The New Year of the Trees: Time to Sprout

Tu BiShvat, literally the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shvat, is known in the Jewish tradition as the new year of the trees. It usually falls in late January or February; for many inhabitants of North America, it might be hard to imagine this time as anything but the coldest of winter, but in the land of Israel, this is when the worst of the winter has passed and the first tender buds of spring begin to emerge. It’s a time of tentative hope for the flowering yet to come.

In the Middle Ages, Tu BiShvat was celebrated by eating a feast of fruits, and in the 16th century, Kabbalists developed a Tu BiShvat seder, modeled on the Passover seder, meant to take participants on a powerful spiritual journey.

This conversation guide is meant to be a roadmap for your own Tu BiShvat seder; like the Passover seder, it features four cups of wine (or grape juice), though here we begin with purely white wine and, with each cup, add progressively more red wine, deepening from the white of winter into the fullness of summer. There are also different kinds of fruit featured with each cup, and four questions relating to the fruit and pointing to our Big Question: How Do We Grow?
Introductions: Growth Spurt

It’s the new year of the trees. After the death of winter comes time for a rebirth of sorts, a chance for new leaves to emerge and for flowers to contemplate what it might be like to come back up above ground. Seeds may be planted, sprout, and eventually grow into something big and strong. And so too for us—we grow in myriad ways all the time. The seeds of our learning sprout in a lot of different ways over time—and so too our capacity to love, our ability to give, our willingness to take risks, our ability to trust ourselves, and so many other aspects of ourselves.

The four questions in this guide offer a space to explore some of the various dimensions of growth: in the ways we protect ourselves, in the ways we are transformed, in the ways we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and in the ways in which we engage with the mysteries of being alive. We hope, by the end of this journey, these individual questions will offer some insights about the ways we grow, and what that means for us individually and together.

Think for a moment about the word “growth.” What comes to mind? As you introduce yourself, please share your name, where home is for you, and what comes to mind when you think about growth.

Question 1: When do you protect yourself?

* A cup of all white wine or grape juice and fruit with an inedible shell (For example: coconuts, pomegranates, pistachios, walnuts, bananas.)*

The original Tu BiShvat seder was intended to be a journey through what the Kabbalists believed were the four worlds of existence—each cup of wine and type of fruit corresponded to a different level of reality.

The first world—corresponding to our first question—is the world of doing, of concrete and practical actions. Here, we eat fruit with an inedible shell. These shells protect what’s inside, and serve as a barrier to the outside world.

Sometimes self-protection is important; healthy boundaries can keep us from toxic people or situations and preserve our time and energy for our biggest priorities. But sometimes, self-protection can work against our best interests—sometimes we put up walls in order to keep us from feeling vulnerable, connecting with others, or facing discomfort.

Here are some images that evoke ideas about self-protection. Spend a few minutes looking at them.
A few questions to consider:

• Which of these images speak to you? Which of them do you find particularly challenging?
• What aspects of self-protection do they evoke?
• If we think of each of these images as a metaphor for our own lives, which of the images strike you as showing healthy actions, and which show less healthy ways of being in the world?
• Can the same type of self-protective action be healthy or not, depending on the context? If so, how so? In what ways do you protect yourself?

**Question 2: When do you let go of who you have been?**

_White wine or grape juice with a splash of red, and fruit with a pit (For example: olives, dates, avocados, cherries, peaches.)_

The second world is the world of emotions and feeling. We eat fruit with a pit—fruit that contains within itself the tools for its own rebirth.

But in order for a seed to become something new—to grow into the tree, shrub or flower it was meant to be all along—it must change shape, change form. The pit must grow roots and let out sprouts. In order to flourish, it has to be willing to crack open, and to cease existing in the same way it has all this time. This can be frightening, of course, and, sometimes, exhilarating as well.

The 16th century Italian Kabbalist Menahem Azariah of Fano used this metaphor in his work *Yonat Elem*. He’s discussing a complex theological principle, but perhaps it has some relevance on other levels, as well. He wrote:

> Just as each grain of seed grows according to its fertile power, so too does each of these points. Just as a seed cannot grow to perfection as long as it maintains its original form—growth coming only through decomposition—so these points could not become perfect configurations as long as they maintained their original form but only by shattering.

As you read this quote, here are some questions to consider:

• In what ways does “growth come only through decomposition”?
• In what ways in your life have you had to let go of who you’ve been in order to grow?
• When has that growth felt like a “decomposition” of who you’ve been? When has it felt like “shattering”?
• What’s challenging about this process of growth? What’s rewarding about it?
• Does growth always have to involve a letting-go of who you’ve been? If not, when does or doesn’t it involve this?
Question 3: When do you let yourself be vulnerable?

Equal parts white and red wine or grape juice, and completely edible fruit (For example: apples, pears, figs, strawberries, blueberries.)

The third world is that of intellect. We eat completely edible fruit—fruit that is soft all the way through. There's no protective outer layer, and there's nothing hard in the middle.

Being soft all the way through isn't easy, and most of us resist it. Vulnerability isn't always comfortable; many of us feel that if we let ourselves be fully vulnerable, we'd be more likely to be squished than savored like a perfect ripe strawberry on a summer day. But it's possible that that's not true, as researcher Brené Brown has demonstrated. Her TED talk, “The Power of Vulnerability,” went viral in 2010 because it spoke so deeply to people. Please read the excerpt from this talk below out loud as a group. If you'd like to watch the video, it can be found here: http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html

There was only one variable that separated the people [in my research] who have a strong sense of love and belonging and the people who really struggle for it. And that was, the people who have a strong sense of love and belonging believe they're worthy of love and belonging. That's it. They believe they're worthy. … these folks had, very simply, the courage to be imperfect. They had the compassion to be kind to themselves first and then to others, because, as it turns out, we can't practice compassion with other people if we can't treat ourselves kindly. And the last was they had connection, and -- this was the hard part -- as a result of authenticity, they were willing to let go of who they thought they should be in order to be who they were, which you have to absolutely do that for connection.

The other thing that they had in common was this: They fully embraced vulnerability. They believed that what made them vulnerable made them beautiful. They didn't talk about vulnerability being comfortable, nor did they really talk about it being excruciating -- as I had heard it earlier in the shame interviewing. They just talked about it being necessary. They talked about the willingness to say, "I love you" first, the willingness to do something where there are no guarantees, the willingness to breathe through waiting for the doctor to call after your mammogram. They're willing to invest in a relationship that may or may not work out. They thought this was fundamental.… This is what I have found: to let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen; to love with our whole hearts, even though there's no guarantee -- and that's really hard… that's excruciatingly difficult -- to practice gratitude and joy in those moments of terror, when we're wondering, "Can I love you this much? Can I believe in this this passionately? Can I be this fierce about this?" just to be able to stop and, instead of catastrophizing what might happen, to say, "I'm just so grateful, because to feel this vulnerable means I'm alive."

A few questions to consider:

• What's the connection between feeling worthy of love and belonging, being compassionate, and being willing to be vulnerable?
• How does practicing gratitude in a vulnerable moment change our experience of that moment, according to Brown?
• What are the risks of becoming vulnerable? What are the payoffs?
• When have you regretted being vulnerable? When have you regretted not being vulnerable?
• How do you decide when it’s a good time to let yourself be vulnerable?

Question 4: How do you experience transcendence?

 Completely red wine or grape juice, and fragrant scents (For example: cinnamon, bay leaf, rosemary, coffee beans, sage.)

The fourth world, the world of emanation, has a mystical dimension. It’s about experiences that go beyond our regular, physical ways of being in the world—so instead of eating fruit, we behold fragrant scents. For some, this sense of transcendence has a divine or spiritual cast to it. For others, transcendence comes through profound feelings in art, in nature, in moments of meditative solitude, or in some other way.

Philosopher and activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote about a feeling of wonder that, for him, is the starting point of transcendence in his 1951 book, Man is Not Alone. Please read this passage aloud as a group:

Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which has only to be organized in order to be mastered. As civilization advances, the sense of wonder almost necessarily declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder. Science does not try to fathom the mystery. It merely describes and explains the way in which things behave in terms of causal necessity. Wonder, rather than doubt, is the root of all knowledge. There is no answer in the world to radical amazement.

As you reflect on this quote, here are some questions to consider:
• What sort of experience is Heschel describing? What do you think he means by “wonder” and “radical amazement”?
• Do you agree with him that “life without wonder is not worth living”?
• When do you experience wonder or radical amazement?
• How do you understand that feeling—is it spiritual? Emotional? Does it relate in some way to the notion of divinity for you?
A Fifth Question: How do you grow?

Our journey through the four worlds never ends. We move between the realms of the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual all the time, often inhabiting several—or all of them—at once. And we are, like trees, constantly growing—putting our roots deeper in the soil, thickening with rings of wisdom and, at times, allowing our leaves to change color or even be shed completely to make room for something new to come into being. Growth is not always easy, but the work of becoming more secure, more open, more connected, more compassionate, and more able to experience the exquisiteness of our lives as they’re happening is some of the most important work that there is. We hope that this conversation has helped you think about the ways in which you hope to continue to flower.

As we conclude this conversation, here are some final questions to consider:

- Has this experience helped you come to any new insights about your own growth?
- What is one thing you want to do in the next 24 hours to act on something you discovered in this conversation?
- What could we do together to improve our community based on what we’ve talked about here?

This conversation is powered by Ask Big Questions®, which was developed, launched, and scaled by Hillel International, and is a registered trademark of Hillel International.

Hillel International is the largest Jewish student organization in the world, building connections with emerging adults at more than 550 colleges and universities, and inspiring them to direct their own path. During their formative college years, students are challenged to explore, experience, and create vibrant Jewish lives.

©2014 Hillel International
Tu BiShvat: How do we grow?

The New Year of the Trees: Time to Sprout

Tu BiShvat, literally the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shvat, is known in the Jewish tradition as the new year of the trees. It usually falls in late January or February; for many inhabitants of North America, it might be hard to imagine this time as anything but the coldest of winter, but in the land of Israel, this is when the worst of the winter has passed and the first tender buds of spring begin to emerge. It’s a time of tentative hope for the flowering yet to come.

In the Middle Ages, Tu BiShvat was celebrated by eating a feast of fruits, and in the 16th century, Kabbalists developed a Tu BiShvat seder, modeled on the Passover seder, meant to take participants on a powerful spiritual journey.

This conversation guide is meant to be a roadmap for your own Tu BiShvat seder; like the Passover seder, it features four cups of wine (or grape juice), though here we begin with purely white wine and, with each cup, add progressively more red wine, deepening from the white of winter into the fullness of summer. There are also different kinds of fruit featured with each cup, and four questions relating to the fruit and pointing to our Big Question: How Do We Grow?
Note for Facilitators: You can use this discussion guide as the roadmap for a leisurely Tu BiShvat seder, a more condensed one, or a four-part discussion on the ways that we grow as people. It can also be used to frame a separate conversation, or a series of conversations, on one or more of the individual questions.

Here are our Four Big Questions of Tu BiShvat:
• When do you protect yourself?
• When have you let go of who you have been?
• When do you let yourself be vulnerable?
• How do you experience transcendence?

If you plan to use this guide as part of a seder, we suggest that you provide the following for all participants:
• Enough red and white wine or grape juice for participants to each drink four cups (approx. 2 ½ cups of white and 1 ½ cups of red per participant). Of course, “drinking” can include taking one sip; we’ll leave that up to you.
• Fruits and fragrant things for each category of the seder: fruits with shells, fruits with pits, wholly edible fruits, and leaves or products of the tree with fragrant scents. More specific examples for each of these types of fruit can be found in the sub-sections below. Don’t feel limited to only those suggestions, though! For each category, we suggest that you provide enough so that participants can have a taste of several different types of fruit from that category.
• A copy of the participant guide for each participant.

Before beginning each section of the seder, participants should pour a cup of wine or grape juice for themselves (or for someone else) based on the note to that section, and take some of the corresponding fruit. If you’d like to say blessings before eating and drinking, they are as follows:

Before drinking wine (at the beginning of all the questions):
ברוך אתה אלוהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי הגפן

Before eating fruit (at the beginning of the first, second and third questions):
ברוך אתה אלוהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי-etz

Before smelling fragrant scents from a tree (at the beginning of the fourth question):
ברוך אתה אלוהינו מלך העולם, בורא אッツי בטימים

Blessed are You, God our deity, ruler of the universe, who creates fruit of the vine.

Blessed are You, God our deity, ruler of the universe, who creates fruit of the tree.

Blessed are You, God our deity, ruler of the universe, who creates fragrant trees.
**Introductions: Growth Spurt**

It’s the new year of the trees. After the death of winter comes time for a rebirth of sorts, a chance for new leaves to emerge and for flowers to contemplate what it might be like to come back up above ground. Seeds may be planted, sprout, and eventually grow into something big and strong. And so too for us—we grow in myriad ways all the time. The seeds of our learning sprout in a lot of different ways over time—and so too our capacity to love, our ability to give, our willingness to take risks, our ability to trust ourselves, and so many other aspects of ourselves.

The four questions in this guide offer a space to explore some of the various dimensions of growth: in the ways we protect ourselves, in the ways we are transformed, in the ways we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and in the ways in which we engage with the mysteries of being alive. We hope, by the end of this journey, these individual questions will offer some insights about the ways we grow, and what that means for us individually and together.

Think for a moment about the word “growth.” What comes to mind? As you introduce yourself, please share your name, where home is for you, and what comes to mind when you think about growth.

---

**Question 1: When do you protect yourself?**

*A cup of all white wine or grape juice and fruit with an inedible shell (For example: coconuts, pomegranates, pistachios, walnuts, bananas.)*

The original Tu BiShvat seder was intended to be a journey through what the Kabbalists believed were the four worlds of existence—each cup of wine and type of fruit corresponded to a different level of reality.

The first world—corresponding to our first question—is the world of doing, of concrete and practical actions. Here, we eat fruit with an inedible shell. These shells protect what’s inside, and serve as a barrier to the outside world.

Sometimes self-protection is important; healthy boundaries can keep us from toxic people or situations and preserve our time and energy for our biggest priorities. But sometimes, self-protection can work against our best interests—sometimes we put up walls in order to keep us from feeling vulnerable, connecting with others, or facing discomfort.
Note for facilitators: If you’d like, you can ask participants to prepare for the conversation. Before the gathering, you might suggest that they bring in any images or writing that evoke themes around protection and vulnerability. You can also use the images below, instead of or in concert with the images they bring in.

Here are some images that evoke ideas about self-protection. Spend a few minutes looking at them.

![Image of protective structures and actions]

Note for facilitators: Give people a chance to look at the images and reflect on them. Depending on the size of the group, you might ask them to talk about their reactions in pairs before asking for responses from the large group.

A few questions to consider:

- Which of these images speak to you? Which of them do you find particularly challenging?
- What aspects of self-protection do they evoke?
- If we think of each of these images as a metaphor for our own lives, which of the images strike you as showing healthy actions, and which show less healthy ways of being in the world?
- Can the same type of self-protective action be healthy or not, depending on the context? If so, how so?
- In what ways do you protect yourself?
Question 2: When do you let go of who you have been?

White wine or grape juice with a splash of red, and fruit with a pit (For example: olives, dates, avocados, cherries, peaches.)

The second world is the world of emotions and feeling. We eat fruit with a pit—fruit that contains within itself the tools for its own rebirth.

But in order for a seed to become something new—to grow into the tree, shrub or flower it was meant to be all along—it must change shape, change form. The pit must grow roots and let out sprouts. In order to flourish, it has to be willing to crack open, and to cease existing in the same way it has all this time. This can be frightening, of course, and, sometimes, exhilarating as well.

The 16th century Italian Kabbalist Menahem Azariah of Fano used this metaphor in his work Yonat Elem. He’s discussing a complex theological principle, but perhaps it has some relevance on other levels, as well. He wrote:

Just as each grain of seed grows according to its fertile power, so too does each of these points. Just as a seed cannot grow to perfection as long as it maintains its original form—growth coming only through decomposition—so these points could not become perfect configurations as long as they maintained their original form but only by shattering.

As you read this quote, here are some questions to consider:

• In what ways does “growth come only through decomposition”?
• In what ways in your life have you had to let go of who you’ve been in order to grow?
• When has that growth felt like a “decomposition” of who you’ve been? When has it felt like “shattering”?
• What’s challenging about this process of growth? What’s rewarding about it?
• Does growth always have to involve a letting-go of who you’ve been? If not, when does or doesn’t it involve this?

Note for facilitators: For this section, please invite participants to discuss the quote and questions in pairs for some time before debriefing in the larger group.
Question 3: When do you let yourself be vulnerable?

*Equal parts white and red wine or grape juice, and completely edible fruit (For example: apples, pears, figs, strawberries, blueberries.)*

The third world is that of intellect. We eat completely edible fruit—fruit that is soft all the way through. There’s no protective outer layer, and there’s nothing hard in the middle.

Being soft all the way through isn’t easy, and most of us resist it. Vulnerability isn’t always comfortable; many of us feel that if we let ourselves be fully vulnerable, we’d be more likely to be squished than savored like a perfect ripe strawberry on a summer day. But it’s possible that that’s not true, as researcher Brené Brown has demonstrated. Her TED talk, “The Power of Vulnerability,” went viral in 2010 because it spoke so deeply to people. Please read the excerpt from this talk below out loud as a group. If you’d like to watch the video, it can be found here: [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html)

Note for facilitators: Read the excerpt together aloud. Ask participants to take turns reading a paragraph.

There was only one variable that separated the people [in my research] who have a strong sense of love and belonging and the people who really struggle for it. And that was, the people who have a strong sense of love and belonging believe they’re worthy of love and belonging. That’s it. They believe they’re worthy. … these folks had, very simply, the courage to be imperfect. They had the compassion to be kind to themselves first and then to others, because, as it turns out, we can’t practice compassion with other people if we can’t treat ourselves kindly. And the last was they had connection, and -- this was the hard part -- as a result of authenticity, they were willing to let go of who they thought they should be in order to be who they were, which you have to absolutely do that for connection.

The other thing that they had in common was this: They fully embraced vulnerability. They believed that what made them vulnerable made them beautiful. They didn’t talk about vulnerability being comfortable, nor did they really talk about it being excruciating -- as I had heard it earlier in the shame interviewing. They just talked about it being necessary. They talked about the willingness to say, "I love you" first, the willingness to do something where there are no guarantees, the willingness to breathe through waiting for the doctor to call after your mammogram. They're willing to invest in a relationship that may or may not work out. They thought this was fundamental…. This is what I have found: to let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen; to love with our whole hearts, even though there's no guarantee -- and that's really hard… that's excruciatingly difficult -- to practice gratitude and joy in those moments of terror, when we're wondering, "Can I love you this much? Can I believe in this this passionately? Can I be this fierce about this?" just to be able to stop and, instead of catastrophizing what might happen, to say, "I'm just so grateful, because to feel this vulnerable means I'm alive."
A few questions to consider:

• What’s the connection between feeling worthy of love and belonging, being compassionate, and being willing to be vulnerable?
• How does practicing gratitude in a vulnerable moment change our experience of that moment, according to Brown?
• What are the risks of becoming vulnerable? What are the payoffs?
• When have you regretted being vulnerable? When have you regretted not being vulnerable?
• How do you decide when it’s a good time to let yourself be vulnerable?

**Question 4: How do you experience transcendence?**

*Completely red wine or grape juice, and fragrant scents (For example: cinnamon, bay leaf, rosemary, coffee beans, sage.)*

The fourth world, the world of emanation, has a mystical dimension. It’s about experiences that go beyond our regular, physical ways of being in the world—so instead of eating fruit, we behold fragrant scents. For some, this sense of transcendence has a divine or spiritual cast to it. For others, transcendence comes through profound feelings in art, in nature, in moments of meditative solitude, or in some other way.

Philosopher and activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote about a feeling of wonder that, for him, is the starting point of transcendence in his 1951 book, *Man is Not Alone*. Please read this passage aloud as a group:

Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which has only to be organized in order to be mastered.

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder almost necessarily declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder. Science does not try to fathom the mystery. It merely describes and explains the way in which things behave in terms of causal necessity.

Wonder, rather than doubt, is the root of all knowledge. There is no answer in the world to radical amazement.

As you reflect on this quote, here are some questions to consider:

• What sort of experience is Heschel describing? What do you think he means by “wonder” and “radical amazement”?
• Do you agree with him that “life without wonder is not worth living”?
• When do you experience wonder or radical amazement?
• How do you understand that feeling—is it spiritual? Emotional? Does it relate in some way to the notion of divinity for you?
Note for facilitators: Give participants time to re-read the passage to themselves. Depending on the size of your group, you may want to invite them to break into smaller groups or pairs to reflect on the questions and the story, before coming back together as a large group.

A Fifth Question: How do you grow?

Our journey through the four worlds never ends. We move between the realms of the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual all the time, often inhabiting several—or all of them—at once. And we are, like trees, constantly growing—putting our roots deeper in the soil, thickening with rings of wisdom and, at times, allowing our leaves to change color or even be shed completely to make room for something new to come into being. Growth is not always easy, but the work of becoming more secure, more open, more connected, more compassionate, and more able to experience the exquisiteness of our lives as they’re happening is some of the most important work that there is. We hope that this conversation has helped you think about the ways in which you hope to continue to flower.

As we conclude this conversation, here are some final questions to consider:

- Has this experience helped you come to any new insights about your own growth?
- What is one thing you want to do in the next 24 hours to act on something you discovered in this conversation?
- What could we do together to improve our community based on what we’ve talked about here?

Note for facilitators: Give participants a few moments to think about these questions. You might only want to focus on one or two of them. Then ask them to share their response with the whole group. This is a powerful way to conclude.

This conversation is powered by Ask Big Questions®, which was developed, launched, and scaled by Hillel International, and is a registered trademark of Hillel International.

Hillel International is the largest Jewish student organization in the world, building connections with emerging adults at more than 550 colleges and universities, and inspiring them to direct their own path. During their formative college years, students are challenged to explore, experience, and create vibrant Jewish lives.

©2014 Hillel International
AIR-IT: A Guide to Facilitating Conversation

A: Ask Big Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Big Question</th>
<th>Hard Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anyone can answer it.</td>
<td>Experts will answer it best.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: “For whom are we responsible?”</td>
<td>Example: “What is the best economic policy for the United States?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focuses on wisdom and experience.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Focuses on intelligence and skill.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: “What’s the best advice you’ve ever received?”</td>
<td>Example: “Are human beings naturally good or evil?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uses plain language.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Uses technical language.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Directed at a subject (me, you, us).</strong></td>
<td><strong>Directed at an object (it).</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: “What could we sacrifice to change the world?”</td>
<td>Example: “Is it better to cut spending or raise taxes to balance the federal budget?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opens up space and invites people in as participants.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Closes space and leads people to feel like spectators.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leads to sharing personal stories.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Leads to debates about truth claims.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emphasizes a both/and approach.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Emphasizes an either/or approach.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I: Invite Personal Stories.

Big questions lead to sharing personal stories. The facilitator acts to support this by:

- Creating the space (physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual) of trust in which these stories can be shared and honored.
- Weaving: Summarize, reflect back, and keep the stories and observations tethered to the big question. This helps the group to maintain integrity and not feel that it is fragmenting or fraying.

R: Really Listen.

Ask Big Questions conversations are marked by real listening. The facilitator’s reflecting back and weaving is crucial to this. Participants should be able to answer questions like: “What did so-and-so say? What do you think they meant when they said it? What did it evoke in you?”

IT: Use Interpretive Things.

Ask Big Questions conversations often use a text, poem, artwork, song, natural object or other “interpretive thing” to help center the conversation and create a common point of access for all participants.
Questions to Ask When Preparing for a Discussion

Where?

• Does the place where you’re having the conversation create a space in which people can feel safe?
• Is it a closed space? Does it have a door you can close to ensure privacy and confidentiality when needed?
• What can you do to make the space visually appealing or lovely? Does it have windows to let in light? Do you want to play some music?
• Can everyone sit comfortably in a circle?

When?

• Are you scheduling the conversation at a time when everyone can be physically awake and present?
• Will people be hungry? Will you provide food or drink?
• Will they be tired or sleepy after a meal?
• How long will the conversation be?
• How will you break up the time if necessary?

Who and How?

• How many people will participate? Will there be enough to sustain diverse conversation? Will there be too many to keep the conversation centered?
• How will you get the word out and then remind people?
• Do you need to make any special arrangements for people with special needs (i.e. physical disabilities)?
• Greetings – Who will welcome people to the conversation and how will they do it?
• How will you have everyone introduce themselves? (Big Questions are great for introductions!)
• How will you close the conversation?
• How will you follow up with people?
• How will you capture their contact information?

What About You?

• What will you do to get yourself ready?