

# Bridging Our Differences: Tools for Understanding and Healing Divisiveness in Our World



**Kadampa Center  
October 5, 2025**



## Bridging Our Differences

I think the best thing many of us can do is to use our skills to reach out and talk with those with whom we disagree. Bridges have to be built, not barricades. In order to resolve conflict and polarization, each party has to recognize the legitimacy of the vital interests of the other parties.

Ken McLeod in "Forget About Being a Buddhist. Be A Human." Tricycle Magazine

## **Bridging Our Differences**

You cannot expect anyone to compromise on what is vitally important to them. Human connection is everything; without it, society falls into Darwinian chaos.

Ken McLeod in "Forget About Being a Buddhist. Be A Human." Tricycle Magazine, November 4, 2016

## **Bridging Our Differences**

For me, at least, Buddhism doesn't tell us how to address these issues per se. Buddhist practice can and does provide the tools to develop the intention, skills, and capacities to engage them.

Ken McLeod in "Forget About Being a Buddhist. Be A Human." Tricycle Magazine, November 4, 2016

## **Bridging Our Differences**

But how we respond depends on many factors, including the circumstances of our lives. It is up to us to figure out how to respond to the challenges of the 2016 election, not as a Buddhist but as a human being.

Ken McLeod in "Forget About Being a Buddhist. Be A Human." Tricycle Magazine, November 4, 2016

## **Bridging Our Differences**

- 1. Why bridging is needed**
2. Equanimity, the foundation of bridging
3. Using the 3Cs
4. Additional resources for bridgebuilders
5. Conclusion

## **Bridging Our Differences**

Despite common ground on many policy issues, a 2022 survey from the Pew Research Center showed that growing shares of both Democrats and Republicans view people from the other party as close-minded, dishonest, immoral, and unintelligent.

Emma Varvaloucas in "Right Speech, Left Speech" Tricycle Magazine

## **Bridging Our Differences**

- 80% of Democrats and Republicans feel coldly towards the other party, an increase of more than 20 percentage points from just two years earlier
- In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, one in six Americans ended a relationship with a friend or family member because of the election

Data presented in "Bridging Differences" GGSC

## **Bridging Our Differences**

- 73% of Americans say Democrats and Republicans not only disagree on matters of opinion and policy, but can't even agree on the basic facts
- 15% of Republicans and 20% of Democrats say that the country would be better if large numbers of the opposing party just died

Data presented in "Bridging Differences" GGSC

## **Bridging Our Differences**

It seems Buddhist Americans are not immune to this trend. I say that without judgment, as I have been very much part of it.

Emma Varvaloucas in "Right Speech, Left Speech" Tricycle Magazine

## Bridging Our Differences

### Othering & Breaking vs. Belonging & Bridging

Othering: "seeing people not only as different but as less deserving and not of equal divinity as us"

Breaking: "othering in action...[denying] the full stories, complexities, and even sometimes the humanity of those we consider other"

Extracted from *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong* by john a. powell (p.15)

## Bridging Our Differences

### Othering & Breaking vs. Belonging & Bridging

Belonging: "an aspiration and orientation in the world...agency for all members of society"

Bridging: "both a practice and a position"

Extracted from *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong* by john a. powell (pp.15-16)

## **Bridging Our Differences**

We live in a world full of fractures and one where polarization, division from one another, and isolating ourselves are becoming increasingly normalized. We live in a world where fear is often more visible than love or hope.

john a. powell. *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong*. Sounds True Publications. (p.16)

## **Bridging Our Differences**

But it does not have to be that way. In our effort to protect ourselves in what feels like a dystopian world, to close ourselves off from one another, we are likely to inflict even more pain and add fuel to the fire of the very world we want to avoid.

john a. powell. *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong*. Sounds True Publications. (pp.16-17)

## Bridging Our Differences

Bridging invites us to listen for the other person's story and particularly their suffering but also their aspirations and dreams. Bridging means we recognize that whatever is the key to the tension between us and the other is never the whole story. We are always more than our worst fears or worst acts. We yearn for our better angels and our best selves.

john a. powell. *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong*. Sounds True Publications. (p.117)

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## Bridging Our Differences

At a foundational, and I would say spiritual, level, belonging also means that there is no other. Whose life is unimportant? Who does not matter? Show me the person not made of stardust. Not only do we all count, but we are all connected. We all belong.

john a. powell. *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong*. Sounds True Publications. (p.16)

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\* From Starts With Us (<https://startswith.us/>)

## **Bridging Our Differences**

### **The 3Cs**

1. Curiosity
2. Compassion
3. Courage

## **Bridging Our Differences**

### **1. Curiosity**

- Starts with having humility and asking, "What can I learn from the other person?"
- Involves respectfully asking questions that come from a desire to know the other person's thoughts and views, rather than a wish to persuade or change their views to ours

## **Bridging Our Differences**

At its deepest levels, curiosity has the power to do much more than give us informational anecdotes for cocktail hour. It can become a force for meaningful connection and transformation.

Scott Shigeoka. *Seek: How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life and Change the World* (p.8). Grand Central Publishing

## **Bridging Our Differences**

It can strengthen our relationships to ourselves and each other, helping us to better navigate disagreements, revive decades-old marriages, or heal from past pain or trauma.

Scott Shigeoka. *Seek: How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life and Change the World* (p.8). Grand Central Publishing

## Bridging Our Differences

Curiosity at this depth invites us to ask questions that invite nuance and surprise. ... Instead of "Are you a Democrat or a Republican?" we ask others "What values are important to you?"

Scott Shigeoka. *Seek: How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life and Change the World* (p.8). Grand Central Publishing

## Bridging Our Differences

### 1. Curiosity (continued)

- Also entails challenging our own assumptions about others and the biases that we hold
- Requires overcoming being fearful of the other person as well as feeling too certain about our own position

## Bridging Our Differences

To really hear the deeper needs of people with whom you disagree demands curiosity.

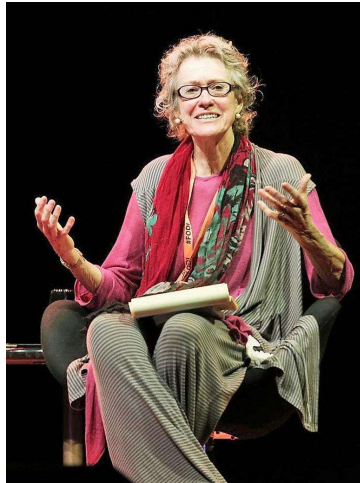
Oren jay Sofer. *Your Heart Was Made for This: Contemplative Practices for Meeting a World in Crisis with Courage, Integrity and Love* (p.81).  
Shambhala

## Bridging Our Differences



Arno Michaelis and  
Pardeep Kaleka,  
co-authors of  
*The Gift of Our Wounds*  
and co-founders of  
Serve 2 Unite

## Bridging Our Differences



Arlie Russell Hochschild,  
Professor of Sociology  
at UC Berkeley  
and author of  
*Strangers in Their Own Land*

## Bridging Our Differences



Tomorrow's Women,  
a Santa Fe organization  
which trains and supports  
Palestinian, Israeli, and  
American women to become  
strong, compassionate leaders

## **Bridging Our Differences**

### **2. Compassion**

- Begins with empathy that imagines what it is like to be the other person, to walk in their shoes, and also to see their similarity to oneself

## **Bridging Our Differences**

Realizing that the other person is also just like me is the basis on which we can develop compassion, not only toward those around us but also toward our enemy.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama

## **Bridging Our Differences**

Normally, when we think about our enemy, we think about harming him. Instead, try to remember that the enemy is also a human being, just like you.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama

## **Bridging Our Differences**

### **2. Compassion (continued)**

- Entails listening deeply to the other person, not just for understanding and learning facts about who they are, but also for emotions and feelings, as well as values and beliefs (i.e., what is important to that person)



## Bridging Our Differences

### 2. Compassion (continued)

- Also involves being able to see how others' views and actions are dependent on their conditioning, just like our own

## Bridging Our Differences

Fr. Gregory Boyle,  
Founder of Homeboy  
Industries, the largest  
and most successful  
gang rehabilitation  
and re-entry program  
in the world



## Bridging Our Differences



Ples Felix and Azim Khamisa, Founders of the Tariq Khamisa Foundation, an educational organization dedicated to the goal of creating safer schools and communities, along with Tony Hicks, the grandson of Ples who killed Azim's son, Tariq

## Bridging Our Differences

### 3. Courage

- Involves having the bravery to engage with another who has a differing perspective and also to speak to your own point of view in their presence

## Bridging Our Differences

A great myth about courage is that it means not feeling afraid. But in fact, far from being the absence of fear, courage is the willingness to be present and vulnerable, meeting what is happening with an open heart, in *spite* of fear.

Oren jay Sofer. *Your Heart Was Made for This: Contemplative Practices for Meeting a World in Crisis with Courage, Integrity and Love* (p.89).  
Shambhala

## Bridging Our Differences

Courage requires wisdom and compassion, two primary Buddhist values. Wisdom offers understanding and perspective, so that we don't freak out when things go haywire.

Oren jay Sofer. *Your Heart Was Made for This: Contemplative Practices for Meeting a World in Crisis with Courage, Integrity and Love* (p.89).  
Shambhala

## Bridging Our Differences

### 3. Courage (continued)

- Includes caring for ourselves and others by creating a safe space and engaging differences thoughtfully

## Bridging Our Differences

Daryl Davis, blues musician, and an anonymous Ku Klux Klan member



## Bridging Our Differences

CP Ellis, a Ku Klux Klan leader, and Ann Atwater, a civil rights activist, who became best friends and founded "Save Our Schools" in Durham, NC.



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Additional Resources for Bridgebuilding:

- Braver Angels ([www.braverangels.com](http://www.braverangels.com)) "Skills for Bridging the Divide"
- Greater Good Science Center (<https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/>) "Bridging Differences"

## **Bridging Our Differences**

Additional Resources for Bridgebuilding:

- Interfaith America (<https://www.interfaithamerica.org/>) "Bridgebuilder Basics" & "Skills for Bridging the Gap"
- Starts With Us (<https://startswith.us/>) "3Cs Classroom"

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So while I caution against approaching bridging as a set of boxes to check, I believe the power of bridging itself is that it moves us away from technique and into a deeper way of considering relationships and the world.

john a. powell. *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong*. Sounds True Publications. (p.190)

## Bridging Our Differences

Bridging will not only help us to understand ourselves and each other better, but will also help us to be more engaged and open with ourselves and the world. Bridging helps us create the conditions to make better decisions about the world we want to create.

john a. powell. *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong*. Sounds True Publications. (p.190)

## Bridging Our Differences

Additional Resources for Bridgebuilding:

- *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong* by john a. powell, Sounds True 2024
- *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* by Jonathan Haidt, Vintage Books 2012



## **Bridging Our Differences**

Additional Resources for Bridgebuilding:

- *Your Heart Was Made for This: Contemplative Practices for Meeting a World in Crisis with Courage, Integrity and Love* by Oren jay Sofer, Shambhala 2023
- *Seek: How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life and Change the World* by Scott Shigeoka, Grand Central Publishing 2024

## **Bridging Our Differences**

Additional Resources for Bridgebuilding:

- *The Gift of Our Wounds: A Sikh and a Former White Supremacist Find Forgiveness After Hate* by Arno Michaelis and Pardeep Singh Kaleka, St. Martin's Press 2018
- *Strangers in Their Own Land* by Arlie Russell Hochschild, The New Press 2016

## **Bridging Our Differences**

Additional Resources for Bridgebuilding:

- *Cherished Belonging: The Healing Power of Love in Divided Times* by Gregory Boyle, Avid Reader Press 2024

# **Thank You!**