

# THE Round Table

Winter 2016/2017

"...a path from where we are to where we should be." --Peter Maurin

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# Why This Issue?

“History has its eyes on you.” This quote from the amazing musical *Hamilton* rings especially true as we enter into 2017. As I write, Aleppo is under siege, climate change continues to accelerate, and black and brown bodies continue to be targeted in this country. It is a time of fear and uncertainty. We know this to be true: white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism and other oppressions were born long before Donald Trump was, and they will surely outlast him as well. And so must our resistance. The election of 2016 was a watershed moment for our country; both our polarization and our willingness to accept racism, xenophobia and sexism peaked. 2017 will be a new world, and we must adapt. Our work for the revolution of love has clearly not been enough to stem the growing tide of Islamophobia, anti-black racism, and the targeting of women and LGBTQ folks. We must continue the good work we are doing. We must venture out of our comfort zones and into new action for justice. We must step into what can feel like the hardest thing of all: difficult conversations.

In this issue titled *Difficult Conversations*, Sarah Nash reflects on the necessity of reclaiming conflict, noting that while “Truth-telling is hard...I must continue to unlearn my conflict-avoidance and reclaim conflict as something to lean into and not run from.” Joshua Saleem from our local AFSC office shares some powerful wisdom gleaned from his conflict mediation work with a group of students self-dubbed as the “Peace Squad.” Noelle Janak, a student at Saint Louis University, discusses the necessity of both affinity and intergroup spaces, noting that “The journey toward justice is a both/and, not an either/or. To truly disrupt and dismantle systems of oppression, each of us must actively work within our intragroup spaces and intentionally show up in intergroup spaces.”

Jason Ebinger explores conflict-avoidance through the lens of race and class, specifically examining how middle-class white folks are socialized to avoid conflict and distance themselves from those who disagree. He notes that “We (white folks) can sit from a distance and talk about the bigots and closed-minded individuals who would vote for Trump, but until we have some sense of responsibility toward those who put him in power, nothing will change.” Haley Shoaf, the newest member of the Round Table committee, takes us through the role of social media in forming our opinions. She observes that “In many ways this election was about the absence of dialogue. About the conversations we’re not having, and by extension, the mediums through which we’re not having them.”

Our gorgeous centerfold (designed by Greg Fister) provides some specific tools for engaging in conflict. From Karen House is a delightful love letter to community penned by Chloe Jackson, and we conclude the issue with a hopeful prayer for the New Year.

The road ahead may feel narrow, but we are powerful people. We can work to deepen our relationships, dig into new and uncomfortable forms of vulnerability, and take strong action for justice. The time is now. History has its eyes on you. ✦



- Jenny Truax

Cover: Greg Fister  
Centerfold: Greg Fister and Jenny Truax

*The Round Table* is the quarterly journal of Catholic Worker life and thought in St. Louis. Subscriptions are free. Please write to *The Round Table*, 1840 Hogan, St. Louis, MO. 63106. Donations are gladly accepted to help us continue our work. People working on this issue include: Sarah Nash, Jenny Truax, Greg Fister, Haley Shoaf, Chloe Jackson, and Jason Ebinger. Letters to the editor are welcomed.

# Reclaiming Conflict: An Opportunity for Connection

by Sarah Nash

For most of my life, I was taught, both directly and indirectly, that conflict was something to be avoided. My parents quickly shut down any conflicts between me and my siblings, my elementary and high school teachers often bypassed difficult conversations in the classroom to decrease the odds of conflict, and within my friend groups, we kept our conflicting ideas and opinions to ourselves or simply agreed to disagree. I quickly internalized from a very young age that creating and engaging in conflict was bad, and that if conflict should arise, it was my responsibility to do everything in my power to alleviate it as soon as possible.

I don’t fault my parents or siblings or teachers or friends for teaching me to avoid conflict. In fact, it seems that they must have been taught the same from their parents and siblings and teachers and friends. They were taught the lie, and then taught me the lie, that a relationship, a home, a work environment, a classroom, a social gathering, etc. without conflict was far better than one with conflict. The definition that appears at the top of my computer screen when I Google the word “conflict” reinforces this idea:

## Conflict | kən - flikt |

*noun*

a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one.

*verb*

be incompatible or at variance; clash

With a definition that includes the words and phrases “serious disagreement or argument,” “protracted,” and “incompatible or at variance,” it might seem strange to suggest that people should lean in to instead of run from conflict, but that is exactly what I believe: That in a world with so much brokenness and division, we need more conflict, not less.



**Sarah Nash** rekindled her love of card and board games during a recent trip to visit a friend in Portland, OR. So, let her know if you want to get a game of Cribbage, Spades, or Ticket to Ride going!

Now hear me out, I’m not advocating for more wars or more hateful and divisive rhetoric, but instead, for more people to be willing to sit in the discomfort of internal and interpersonal conflict. This, I believe, is the only way to overcome the human-constructed barriers and borders in our hearts, cities, countries, and world to create true connections with each other. Truly listening to “the other,” sharing authentically with “the other,” and navigating internal and interpersonal conflict with “the other,” builds relationships of mutuality in which we come to realize that there is no “other,” just an “us.”



Source: <https://media.licdn.com/mpr/mpr/p/1/005/058/198/261c289.jpg>

Just last week, I went to a coffee shop with a friend of mine to spend some time working on this article. Before beginning our work, we were catching up on each other’s lives and I expressed my nervous excitement to return home for the holidays and create some conflict with my family and friends around the dinner table. A huge smile came across his face and a little chuckle escaped his lips.

“What are you laughing at?” I asked, slightly confused and annoyed.

“You’ve just come such a long way in two years!” he responded, still smiling.

“What happened two years ago?” I asked, still not

understanding what he was talking about.

“Don’t you remember in class when we were talking about the need for white people to confront their families about their whiteness and racism and you shared how difficult that was? And I sort of challenged you and we got into it in the middle of class?”

As he retold the story, a story in which there was undoubtedly internal conflict within myself and interpersonal conflict within our budding friendship, I could feel myself becoming uncomfortable all over again. You see, this moment of conflict happened during an Intergroup Dialogue course about Black male identity; a class where out of seventeen students, I was one of two white women. During one of our always brutally honest and authentic class discussions, the only white man in our class asked a question about the role of white people. A Black man in our class quickly responded that we had an obligation to confront white people in all of the spaces that he, and the people who look like him, didn’t have access to: our white neighborhoods, our white churches, our white schools, and our white families.

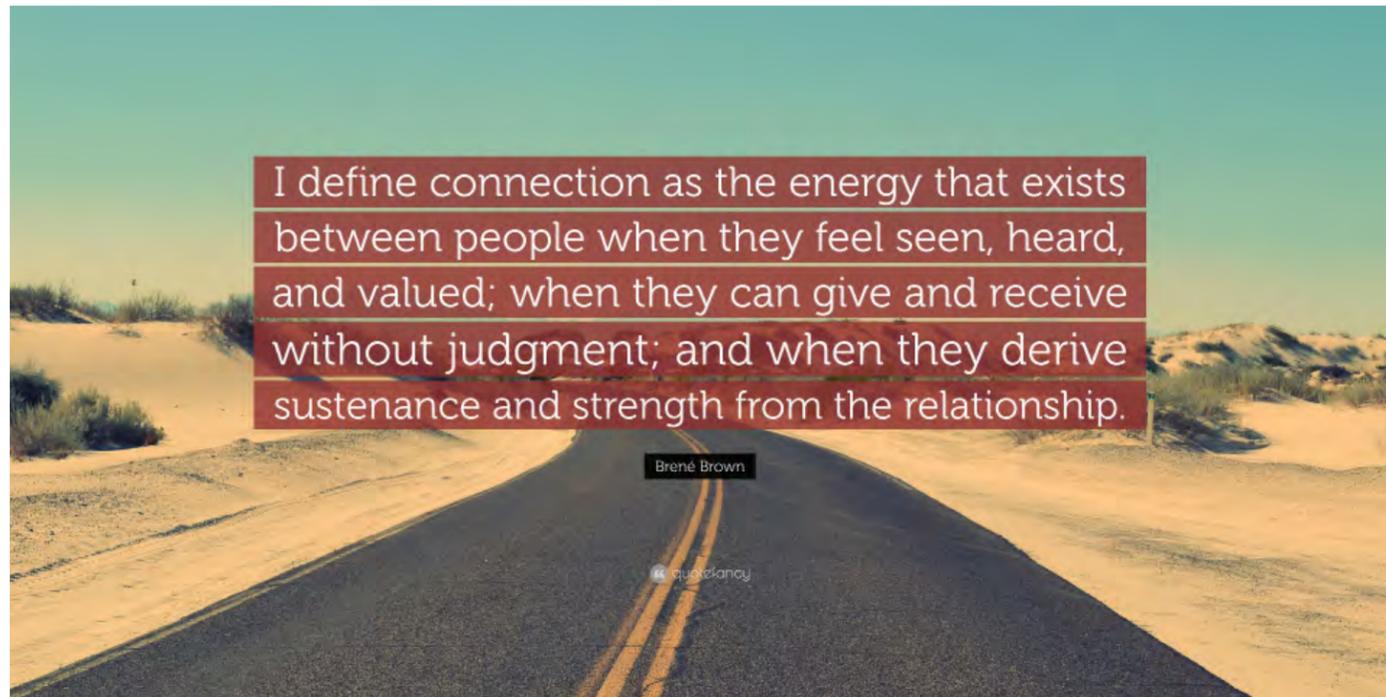
“I agree with everything that you’re saying,” I responded, surprising myself by all of the emotions that I felt in that moment, “and, that is an incredibly difficult thing to do. When you challenge and confront the people and places that have made you, you, there could be feelings of rejection on both sides.” I then shared with the class the story of telling my cousin, who was also my confirmation sponsor, that I declared African American Stud-

ies as one of my majors. Instead of asking me clarifying questions about why I decided to do this, he responded with: “Great, Sarah wants to be Black now” and mockingly put his fist in the air. My dad, who had previously expressed his support for my decision, laughed loudly and joined my cousin in extending his fist. In that moment, I felt belittled, disempowered, and rejected by two of the most important people in my life.

I could hear my voice shaking and feel my tears forming as I shared this deeply personal story with the class. “I know that it is important to confront our white families and our white spaces, and I just want to say that this is really difficult and painful.”

“I hear you,” my friend responded, “and you have to push through that discomfort. You have to trust yourself and your truth enough to keep speaking it, even if that means that your family will reject you. You have to because if you don’t, who else will? Yes, it is hard, yes it might affect your relationships, and you have to keep speaking the truth anyways. You just have to.”

As I sat across from my friend in the coffee shop and we reflected on that moment together, I was overcome with gratitude for him and his willingness to confront me on my own conflict-avoidance. He was right, truth-telling is hard, it has affected, and will continue to affect, many relationships in my life, and I must continue to unlearn my conflict-avoidance and reclaim conflict as an opportunity for connection, something to lean in to, not run from. Will you join me? ✦



Source: QuoteFancy

# Lessons from the Peace Squad

by Joshua Saleem

On this particular afternoon our classroom was lit up only by the natural sunlight coming through the row of square windows; we rarely turned the bulky fluorescent lights on. Spotify was playing the “peaceful” playlist the peer mediators had agreed upon, which included some Drake, Erykah Badu, and Kendrick Lamar. A playlist that was relevant enough to vibe to but wasn’t so laid back that students wouldn’t notice it. Yet, as I watched the students in conflict start using more colorful language with one another, then yell at one another, and finally get up out of their chairs and threaten one other, I made a mental note that the right ambiance doesn’t necessarily guarantee a successful mediation.

Being involved with mediating conflict between high school students has taught me a lot about difficult conversations. Our work partnering with students at Northwest Academy of Law to decrease the number of fights in their school began in the 2013-14 school year. A group of 10 students called themselves the “Peace Squad” and tasked themselves with leaning into conflict to help other students resolve their issues.

Their vision statement was “To create a peaceful environment at Northwest Academy of Law where students can learn and resolve any issues they have through words and not their fists.”

Over the last four years we’ve had a number of different peace squads moving that vision forward. They’ve helped resolve conflicts over gossip, bullying, stolen property, hurt feelings, social media, etc. And while the goal has been to address things before they escalate into fighting, they have even handled individuals who have been in fights to make sure violence doesn’t continue.

Here are some of the most important lessons the Peace Squad has learned:

## Set the Table

Literally and figuratively, create an appealing space



**Joshua Saleem** is the Peace Education Program Director for the AFSC’s St. Louis Office. There he works with youth to help them gain a sense of their own power to be agents of change in their schools and neighborhoods. His hobbies include cooking and imagining he’s the trombone player for a 70’s funk band.

for the difficult conversation to be had. If it were possible to have a meal over mediation, we would. Given that we are working within a school, however, we have to settle for candy. You’d be surprised at how many times students have come into the mediation room with arms crossed, committed to not sharing until a Starburst or Jolly Rancher is passed around. It’s almost magical.

Setting the table also means preparation. Before we’ve met with youth in conflict, as a group we’ve already talked about the situation and gotten a sense of generally what to expect out of the mediation.

## Reach Your Growing Edge

In mediation training we begin with how we’ve been socialized to have a negative perception of conflict, associating it with anger or fear when it is essentially an opportunity for growth. We’ve had friends draw closer to one another having endured a difficult conflict. We’ve seen young people come to a deeper understanding of themselves having gone through the process. Growth is not easy. It often involves awkward and uncomfortable vulnerability -- an openness to a new way of thinking and being that only comes from reaching your growing edge.

## Listen for Feelings

Asking yourself “What is this person feeling right now?” is a critical step to having a productive conversation. It’s a part of active listening. We also have to expand our emotional vocabulary and be clear about what people are feeling. While a student may come into the room clearly looking angry, we have to listen to what they say and ask questions about the sadness or betrayal that may have preceded their manifesting anger.

Earlier this year there were two freshmen on the football team who were brought in after a fight. Once we got to the root of the conflict it was revealed that they were really angry and frustrated at their losing record. Sure,



Young people participating in a peer mediation group.  
Photo from Joshua Saleem

they were upset with one another, but the unexpressed frustration and sadness of their zero-win season made it easier for a relatively minor conflict to escalate into a fight.

Empathize

Once you've identified the different emotions someone is feeling, we ask ourselves when we've felt that way in order to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. It's not enough to acknowledge what the other person is feeling; we must enter in and recognize we too have felt the same way before. In this way we bear one another's burdens, making it easier for us to enter the final step in a less adversarial way and looking for a "win/win" outcome.

Agree

It's not the expectation that at the end of our mediations there will be hugs and handshakes. Forcing this minimizes the very feelings and behavior that brought us

to the table in the first place. I've been a part of mediations where all the young people could do was give each other a head nod. That was enough because in that head nod there was an acknowledgment that they could move forward with an understanding.

Head nods are significant, especially for African American men. On the street a head nod means solidarity; recognition of the fact that even if this society doesn't see you, I see you and acknowledge your humanity.

I believe that's what we're doing for the almost all black student population at Northwest. We're creating the space for them to have difficult conversations and validate each other's feelings. In doing so, they're validating each other's humanity in a society that loudly proclaims theirs doesn't matter. †

# DARING GREATLY

ENGAGED FEEDBACK CHECKLIST

I KNOW I'M READY TO GIVE FEEDBACK WHEN:

- 1 I'M READY TO SIT NEXT TO YOU RATHER THAN ACROSS FROM YOU
- 2 I'M WILLING TO PUT THE PROBLEM IN FRONT OF US RATHER THAN BETWEEN US (OR SLIDING IT TOWARD YOU)
- 3 I'M READY TO LISTEN, ASK QUESTIONS, AND ACCEPT THAT I MAY NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND THE ISSUE
- 4 I WANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT YOU DO WELL INSTEAD OF PICKING APART YOUR MISTAKES
- 5 I RECOGNIZE YOUR STRENGTHS AND HOW YOU CAN USE THEM TO ADDRESS YOUR CHALLENGES
- 6 I CAN HOLD YOU ACCOUNTABLE WITHOUT SHAMING OR BLAMING YOU
- 7 I'M WILLING TO OWN MY PART
- 8 I CAN GENUINELY THANK YOU FOR YOUR EFFORTS RATHER THAN CRITICIZE YOU FOR YOUR FAILINGS
- 9 I CAN TALK ABOUT HOW RESOLVING THESE CHALLENGES WILL LEAD TO YOUR GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITY
- 10 I CAN MODEL THE VULNERABILITY AND OPENNESS THAT I EXPECT TO SEE FROM YOU

- from *Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown -

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# Inside Out: The Importance of Intragroup *and* Intergroup Dialogue

by Noelle Janak

The past few months have been a trying time for many Americans. From the massacre of Black and Brown queer folks at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando to the election of a racist, sexist, xenophobic President, our character as a nation and as justice doers has been put to the test over and over again. In the midst of such trial I, like always, have turned to prayer. For me, prayer differs from the evangelical laying of hands I grew up with. Instead, it is performing and listening to music. My saving grace these past few months has been everything from Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" to Mahalia Jackson's "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." Primarily, I have been turning to the music of unapologetic Black women, like Solange Knowles, the lesser-known sister of Beyoncé Knowles. On her recently released album, *A Seat At the Table*, Solange sings a song entitled, "F.U.B.U." Now, some of you may be familiar with this phrase, once used for a popular Black clothing line of the same name, but the phrase is actually an acronym meaning for us, by us. While she may use slightly more explicit language in the song, basically she writes that Black people need our own space to process racism apart from spaces with white folks. In a time when avowed white supremacists are set to occupy major positions in our President-elect's cabinet, this idea of racial affinity spaces—racially segregated spaces to process systemic oppression—make logical sense. But what does this look like in reality?

In the wake of the #ConcernedStudent1950 protests at the University of Missouri, I felt called to mobilize freedom fighters at Saint Louis University, where I go to school, and create a sustainable plan of action to draw attention to the racial issues that remain on our campus. I set up a Facebook message with these folks, hoping that the space would indeed be an interracial space of mutuality. When I arrived in the meeting space a week after



Source: Carbon-Fibre Media, LLC

sending the message, I encountered something very different—I encountered a room full of 60 white people. As we began the long process of planning a direct action and creating a curriculum for cross-cultural dialogue, I became frustrated. The weeks dragged on and the space was, well, white. As a Black person trained in Black Power historical analysis, I left every Billikens for Black Lives (BBL) meeting feeling drained because I was the only Black person in the room, and whether implicitly or explicitly, I was expected to share my experiences on behalf of all Black people. After months of planning, the group eventually disbanded, but the experience taught me something I still carry with me. Affinity spaces—white spaces, Black spaces, Brown spaces, Indigenous spaces, etc.—only disrupt white supremacy and institutionalized racism if

they are accompanied by interracial spaces of mutuality.

Don't get me wrong. Affinity spaces are vital to Black folks processing the daily micro and macroaggressions we experience at the hands of systems, our friends, our partners, and professors. At the moment, I serve as a Black Student Alliance Senator on Student Government Association and I helped create the programming undergirding the affinity spaces hosted by Housing and Residence Life on campus. While these spaces are important, white folks cannot begin to disrupt racism until work is being done in white only spaces AND in interracial spaces. BBL was a perfect example of what these spaces should not look like. Interracial spaces are useless if they are not spaces of mutuality—spaces in which both white folks and people of color benefit, spaces that reaffirm Black lives matter, not re-traumatize Black folks. Even before BBL, there were the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and Students for a Democratic Society. They too fell victim to the non-racist trap of ally theater, in which the all-white group, SDS, proclaimed themselves allies, but ultimately demonstrated white supremacist behavior and ideology towards the mostly Black organization, SNCC.

If white and Black anti-racist organizations in the 1960s could not even figure out how to create both affinity spaces and interracial spaces of mutuality, how can we expect to be able to do so? Those of us who hold systemic privilege (white folks, cisgender folks, straight

folks, middle class folks, etc.) are actively working toward becoming good allies. No doubt, this is a noble endeavor, but when we live in a world where the police are shooting rubber bullets at the faces of Indigenous water protectors in North Dakota and basic reproductive services are at risk, we do not need allies. What the world needs are accomplices. Allies post Facebook statuses and talk to their white friends about their voting choices at work Christmas parties. Accomplices, however, put their name down in the Muslim registry and form circles around activists of color when the police start charging with their militarized weapons pointed directly at the circle. Accomplices heed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words that "the ultimate measure of a [person] is not where [they] stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where [they] stand at times of challenge and controversy."

And perhaps, most importantly, accomplices actively work to disrupt and dismantle systems of oppression in both intragroup and intergroup settings. BBL struggled, and ultimately failed, because it was neither an interracial space of mutuality nor an intragroup space of whiteness work. White students in BBL were also not building relationships of mutuality with other students of color. They were also not processing with, educating, or organizing, other white students. The journey toward justice is a both/and, not an either/or. To truly disrupt and dismantle systems of oppression, each of us must actively work within our intragroup spaces and intentionally show up in intergroup spaces. We must call in our people—our friends, our family members, our neighbors, etc.—and we must be willing to accept the invitation when we are the ones called in to create intergroup spaces of mutuality. We simply must do both. +



Sarah and Noelle, co-founders of BBL, talking with Diane Nash, a founding member of SNCC, in January 2016  
Photo by Stefan Bradley



**Noelle Janak** is a student at Saint Louis University where they study African American Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and Theology. They currently spend their time playing Oregon Trail (yes, that's still a thing) and reconsidering their decision to dedicate their life to the ivory towers of academia.

# WHY do we avoid having impactful conversations?

**(SOME) PRINCIPLES OF CREATING TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE**  
**LISTEN** closely to what the other person is saying, without interrupting, challenging, or judging their views.  
 Be sure you aren't just waiting for the chance to respond.

**AVOID** jargon. Some words act like fuel on a fire and break down conversation. Use language and references that more people can relate to.

**SPEAK** in the "I" about your personal lived experience. Examples of this would be: "In my opinion," and "in my experience"...

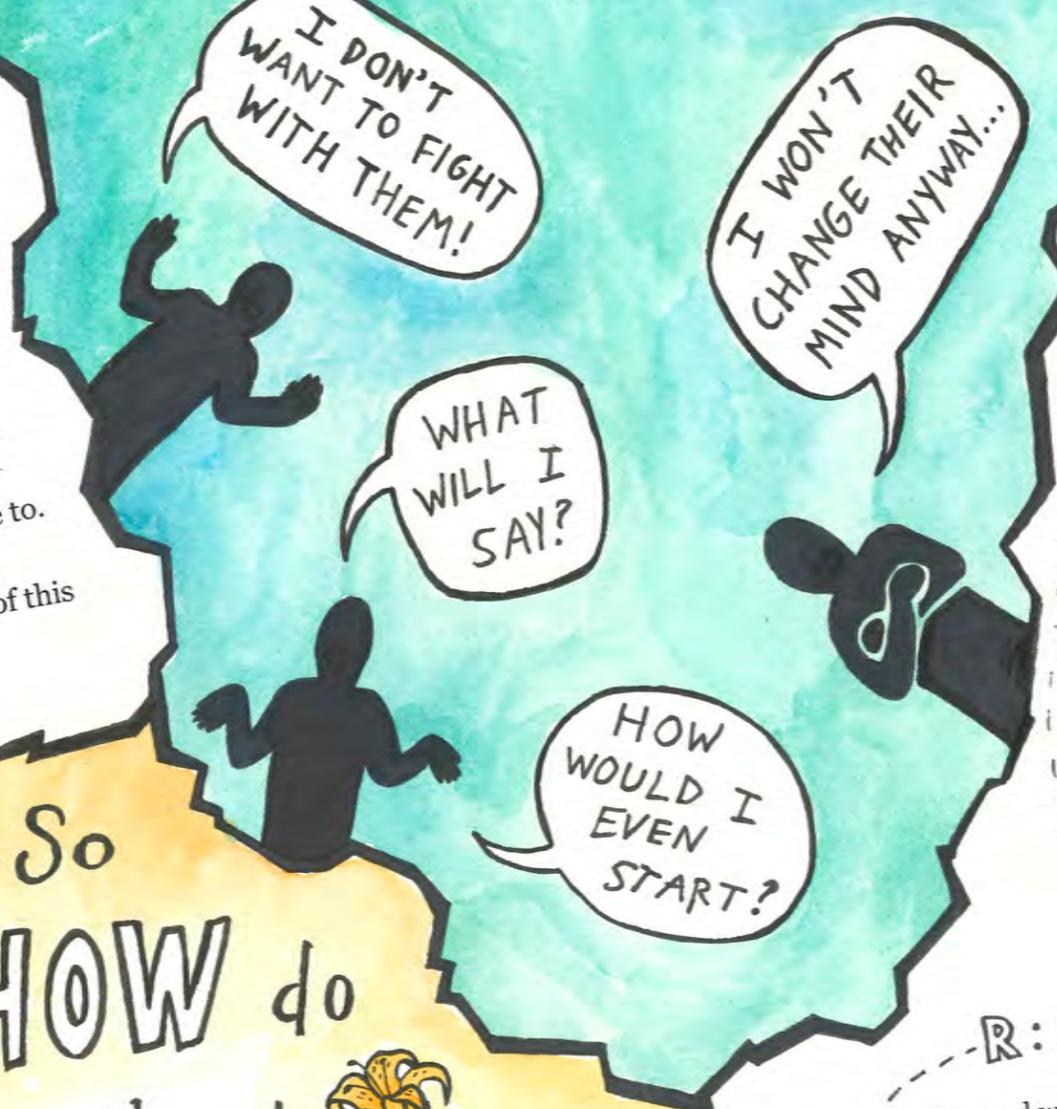
**KNOW** your emotions about what you're talking about before you go into the conversation, and be prepared to manage them effectively.

**EXPRESSIONS** of appreciation, affirmation and empathy help to set a secure atmosphere that is important for reaching common ground.

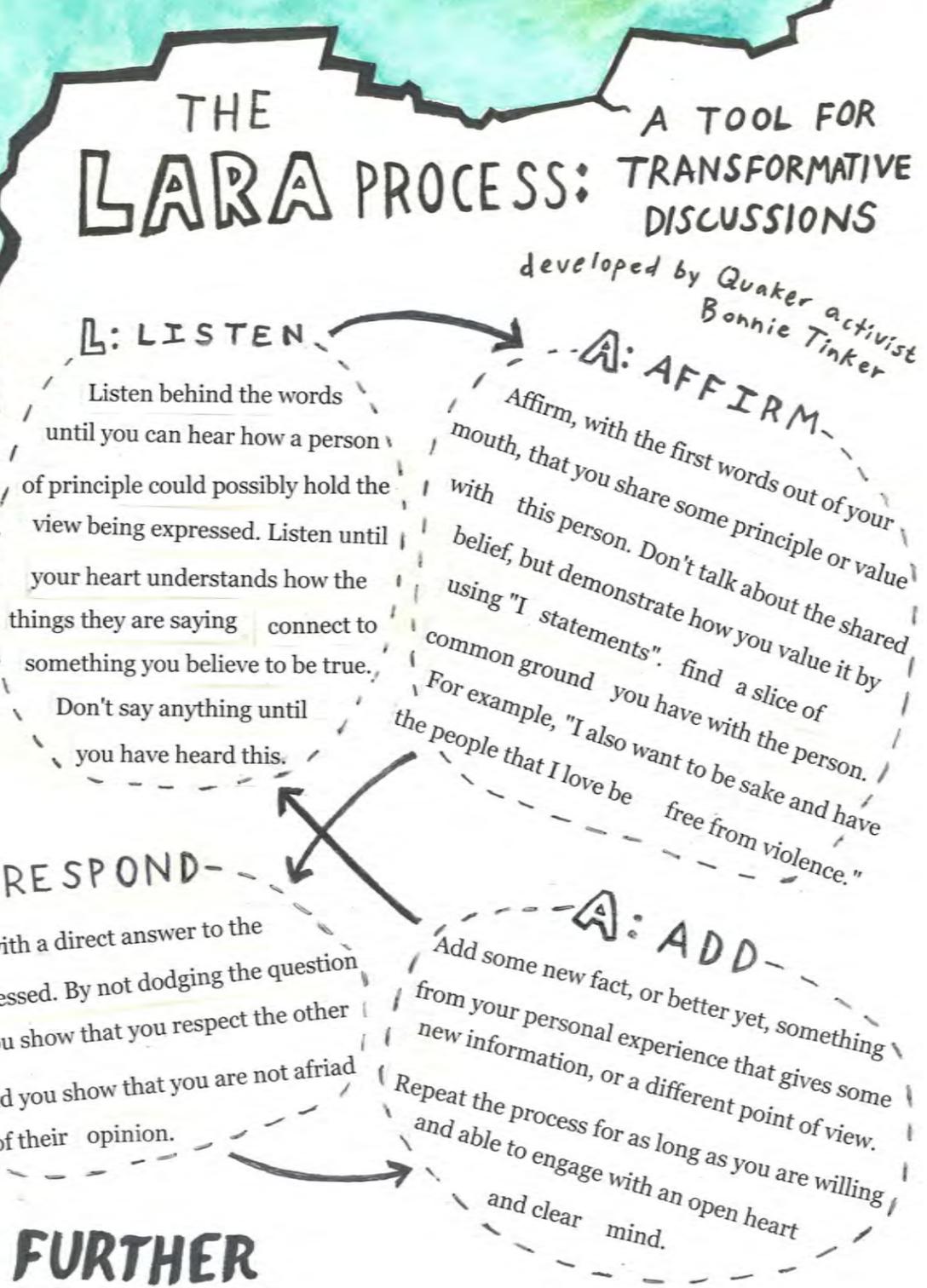
**BE CURIOUS:** listen carefully with an intent to hear, rather than just waiting to react.

**ACCEPT** and honor negative emotions about social issues.

**FIND** a stopping point. You are not likely to change someone's worldview in one sitting. End when the conversation is in a place of agreement, and revisit it again later.



So **HOW** do we go about starting them?  
 (Here are a couple ideas!)



**SOURCES & FURTHER READING**

We Have to Talk: A Step-by-Step Checklist for Difficult Conversations - Judy Ringer

Principles of Respectful Dialogue - formulated by Don Pelz and Anne Remley

# Whiteness and Conflict

by Jason Ebinger

Since Trump's election, there has been a mobilization of white people around the country. Groups focused on racial justice have seen a growing interest from the white community, and anti-Trump marches and rallies have been planned and carried out in several different cities. For many, this was the first time they have been moved to action and taken their voices to the street. Great, right?

While we can hope this marks a true shift and that those who have been mobilized stay mobilized, Black leaders across the city and country were quick to critique how it was problematic that now is the point that white people are showing their discontent and choosing to become involved. It was, of course, white America who elected Trump, yet many of those who are upset now did not go to the same lengths to move other white people (their friends, families, and communities) into a greater understanding of the dangers of a Trump presidency before he was elected. For many white folks, we don't have to reach far to find someone who voted for Trump. Among Catholics, 54% voted for Trump. Especially when those people are our friends and family, why do we not feel responsible for engaging them on important issues?

Honestly, I can't say that I find this very surprising. Especially for people who are white and raised middle-class, there are several factors at play here regarding how we relate, and don't relate, to other white people and the world around us. Of course, people of all backgrounds would find engaging in difficult conversations to be, well, difficult, but the very construction of whiteness presents some particular roadblocks for many white folks to feel responsible for the communities around them and to do the work that is necessary to tear down destructive ideologies like white supremacy and colonialism.

Both "middle-classness" and "whiteness" are difficult concepts to really pin down. They are both identities that are formed in relation to the other. They are more focused on what you are not rather than what you are. The concept of whiteness did not exist before the construction of the U.S., and those who are able to claim whiteness

has shifted with time. Whiteness is a carrot that is offered to some in order to avoid dissidence and meaningful coalition building; it is a system of "better than" and "at least I'm not...". Many communities that are considered white today would not have been at other points, but throughout the history of this country, fair-complected groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews, have been offered whiteness in exchange for their own more specific, deeply rooted cultural identity. This identity of whiteness comes with it the benefits of white privilege, yet there is a more detrimental side that is rarely acknowledged.

In her ethnography of a mostly white suburb, Anthropologist Rachel Heiman states, "being middle class is inherently unsettling." She notes that "middle-class" is not a fixed position and is defined in relation to the working class and owning class. To be middle class is defined by a fear of falling into a lower class and/or an anxious striving to rise beyond the middle class. Jobs that are available to the middle class are often in paternalistic or antagonistic relationships to working class people, and privileges afforded to the middle class are used as a wedge between the two. These privileges are tied closely with a middle class identity, and we tend to place a significant amount of energy in preserving this identity. To be middle class is by nature precarious. Because of this, there is a strong value placed on "not rocking the boat" or taking any actions that may land one outside the purview of middle class values.

These identities work together to encourage a behavior that "pervades dominant white culture: conflict avoidance" (Tochluk). While this tendency toward conflict avoidance may not pervade all areas of white culture, particularly for those who are involved in resistance work, it is not uncommon for it to define how we relate to family and friends whose political ideologies do not align with our own (particularly if conflict has gone poorly in the past).

Another important factor in our challenge to engage with difficult topics is what Shelly Tochluk would call the primacy of individualism. This shows up in a couple of



We don't have the ability to opt out of our current political situation. Now is the time to recognize that Trump's election is an indication of the white supremacy that is prevalent throughout all of American society. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/fibonacciblue/30819343391>

ways. It allows us to see ourselves as exempt from the forces that shift and shape racial identities and reinforce systems of white supremacy, and it allows us to see ourselves as not personally responsible for much of what occurs in white communities. Rather than acknowledge and address the pathology in our communities that have allowed Trump to rise to power without considerable alarm from the vast majority of white people, many of us stay relatively comfortable in our discontent knowing that we did not vote for Trump. We can sit from a distance and talk about the bigots and closed minded individuals who would vote for Trump, but until we have some sense of responsibility toward those who put him in power, nothing will change. It was of course not solely the overt bigot that placed Trump in the White House but also millions of more moderate right-wingers.

It is a comfortable yet unhelpful perspective to view white supremacy as being upheld solely by the actions of overtly racist people. Hollywood loves to really play this character up, and we as white Americans love to consume this image in order to position ourselves, in our own worldview, as individuals outside of the actions that create and enforce systems of racial injustice. For every act of overt racism, there are countless acts of complicity with

a system that keeps these divisions in place. Accepting the primacy of individualism in this way is in itself an act of complicity. By seeing ourselves as distinct from these systems of oppression, we are able to convince ourselves that they are not our responsibility. We are able to justify not engaging in difficult conversations even when we may be the very best people in the world to counter those problematic views, as is often true when thinking about our friends and families.

This leaves me wondering how far we as white people have really come in figuring out how to support the struggles of communities of color. In the 1960's Stokely Carmichael posed the question, "Can we find white people who are going to have the courage to go into white communities and start organizing them? Can we find them? Are they here and are they willing to do that? Those are the questions that we must raise for the white activist." Those questions have been raised yet again, and I wish that the answer could be a more resounding, "Yes!"

The frustration with white folks becoming active after Trump's election seems to mirror the uncertainty of Carmichael's question. For many of us involved in justice struggles, we have done the opposite of what Carmichael has suggested. We have uprooted ourselves from our home communities, and cut ourselves off from (or simply left behind) those whom we don't agree with. During holiday times when we may re-enter those dialogues, the intensity and passion of our daily activism and work for justice may be left at the door when it comes to organizing our own people.

My hope, however, is that this stems not from a lack of desire to engage but rather a lack of practice. Too often, our experiences of engaging in difficult conversations, opening conflict, is one that ends in rejection, disconnection, or anger. It makes sense: our tendency to avoid conflict makes us less skilled and less practiced when it does arise, and as a result, we get stuck.

Often when it comes to issues that are difficult to talk about, we either don't have or don't use the proper strategies for dealing with conflict. A recent instance in which this was true for me was at an anti-Trump rally that I stumbled across in Kansas City. While I originally decided to join the protest, after a while I drifted behind and started to talk to people who were witnessing the event. Not surprisingly, reactions were all over the board. While I had a couple of good conversations, some were frustrating beyond belief. I talked with one couple who was yelling that everyone should be arrested. The man was talking about how they were impinging upon his right to shop, but when I asked him if arresting them would



Jason Ebinger has been perfecting the art of fermenting radishes and making bone broth this winter.

be in conflict with their First Amendment rights, he was not interested in listening. When making his points, he kept coming back to how he was American--as if those at the anti-Trump rally were not. It was painfully clear that his argument lacked any sort of logic, and he was clearly holding his non-Constitutional rights above these protesters' Constitutional rights.

To respond in a way of trying to debunk his arguments (which I did for a while), would completely fail. His reaction to this protest was highly emotional, and clearly he found it in some way threatening. While I may have never hoped to reach these random people on the streets, interactions like this with loved ones whose relationships mean more to us can be impactful as long as we respond with the proper strategy. These strategies will vary with the occasion, topic, and relationship with the person we are talking with, and we all will have particular strengths based on our personalities and skill sets.

In a blog post about how to talk to your family about Trump, Christena Cleveland suggests: "Rather than planning to launch shaming justice grenades on your family members, spend time preparing to strategically and vulnerably share your story with them. I've found that personal story-telling is one of the most effective ways to awaken people to justice and guide them along."

In a letter written to Angela Davis, James Baldwin noted that "White people will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other." We cannot do this if we do not engage with each other, and while avoiding conflict may preserve relation-



The separation, compartmentalization, and isolation that signify middle-class, white, suburban America are a physical representation of the difficulties we have to overcome in organizing white communities.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/21767864@N00/213610170>

ships in the short term, it is ultimately damaging and limits our capacity to love each other and build a meaningful resistance to oppressions of all kind within our white communities.

While there has been a surge of interest among white people to get involved, I would be remiss to not mention that there has been also been a major uptick in instances of overt oppression and hate crimes targeted at marginalized communities. While we hear of some, we can be certain that many go unreported or are intentionally disregarded. Now marks the time to devote more energy to developing strategies for engaging in conflict. While these strategies certainly involve listening, they do not include justifying or rationalizing problematic viewpoints. There is a way to move forward in love while also vehemently opposing that which has kept us separated.

I write this to identify a problem and to ask us to move forward together toward a solution. I don't have that solution myself, but I will be working on developing those strategies. I would love to hear how it goes for you!

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# Breaking the Echo Chamber: Awareness and Dialogue on Social Media

by Haley Shoaf

One of the most difficult conversations I've had this election season was not explicitly a matter of candidates or policy, though it did begin that way.

Sitting at lunch in early September, I held up an article about yet another absurd quip, remarking to my friend, "I just don't understand how anyone can possibly be voting for Trump...Are they not seeing this?!?!?"

He paused for a moment before replying, "Actually...they're probably not." I scoffed and rolled my eyes, but he protested, "In the same way you can't imagine supporting Trump, there are entire subgroups out there who are seeing totally different things, and don't understand how you could possibly be supporting Hillary Clinton. Pull up your Facebook." And so I did. And what I found actually gave me pause.

Over the years I've somehow managed to acquire 1,342 Facebook friends. Of those, only 15 have "liked" Trump on Facebook. Of that, I'd wager at least 5 liked the page ironically, which likely leaves the true number in the single digits; a small fraction of a percentage of what in many ways represents the outer reaches of my social circles. Now, liking something on Facebook isn't a perfect proxy for support, but it does make a point, particularly when several hundred of my friends "like" Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders, or both.



What are your news sources? Today, many folks use social media websites and applications like Facebook and Twitter.  
 Source: <https://pixabay.com/en/media-social-media-apps-998990/>

As a follow up to this conversation, my friend showed me a tool that the Wall Street Journal produced in May entitled "Red Feed/Blue Feed" (<http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/>). Users enter a political issue or controversial topic, and the tool will display common content of a conservative leaning newsfeed and a liberal leaning newsfeed, aggregated in real time, side by side. The results are fascinating. In this, the digital age, we don't just come to the conversation with different perspectives; in many cases we are literally having entirely different conversations.



**Haley Shoaf** currently spends her weekdays helping people learn how to code and her weekends trying to master the unicycle.

More than I would like to admit these days, I end up getting news from Facebook and other social media platforms. And a bit of research supports that I'm not alone. In fact, in stating the purpose of "Red Feed/Blue Feed" the Wall Street Journal noted:

"Facebook's role in providing Americans with political news has never been stronger—or more controversial. Scholars worry that the social network can create "echo chambers," where users see posts only from like-minded friends and media sources."

My friend's point was not about the the content of my views, but rather about how those views were informed by the deluge of information I interact with every day. And beyond that, the implicit assumption that my information waterfall matched that of others nationwide.

I first began my explorations for this article in early October, based on these initial touch points and the hunch that my perception of the election was heavily colored by the content I was seeing online. Since then I have not only had that hunch validated, but have witnessed the phenomena of the social media echo chamber played out with such excruciating precision to be truly alarming.

In many ways this election was about the absence of dialogue. About the conversations we're not having, and by extension, the mediums through which we're not having them. The way we communicate and receive information has changed fundamentally over the past decade, and it doesn't show any signs of slowing down. We're spending an ever-increasing amount of our time online, particularly on social media. One recent study found that the average American checks their Facebook,

Twitter, and other social media accounts 17 times a day; meaning on the aggregate we are plugged in to these sites at least once every hour that we're awake, if not more.

With this increased time spent, we are increasing the amount of news and information we get from social media. Long form stories are replaced by sound bytes, blog posts, and video clips, most of it editorialized.

There are definitely benefits to social media. Aside from allowing us to maintain connections with people across the country and the world, in theory it is an easy access point to communication on a large scale, democratizing information through network effects. Social media can be a means by which to organize protests, share stories, and promote causes and conversations. The popular Facebook page Humans of New York, for example, conveys challenging narratives of a wide cross section of people to an audience of 17 million. The Black Lives Matter movement began with the use of a hashtag on Twitter.

Unfortunately, however, this type of intersection tends to be the exception rather than the norm. As human beings, we crave confirmation...which is why difficult conversations are so challenging to begin with.

Because we receive it in a very personal, curated way, social media feels intimate. In fact, this phenomena is engineered. Facebook, Twitter, and Google all use personalization algorithms, noting not just the content we click on, but the friends we interact with and the content they click on, in order to continually refine what we see. It is by design that we see almost exclusively posts, stories, and articles that we agree with, as it increases click rates for sites that, quite frankly, are in the business of

maximizing clicks.

Even within this curated bubble, however, we are exposed to an amplification of natural human behavior. In 1974, German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neuman coined the term "spiral of silence," which refers to the "tendency of people to avoid speaking out about controversial political issues due to fears of isolation and judgment." Forty years later, in 2014, Pew Research Center conducted a study of nearly 2,000 adults which found that the spiral of silence also applied, and in fact, appeared more pronounced, on Facebook, with Facebook users "deliberately avoiding controversial topics due to fears of social disapproval."

At times social media can feel like a soap box, but upon deeper analysis, we generally play it very safe, posting only things that we know will be well received by our audience. In fact, the Pew study found that nearly twice as many people were willing to talk about a politically thorny news story in person than they were to discuss it on social media. Despite the streams of comment-wars, "social media is a place where many people feel particularly uncomfortable conversing about things they think might elicit a lot of disagreement."

The way in which people interact online is often an augmented version of their real life experience. A related Pew study found that 70% of white people say they never post anything related to race. Over 25% of black respondents said most of the content they see is about race, while only 6% of white people said the same.

There is a growing awareness of this bias on a macro, research level, but how it seeps into our day to day lives is much more complicated. For example, users of Facebook and Twitter who thought their social networks disagreed with them were less likely to speak their minds in person.

In today's world, digital fluency is becoming as important as literary fluency. And yet we have few conventions giving context for how to communicate by abstraction online, or for understanding how we process this communication. That being said, we are not entirely powerless, and often a bit of awareness can go a long way. Kartik Hosanager, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, reported that "the primary driver of the digital echo chamber is the actions of users - who we connect with online and which stories we click on - rather than the choices the newsfeed algorithm makes on our behalf."

As we are exposed to greater quantities of information than ever before, there is definitely an argument to be made about the increased value of face to face conversations, emphasizing personalism and connection. Efforts should be made to prioritize this where possible,



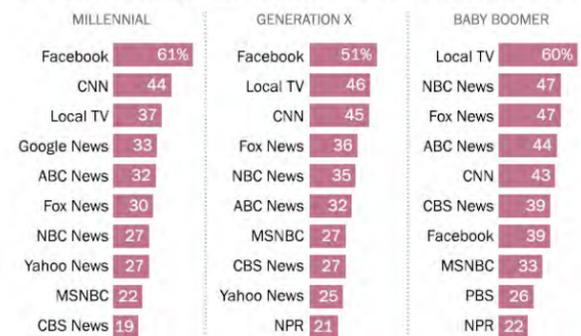
Source: Hiroshi Watanabe/Getty Images

and more often than not, breakthroughs happen at the one-on-one level. But at the same time we should not run away from engaging with difficult content on social media, and recognize that given the amount of time we spend on these networks, and the amount of information we glean from them, that how we engage matters. Since the election, I have been on the hunt for strategies to diversify the information I see on social media. Some of these are simple, such as choosing to "like" a candidate of the opposite political party, or a click on a polarizing news source to increase the diversity of perspectives in my feed. Others require more effort, such as trying to engage in person when I notice someone posting an opinion I disagree with online, rather than simply disregarding the post, or inciting a public back and forth.

I can't claim to have found any easy answers, but the fact remains that we can't begin to have these conversations without first understanding what the other side is seeing. +

### Among Millennials, Facebook Far Exceeds Any Other Source for Political News

% who got news about politics and government in the previous week from...

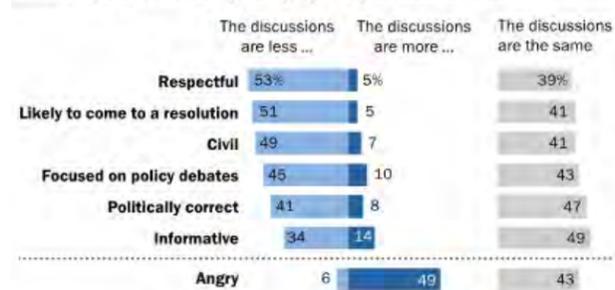


American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q22, Q24A. Based on online adults.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

### Many users see social media as an especially negative venue for political discussions, but others see it as simply "more of the same"

% of social media users who say their political discussions are more or less \_\_\_\_\_ compared with other places people might discuss politics



Source: Survey conducted July 12-Aug. 08, 2016.

"The Political Environment on Social Media"

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# From Karen House

by Chloe Jackson

We can tell winter's finally on its way here at Karen House. Fans are no longer blowing in every room, neighbors aren't asking for ice water at the door, and we're starting to notice the draft from the hole in the stained glass window at the top of the stairs.

When I first moved into Karen House seven months ago, it was warm and sunny. It was also quiet. I moved in at a time when we were low in numbers and trying to figure out a new process for accepting guests and tackling issues of race, class, and age that showed up in the house. We were trying to figure out ways to make our house even more like a home. Now, over half a year later, I'd say we've made progress. Granted, I was not here in the months and years before these shifts were made. But though we'll always be growing and changing, I'd say Karen House does, indeed, feel like a giant, sometimes loud, often laughter-filled home that is trying, however imperfectly, to address the unhealthy patterns that often show up in shelters and houses of hospitality, remnants of the -isms we've all grown up experiencing and practicing.

Still, sometimes it can be hard for introverts like myself to live in community. Especially when that community includes nearly two dozen other people and a steady influx of volunteers. I was nervous moving into Karen House because I often tend to keep to myself and a couple of close friends. I am a highly emotional person too, and I don't open up to people easily or often. I get very overwhelmed by the prevalence of homelessness in the city and the news I read coming in from halfway around the world. It is not uncommon for me to break down crying from sheer emotional exhaustion. But I came as I was into the house, and have been welcomed with open arms since.

This fall in particular I was grateful for how my fellow Catholic Workers supported me even when I had to go out of town for weeks at a time. Within just two months, I traveled to northeast Missouri to get my Permaculture Design Certification, visited Lake City Catholic Worker for their annual pig butchering, and, most recently, went to Oceti Sakowin Camp in North Dakota to stand in solidarity with the water protectors there. Each time I left I worried about what I was leaving

behind. Was Greg really okay with taking my house shifts? Did I remember to empty the compost bucket before I left? Would people think I was deserting them?

Each time I came back I was met not with the looks of disdain I feared, but with hugs, friendly updates on St. Louis happenings, and questions about how I grew in my time away. My community wanted and still wants me to grow and blossom in whatever way that looks like for me (as long as I'm not oppressing other people as I do so.)

This wasn't intended to be a love or thank you letter to the Karen House Catholic Workers, but that is what it's turning into. And maybe that's for the best. My tendency to be introverted also means that I don't always express my appreciation for others in a way that's noticeable. So in case Annjie, Colleen, Greg, Jenny, Miranda, Taheisia, or Tim don't know: I appreciate you all immensely. I have grown so much in my short time here. I have loved chatting with Annjie on Wednesday mornings during the food run, practicing external processing with Colleen, talking vegan recipes with Greg, doing anti-oppression work with Jenny, laughing at cartoons with Miranda (and Charlie), getting to know Taheisia at Welcome Wagon, and trading gardening knowledge with Tim.

As I snuggle up in my blankets, all more I can think to say is thank you, thank you, thank you all for teaching me and challenging me in so many ways, just by being who you are. Early May is long gone now, and the cold coming through the windows is increasingly noticeable. But as the seasons change I'm recognizing that I am, too.

So here's to community. If you haven't thanked them in a while, or shown them you love them, I encourage you to do so. I may have waited a bit too long...but I know I'll be forgiven and loved for that too.



**Chloe Jackson** is currently missing the farming season and spending her days outside gardening. She is looking forward to learning how to make soap, play the banjo, and spin pottery this winter instead.

# In This New Year

by Jill Rauh, from Education for Justice

In this New Year,  
We look to an end to violence and war.  
We pray for peace, understanding,  
and reconciliation.

In this New Year,  
We hope for a future where all can have enough.  
We pray for prophetic voices to speak for the  
poor and the marginalized.

In this New Year,  
We will feel the pain of those dying  
from preventable diseases.  
We pray that antiretrovirals and medicines  
can be available to all.

In this New Year,  
We will breathe air and feel alive.  
We pray to improve our stewardship  
of God's creation.

In this New Year,  
We wish to start anew.  
We pray for wisdom to acknowledge  
mistakes and move on.

In this New Year,  
We believe that with God's help,  
it is possible.  
We pray for justice to reign and  
dignity for all people. ✦



Christmas Tree at Karen House.  
Photo by Sarah Nash



# The Round Table

Karen Catholic Worker House

1840 Hogan ■ St. Louis, MO. 63106

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## The St. Louis Catholic Worker Community

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*Ella Dixon "Little" House*  
1540 N. 17th St.  
St. Louis, MO. 63106  
314-974-7432



*Carl Kabat House*  
1450 Monroe  
St. Louis, MO. 63106  
314-621-7099

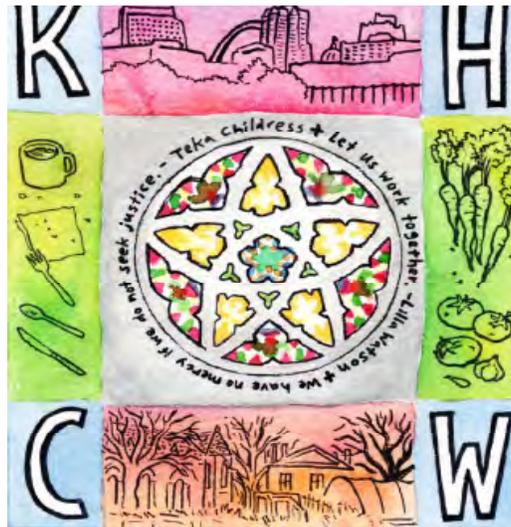
*Teka Childress House*  
1875 Madison  
St. Louis, MO. 63106  
314-588-9901

[www.KarenHouseCW.org](http://www.KarenHouseCW.org)

## Karen House Updates!

Thank you for your warm responses to our November appeal letter! We are grateful and humbled, reminded that it is because of the support of our extended community that this work continues.

We had some electric and heating issues in December, resulting in some unexpected bills (and unexpected cold nights in the house!) Any help you can give at this time is greatly appreciated.



We could use help with **DINNER COOKS** - Cooks can either prepare the meal at home or cook at KH using our food. Give us a call to sign up!

Please connect with us on Facebook and over email to receive Karen House updates!

To love, to be loved. To never forget your own insignificance.  
To never get used to the unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of the life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.  
-Arundhati Roy

Check [KarenHouseCW.org](http://KarenHouseCW.org) for updates on Karen House, resources on the Catholic Worker, an archive of past Round Tables, and more! Our website has a HUGE trove of resources on racism, white privilege, and the Black Lives Matter movement!