

How Can We Build Common Ground Between Bubbles?

by
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The 2016 US election and its aftermath have generated enormous social conflict, which continues to escalate. How can we move forward constructively, particularly in our personal interactions? Progress may depend, in part, on breaking down barriers of misunderstanding and fear between groups in our society.

Some post-election analyses argued that people on the coasts live in a "bubble" and are "out of touch" with most people who live in the middle of country. Others argued that people in the Midwest and South are the ones in a bubble.

Unfortunately, I think that most of us probably live in bubbles of geography, class, religion, ethnicity, and social worldviews. These bubbles are related to people's residence in rural, suburban, or urban areas. To deal with this polarization, it may help to start by using a neutral, mediator's mindset to sympathetically understand how the world looks from both "bubbles," without evaluating the merits of the views.

It can be dangerous to make broad generalizations, so the following portraits should be read cautiously, recognizing that there are exceptions to these characterizations, which do not include all the elements of the perspectives.

LIBERAL / PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE

Many predominantly Democratic constituencies have suffered legalized discrimination and still feel the sharp sting of prejudice and de facto discrimination. African Americans endure a legacy of hatred and lies that began before our country was founded. A series of shootings of blacks in recent years, and the recognition of implicit racial bias in many realms of life have highlighted problems that black people routinely face. Despite legal protections, many women throughout society still feel vulnerable to discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. Many Hispanics feel threatened by exploitation and risk of deportation, due to real or perceived lack of legal status. LGBT people are subject to legal discrimination in many places and could not legally marry until recently. Progressives generally believe that large banks and other corporations take advantage of the vast majority of the public. Democrats feel victimized by Republicans' refusal to consider the nomination of Merrick Garland to the US Supreme Court and installation of Neil Gorsuch in his place. Democrats also condemned the

release of FBI Director James Comey's statements in the last days of the election campaign, violating Justice Department guidelines. A substantial percentage of Democrats, especially women and minorities, believe that although the election of Mr. Trump was legal, it is not legitimate.

CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN PERSPECTIVE

Political scientist Katherine Cramer, who has studied rural residents, found what she calls the "politics of resentment." She wrote, "[T]he people I listened to felt like they were on the short end of the stick. They felt they were not getting their fair share of power, resources or respect. They said that the big decisions that regulated and affected their lives were made far away in the cities. They felt that no one was listening to their own ideas about how things should be done or what needed attention. . . . [T]hey resented that they were not getting respect. They perceived that city folks called people like them ignorant racists who could not figure out their own interests. To them, urban types just did not get small-town life — what people in those places value, the way they live, and the challenges they face."

A reviewer of sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's book, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, refers to "Tea Partiers' complaints that they have become the 'strangers' of the title — triply marginalized by flat or falling wages, rapid demographic change, and liberal culture that mocks their faith and patriotism." After listening to her subjects, Hochschild described their perspective: "You are patiently standing in a long line for something you call the American dream. You are white, Christian, of modest means, and getting along in years. You are male. There are people of color behind you, and 'in principle you wish them well.' But you've waited long, worked hard, 'and the line is barely moving.' Then 'Look! You see people cutting in line ahead of you!' Who are these interlopers? 'Some are black,' others 'immigrants, refugees.' They get affirmative action, sympathy and welfare — 'checks for the listless and idle.' The government wants you to feel sorry for them."

From Republicans' perspective, Democrats — especially President Obama—far exceeded the legitimate authority of the federal government.

People in our society have very different sources of knowledge, so that people in polarized conflict typically believe they have legitimate accounts of reality and the other side's "reality" is based on falsehoods. Both believe that the other has committed serious political sins. These views often are reinforced by reactions to highly publicized statements of extreme partisans of each side, which probably don't reflect the views of most people on their side.

BUILDING EMPATHY AND COMMON GROUND

I believe that people on both sides feel real pain. From a mediation perspective, it helps to begin by acknowledging everyone's pain.

This can be very hard to do. Some people feel that acknowledging others' problems is an implicit devaluation of their own. It would be nice if others' pain could be acknowledged without people on either side feeling devalued as if in a zero-sum situation. Indeed, it would be good if people could simultaneously acknowledge the valid concerns of people on all sides.

Probably most of us have strong sympathies with one side and find it difficult to acknowledge the legitimate perspectives and problems of the other. One need not believe that there is equal merit on both sides. I certainly don't believe that. However, I suspect that these major social conflicts will not be resolved through competing arguments about the truth or about who has suffered more. Rather, as the preceding portraits of the bubbles' inhabitants illustrates, much of the conflict fundamentally is about identity: who is worthy of respect or sympathy and who is not.

I would like to think that in our daily private lives, in our schools and communities, people will increasingly decide to treat people in other "bubbles" with curiosity, respect, and appreciation even when we disagree about extremely charged issues in our society.

MIXING THE BUBBLES

Here are two examples of efforts to break open bubbles and promote understanding and respect.

In 2008, then-Senator Obama gave his "More Perfect Union" speech in the wake of the Jeremiah Wright controversy. Reverend Wright had been Senator Obama's pastor and made inflammatory statements that caused a major controversy for Obama's presidential campaign. In this speech, Senator Obama provided a sympathetic account of perspectives of both blacks and whites in the US. While sympathetically explaining Reverend Wright's thinking generally and how it related to African Americans' struggles in our history, he was also critical of parts of Wright's approach. Balancing this discussion, he sympathetically described whites' views, also noting some criticisms, which he illustrated by referring to his white grandmother, who he loved dearly, but who sometimes had used racial stereotypes that made him cringe.

This speech is a good model, in both approach and tone, for trying to build common ground. Senator Obama sought to under-

stand perspectives of blacks and whites in the US, and judge them sympathetically without suggesting that one was better than the other.

Of course, some people are hateful and take actions and make statements that are intended to harm others, or that are indifferent to their effects on others. Sometimes people make statements that cause pain due to lack of understanding and insensitivity rather than intent. Obviously, intent is a critical element in making judgments about people's actions and statements. People like neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klan members, who believe that certain races and religions should be oppressed, deserve harsh judgment.

We can take several lessons from Senator Obama's speech. People should first try to understand others, especially those with whom we disagree – perhaps disagree quite strongly. After serious effort to understand others, we should judge. All ideas are not equally valid or beneficial (or harmful). So being non-judgmental isn't a good solution. When we judge others and their ideas, we should be as sympathetic as appropriate, considering their intentions, among other things.

We should also have some caution and humility recognizing our own biases, cognitive and otherwise. In particular, we should recognize that we are subject to the bias of reactive devaluation – judging favorably ideas of people we like and judging unfavorably ideas of people we don't like. A second example of constructive communication comes from an op-ed in the New York Times ("I'm Prejudiced," He Said. Then We Kept Talking, December 10, 2016) that described a remarkable conversation "between bubbles" in our society. Heather McGhee, a black woman who heads the think tank Demos, which is undertaking a "truth, racial healing, and transformation project," got a surprising question when she was on C-Span. A caller named Garry said, "I'm a white male and I'm prejudiced. What can I do to change to be a better American?" Ms. McGhee gave Garry some suggestions on-air and a video of this conversation went viral, with more than eight million views. Heather and Garry continued to talk offline and in person. Garry said he spoke for a lot of people who are afraid to admit their fears and prejudices. He said many white people are like him and are good people who don't know how to interact with people of different races. He suggested that more black people reach out to whites for two-way conversations of learning. His own efforts to deal with his prejudices helped him let go of his stereotypes and empathize with others' struggles, including those of both blacks and whites.

It would be great if there would be more conversations like the one between Heather and Garry. Unfortunately, such contact rarely happens spontaneously because of so much residential segregation and self-segregating behavior.

These problems are exacerbated by the news and social media. By definition, the news media highlight things that are unusual and often shocking -- or else they usually wouldn't be considered "newsworthy." These tendencies are aggravated by

presenting things out of context to make the stories punchier. Similarly, people sometimes use social media recklessly, escalating conflict by circulating false and inflammatory stories. Indeed, the Oxford Dictionary named “post-truth” to be the word of the year, reflecting the view that objective facts are less important than emotion and belief.

CONCLUSION

Engaging our society in social healing will require redoubled efforts by projects promoting real empathy and care for people in other “bubbles,” especially (but not exclusively) for people in groups that have suffered historic injustices. I don’t know whether these efforts would make any difference in healing the deepening wounds of polarization that have been getting worse in recent decades. It seems unlikely that such efforts would be sufficient by themselves to reverse this trend. Other strategies are needed to counteract those purposely propagating deception and hatred. But promoting constructive dialogue could help increase understanding and concern across lines of mistrust and disrespect and heal some painful wounds. In any case, it seems like a worthwhile effort.

This approach was reflected in President Obama’s farewell address: “Hearts must change. It won’t change overnight. Social attitudes oftentimes take generations to change. But if our democracy is to work in this increasingly diverse nation, then each one of us need to try to heed the advice of a great character in American fiction – Atticus Finch who said, ‘You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.’

“For blacks and other minority groups, it means tying our own very real struggles for justice to the challenges that a lot of

people in this country face – not only the refugee, or the immigrant, or the rural poor, or the transgender American, but also the middle-aged white guy who, from the outside, may seem like he’s got advantages, but has seen his world upended by economic and cultural and technological change. We have to pay attention, and listen.

“For white Americans, it means acknowledging that the effects of slavery and Jim Crow didn’t suddenly vanish in the ‘60s that when minority groups voice discontent, they’re not just engaging in reverse racism or practicing political correctness. When they wage peaceful protest, they’re not demanding special treatment but the equal treatment that our Founders promised.

“For native-born Americans, it means reminding ourselves that the stereotypes about immigrants today were used, almost word for word, about the Irish, and Italians, and Poles – who it was said were going to destroy the fundamental character of America. And as it turned out, America wasn’t weakened by the presence of these newcomers; these newcomers embraced this nation’s creed, and this nation was strengthened.

“So regardless of the station that we occupy, we all have to try harder. We all have to start with the premise that each of our fellow citizens loves this country just as much as we do; that they value hard work and family just like we do; that their children are just as curious and hopeful and worthy of love as our own.” ■

Reference:

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