

## Strategic Conversation



learner-centred  
establishing trust  
radical

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# White Spaces & White Fears: Speaking from a North African Woman

SUBMITTED BY **Amira Nanis**

**In order to write, we must tell our stories. In order to tell our stories, we must be true. And in order to be true, we must show our experiences and embrace our emotions.**

Coming to North America has shaped my understanding of **freedom and happiness** and I have come to see that the Western idea of luxury is nothing but an illusion. The truth is, **privilege determines who gets to thrive**. Privileged people reap the benefits of this world, while **foreigners, immigrants and Indigenous peoples** are left with the scraps. We are forced to work three times harder just to earn a fraction of the respect others receive automatically. And even then, respect is not guaranteed.

We are expected to be **grateful but not outspoken**, hardworking but never demanding, strong but never too bold. We must disguise our true selves because, to white people, we are **too different, too aggressive, too much**. But the truth is, this so-called “kindness” that many privileged people exhibit is **just a mask**—a disguise for the deeper issue at hand: **racism**.

For white people, the word racism is deeply uncomfortable. It makes them defensive rather than reflective. Instead of acknowledging their privilege and responsibility, they often say, I know I’m privileged, without truly understanding what that means or what they have done to benefit from it. This is what I want to explore in my conversation:

- The difference between feeling unsafe and feeling uncomfortable
- How words and discussions shape the flow of a conversation
- Why fragility is used as a defence mechanism against accountability

### What is White Fragility and What Does It Really Mean?

White fragility is the discomfort, defensiveness or even anger that white people experience when their privilege is challenged. It manifests in dismissive reactions, guilt-driven silence or shifting the conversation away from accountability.

### I Am Different. So Are You. Let’s Talk About It.

Difference should not be feared—it should be understood. But often, when we speak our truths, we are met with **resistance rather than curiosity**. Why is it so difficult for some to simply listen?

### Being Unsafe vs. Being Uncomfortable

There is a difference between feeling **unsafe** and feeling **uncomfortable** in a conversation about race and privilege. Being uncomfortable means confronting truths that may challenge your worldview. Being unsafe means being in actual danger. Too often, white discomfort is mistaken for a personal attack, while the actual safety of marginalized people is ignored.

# Radical Welcome: A practice, not just a feeling

**Radical welcome** is the intentional act of creating space where people—especially those from marginalized backgrounds—can show up fully, speak honestly and be heard without having to soften their truth to be accepted. It requires courage, humility and a commitment to equity.

## 5 Key Components of a Radical Welcome

### Emotional Honesty

Welcome real experiences and emotions—even when they challenge norms or make us uncomfortable.

### Active Listening Without Defensiveness

Respond with curiosity, not correction. Resist the urge to explain or defend when someone names harm.

### Power Awareness

Understand how social power, privilege and positionality show up in conversations—and act to balance them.

### Accountability and Repair

When harm happens, acknowledge it, take responsibility and stay engaged in repairing the relationship.

### Centring Marginalized Voices

Shift the focus from dominant comfort to collective safety. Let the most impacted lead the truth-telling.

It's time to stop tiptoeing around the truth.

**Let's talk about it.** ♦

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### References:

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2. Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism.* Oxford University Press.
3. hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom.* Routledge.



**Scenario:**

## Intake Meeting—“Too Direct?”

**Setting:** A small, quiet office. Emma is friendly, kind and well-meaning. She's also nervous about “saying the wrong thing.” Nadia has agreed to share her learning goals, but quickly notices the tension in the room when she starts talking honestly.

**Emma:**

So, Nadia, we're really happy to have you here. I just want to learn a bit more about your background and goals. What brings you to our program?

**Nadia:**

I used to teach back home. University-level English. Here, they told me I have to “start over.” I want to improve my writing and figure out how to work again. But it's... hard.

**Emma:**

*(smiling nervously)* Yes, yes... that must be hard. But you're here now, and that's what matters, right?

**Nadia:**

*(pause)* I don't like when people say that. “You're here now.” It feels like you're ignoring what I've lost. I'm tired of being told to be positive all the time. Can I be honest?

**Emma:**

*(visibly uncomfortable)* Oh—I didn't mean it that way. I'm so sorry if I offended you. That wasn't my intention.

**Nadia:**

I know. But I need to be able to say how I feel, even if it makes people uncomfortable. I have to start over in a country that doesn't see me the way I see myself. That's real.

**Emma:**

*(takes a breath)* Thank you for saying that. I... guess I feel a bit defensive because I try so hard to be welcoming. But maybe I need to listen more and fix less.

**Nadia:**

*(softly)* That's all I need. Just let me speak without having to soften everything for you.

**Emma:**

You're right. This is your space too. Let's start over—with honesty this time.

### Reflections

- Nadia's honesty created discomfort—but that discomfort was a gateway to truth.
- Emma initially deflected (“that wasn't my intention”), a classic move rooted in fragility.
- But when she leaned in instead of pulling away, the conversation shifted.
- This is what “radical welcome” looks like—not always easy, but transformative.

## Scenario:

# “Uncomfortable or Unsafe?”

**Setting:** A virtual adult literacy tutoring session over Zoom. The learner, Amina, is a newcomer woman from Pakistan working hard to improve her reading and writing. Her tutor, Jan, is a white Canadian volunteer in her 50s. Amina is articulate, determined and direct. Jan is friendly but struggles with confrontation and tends to avoid uncomfortable conversations.

**Amina:**

*(with calm assertiveness)* Jan, I wanted to say something about yesterday's lesson. When I was reading and you said, “We've gone over this so many times already,” it made me feel like you were frustrated with me. It felt like you didn't believe I was trying.

**Jan:**

*(visibly flustered)* Oh... wow, okay. I wasn't expecting this. I'm starting to feel a bit unsafe right now. This feels very confrontational.

**Amina:**

*(surprised)* I'm not trying to confront you. I'm just telling you how your words made me feel. I thought this was a space where I could speak honestly.

**Jan:**

I understand, but your tone is making me really uncomfortable. I don't feel okay continuing this session. I think I need to talk to the program coordinator before we go further.

**Amina:**

*(pauses, takes a deep breath)* I see. That's disappointing. I came here to learn—to have a real conversation. But now I feel like I've done something wrong by speaking up. I'm not yelling. I'm not being rude. I'm just being honest.

**Amina:**

*(quieter)* I've seen this before. When someone like me speaks up, we get labelled as difficult. Or the session ends. Or someone reports us. And that's what makes me feel unsafe—not being corrected, but being silenced.

## Reflections

- Amina's directness is a strength and reflects her trust in the learning environment.
- Jan's discomfort is valid, but her use of the word “unsafe” is a misapplication—it shuts down dialogue rather than opening it.
- When white educators mislabel direct communication from racialized learners as aggression or “too much,” it creates real risks: exclusion, labelling and lost opportunities.
- Discomfort is part of growth; genuine safety means having the courage and capacity to navigate those moments with care and respect.
- In CALP settings, building cultural humility and emotional resilience is essential for tutors supporting diverse learners.



# Reflective Questions for CALP Staff

**How do I typically respond when someone gives me direct feedback—especially if it challenges my tone, actions or assumptions?**

Do I become defensive, or do I stay open and curious?

**Have I ever used the word “unsafe” when what I was actually feeling was uncomfortable?**

What impact might that have had on the person speaking to me—especially if they were from a marginalized group?

**Do I expect certain communication styles (e.g., soft-spoken, “polite,” indirect) to be the norm?**

How might these expectations silence or misinterpret colleagues or learners who come from different cultural norms around communication?

**How can I make room for emotionally honest conversations—even when they’re difficult—without centring my own discomfort?**

What would it look like to sit with discomfort in service of trust and equity?

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Images by Naomi Bly

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