Connecting Conversation B:
Lives of Action and Purpose Text Handout

*From our I*Express Innovation Initiative*

The selections below are designed to be used with the Four Boosters Connecting Conversation B as examples for the Lives of Action and Purpose conversations.

Lady Gaga

(adapted from: *Lady Gaga and the Life of Passion* by David Brooks, NY Times, Oct. 23, 2015)

Earlier this week I watched some young musicians perform Lady Gaga songs in front of Lady Gaga. As India Carney's voice rose and swooped during the incredible anthemic versions of her dance hits, Gaga sat enraptured. Her eyes moistened. Occasionally her arms would fling up in amazement. Finally, she just stood up and cheered. It was at a dinner hosted by Americans for the Arts, a leading nonprofit organization promoting the arts and arts education. Gaga received an award, along with Sophia Loren, Herbie Hancock and others.

Her acceptance speech was as dramatic as the music. Tears flowing, she said that this blessing of respectability was "the best thing that's ever happened to me." And she remembered her childhood dreams this way: "I suppose that I didn't know what I would become, but I always wanted to be extremely brave and I wanted to be a constant reminder to the universe of what passion looks like. What it sounds like. What it feels like."

That passage stuck in the head and got me thinking. When we talk about Lady Gaga and the Life of Passion which is sort of a cliché, what exactly do we mean?

I suppose that people who live with passion start out with an especially intense desire to complete themselves. We are the only animals who are naturally unfinished. We have to bring ourselves to fulfillment, to integration and to coherence…

…First, people with passion have the courage to dig down and play with their issues. We all have certain core concerns and tender spots that preoccupy us through life. Writers and artists may change styles over the course of their careers, but most of them are turning over the same few preoccupations in different ways. For Lady Gaga fame and body issues recur throughout her videos. She is always being hurt or thrown off balconies…

…Second, people with passion have the courage to be themselves with abandon. We all care what others think about us. People with passion are just less willing to be ruled by the tyranny of public opinion. As the saying goes, they somehow get on the other side of fear…Gaga is nothing if not permanently out there; the rare celebrity who is willing to portray herself as a monster, a witch or disturbing cyborg — someone prone to inflicting pain.

Lady Gaga is her own unique creature, whom no one could copy. But she is indisputably a person who lives an amplified life, who throws her contradictions out there, who makes herself a work of art. People like that confront the rest of us with the question a friend of mine perpetually asks: Who would you be and what would you do if you weren't afraid?

Lin Manuel Miranda

(adapted from: *Hamilton: Meet the Man behind the Broadway's Hip Hop Masterpiece*, Rolling Stone Magazine*)*

Miranda is equally conversant with the oeuvres of Stephen Sondheim and Big Pun, of Alan Menken and Biggie, of XTC and Rubén Blades — and these days, he's tight enough with Sondheim himself to send the 85-year-old composer rap songs he thinks he'll like. Miranda credits a lot of his cultural nimbleness to the "bifurcation of my childhood," adding, "I've been code-switching since I was five." He grew up commuting between a Hispanic neighborhood in northern Manhattan and a highly selective Upper East Side public school for gifted kids, while spending his summers in his father's native Puerto Rico, and later going on to college at artsy Wesleyan. He's been making art, putting on little shows, shooting home movies, since he was small — he wrote his first musicals before high school. So, yeah, Miranda has no call for a rhyming dictionary — he just needs to put his brain on shuffle.

Miranda is 35 but looks weary enough to seem slightly older, a condition that's probably temporary. He's still puffy-lidded from the exhaustion of simultaneously tending to a baby musical and an actual baby — his wife, Vanessa, gave birth to a son, Sebastian, as *Hamilton*'s tech rehearsals began. Sebastian, whose name is only tenuously linked to his dad's love for Menken's *Little Mermaid* score, just started sleeping through the night.

Miranda has been a prominent Broadway figure since the 2008 debut of his first musical, *In the Heights,* which combined hip-hop, salsa and more-traditional show tunes. It won him a Tony and a Grammy; his acceptance speech for the former was itself a rap, half-freestyled in front of a TV audience of millions. *Hamilton,* though, is a much bigger deal: Profound, audacious and deeply moving, it's a universally acclaimed masterpiece, arguably the first real hip-hop musical…

Perhaps inevitably, Miranda has been hearing the word "genius" thrown about. "You know what's a great way of tricking people into thinking you're a genius?" he says — when he gets excited, his speaking voice sounds nearly identical to Woody Allen's, while he raps in an addictive whine that lands somewhere between Eminem and the guys from the Pharcyde. "Write a show about geniuses!"

Miranda isn't sure exactly where he's going from here. There isn't much precedent for a Broadway composer-star, let alone one who can seriously rap. There are some stand-alone album projects he'd like to do, and there's always the temptation of Hollywood. "It's tricky for me," he says. "I have a couple of ideas for films. But, you know, Quentin Tarantino acted in a play, and I'm very happy that he got that opportunity, but I also want him to keep making movies because he's one of the best people in the world at making movies! I have these other interests, but I've worked really hard to get good at writing shows, so it's not a matter of stopping that to do other things. It's a matter of how much else can I fit in my life." There is one thing he won't try, though: "I like the quiet it takes to pursue an idea the way I pursued *Hamilton,* but I couldn't write a book," he says, then laughs. "Because there's no applause at the end of writing a book."

Rabbi Akiva

Akiva ben Joseph lived in the first century C.E. during a tumultuous time in Jewish history. He came from humble parentage and was an uneducated shepherd. He worked as a shepherd for Kalba Savua, a wealthy citizen of Jerusalem. Akiva fell in love with Rachel, Kalba Savua's wise and kind daughter. Although Akiva was very bright, he was ashamed to be illiterate. He could not even read the Hebrew alphabet. Rachel was smitten with him, and encouraged him to study, dismissing all counter arguments. Akiva was skeptical.

One day, as the Talmud describes, Akiva was walking past a stream, and he noticed a huge boulder, with a gaping hole, laying in the middle of the rushing water. He realized that surrounding bits of water and constant pressure of the passing water had penetrated the surface of the stony granite. He drew inspiration as he thought that if the drops of water can carve a hole in hard rock, then with hard work and perseverance, he felt he could learn Torah. Rachel encouraged him. They fell in love, and she consented to a secret betrothal on the condition that from that point on he devoted himself to study. When Akiva's wealthy father-in-law learned of their betrothal, he drove his daughter from his house and swore that he would never help her while Akiva remained her husband.

But, they were not deterred. Akiva and his wife lived in such poverty that she sold her hair to enable Akiva to pursue his studies. A story tells that once, when they had only a bundle of straw for a bed, a poor man came to beg some straw for a bed for his sick wife. Akiva at once divided with him his scanty possession, remarking to his wife, "You see, there are those poorer than we!" This pretended poor man was none other than the prophet Elijah, who had come to test Akiva (Ned. 50a).

Both Rachel and Akiva had much more ambitious plans. They were not content to merely teach Akiva to read and study Torah superficially. By agreement with his wife, Akiva spent twelve years away from home, pursuing his studies.

Returning at the end of that time and on the point of entering his home, he overheard his wife say to a neighbor who was critical of his long absence: "If I had my wish, he should stay another twelve years at the academy." Akiva returned to the academy, emerging twelve years later as a famous rabbi and scholar, escorted by 24,000 disciples. When his wife went to embrace him, some of his students, not knowing who she was, sought to restrain her. But Akiva exclaimed, "Let her alone; for what I am, and for what you are, is hers." (Ned. 50a, Ket. 62b et seq.). Happily, Rabbi Akiva and Rachel reconciled with her father as well.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg

(adapted from *Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Gloria Steinem on the Unending Fight for Women's Rights*, by Philip Galanes, NY Times November 14, 2015)

These women have a history. Long before she was crowned "Notorious R.B.G." — a nod to the tough-guy rapper Notorious B.I.G. — for her fierce intellect, Justice Ginsburg was a trailblazing litigator for women's rights. Beginning in the early 1970s, as a professor at Columbia Law School, its first tenured woman, and as a founder of the American Civil Liberties Union's Women's Rights Project, she successfully argued five cases before the Supreme Court, focusing on laws and government policies built on gender stereotypes. One of many notable cases she took on was before abortions were legal in this country, young African American women were being sterilized without their permission. Although abortions were illegal, a notorious obstetrician would automatically sterilize a woman if he delivered her third child. RBG brought this to the attention of the ACLU, and with her considerable reputation convinced them to accept the case, and helped them fight and win the case before the Supreme Court.

Although she graduated top of her class, she had "three strikes against her." She was Jewish, and the Wall Street firms were just beginning to accept Jews. Then, she was a woman, and most importantly, she was the mother of a 4 year old girl, Jane.

RBG was continuously criticized for championing women's rights, by riding on the "coattails of the civil rights movement". Although the women's movement was disproportionately pioneered by black woman in this country, this change for women's rights was occurring all over the world, even in homogeneous places, like Sweden, where there were no racial differences.

How did RBG decide to go to law school? She fell in love with Marty, a successful tax lawyer, "an extraordinary man. He was so secure in himself that he never regarded RBG as a threat." They decided when they met- she at 17, he at 18 that they would go together- whether it be in medicine, law or business. Marty was a devoted golf team member, and at Cornell chemistry lab was held in the afternoons. Medicine was out. He wanted to go to graduate school at Harvard, and the business school wasn't accepting women. Business school was out. So that left law. She feels strongly that this is an important message about "having it all." We don't have it all. Who does? I've had it all in the course of my life, but at different times.

Louis D. Brandeis

(adapted from The Choice that Brings Us Here in *Three Times Chai* by Laney Katz Becker)

For Louis D. Brandeis, life at Harvard Law School was not easy, although it wasn't the curriculum that made his journey so difficult. For three years, students sat next to him uninvited at lunch each day. They said things like, "Brandeis, you're brilliant. You could end up on the Supreme Court if only you weren't a Jew. Why don't you convert? Then all your problems would be solved." Brandeis listened but never responded.

By his final year of law school, Brandeis's preeminence could no longer be denied. Jewish or not, he was invited to join the honor society. It was an electric moment—the first time that the exclusive society had accepted a Jew. On the evening of the official introduction, the room was hushed; the atmosphere was thick. All eyes were on Brandeis as he walked to the lectern. Slowly he looked around the room.

"I'm sorry," he said, "that I was born a Jew."

With that, the room erupted into applause. There was an explosion of shouting and cheers.

"We have convinced him," the members of the audience thought, "Finally, finally, he has seen our point!"

Brandeis waited for the excitement to abate. When silence was reestablished, he began again. "I am sorry," he said, "that I was born a Jew, but only because I wish I had the privilege of choosing Judaism on my own."

This time there was no applause, no explosion of shouting or cheers. This time there was only silence. When the quiet had grown uncomfortable, members of the exclusion Harvard honor society began to stand. However they didn't walk out. Instead, awed by Brandeis's conviction and strength of character, and his unequivocal choice, the members of the society gave the honoree a standing ovation.

Louis Brandeis was the first Jew to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court. He graduated from Harvard Law School at the age of 20, and quickly became known as "the people's lawyer" because he refused payment for his services as he fought tirelessly for workers' rights and the breakup of monopolies. In 1916, President Wilson nominated Brandeis to the Supreme Court. Though Brandeis faced bitter opposition from anti-Semites and supporters of big business, he was confirmed, and became the first Jew to sit on the Supreme Court. His decisions affirmed individual liberty and privacy and opposed unchecked governmental power.