

On social media arguments in the Trump era

Is it worth the time to engage with people who are convinced their version of reality is right?

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What an interesting time to be alive. We've just been through a rancorous election, and the election of a president whom more people voted against than for—some 8 million, to be exact.

We are divided. And cranky.

In the wake of this, I've been thinking a lot about social media, and how we engage with one another around disagreement—or don't. I have friends who are frustrated by the proliferation of fake news and “alternative facts,” and who see no utility in trying to talk to people who are convinced that their version of reality is correct. Whether it's the size of Trump's inaugural crowd, or the reality of climate change, there's no convincing people, so why try? Our time can be used more productively in other ways.

And I have friends who believe we still need spaces where people who don't see eye to eye can come together and hash things out. That deep down, many of us want the same things for ourselves. That we all have our bubbles, and we need to be disciplined in breaking out of them whenever possible.

As I think about where I stand, I know there are things on which I'm not willing to concede ground in order to keep the conversation going: the full personhood of LGBT persons, for example.

With that said, however, I fall more in the latter camp. I know that like the Apostle Paul, I see through a mirror dimly. My vision is imperfect. And I'm a big believer in polarity management, which means that traditional struggles such as left v. right

can never be fully resolved. Rather, the two poles need to be managed so that they inform and complement one another in a healthy way. For that reason, I don't root for the ultimate destruction of the GOP. Rather, I root for a sane, reasonable, fact-based conservative party to emerge out of the mess we're currently in. I resonate with the words of Jack Shephard on *Lost*: "If we can't live together, we're going to die alone."

Anyway, I think about all of this as it relates to online interactions. I'm interested in engaging, and I try to enter conversations with people I disagree with from a place of good faith. The person may quickly show they're not willing to engage in honest, thoughtful exchange, but I at least want to give them an initial chance. (And I'm sure I miss the mark on this myself sometimes—it's soooo much easier to make assumptions and respond with snark than with authenticity.)

But many times we have to cut our losses and call it a day, either because the conversation isn't going anywhere, or we just have other things we need to do. I've been trying to figure out how to do that gracefully. [Brian McLaren](#) has suggested that one close with a simple "I see it differently." If the person wants to pursue it, offer to have a face-to-face conversation. You've registered your opposition to the view being presented, but stewarded your time well enough not to get into a back-and-forth that is not going to go anywhere.

It's a decent way of bowing out. But it has its limitations. For one thing, when someone presents a falsehood as truth, then doubles down on it, saying you "see it differently" implies that truth is in the eye of the beholder, and that there's no way to know what's right.

So lately I've been trying on this phrase:

"Thank you for helping me understand you better."

I like it because we can understand one another without agreeing. I like it because it grounds the interaction in terms of relationship rather than rightness. I like it because, in situations in which I've used it, it has disarmed the person I was talking to—they felt heard. And I like it most of all because it's a way of holding *myself* accountable to how I want to be online. Yes, I want to be a voice for the things I believe in, but ultimately, the only person I can ultimately change is myself, and if I've learned something, that's a fruitful thing.

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