

Book of Fundamentals Episode Four:

“The Second Conversation: Avoiding Assumptions, Cultivating Compassion”

Summary

In this second conversation episode, Jack interviews Mauricio, an individual from St. James, Minnesota. Mauricio describes his town from a student’s perspective, noting the difficulties that the older generations in his community experience when interacting with different cultures. Despite this possible barrier, Mauricio comments that the sentiment in his town is one of togetherness. He emphasizes the importance of compassion, sympathy, and willingness to understand your neighbors if an individual intends to construct a strong community. The discussion returns repeatedly to the idea of conversation as a means of understanding an individual’s ‘process,’ as Mauricio describes all people to have the same general goal: Leading a good and happy life. We invite you to join us for this second exchange of experiences in Episode Four of the Book of Fundamentals podcast.

Key Points

- There is a generational difference in regards to the ability to accept or interact with cultures and identities different from your own.
- While the size of St. James means that the chance of exposure to a different community is smaller, it also provides many opportunities for interaction between different communities (once a ‘new’ population is introduced).
- Compassion, empathy, and sympathy are crucial in helping people understand each other.
- Conversations are a productive tool in achieving understanding, especially because ultimately, all people have the same goal: “We go to work because we want to have a good life, have a good place for ourselves and our families. If we start there, people understand so much better. At the end of the day, we’re all trying to do the same thing, we’re all just trying to live a happy life, have good opportunities for ourselves and for our families and for our loved ones.”

Episode Details

St. James, Minnesota

- Population: ~4500 people (~35% hispanic)
- Schools: One high, one elementary
- Small-town restaurants

Community Building

- The older generations struggle more with reaching across cultural borders; smaller communities are less likely to be exposed to different ideas.
- The size of the town makes it difficult to avoid the ‘immigrant’ population, so a significant amount of exposure to different ethnicities and cultures *does* occur.
- The diversity of schools, businesses, and the city in general encourages interactions between groups.
- Exercise compassion, empathy, and sympathy.
- Recognize the different experiences that people have, and be prepared to listen.

Caution Signs

- Avoid the idea that all immigrants are criminals.
- Remember that we are all, at base-level, seeking a good life. Don't assume malintent.

Episode Four: Transcript

Jack: Welcome to another episode on the Book of Fundamentals podcast, my name is Jack Anderson and in this episode I will be interviewing Mauricio. This conversation is meant as a way to engage with our audience by learning more from individuals about the context of words, language, and communication, specifically in regards to understanding issues on immigration. We want to include the perspectives of individuals from smaller communities in Minnesota as part of this conversation, to give an example of how people may understand each other, where there are differences in understanding, and why those differences occur. Thank you for joining me today, I'm very appreciative of you giving your time to engage in this conversation. Could you introduce yourself?

Mauricio: Yeah, my name is Mauricio, I'm a sophomore at St. Olaf College, I'm a science and history major from St. James Minnesota, which is a town in like, south-central, southwest Minnesota.

Jack: What could you tell me about St. James?

Mauricio: It has a population of about, like, 4000, 4500 people, and it's a pretty small town. Yeah it's got an elementary school, high school, like 6-12, no middle school, just a 6-12 school. It's that sort of small town where a lot of people kind of know each other there's families that everyone sort of knows, in school and around town. It's got your normal basic stuff, like you got your McDonalds, you got your.. restaurants.

Jack: So, what do you think they should keep in mind about St. James if they're working on mindful community building?

Mauricio: I think you should keep in mind that: St. James is your, you know, sort of I guess: "average rule town." So, a lot of people in a town aren't exposed to different ideas, they're just sort of exposed to the same ideas that they live with there in St. James, you know, a rural town, small town. People in St James... y'know.. a lot of these people just don't know... you know, the experiences, or stuff like ,about other people.

Jack: Yeah, when you say-- "these people--" which people are you referring to in St. James?

Mauricio: I would say maybe the older population. I guess, maybe them, but also just like: when you grow up in a small town and you've lived there your whole life, there's just not much to.. you just, you just don't know much. You've lived in a town of 4000 your entire life, so, you know, there's not much to know there about different types of people, different types of ideas. So, I guess old people, but I guess just in general: everybody there.

Jack: Are there distinct groups of people within St James? How would you describe that?

Mauricio: I would say St. James has a decently large Hispanic population. If I give an estimate, I would probably say around 30 to 40 percent. So, not quite half, but I would say around 30-40 percent of the population is Hispanic, and the rest is white. That's... I would say if I describe different racial groups, different ethnic groups, I think I would say those are the 2 majority groups in St. James.

Jack: Is the Hispanic population generally younger than the white population, or?

Mauricio: Yeah I would say so, I would say that it's younger.

Jack: How do you think the groups interact with each other?

Mauricio: I think they interact...well... I suppose... Yeah, I don't know, I think they interact well..like in school.. You know, in school you have like...I don't wanna split them up, but you know, in school like, you know, in school everything is fine... I guess, from what I've seen, going to school there, growing up there. Going to school, everything is fine. Groups interact fine in school, at least. And in the community it seems like people get along. Y'know, the two groups seem to... and I feel like there's not really... I don't like talking about it as two groups. If I *do* talk about it as two groups, they get along well.

Jack: So does it feel like one community then?

Mauricio: I think so. I think it's so small that it definitely does feel like just one community, I suppose.

Jack: Okay, so you think the small aspect of it is what motivates people being together in St. James?

Mauricio: Yeah.

Jack: Does just living in St. James make you a part of the St. James community? Or like, are the people that moved there that, if you didn't grow up in the schools, per se, because there's just one line of schools, right? So if someone didn't go through that school system in St. James, are they still being part of the community?

Mauricio: Yeah I mean, if, I mean even if you don't grow up there, yeah I guess, if you live there... You interact with all the people around town, you know, you shop at the businesses and stuff like that... yeah, I guess, events the city puts on, yeah I think so.

Jack: What qualities do you think people from different groups need to have in order to try and understand each other, understand different perspectives?

Mauricio: I think compassion is huge. I think that's probably the biggest thing, in my opinion, to understand other groups because... Yeah compassion is huge like, I mean, it's understandable that someone doesn't know what someone's going through, you know, how do you expect this person to know what this other person is going through... but, but, I think even if they don't know what they're going through, they should still have some sort of compassion to try to understand like: Yeah, I've never been through person's experience, but, it seems like it's tough for them, so maybe I should try to understand, even though I've never been through that situation. Yeah, I think compassion, empathy, sympathy... like those are, those are *key things* to sort of help people understand each other...

Jack: Are there any of these kinds of experiences in St. James that this kind of population faces?

Mauricio: Regarding?

Jack: Regarding experiences that the white population of St. James might not have.

Mauricio: Yeah, I would say the biggest one is just like, the experience of immigration. That's the biggest thing that they don't... Yeah I mean, I assume most of them haven't had to go through that immigration process or experience. And so I think *that* is the biggest thing that they might not understand.

Jack: Did you grow up in St James or did you, did you immigrate to St. James?

Mauricio: I grew up in St. James. I. I was born there, and then we had this thing where we had to move to Texas for like 2 years, but, but then I moved back, so for the majority of my life... I was born and I lived in and went to school in St. Jame.

Jack: Do you think just being exposed to that one perspective in a small town limits your ability for compassion or empathy? Or do you think it makes it harder to have that quality?

Mauricio: I think it depends on the kind of town you have, the makeup of people you have. I guess, I would *like* to think that people in our town have a sort of better., a little better understanding of the immigration experience, because so many of our Spanish population had to go through, or I knew some who had to go through that process. So, I'd, I'd like to think our town has a good idea...

Jack: What kind of conversations across groups do you think might be hard to have?

Mauricio: I think conversations about why we do the things we do, because ultimately the things we do are the same. We go to work because we want to have a good life, want to, you know, have a good place for us, ourselves and our families, and I think if we start there, people understand so much better. Because at the end of the day, we're all trying to do the same thing, we're all just trying to live life, live a happy life. Have a good family, and have good opportunities for ourselves and for our families and for our loved ones. And I think if we start there, that'd be a good starting point because people... that's what everybody is trying to do.

Jack: In trying to understand each other, do you think there are any warnings or like caution signs that people should try to avoid talking about or bringing up in order to avoid unnecessary conflict in having conversations?

Mauricio: They should try to avoid the idea that immigrants are like criminals because they committed a crime. Not every immigrant came here illegally, there's plenty that came here legally. You know, through the process, or they got a VISA or like.. But I feel like there's just this whole like.. idea of like... immigrants being criminals or like... I dunno, I shouldn't use that word, cause even if you did, y'know, even if you did cross the border illegally, and you committed a crime, I guess, there's just so much there to unpack and to know, and you can't really judge someone based off of one action. So, that's, I guess , that's one thing caution point.

Jack: Do you think that the perception pervades in St James at all, or do you think it's been– that opinion doesn't really come across in the community?

Mauricio: I feel like as people have lived there longer, that, I think that idea has gone away. I don't think it's there. If I remember correctly, I think, one of my coworkers who I worked with at a local grocery store said that like: "For the most part, St. James has always been like a majority white, mostly white, and then the hispanics didn't come until the like, 90s, 80s or 90s." And then that's when, you know, the Hispanics started coming to town. And so I think, over time, I think culturally, gone away.

Jack: Is there any last things that you think we should know about either difficult conversations to have, or caution signs or things to avoid, or just anything about St. James, just to wrap up?

Mauricio: Like I said, I think it would conflict if we just start with the fact that we're all trying to do the same thing. We're all trying to just live a good life. And so, starting from that, and trying to understand the other person *from that point*, cause that's what everybody's trying to do, I think is *so* important. And compassion is very important in understanding other people. I think, not not assuming you know things about everybody's—like a cautionary thing you should do— you can make an assumption about this person, and it may be right, but it also could be wrong. So I think going in with no assumptions about that person, just really trying to understand where they're coming from... Just listening, and even if you maybe, you know, don't agree with them, you can try to understand *how* and *why* they, they did. The way they think. Instead of just judging them

Jack: Right thank you so much for your time, this was very helpful.

Mauricio: Yeah.