

Can Deep Listening Heal Our Divisions?



For bridge-builders in the U.S., the way forward is to engage deeply across lines of difference.

BY SIMON GREER | JANUARY 19, 2021

At the start of 2021, five very different college campuses kicked off a program called Bridging the Gap. The program is focused on deep listening as the basis for effective communication across lines of difference. The promise of the course is that if we engage the “other,” listen to all stakeholders, and lead with humility and curiosity, then we can better solve the pressing issues facing our nation.



This has been a truly unique time to try to teach bridge-building and promote the notion that the heroes are the bridge-builders. It is a tribute to the students on these very different campuses—schools as liberal as Oberlin College and as conservative as Spring Arbor University—that they have leaned into this approach and these practices at a moment when our democracy seems to be tearing itself apart.

As we wait for the inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States, our country is on edge. So far, the new year has seen violence in our nation’s capital, a second impeachment, and political fractures at the highest levels, further rattling a nation already pummeled by a pandemic, economic collapse, and political polarization not seen since the Civil War. There is a feeling of fear, and maybe even panic, as we hold our breath and pray for a peaceful transfer of power today.

So, in that context, it might be hard to imagine engaging in deep listening across lines of difference. It might even seem counterintuitive. There is a legitimate fear that this “other” might not just disagree with you, or even fundamentally challenge your core values—they might actually be dangerous.

Let me say off the bat that even as I advocate for the centrality of communication across lines of difference, I believe there is no place for violence in our politics. It must be rejected, safety and security re-established, the perpetrators held accountable; and those who aid and abet it must be reckoned with. Violence makes deep listening difficult, if not impossible.

And then the question remains, now what? If you aren't going engage deeply with those we might call the “other,” then what *is* your plan? Unfriend everyone on social media who doesn't belong to your political party? Support your state in seceding from the union? Turn your home into a fortified bunker? Immigrate to Canada?

I don't put great faith in any of those solving our big problems because I believe that, underneath the multiple political crises in our country today, there is an even more foundational crisis: our lack of 100% commitment to each other's humanity and the lack of faith in people that results from that.

As Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*, believes about people on death row: “They are more than the worst thing they have ever done.” And so I would ask us for a moment to consider the application of that principle to these 75 million Americans who voted for Trump and the 81 million who voted for Biden. While many of us have been convinced by the wisdom that people on death row are better than their worst deed, we are still quick to condemn “those voters” as worse than their worst vote. Why have we, so far, been unwilling and unable to apply Stevenson's teaching here in the political context?

In the face of the political, economic, and cultural trends that have been heaving us in this direction for some years now, I have been inspired to return to my roots—to my deep faith in people, to a humble curiosity about why people think the way they think,

to a sense of wonder as to how we construct our realities, to the brutal truth of what so many face as they try to get through each day, to the courage to meet and accept people where they are, and to the practice of deep listening.



Bridging the Gap students in front of the State Capitol in Lansing, Michigan.

This led me to find myself last January living in a dorm at an evangelical college. Bridging the Gap (BTG) was piloted at the beginning of 2020 with 17 students from Spring Arbor University and Oberlin College. According to the prevailing societal perceptions and stereotypes, Oberlin students are condescending, liberal snowflakes; conversely, Spring Arbor students carry the label of hate-filled, conservative evangelicals—and, according to this narrative, both should see the other as their enemy. But BTG’s premise is that the heroes can be the bridge-builders. So we brought together these two groups of people, who were expected to deeply disagree with each other, to build relationships, listen deeply, and explore the very issues that might drive them apart.

Here is what I learned from my experience with them—and how I think we can scale up the project in years to come.

Learning to listen with our whole bodies

The initial invitation purposefully set the tone for the entire experience. We laid out our intention to:

- take seriously what others hold dear;

- be curious about why people think the way they do;
- believe we are enhanced by proximity to points of view we disagree with; and,
- stay open to finding common ground or, at the very least, disagreeing not with mere tolerance but with true respect and even love.

Building on this invitation, and before students from each college met, we invested in intensive skills-building, so that their eventual meeting would be profoundly different from what we've grown used to in discourse and politics.

One of the first skills we taught was “listening.” While listening may seem like an obvious and easy task, the truth is very few of us have formal training in listening. And while we think it's as simple and automatic as breathing, the truth is that true listening takes training, practice, and a deep commitment.

When someone else is speaking, it's easy to daydream, plan replies, get distracted by judgment, and interrupt with self-centered questions or quick-fix solutions. Listening deeply means silencing that noise, listening not just with your ears but with every sense you've got, every cell in your body. It means listening to all that is said and unsaid, to the body language, the tone, the eye movement. It's full-body listening.

This type of listening builds trust, opens doors, and offers a path to deep discovery and a sacred connection that forms the basis for new understandings and otherwise unimaginable possibilities. Study after study shows in sector after sector—in medicine, marriage, real estate sales, and more—that true listening generates better results. And yet most of us go through our entire education without having learned how to do it.

With this foundation of intention and training, we moved into the realm of feedback. Often in efforts to bridge across deep divides, there is either a desire to avoid the “tense stuff” for fear of damaging the relationship, or to go hard at the most fraught areas to prove our own commitments and defend deeply held values.



Bridging the Gap students sit down for a discussion.

The BTG project model resisted both urges. Our approach was to invest in the relationships, knowing that the capacity to disagree constructively is directly tied to the strength of the relationship. So, we didn't tackle the hardest things first—but we were also totally up front that we aren't afraid of those things and don't mean to sweep them under the rug. We promised that the group would come to them, in time. We also taught an approach to giving feedback that distinguished between experience and interpretation. This approach emphasizes disclosure rather than accusation, and it offers a common framework that supports participants having hard conversations in a structured manner where everyone knows how to engage.

We also stayed away from the most common tools used in debates or disagreements, which is to throw out statistics and facts to prove a point. Instead, BTG used storytelling as a way of going deeper and diffusing tensions that might cause someone to get locked into their position. Our goal was to open up space for the type of dynamic tension that can create motion and unleash new and positive energy.

Storytelling is a way to express beliefs and where they come from, humanizing a potential “opponent” in our eyes and vice versa. We kept it simple but taught that good storytelling includes telling your story like a good play, in three acts:

- meet the characters;
- understand the challenge or conflict;
- seek the resolution.

Additionally, we encouraged students to show and not just tell. For instance, not just saying “the movie was funny,” but sharing a line that actually made you laugh.

Meeting with the “other”

The encounter is where the rubber hit the road! This is when the students met and applied all the skills they’d learned about how to build bridges, communicate constructively, and cultivate relationships with the “other.”

What underpinned this phase were a handful of crucial and, perhaps, unorthodox principles. To begin, we decided to start with values and stories, rather than immediately taking on a hot-button issue, to get to know the person across the table. We encouraged students to learn about each other’s background and to try and understand what makes them tick, whose shoulders they stand on, and why they see the world the way they do.



Bridging Differences Course

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In fact, in our first group activity, we used 21/64's deck of 50 *Picture Your Legacy*TM cards with images on them and asked the students to sort through them to find the three images that most reflect the values they try to live by and the way they try to lead their lives. Then we asked them to find the three cards that resonated *least* with their values and how they try to lead their lives. The students shared their top and bottom cards with the group, and they worked together to look for areas of alignment or disagreement, seek out patterns, and try to get to know each other at the level of values.

We also made sure participants were staying in motion. These issues are big, they're complex, and they're *stuck*. We strongly believe that physically keeping things moving could help make students feel more open and receptive to different beliefs and opinions. We also made sure to mix up the groups and their sizes, composition, and dynamics. This helped keep the positive energy alive without leaving anyone trapped in a dead-end conversation.

Many experts agree that upwards of 80% of all communication is nonverbal. So, we wanted to include exercises that allowed students to express themselves without speaking, especially when we were beginning to tackle more divisive topics.

For instance, we wanted to explore where there were strong, divergent opinions and even sharp disagreements. To do this, we used an activity called "Lay It on the Line," where we would start with a statement, such as "I believe in each American citizen's unrestricted right to bear arms." Students would then physically, and silently, position themselves along a spectrum with "strongly agree" on one end and "strongly disagree" on the other. This nonverbal, but revealing, exercise gave us insight into where there may be great (and surprising) splits. We could start to explore those gaps without locking into a debate-style format. Students observed their peers moving in unexpected ways, patterns were upended just as they were revealed, and gradations were stark just as we moved quickly through the questions before labels could take hold.

As mentioned, we were not trying to approach this project using the standard format and techniques—we know that hasn't worked so far. We wanted to set up conversations with unusual and unexpected content. Our approach was to *selectively tackle controversial issues head-on*.

For example, we showed a film called *Belief*, where people as diverse as *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, Megan Phelps-Roper (granddaughter of the founder of Westboro Baptist Church), and Illyasa Shabazz (daughter of Malcolm X) shared their relationship to belief, love, God, and the soul. The speakers had competing perspectives, and afterward we asked students to break into small groups to "share a time when your beliefs informed a private decision in your life." After some discussion of the private realm, then we turned to the public square and asked, "How does your belief system influence your positions on important public policy issues?"

In a group of Christians and non-Christians, this was potentially quite divisive territory. But these discussions were set up as an invitation to reflect on beliefs, and the role of beliefs in constructing worldview and the “why?” underneath stances on issues. Perhaps as a result, they did not become arguments. Instead, the conversations were places for students to disclose how they think and convey their truths. Those truths then interacted with other different truths and the complexity of who we are was revealed.

From listening to policy

The last phase of the program was to bring the skills and the encounter to bear on a pressing and contentious policy issue to see what might be possible when we apply this approach.

We selected criminal justice and utilized the BTG multi-stakeholder approach. Just as we had skillfully encountered “the other” in the second phase of the program, now we encountered all sorts of “others” as we met with stakeholders from across the criminal justice system. Corrections officers to people who are incarcerated, the formerly incarcerated and the corrections officer’s union, the reform advocates to the head of the Department of Corrections, the legislators who approve the budget for corrections—we met them all.



Identify Common Goals

A way to forge connections across lines of difference

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It was not lost on students that these stakeholders don't ever sit down all together and that their caricatures of each other can often be quite limiting, especially as they seek political and policy solutions to complex problems.

Students quickly understood that you are only enhanced, not diminished, by hearing from the full range of stakeholders, even if you deeply disagree with their perspective. It became clear that when you miss an important stakeholder's voice, it not only generates resistance from those who feel left out, and may be crucial to successful implementation, but results in blind spots as you miss key factors and interests in the system as it is.

And, most importantly, you might well miss deeply buried opportunities for common ground where the most unlikely of allies might discover that, even if they don't like each other, they have common interests.

Through the policy-application phase and up until their final presentations, the students kept encountering these opportunities. If our criminal justice system is failing with both painfully high recidivism rates among those who are incarcerated and the highest suicide rates of any profession among those who work in prisons, then shouldn't the fact that the system is killing the two largest stakeholder groups be a first step toward common ground?

Listening over the long run

I, too, stand stunned from time to time while listening to "the other side." Often, they seem to live in a completely different country from the one I live in.

But then I have to remind myself that this is deeper work and it is not short-term. It's not a quick fix. It's not for the faint of heart. I don't honestly know what will stop our country from convulsing its way to civil war. I really don't. But my gut keeps reminding me, even when I get angry and want to write people off, that winning elections, while it matters, won't solve this crisis, and shouting "them" down won't turn us around. I have to believe that it is the deeper work that is required of us in this moment.

President Biden has rightly called for a renewed spirit of unity. But he, and we, will be hard-pressed to achieve it with the country divided into two warring factions where neither side thinks the other has much to offer.

Even worse, our culture now appears to hold that listening to the other side, really listening, is considered a waste of time, at best, and at worst an act of infidelity or high treason. Today, these are particularly tough things to write, and surely to do, as we must bring to justice those who use violence to threaten our democracy but not demonize everyone we disagree with. If we make the entire opposition into a monolith and demonize them along the way, we ensure that this vicious cycle continues.

To get beyond this crippling divisiveness, we must seek out a deeper understanding of the call for unity, the spirit of unity, the intention of unity. It isn't that the intention is wrong, far from it. The problem is that unity fails when it is understood solely as an intention. Unity must not be just a principle. Unity must be a practice.

Bridging the Gap is about practice, more than it's about language or beliefs. If we are going to find unity again in our country, we need to *practice* it. Those who practice it we call bridge-builders. When they are viewed as our heroes, not the sell-outs or villains, then our culture will be well on its way to repair and healing. The good news is that more and more college students are hungry for it.

Watch the full, newly released film about Bridging the Gap.

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