



BRIDGING DIVIDES

Learning tactics to lessen polarization—with both people we know and those we don’t—can be potent personal and societal medicine

BY DARCY BROWN-MARTIN

IN MAY 2020, AS George Floyd’s murder ignited Black Lives Matter protests and a new national reckoning with race, yoga teacher and holistic health coach Brialle Ringer ran into a deeply personal iteration of our country’s combustible racial divide.

Ringer was home for the first time in years in L’Anse, Michigan—population 1,842 and 85.6 percent white. She noticed that one of her aunts had created a Facebook post reading, “I don’t support Black Lives Matter, but I support my Black friends, just like I don’t support the KKK but I support my white friends.” Many relatives had liked the post.

Ringer’s mother, who has seven siblings, is white. Ringer grew up amid her mother’s sprawling clan but spent holidays in Detroit with her father, who is Black. After leaving L’Anse for college, Ringer lived in racially diverse cities, earned her bachelor’s in social work, became a social justice activist, and had what she calls “my racial awakening.” She also began to distance herself from her mother’s family, whose beliefs and values felt increasingly at odds with her own.

“We have a reunion on the beach at Lake Superior every year with 50 to 100 family members,” she says. “I didn’t go for five years because I

couldn’t hold space for our differences.”

At a time when many of us feel emotionally exhausted by broad national divides—racial, political, financial, geographic, generational—and headlines insist that “It’s Clear That America Is Deeply Polarized” (*Time*) or wonder “Is there any hope for our divided nation?” (*Washington Post*), Ringer, like many people, was suffering the personal price of polarization: strained relationships and politics-related stress.

“People’s level of pain and distress around political conflict has increased in our country, and that’s not good from a health and wellness perspective,” says Dr. Tania Israel, a professor of counseling, clinical, and school psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. “Being in a sustained state of stress can really take a toll.” What’s more, multiple studies show

that our physical and mental health is negatively impacted by weakened family bonds or other social ties.

Fortunately, Ringer had been developing tools that would enable her to address these negative impacts of polarization and their source. In the last few years, she had been involved with Living Room Conversations (LRC), a nonprofit founded in 2010 to help Americans bridge divides through respectful conversations about polarizing topics. Now, her “bridging” experience was motivating her “to go home and try to heal some divides.” Before heading to L’Anse, she invited a few relatives to join her during her visit for a structured conversation about race.

In reaching out this way, Ringer is part of a trend. As polarization has intensified in America in the last decade, organizations that promote civil communication and the uncovering of common ground by people with opposing views have also begun growing in size, number, and visibility.

ISTOCKPHOTO

Being

Bridging groups such as Braver Angels, Civil Squared, Be the Bridge, and The People's Supper (to name just a few) foster dialogue among people with divergent views. Formats range from "Red/Blue" workshops to shared meals-with-discussions in racially divided communities to one-on-one conversations between rural- and urban-dwelling strangers. All groups and events work from ground rules that support the exchange of ideas rather than hostile debate.

Despite their diverse formats and foci, bridging groups have a common goal: reestablishing civility as a norm in public discourse. In advancing this objective, groups also aim to repair and strengthen our civic fabric. As a significant bonus, bridging practitioners find that the skills they acquire through participating in fostered dialogues are enormously impactful in healing personal divides.

Bridging work "is such an opportunity," says Tania Israel. "When you learn to engage in productive dialogue, you gain skills that will serve you in all parts of your life." Dr. Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, agrees. "The tools involved in bridging or antipolarization work are helpful in the broadest journey of self-discovery," he says.

The personal is political

Brialle Ringer practiced bridging in LRC conversations focused on topical issues such as climate change, energy, and the movement to defund police. As she grew into an LRC leader, she facilitated dialogues with greater personal resonance—

an intergenerational conversation with her dad and other father-daughter pairs, and a "morality of food" discussion with farmers, a hunter, and fellow vegans.

She became fluent in bridging skills: listening to understand, rather than to argue or persuade; entering dialogue from a place of intellectual humility; suspending judgment; and highlighting common ground wherever it appeared.

In L'Anse, she was able to approach her aunt's Facebook post as an opportunity. She wrote in her aunt's feed, "How do you support your Black friends? Because this post does not make me feel supported. Could we talk about this offline? I'm hosting a conversation about race tomorrow and would love for you to participate."

Her aunt did not respond.

That same evening, Ringer and her great-grandmother were making their way across Lake Superior's shore to a family bonfire when another aunt rushed at Ringer, screaming, "How dare you step on my property after you called all of us racists today? Get out! Our relationship is over!"

Ringer stayed calm and reiterated that she was open to conversation. The aunt's husband joined in, shouting, "Take your racist BS elsewhere! You're not welcome here!" That's when Ringer felt compelled to respond. "This



is exactly the racism in this family that we need to talk about," she said. Then she and her great-grandmother left the beach.

Building blocks

Ringer had run up against the limitations of bridging. It's not for everyone, nor for every circumstance.

Bridging depends on the willingness of participants to listen. It collapses if participants focus solely on their own opinions or on trying to convince someone else to change their views. As Israel writes in her book *Beyond Your Bubble: How to Connect Across the Political Divide*, "Dialogue isn't about winning. It's about understanding." Bridging conversations get at the roots of people's beliefs, rather than focusing solely on the beliefs themselves.

Renita Fisher, a Wells Fargo policy management consultant who immigrated

from Guyana 22 years ago, learned this during her first Braver Angels (BA) Red/Blue workshop in 2017. An active Democratic party member in her politically diverse, "purple" Minnesota district, Fisher accepted an invitation to participate with the intention of "standing up for Blue values and rebutting conservatives." But, she says, "That's not at all what happened."

In BA debates, Reds and Blues take turns responding to the same question without interruption; the other side simply listens. In Fisher's event,

a question was posed about immigration. Fisher says, "I expressed my fear about being an immigrant, a Black woman, in a neighborhood that had voted for Trump. I didn't know that one of the Reds that day was my Republican state senator. Afterward, he introduced himself and asked me to coffee to talk more about my feeling of not being welcome in the community." Thus began a yearslong series of lengthy conversations.

"Those talks were so impactful for me," Fisher says. "We used bridging principles. I was able to listen to understand rather than debate or rebut. I didn't lose myself in the process or change my positions, but I was able to hear where he was coming from. His views were very far from mine, but I was able to see him as a human and not my enemy."

Spanning a family gap

Bridging wasn't possible for Ringer on the beach, but she

HELP IS HERE

Excellent groups and leaders are fostering bridging all over the country. Here's a sampling of resources to help you learn more about or get involved in bridging.

- Dr. Tania Israel's ***Beyond Your Bubble: How to Connect Across the Political Divide*** is an accessible primer that includes exercises to lay personal groundwork for engaging in difficult conversations.
- **Braver Angels** (BA) is “a citizens’ organization uniting red and blue Americans in a working alliance to depolarize America.” BA hosts Red/Blue workshops and one-on-one conversations between people on opposite sides.
- Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a practice of developing radically high self-awareness and compassion in order to peacefully address conflict within one’s self and between people and groups. **The Center for Nonviolent Communication** hosts NVC workshops.
- **Civil Squared** works “to get un-likeminded people talking again because that’s how, together, we’ll create the most effective solutions.”
- The ***Bridging Differences Playbook*** created by the Greater Good Science Center’s Bridging Differences initiative is a concise but complete introduction to bridging, and includes a robust guide to bridging organizations.
- **Living Room Conversations**, “a simple way to connect across divides—politics, age, gender, race, nationality, and more,” offers conversation guides and opportunities to participate in dialogues on a huge range of topics.

did have her Living Room Conversations—style discussion about race on the calendar. The relatives she invited were those she is closest to and “could already somewhat talk about these things with.” She had shared in advance a

As Israel notes, “Even if you cannot reach agreement, bridging may help you better understand another person’s experience, which can have a beneficial impact on your own mental and physical health.”

meditation and my fabulous therapist for helping me stay engaged in this work,” Fisher says. “And staying in is key. Listening to understand is an ongoing learning process.” “This work is not all or nothing,” says Mendoza-

BRIDGING GROUPS HAVE A COMMON GOAL: REESTABLISHING CIVILITY AS A NORM IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE.

conversation guide on race and a set of conversation agreements. The day after the beachfront confrontation, she sat down with five relatives in her great-grandmother’s living room and waded in. The conversation was challenging, rewarding, civil, enlightening, and emotional.

“My uncle, who has a biracial daughter, got tearful thinking about what it would have been like for his four-year-old to have been in my shoes at the beach,” Ringer says. “One of my aunts confessed she had never thought of herself as being of any race until she adopted two kids who are people of color. And I was able to see a larger story about my family, beyond ‘they are racists.’”

Ringer and her relatives practiced perspective taking, seeing one another’s experiences with compassion. The confrontation at the lake was unresolved, but Ringer was able to ask her family to hold the angry aunt accountable. This in turn allowed Ringer “to feel I could preserve my connection to that place and family I love. It made me feel I don’t have to stay away. I can be a bridge.”

Bridge benefits

In early 2021, *USA Today* published an opinion piece by Joan Blades, cofounder of LRC. Citing research by Harvard University political scientist Erica Chenoweth, Blades wrote, “Just 3.5 percent of the population actively and peacefully participating [in bridging] would be sufficient to create the culture change we are seeking . . . [creating] a culture with norms of respect and trust.”

If that isn’t enough to convince you to try bridging, consider the potential personal impact. “Intolerance and bias are bad for health,” says Mendoza-Denton. “If you are the target of bias, you are subjected to having fewer resources, and if you are biased, that affects your levels of anger. And anger is definitely associated with higher rates of early death.” Bridging, which lessens bias by humanizing others, is thus both broadly and individually beneficial.

It must be noted that bridging benefits are not earned easily, and a single conversation is rarely enough to heal a divide. “I’m grateful for guided

Denton. “There may be movement toward civility but also regressions, stumbles, obstacles. Bridging is always a work in progress and needs maintenance and sustenance.”

Ringer knows her family’s conversation about race was a first step and is delighted that her relatives agree. “My great-grandma told me afterward that we need to talk more as a family, and other relatives said, ‘We should have conversations on other topics, too.’”

Both she and Fisher share Blades’s hope that bridging can lead to a cultural shift. They also share similar personal motivations for doing this work. Says Ringer, “I’m deepening into family relationships now with honesty and curiosity, and it’s so rewarding. I want to have children, and I want my children to feel welcomed in my family for all that they are.” **DW**

San Francisco Bay Area-based writer Darcy Brown-Martin is happiest uncovering and sharing stories that build community, amplify social justice movements, and strengthen readers’ health.

Being