



**2023-2024 Undergraduate Ethics Essay Prize
2nd Place**

**Understood: Is Connection the Ethical Response to a Polarized Society?
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Understood: Is Connection the Ethical Response to a Polarized Society?

Our allies are concerned, and our enemies are overjoyed; there is constant drama in the American family broadcast for the world to see. And while the show is entertaining, it couldn't be more damaging, as people are losing touch with the individuals that matter to them, and the world is losing confidence in the democratic system. The world has long looked to America as a model of governance, and the current division threatens the United States' status as the World leader. Some may argue that political polarization is an issue for our elected officials to solve. If they only provided a model of how to communicate about politics and then did it themselves. Then decisions would be made, problems would be solved, and we, the American public, wouldn't be so apprehensive to talk about politics. Others may think the problem stems from the other side of the aisle. If we divided the country half-blue, half-red, we'd all be happy, right? Those morally deranged nutjobs would no longer have a say in America's future. Just like any family drama, we point at them refusing to take any responsibility ourselves, but like any good TV show, the audience knows something the main character does not, that they are actually the problem. How did we get here? Why are we so much more problematic and divisive than previous generations?

Interestingly, in terms of party affiliation (Democrat v. Republican) or ideological affiliation (Progressive v. Conservative), the American public is not more polarized than in prior decades. Peter T. Coleman, a social psychologist and author of *The Way Out*, employs polling from the Pew Research Center and American National Election Studies (ANES) to demonstrate "that these trends [of polarization] have been mostly flat or in decline for about seventy years" (Coleman 23). "Americans may not be further apart on issues than they used to be," but "they [do] feel colder toward and [more] contemptuous of those on the other side of the divide than in

past decades” (Coleman 23-24). Arthur Brooks, Harvard professor and author of the article “Our Culture of Contempt,” states that this contempt is caused by “motive attribution asymmetry” or the “assumption that your ideology is based in love, while your opponent’s is based in hate.” Brook states, “Each side thinks it is driven by benevolence, while the other is evil and motivated by hatred — and is therefore an enemy with whom one cannot negotiate or compromise.” Divisive politicians, screaming heads on the news, and contempt-filled social media posts further confirm our self-righteousness as we find ourselves in an echo chamber that “caters to one ideological side [and continually] feed[s] our desire to believe that we are completely right and that the other side is made up of knaves and fools” (Brooks). These echo chambers confirm our biases and worst assumptions about those who disagree with us.

Today’s method of retrieving information conditions people to seek out sources that confirm their viewpoint rather than those that challenge it. This new norm means many people “organize their social lives ...along ideological lines to avoid people with opposing viewpoints” (Brooks). While many have disregarded the other side’s viewpoint, Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, uses psychology to display why we need each other, especially those who think differently than us. According to Haidt, “People make moral judgments quickly and emotionally” (47). Typically, people make these judgments based on affect, “small flashes of positive or negative feeling,” which prepare them “to approach or avoid” what they’ve encountered (Haidt 65). Typically, you know whether you like someone within seconds of meeting them, and that is you exercising your “affect” muscle. Because we make our judgments rapidly, we are dreadful at seeking out evidence that might disconfirm those initial judgments. Yet friends can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves: “They can challenge us, giving us

reasons and arguments that sometimes trigger new intuitions, thereby making it possible for us to change our minds” (Haidt 55). Yet, to challenge someone’s views effectively, you can’t just assert your position. You must understand the other person's viewpoint as well as your own and approach the conversation with empathy and understanding. Under the direction of the Engaged Learning Fellowship, I had the opportunity to hold multiple focus groups to understand how SMU students think and communicate about politics. Each group emphasized the importance of listening when having a political conversation. They said to have productive discussions, each person must “actively listen” to the other, not just “wait for their turn to speak” or “actively prepare what they’re going to say to disprove the other’s point” (House Divided, ELF Project). Speaking immediately after someone has finished talking and not acknowledging their point of view demonstrates that you don’t value their perspective. People do not trust those who do not respect them and, therefore, will probably be unwilling to consider the opposing argument to their viewpoint. Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company and pioneer in making automobiles affordable, agrees, stating that the “secret to success ... lies in the ability to get the other person’s point of view and see things from their angle as well as your own.” Empathy seems like an obvious tool for a productive political conversation, but “few of us apply it in moral and political arguments because our righteous minds shift so readily into combat mode” (Haidt 58). We want “to impress our friends and show them that we are committed members of the team” (Haidt 58). Yet this self-righteousness does not bridge the divide or allow our opponent to understand why we hold the views we do. To help people see our point of view, we must first understand their view “deeply and intuitively” (Haidt 58). This empathy and attentiveness will provide a framework in which we can present our views in a way that might resonate with the other side (Haidt 58). Many centuries ago, Plato stated,

"Opinion is really the lowest form of human knowledge. It requires no accountability and no understanding. The highest form of knowledge is empathy, for it requires us to suspend our egos and live in another's world. It requires profound purpose larger than the self kind of understanding."

It takes effort, restraint, and laydown of ego to practice empathy, especially in a world where politicians, news outlets, and social media apps encourage divisiveness. Without it, though, we will continue to talk past each other, unable to compromise and make the necessary decisions for our country's continuity. Therefore, as Plato stated, we have the "profound purpose" or ethical duty to practice empathy and respect during political conversations to help heal our country. On paper, having respect and empathy for the other party seems like a fail-proof method for having productive political conversations, yet the brokenness of life often creeps in. Just as positive interactions can humanize the other side, negative ones demonize the other side on such a personal level it becomes understandable to never again interact with those who think differently than you. In fact, "one in six Americans has stopped talking to a family member or close friend because of the 2016 election" (Brooks). In my focus groups, one member had stopped speaking to an entire side of their family because of a political fight that happened when they were a child (House Divided ELF Project). They now vow never to speak of politics, and relaying this story was the only time they spoke in my session where we discussed politics (House Divided ELF Project).

Broken relationships can result in emotions and decisions to disconnect that are rarely discussed in an academic setting. I experienced the fracture of a friendship. It was a relationship characterized by such adoration and respect. We were invested in each other's dreams and trusted each other enough to debate issues we disagreed on. There would be no punishment for having a different opinion; we saw it as an opportunity to grow in how we interpreted the world. It was the first time I had felt fully known and understood by a friend. Then, little by little, I watched

our relationship crumble. Perhaps our friendship couldn't withstand the direct academic competition we were forced to engage in being the same major or the differing life phases we were in. Her relationship with her boyfriend was getting more serious, and I was still as single as I had always been. Whatever the reason, I wondered, "Why did someone I trust so wholeheartedly suddenly turn on me? Did our different political preferences equate to differences in morality? It was my first time trusting someone who had such a different way of looking at the world. Is this what happens when you trust the other team?"

I remember that on her birthday, someone asked her what she had learned from the past year. She looked at me and said, "Girls these days think they need to do everything together." It's good to have some alone time. You don't need someone to take out the trash with you. We had visited the dumpster literally and hypothetically more times than I could count. In that moment, the statement stung; our friendship had long since faded. Reflecting on it now, her statement makes me chuckle; she had inadvertently pinpointed the mechanism to healing division.

To solve this mess, we have to take the trash out together.

Why would you show someone your trash: the real day-to-day you? There are things in the bag you'd rather people not see. Why would you accompany someone through one of their most unpleasant and mundane tasks of daily life? The trash stinks. The walk to the curb is often cold and uncomfortable. No one walks to the dumpster with a friend. In fact, no one does anything with anyone anymore. Harvard professor and researcher Robert D. Putnam discovered in the early 1990s that "while people were doing various things, they weren't doing them together" (Sasse 26). "Americans are spending measurably less time with friends than they did a decade ago – less than half as much" (Franco). "According to Roper poll data, even sustained

conversation with friends and family fell precipitously” (Sasse 27). Putnam states, "It is hard not to read these figures as evidence of rapidly loosening family bonds.” We live in a world where isolation is encouraged. Our technology and work sequester us from those we love. Apps like Tiktok, Instagram, and Facebook are designed for an audience of one. Yet, these apps “give us ... [only] snacks of connection,” and these “snacks of connection from social media” aren’t as “nutrient dense” as the meal of in-person connection,” says Dr. Marisa Franco, a psychologist and friendship expert. We live in a world where we’re encouraged to show people the perfect version of us, the job promotion on LinkedIn, the bikini body on Instagram, or the perfect family on Facebook. We become conditioned to look for Instagram-worthy moments to impress our digital following with how connected and liked we are. There is no glory in real connection. You can’t post yourself standing next to the dumpster, taking the trash out with a friend. You can’t post the hard conversation you had that ended in disagreement but also a hug. Yet, for people to truly know us, we must drop the facade; we aren’t perfect and never will be, no matter how hard we try to portray that illusion. Recognizing the value of relationships and doing life together fosters a respect and compassion between men that makes having hard conversations possible. When differences of opinion emerge, the connection forces you to have empathy. You respect and adore this person. If they think differently than you on an issue, you know there must be a reason or experience that informs their opinion. You can’t label them as morally deranged for their view. You know their intrinsic goodness firsthand. Real connection and compassion also provide a safety net for you to get it wrong. You can think out loud. You can misspeak. They aren’t looking for a "gotcha" moment. They lovingly challenge you to see the issue from different perspectives.

Why invest all the effort to develop the connection necessary to have these conversations? Why challenge yourself to be vulnerable enough for a real and honest conversation? You must be courageous to be vulnerable. That bravery feels foolish if someone walks away. The energy it takes to practice empathy seems like a worthless investment. Broken relationships take more than just an emotional toll; medical research shows the significant effect it has on our bodies as the “rejection or loss causes stress hormones to flood the body, mimicking the effects of a heart attack”(American Heart Association). “Tests show dramatic changes in rhythm and blood substances that are typical of a heart attack” (American Heart Association). When a relationship breaks, it sends our mind and body into shock. So why should we engage and deepen our relationships if the consequences when it breaks are so high? We should because I believe that increasing and strengthening our connections is the highest ethical duty of our generation. Our country is on the brink of collapse. Americans no longer have faith in their leaders to find agreement with the other side, and the recognition of the human dignity of those with ideological differences is no longer the norm. Labeling the other side as an enemy of America has become okay because they took a different approach to the problem than you did. The world sees this division within American society and government and is beginning to lose trust in the US because of its apparent instability.

The antidote to this division is connection. Connection humanizes the other side. Connection provides the opportunity to talk to the other side and find out what they actually believe, not what the news media says they believe. Connection negates the propaganda spewed by politicians, social media outlets, and news channels that we are too different to work together and that the current problems America is dealing with are the other side’s fault. Brené Brown states, “You can’t hate up close.” My best friend supports the opposite party I do. I can’t hate the

party because I adore her. I understand why that platform resonates with her based on her personal experiences, and while I don't agree with many of her positions, I can respect hers and the party she belongs to. The political atmosphere of the US will not change unless we do. We command this circus we pretend to have no control over. We vote for these divisive candidates. We donate money to these campaigns. We repost the infographic on Instagram positive that our opinion is the only correct one held on the app. We vow only to watch the news channel that aligns with our viewpoint. Connection allows the fog to lift; we realize we're not as divided as they tell us we are. There may even be issues we agree on. While we might hold different views on how to solve various problems, we respect and admire the people on the other side because we know the other side personally. We've been bamboozled by those who want to gain money and power at our expense. Division is one of the "best" political tools one can utilize to increase their base: "the other side doesn't understand you, only I do; vote for me; I am the only one who can solve this problem. Opposing thought is not the enemy. Those who oppose multiple viewpoints are.

Our founding fathers understood that connection provides an opportunity to embrace competing viewpoints. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were best friends but had very different personalities and opinions. Adams was incredibly cynical and cantankerous, while Jefferson was considered the "inspirer of a nation" (The Kennedy Library Forum: Friends Divided, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson). They differed on almost every issue except the "rightness of the American Revolution and [their shared] hatred of Alexander Hamilton." Yet, their differences in opinion and temperament contributed to the creation of a government that has served millions of Americans over the past few centuries (The Kennedy Library Forum: Friends Divided, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson). Adam's cynical nature, which was suspicious of

people's true intentions, spurred the creation of checks and balances, protecting the young nation from power-hungry individuals and ensuring the continuity of democracy for generations to come. Jefferson's galvanizing words in the Declaration of Independence prompted many to fight in the American Revolution, which resulted in the creation of the United States of America. His optimism and vision of America as "a chosen country" with a "special responsibility to bring democracy to the world" resulted in many other countries adopting democracy as their mode of governance and an increase in freedom all around the world as more people than ever before began to have a say in how their government was run (The Kennedy Library Forum). Most people view optimism as the correct lens through which to view the world. We teach our kids to see the glass half full instead of empty, but both John Adams's pessimism and Thomas Jefferson's optimism were necessary to form the American government, demonstrating that competing viewpoints are not only valuable, they're essential for the livelihood of democracy.

Yet, we aren't the only ones to experience broken relationships; John Adams and Thomas Jefferson's friendship fractured due to a difference in ideals. The men became friends when they served as delegates to the Continental Congress in 1775, and their friendship grew stronger in the 1780s when they served together on diplomatic missions to Europe. They became so close that "while living in England and France, both Adams and his wife, Abigail, consoled Jefferson after the loss of his wife, Martha, and grew to consider him almost a part of the family" (Pruitt). Their relationship initially turned sour because of their radically different ideas on the direction of the new nation. Jefferson feared a central authority that was too powerful, while Adams valued a strong central government to ensure the new nation's survival. Their disagreement on the young nation's path forward escalated into downright enemy behavior. In the election of 1800, "Jefferson hired a sleazy journalist, James Callendar, to smear Adams in the press, including the

false story that he wanted to start a war with France” (Pruitt). John Adams claimed that Jefferson had not written the Declaration of Independence and wrote letters to his sons gossiping about the affair of his former friend. Adams didn’t attend his once best friend’s inauguration for president. They didn’t exchange another word for 12 years.

Thanks to the efforts of Benjamin Rush, they reconnected. Yet, they still held the same radically opposing views. Adams was still cantankerous and wore his thoughts on his sleeve, and Jefferson was still an optimistic visionary. While nothing changed in their mindsets, their affection for each other also never wavered. Rush saw “the estrangement of the two former presidents as a personal and national misfortune” and made it his duty to help heal the breach (Cappon 284). Rush tried for two years to help mend the relationship, corresponding with both men and encouraging them to reach out to the other. He even relayed a dream to Adams where he and Jefferson renewed their friendship and then “sunk into the grave at nearly the same time (Cappon 285). Yet nothing convinced the men until Jefferson learned that Adams had told Coles, a neighbor of Jefferson's, that “[he] had always loved Jefferson, and still love[d] him” (Cappon 284). Jefferson wrote to Dr. Benjamin Rush,

“This is enough for me. I only needed this knowledge to revive towards him all the affections of the most cordial moments of our lives.” Why should we be separated by mere differences of Opinion in politicks, religion, philosophy or anything else. His opinions are as honestly formed as my own. Our different views of the same subjects are the results of the differences in our organization & experience. I have never withdrawn from any man upon that acct: altho’ many have done it from me, much less should I do it from one with whom I had gone thro’, with hand and heart so many trying scenes. I wish, therefore, for an Apposite Occasion to express to Mr. Adams my unchanged affection for him.” (National Archives).

Rush copied Jefferson’s statement and sent it to Adams. The men were finally convinced that they should resume relations. Adams sent two pieces of homespun to extend the olive branch and wrote, “I am with a long and sincere esteem your friend and servant” (Cappon 290). In a world

where relationships break and rarely reconnect, why did these men decide to reconcile? How did they overcome their radically opposing views? Why did they accept and forgive the slanderous behavior of the other that plagued their careers? These men knew each other well and knew how to damage each other even better. Why reconcile with the enemy? Because their connection and affection for each other was “unchanged.” Their connection and admiration of one another was so strong it still survived even after they had viciously attacked one another. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams’ friendship shows that connection: the love between men and the empathy we engage in to develop that love is a much stronger unifier than belonging to the same team. How many men do you know that had a severe falling out and decided to reconnect because they agreed on how the immigration issue should be handled? Our love, respect, and compassion for each other is the glue that holds society together, but it remains unactivated unless we are humble enough to engage in empathy and reconciliation.

If there is a God, I think sometimes He winks at us to show us we got it right. Letters flowed between the two men for over a decade until Adams and Jefferson “sunk into the grave” only hours apart on July 4th, the day the country they helped build together was born. Just like a married couple who die within months of each other because of their extreme need and love for each other, I believe Jefferson and Adams’ coinciding death demonstrates the power and depth of their connection to each other. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams understood the power of their connection. They put all ego aside to acknowledge their long-held respect and admiration for each other. In their final days, they exchanged over a hundred letters debating the political issues of the day. They used empathy and acknowledged the other’s viewpoint while also respectfully challenging their opinions by asserting their own argument. They showed the new nation and the generations following that differences in thought did not extinguish the American

experiment; they livened it. I've found a similar sentiment in my own relationships with those on the other side of the aisle. I've watched those my party calls morally deranged and a detriment to America be as invested in my dreams as I am and love me in ways I have never been loved before. Those who think differently than us aren't bad people; they just have a different way of approaching the problem than we do. These connections have humanized the other side more than any class, news article, or politician ever could. Therefore, I believe it is our moral obligation not to discriminate based on political philosophy when forming deep connections. They provide the portal of realization that while we disagree on many issues, we can agree on one thing: each of us has something special to share with society and deserves compassion and respect. When we begin to understand the other side, the voices that seek to divide us no longer have such a command over us. I know the other side. I adore the other side. I hope you will, too.

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