Doug Sprei:

Well, I am so jazzed after this incredible talk you just gave. We're both on a high, and I really appreciate you spending a couple of minutes to join us. I mean, we can wing it here. There was so many threads that came up in this conversation that animated me, and I want to just start from the last thing I heard. It resonates in our Braver Angels debates. Something that you talked about as a value or a kind of a living principle or an operative energy that takes place is when you said people hear better when they're heard. It occurred to me that we are actually allowing that to happen in a Braver Angels debate. That's probably one of the forces that animates it.

Monica Guzman:

Yes.

Doug Sprei:

So, let's talk about where we are here at Pacific Lutheran, the ideas that you're cascading out to an audience that is primarily college students, that whole world of very shy college students who are not used to talking in public, who self-censor, afraid to share political and social viewpoints. How is it all resonating for you just being here at Pacific Lutheran?

Monica Guzman:

Ooh, it's intense, because I have to constantly remind myself that as much as sometimes it feels like, "Just yesterday, I was a college student," nope, that was half my life ago. It's been a while. What I remember from being in college is just not the same world that exists today for these students. That's really come home to me when I compare. I remember being a freshman at Bowdoin College, and staying up all night, it seemed, with debating something with my friends, the door open to our dorm rooms, and hoping more people would come in, and they would. I've told that story to some students and professors today, and they're like, "It's the opposite now." All the doors are closed.

I've heard from... There was a school I went to. A student said that her mother had told her, "Just don't open your mouth in class. You're conservative. They're not going to ever respect you. Don't open your mouth. Just get your grades, and move on," in this one particular school, but you hear all these things. So being at PLU, I feel like I just carry in a lot of stories and hopefully a humility that I don't know these experiences, but I'm honored to have the privilege of just sharing the space with it.

Doug Sprei:

One of the words that just resonates for me is humility. This Templeton Project that we're embarked on and we've been engaged with for the last year and a half, it's going to end at the end of this year, is predicated upon or under the general rubric of intellectual humility. In your talk, I heard you describe intellectual humility in a way I had never heard described before. I wanted to see if you could unpack that a little, because I thought it was scintillating.

Monica Guzman:

So, this was from a researcher from Hope College named Daryl Van Tongeren. He's one of the foremost thinkers on intellectual humility and researchers. He says that it boils down to being the right size in a given situation. Am I too big? Am I too small? If I'm too big, I'm arrogant. If I'm too small, I'm a pushover. But if I'm just the right size... Now, it's in a given situation because depending on where you are, the right size may be a very different size and what situation you're considering. But, I think it's a beautiful

way to think about things, and just to notice that it's a question that bears repeating and re-asking and re-asking and re-asking, "Am I the right size? Am I listening well? Do I assume I know too much?"

Many of us, I would venture to say probably all of us have had moments where we are too big, and we assume we know too much.

Doug Sprei:

Tell me a little bit about your experiences with college students, what you're seeing in this world, and what you're encountering on the college campuses you visit, because we have a college program, and it's usually cascading debates out, giving students an immersive experience. Today, listening to your talk and your conversation in front of a very large audience at PLU was really galvanizing for me and for our team to listen to you. You're very much focused on principles that are embedded in the one-to-one conversation. Yet in our debates, we have one-to-one, but we have one-to-many and many-to-many. I feel that there are some common values there, but I can't get my articulative process around it as well as you can. Tell me a little bit about that.

Monica Guzman:

I think that that's the objective. The way I look at it, the one-to-one conversation is the fundamental to come back to, because it's a place that there's so much of a seed there. You can bust through so many walls by bringing it down to the level of one-to-one. Sometimes that's the only way. We know that just through the history of social movements and what goes on behind the scenes and all of that, and just the importance of building relationships. All that said, the beauty of college campuses is the classroom environment, the idea of group learning. College campuses have never been everybody in a room reading a book alone. It's about conversation is how we learn. It's how we form society. It's how we make our minds sharper.

The French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, and I love thinking about this phrase, but he wrote about how we rub and polish our brains against those of others, that that's how they get sharp. You can't do that alone. So, the classroom is and has always been one of the technologies of learning in our academic institutions, because we know that many heads are better than one. We know that many perspectives needs to come into communion with each other. What's happening now is that a lot of our assumptions about how that should happen have been disrupted by the amount of fear, in some cases, like traumatic kinds of experiences that people have adopted into themselves, either have had themselves or adopted into themselves just looking at the headlines.

There's a lot of high-stakes issues out there, and a lot of fear that, "What if I'm bad? What if I'm bad?" Now, young people, there's so much pressure on them. That's one of the things I see when I go around is like... I'm in my early 40s, right? I know a lot of parents in their 50s, and these are the parents of college students, and some of the things these generations have put on their kids. It's not that we meant to or anything, but I think they're feeling so much pressure to clean up a big mess, and to change the world and to be good where others have been bad. But what does good mean? Is it okay to question that? Maybe it isn't.

No, it has to be, "Oh, I don't know what to do," and so that it's just sometimes easier to go to silence. That's tragic because once we're silent, we're invisible to each other, and we can't learn together. We can't grow. So, it's that paralysis that I think everyone is so hungry to break free from, because we cannot be known.

Doug Sprei:

Well, one of the things that delights me most in doing this work on college campuses is watching the students engage in a debate or a workshop come up to us later, and say, "I've never had a conversation like this before." A few of them had said, "I want to take this into my life. I want to take this out to my family. I want to take this to the workplace. I want to take it after I graduate into what I do." I think that's part of why we're doing this work. We want it to catch fire in people. Also, there's an aspect that delights us about the faculty themselves. A lot of the faculty we meet are very dedicated as educators. They really care.

They have an educational mission that's personal as well as institutional. So, I was wondering if you see anything in all the civil discourse that we're doing at Braver Angels, the work you're doing, the work our program is doing, that just is a natural enhancement to education itself, learning itself.

Monica Guzman:

Absolutely. Absolutely. I don't think that what Braver Angels works on and many other bridging organizations work on is necessarily something that is new. In fact, I told somebody this the other day that it's more about what we're unlearning than what we're learning.

Doug Sprei:

How so?

Monica Guzman:

Well, because I think we're taking away the barriers more than we are learning how to be ourselves. We know how to be ourselves deep down in there somewhere, and we know how to have conversations deep down in there somewhere. What it is is about peeling away the things that make us afraid and the things that make us want to be certain, and therefore not ask questions of each other. I think it's mostly about that, and that gives me some hope, because I always react when people say, "This is hard. This work is hard." Now, I don't disagree. It is hard, but I worry that when people hear, "This is hard," they think it's rocket science.

"I can't learn rocket science. I don't have time," but again, it's not what you're learning. It's what you're unlearning. So, if you look at it that way, it's like, "Look, we are all... We know how to be human. We know how to be good people," in there somewhere. It just takes a self-inquiry and all of that, but I feel like I forgot one of the things that I wanted to address in your question. So, can you remind me?

Doug Sprei:

Well, I mean, I'm, again, animated. Our whole team is animated by the joy we see on educators' faces when they see their students-

Monica Guzman:

Yes, that's it.

Doug Sprei:

... engage in discourse and in debating, and just come alive and think creatively and speak courageously, right?

Monica Guzman:

Yes. Yes, and it is. It's a fresh thing, because I've been there at those debates where young people go, "I've never done this before. I didn't even know this was possible." Then they go, "It looked simple. It was just a structure that we all bought into. That was all it took to give us enough security," and then we saw it demonstrated. I would say the other big thing, because you said it's people can only hear when they're heard. It's true. One of the ways that these skills and structures really bring that in is that moment, that moment when somebody has said a thing that they might've been judged for in another context. Will they be judged? Our structure ensures that if they're being judged, it's happening silently in people's heads, where those people who are doing the judging silently and in their heads get to keep listening.

So, that's amazing. That's amazing. A lot of us don't realize how much we need that, that when you have heard something that could be, for lack of a better word, triggering to you, that's it. You're so afraid of that sometimes that that's the reason you never want to start these conversations in the first place. You don't know what you'll do. What if you're in a one-to-one conversation, and you're triggered? What do you do then? What if you make a fool of yourself? What if you get convinced of something that you think is terrible and later you regret it? There are so many fears, but in that room all together, we're both public with each other, but we're also really beautifully private.

Everyone has the integrity of their own mind. You listen to the other side, and inside you go, "Oh, I hated that. Oh, I really hated... Oh. Oh. Oh, he's putting it that way. Oh, well, that's interesting." So, people are each having that dialogue with themselves, because they have to listen for a full four minutes. That's a lot of time to listen to something that you might think is high octane explosive, and there it goes. It happens for four minutes, and then that speaker is done. What happens? Does everyone explode? Do people kick them out? Nope. People ask questions.

Doug Sprei:

Right, and then we actually invite questions. Then the way we ask them to ask the question is not, "Why do you say this? Madam Chair, I'd like to know why the speaker says this." It's that third person. There's something about that that elevates the conversation, or just makes students think for a minute, change the tone of what they're putting out.

Monica Guzman:

Absolutely. It preserves a certain validity of whatever this person just said is valid. So, once everyone knows, "I can go up there and say anything, and it will be treated as valid in this basic level of being accepted and heard in this space," that's incredible. It feels like we've closed ourselves off to this being possible in public.

Doug Sprei:

The response to your book has been tremendous. I got it very early on when you first published it. It's been really a deep, great pleasure to see how far it's cascaded out into the public eye, and that you're in high demand, and this is wonderful. Similarly, there's a huge demand for our program. It's growing fast.

Monica Guzman:

Yes.

Doug Sprei:

I attribute part of that, part of both of these examples too, we're not going against nature. We're actually surfing on it. We're like, "There's something natural about what we're doing, right?

Monica Guzman:

Yes. That's exactly right. I think you just put it better than my whole learning unlearning. That's it. It's already innate. It's already innate. That should be life-giving. We already have what it takes.

Doug Sprei:

Right. As the dogs bark outside, nature is about all around us.

Monica Guzman:

I know. Sorry about...

Doug Sprei:

So, there's a lot in that, because it's human nature, and there's something natural. That's why I think that students really take to it so naturally, and it's such a delight for us to see them just come alive in debates and become so engaged.

Monica Guzman:

Yes.

Doug Sprei:

The best job that we can do as chairs of these debates or moderators of discussions is to just be transparent and present enough to let that happen, to facilitate it.

Monica Guzman:

Exactly.

Doug Sprei:

But the other side of the equation is we're doing a Templeton project. That's a research-driven thing. You just talked about in your... I just learned or remembered that you are now a fellow at University of Florida.

Monica Guzman:

Florida.

Doug Sprei:

I wonder if you could unpack a little of that, because fellowships are academic, and there is research involved, so we're actually parsing out nature. What are you learning?

Monica Guzman:

Oh, I mean, the coolest thing is sort of that. It's what's happened with intellectual humility is happening with so many of the things that have suddenly become at the center of everything, which is that we need to know how to talk to each other. Let's get back to fundamentals. Can we nail down scientifically

some of these things about hearing, listening, humility, whatever it is? So, that's what's happening. The fellowship at the University of Florida, I am working with researchers, and we've in fact already completed a study. The results came in in the fall. With the pace of academic publishing, it'll be about a year before the paper gets published, but boy, oh boy, were the results cool.

Doug Sprei:

Wow.

Monica Guzman:

I think what I can say, there's a... You have to be careful about what you say about studies that are unpublished, and not give too much away, but what I can say is that we did an A-B test with participants. There was a way of measuring how heard people feel, and the inclusion of, I think, two sentences, only two sentences difference between these scripts that were actually recorded, and it was really cool. Two sentences difference was enough to make a statistically significant difference in how heard people were in a long script, two sentences.

Doug Sprei:

Wow.

Monica Guzman:

Imagine if people bring in just a couple of ways of saying, "Tell me more. I'm curious what you think, that kind of thing, but I want to know your opinion." Man, if we just do a little bit more of that, just a teensy bit, we could change everything.

Doug Sprei:

The book's title is I Never Thought of It That Way. That's another one of these operative amazing vectors in the debate where students walk into the room thinking one thing about a topic, and then come to us and say, "Why?" It's like, "I ended up agreeing with the other side, or I came out and I changed my mind a few times." That's something that we're trying to explore a little more of. I always think of your title when that kind of thing happens in our debates.

Monica Guzman:

I never thought of it that way, because that's the moment.

Doug Sprei:

Good. It's the moment.

Monica Guzman:

It's the moment where you become aware, because we have thousands of "I never thought of it that way" moments every day, each of us, but 99.999% of them happened beneath our level of awareness. Somebody... Who was I talking to? The author David McRaney gave me this thought experiment. Would you, Doug, give control of your life today to Doug Sprei of 20 years ago? Would you do that?

Doug Sprei:

No.

Monica Guzman:

Though you wouldn't, and the reason you wouldn't is because your mind has changed a lot in 20 years. So, people say, "Oh, you can't change minds." Yeah, you can. Our minds change all the time. The "I never thought of it that way" moment is just the moment of awareness that it's happening, which gives us a little more control, a little more noticing, which can be really magical.

Doug Sprei:

Part of it is because I'm a lot older now, and with age comes natural humility.

Monica Guzman:

Sure.

Doug Sprei:

I mean, there's a natural rhythm of gaining humility just through human nature, but I think that we're doing with students and with citizens in general accelerates the process.

Monica Guzman:

Yes. Exactly.

Doug Sprei:

It gives you more access to those kinds of moments where the impressions come in, and you feed on them.

Monica Guzman:

Yes. What you're giving students is a way for them to find their own freedom, because look, one of the... Loneliness sucks. Isolation sucks. Feeling like you can't, like there's a dissonance between something you feel is true in your heart and something that is true in the space around you, that sucks. But when you find the freedom to contribute, to express, to learn, because it's horribly entrapping to be afraid of being wrong. When you're afraid of being wrong, then you have to be rigid. You're terrified of the conversation that might influence you. That's no way to live either. So, it goes both ways. Hearing and being heard is liberation.

Doug Sprei:

Well, let's build on that for our last question, because I'm going to let you go to go pick up your kids [inaudible 00:18:53]. Stay on schedule. It is now 3:53.

Monica Guzman:

Okay. Two minutes.

Doug Sprei:

We got a couple just a few more minutes, but here's the cover. For podcast listeners, it's a matter of loneliness, building connections for collective well-being. That's the moniker for the entire event that

we're doing here at the Wang Center, the symposium. So, how does the work you're doing, the work we are doing in Braver Angels connect with this?

Monica Guzman:

Matters in loneliness?

Doug Sprei:

Yeah.

Monica Guzman:

I mean, it's because when we don't have conversation across disagreement, we also just don't have conversation, because it becomes paralyzing. If I can't be honest with you because you disagree with me, then I can't know you, and you can't know me. So, that's one fewer person who can know me, one fewer person I can be connected with when I feel like I need to burn a bridge with someone around me, because it just seems incompatible with my belief system to have this person in my life. I'm at risk of becoming more lonely, especially if that person once held a really important role in my life. I'm now burning that bridge. Do I know the cost? Sometimes it's worth it. A lot of times, it's not.

Then just, boy, when you feel that no one will hear your concerns, that nobody gets you, that there's no space for you to just be or explore ideas, just explore ideas openly, then what do you do? I don't know. Maybe you go to your phone. You go to your computer, and there's these trappings of society and socialness and connection that aren't going to be like the real thing. I think we're seeing that everywhere, just the addition, the adding up of all of that, and we need to break it. We need to come back to each other.

Doug Sprei:

The postscript here is... This is the last bit that in the conversation we just were in at PLU, you actually said, and it was very refreshing for me to hear this, "I haven't read my book in a while."

Monica Guzman:

I mean, yeah, a long while.

Doug Sprei:

That was so cool, because... So, it made me immediately wonder, "Well, what's she up to now?" Where are you now? The book was written a while ago, and there's a huge platform there, but there's freshness coming out of that. Where are you? What's fresh for you right now, Little Frontiers.

Monica Guzman:

Big Frontier is the Braver Way podcast. That's a podcast I'm producing with Braver Angels. We're producing season two right now. So, the stories of the two interviews that we've already done for season two are just fresh in my mind. I brought up a couple of them already today, and we're planning. This morning, we had a two-hour meeting to plan who the other eight episodes are going to be about. So, boy, it's about stories. Stories are how people feel the truth of these things, and so finding the stories of people who have discovered what's possible is the most important work I'm doing right now.

Doug Sprei:

All right. It's been a pleasure for me to hang with a kindred soul for a few minutes. I'm so glad we could finally do this. I've been waiting to do it for a long time. Stay tuned for actual debates on the podcast.

Monica Guzman:

Yes. Yay. That's going to be so exciting.

Doug Sprei:

Thanks so much, Monica.

Monica Guzman:

All right. Thank you, Doug. Thanks for everything you do.

Doug Sprei:

Thank you too. Talk to you soon.