

My Life as a Bridge

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In the tug and pull of two increasingly polarized sides of our national debate, I have friends on both sides. I see as legitimate many of the concerns of each side and appreciate their solutions which I may or may not fully agree with. In this way, I see my life as a 'bridge' between the two sides, searching to identify the common ground we each share so that we can all work together to build a better community and a better life for ourselves and our children.

When I listen to my conservative friends worry about border security or about a fast changing economy with fewer good paying jobs, I understand their concerns. When my liberal friends worry about growing disparities in wealth and racial achievement, I understand their concerns. But that doesn't mean that my conservative friends are racist or that my liberal friends want open borders for criminals. To each side I say 'whoa, just slow down a second.'

Having diverse opinions is a good thing. It's like the old saying: "If everyone in the room is thinking the same thing, no one is thinking very much." Tension and a difference of opinion can lead to learning new ways of seeing and understanding what is becoming a very complex world. But you have to be OK with hearing differing opinions - you have to be open to the possibility that the person you disagree with actually may share some things in common with you. That they are also a caring person, not an enemy or a fool. That at their core, they may care deeply about many of the same concerns that keep you up at night. The fact that they view the cause or a solution much different than you doesn't mean that the two of you couldn't have a respectful conversation about the options and find a reasonable solution that works for both of you!

Take the plight of a person living in poverty. A conservative may say the key is that they need to know the value of hard work and to make better choices with their money and their health. And a liberal may say that the person needs a helping hand to pay the rent and to get alcohol treatment and job training so that they can become a productive member of society. This doesn't seem to be an 'either or or'. It is about both. You don't get unlimited passes at responsibility but you should get a real opportunity to get better.

Or consider our criminal justice system. Being tough on crime may sound good to a conservative as one way to keep our communities safer. But paying nearly \$40,000 a year to lock up a criminal whose real problem is an addiction to drugs may seem to be a waste of tax dollars to other conservatives. And a liberal might say that there should be more money spent on rehabilitation or job skills training while in prison, but they would also agree that dangerous folks need to be locked up. Surely a reasonable compromise can be found.

So is there really such a big divide? Can't each of us try to skip the nasty blaming and instead listen better so we can learn from those we disagree with? It is important to teach our children that civil and respectful disagreement is part of being an American, just as is the responsibility of working together to make our communities better for everyone. Can you be a bridge that can work with both sides and bring forth workable solutions?