

Deanna Unyk and Josh Brahm speaking to a full room at the University of Portland.



Relational Apologetics Tips: How to Cultivate Friendship Amidst Challenging Conversations

By Josh Brahm

Equal Rights Institute is focused on teaching pro-life advocates practical dialogue tips, rigorous philosophy, and relational apologetics. When we use the phrase “relational apologetics,” we mean **trying to change a person’s mind about a core belief in the context of genuine friendship**. Most people will not change their minds about a serious subject after one conversation, so an ongoing dialogue with a friend can be really helpful.

When I speak about relational apologetics, I usually illustrate with the story of my friend Deanna Unyk, who began dialoguing with me about abortion two years ago, and began self-identifying as pro-life ten months ago.

(To read what changed Deanna’s mind about abortion, go to JoshBrahm.com/Deanna. If you want to learn more about why I think guy-girl friendships can be virtuous, God-honoring friendships, and what boundaries I think should be in place, go to JoshBrahm.com/Friendship.)

When the pro-life club at the University of Portland heard Deanna’s

story, they asked Deanna and me if we would be willing to do a public discussion about relational apologetics (in addition to being a great opportunity, this was also a personal blessing because it gave us the chance to finally meet in person). We sat on stage, told our story, and encouraged the audience to cultivate friendships among people with whom they had serious disagreements. The event was a great success, with around 80 in attendance from both sides of the abortion debate. Many people came up afterwards, saying that they had never been to an event like this, and that it helped them to think about abortion and relational apologetics in a new way.

During the event, Deanna and I offered practical tips for cultivating friendships with people who disagree with you about important issues. Here are a couple of my favorites:

Don’t Just Debate Issues

Sometimes when pro-life and pro-choice people talk, they talk only about abortion. Forgetting that people are complicated, multifaceted creatures can

ruin your chance to form a meaningful friendship with someone.

If I have multiple conversations with someone about abortion, my hope is that the pro-choice person and I can be intentional about building a friendship as well, which means sharing the kinds of things about each other’s lives that friends share with one another. Maybe this person will discover that right now my sons’ favorite things to do with me are playing the “Sorry!” board game and getting chased around our back yard. Maybe she will learn that I love playing music, or what TV show my wife and I currently watch together at night. Knowing details like these helps the person to see that I am a multi-dimensional person, not just whatever caricature she may have of pro-lifers. Likewise, I want to recognize the depth of the person I am talking to, which is why I want to know some non-abortion-related aspects of her life, too.

Deanna and I spent most of our early emails debating abortion, but we also cared about each other as people. I would ask her about the process of moving out of her parent’s house. She

would ask me how my kids were doing. I was there to grieve with her when her grandmother died. She was there to help me process as I went through the highs and lows of launching a non-profit. We were people on a mutual quest for truth, who were also becoming friends. We were not merely two people whose idea of fun was debating abortion for hours on end.

Allow the Person to Remain Unconvinced

Sometimes when I am talking to someone about a moral or political issue, I catch myself getting frustrated if she is not changing her mind. In those situations I find it helpful to remember something that Dale and Jonalyn Fincher said in their book *Coffee Shop Conversations*:



Father Charlie McCoy, a PhD graduate from Notre Dame said after the event, "A significant portion of the event obviously had specifically pro-life content. But more generally, the event was about defying stereotypes that keep us divided and polarized; it was about having meaningful and even transformative dialogue on controversial issues that most of us just try to avoid."

Personal Note from Josh

Last month was a whirlwind of speech-writing and travel. My trips to Iowa, Washington DC and San Francisco were amazing! You might think coming up to a speaker after an event and telling them you appreciate their work wouldn't make much of a difference, but it's actually really encouraging. Last month I was able to talk to dozens of students like Peter, pictured on the right, who told me they have better dialogues with pro-choice people because of my work.

"New ideas change us slowly, like water on a rock, imperceptibly reshaping grooves and contours." Given that people usually change their minds slowly, we need to guard ourselves from feeling frustrated when, after having serious conversations about abortion with someone, she does not immediately change her mind. Before fully changing their minds, most people will need months of thinking seriously about a subject, and multiple conversations where they can ask all of their questions.

When people argue, there is often a strange, unstated attitude that if someone is unable to answer the other's argument, then that person must change her mind on the spot. That perspective really bothers me. Some people are just bad debaters. In fact, some of the smartest people I know are not good debaters. They have great ideas, but they need time to process those ideas and then figure out how to articulate them. So when someone I am speaking with admits that she is not sure how to respond to one of my arguments, I often clarify that *that's okay*, and it does not mean that she has to abandon her views on the spot. This may seem like I'm losing an opportunity, but I'm actually strengthening it. This shows that I am not just trying to out-debate people, and makes her more at ease and able to just admit she does not know something. It also puts me in a very reasonable position to appropriately challenge her to reconsider her views.

However, the fact that she should not have to change her mind on the spot does not mean that it is okay for her to

Being able to see living, breathing proof that we're making a difference makes all the hard work worth it. All of the students I spoke with were very excited about Equal Rights Institute, and more than a dozen campus clubs expressed interest in having us do a seminar and outreach at their campus.

Thank you for your prayers and financial support that made this possible.

~ Josh



never change her mind. I will point out that it is okay for her to not shift her views in the moment, but I will also urge her to seriously consider the point later when she is processing, and I will clarify that if she cannot find a good response, she absolutely *should* change her mind eventually.

What is stopping you from having these transformative dialogues in your life? Is it a lack of desire? A lack of friends who disagree with you about important issues like abortion? Or does life just seem too busy? At Equal Rights Institute we are very interested in giving people the practical help necessary to do great things. Share your thoughts on this topic or the challenges in your way to doing this by emailing me at Josh@EqualRightsInstitute.com. I would love to hear from you and help you to get over those hurdles, so that lives around you can be, by God's grace, transformed.

