

The Political “Other”

A conservative’s experience in liberal non-profits.

By Anonymous

The question, “How do we share across political difference,” is a bit off-putting. My experience of “diversity conversations” in the non-profit sector is that everyone’s actually on the same page, they just differ in degree. In my organization, I have never been in a conversation where a true “other” voice is present or welcomed. My experience of politically liberal organizations is that the voice of significant difference has been silenced. Friends suggest that I should share my opinions, but that would alter my employment prospects. That’s why I’m writing this anonymously.

In the current political climate, both sides ascribe ignorance and hate to each other. This kind of divisive stereotyping—magnified by the press—effectively creates the “evil other,” which allows us to discount everything coming from the other side and feel good—even righteous—about our own views. It creates two warring parties who are dug in, not listening, not learning, not questioning, and, in my opinion, not creating the best solutions to complex problems.

When I have brought up my difference of opinion on an issue to liberals, particularly in emails, there is no response. I am ignored. I feel dismissed. So one thing I do is stick to talking about the actual work I’m involved with. I don’t talk politics or political ideology. That is how I safeguard myself. I don’t think I’m anointed to take on every issue on behalf of conservatives all the time, so I listen closely and I choose moments where I think there can be learning. If I can ask a series of questions that can broaden how we look at an issue, I take those moments.

However, it’s very risky to engage too frequently. When I stay engaged it is because the people with whom I disagree are intellectually curious...they ask questions and listen to the answers. Then I speak about my beliefs, but there are very few places that welcome that kind of exchange in the non-profit sector. However, in the few conversations I’ve had with thoughtful colleagues, I’ve learned and expanded my understanding—and theirs.

More often, people have an opinion and want to be heard. In my work environment, liberals assume you will agree with them. Very few are interested in really, to use a VISIONS term, “trying on” a conservative idea and then bouncing it back and forth thoughtfully. And just because you are willing to have a conversation doesn’t mean you are open to having your core beliefs shift.

Most people with an opinion will state it, assert it, and demand that you believe it. What is it that is so powerful about the need to be right?

I try to think about what might we learn from each other. The irony is there is a lot we do share. If you did a survey, you would begin to see that a conservative and liberal might have the same values on their list, but they would be reversed and in different priority. That’s why they get to different answers.

In his new book, *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt says liberals place more value on equality and fairness and conservatives on liberty and freedom. I believe we are created equal but if we guarantee equality of outcome, we lose all our freedoms. If I had to make a list, at the top is the freedom to live my life, and to liberals it is really, no matter what the

cost, to get equality of outcome. According to the founding doctrines, we were created equal in the eyes of God, and I think we should be removing barriers to equality—as we are with institutionalized racism—but we don't have to guarantee an equal outcome. One side tries to guarantee the outcome but the other side says, "No, because if we give up our freedom to get that, then what do we have in the end?" I think that is where the battleground lies between the Tea Party and everyone else.

I had an interesting discussion on an issue the other day with someone who was liberal and he said he wanted to get more facts so that we could continue talking. He thinks the answer is in the facts. I said to him, "With all due respect, I could get you six truckloads of reports that will tell you absolutely I am right. You could get six truckloads that tell you that you are right. In the end, neither of us is going to convince each other. If you want to take on a hot issue, I want to talk with you about how you got to your opinion."

I used this idea in a recent conversation about politics and ideology. We focused on personal specifics, how we grew up, what made us think the way we do. That's a conversation I think everyone can have and everyone can listen to. Forget if you are pro-life or pro-choice, there is probably damn good reason why people believe what they do. But talk to me about your own life and journey, tell me about that and begin to explore who you are and where you got your ideas. People open up on that level.

I am trying to work around the edges and see if we can get a conversation going that might be intriguing to all of us...perspectives that enlighten both sides. I am open to learning because there is a lot more to these issues than I realized before I had these conversations.

I care about the issues I work on, but I feel isolated and at risk for being who I am and sharing my opinions. I believe strongly that innovative solutions occur either at the margins or when different perspectives are aired, listened to, and tried on. For me, that's what is missing.