

Crossing The Great Divide

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I grew up in the Atlanta Unitarian Church at the same time as Dr. Martin Luther King was preaching at Ebenezer Baptist Church. I am a lifelong Unitarian Universalist (UU), political and social activist as well as a student of religious, political and social history. But early on, I learned that political tribalism could lead to violence when I was beaten up in my high school gym class in Pennsylvania for leading the local presidential campaign for Hubert Humphrey.

After graduating college with a degree in Political Science, I earned a living working in all three branches of state government, starting with the legislative, judicial, then executive. I was also active in political campaigns and advocated before federal, state and local government.

After passing the Maryland bar. I created my own legal and government relations practice and was able to prove to myself that I could be a successful state lobbyist for nonprofits without compromising my ethics or my deeply held UU values. I was especially proud to have been the paid lobbyist for Free State Justice when we got Maryland's LGB anti-discrimination law passed in 2001. (I had been told at the time that representing "gays" was a career ending move.)

When Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice (UUSJ) was formed in 2000, I served on its first Board of Directors and chaired its Advocacy Committee for five years. In 2005, I helped create the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of Maryland, and I have been its Chair for the last seven years. Last year, I ran the statewide effort to UU the Vote, and I wrote a guidebook about how to talk to people who don't vote.

In short, my lifetime of experience has given me an understanding of how change has happened and can happen in our society, what is possible and what is counterproductive. I do not subscribe to magical thinking about creating a class-based "revolution" that will make everything better, nor do I think that "all you need is love."

But we must bridge our political divides if we hope to save our democracy, and I firmly believe that love must be the driving force behind and a key component of any successful effort. How many of us have struggled with friends or family members who espouse beliefs that are at odds with ours, beliefs that seem anathema to us? We don't understand them, and we don't know how to talk to them.

America has been sorting itself into Red and Blue camps geographically, religiously, and culturally for a while, and each side has become more extreme over time as they talk only to like-minded people. This is objectively true for both sides.

Remember, it wasn't so long ago that many Democrats were openly pro-life or pro-gun, and others were not sure about marriage equality or trans rights or concerned with the presence of Confederate statues around the country. And only recently, there were Republicans who supported civil rights legislation and some supported abortion, affirmative action, gun control, or trans rights.

Now, each political camp has leaders and media that perpetuate the division and feed a continuous stream of information that attacks the other side. The divide has grown in recent years, and it has become much more dangerous. Fortunately, thoughtful people on both sides are concerned about the divide and exhausted by the constant warfare between the opposing camps.

So, what can we do? Many who have trouble understanding their political opponents find it easier to dismiss them as backwards, ignorant, gullible or malevolent. It is not uncommon, even in UU circles, to denigrate our political opponents, to treat them with contempt, call them crazy, stupid or "deplorable."

This is not only unhelpful in swaying the persuadable and getting progressive policies enacted; it harms both them and us. Dr. King spoke eloquently about how contempt breeds hatred, triggers hatred in others, and destroys those who act from hate and contempt.

In particular, liberals need to stop reflexively accusing others of racism and sexism. We need to recognize that others may not be as informed or aware as we are of America's history of oppression and stop ascribing evil intent to actions or statements that are often more ignorant than intentional. A statement or action does not need malicious intent to harm another, but lack of intent should make a difference in how we handle it.

Raising awareness of actions that offend or harm others is different than attacking someone as a racist, and it can be counterproductive. When we do this to our own potential allies, it insists on a level of purity that is unattainable, even by ourselves, and it looks like we are more interested showing how right and "woke" we are at the expense of well-meaning people who make a mistake. Even worse, when done to political opponents, it triggers anger, resentment and even hatred, and prevents any real discussion of issues.

Another mistake we make is failing to listen or even attempt to understand opponents' situations and grievances. A liberal, upper-middle-class person may have strong feelings about certain media and politicians but be oblivious about how recent history has affected many working-class people who have watched those media and supported those politicians.

The 2008 recession created historic levels of home loss and job loss and undermined the common belief that every succeeding generation would have it better than those before.

Minorities may be used to struggling with political and economic systems that put them at a disadvantage, but many whites had never experienced the threat of significant economic loss or the need to overcome hardship. After all, studies have shown that people who lose something, whether it be money, a home, a job, privilege, or dignity, always feel it more acutely than if they had never had it at all. And the threat of loss can also be traumatic. Evidence of the impact can be found in the huge spike in both drug addiction and suicide among white males, and average lifespan dropped for the first time.

Cultural changes have also been occurring rapidly. Participation in organized religion has been dropping while traditional roles and values regarding sex, sexual orientation and gender identity

continue to evolve in the public culture. There has also been a growing awareness of systemic racism in the national culture, revealing uncomfortable truths.

When beliefs and institutions that help define peoples' social circles and identity are falling away or changing, they can easily think that their way of life is threatened. While loss of white privilege is certainly a part of this, it is not the whole story, and we do people a disservice if we make no attempt to listen to their personal experiences. There is a culture war because the culture is changing, and many feel adrift without long-standing anchors to keep them moored.

The alternative is to reach out to political opponents, reduce their fear, and engage in constructive dialogue. We must cross the divide and begin the healing. The fact is, those who are trying to undermine our democracy rely on the blind following of millions to support their actions. If we can undermine this support in the larger community, we can deny them the power they seek.

Understanding some of the reasons for opponents' beliefs is a start in making peace with them, but we also need to know how to talk to them. It may seem a daunting task to engage with political opponents, but there are ways to do it that are relatively easy to follow.

Dr. John Gottman, a famous social psychologist, set forth four rules to heal relationships:

1. "Focus on other people's distress, and focus on it empathetically. When others are upset about politics, listen to them respectfully. Try to understand their point of view before offering your own. Never listen only to rebut.
2. In your interactions with others, particularly in areas of disagreement, adopt the 'five-to-one rule' . . . Make sure you offer five positive comments for every criticism. . . .
3. No contempt is ever justified, even if, in the heat of the moment, you think someone deserves it. It is unjustified more often than you know, it is always bad for you, and it will never convince anyone that she is wrong.

4. Go where people disagree with you and learn from them. That means making new friends and seeking out opinions you know you don't agree with. How to act when you get there? See rules 1 to 3!"¹

I would also add that we need to avoid saying anything that could trigger defensiveness, fear, or anger. Stay away from terminology that could feel threatening to your opponent. Slogans like "Defund the Police" and "Abolish Prisons" may thrill progressives, but their direct and literal meaning scares many people, including many moderates and liberals, including the majority of African Americans. There is a reason that Maryland's African American Speaker of the House, Adrienne Jones, did not couch her strong police reform proposals that passed this year in terms of "defunding the police."

In his book, *Thank You for Arguing*, Jay Heinrichs says: "Fear compels people to act, and compulsion precludes a choice. No argument there, only naked instinct."² The last thing we need is highly motivated opponents taking action out of fear (even if we think the fear is unreasonable). Best to avoid triggering fear in any way.

As a positive strategy, move away from talking politics and about politicians and focus on issues. Many people who express a contrary ideology also support many progressive issues and policies.³ Stop talking about which group you identify with and start talking policies.

One way to do this, Heinrichs suggests, is to move every conversation from the past tense through the present tense to the future tense.

¹ Summarized in Brooks, Arthur C., *Love Your Enemies* (pp. 39-40). Broadside e-books. Kindle Edition.

² Heinrichs, Jay, *Thank You for Arguing*, p. 87.

³ "The American electorate consistently holds collectively left-of-center views on most policy issues even as it leans to the right on more general measures of ideology—as Lloyd A. Free and Hadley Cantril observed nearly five decades ago, the public is simultaneously operationally liberal and symbolically conservative." Grossmann, Matt; Hopkins, David A.. *Asymmetric Politics* (pp. 23-24). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

- The past tense involves conversations about blame, who did what terrible thing?
- “We use the present tense to talk about values: That is wrong. This is right.”⁴ The present tense involves what is important to you, and it can be helpful to clarify respective positions, but it is not usually enough to reach agreement.
- Future tense, however, is a deliberative discussion since it involves choices, where do we go from here? How do we solve this problem?

If your conversation starts with accusations about how awful your side is or how they messed up a particular issue, you can start talking about what you believe is important (a values statement in the present tense). Then, you can ask how they would go forward to solve the problem. Look for places where there you can agree. There is nothing wrong with conceding on facts or ideas they express, but then use them to make your own point.

I recently had a discussion with a relative who stated that he didn't think we needed to remove Confederate statues or rename military bases. His reason? “It's history.” I agreed that it they were part of history, but they betrayed their country and fought to preserve slavery, and I could see how African Americans would feel resentment that the country they fought now honored them. He conceded that point.

Another tactic (especially when dealing with a bully) is to ask questions. Sometimes “the only practical response is to get them to challenge their own assumptions. Don't strike back. Undermine their opinions by getting them to think about how they define their terms.”

“To ask these questions effectively, you need to make your opponent believe you're being openhearted and respectful. Keep in mind that the most hateful opinions are held by good people. Ask your questions as a friend. Love . . . conquers all. At the very least, you'll make people's

⁴ Heinrichs, Jay, *Thank You for Arguing*, Broadway Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York (2007, 2013, 2017, 2020), p. 28

comfortable assumptions a little less comfortable, . . . At best, your agreeable stances help achieve the nirvana of argument, agreeability.”⁵

Now, what do you do when you don’t feel the love? In his book, *Love Your Enemies*, Arthur Brooks says: “Your opportunity when treated with contempt is to change at least one heart—yours. You may not be able to control the actions of others, but you can absolutely control your reaction. You can break the cycle of contempt. You have the power to do that.”⁶

How? Act as if you felt loving. Ironically, studies have shown that “it is what we do that most often determines how we feel, not the other way around.”⁷

“In his bestselling classic, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey stated: ‘Love is a verb. Love—the feeling—is a fruit of love, the verb. . . . Love is something you do: the sacrifices you make, the giving of self. . . . Love is a value that is actualized through loving actions.’”⁸

And as Brooks says: “We don’t have to feel unity and brotherhood. We simply need to act in a spirit of unity and brotherhood, and the feelings will follow. By the same token, if we allow ourselves to indulge in habits of contempt—frowning as we listen to talk radio or getting angry at the latest outrageous statement from a politician—our emotions will follow those actions as well.”⁹

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁶ Brooks, *Op.cit.*, pp. 42-44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

Also, “show gratitude. Gratitude is, quite simply, a contempt killer. You cannot have contempt for someone to whom you are grateful.”¹⁰ Be thankful for any meaningful dialogue and demonstrate respect and concern. Contrary to common belief, familiarity breeds compassion, not contempt. This is how to reach out with love, respect and gratitude.

I can tell you that this works since I have done it successfully, even with family members. There are also several groups that sponsor opportunities for opposing sides to have meaningful dialogue. America Talks (<https://americatalks.us/>) held a National Week of Conversation in June and some of our congregants participated in it. There’s also the Listen First Project (<https://www.listenfirstproject.org/>), the Civic Health Project (<https://www.civichealthproject.org/>) and CommonAlly (<https://www.commonally.com/>) whose slogan is “Screw Politics. This is About Issues.” I have also conducted training in Deep Canvassing to engage people and encourage voting. There are many ways to get started.

The point is, if we want to overcome the barriers that separate us from political opponents, we must engage them. To bridge the great divide, we can and must stop saying and doing things that trigger anger and fear in others, and instead actively listen to their stories, ask questions to learn, not just to rebut, talk about issues in the future tense, and show them the same respect, gratitude and love that we show our allies and friends. Think what that could do for those contentious family conversations. It has already helped mine.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 58.