the gloaming
are cool prayers
to the harvest hands. . . .*

Photographs (top to bottom) courtesy
U.S. Department of Agriculture and Neil Drevitson.



Stereotypes

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This conversation starter asks participants to explore the barriers created by stereotypes and think about how we can overcome them.



Diane Burns

"Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question"

Songs From This Earth on Turtle's Back

1983

Many Americans feel trapped by stereotypes imposed by others. Consider this poem by a poet and painter who is Anishinabe and Chemeheuvi.

How do you do?

No, I am not Chinese.

No, not Spanish.

No, I am American Indi-uh, Native American.

No, not from India.

No, not Apache.

No, not Navajo.

No, not Sioux.

No, we are not extinct.

Yes, Indian.

Oh?

So that's where you got those high cheekbones.

Your great grandmother, huh?

An Indian Princess, huh?

Hair down to there?

Let me guess. Cherokee?

Oh, so you've had an Indian friend?

That close?

Oh, so you've had an Indian lover?

That tight?

Oh, so you've had an Indian servant?

That much?

Yeah, it was awful what you guys did to us.

It's real decent of you to apologize.

No, I don't know where you can get peyote.

No, I don't know where you can get Navajo rugs real cheap.

No, I didn't make this. I bought it at Bloomingdales.

Thank you. I like your hair too.

I don't know if anyone knows whether or not Cher is really Indian.

No, I didn't make it rain tonight.

Yeah, Uh-huh. Spirituality.

Uh-huh. Yeah. Spirituality. Uh-huh. Mother

Earth. Yeah. Uh'huh. Uh-huh. Spirituality.



*No. I didn't major in archery.
Yeah, a lot of us drink too much.
Some of us can't drink enough.
This ain't no stoic look.
This is my face.*

Some Americans report that they often are treated as foreigners even though their families have been Americans for generations. The short passage from sociologist Harry Kitano illustrates this stereotype.



Harry Kitano
*Generations and Identity:
The Japanese American*
1993

No matter how different Japanese-Americans are from those born and raised in Japan, it remains difficult, perhaps even impossible for many Americans to separate the two. Therefore, when relationships between the United States and Japan are smooth, the image of Japanese-Americans is positive; whereas when relationships are negative, the perception of Japanese-Americans suffer.

- Have you had the experience of being stereotyped? In your school? In your job? In your community?
- Did it bother you? How do you think Americans should deal with such problems?
- Have you ever stereotyped someone?
- Is it inevitable that we stereotype each other and ourselves based on race, ethnicity, and culture? For example, is it natural to distinguish people on the basis of skin color? Or do we choose to focus on this difference? Why don't we choose other characteristics, such as eye color or height?

Free Speech and Its Restrictions

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This conversation starter asks participants to explore uses and limits of free speech.



Justice Oliver
Wendell Holmes

Abrams v. United States
1919

Many people hold that freedom of speech, guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, is the bedrock of democracy. In fact, our government often judges other nations' commitment to democracy by their commitment to the principle of free speech.

- Is freedom of speech necessary for our conversation on what it means to be an American? Or does such a right actually hinder the effort to talk with one another?

Consider these questions as you read the following excerpts.

The ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas—that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market. . . . That at any rate is the theory of our Constitution. . . . I think that we should be eternally vigilant against attempts to check the expression of opinions that we loathe . . . unless they so imminently threaten immediate interference with the lawful and pressing purposes of the law that an immediate check is required to save the country.



Catharine A. MacKinnon

Only Words
1993

The law of equality and the law of freedom of speech are on a collision course in this country. Until this moment, the constitutional doctrine of free speech has developed without taking equality seriously—either the problem of social inequality or the mandate of substantive legal equality. . . . Both bodies of law accordingly show virtually total insensitivity to the damage done to social equality by expressive means and a substantial lack of recognition that some people get a lot more speech than others. . . . Understanding that there is a relationship between these two issues—the less speech you have, the more the speech of those who have it keeps you unequal; the more the speech of the dominant is protected, the more dominant they become and the less the subordinated are heard from—is virtually nonexistent.

- Do you agree with either author?
- Have you ever felt unequal in the way that Catharine MacKinnon describes? If so, was it as a result of a law that formally excluded you, or was it because of something someone said or wrote?
- Is the model of competition a good one for describing how thoughts and ideas are assessed in our country?
- If you do not agree that the “competition of the marketplace” is the best regulator of speech in our society, who or what should take its place?
- Which position would enhance our ability to have a national conversation? Do you have another view?

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Policies and Attitudes Toward Expressions of Diversity

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In this conversation starter, participants examine how our government policies and our society in general deal with expressions of diversity.

The excerpts from the newspaper stories below report on government actions concerning the right of individuals in different public settings to wear clothing required by their religious beliefs. The first article describes a situation in France, and the other two report on cases in our country.

- How is our government policy different from France's concerning the right to express individual or group identity? Which approach do you think is better for the individual? For the country?
- How do our policies reflect American values? What do they say about religious freedom?
- Now consider society's attitude toward expressions of cultural and religious diversity. How much do we accept one another's expressions of diversity?

The New York Times

Alan Riding,
December 5, 1993

Four years ago, when head coverings worn by Muslim girls first tested the secular tradition of France's public school system, the Government allowed school principals to set their own rules, and in practice, most chose flexibility over confrontation with local Muslims.

But early last month, when two Turkish and two Moroccan girls obeyed the orders of their parents and showed up for classes wearing head scarves, they were promptly suspended by the principal of their primary school at Nantua in eastern France until they abandoned the religious custom.

FRANCE REVERSING COURSE, FIGHTS IMMIGRANTS' REFUSAL TO BE FRENCH

The Government then went further by deporting a local Turkish imam, or religious leader, Husseyin Konus, who had backed the girls by declaring that "Allah's law takes precedence over French law." It also placed Moulay Hassan, another Islamic "adviser" to the parents, under house arrest.

Of itself, the incident was just a footnote to the evolving drama of France's relations with its large immigrant population, but it was a clear sign that France's new rightist Government fears that Islamic fundamentalists are beginning to infiltrate this country's 3.5 million-member Muslim population.

No Multiculturalism

Yet, even more urgently, it underlined new awareness that France's social cohesion is now threatened by its failure to integrate third world immigrants. And by taking a stand on the headscarf issue, the eight-month-old Government signaled that it would no longer tolerate multiculturalism.

The Government insists that it is not discriminating against Islam because no religious expression of any kind is permitted in French public schools. Its clear message, though, is that



Americans As World Citizens

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This conversation starter explores the extent to which we Americans should consider ourselves citizens of the world.

Read Martha Nussbaum's essay, "The U.S. and the World," in the Scholars' Essays.

- Do you agree or disagree with her argument? What values does she base her ideas on? Do you share these values? Which of her four arguments do you agree with the most? The least?
- List issues on which it might seem more practical to view yourself as a world citizen rather than as an American citizen, for example, when it comes to ecological problems such as the ozone layer.
- To what extent do we, as Americans, wish to be guided by what is practical? By what is ethically right?

The Vocabulary of Identity

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In this conversation starter, participants discuss how they prefer to be identified and why.

Many Americans believe that the word “American” encompasses all the diversity of our people.

But many Americans feel that the term “American” does not do full justice to the complexity of our heritage and have strong ideas on how to be identified in terms of racial, ethnic, or cultural background.

SHOE JEFF MACNELLY



Not all people within the same group agree on what they want to be called; differences, for example, might depend on the region of the country they live in or the generation they belong to.

- How do you as an individual prefer to be identified and why?
- How can we learn how others prefer to be identified without offending them?
- Why do you think people change their minds on how they want to be identified?
- Do you agree that our diversity is a source of our strength?

Overlapping Roots and Identities

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In this conversation starter, participants talk about their roots and overlapping identities.



Simone Weil
The Need for Roots
1952

Do you agree with the following quotation from a well-known French writer?

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession, and social surroundings. Every human being needs multiple roots.

Each participant lists the many overlapping affiliations, or roles, he or she has, for example, mother, secretary, American, Irish-American, PTA vice president, Catholic, white, resident of Boston, New Englander, bird-watcher, and so on.

- How do you decide which of your various roles should guide you in a particular situation?
- How do these roles operate in your public versus your private life?
- What characteristics do you associate with these identities?
- In your place of employment, which of these identities has affected you most positively? Most negatively?

The excerpt below speaks of conflicting identities.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. . . . He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.



W.E.B. Du Bois
The Souls of Black Folk
1903

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Gaining Understanding and Finding Common Ground

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This conversation starter explores how cross-cultural understanding affects our behavior and helps us find common ground.

The article below illustrates the potential for misunderstanding between people from different cultures. It also shows members from two groups, Buddhists and Jews, being sensitive to the concerns of the other group.

Los Angeles Times

Tersa Ann Willis and Sam Enriquez
April 27, 1994

BUDDHISTS' USE OF SWASTIKAS FOCUS OF CULTURAL CONFLICT

Two simple lines, bent into one of the Western world's most hated symbols, have also come to represent the complex weave, and increasing tangle, of cultures in the San Fernando Valley.

A Chinese monk and his students two months ago installed six one-foot-wide swastikas, a symbol of peace to Buddhists and Hindus but a symbol of Nazism to Westerners, in the wrought-iron gates at the entrance of a home they are converting to a Buddhist temple.

The saffron-colored, two-story home is in the middle of a block that in some ways typifies the whole Valley. There are white, Asian, Middle-Eastern and Latino neighbors, as well as a Jewish family who lost relatives during the Holocaust.

So it is not surprising that the emblems have prompted complaints to police and the local office of the Anti-Defamation League.

"Our concern in looking into it was that some of the calls were rather threatening in nature," said Mary Krasn, director of the ADL's Valley office. "People who called implied that there might be harm to the residents."

No harm has come to anyone affiliated with the American Hwa Yen Buddhist Studies group that is building the De Soto Avenue temple. But recently two of the swastikas were sawed off—the spent hacksaw blades left behind on the temple driveway, the fresh metal scars on the fence already turning to rust.

This sudden controversy has caught Mona Truong, a temple member, by

surprise. She said what others call a swastika is a common symbol used to mark Buddhist temples throughout Asia. . . .

"It means peace and it is in all the Buddhist temples," said Truong of Canoga Park, who came to the U.S. from Vietnam 14 years ago. "It is like the cross in Christianity."

So common is its use, that Chinese maps use the symbol to designate the location of a Buddhist temple.

Besides, Truong said, the emblem at the temple points in the opposite direction of the swastika used in Nazi Germany.

But for Evelyn Silverman, a neighbor whose relatives were among the 6 million Jews to die in the Holocaust, the emblem is a hated reminder of war, not peace. . . .



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