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INTRODUCTION: THE STATE OF OUR UNION

The United States is acutely divided. We are #metoo, and we are “Make America great again.” We are gun rights, and we are gun control. We are oil and coal, and we are climate change. We are tearing down Confederate monuments, and we are building walls to keep immigrants out. We are marching and shouting, and we are weeping and cheering. We are tweeting and sharing, and we are liking and unfriending. We are in turmoil.

Political polarization is at an all-time high, and it’s affecting us. Democrats and Republicans hold more disparate views on issues and more negative views of each other than ever before in recent history.¹ This conflict causes gridlock in Washington, DC, but it also has an impact closer to home. You might have a childhood friend whose Facebook posts upset you. You might avoid family gatherings. You might distance yourself from friends. You might feel tense about interacting with certain coworkers. This divisiveness is taking a toll on the mental health of the American public, with most adults reporting increased stress associated with political conflict.²

We are having trouble talking with and listening to people whose political views are different from our own. We choose news



sources that support our beliefs. Our choices guide the complex algorithms of social media that tell us what we want to hear and shield us from opposing views. We find ourselves in a collective existential crisis as we disagree about what is truth. As media frames opposing viewpoints as shouting matches and comments on Facebook and Twitter convey vitriol and accusation, we shy away from people and organizations whose positions may conflict with our own. We take refuge in echo chambers of like-minded people expressing views we support, cheering each other on as we rake our common enemies over the coals. Within our bubbles, we are free from challenge, safe from alternative perspectives, comforted by our own certainty.

Made of soap and water, bubbles are beautiful and fun and magical, but they are also fragile. The bubbles we create from political insulation are similarly unsustainable. If we cannot survive outside of our bubbles; if we cannot tolerate listening to our friends and families and neighbors; if we cannot see beyond our own perspectives; if we view our fellow citizens as enemies, how can we sustain our relationships, our communities, our country?

MOVING BEYOND OUR BUBBLES

Despite these divisive dynamics, I am hopeful we can bridge the political divide. My personal and professional experiences inform this hope. As a professor of counseling psychology, I teach classes on helping skills, leadership, and community collaboration. I conduct research that informs policy and practice, and my expertise has been solicited by the Institute of Medicine, Congress, and the White House. I've organized and facilitated educational programs and difficult dialogues in communities and professional settings about a range of topics including sexual orientation, law enforcement, and religion. My life's work is not just about understanding problems; it's about what can be done to alleviate them.

In the wake of the 2016 election, the problem of political polarization was evident, and I started developing tools to help people who were struggling with the disconnect between themselves and people outside their bubble. "The Flowchart That Will Resolve All Political Conflict in Our Country," which I introduce in Chapter 1, is where I began. Within 6 months after the election, I was offering a 2-hour interactive, skills-building workshop for my local community. Hundreds of people have participated in the program since that time, with an overwhelmingly positive response.

When I ask people what they're taking away from the workshop, participants say they have developed a more open mind, greater willingness to listen to others, less fear of confrontation, and confidence to keep trying to connect rather than withdraw. They also express commitments to use the skills and perspectives they gained. For example, one participant said, "I need to stop trying to convince others on the 'other side' of their erroneous thinking, and instead listen more to understand where they are coming

from.” One described the workshop as “a reminder that to have true dialogue, I must listen and be open, even when the ideas presented feel threatening.” Another stated, “I will try to judge less, take my time, and look at other people’s views.” Particularly promising was the shift from feeling discouraged to the expression of hope.

People started asking me for more resources—more than I could offer in a flowchart or 2-hour session—so I wrote this book. My aim is to support people who want to connect with those who have different political views and values by offering concrete skills, as well as overarching principles and strategies that will promote constructive conversation. Moreover, as a psychologist, I am aware of the vast knowledge base my field can offer to address challenges people are facing due to political polarization, and I want to make these resources available to everyone.

Many people feel paralyzed by political polarization. I encounter a lot of pessimism that such dialogue is a viable or desirable endeavor. On the basis of my experience in these workshops, I am optimistic about the potential to bridge the political divide through dialogue. *Beyond Your Bubble* offers teachable skills and information that can move us toward civility and connection. I am hopeful, and, equipped with the tools herein, I believe you will be, too.

Although this book is based primarily on experiences within the United States, conflict and desire for dialogue exist throughout the world. One only need look at the United Kingdom,³ Brazil,⁴ and Malaysia⁵ to realize that polarization and opportunities for bridging the divide are widespread. The political divisions and contentious issues that keep people from dialogue may vary across the globe, and it is important to consider cultural values and communication to guide implementation of these strategies in varying contexts. Nonetheless, I suspect there are ideas and guidance in this book that will be useful around the world.

MY EXPERIENCE WITH DIALOGUE

As you may have sensed, I don't shy away from controversial subjects. In fact, one of my most meaningful dialogue experiences focused on a highly divisive topic. I've been pro-choice since high school, a view that became further solidified as I became a women's studies major and worked as a pregnancy counselor after college. My job was at a clinic that provided reproductive health care, including abortions; I counseled hundreds of women with unintended pregnancies, providing contraceptive education and support. Regularly, I steeled myself to hurry past protesters on my way into work. As they hurled accusations of "baby killer" toward me, the last thing I wanted to do was prolong my interactions with pro-life advocates. I had come to see pro-lifers as antiwoman and hypocritical, as I witnessed how they distressed our patients.

Over time, however, I grew weary of the animosity I felt toward the pro-lifers. And I recognized that my anger was not benefiting the women I was trying to help. Thanks to a timely radio story, I learned about Common Ground,⁶ a St. Louis-based group that was fostering dialogue among pro-choice and pro-life individuals. I reached out to the director of a local pro-life crisis pregnancy center to start a Common Ground group in our town. She was game, and we invited our respective communities to participate. Despite some skepticism and resistance from my fellow pro-choice advocates, several welcomed the opportunity to talk with pro-lifers. Three years earlier, when I started work at the clinic, I certainly would not have imagined myself reaching out to collaborate with the director of a pro-life crisis pregnancy center to start a dialogue group. Yet there I was, at the public library in Charlottesville, Virginia, with pro-life and pro-choice people who wanted to talk with and listen to each other.

At the meetings, we established ground rules, shared our perspectives, and identified areas of agreement. For me, these

conversations humanized people whose views I was in the habit of dismissing as ignorant. Hearing them describe their values, I recognized a logic and morality that, although different from my own, were consistent with their beliefs and experiences. Evaluated from my frame of reference, their stance didn't make sense; however, the underlying stories revealed new insights that guided me to understand how they arrived at their conclusions. It became clear that the opinions about abortion voiced in this group were far more complex than could be represented on bumper stickers and that the usual spokespeople for the opposing sides did not represent the range of individuals who identified with these labels. I listened to a wide array of people, including pro-life feminists and pro-choice people of faith. I found myself articulating my own values with greater nuance than I typically had occasion to express within pro-choice circles (where everyone presumably has a similar viewpoint). This dialogue did not change my views on reproductive choice, but it did change my views about people who disagree with me on abortion. While still recognizing our differences, it had become clear to me that we were all ethical, intelligent, good-hearted people. Best of all, my participation in Common Ground showed me how dialogue could provide insight into the healing process within conflicted communities. We might not end up agreeing on substantive policy or values, but we could humanize rather than demonize those with whom we disagree, we could exchange ideas respectfully, we could deepen our understanding of ourselves and each other. Given the internal and external turmoil I had experienced regarding pro-life advocates, these felt like very satisfying outcomes.

Flash forward 2 decades: After the 2016 election, I saw liberals struggling to understand how so many people could vote for Donald Trump. I heard conservatives feeling threatened and silenced by social justice advocates. I witnessed accusations of stupidity and corruption hurled from both sides. I worried that our deep divisions

were unraveling our democracy. I sought out resources, and I found some experts saying we need to talk to each other, but it was harder to find guidance on how to do so. As someone who is engaged in community and in politics, who teaches people how to heal, and who has experienced the power of dialogue, I thought I might have something to contribute. This book is my offering to the state of our union and to all of you.

MEET KEVIN AND CELINE⁷

Celine has an associate's degree and is an office manager in a small business. She and her friends care a lot about their local community. She supports her church and is active in her kids' school. She considers herself pro-life, but she's not an activist. Celine feels like liberals are always criticizing people like her, putting them down, calling them uneducated, so she mostly limits conversations with people who disagree about politics.

Kevin works for a nonprofit. He donates money to political organizations and is mystified by people who watch Fox News. He feels a sense of urgency about climate change and is incensed by roll-backs on environmental regulation. He hasn't been to church since he left home for college 20 years ago. He embraces opportunities to advocate for social justice.

Kevin and Celine are cousins. They've been avoiding each other because their opposing politics have gotten them into trouble at holiday gatherings and on Facebook in recent years. But their kids miss each other, so when they saw *Beyond Your Bubble* on Instagram, they got this book for their parents. Knowing they'd all see each other at an upcoming family wedding, the teens suggested their parents might each read it to help get past their differences. Celine and Kevin agreed, and they broke the ice at the wedding by making a plan to meet up and dialogue the following week.

We'll be following Celine and Kevin throughout the book as they engage in dialogue with each other. You'll see how they use the skills and activities to connect across political difference.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Beyond Your Bubble is intended as a resource for people who are interested in engaging in dialogue across political lines. It won't simply tell you what you should do; it will help you develop the skills to do it. Plus, the content is backed by scientific evidence and a wide range of human experience to give you practical and well-supported guidance on what fosters connection and understanding. This makes your new dialogue skills useful regardless of your place on the political spectrum and for deepening your conversations in any relationship and circumstance. You may be skeptical of dialogue, and you may encounter others who are disinclined to connect across the political divide. This book will help you decide whether you want to have dialogue, with whom, and in what contexts.

Read the book on your own or with other people who are interested in practicing these skills, such as an interactive book club. Reading the book with others may deepen your experience and better prepare you for dialogue. Alternatively, working through it alone might give you an opportunity to reflect on the material before trying to apply it. Either way, you will be exposed to useful ideas and skills.

Whether or not you read the book with others, practicing the skills you learn here will be helpful. You will get better at them and feel more confident, which will also increase your likelihood of engaging in meaningful dialogue on political themes. Whether you're someone who dives right into weighty political conflict or shies away from discord, you'll find something in this book that

will help you to be more effective interacting with folks across the political divide.

Chapter 1 will give you a sense of what dialogue is and what it isn't. It will also help you identify what draws you to dialogue and what gets in the way. You will learn that a successful exchange can be boiled down to just two things, and the rest of the book should equip you to do these two things well.

Is it hard to even imagine where to start? If so, Chapter 2 will lay the groundwork. You'll engage in individual preparation, as well as gain ideas for how to initiate dialogue.

Chapter 3 is about listening: why it's important and how to listen effectively using nonverbal signals, paraphrasing, and questions. If you have a difficult time responding without arguing, this will be a great chapter for you.

If you feel your blood pressure rising just imagining talking with someone on the other side of the political divide, Chapter 4 will help you anticipate and manage feelings that arise so you can keep your cool and stay engaged.

Chapter 5 offers strategies for seeing things through another person's eyes. If you find yourself wondering, "How could someone possibly think that?" try a perspective-shifting activity and learn different ways of viewing moral values.

Want to learn how to share your views most effectively? Chapter 6 explains how to tell your story, find common ground, and be as persuasive as possible. In my experience, how to talk is one of the first things people want to focus on. If you're eager to get to this material, it's fine to start there, but I encourage you to go back to familiarize yourself with Chapters 2 through 5. Talking is not very effective without the foundation of the other skills.

Chapter 7 puts dialogue skills in context. How will dialogue be affected by the relationship between you and another person, the skill level of both parties, the origins of your values.

How can sharing a pizza illustrate dynamics of dialogue across political lines?

Chapter 8 will help you develop an action plan and other tools to prepare for a successful conversation, including how to bring your dialogue to a close. You'll also find some final thoughts and encouragement to prepare you for dialogue. After that, all that's left to do is use the skills you've learned!

Additional materials will help you hone and implement your dialogue skills. If the book whets your appetite to read more or find groups supporting dialogue, check out the Additional Resources. The Communication Guidelines can help lay the groundwork for successful dialogue. If you're reading the book with others and want to practice skills, you'll find instructions for activities in Activities to Try With a Partner.

You might choose to read the book from cover to cover, or you might focus on skills that are most challenging for you. It might be helpful to skim the entire book, then dig deeper into areas that contain stumbling blocks for you.

I offer a caveat that this book is about applying these skills within the context of dialogue across political lines. It does not necessarily apply to the way you communicate with people who agree with you. Nor should these principles be assumed to apply to rhetoric in speeches or in written materials. There are other resources that address how to frame an argument to appeal to liberals and conservatives (for example, *Don't Think of an Elephant*⁸ and other works by George Lakoff, as well as research studies on moral framing⁹). There is a body of literature on persuasion outside of an interpersonal context (e.g., media messages) and for the purposes of marketing. Much of this literature focuses more on the content of the message than on the interpersonal context in which the message is delivered. That said, I think you will find material in this book that will inform your understanding of and ability to communicate with people across the range of political positions.

As you embark on this journey, I want to say how encouraged I am by your interest and your willingness to try to reach across the political divide. Openness to dialogue and to diverse viewpoints are important qualities as we work toward unifying our country and our world. Thank you for joining me in this brave endeavor.

NOTES

1. Pew Research Center. (2017). *The partisan divide on political values grows even wider*. <https://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>
2. American Psychological Association. (2017). *Stress in America: The state of our nation*. Washington, DC.
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4. Ortellado, P., & Ribeiro, M. M. (2018). Mapping Brazil's political polarization online. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/mapping-brazils-political-polarization-online-96434>
5. Bonura, C. (2015). *Political polarization, transition, and civil society in Thailand and Malaysia*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/political-polarization-transition-and-civil-society-thailand-and-malaysia>
6. Kelly, J. R. (1996). Truth, not truce: "Common Ground" on abortion, a movement within both movements. In J. L. Nolan (Ed.), *The American culture wars: Current contests and future prospects* (pp. 213–242). University Press of Virginia.
7. These characters are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased) is intended or should be inferred.
8. Lakoff, G. (2014). *The all new, don't think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate*. Chelsea Green.
9. Feinberg, M., & Willer, R. (2015). From gulf to bridge: When do moral arguments facilitate political influence? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(12), 1665–1681. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167215607842>