

Listening beyond the echo chamber

Hope for healing our polarization — for the long run

By Amy Uelmen

I can't wait for it to be over. The U.S. presidential election, that is. After a long, hot summer of violence on a global, national and local scale, is anyone not dis-spirited and exhausted by the intensely vitriolic campaign rhetoric?

But wait — do I really believe that the morning after the election our deep divisions will instantly heal? No. In fact, for some time now, cultural analysts have been warning us of the elements that have been coming together to concoct the toxic brew of polarization that is poisoning our social and political life.

As journalist Bill Bishop observed in *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (2008), the wide variety of choices that many have regarding where to live, where to congregate, the activities in which to engage, as well as the plethora of options for cable and internet viewing and consumption, have led to a tendency for like-minded people to converge. When they come together, they tend to create “echo chambers” that make it very challenging to connect with others who may have different political, social, cultural or ideological perspectives.

And even when we do try to connect across serious divides, we seem to have a very difficult time understanding each other. In his 2012 study, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt identified six foundations for morality. He noted that liberals tend to emphasize concerns regarding care, and on the flip side, harm, and fairness (equality)/cheating; while conservatives, in addition to these, tend to draw on four other moral foundations: liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation.

For example, contrast how liberals and conservatives might view San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the national anthem because he did not want to “show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.” Through the lens of care, equality, and perhaps also liberty, this mode of protest may seem both appropriate and valuable. But when loyalty, authority and, in a certain sense, the sanctity of the flag are brought into the evaluation, we can anticipate a very different response.

When we sense the depths of these divides, discourse at every level, at every turn, feels impossibly difficult. What might be the antidote to this toxic brew?

For me, an initial step is imbedded in the animated film *Zootopia*. The allegory about a hopeful, naïve bunny and a cynical, cunning fox is a courageous invitation to be sincere about the ways in which we tend to misunderstand and hurt each other, notwithstanding our best intentions. And in that honesty, the film delivers a touching message of the power in letting ourselves and our relationships be regenerated by open communication, forgiveness and starting again in the effort to bridge our divides.

I think the next step is to purposefully seek out environments that engage in the hard work of getting beyond the “echo chamber” of conversation that can occur among like-minded friends. For example, one might invite a motley crew to read and discuss a book together; or simply sit with someone new at lunch; or perhaps try to reconnect with an estranged cousin who sees the world so differently.

How might we interact once we find these spaces?

As with any conversation in which we hope to truly engage with another person, it may be a good idea to try to unplug from technological distractions in order to communicate a readiness to listen with a focused heart and mind.

Then, I (figuratively) take off my shoes. Using an image that is frequently invoked to indicate the presence of God — the burning bush — Pope Francis has encouraged us to learn how to “remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5)” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 169). As I enter into a conversation with a person with whom I may encounter strong differences of opinion, this image helps me to assume a posture of respect for the dignity of the other and for the sacredness of their story — and to place that respect above the eagerness to get my point across.

What happens, to use Haidt’s analysis, when I realize that that the other person is speaking in a register that feels unfamiliar to me? At this point — à la *Zootopia* — I try to admit that I may not have all of the elements that I need to understand the other person. Rather than jumping to conclusions, this is a chance to ask some sincere questions that leave the other space to frame the new information according to their own criteria and background.

And the ultimate antidote? Hopefully the result of this new brew is reciprocal gratitude for the chance to learn something new, for a fresh insight, or perhaps even for a growing relationship of understanding, trust, and friendship.

Or as Gazelle (voiced by Shakira) in the *Zootopia* theme song recommends: “Try everything.”