

## Avoiding Avoidance

*Four strategies to bridge the political divide.*

From a conversation with VISIONS consultants Jim Turner, Sarah Stearns, Felipe Garcia and Jane Ariel. Written by Carlene Larsson, VISIONS Board Member.

Liberal, Progressive, Conservative, or Libertarian now seems to describe who we *are*, rather than what we *think*. It's about how we should be and who's right. As Sarah Stearns admitted, "Two of the hardest things for me in this political divide is to observe the VISIONS' *Try on each others' ideas* guideline, and the principle of *I'm okay, your okay*."

Jim Turner related this difficulty to his youth: "When I was steeped in my racial identity development back when I was 21, it was the sum total of my whole existence. Any assault on my way of thinking felt like an annihilation. It felt like my whole sense of the world, who was important to me, what my life goals were all about, were being questioned. I think some of that plays out as well in this process."

This sense of fear, of losing control, of people with threatening political views having power over you was palpable for many in a recent conversation among four VISIONS consultants. Sarah, voicing this concern, said, "I get triggered most when I feel like the consequences of where things are headed are dangerous. I don't think of it just as my own personal loss of power, I think of it as the world that I want to see is getting lost." Although she was speaking of gay rights, wealth disparities, and the removal of social safety nets, conservative Republicans and the religious Right could probably speak the same words, although with different fears.

However, given the difficulty of "trying on" different political worldviews in the current polarized climate, particularly in spontaneous conversations, consultants admitted to falling back on a variation of "avoidance of contact"—either agreeing not to talk politics, withdrawing from the conversation, or just changing the subject and moving on. Everyone had examples of these situations, the most difficult being with relatives or other people with whom they needed or wanted to be in relation.

There were, however, other options that consultants had tried successfully—and each of these strategies link to VISIONS guidelines.

### ***1. Indirect contact can lead to an effective "try on" experience.***

VISIONS' Guidelines: (a) Notice both process and content; (b) Try on each other's ideas, feelings, and ways of doing things for the purpose of greater understanding.

Speakers and books, for example, can also become a form of "trying on." Felipe Garcia reported, "Sometimes I listen to Fox News just to hear their line of thinking. I stretch myself to look at the frame of reference from which conservative people come and to make sense of it, and some of it does make sense. I think some of the points they make are important, so I can go there. It's not easy to engage people in conversation across political difference, but I do listen to speakers and listen for how I can broaden my perspective."

The new book, *A Righteous Mind* by Jonathan Haidt (see “Check These Out” in our sidebar) helped Carlene Larsson put a wedge in her disdain for the “other side.” A social psychologist, Haidt, offers insight into why reason and facts do not persuade and the role moral values play in the current political arena.

## ***2. Focus on sharing views, not changing opinions.***

VISIONS’ Guidelines: (a) Practice self-focus, (b) It’s okay to disagree.

As Sarah said, “It’s helpful to be clear that when I speak, I’m not there to convert. Often conversations like this often stir up my own values with a sense of urgency—as though I *have* to get my ideas across to this person. I find that that really backfires. I guess unless there can be an agreement to just ask and learn and try on a point of view, it may be best to steer away from it.” Felipe commented, “Ask questions that aren’t meant to prove something, but questions that really come from genuine curiosity—like, ‘How would you see the world if we move in that direction?’ Then, at least we can agree to disagree—it’s not about changing people minds, but just learning from each other about how you view the world.”

## ***3. Disagree without rancor.***

VISIONS’ Guidelines: (a) It’s okay to disagree, (b) It’s not okay to blame, shame, or attack ourselves or others.

Jim, also a university professor, observed, “As I listen to students of color talk with white students, or the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students talk with heterosexual students, there is a way that their level of agreeing and disagreeing doesn’t feel as toxic as the way in which I disagree and the way in which my encounters with the “other” often feel so loaded. I am wondering if there’s more hope with our young people...they listen to each other. They give room for each other to say what they think. And they will say, ‘Yeah, I can hear that, but...’, or ‘I can hear that, and let’s look at this piece...’, so there’s some interest in engaging on both sides that I find lacking with older folks.”

## ***4. Look for areas of agreement.***

VISIONS’ Guideline: Practice “both/and” thinking.

“I have often times talked to people about the Israeli-Palestinian issue,” Jane Ariel related, “and essentially found that most conversations don’t change anybody—and it’s very frustrating because you want to. I’ve never been successful...the alternative that I have chosen is to try to create relationships around common interests.”

“For example, I went to visit this place where Tea Party representatives were talking, not to fight, but to be interested. So I spent 15 minutes trying to understand, and that warmed up the whole conversation with someone I know in the Party. It also made me understand that there were some places that we were alike—she was in the Tea Party because she wanted the world to be better for her grandchildren, I’m not in the Tea Party because I want the world to be better for my grandchildren.

But we could actually connect over our grandchildren. Talking about the literal content of your difference may not move anything, but being able to comment on how hard it is to talk about it and what might we have in common is a way to have a conversation in which somebody learns, and then maybe thinks about it. I started to have another sense about the Tea Party after I did this, realizing these are just human beings trying their best to find the same universal values that I want, and that made it a little easier.”

Carlene reported steering discussions to campaign finance and the *Citizen United* decision, where many on both sides of the political spectrum agree that too much money and private/corporate interests are negatively influencing elections. Once some common ground is found, it is easier to explore divergent ideas.

And finally, as Felipe pointed out, one definition of “ideology” is “the body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class, or culture.” He reflected, “Our ideologies represent a survival system learned from our respective cultures, which we use to live our lives. Until we open up and “try on” another’s point of view and related options that may be useful to us, our ideologies will remain static and divide us. In our democracy, we need a variety of perspectives to reach the best decisions and solutions to problems. Even though I may disagree with you, I need to be glad you are in the dialogue to hopefully broaden my view and that of others.”