

Witness to Reconciliation

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I remember the day when I was first called, "Baby Killer." It was fifth grade, shortly before the 2000 presidential elections. My classmates and I had been discussing who should be president. I was the only one who had said Al Gore. From that moment on, I had marked myself as lone democrat in a sea of republicans in my Christian school. I learned quickly that you have two choices in this situation. You either say nothing when political subjects come up or you learn more than you classmates on whatever the subject is and argue with them until they are silent. The later was the choice I made most often. It left me feeling better but often isolated.

For those of you who don't know, I now work in politics in the Detroit area. If ever there was an area that needs reconciliation, it's the realm of politics, both nationally and, more importantly, between one another.

What has divided party and ideology in politics can be traced to many things. Anthropologically speaking, humans have always divided themselves into groups. The modern world has used language, religion, nationalism, ideology, geography, and more to divide ourselves. Today, we mostly divide ourselves into two groups who fail to see the same problems, and even less so the same solutions. This rock solid partisanship is a very destructive force to both governing and relationships between those who have different ideologies.

But we still live in a representative democracy. Most of us have a continual ability to have a say in those who represent us. The problem is, often we select those who have the same ideology that we do while ignoring partisanship. Then we step back and balk at the partisanship in Congress. We also run against that partisanship in our daily lives, often building our social circles around those who agree with us politically. The age of the Internet has allowed us to filter the information and opinions we consume on a daily basis. As such, we often end up listening and reading those who agree with us and discounting those who don't. We allow ourselves to close off those who we disagree with.

I don't have a perfect answer to this problem. I do, however, know one thing that helps bridge the gap for me.

Keep an open mind while listening to others. While this cliché is often spoken, its rarely done because we don't know how to naturally. If we can disallow ourselves from running through our own counterpoints in our mind during a discussion and instead try to find the righteous perspective behind the person we are arguing with or listening to, we can begin to bridge the gap. Listening even when it hurts to listen. Listening even when all we want to do is shut the person, article, TV show, or Radio Program out. Keep listening.

This took me years to learn. But my two best friends also work in politics but for the opposite party. When we discuss politics, we end up agreeing more that disagreeing because we've learned to absorb the other's perspective. It's not easy at first. It takes an honest starting point of, "I'm probably wrong" or at least acknowledging that our vision of how things are and how they should be is incomplete at best.