



Solving The Kaepernick Conundrum

by Paul Tokunaga
MELD: Multi-Ethnic Leadership Development
Founder & President

A **conundrum** is a problem or puzzle which is difficult or impossible to solve.
[Collins English Dictionary]

There is a mega-watt laser beam focused on Colin Kaepernick right now. We have either thrown Kaep under the bus or put him on a pedestal.

It's easier that way. It's all on him.

But whose conundrum is it, really?

We got us to this place. *Not Kaepernick*. Precisely, this is not his conundrum. He's just the guy who decided to strike the match that ignited the flame that was sitting there waiting to be lit.

We—all Americans— are the conundrum to be solved.

Race has always been America's #1 consistent and persistent social problem. It starts with the chip in every person's DNA that wires us to build a fence around what I feel is mine.

My rights. My property. My ideas. All me, all mine.

Whatever threatens what is mine should be ignored, pushed away or flat-out eliminated. Whatever looks and feels out of place in our ideal world is a threat and should be avoided at all costs.

It's tempting to say our race problems began when that first ship of African slaves entered the colonies when it docked in Jamestown in 1619. Slavery is the cornerstone of the intensity of American racism, without question. There's a long, continuous thread

connecting the Kaepernick Conundrum to the enslavement of free Africans. We'd be hard-pressed to find a credible sociologist who wouldn't acknowledge this.

But that thread was unraveling in America before 1619 and no one can honestly say it doesn't run through each of our family lines as well.

Colin Kaepernick is a lightning rod. In 2018, we gravitate to lightning rods. They give us permission to tweet and post one-liners filled with hate and self-righteousness. We feel better, and then proudly call ourselves social activists.

But does it help? Does it heal deep wounds? Does it build deeper relationships with the neighbor or co-worker or teammate who doesn't look like you or think like you?

What if tense issues like kneeling at football games were catalysts for deeper understanding? What if we were driven by the opportunity to understand one another better over the need to be right? Can the Kaepernick Conundrum become a catalyst of racial healing that transcends political polarities and generations of convictions? It's possible.

I'd like to suggest **two skills** for us to take seriously and try to build into our lives collectively. If we do, we can thaw the part of our souls that feels intractable so that we can hear what others are saying.

American poet laureate Robert Frost had timeless insight in 1914 when he penned "Mending Wall." The dynamic between neighbors is as true now as it was 100 years ago.

"Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.*"

That's the goal in fact, to find that "something there is that doesn't love a wall," then feed it and nurture it until it won't accept anything short of the wall crashing down.

So what are the two skills? First, we need to practice Civility.

Civility "...is public politeness. It means that we display tact, moderation, refinement and good manners towards people who are different from us."

Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*

“One of the real problems in modern life is that people who are good at being civil lack strong convictions and people who have strong convictions lack civility.”

Martin Marty, *By Way of Response*

Civility is in short supply these days. Lack of civility shows up in our tweets, our rush to get into the shortest line when shopping, our impatience when driving, our unwillingness to give others the benefit of the doubt or our manners towards those holding political positions opposed to our own.

In sports, it shows up in the unnecessary hit after the whistle is blown. Not treating officials and referees with respect when the call doesn't go your way. Treating our opponents as if they are our enemy not just fellow competitors in a given match.

How does one become more civil? For starters, we must roll up our sleeves and get better in these three areas: **empathy, curiosity and mutual respect**.

Empathy. Having empathy is to project yourself into another person's feelings so you can understand their experiences. It means walking in their shoes.

How can you develop **empathy**?

- Interview yourself, “What do people experience in my presence?” Think through several of your teammates. How do they likely feel when they interact with you—those you hang with and those you avoid. It all starts with an accurate self-perception.
- When you hear yourself asking, “What in the world were they thinking?” Ask instead, “Why? What am I missing? There's got to be more going on here than what I just heard/saw. What is it?”
- This week grab coffee or a coke with someone who has an opposing view on some aspect of life. No agenda. No script. No control over the outcome. Just hang out and see what happens. One rule: listen well. Think 10:1 (ten of their words to your one).

Curiosity. Having trouble having empathy towards those who think, act and believe differently than you? Grow in your curiosity. Curiosity may have killed the cat but it gives life to empathy.

Think of life as an artichoke. At least half of an artichoke is not edible. The outer leaves are too chewy and fibrous to eat. And after you enjoy the edible leaves (I recommend dipped in a nice hollandaise) you run into a thick layer of prickly interior leaves. But you persevere because you want the best part of the artichoke: the heart.

Getting to the “heart” of someone, requires work. Ask lots of questions. Think Sherlock Holmes. Why did he say that? What made him do that? Why does she feel that way?

How can you become more curious ?
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Find someone you would like to know better and invite them to this conversation over lunch or dinner. “I’d be interested in hearing what life is like in your family. Tell me a few of your stories growing up. I’d also be happy to tell you about what life was like for me as a kid.” |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask a teammate, “When did you start playing ____? What do you love most about it? Why? Do you hope to keep playing after you graduate? (If not) What are your plans after you leave here?” |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• This is a question for someone different than you ethnically, politically or socio-economically (or all three) and shouldn’t be asked until a decent comfort level is established: “We’re clearly pretty different. I’d love to hear your perspective on some things. Can I ask you a few questions?” |

Mutual respect is when I humbly acknowledge your views have merit. I don’t have to agree with your view, but I have to be humble enough to admit perhaps my view doesn’t fit everyone and every situation. In my family, we’ve learned to say, “You know, you may be right.”

How can you become more respectful ?

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask yourself, “What can this person do on the field/court that I can’t do nearly as well? How does their contribution make us a better team?” |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Now that you know more about a teammate’s personal story, what past life experiences of theirs can help make your team better? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Find ways to enter someone else’s world: eat at their favorite restaurant, listen to their music, get to know their circle of friends, accept an invitation to go home with them for a weekend. Learn about what is important to that person. |

These are three statements you want to eventually be able to say about a person that you know you have disagreements with:

- “Now that I have heard their perspective, I respect why they feel the way they do about _____.”
- “My ideas and opinions aren’t better than his, just different. We both have unique experiences that make us who we are.”
- “Mutual respect starts with one person taking the lead. I’m willing to be that person and create an environment of respect between us despite the ways we disagree.”

Secondly, after Civility, I suggest we learn the skill of Opposable Thinking.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in *The Crack-Up* in 1945:

“The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. One should be able to see, for example, that things are hopeless, yet determined to make them otherwise.”

The Kaepernick Conundrum draws a firm line in the sand. On his side of the line are those protesting police brutality towards African Americans. On the other side of the line are those who are enraged that athletes are disrespecting our military and thus are being unpatriotic.

The easy out is to choose which side you are on, plant your feet firmly, and self-righteously shout unkind things about the ignorant people on the other side of the line.

Anyone can take those cheap shots. And they are cheap. They cost nothing.

It takes a unique person to look beyond the rhetoric and see the deeper, more important issues at stake.

Kaepernick is right: there *is* too much unwarranted police brutality towards African Americans. It has to stop.

Kaepernick-opposers are right: the military *does* deserve our deep respect and appreciation. Being patriotic is important.

Why can't both be true at the same time?



I believe both are true. But somehow, right now, the bent knee on one side provokes a knee jerk reaction on the other side. We've gone beyond being respectful and reasonable. The other side has to be wrong. Why? So we can be right.

In *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking*, Harvard Business School Press, Roger Martin proposes a third way.

Martin interviewed over 50 of the most innovative and successful business leaders over a six-year period to see if there was a common thread. He found one. It "has emerged with striking clarity." He calls it *integrative thinking*:

"The ability to face constructively the tension of opposing ideas and, instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, generate a creative solution of the tension in the form of a new idea that contains elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to both."

To solve the Kaepernick Conundrum it will take people that understand these qualities and strive to implement them in their relationships. If we look hard, we can find them. And when we do, we may be surprised with who they are.

They will be respected and respectful people who embody civility (which includes empathy, curiosity and mutual respect), and opposable thinking. They will be people who care more about the "creative solution" than they do their reputations.

There's much more that can be said about the integrative thinking process than this short piece can cover. This link (https://www.slideshare.net/N_Albro/roger-martin-and-integrative-thinking) takes you to a succinct summary of Martin's approach to integrative thinking (and ends with a video of Martin addressing the topic).

Will this really help us solve the Kaepernick Conundrum?

In the large non-profit for which I served in executive leadership, we encountered several complex “either-or” issues. For several years, we intentionally applied Martin’s integrative thinking principles to help us find solutions “superior to both” opposable options.

I personally developed training exercises for senior leaders based on Martin’s work that helped them develop integrative thinking “muscles.” Like with athletes, these new skills became part of their muscle memory and almost second nature when they encountered complex issues.

If we can practice both civility and opposable thinking, we can begin to solve the Kaepernick Conundrum. It won’t be easy. It will take hard, intentional work. When you consider what got us to into this polarized state, it’s not going to get better overnight. It’s going to take patience. It’s going to take civility. It’s going to take the ability to see things from someone else’s perspective.

Keep at it. Before every team meeting, every game, every long ride back home after the game, think to yourself, *“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”*

Be that something. Be that someone.