



Whenever my extended family planned to get together, my brother and I knew it was time to prepare for war. The enemies were my brother-in-law and my dad. The battlefield was politics. They were on one side of the ideological divide, and we were on the other. A few days before the family function, we would review casualties from the last discussion, formulate new war plans, gird up our loins like Book of Mormon warriors, and ready ourselves for battle. War was inevitable in those days.

While the dinner or event would start peacefully enough, conversations tended to veer into politics as if we were opposing magnets, helpless

Abandoning the Art of War

Three Ways to Improve Political Discussions with Family, Friends, and Just About Anyone

before some invisible, powerful pull. A light liberal jab here or a slight conservative uppercut there, and suddenly we would find ourselves, inescapably, brawling over some political issue like cowboys in a chaotic

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bar scene from an old Western. These battles raged for years, but in spite of the fervor and passion in which we engaged, there is not a single issue we debated in which one side changed the other side's mind. In fact, I finally realized that discussing politics was making me like them less, so we called a truce—no more discussing politics—and we have (mostly) avoided political discussions ever since.

While this truce of avoiding political discussions with my dad and my brother-in-law has enabled us to preserve our relationships, I am bothered that we weren't able to engage productively on political issues. It strikes me as slightly depressing that we were so incapable of talking about difficult issues that we had to abandon discussing them completely. Even more disheartening is my sense that our failure in these efforts

is in no way unique—that many (if not most) family members, friends, and coworkers in the United States also really struggle to engage productively with each other on political issues.

This divisiveness in our country has been festering for a long time and seems only to be getting worse. In the early 2000s, one social commentator attributed the growing political divisiveness at the time to the rise of the internet and specialized media outlets in which we can immerse ourselves in facts and narratives that reinforce our preexisting worldviews. Websites, radio stations, and cable news programs allow us to silo ourselves into like-minded cliques:

You get to choose your own reality. You get to believe what makes you feel good. You can ignore inconvenient facts so rigorously that your picture of the world is one big distortion.

And if you can give your foes a collective name—liberals, fundamentalists or neocons—you can rob them of their individual humanity. All inhibitions are removed. You can say anything about them. You get to feed off their villainy and luxuriate in your own contrasting virtue.¹

His assessment has become only more apt over the years.

Of course, we don't need to agree with each other on political issues. Healthy debate about the best way to approach difficult issues often brings clarity, and in a pluralistic society, we cannot expect everyone to share the same views. But we *should* expect that we can at least discuss political issues with people who disagree with us and that we can understand and respect

each other, regardless of our differences.

Many have lamented the lack of civility in political discourse. While I, too, would appreciate seeing more civil discussions, I tend to think that the solution to unproductive political dialogue lies elsewhere. Speaking with greater civility might mean views are exchanged more politely, but I believe we need a more transformational remedy that involves the true exchange of ideas with those who differ with us. Specifically, there are three simple focal points that would significantly change the way we engage in political discussions.

FOCAL POINT 1: Switch Your Goal from Changing Someone's Mind to Creating Mutual Understanding

When was the last time someone changed your mind on a major, important political issue during a heated exchange? This rarely happens. Political opinions are typically formed over many years from a wide range of influences (e.g., family, friends, religion, education, life experiences), and they tend to connect deeply to our inner sense of identity. But for some reason we think that if we present others with just a few more facts on Facebook or email one more website link or emphasize our point a little more loudly, we will change their minds.

Rather than wasting time and energy (and potentially ruining a relationship) trying to change someone's mind, we should focus on seeking mutual understanding. When a political discussion begins, before getting to substance, make a verbally explicit goal with the other person that your objective will be to understand each other

as deeply and fully as possible. Once we have unburdened each other of the heavy, onerous task of changing minds, we will likely experience an openness and freedom that we rarely experience in political discussions. Paradoxically, we will often find that our ability to change someone's mind increases significantly when we stop making changing their mind our goal.

FOCAL POINT 2: Become a First-Class Listener

Chances are you have a hard time listening to those with whom you disagree. Most of us do. But listening is a superpower that almost everyone is capable of developing. Unfortunately, rather than listening during difficult political discussions, we are usually just waiting our turn (often with a very visible degree of impatience) to tell the other person how wrong she is. We sense this dynamic in our political debates, so our guard is up. We feel an urge to argue our point even more vehemently, bracing for the counterattack that will inevitably follow. We are afraid that if we stop and listen, the other side will think that we agree with them or, worse, that they have won because we haven't yet rebutted their point.

Effective listeners are able to see through this fallacy. We can listen without agreeing. We can seek to fully understand the other side's perspective without "losing" the argument. In fact, as dedicated listeners, we stop seeing the discussion in terms of winning or losing, because our primary concern is genuine understanding. And then the magic happens: most often we will find that once the other side feels sincerely understood, it opens up the space for them to truly listen to us.

Becoming a better listener requires intention, effort, and practice. Here are two powerful ways to improve your listening skills:

1 CULTIVATE MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is the practice of quieting our minds. Left unchecked, our minds typically wander in a dozen different directions. All in one moment, we might think about what we want to say next, what we wish we would have said earlier, what we plan to have for dinner, what we need to have done at work by tomorrow, and so on. A mind

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racing in so many directions is typically unsuited to paying attention to what is being said by the other person in the moment. Cultivating mindfulness allows us to slow down, become aware of our thoughts, and be more fully present in the current moment. In a compelling essay, "The Art of Listening," author Brenda Ueland advocates as follows:

Try to learn tranquility, to live in the present a part of the time every day. Sometimes say to yourself: "Now. What is happening now? This friend is talking. I am

quiet. There is endless time. I hear it, every word.” Then suddenly you begin to hear not only what people are saying, but what they are trying to say, and you sense the whole truth about them.²

One of the best ways to become more mindful is through meditation. Meditation is a simple exercise with rich benefits, and it is especially helpful in improving our listening ability. There are many online resources, including a number of quality apps, that can help you get started and learn the basics of meditating.³

Think of yourself as a journalist interviewing the other person. You want to find out as much about their position as you can. If you approach the discussion from a position of genuine curiosity, it can help prevent you from feeling and acting defensively—and when we act defensively, others tend to act defensively. Leo Tolstoy wrote that “the most important person is always the person with whom you are, who is right before you.”⁴ Commit to seeing the person in front of you as the most important person in the world right now. As we adopt

is by having the courage to be vulnerable. Admitting that we don’t have all the answers or that we are unsure about certain aspects of an issue is not weakness; rather, it is the type of humility that is born of strength and invites the other side to reciprocate.

A simple but effective tool to facilitate this kind of vulnerability is inviting the other person to join you in responding to the following two questions: (1) What concerns do you have about your position? and (2) What good can you find in the other side’s position?⁵ Our willingness to approach a political conversation this way signals an openness to learning. It usually works best if you lead by example, answering the questions before asking your counterpart to do so.

Another approach is to invite the other person to be on the same team. This doesn’t mean switching political parties; rather, take a political issue and treat it as a joint problem to solve. If you don’t have all the right facts, find them together. By getting on the same team, you mitigate the adversarial pitfall that leads to so much impasse in political discussion.

There is a helpful activity I sometimes use in class in which I have two students stand facing each other. I instruct them to put their palms against the other person’s palms, and then I tell one student to start pushing against the other student. I tell the other student that she shouldn’t fall backward. What naturally happens is that the student getting pushed starts pushing back. But once one stops pushing, the other can stop pushing. When we join each other in a search for mutual understanding of a political issue, we effectively

stop pushing against each other, opening space for each other to listen and to discuss without defensiveness.

I recently called my dad and engaged in a political discussion with him following the three focal points discussed above. It had been a long time since we had talked about politics, and he was understandably a bit wary about my motives. But after assuring him of my aim to seek mutual understanding, we had a very productive conversation. Unburdened of the need to change his mind, I was able to listen with curiosity and really dig deeply to understand his perspective. Because I wasn’t pushing, he didn’t feel a need to push, and we opened up space for him to listen to me too. The scars from previous political battles haven’t faded entirely, so I could sense we were both cautiously optimistic about this new chapter, but I am excited to be able to engage in a broader range of topics that have been off limits for us and to see how we might better understand each other through this process and strengthen our relationship.

NOTES

- 1 David Brooks, “The Era of Distortion,” Opinion, *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 2004.
- 2 Brenda Ueland, “Tell Me More,” in Ueland, *Strength to Your Sword Arm: Selected Writings* (Duluth, Minnesota: Holy Cow! Press, 1993), 210.
- 3 For example, Insight Timer, Calm, and Headspace are among the most popular meditation apps.
- 4 Leo Tolstoy, “Three Questions,” in *What Men Live By and Other Tales* (1885).
- 5 Adapted from Francis Kipling, in an interview with Krista Tippett, “Francis Kipling: What Is Good in the Position of the Other,” *On Being* podcast, Jan. 20, 2011.

unburdened each other onerous task of changing minds, likely experience an openness that we rarely in political discussions.

2 BECOME VERY CURIOUS

Internally navigate to a place of genuine curiosity about what the other person thinks and why. Dig deeply. When someone expresses a viewpoint with which we disagree, our natural reaction is often to formulate a rebuttal and start pushing back. Acknowledge that impulse in your mind, but instead of acting on it, sit with it (this is a form of mindfulness, discussed in the previous section). As you do, you will usually find that it dissipates, which allows you space to be really curious.

that perspective, our curiosity will increase, and our desire to understand them will follow.

FOCAL POINT 3: Have the Courage to Be Vulnerable and Invite Joint Problem-Solving

Too often when discussing politics we get so caught up in how right we are and how wrong the other side is that we begin seeing others as political enemies to be beat rather than fellow sisters or brothers who, like us, are also just trying their best to figure things out. One way to engage more effectively