

Growing up is a difficult thing to do. I've been doing a lot of growing recently, or.. So I've been told, many, many,.. Many times. And honestly, these past years for me have not only been a huge leap for my height, but for my understanding of others. Of the world around me.

And, one thing I have noticed, especially in the past year, is that a lot of people disagree on a lot of stuff. And there have been a whole host of heated issues in the last year.

Now, I was raised Unitarian Universalist from a very young age, and one thing that comes with being raised in this community is a deep love of just sitting down, and linguistically clobbering someone. I'll be the first to admit I love a good debate. I've had discussions that were an hour long, two hours long, ones that went past midnight and into the morning.

So when a time such as this with so much political tension occurs, It's a great opportunity. But something has happened here that is a big problem for arguers like me.

The political spectrum has become very polarized, but not only that, it's become resentful of the opposing sides to such an extent that people truly hate each other simply because of differing beliefs. I'm really worried about the future because of this. All the energy is being spent yelling at each other and not listening.

I think one of the main issues that arise over the past year due to such an aggressive presidential campaign from both sides is this renewal of ideological possession. Ideological possession is the complete submission to an oversimplified view of the world supported by a large group of people. It excuses bad behavior in mob mentality, and it allows people to sidestep questions that challenge their beliefs. These ideologies claim to have every answer, and therefore any challenge to the ideology is wrong.

To many people have forgotten how to be kind to each other. How to be welcoming and loving to those who oppose us. There's a lot of passion in these beliefs, and that's great, but they come with a lot of violent, threatening baggage. People have pride in their beliefs, but also arrogance, their determined, but stubborn. Political slurs like Snowflake and Fascist have become to prevalent.

So much so that sometimes we have a hard time seeing the people behind the shouting, the real human beings with dreams and hopes and Lives. We too often forget we are one people, one humanity, and we should all be passionately disagreeing together, not apart.

Now, I want to be clear when I make these statements. I'm not arguing for one side or the other. What I'm trying to do is promote the great work we're doing here, past not just fighting for people who face oppression or hardships, but to support and teach others how to be willing to listen.

As Nelson Mandela said, **“The best weapon is to sit down and talk.”**

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All of this hate is prevailing because many people are forgetting a simple fact. The true goal of a discussion, an argument, is not to have a victor, but for all parties to grow together. They forget that to open your gates to other ideas is not the same as conceding, and that changing your mind on something is a natural part of thought, it is not something to refuse or be ashamed of.

When we stop to listen to others, we learn more about the world around us, and ourselves. This philosophical diffusion creates a understanding with others and new ideas form about how we should approach greater problems. Even if one does not change any of their views, any constructive challenge to your beliefs strengthens your argument to be more sound.

When a society forgets how to have a civilized discussion as we have begun to, everyone suffers. We allow ourselves to exist in a political echo chamber. And the only way to stand out in an echo chamber is to yell louder and more extremely than everyone else. This is why we see such a strong divergence and split between so many people. The way to stand out is to get more politically extreme. Everyone losses. This is why I believe this should be bipartisan movement, and a top priority for anyone who wants to see an improvement in our politics. If we want any change, any kind at all, the most effective step is to first make change efficient, constructive, and stable by getting as many disagreeing voices involved together.

From Nelson Mandela again - "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner."

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I think Unitarian Universalists occupy a special place in this dynamic. Although it can be a struggle, we as a denomination aim to be accepting of all people. And if we want to begin to erode these destructive barriers that have been built up, we have to put effort into accepting not just all people of all identities, but all people of all philosophies. Accepting not because they are right or wrong, but because progress can only be made when we can truly stand to the claim of accepting all people.

There are not a lot of churches that get to be in the position we are in, and I think we should use it to its fullest. We, as a Denomination, tend to identify more on the quote unquote Liberal side of the spectrum, but that does not have to stop us from learning how to listen to others and helping others listen. Just because we hold many Leftist values does not mean we can't spread love and kindness to all people.

It's a difficult paradox, accepting all people, even those who don't accept others. It takes patience, it takes bravery, and most importantly, a willingness to be wrong once in awhile. Sometimes accepting that you're wrong can be the hardest thing to do.

We need to work to unite more people together, not under the banner of a common agreement, but a common understanding and respect of each other.

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Once one begins to express acceptance and kindness in this way, it's surprising how alike you are with people you thought couldn't be any more different than you. You might even find yourself agreeing with them once in awhile. These may be simple truths, but it is easy to forget them in the moment. And to spread a message of listening and kindness, one must first practice it within themselves.

In the past year, watching the political turmoil spiral around me, I decided that I would take steps to become more accepting of opposing views, and to learn how to listen.

The first thing I did, was I found a friend of a friend that I had lunch with, and had arguments with him. Now my friend's name is Matt, and his friend's name is Aden. Aden held mostly opposing political views to what I believed. Matt tended to be on my side. So me and Aden would spend every lunch, every other day, for half of this school year, just arguing. It was very nice. Then, I notice something happen.

As we talked and discussed, after not to long, we began to understand each other's arguing style. There was a rhythm to our debates. And so we began to no longer overlap each other in conversation, giving each other space as we felt the beats of the conversation. I began listening to him, and he began listening to me.

And then something more happened....

We agreed on something.

Now it wasn't a big deal to us at the time, it seemed totally normal. But we did this a few times more. Agreeing on just one idea or view. And I realized that, each of our agreements was actually an axiom we both viewed as logically sound. This was more than personal common ground. This was argumentative bedrock. Together, we built an arena out of the axioms, a stage on which we could argue. By the end of the Half a year, we had discussed so much because we found some simple common ground to battle each other over. Things like, every Human has inherent worth, all the way to the complexity and value of spirituality. When we agreed together on something, it made it easier to disagree together.

The second thing I did was whenever I felt like watching political media, through youtube, or a newsfeed, anyway I got political information with bias, I would also search out opposing views of the same issues on the internet. After a while, I was watching political videos I thought I'd never be watching. I found I actually liked some of them. Even the ones I did not agree with, some of them I found to be helpful because it would force me to disprove their arguments that could seem flawless, or I would have to better support my arguments and assumptions I had.

The final thing I did, was honestly a bit of improvisation. I was arguing with Aden again, and Matt was there. Aden made a point, and Matt made a counter claim, and I decided to oppose Matt. Internally I totally agreed with matt, I just decided then and there that I would try arguing for what I opposed.

As Aristotle wrote, "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it."

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From that point forward, when I would debate anyone, I would always stand opposed to them. I decided my political party was the Devil's advocate. It did two things for me. First, my ability to understand other's thoughts and arguments became easier, and I could argue for and against many more points. And second, there was always an argument to be had. I opposed everyone equally so I never ran out of people to discuss with. Instead of halving half the population to argue with, I doubled the number of people I could get into excessive talks with.

These three steps I took, Talking to my enemy, Listening to my enemy, and then becoming my enemy, were entirely transformative to how I approached politics as a whole. I became less intense and attached, less stubborn, not because I did not care, but because I have come to realize that a debate is not a fight for survival, but of understanding. That we are never backed into a corner, rather sometimes we must allow ourselves to be led down a hallway.

I thought, well now what do I do with this. If my goal is to teach others how to listen and be accepting of other's arguments, how do I teach others. And at some point I realized I had already done that. I wasn't the only one who had become better at listening. Aden and Matthew's ability to listen and to talk about important issues they felt strongly about had also been improved. Simply by practicing listening to others, others began to listen back.

If you want to teach others how to be more kind, more loving when we talk, I say take them to a room with two comfy arm chairs, sit them down, and furiously disagree with them. Make an afternoon of it. Say to them, "I disagree with you, But I am listening. I am listening to you with everything I am" Say it with your voice, with your eyes as they speak, your body movement. Show them you care, let them knock down their own barriers from the inside. You don't have to change their minds, you only have to free it.

As our current Dalai Lama commonets, "Peace does not mean an absence of conflicts; differences will always be there. Peace means solving these differences through peaceful means; through dialogue, education, knowledge; and through humane ways."



