

Bridging the ideological divide

It isn't easy to lower the temperature of our political discourse. But there are people working to help us have better conversations.

by [Jeannine Marie Pitas](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration by Sally Deng)

Last fall, I heard an unforgettable talk by Dan Leger, a survivor of the 2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. He spoke of the ways he has sought to maintain his faith in God and humanity since that horrific day when 11 of his fellow congregants lost their lives—and he nearly lost his own. He has drawn strength from devoting his life to two things: lobbying for gun control and urging Americans to become less polarized in our political and civil discourse. “We need to have better conversations,” he said.

Many of us have seen the unfortunate effects of polarization and political discord within our churches, both at the wider institutional level and within individual congregations. Like others, I can also relate to these challenges personally. As an only child of two octogenarian parents whose political views are firmly opposed to mine—parents whom I love deeply and whose care is my responsibility—I must contend with divisive, challenging conversations constantly. The same holds true in my workplace, a Benedictine Catholic liberal arts college where I encounter ideological diversity in the classroom every day.

Lowering the temperature of our discourse is not easy. Over the past several years, however, I have encountered people in both the religious and secular realms who are working to encourage us to have better conversations.

Mike McGillicuddy, a retired social worker from Chicago, has never felt at home in any political camp. Originally from Omaha, he spent his college years in a Roman Catholic seminary, discerning the priesthood. During that time, he marched with Martin Luther King Jr. and watched the Second Vatican Council transform the church he had grown up in. “In the late 1960s I felt like I was on an ice floe,” he says. “Suddenly it was breaking in two. I had a leg on one half and a leg on the other. Most people jumped from one to the other, landing in a conservative place or a liberal one. But I have kept trying to keep those two ice floes together.”

McGillicuddy recalls the '60s as a time when the “givenness” of Christianity was challenged; everything became subject to questioning. “There was a glibness creeping in at that time,” he says. “I used to dismiss the ritual acts that conservatives imbue with great meaning—genuflecting, kneeling, praying with hands together. But perhaps those were the walnut shell that protected the tender nutmeat. We cracked the shell, and the nutmeat withered.”

During this time of rapid change, the young McGillicuddy found himself wishing to live in a world that his parents could also live in. “I didn’t want to reject them and everything that was near and dear to them. But I also wanted to make my own way and was drawn to pursue social justice,” he says.

Today, he laments the ideological divide he sees in US Catholicism, a divide that cuts through its universities, communities of vowed religious, and media outlets. His goal is to challenge people of all viewpoints to become more attuned to the personal histories and perspectives of those who hold different values. He currently leads Untying Knots, an initiative to bring communication workshops to Catholic and Protestant churches, colleges, and retreat centers.

“Absent from the agenda is any direct focus on polarizing issues,” he says.

“Premature attention to issues encourages focus on differences, feeds into the illusion that we’re going to convert one another, and affects the credibility of the presenter. We focus on listening and storytelling. We need to tell new stories and edit existing ones.”

The Untying Knots workshops typically begin by delving into the consequences of polarization, explaining why the dominant approach of dispute tends to entrench people more deeply into existing views rather than changing their minds. After some dialogue about the impact of polarization on workshop participants’ relationships, McGillicuddy urges them to brainstorm solutions. “We must abandon the expectation that conversion is the goal, that fact alignment is a prerequisite, and that the other party will match our perception of our own openness,” he says. “The left names itself tolerant and expects tolerance from the other side. But it’s arrogant to assume the other party needs to be as open as I am. I question how open any of us are.”

McGillicuddy suggests that people can benefit from seeking connections in civic spaces that are free of controversy. “There is absolutely no reason when people go to volunteer at the homeless shelter or food pantry to declare who you’re voting for,” he says. “Once you’ve done that, how comfortable will the other group feel about participating? They will at least be guarded about what they say.”

He asserts that rather than seeking to express our own personal viewpoints, we should try harder to show curiosity and listen to our interlocutors. “Pulling on knots makes them worse; that is the entry point toward untying knots of polarization,” he says. “In religious settings, choose faith as the focus. The first service we owe to

others is in learning to listen to them. The ministry of healing is committed to us by God, who is the great listener.”

“Ever since I was a kid, I’ve loved a full table,” says K Scarry, an activist based in Herndon, Virginia, just outside Washington, DC. “My parents would always have folks over at our dinner table. We’d share every holiday with newly arrived immigrants to the United States. These meals showed me the importance of treating people as welcome. I would like everyone to know that if they’re driving through my town, even if we’ve not talked in 15 years, there’s a place for them at my table.”

Scarry is director of the People’s Supper, an initiative to organize community meals that bring people of diverse viewpoints together for conflict resolution and community building. “We do deep-dive partnerships with organizations and communities to implement a people’s supper toward whatever their goals might be,” she says.

These communities include Erie, Pennsylvania, whose city government partnered with the People’s Supper to host dinner conversations around issues of race and racism that culminated in policy proposals; Oakridge, Tennessee, where people mobilized to discuss racism and tell their public story as the first community in the Southeast to integrate its school system; and the United Methodist Church, which worked at the congregational level to facilitate conversations around race and sexuality.

“The People’s Supper wasn’t designed to be a political bridging space, but it has become that,” says Scarry, adding that its facilitators work together to offer shared tools and get to know the dynamics of a place. “Often there is a deeper issue happening in a community, but politics become an easy thing to point fingers over. We use politics to figure out where people land so we can begin the process of engagement in deeper issues, such as race.”

When she became director five years ago, Scarry already had several years of experience hosting open community meals in her home, serving those in need of food and fellowship. “I invited all kinds of people—regulars at the coffee shop, a patient sitting next to me in the therapy waiting room. A lot of people showed up as strangers, but a lot of people knew me.” Scarry got into the rhythm of hosting meals every Tuesday night, which meant she held a dinner the night of the 2016 presidential election.

“Since we’re in the DC area, we had people at our table who weren’t sure what their job would be, based on the election results,” she says. “There were a lot of discussions of ‘How will we maintain this weekly dinner when we can’t agree politically?’ A lot of people say you need deep relationships to lay the groundwork. But I had the opposite experience. People who barely knew each other were seated around my table. On the 2016 election night, one person had an ‘I’m with her’ badge and another had a ‘Make America great again’ hat. The tension was palpable.”

Scarry recalls that she sought to diffuse the tension by naming it. “I said to the group, ‘There’s no ignoring we’re not in agreement about what we hope for. We have this dinner every week, but let’s figure out how we want to move through this.’” Under her leadership, the group decided to put their phones away, share a normal dinner, and watch the election results together, acknowledging in advance that no matter the outcome, some would be pleased, others devastated.

“We needed that empathy with each other,” she says, stating that it came when people of different views were able to appreciate the others’ intense emotional reactions, knowing that—given the election’s closeness—these could easily have been their own.

At the interpersonal level, Scarry believes that relationships can be maintained across difference if both participants can grow in self-awareness of their own emotional responses. “We need to know where we’re starting from,” she says, citing her own experience as a White woman engaged in conversations with a Black friend. “I noticed that in my early 20s, if my friend shared a story of racism, I bristled internally and focused on showing her I’m not part of the problem instead of sitting with her experience. I have tried to get better at centering what she is saying.”

Scarry urges participants to be aware of their defensive impulses and to remember that we can be responsible for repair without being directly responsible for harm. “I think about intent versus impact. Some people focus just on one or the other. But it makes a difference if someone speaks out of malice or ignorance. I might invite someone who was ignorant into a learning moment so we can figure out what it means to do right by one another.”

Like McGillicuddy, Scarry believes that listening and empathy are at the heart of holding better conversations. “We need to believe that our own becoming is work that happens in community,” she says, adding that [the People’s Supper](#) is seeking to

implement training sessions and share guidebooks for general use. “We want to be a resource hub for individuals and communities who want to implement their own work, their own suppers, without us being in the room.”

Many efforts to temper polarization focus on hearing people’s stories and empathizing with their emotions rather than deconstructing their arguments. Leah Libresco Sargeant, however, believes that debate is a fruitful tool to improve our conversations about controversial issues. She currently coordinates a debating program as part of Braver Angels, a national organization whose mission is to “bring Americans together to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic.”

“I’ve been in Braver Angels for two years. In college I was in the Yale Political Union, as was my current boss. We had transformative experiences of debate and fruitful conflict. That meant so much and led me to run a debating group out of my living room in DC,” says Sargeant, who describes herself as someone seeking solutions beyond the two-party system. Though raised a Democrat, throughout her life she has explored various interests—from G. K. Chesterton’s ideas to Bay Area seasteading communities—that seek solutions beyond party politics.

Braver Angels offers a variety of workshops and conversational partnerships. But Sargeant sees debating as a particularly useful tool for young people on college campuses, where she is seeking to expand the organization’s programs. “We want to equip people with tools that fit their personality. We attract conservatives more to our debates than our workshops, as workshops are more blue-coded. There are conservatives who must be polite in blue spaces, whereas in debate they can be disagreeable,” she says, adding that the debates focus on individual issues rather than on the common composites that make up the liberal/conservative divide.

Sargeant is working with colleges to restore debating as a common undergraduate experience. “Having the experience of fruitful conflict sets the tone for their entire college experience,” she says. “So I want to keep training people in the skills for debate. There are people who have had bad experiences with conflict,” she explains, but also others who have “so much trepidation that they don’t have any experience of conflict. Sometimes it’s the first time they’ve been able to ask a question of someone who disagrees or to express disagreement. They see it can be worth doing and doesn’t always go badly.”

In Sargeant's observation, debating skills can be transferred to improve conversations in other contexts. "One skill is approaching arguments with curiosity about how they hold together. We can learn to map the other side's viewpoint before trying to knock it down—asking, 'Why do you think this?'" She notes that participants might be on the same side of an issue but for different reasons, which also matter. "You have to argue with the person rather than just a position generically. You have to listen to your opponent."

Sargeant believes that striving for better conversations at the interpersonal level is crucial for the health of our democracy. "The last ten years have seen many of our safeguards fall away. We see brawling in Congress, defenses of January 6 from politicians whose lives were in danger on that day, as well as discussions of packing or abolishing the Supreme Court," she says. Nevertheless, she believes that studying history can help us put our current situation in a wider perspective. "We experience our own time densely and history as a sweep. But cities used to be run by party bosses; people used to get jumped for voting for the wrong person."

She agrees with Scarry that inviting people into one's home is also crucial. "The intimacy of having people in a private space you are responsible for is different from meeting in a commercial space like Starbucks," she says. She adds that when both interlocutors are Christian, it's important to ask what intentions you can offer in prayer for them.

Like McGillicuddy and Scarry, Sargeant believes that religious faith can serve as a unifier in divisive times. A convert to the Roman Catholic Church, Sargeant has encountered much diversity in her community. "I've never been around as diverse a group age-wise. It brings people together even in siloed neighborhoods," she says. Sargeant's concern about her church is not that it will be rent by schism but that it suffers from disengagement. She urges Christians to remain engaged and to remember that church is about our deepest concerns around faith and salvation. This recollection, she argues, should unify Christians and help us to see past divides.

"If the church is framed as a way to have community, so is the Rotary Club. If it's a place to get into justice, so is your union. If it's framed politically, so are party politics. We need to talk about our foundation in Christ. If the church isn't Christ's church, it isn't worth people's time. We need to proclaim loudly what it is."

Premature attention to issues encourages focus on differences. Better to focus first on listening and storytelling.

For me, walking is a way to bridge differences. Many of my best conversations have taken place on hikes. Ten years ago, I spent a month on the Camino de Santiago in Spain—a place where I encountered people of all ages, nationalities, religions, and viewpoints. Toward the end of the pilgrimage, I saw a mural of a dove with the inscription with the phrase, “If all our world leaders could just walk the Camino, in a month we’d have world peace.”

Retired history professor Greg Wegner, who has devoted most of his career to researching the Third Reich, agrees that better conversations are needed to safeguard our democracy—and that walking in nature might be a good place to have them. As one of five brothers who hold different religious as well as political beliefs, Wegner decided to walk the Appalachian Trail with them all soon after Donald Trump’s election in 2016. Wegner knew that his brothers had voted different ways.

“We spent five days on the trail. As a group of five brothers, we supported each other during the hikes, talking about our families, about politics. The most important thing was that we prayed together. I am Catholic and have brothers who represent three Protestant traditions. Our experience shows that, as the gospels suggest, love is the force that heals divides,” he says.

“There are serious splits in all the Christian churches. Bishops, priests, and nuns are struggling with it; Catholic schools are struggling with it. This is a turning point in US history,” he says.

As we approach another contentious election cycle, my parents and I remain divided in our views. In response, I aim to love them, respect them, and seek to understand where they are coming from. The same holds true for my students who passionately argue for positions I fundamentally disagree with. Rather than isolating myself among the like-minded, I am called to engage with difference. We can all draw lessons from the work of such initiatives as Untying Knots, the People’s Supper, and Braver Angels, as well as from the efforts of individuals like Wegner.

“Our parents left my siblings and me with something that transcended political difference and strife,” he says. “They taught us to love other people as we are called to do in the Father. My mother was very disappointed that some of my brothers left Catholicism and joined other churches, but she embraced the change because she knew that her sons’ callings needed to be respected. I learned a lot from how my parents handled that.”

Wegner says he and his brothers remain close, allowing neither religious nor political differences to destroy their love for each other. “I believe this country needs a healing balm,” he says. “While our leaders are trying to provide that, it mostly needs to come from the grassroots level, from each one of us.”

The *Century's* community engagement editor [Jon Mathieu](#) speaks with author [Jeannine Marie Pitas](#) addressing the question, “Is there anything we can do about political polarization?”

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