

HOW

T
TO
TALK
TO
YOUR
REPUBLICAN
UNCLE

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My brother and I grew up in the Unification Church, a cult popular in the seventies. Like Scientology and most of the other cults of the time, the Unification Church was full of ex-hippies and washed up musicians whose dreams of world peace turned fascist and authoritarian. The Unification Church founded The Washington Times, an ultra-conservative newspaper. Ted Nugent was a frequent columnist. The leader of the Church, Rev. Moon, met with presidents such as Richard Nixon, lent money to the Bushes, and may have been involved in Reagan's Iran-Contra scandal.

Growing up, I knew we were different from other families. Most middle schoolers didn't have a favorite pundit, much less pay any attention to politics. My classmates barely went to church, and I knew that if word got out about my faith, I would be ostracized even more than I already was.

During the Obama years, I struggled to convey the sense of frightened secrecy that permeated my childhood. Life was far from perfect then, but there was a feeling in the air that America was evolving, that our arc was bending towards justice. My art practice, about religion and its repercussions, seemed to strike some studio visitors as irrelevant, and out of touch with contemporary life.

On the night of November 8th 2016, I smoked a rare cigarette and surveyed the crowd assembled at the Women's Center for Creative Work in Los Angeles. I knew most of them- they were my friends. I prayed that the news wasn't true, and I felt as though I was being sent back home. This time, however, my friends were coming with me. All too soon, they would be able to relate to my upbringing, where rumors



I was a baby Republican. My parents weren't the easygoing Republicans typical in the eighties and nineties. Our family was militantly Republican, tea-partiers before that existed. Our theories didn't revolve around President Obama, who was barely out of law school at the time. Instead, our conspiracies all centered around the Clintons. I grew up believing that President Clinton ordered a hit on at least one person to cover up his crimes.

In 2000, we moved to the countryside in South Korea. The radio station of the US Army, AFKN, played one hour of Rush Limbaugh every day at three in the afternoon, before "Fresh Air" at four. My brother's watch alarm alerted us when it was time to listen to Rush. I remember hearing the tinny beep from the backseat and turning the dial on my dad's old blue four-wheeler. We listened as our car sped away from

had free reign, where trust was hard to find. I never dreamt childhood would be my reality again.



Trump and his inner circle exhibit behavior “very typical of a cult” according to Janya Lalich, sociology professor at Cal State Chico and expert on cults. All the components are there: the charismatic leader, the authoritarian rule, blind obedience, the fawning constituents, and extreme distrust of outsiders. Even Senator Bob Corker, a Republican, called Trump’s supporters “cultish.”¹



Cults are often seen as mysterious, terrifying phenomena, like quicksand at the beach. At any point, an innocent person can be swallowed whole, sucked into them without leaving a trace. The victims vanish, occasionally reappearing as a shadow of their former self, parroting their dear leader.

In my experience, this portrayal doesn’t have much to do with reality. Cults flourish at specific times and places in history, usually during a time of social upheaval. In the seventies, America experienced an outbreak of cults. The Unification Church, Scientology, Hare Krishna, Peoples Temple, Rajneeshes, The Family, Self-Realization Fellowship, and more. Cults seemed to appear from nowhere, springing up in California and devouring the nation’s youth.

The baby boomers who joined the Unification Church were kids looking for a family. Many had fathers who fought in World War II, who returned with untreated PTSD. They

¹ Tom Jacobs, “A Cult Expert Finds Familiar Patterns of Behavior in Trump’s GOP,” Pacific Standard, June 21, 2018, <https://psmag.com/news/a-sociologist-explains-the-similarities-between-cults-and-trumps-gop>.

came from families struggling in the aftermath of war, in a culture eager to forget, suppress, and move on. It wasn’t just in America- the Church started in war-torn Korea, and many members grew up in the aftermath of World War II in Japan, Germany, and Austria.

I once heard of the glory days of the Unification Church after the USSR fell. A Russian member spoke of people walking around in the streets, unsure of their new life. It was so easy, she said, to walk around and say, “I can explain how to get to heaven.” People needed answers, especially at that time. People in her city flocked to Church lectures and workshops. As Russia started to stabilize, she complained, a lot of the new members quit.

Cults sweep new members off their feet, offering a sense of purpose and a loving family. This process was coined “love bombing” by the Unification Church. But when the honeymoon period is over, members work tirelessly to appease a mercurial leader. Mistakes are met with severe punishment. All relationships become dependent on the cult leader, who isolates the members from the outside world.

Cults are essentially an abusive relationship on a larger scale. To a person who grew up in a healthy family, the love bombing would raise red flags or at least seem insincere. To someone from an abusive background, it would feel like the perfect escape.



In “What Doomsday Cults Can Teach Us About ISIS Today,” reporter Clyde Haberman compared cults from the seventies to the allure of ISIS. Haberman suggests that the

young men joining the Islamic State are not too different from the youth who joined the Peoples Temple and the Unification Church in the seventies.² They're kids looking for a place to belong, for an answer to their alienation.

Like the Taliban before them, ISIS has been portrayed by the American media as terrifying bogeymen, hellbent on senseless destruction. But as someone who grew up in a cult, they seem like a predictable development. The territories they come from have been destabilized for years, mostly by American interventions. Generations have grown up in war-torn conflict, any sense of normalcy obliterated. Families and communities torn apart, no jobs, no schooling, no hope. These conditions make a terrorist group like ISIS seem attractive. It offers the closest thing to stability and community that's available in the region, ultimately framing the conflicts as signs of the impending apocalypse.



For the past few decades, even mainstream politicians have had to grapple with conspiracy theories in America. There was the Clinton body count lists in the nineties, then 9/11 truthers, Obama birthers, and now pizzagate and the deep state. Sociologists have been researching the correlation between feeling helpless and believing in conspiracy theories. When humans lose our sense of personal control over our lives, we are likely to look for a reason. Our belief in the supernatural increases, we see patterns in seemingly meaningless data. The idea that the universe could be chaotic and uncontrollable is stressful for humans. We want to believe that if we aren't in charge, someone else is.³

² Clyde Haberman, "What Doomsday Cults Can Teach Us About ISIS Today," *New York Times*, November 5, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/zj3qa8g>.

³ Ian Mcgregor and Kyle Nash, "Religious Belief as Compensatory Con-



There has been much discussion over whether Trump voters are "working class." The median household income for a Trump voter is \$72,000, well over the median household income in America of \$59,000. But \$72,000 is still not that much, especially if the household is two adults, and there are children. After taxes, take home pay is about \$5,000 a month. The average cost of basic necessities (rent, health insurance premiums, transportation, groceries, childcare) add up to at least \$4,000,⁴ which means that most families that support Trump share a few hundred dollars a month to cover the cost of school supplies, prescriptions, the odd calamity, clothing, a sick family member, and perhaps putting a little into savings.

Most Americans live with extreme economic vulnerability. Nearly half of Americans have less than four hundred dollars in savings.⁵ Wages haven't risen in decades, while the

trol," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1 (February 2010): 37-48 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309353750>.

J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014): 952-966 <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12084>

⁴ "This Is How Much Child Care Costs in 2018," Care.com Editorial Staff, accessed August 20, 2018, <https://www.care.com/c/stories/2423/how-much-does-child-care-cost/>.

"Quarterly Residential Vacancies and Homeownership," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed August 15, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/files/currenthvspress.pdf>.

Ester Bloom, "Here's How Much the Average American Spends on Health Care," *CNBC*, June 23, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/06/23/heres-how-much-the-average-american-spends-on-health-care.html>.

⁵ Ben Taylor, "Why Half of Americans Can't Come Up With \$400 in an Emergency," *USA Today*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2017/10/06/why-half-of-americans-cant-come-up-with-400-in-an-emergency/106216294/>.

cost of living has risen unabated. Housing is costing most of our salaries, health care takes the rest, and most college educated Americans are at least \$20,000 in debt.⁶ We have been slowly sinking for decades, with no life raft.

All the while we're told that if we just try harder, we can achieve "The American Dream," a term not so coincidentally coined in the Great Depression. Corporations gaslight the public into thinking that it's possible to bootstrap our way out of our problems through hard work, even though they're not paying living wages. The situation doesn't show any signs of getting better. Life expectancy is down, children have less favorable economic outlooks than their parents. How can Americans feel except helpless?



A few months after the 2016 election, I went to a local Indivisible meeting. The guest speaker, Mike Young, was from the California League of Conservation Voters, the political arm of California's environmental groups. It was his job to help people get elected to state government who will fight climate change. I had just read Jane Meyer's book, *Dark Money*, about the Koch brothers spending billions of dollars to fund conservative issues, and I was deflated. I asked the speaker if there was any chance of winning against those billionaires, and he nodded and said he got that question a lot.

Mr. Young explained that he runs candidates against those funded by the oil companies who have far more money

⁶ Abigail Hess, "Here's How Much the Average Student Loan Borrower Owes When They Graduate," CNBC, February 15, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/15/heres-how-much-the-average-student-loan-borrower-owes-when-they-graduate.html>.

and resources. But, he said, if he's able to raise just 1/3 of the amount the other candidates have received, just enough to pay for leaflets to ensure all the constituents hear their arguments, the environmentally friendly candidate will win.

The oil industry, the Koch brothers, and other secretive conservative groups put billions of dollars into our politics because they have to. They need to spend all that money because they are convincing people to vote against their own interests, and it takes a lot of resources to make that happen. The Koch brothers and their ilk are making a lot of effort to seem all-powerful. This works two ways- generates support from their base, but also intimidates the opposition. They don't want a resistance who are confident and are unafraid to argue. They don't want ordinary folks to realize their own power in the fight for justice.

Social change looks inevitable when it's in the rearview mirror, but looks impossible when it's ahead. Dr. King and the civil rights movement both have high approval ratings now, but in the sixties their numbers were dismal.

Today, many second-generation members have left the Unification Church and its politics behind. A lot of us are liberal Democrats, but we fall everywhere on the political spectrum. All of us still have to deal with our parents, who are mostly still staunch conservatives and believe that Trump was sent by God to save America. I don't believe that we are anomalies. I believe that people change their minds all the time. The battle for marriage equality has shown me that, when in a few short years public approval skyrocketed. I believe that we're all making political decisions every day.

Trump and Fox News are throwing a lot at us, and it's

easy to get overwhelmed by it all. That's a tactic they're employing to immobilize us, so they can keep pushing their fascist agenda. It's true they have the upper hand right now. They control all three branches of federal government, and most of the states. Trump has walked back DACA, environmental protections, and threatened our healthcare. Hate crimes have increased since Trump's election, with one new study pointing to a correlation between Trump's tweets and a rise of anti-Muslim hate crimes. For many of us, the world already wasn't safe. Since 2016, however, it has gotten more dangerous. With America on the path to a fascist state, the actions of ordinary citizens become even more crucial.

Just after Trump's election, Robert Reich called for Americans to become sand in the gears of Trump's machine. Perhaps we can't stop him fully, but we can each, in our own way, slow him down. I believe there is still time to change the direction our society is going in. The reason I believe this is that most Americans do not agree with Trump. Sixty-four percent of Americans are pro-choice. Most Americans are pro-gun control, and like the idea of universal healthcare. When interviewed about hot button issues, most Americans are left-of-center.

I believe that it's up to all of us to fight Trumpism and make America safer for all. We each have a duty to work as hard as we can to call out prejudice in our families and communities. The election of Trump has emboldened racists, ripped off the polite veneer that allowed some of us to assume that America had evolved.

Since the 2016 election, I've noticed more of my friends trying to talk to their Republican uncles, or realizing that they need to be more active in standing up to sexism, racism, and

homophobia in their communities. I have found myself coaching friends on how to engage with people from differing political persuasions, using what worked for me. Talking about politics is tricky, but it's not rocket science.

TIPS
FOR
TALKING
ABOUT
POLITICS

1. Protect Yourself

A week ago, my brother called me. He had just been to a BBQ, and he was the only queer person among a group of people he didn't know so well. One of the other guests started defending Confederate statues. Usually, my brother wouldn't hesitate to argue, but in that situation, he wasn't confident in his own safety. So he kept quiet.

Talking about politics comes with actual risk- people can get extremely angry, and it brings latent prejudice to the surface. It's far better to err on the side of caution when talking to people. If you are feeling safe, go for it. If you are not, let the moment pass. Do not engage in talking about politics with anyone who has exhibited abusive behavior to you.



Know what your boundaries are. Amber Hikes, Executive Director of Philadelphia's Office of LGBT Affairs, said it best:

Especially in this political climate, we need to be all moving towards a place of accomplice-ship. Sometimes that means putting ourselves on the line, it means speaking up when it's necessary. But what I call it, is being political in place... the idea of looking at the privilege that you hold in the spaces that you're

in, stepping up when that's necessary, stepping back when it's necessary. So, my identities as a black queer woman- that's a lot of marginalized identities. But I'm also cis. so I am often exhausted and don't feel like fighting sexism and homophobia and racism, but I ALWAYS got time to fight some transphobia. You coming for trans folx, for non binary folx, you're going to get this work. I'm going to step up and do that because I have the space for that. But I'm damn sure to call in some white folx to deal with a crazy racist jackass.⁷

I have been recognizing the emotional toll it takes me to explain the #metoo movement to my friends, especially cis-men. I do not want to explain why feminism is important. It's not fair to ask a person to justify their existence, it's degrading and dehumanizing. For my personal sanity, I've started to call into the conversation men who are reasonably well informed. When cis-men ask me about the #metoo movement and if it's gone "too far" I say, "I think it's important to discuss the #metoo movement, but just to let you know, if you're going to ask a woman about it, chances are you're asking an assault survivor." That usually changes the attitude from a debate to a thoughtful recognition of the human cost of sexism.

I have a lot of privilege- I am straight, white, and cis. I try to use that privilege to educate myself on others' issues so that I can do the emotional labor of arguing for their rights. I try to act the way I want men to act when someone is being sexist. I want them to shut that language down, or at least support me when I try. Too often I've heard the excuse of not

⁷ Amber Hikes, "Amber Hikes," interview by Cameron Esposito, Queery, Earwolf, July 22, 2018, audio, 29:17, <https://www.earwolf.com/episode/amber-hikes/>.

wanting to be a "white knight," but honestly, I'd rather have people try to speak up rather than stay silent.

2. Know Your Enemies

In the seventies, some families paid deprogrammers to kidnap cult members and bring them back home. Occasionally, the members escaped and rejoined the cult. I heard a few stories of deprogrammers when I was a kid. They sounded quite scary, and there were accusations of physical abuse. The deprogrammers would try to break cult members through sleep deprivation, yelling, and physical violence.

One auntie told us about her experience being deprogrammed. At first, she said they were really mean. It made her resolve stronger, and she was determined not to let her faith down. But then the deprogrammers took another tack. They became really nice and started to befriend her. She decided that maybe the deprogrammers had a point, and she left the Church. She only rejoined years later after running into an old Church friend. The deprogrammers were only able to convince the auntie when they stopped treating her like their enemy. She wasn't the cult leader pulling the strings. She was a scared kid.



As part of anti-terrorism operations, FBI Special Agent Ali Soufan was responsible for interrogating many people, including Osama Bin Laden's bodyguard. Mr. Soufan confirmed the identities of the 9/11 hijackers. He spoke out against waterboarding and other "enhanced interrogation techniques" in 2011 because he said they were ineffective.⁸ Mr. Soufan at-

⁸ Ali Soufan, "Ali Soufan," interview by Stephen Colbert. Colbert Report, Comedy Central, October 19, 2011. Video, 18:26. <http://www.>

tributed his successes to his building a rapport with his subjects. He knew where they were coming from, and he knew a lot about their organization.



For centuries, the wealthy have used a technique called a “racial bribe” in order to distract the working class into infighting, to turn their grievances against people who have less than them. In 1675, slaveholders in Jamestown gave white indentured servants a little more freedom in order to break their allegiance with the African slaves. The tactic has been used successfully ever since.⁹

Racial bribes work because of displaced aggression. When our bosses cut our hours or take away our benefits, we don’t want to lose our jobs, so we don’t argue with them. Instead, we flip off someone on the drive home, or turn our anger on an assistant or intern.

It is quite easy for me to get frustrated with Trump voters. I want to scream at them, blame them for the hellhole we’re living in now. But when I get angry, I visualize myself taking that anger and placing it at the feet of Rupert Murdoch, Donald Trump, and Paul Ryan. I will not play their games and continue the cycle. I know who my enemies are, and I know how they’re playing us. The checkout lady who’s worried about job insecurity is not my enemy. I direct my spite at the billionaires pulling the strings. They are manipulating our family members and neighbors into believing that Mexicans and “the gays” are the reason they’re suffering.

cc.com/video-clips/fztuzs/the-colbert-report-ali-soufan

⁹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 24-25.

In my experience, it is really hard to win an argument while being angry. Usually at the first sign of hostility, people get defensive and double down on their arguments. They stop listening and go into fight or flight mode. We live in a patriarchy, and we’re all part of it, it affects all of us. Racism is not a light switch- this is not a binary of “racist” or “not racist.” I see prejudice as a spectrum- we live in a society built on systemic racism, and none of us are completely free from prejudice. When I talk with someone I disagree with, I imagine that perhaps I’m a little farther along on the spectrum, but I’m holding a hand out behind me to lead the way, as countless others have done for me. This doesn’t mean that my anger is invalid. I just know who to direct it at.

3. Protect Others

The Unification Church is an extremely homophobic religion. Gay people are seen as defective and under the influence of the devil. Thankfully, most of my generation has rejected that view. But our parents’ generation can still sometimes be homophobic. When I am in settings with a lot of current and former Unification Church members, a potluck for example, I will make sure to confront any homophobic behaviors. My aim is to let young kids know that homophobia is unacceptable. That they also have a safe person to talk to if need be. My aim is to encourage others to think twice before saying something in public.

A couple years ago, Reddit shut down a few racist subreddits. A recent study shows that hate speech by users who frequented those subreddits diminished by around 80%. “bigotry is easy and those who cherish it are lazy. Make it difficult and many people may find it more trouble than it’s worth to

harass, shame, and otherwise abuse online those different from themselves,” explains Devin Coldewey at TechCrunch.¹⁰ When I see someone being unapologetically racist on facebook, my aim becomes less about reasoning with them than calling them out and shutting them down. If a person of color has already started to engage, I’ll move to a supportive role.

When talking about politics, context matters. When I get into a private discussion with someone and they are struggling to understand my point of view, I try to be patient. But my compassion for others does not extend to standing by and watching them be hateful to others. When I hear someone making an apologetically homophobic statement or a racist remark in public, I think it’s important to speak up. At that point, my aim is not to win an argument with that person. In those situations, I want the person to get nervous about being a bigot in public. I want others to know that this language is unacceptable. Most importantly, I want to do the labor of shutting them down so the affected community doesn’t have to.

4. Be Kind

I learned about racial profiling by listening to 770 WABC. Rush Limbaugh explained that the New Jersey State Troopers were getting in trouble for pulling over black men. He said that they were running drugs from Florida to New York, and their route took them through New Jersey. Mr. Limbaugh said that drug traffickers used to be white guys from the south, but now black men are doing most of the drug running, so it makes sense that the police are focused on them. He said it’s

¹⁰ Devin Coldewey, “Study Finds Reddit’s Controversial Ban of Its Most Toxic Subreddits Actually Worked,” TechCrunch, September 11, 2017, <https://techcrunch.com/2017/09/11/study-finds-reddits-controversial-ban-of-its-most-toxic-subreddits-actually-worked/>.

not being racist, it’s just facts. It made sense to me, listening in the car with my dad on the way to soccer practice. I knew that our small New Jersey town was relatively quiet, and we only had a police force because of drug traffickers.

When I went to college I brought up this theory to my friend. She got a little quiet, and then she said, “You know, Akina, I used to think that too. But I met my ex, who is black. He used to complain about being followed around stores and being pulled over. I thought he was just complaining, but after awhile I noticed it happens all the time. I realized he wasn’t making it up.”

She could have yelled at me, told me I was being racist. Instead she explained another perspective, without trying to shame me. What she said made sense too. I thought about it, and soon all the arguments from Republicans about how people of color are treated the same just didn’t make sense. I realized how much daily interactions mattered, how they built up into an experience of being included or rejected by society. How being automatically suspected by others was demoralizing and terrifying.

My friend treated me like I was a good person, just not fully informed. She kindly clued me in when I was being ignorant, and I didn’t get defensive because she didn’t make me feel attacked. I think about my friend, and try to take a page from her book when I can.



I talk to people with differing opinions or politics as if they are good hearted people, complicated people, perhaps not fully familiar with issues. I try to see myself as providing an

alternate viewpoint. Perhaps I might disagree with the cause of their problems, or how to fix their worries, but I acknowledge the often real pain behind their ideas.

If I find myself getting angry easily, I examine my motives. Am I feeling self-righteous because it's masking my embarrassment over my own internalized prejudices? Or is it because people are dismissing a topic that directly impacts me and I don't have the mental energy to do the labor of explaining their privilege to them?

If I'm getting angry no matter what the topic is being discussed, it's a sign that I am approaching burnout. Life under Trump is hard and exhausting. I try to pay attention to the mental cost of everything, and if I find myself getting snappish all the time, I take extra care of myself. I get together with other activists or sympathetic friends. I unplug from the internet and read a book, or go on a walk. I schedule time to do nothing.

We're all learning. In gratitude of all the people who have brought me here, I try to extend a hand behind me. I view the conversation as a bread crumb trail. I can't help someone become a progressive overnight, but I can help light their way down the path.

5. Play the Long Game

The doctrine of the Unification Church is an elaborate set of theories based on the interpretation of the Bible. It depends on all sorts of logical fallacies to make any kind of sense. For the longest time, I was a halfhearted Church member because of circular reasoning. At the time, I thought that I be-

lieved in God. And if God was real, that meant that the Bible was real. The Unification Church was the best interpretation of the Bible, so didn't that make me a Unificationist? When I started to realize that my own belief in the supernatural didn't have to be connected to the Bible, the whole argument for me staying in the Church fell apart.



One issue for cult members trying to leave is that leadership does a good job of isolating them. It's hard to leave when you know you will lose your community, and you have been conditioned to be afraid of outsiders. Fox News works similarly to any other cult. They sell their viewers a vast conspiracy of interconnected lies, providing scapegoats and redirecting anger towards other victims and away from corporate interests. One of the first lies they tell is that Democrats are the enemy, evil monsters hell-bent on erasing what makes America great. They portray liberals as hating Christmas, America and football.

One of the nice things about arguing with someone who has been brainwashed is that if you can prove one of their points are incorrect, the whole framework can fall apart. The lies are interdependent and need each other, and without one, it's harder to buy into the illusion. The easiest lie to dismantle is that Democrats are the enemy. If I am not only knowledgeable but kind, it's flying in the face of Fox News. I'm a real-life Democrat. I am not paid by George Soros. It's hard to believe that I'm the enemy. So that's why, even when I'm talking with an Evangelical Republican and I don't believe I will be able to change their minds about anything, I'll still talk with them about quilting or sewing, or any other hobbies we have in common. I'm usually wearing my Planned Parenthood

tote bag, so they know where I stand. And I know that sometimes that alone is going to make them second guess when Fox News talks about “liberal activists,” and make them a little less likely to accept the Right’s hateful rhetoric.

I remember the first time I realized that Democrats weren’t as scary as I was led to believe. It was October of 2004, and I had been in California for only a year. I was unused to voting in California- there were so many local races and state referendums to vote for. My classmate, Nikhil, saw me examining a California sample ballot. He nodded conspiratorially and asked if I did what everyone else did- use the Democrats’ voting guide as a cheat sheet.

“No,” I responded. “It looks like I’m going with them 50% of the time.”

I felt brave for saying that. Our school was very liberal, and I was afraid if I showed my conservative leanings, I would be ostracized.

“Oh, you think for yourself.” Nikhil replied with a smile. “I like that.”

I was completely shocked when he was nice. I expected him to grab a bullhorn and announce my political leanings, or run me out of town.

A few months before I met Nikhil, I spent the summer in Korea with my parents. I was having trouble sleeping. I was addicted to the news, so I watched one of the only English speaking TV channels we got, CNN. They were broadcasting speeches from the 2004 Democratic convention. I thought most of the speakers were self-righteous and snooze worthy. But I remember the goosebumps on my arm when the newcomer running for Senate, Barack Obama, started speaking. He invited everyone into the party, and didn’t spend the whole time ragging on Republicans. I felt welcomed, and electrified. I even

tried telling my dad about the speech, even though he didn’t seem interested.

We lived near the DMZ in South Korea. At night when it was quiet, sometimes we could hear loudspeakers blasting propaganda music. Every hour the South Korean speakers would announce the time. The reasoning was that if the North Korean soldiers, who didn’t own watches, could start relying on the South Korean speaker system for the time, they would start to learn that South Koreans can be trustworthy, and perhaps start to see through Northern propaganda.



This is a long, long, long game. It took me years to change my political affiliation. My mind was changed by hundreds of tiny conversations. Conversations where friends explained how they experienced the world. When talking with people about politics, your goal doesn’t need to be to “win” the conversation completely, to flip someone from Republican to Democrat in one hour. It should be to have an honest exchange, to give them something to chew on, to mull over. And to know that you are someone they can come to to ask more questions.

6. Be Smart

When I feel like I know a lot on a topic, I feel a lot calmer discussing it. I feel confident that I can debate it without losing my cool. To do this, I read a lot and try to stay informed. This doesn’t mean that I’m glued to the news. I don’t have news alerts on my phone, and I regularly unplug from the internet. Instead, I read a lot of books. Over the past few years, *The New Jim Crow*, *One Nation Under God*, *Dark Mon-*

ey, and Evicted, have been the most helpful in explaining large, intricate problems in our society. They also help me feel as though I'm understanding forces at play in our politics, better able to integrate the day's news and keep everything in perspective. Zephyr Teachout, Robert Reich, and Noam Chomsky all have excellent interviews and documentaries explaining problems in our government today. Ta-Nehisi Coates' essay on reparations for the Atlantic and Lindy West's editorials in the New York Times on the #metoo movement have also been extremely illuminative.



The first person to plant the seed of my progressivism was probably my middle school librarian. I was lucky to go to a great public school that had money for computers and a library. We were introduced to the new thing called the "Internet." Our librarian carefully explained to us that all websites were not created equal, and that some had hidden agendas. She gave us tips on how to judge the content of different sites. This information was reinforced over and over again by our teachers. Paying attention to the news sources helped when I started receiving new information about subjects like climate change and gun control.

It feels second nature to me now, and I am often surprised when I see even highly educated people make simple mistakes about sources. Gently asking about sources is especially helpful on social media, as it helps slow down the conversation and asks people to pay more attention.



Conservative media like to cherry pick data and skew results. It can be frustrating to argue with someone if you are

unable to point out where their information is faulty. The NRA likes to make a big deal when a person uses a gun to defend their family from an intruder. They make it sound as though that's a regular occurrence. But if you are aware of firearm statistics, you will be able to point out how rare that is, and how guns in homes raise the risk of death and injury for the entire household. Or, if someone says that women don't get raises because they don't ask for them, I would remind them that women are penalized if they ask. Studies show that women are perceived as being bitchy and aggressive when negotiating, while men are seen as being confident and assertive.

7. Address the Underlying Issues

A couple years ago, I started to read the Bible. I hadn't read it since I was a kid. It has been quite an eye-opening experience. I am struck by often-quoted parts such as -how gay men should be put to death- are next to passages that most people ignore, like outlawing any blended clothing. The cotton-linen top I'm wearing right now would be illegal. My favorite passage says that people who pick firewood on the Sabbath should be put to death. That death row would include me and probably every Boy Scout who's gone camping, including Ted Cruz. The Bible actually seems ambivalent about the value of a fetus, and Jesus was a socialist who hung out with prostitutes and hated the rich. The only thing it seems all the chapters of the Bible agree on is that immigrants must be cared for and protected.

What we call the Bible is a hodgepodge of texts written over the span of 500 years by dozens of authors, compiled by several communities. The Bible is being used by activists to justify everything from a border wall to denying healthcare.

Government officials use it to make foreign and domestic policy.

Besides the Bible playing a large part in our political situation, there are plenty of conspiracy theories that don't seem to go away. Anti-vaxxers are causing outbreaks of nearly eradicated diseases, and there are people who believe that the earth is flat.

What's frustrating is dismantling those theories in a debate doesn't usually change people's minds. After the scientist Bill Nye was widely considered to win a debate with creationist Ken Ham, donations to Ham's foundation rose.¹¹ Likewise, sales on Goop, Gwyneth Paltrow's lifestyle website rise when critical articles are published that question the safety of her products, such as bee sting therapy.¹²

While it's easy to dismiss Paltrow's clientele as rich, frivolous white women, western medicine has often failed to take the concerns of women seriously. When something is obviously wrong, but mainstream sources aren't addressing the problem, people will look elsewhere for help.

If we attack Trump, his numbers are going to rise. People have married their livelihood insecurities to him, just as women have tied their medical anxieties to Goop. When talking to Republicans, I know that if I focus on Mueller's investigation or Trump's business dealings, I will come off as being a whiny nitpicky intellectual who is ignoring the actual

¹¹ Katie Herzog, "Bill Nye Inadvertently Played a Role in Creating Noah's Ark," Grist, July 11, 2016, <https://grist.org/living/bill-nye-inadvertently-played-a-role-in-creating-noahs-ark/>.

¹² Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "How Goop's Haters Made Gwyneth Paltrow's Company Worth \$250 Million," New York Times, July 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/25/magazine/big-business-gwyneth-paltrow-wellness.html>.

problems people are dealing with. As Jon Favreau, Obama's former speechwriter, says, Democrats need to "lead with our vision, instead of our response to someone else's bad faith criticism."¹³

When I argue with a Republican, I might say "Trump doesn't actually care about the working class. He is a scammer." Then I pivot to a policy that will address the very real issues that are actually affecting people. So then I might say, "That's why I support Candidate X. She's for a living wage, and Medicare for all. I can't keep paying our \$700 healthcare premiums anymore!"

By dismissing Trump quickly and then pivoting to a solution to the same problem, I give people something to think about, an alternative solution to their very real woes without denying their problems.

8. Try

I don't know you. I don't know what your strengths are, whether you're able to remember a lot of facts, or if you're good at keeping your cool. Maybe you don't know your best argument strategies either. You won't know until you try. If you're nervous to talk about politics when you're surrounded by Trump voters at the Thanksgiving table, start small.

Perhaps wear a political button or t-shirt while shopping for groceries. Share a trustworthy news article on social media. When someone says something offensive, try to say something. Encourage baby steps. When you try, you are

¹³ Jon Favreau, "Chapter Nine: The Second Bill of Rights," The Wilderness, Crooked Media, August 13, 2018, audio, 18:30, <https://crooked.com/podcast/chapter-9-the-second-bill-of-rights/>.

gathering info. You are learning what works and what doesn't. Talking about politics is a skill like any other. It takes a while to pick up and feel comfortable doing. As Dan Pfeiffer, advisor to President Obama says, "It's better to fight and lose than never fight in the first place."



Social scientist Erica Chenoweth makes the case that 3.5% of the population can change the policy or leadership of the country, if they are committed to the cause.¹⁴ Now is the time to fight. It doesn't mean we fight all the time and burn-out. We're in a relay race. We each pick up the slack when we can. We can be that inevitable change, that looks so obvious in the rearview mirror.

I know many people think we are talking too much about politics these days. But I think we're not talking about it enough. Our country is saturated by very concerning issues that need to be addressed. Too often, we only talk about politics when we're completely surrounded by people who we are certain agree with us.

I believe that we all need to be a little bit braver and speak up more. Talk more with our Republican uncles, our libertarian cousins. When we are silent, we are complicit because we're allowing only one idea to take up all the space. When we speak out and strike up conversations, we are creating space for a more complicated reality. We are signaling to others that it's ok to speak out and talk. We are making life a little safer for ourselves and our neighbors.

¹⁴ Erica Chenoweth, "It May Only Take 3.5% of a Population To Topple a Dictator- If Civil Resistance Is The Cause," *The Guardian*, February 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/01/worried-american-democracy-study-activist-techniques>.

