

Air Conversations

Talking with Friends and Family about Air Travel

Talking about our choices, whether it's about air travel, food, or energy consumption is one of the most powerful and effective things we can do. We learn, process information, and ultimately change our lives based on our relationships and interactions. Conversations are powerful and real.

And - it's not easy.

We've all been there before - trying to convince our partner, sister, dad or work colleague that they should think about our impact on the climate -- and met resistance and defensiveness. Perhaps you've found that the person you're trying to change became even more resolute in their position about the topic during your conversation?

We feel you.

All of us who broach this topic do it because we *care* - about the environment, healthy communities, future generations, and/or we simply want to help our loved ones feel better. We sometimes presume that people who fly often do not care, unless they are acting, or doing something that looks like we do. This is often not the case, however.

Rather, more often than not, people want to avoid or deny the impacts of our behaviors -- such as air travel -- usually because they are overwhelmed, conflicted, distracted, or insecure about the efficacy of their actions. What difference will it make if I fly less? It is easy to feel our actions are insignificant.

A common tendency in sustainability and climate change efforts, is to engage in a communication style that can have a paradoxical effect. This includes:

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- Persuading
- Judging
- Pressuring
- Informing/Educating
- Scolding
- Shaming

How many of these do you fall into? How do people respond?

Our relationship with air travel is very complicated. Air travel is often culturally, socially and psychologically synonymous with freedom, status, adventure, relationships and duty. So when we begin to communicate with others about these topics, we easily find we come up against a lot of resistance, or what are called “defense mechanisms.” This is completely understandable and normal.

Based on thousands of studies and evidence in neurosciences, psychology and Motivational Interviewing, we know that persuading, educating, cheerleading or doing a “sales pitch” turns people off. This is because it’s not really about connecting, it’s about pushing our agenda on others. People are more open and receptive when they feel there is genuine curiosity and openness. By meeting people with an attitude of curiosity, compassion, and humor, we will be much more effective communicators.

Guide, Don't Right

Bill Miller, one of the founders of Motivational Interviewing, talks about our tendency to tell people why something is the “right” thing to do. We think this is the best approach, because we genuinely want to be effective at influencing others when it comes to making lifestyle changes. However, what he found is that “righting” almost always leads to people tuning out and going into resistance.

We invite you to consider approaching your communications from a very different angle: by inquiring into the other’s experience first. We call this “Guiding” versus “Righting,” based on the research in Motivational Interviewing.

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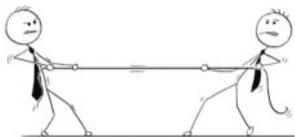
Asking open-ended questions as a primary way to engage people, before we go into the 'telling,' educating and awareness raising, is integral in the context of an engaged conversation. In other words, the more open, honest, vulnerable, down to earth, and real you can be while being vibrant and aspirational, the more productive your conversations will be.

If you demonstrate genuine empathy and understanding for the other's experience and POV you will have a much better chance at moving the interaction forward. This can be very hard when the stakes are so high, and our passion and commitment is so strong. While we know that we as humans must make changes quickly at individual and systemic/collective levels, we need to bring others along with us skillfully.

We suggest watching this [short video](#) based on Renee's research, by the Alliance for Climate Education, for high school students - based on principles of Motivational Interviewing.

The Three A's

The Three A's is a tool to help us stay open and connected with how others may be responding to these issues, as we connect the dots between air travel and climate change.



Ambivalence is probably one of the most important concepts to understand in our work on education, climate, and behavior change. Many people experience ambivalence when confronted with change of any kind. Ambivalence is the competing desires

within all of us. "Yes I want to do my part for our environment, but I love traveling and don't want to give any of that up." "Yes I love the planet and my spiritual commitment is stewardship, but I can't say no to my children who are counting on those holidays." "Yes I want to be in alignment with values and be a better person, but I can't say no to my boss or manager who is asking me to fly." These are understandable "double binds" that come up for many people. When you listen and draw these out, you can engage in problem solving together. Often simply saying "Of course" can allow for a deeper and more honest conversation. We all fear being judged and criticized, so signalling that you are not going to attack or blame is important.

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Anxiety of all sorts bubbles up for people when they think about reducing our air travel and other behaviors linked with climate change. "I want to see the world and you are taking this away from me!" "I can't handle learning more about our impacts on climate, it's overwhelming." Our capacity neurologically to process information is actively impaired when we have any kind of anxiety, guilt, fear or shame. By *acknowledging* people's anxieties we can communicate with people about the connections between air travel, health, climate and environment in a way that allows people to actually take in the new information.



Aspiration is when we feel excited, have desires and dreams for ourselves to be part of the solution, alignment with our deepest values, and be the best person we can be. When we signal what we at Project InsideOut refer to as

"bright spots," we activate aspiration and remind each other of what we *are* doing that is a step forward. The key is to do this in the context of the other A's - so we are not only focusing on aspiration or any of the others. We need to address them all in our interactions, ideally.

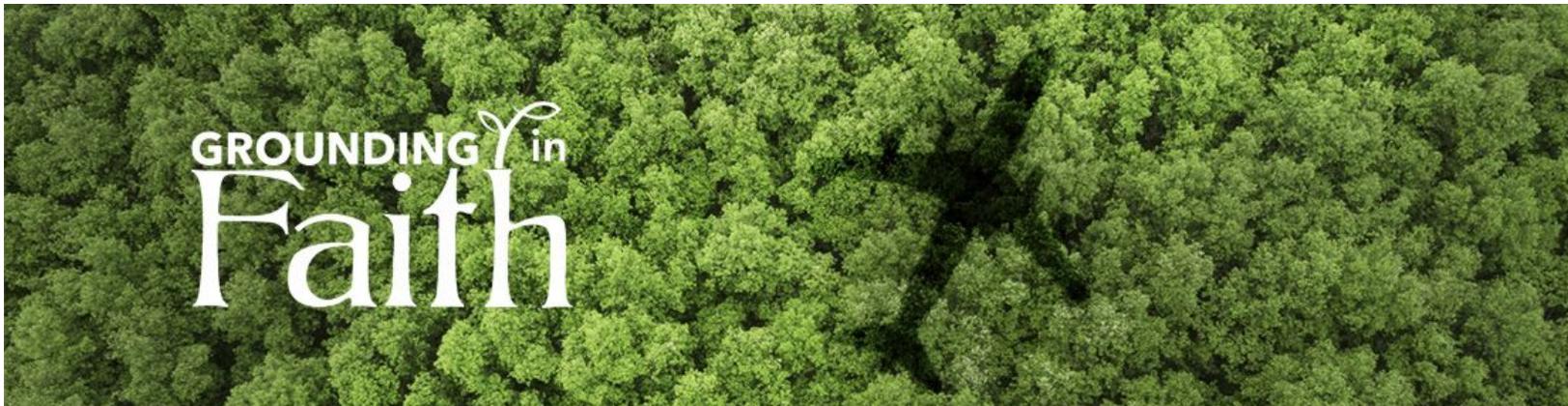
Initiate your conversation

To prepare for your conversation, reflect on what the three A's might be for the person you're seeking to engage with air travel -- whether it's a friend, family member, spiritual leader, manager or partner.

Step 1: Listen and interview, ask clarifying questions and refrain from adding your own views or experiences. Seek to understand their point of view. Try to evoke feelings from the other person. Let them know you're not judging, shaming or attacking them, that you are genuinely curious to learn where they're coming from.

Example:

What's your experience with air travel, have you ever considered the climate impacts?
What's your relationship with air travel, how do you feel about how much you fly?



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Step 2: Acknowledge. Formulate a response that incorporates the Three A's, using reflection, summary, and open-ended questions.

Example:

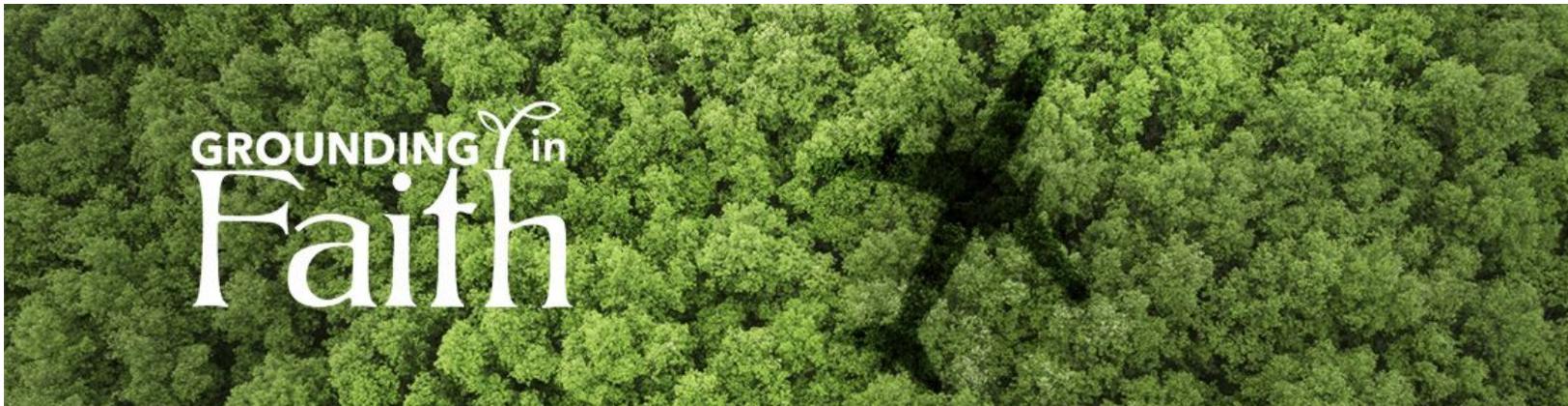
It sounds like you're doing your absolute best to live a good life and be in alignment with what you care about. I hear that you are open to flying less or at least looking at your air travel - but you feel overwhelmed to make the change because you fly often for work, your family depend on this, etc. I also hear you saying that you're excited to make some small changes to your lifestyle to address our climate crisis. Can you imagine a scenario where

you choose to take one less long-haul flight a year, or focus more on staycations, while talking with others about what is possible if we were all to be more mindful about our flying?

Here are some ways we can explore ambivalence with people.

- Ask permission: "Would it be OK if we spent a few minutes talking about ___?"
- Ask "disarming," open-ended questions: "What are some of the advantages of keeping things as status quo, as usual?"
- Ask "reverse" open-ended questions: "On the other hand, what are some of the reasons you can see for making the change?"
- Summarize both sides of the ambivalence, starting with the reasons for NOT changing, followed by reasons for changing: "So, you are already dealing with so much, like making sure your family is taken care of, and you also really recognize how important it is to be mindful or conscious of how we live, and the impacts on climate and environment."
- Ask: "Am I getting it right, following you, etc.?"
- Ask about the next step: "What's the next step, if any?"
- Show appreciation: "Thank you for your willingness to talk with me about ___."
- Voice confidence: "I'm confident, or I can tell that if and when you make a firm decision to make a change in this area of your life, you will find a way to do it!"

Demonstrating empathy is one of the most powerful tools at our disposal when it comes to talking about charged topics like air travel, food choices, and energy consumption with our community. In her [TEDx talk](#), author Marta Zaraska of *Meathooked* begins with sharing the



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disarming data that a high percentage of vegans and vegetarians still eat meat, especially after they've been drinking. She then tells a story illustrating the "meat paradox" - the cognitive dissonance that leads people to consume more meat, when confronted with the facts about its negative impacts. Marta explained in an interview that she always opens with this kind of preamble because it helps disarm the audience about the topic. People can relax because they know that she is human and won't be pointing fingers, or being a "cheerleader" for vegan lifestyles. She humanizes the issue.

Our recommended approach is based on the recognition that most people, when given the opportunity, will elect to do things that are considered beneficial, healthy and pro-social.

However often people are caught up on "tangles" that we are not even fully aware of. This is referred to as cognitive dissonance.

When we enter into conversations mindful of what the other may be wrestling with, and put aside our own assumptions, we are in a better position to guide and support others in aligning with our deepest held values and commitments. We can do this together, in conversations and compassionate interactions.

Try this and let us know how it goes! Please visit our Facebook Grounding in Faith group and share your story, or post on social media, and use the #groundinginfaith tag. How did it go, what happened?