

CHARLYNE GELT, PH.D.

Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



Build Bridges, Not Walls by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.

*Do we turn on each other or do we turn towards each other?
If we don't learn to share the planet with each other . . . we don't survive.*

UC Berkeley Professor John Powell
The Language Of 'Othering'



<https://youtu.be/s8V0IJ11CoE>

Trees Communicate: If Trees Can Communicate, So Can We!

2020 has been a disruptive year. An on-going global pandemic, a divisive national Presidential election and its contentious aftermath, and the usual challenges and stressors of everyday life have left us feeling overwhelmed and anxious. Instead of communicating with each other like adults, we've regressed into bitter arguing, trading insults on social media, cutting ties with people who disagree with us, or even acting out in destructive ways. The result is emotional fatigue, and wear and tear on our emotions, none of which is good for the soul. Rather than finding solutions, it leaves us with a laundry list of worries and fears about the future:

- When will this pandemic end?
- What will happen to my family, my work, and to me?
- How will the political outcome affect me economically?
- Will we ever be able to have civil conversations with each other about our differences?

We have forgotten that conflict can be a turning point that creates change (for the better). Through conflict we learn we have choices about how we respond to challenges and crises, and how we respond builds resiliency that may determine the quality of the life we lead.

Restoring Civil Discourse

If words can divide us, so, too, can words become a bridge that unites us despite our differences, so it's worth doing the hard work to practice the art of civil discourse. Were you trained to communicate and offer constructive feedback? If were you trained to pound your views into the listener it might be difficult to sit down with friends or family members who see things differently, especially politically. You get put off by their views and think: "*How can they not see that?*" or "*What's wrong with them?*" You might jump to judgments based on "*right or wrong, good or bad,*" or "*my way or the highway*" thinking and discourse gets blocked. What has happened here is that the stressful or negative emotional environment from our family of origin has been triggered in our current environment – and we tune out or worse — lash out.

"When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world." — John Muir

Ways to Build Bridges

- *By engaging in dialogue:* In the "culture of contempt," there is no alternative to dialogue.
- *By listening:* Take the time to talk with someone on the other side and listen to all perspectives.
- *By not using the H-word (HATE):* A 4-letter obscenity. "*Tone down the rhetoric and restore civil discourse,*" says Rabbi Hazzan Jeffrey Myers at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh (www.cbsnews.com/video/rabbi-hazzan-jeffrey-myers . . . Nov 17, 2020 (According to a new FBI report, 2019 was the deadliest year on record for hate crimes in the U.S).
- *By joining in on existing dialogues:* For example, StoryCorps and NPR ONE member radio stations, such as WBHM in Birmingham, have been working on a test project called *One Small Step: Courageous Conversations Across a Growing Divide*, which explores the idea that intentional conversations between partisans could be a catalyst for national healing, pairing people of opposite political views to have a conversation. Participants talk, listen, and get to know each other for forty minutes — not to change each other's minds, but to respect each other as people.
- *By practicing empathy:* An effective strategy that can open-up a closed system of thinking.
- *By reading:* There is much written to help us heal what divides us, such as "Brighten the Corner Where You Are: Finding a New Ways to be Thankful in a Pandemic," and "The Home We Build Together," by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

Wired to Bond

The truth is our brains and bodies are *wired to bond*. Without bonding, our species could ultimately become extinct. Ideally, we could *all* learn better "bonding" and develop the ability to identify and resolve conflict *when it happens*—just nip issues in the bud and sit down and have a creative *win-win* dialogue during which we could welcome different perspectives that might lead to outside-the-box solutions to problems that could benefit all. This is a difficult concept for people who are dug in at either end of the spectrum of their beliefs. But both ends — the "pleasers" and "controllers" — need to learn that other ways of living in the world are possible.

Going to the opposite extreme and expressing *no* conflict in human relationships doesn't help, either. Certain Asian cultures strive for conflict-free living and prefer to smooth over bumps in the interest of harmony. They may do this by *suppressing* their emotions and practicing extreme politeness to avoid unpleasant disagreements when faced with even the most ordinary "concerns." The problem here is that suppressing emotion isn't an effective way to handle difficult issues that arise in everyday life. Sometimes a person can be thrown off-center and have their sense of belonging disrupted when a real conflict enters the picture. A situation may occur and they suddenly get flooded with emotion, such as fear, or anxiety, or they feel threatened. They may not even understand why.

Dave Isay, founder of StoryCorps (mentioned above) says, “*We're going to try to convince the country that it's our patriotic duty to see the humanity in people that we disagree with.*” The effort is based in a theory of psychology known as the “contact hypothesis,” which suggests that contact between people of different backgrounds, under certain conditions, can melt away conflict.

Contacts and Conversations

Our nation needs to heal. Regardless of our political leanings, our families and our nation need to come together and heal — personal and collective — the political splits and focus on strengthening our common bonds. Even under “normal” circumstances, life is uncertain, but the pandemic and the political situation have saddened and drained our emotional resources. COVID and political upheaval shifted the landscape under our feet and exposed difficult social issues that need to be dealt with. Also, it has brought to light the gaps in our preparedness for a national crisis. Facing these challenges has tested our usual resiliency and unwavering impetus for change. Becoming a proponent of contact and conversations healthy communication are the best ways to bridge differences. When we see options, our sense of feeling trapped, stuck, lifts and we recognize choices about how to respond to these challenges. It's worth a try!

“If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.” — Marcus Aurelius.

Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.

www.drgelt.com

cgelt@earthlink.net

818.501.4123

Resources

[Courageous Conversations Across a Growing Divide: One Small Step](#)

Ever wonder . . . if robots can have personalities? Learn more about these robots and how giving them personalities can help them engage socially with humans.

Find out by listening to our new [Ever Wonder? podcast episode](#), featuring USC roboticist Maja Matarić. Maja Matarić is a distinguished professor of computer science, neuroscience, and pediatrics at USC Viterbi School of Engineering who makes “socially assistive” robots. This interview is part of our [Science Beyond the Center](#) educational series.

Japanese artist known as [lito leafart](#) creates incredibly intricate leaf art.

Whizin Center for Continuing Education Capture Life's Unexpected Year



Wednesdays, 10am-12pm PST. Document and articulate this most unusual, unexpected, and challenging year using your iPhone or camera of choice! During 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has changed life for people around the globe, yet we have each faced this in different ways. Let's look back at how we've adjusted routines, coped with loss, gained wisdom, and acquired lessons and insights. Become a photo-journalist of your own life and learn new skills.