

# Staying Open and Staying True

## A liberal responds...

By Greg Gale, Associate Director of Programs

This whole issue is a real “both/and” for me. Yes, I want to be open to ideas that might change my viewpoint and engage with those who see things differently than I do—**AND**, in my perspective, the stakes are high and getting higher for this country as I see increased radicalism and unwillingness to compromise from the right. Conservatives’ fear of losing a certain type of “America” seems to be fueling an anger and fear that, for me, leads to inhumane responses to social policy.

You challenge me to ask myself if something is lost when I don’t engage with the “political other”? What is the cost of my disconnection, both to me and to the broader political process? How do I both be open to different, challenging perspectives **AND** stay true to my values and my commitment to social justice?

For me, the non-profit world has been a place of community, of shared values about social justice, of belonging. However, since openness and open-mindedness are also critical values to me, perhaps I need to consider how I have isolated myself—with a few exceptions—from opposing political viewpoints.

I’ve tried to talk to my uncle who is definitely proud of being conservative and perceives me as being proud of being liberal. Our encounters are so unsatisfying because each of us gets scared, triggered, and defensive, and then each goes to the party line. It gets really boring because I know exactly what he is going to say, and he knows what I am going to say. Then we stop talking because it gets too stressful. In hindsight, I realize I did not approach him in a way that made him feel reassured enough that he should stay in this, nor did he do that with me. For example, he said Obama reminds him of Hitler, which doesn’t make me want to ask him more.

I think if I approached him differently, to find out what is behind his attitudes (as was suggested by the conservative columnist), he would expound because he would like to be heard. As it is, I don’t stay in conversation too long because I start to get reactive. My wife has actually approached him in ways that open the conversation. She asks him questions that actually get him to stop throwing grenades and to start to share his worldview, his experience, or his concerns for the country. I just shut up and listen because she finds him interesting. I can see his shoulders relax and he hangs in there. He knows he’s not going to get full agreement, but he does feel heard.

It’s possible that I would find that we share some values, albeit with different emphasis. For example, during the Republican debates, Santorum said this country is about “faith, family and freedom”. I actually value all three of those things. I realized that the difference was in prioritization—plus, there was no mention of equity.

I don’t agree with you that the liberal viewpoint is all about equality. Equality is sameness and can mean same outcomes, although I don’t think that automatically flows from equality. To me, it’s not just equality, but equity, fairness...giving a person what they need to have a shot at equality. I remember a long time ago, talking to a teacher about a student who had a learning disability. She insisted, “I can’t give him extra time on the test—then I’d have to give all the other students extra time.” But the other students didn’t *need* extra time to have a shot at an A. That’s the difference between equality and equity.

Perhaps our values *are* similar, although differently aligned, defined and emphasized. I'm not sure. I do know that when I listen to the current conservative rhetoric it pushes my button of fear, which then turns into anger at how powerful and extreme the conservative side has become...it seems like it's all or nothing. When my fear and anger are operative, I'm more likely to demonize rather than humanize. I'm more likely to attend to the inflammatory content, rather than how the person came to have those opinions or values. You, personally, may not approach things that way, but you have to admit that the conservative position has gotten much more radical.

Yet when I do engage across the political divide, as I have on occasion, I find myself walking on eggshells—trying to stay present and not get triggered, to be perceived as open and questioning rather than didactic and inflexible. It is an uncomfortable tightrope walk. Being “open” sounds better than it feels. I'll stay with it, however, because VISIONS has taught me that there is learning in the discomfort.