

Is It Time to Welcome a New Political Tribe on The Horizon?

By Jacob Hess

I am among the sizeable number of conservatives today who feel cut off and alienated from the “mother party” of Republicans in America today – given how little the predominant right-tribe seems to represent many of our values and core convictions anymore. [Like Mitch Daniels](#), who worked under Reagan and Bush presidencies, “I feel homeless.”

I’m also aware of a not-insignificant number of liberals who are concerned with some of the ascendant “social justice warrior” themes on the left – similarly unsure how this increasingly illiberal intolerance of ideological diversity represents their own core values.

These parallel trends raises perhaps the obvious question: Is it time for the disgruntled, the alienated, and the hungry-for-something-better to find each other – and make that *something better* happen?!

Glimpses of a new aggregation. I’ve been tasting some of these possibilities for years in my work with Joan Blades and Debilyn Molineaux at [Living Room Conversations](#), with Liz Joyner at [the Village Square](#), and the larger gathering of people from all walks of life within the [National Coalition of Dialogue & Deliberation](#).

Along the way, we’ve been heartened to find many are making unorthodox cross-political connections in their own personal lives, as documented in [the Respect & Rebellion initiative](#) to showcase red-blue friendships across America. And of course, this is central to what the larger “transpartisan” movement has tried to do over the last two decades, led by people like Jim Turner, Lawry Chickering, John Steiner, & Mark Gerzon - and more recently, by the inspired founders of [Better Angels](#), the [Bridge Alliance](#), and [Bridge USA](#).

Despite the courageous efforts of these disparate groups, it’s unfortunate that this kind of work has remained largely ignored over the years or stereotyped in ways that reduce its relevance¹ - with few of its stirring possibilities for preserving and protecting our democracy ever acknowledged.

I will admit that to this point, I’ve also largely understood dialogue as a kind of personal practice, shared with professional associates who share a similar (unique) interest in the craft of facilitating high-quality conversation. Aside from a number of beautiful friendships, I haven’t always imagined anything broader between us.

Until now.

¹ For instance, cross-partisan dialogue has been portrayed as kumbaya hand-holding, bipartisan distractions, a mere waste-of-time (“nothing is going to change”), or alternatively, an invitation to relativism, covert liberal proselytizing effort, or a conservative attempt to placate dissent and present the status quo.

The hardening of America. Almost no one would disagree that seismic shifts are happening in America right there, starting with President Obama’s tenure, and punctuated in dramatic fashion by President Trump. Laying aside all of the usual policy disagreements, it was Liz Joyner who best summarized the sense many have had: “This president is almost custom-designed to harden the divides in our country - everywhere you look.”

She went on to point out how large swaths of people in this country (including, especially, the African-American community and other minority groups in America) seem to be “done” with talking across differences.

It’s hard not to look at the whole picture and feel profoundly sad and worried. Almost everyone I know (on the left and the right and in between) seems to be feeling some of that. While some speak plaintively of a future day when “things can get better,” there are tangible signs of helplessness among those of us especially concerned with the acceleration of animosity in America.

If not for one big-and-seemingly-crazy idea...I too, would be feeling a bit hopeless.

But I don’t. Because there is one larger possibility that remains untapped - like a trillion dollar oil field - something that I’ve come to believe we *can* do right now – something exciting, and even thrilling.

The big-time silver lining. This idea started coming up more and more frequently in conversations with Joan Blades & Liz Joyner, two of my mentors in the dialogue field and friends who hold deep socio-political differences with me. How is it that we felt such affinity, respect and connection together - when the rest of the country seems ready to go to war?

At times it seemed we felt more connection with each other, than with the louder, more extreme elements of our own tribe. Was there something we could do together within relationships like this – even something important?

The (urgent) possibilities in this space between us became *especially* clear only after interviewing Evan McMullin² before a speech at the Bridge USA Summit in Dallas this spring. On that occasion, he told attendees, “disagreement about policy issues is fine – even passionate differences. This ought to be welcomed in our country – the idea that we can grapple with these differences together.”

But then he said, with rising emotion in his voice, “but there are some things *we must not disagree about...*”

² I spoke to a national columnist recently who poo-pooed Evan McMullin insignificant to the American political conversation today. To my view, this essay illustrates one of the reasons why this journalist was dead wrong.

And he went down the line: Truth, Equality, Justice, Freedom. McMullin spoke plainly and earnestly about the founding ideals of America – as he often does. And he cautioned that commitment to these ideals is receding on both sides of the political spectrum.

To those who heard this as mere patriotic bluster, McMullin added the following illustration: “Right now, we have people on the right who are questioning equality as a mere figment of the liberal agenda. And in the same moment, we have people on the left who are questioning freedom as a dangerous tactic of the conservative agenda.”

Can anyone else see the danger in this?

Just not into democracy anymore? That’s essentially what McMullin was asking all in attendance. When we have large segments of America “not into equality” or “not into freedom” (or “not into democracy” as a whole), what does that mean for our future?

In a [bipartisan survey of 1700 citizens](#) supported by the George W. Bush Institute, and the Biden Center, a full *half* of Americans reported feeling the United States is in “real danger of becoming a non-democratic, authoritarian country.” Fifty-five percent of this same group of respondents saw democracy in the U.S. as “weak” — and 68 percent believed it is “getting weaker.” In addition, 8 in 10 Americans say they are either “very” or “somewhat” concerned about the condition of democracy here.³

A [Washington Post report on the survey noted](#), “The concern about the condition of democracy inside the United States transcends the tribal divide between Republicans and Democrats, with majorities across races, genders, age groups, levels of education and income brackets expressing fear.”⁴

Former President George W. Bush [said in a statement](#) about the results, “We hope this work can be a step toward restoring faith in democracy and democratic institutions.” Former Vice President Joe Biden said, “the findings of The Democracy Project confirm we can’t take our freedoms for granted—we have to work for them, and we have to defend them. It’s also a reminder that our democracy has never been perfect, and we can’t be complacent if we hope to continue to lead in the 21st century.”

³ In the Post’s summary, [they noted variation](#) by age and ethnicity, “Racial minorities, women and young people who have missed out on the full bounty of American greatness also tend to perceive fewer benefits from democracy and are thus less convinced of the system’s value. Only 42 percent of nonwhite respondents said they are satisfied with ‘the way democracy is working in our country,’ compared with 51 percent of white respondents. Spotlighting a generational gap in attitudes, only 39 percent of respondents under 35 picked 10 on the scale of one to 10 when asked to rate the importance of democracy.”

⁴ Michael Abramowitz, the president of Freedom House [noted](#), “Americans are deeply worried about the health of their democracy and want to make it stronger...There appears to be a crisis in confidence in the functioning of our democracy, and it is not a party-line issue.”

Rock-solid common ground. Could the threat of abandoning these core values and ideals be something that draws us together powerfully in this perilous moment? Could this unifying need be strong enough to transcend all the other divides we have?

I believe so! And I think McMullin is right when he says that we need to invite all Americans to “recommit to certain fundamental ideals.”

That’s not an unrealistic effort (at least not yet). As [the Washington Post adds](#), “The good news is that Americans overwhelmingly still support the concept of democracy and believe it’s important to keep the system we’ve inherited. Asked to rank the importance of living in a democracy on a scale of one to 10, with 10 being ‘absolutely important,’ 60 percent picked 10 in the new poll. Overall, 84 percent picked a number between six and 10.”

While we can debate on the exact meaning of “freedom,” the best ways to pursue “equality” and the proper way to ascertain “truth,” perhaps McMullen is right in his insistence that we *cannot* debate or disagree on the value of these ideals as fundamental principles.

But not everyone (on either side of the political spectrum) would agree with that, right? And that’s exactly the point - and, I would submit, the core dividing line between different kinds of conservatives *and* different kinds of liberals today: to what degree do you *really* support the founding ideals of our country?

That big disagreement. Karen Stenner, who taught politics at Princeton University, wrote a [2005 book](#) about the forces that tear countries apart. Among other things, she compared patterns of places like the former Yugoslavia that descended into bloody civil war, and successful democracies in Europe and North America - documenting the conditions and political predispositions that make civil strife most likely. [As recapped by Conor Friedersdorf](#), Stenner concluded that “across eras and countries, some humans, who she calls ‘libertarians,’ strongly prefer individual freedom and diversity, while others, who she calls ‘authoritarians,’ possess a perhaps innate discomfort with difference that causes them to prefer sameness and unity, even if coercive measures are needed to enforce it.”

Are there not “authoritarians” on both sides of the political spectrum? And are there not “libertarians” on both sides as well?

If so, then perhaps it’s time for the “libertarians” across the political spectrum to find each other? (simultaneously waking up from the seductive illusion that what unites each of our existing political tribes is more important than these fundamental ideals).

What could it mean for democracy-loving liberals and those democracy-loving conservatives to recognize the profound cause we share – one arguably more important than any other ideological commonality shared with *those other* conservatives or *those other* liberals?

What would happen if we actually *found* each other - and saw each other as partners and allies in a work *even greater*, and *more fundamental* than the focus of our respective, individual parties?

The big confusion. Perhaps the greatest barrier to getting there is our deeply felt, and widely held perception of each other already - e.g., all liberals are X and all conservatives are Y. Referring to the conflation between authoritarianism and conservatism, for instance, [Dr. Stenner writes about](#), “significant implications” of this particular confusion. In particular, “It can drive those who are merely averse to change into *unnatural and unnecessary political alliances with the hateful and intolerant, when they could be rallied behind tolerance and respect for difference under the right conditions.*”⁵

Said another way, conservatives could well join with many freedom-loving liberals in many kinds of joint efforts. As [Stenner underscores](#), “Status quo conservatives, if properly understood and marshaled,” can be among “liberal democracy's strongest bulwark against the dangers posed by intolerant social movements” (Especially if paired with classic, liberty-loving liberals, I would add!). If not, [Stenner warns](#), the alignment of all conservatives (the good, bad and ugly), may well push a nation (any nation) towards serious repressions and even civil war.

This is not mere paranoia or hand-wringing. As Americans face the real prospect of the age-old (and always ugly) battle between fascism and socialism on our own soil, we must talk seriously and soberly. I am not alone in fearing that if we continue on this path, we should not be surprised by growing violence.

So, what *is* to be done, if the ugly left and the ugly right are not to be dissuaded from more aggression? Where are we to focus our energies if people refuse to put down their accusations and rhetoric?

How about *right here*, with each other? Wouldn't it be something if liberal and conservative Americans who *love* truth, freedom and equality, could *find each other* – and recognize that “common heart” despite continuing profound contrasts in narrative, ideology, theology and philosophy?

⁵ (Emphasis my own). Stenner goes on to describe the conditions for this crucial realignment as follows:

- “authoritative reminders that tolerance and respect for difference are privileged ideas in our national tradition;
- “reassurances regarding established brakes on the pace of change, and the settled rules of the game to which all will adhere;”
- “confidence in the leaders and institutions managing social conflict, and regulating the extent and rate of social change.”

Imagine what it might mean to gather together all the goodness, beauty, truth and virtue *on both sides of the political spectrum* – with modern-day echoes of the ancient Biblical “gathering” of the good-hearted into one “Zion people.”

A new tribe on the horizon. Not coincidentally, it was my dear lesbian activist friend who raised this most poignantly in a recent conversation. In reflecting on the affection, respect and enjoyment we’ve found in our own friendship (despite deep disagreements), I told Tracy, “Isn’t it weird that we seem to have more affection and affinity together – than even with many in our ‘own’ political tribe?”

Tracy responded, “it’s almost like *we’re forming a new tribe*, Jacob!”

Imagine that: a new political super-identity that gathers people united on common principles of respect, decency, truth, equality, freedom, and love.

Though these wildly diverse people would (inevitably, and constantly, and profoundly) disagree on how these ideals best manifest, and what they look like (and what policies best enact them) – they *would not disagree* on the central value of these fundamental ideals.⁶

Wouldn’t it be remarkable if, out of the chaos, confusion and animosity of this day arises a stunning new aggregation of goodness and beauty in America – expedited by the very forces that threaten to tear this country apart?

This would be, [in the words of Steve Schmidt](#) (former Republican strategist with Senator John McCain’s presidential campaign), a “Coalition of the Decent.” Or maybe it’s a division between “those who care about order, and those who do not” as Liz Joyner told me - or I would add, “those willing to dehumanize” and “those who resist and wrestle against their impulse to do the same.”

What could such a gathering of “freedom-lovers” accomplish and do together? And what kind of an impact could we make?

Let’s find out!

⁶ Said another way: this new political coalition would span *all disagreements* – except one: whether these founding ideals of America are worth upholding.