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Challenging with curiosity

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I was facilitating an open-to-public workshop on using enabling language in a relationship. The participants included persons of various ages. At one point, over a slightly controversial debate, an elderly participant confronted me and contested my point of view. I took his point in my stride, but was uncomfortable in the manner my point had been contested. A little later, a youngster stood up and also debated a point with me. Yet, in this case, I experienced his question coming from curiosity rather than disagreement. I felt challenged rather than contested.

Challenging someone, I realise, is very different from contesting. Challenging is direct, inclusive and perhaps credible, and can be effective, for I believe it comes from being curious. Contesting, on the other hand, comes from a position of feeling more knowledgeable on the subject in contention.

Challenging is direct and usually spontaneous and reflective. Challenge retains a certain naïveté and curiosity. The person being challenged can actually engage with the challenger in a way that helps the enquiry. In a contest, by design, the debate turns into an argument, with finality as its objective.

There is a certain liberating feeling in challenging, where mutuality can be established, where each of the parties can explore, resulting in new insight.

Ask yourself the next time you see yourself raising a point, particularly an objection, if the curiosity is welling from an interrogative stance or from a position of genuinely wanting to know.

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