



## **The Virtues of an Open Mind: Making Room for Flexibility in Intercultural Dialogue**

*Rohak Jain*

INTERLAKE HIGH SCHOOL, BELLEVUE, WASHINGTON

“Are human beings inherently corrupt?”

I was not expecting to be confronted with such an open-ended question that day, but I suppose it captures the essence of intercultural dialogue. Shared experiences and common ties mesh with differing ideologies and contrasting backgrounds. And somehow, this chaotic frenzy of thought exists within a single conversation.

Throughout this essay, I'll unpack the many dimensions of intercultural dialogue, demonstrating that to resolve conflict through intercultural dialogue, it is important to listen, understand, and contribute. Maintaining constructive conversation is key.

Ever since I joined Acquaint, a platform dedicated to fostering cross-cultural collaboration, I've learned so much about digital interaction. Whether it be picking the brain of a Zimbabwe university student or finding inspiration in the story of a Pakistani bodybuilder, each conversation takes me somewhere new. I think it's fascinating how the human experience can connect me with virtually *anyone*—there are no prerequisites required to engage with different cultures and communities; it's almost instinctual.

To return to the question posed earlier: are humans corrupt? How could something so existential and profound possibly come up in a conversation between strangers?

On this occasion, I happened to be talking to Mark, a resident of Guyana who had seriously reflected on human behavior and psychology. Being South American, Mark had always been immersed in a multiethnic society, where different communities were expected to not only tolerate, but actively celebrate one another's company. Despite this, he explained how it seemed that everyone secretly moved their own agendas forward, selfishly pursuing those means at any cost. According to Mark, this friction even motivated myopic pursuits of knowledge, whose purpose was solely to fend off criticism and establish supremacy. Conflict was simply inevitable.



At first, from my perspective as a Seattle native, where inclusivity and diversity are encouraged, this lack of accommodation seemed unthinkable. But I didn't immediately reject Mark's train of thought. Instead, I let go of my preconceived notions and pushed myself to learn more. Upon considering his points, I discovered what I had initially overlooked: the herd mentality. The desire to follow the crowd and associate with a like-minded group was the crux of any conflict. Just as I bore witness to echo chambers and censorship on social media, Mark struggled to consolidate the warring factions around him. Each community huddled together in safety, desperately seeking to assert themselves over the rest. Listening and mutual understanding were forgotten virtues—we both recognized that.

This interaction taught me several things. I realized that intercultural dialogue is a testament to open-mindedness, compromise, and flexibility. While constantly having to grapple with a diversity of opinion seems frustrating, it's a critical aspect of challenging stigma and overcoming stereotype. Had I not come to appreciate Mark's viewpoint, I couldn't have developed my own understanding of the human psyche in the same way. Above all, though, being amenable to new insights helped Mark and me see each other eye-to-eye and feel comfortable in tackling sensitive topics through critical thinking. Going forward, I'll try to ensure that each conversation is reciprocated, that there is never an overbearing power dynamic favoring one speaker over the other. Through Acquaint, with representation spanning over 950 members across 70 countries, I've been exposed to a wide array of perspectives that wouldn't be available to me elsewhere. And I leave every virtual session inspired and fulfilled.

My #1 takeaway? Listening goes a long way toward permitting intercultural dialogue, even with complete strangers.

