



## Bridging the Divide: What I've Learned So Far

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Growing up in the '60s and '70s, I was taught never to talk to strangers; never to get into a stranger's car (well, that was before Uber) and never to discuss politics or religion.

But throughout my life, I've had good things happen when I talk to strangers—on airplanes, at the post office and to new neighbors in Easton Village. As I turn 65, I realize that talking about politics and religion can be a positive experience.

Discussions with the intent to listen, learn and share with civility and respect lead to a deeper appreciation of an array of viewpoints. Variety, it turns out, *is* the spice of life!

Removing this “spice of life” from your diet can be stressful, even unhealthy. A [recent survey](#) by YouGov, an international market research and data analytics firm based in the UK, found that one in four people in the U.S. have ended a friendship over political disagreements.

The [Blue Zone studies](#) found that friendships and community engagement are key to living a long and healthy life. So it's not surprising then that an inability to maintain sustaining relationships can [negatively impact our health](#) through increased isolation, anger and higher stress levels.

I'm lucky to have a vibrant, caring, smart niece who works at the global organization [Search for Common Ground](#), a nonprofit that has been around for more than 40 years.

She told me about their awesome work around helping to bring people together to build infrastructure and self-sufficiency, expand food distribution, protect children and provide emergency relief, among other projects.

We chatted recently about the work Common Ground is doing to bridge the political divide, not just here in the United States, but around the world. She introduced me to a team that ran the post-2024 election [Love Anyway Feasts](#), and they sent me a “host kit.” I hosted a small tea party just before Thanksgiving, and it was great to listen to the various viewpoints and challenges. Several participants said they had been “unfriended” on social media or knew someone who did unfriend over political party affiliation.

And thus, the idea for this article came about. I’ve put together a list of resources if you’d like to learn more about efforts to bridge the divide—along with the many organizations that are working and doing research in this area. I’ve also provided some tips that might help you prepare for and handle awkward conversations at gatherings with friends and family.

Some resources:

- [Considering Successful Counterspeech](#)
- [Ideas for Reducing Political Polarization](#)
- [The Perception Gap](#). How Americans tend to have a distorted understanding of people on the other side of the aisle, what causes it and why it matters.
- The [Harvard Program on Negotiation](#). Founded in 1983, this interdisciplinary research center focuses on improving the theory and practice of negotiation and dispute resolution through the lens of several fields, including law, business, government, psychology, economics, anthropology, the arts and education.
- The bestseller [Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In](#), written by members of the Harvard Program on Negotiation.
- The book [Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct](#).

A few organizations doing work in this area include:

- [Stand Together](#)
- [More in Common](#)
- [Braver Angels](#)
- [Starts with Us](#)
- [Search for Common Ground](#)
- [Better Arguments Project](#)

And lastly, from Search for Common Ground is this handy list of [50 Things Anyone Can Do](#).

The pros offer some general tips on how we can all help to bridge the divide:

- Think about how you might have your own stereotypes of the other group. Stereotypes and unconscious bias can lead to dehumanizing a group of people vs. seeing them as individuals with their own challenges, experiences, values and beliefs.
- Try not to live in a bubble. If you socialize only with people who think like you do or get their news from sources that don't offer multiple points of view, then you may be getting an incomplete picture. Chances are that we have more in common than we're led to believe by an "us-vs.-them narrative."
- Don't believe everything you read on social media. Foreign governments and other dark web players try to elevate and deepen the divide. When in doubt, don't repost, share or like what you are unable to verify. Sites such as the [News Literacy Project](#) can help you discern fact from fiction.
- Pick up the phone or talk with people in person. Volunteer if you can. Getting more engaged in the community is healthy "Blue Zone" behavior that broadens our understanding of each other and the world around us.

And here are some tips for having those difficult conversations:

- **Listen first.** No one will listen to you until you have heard them. That doesn't mean you have to agree with them, but listening is the first step to bringing people together.
- **Repeat back** what you thought you heard. Turns out listening is hard sometimes. We all use words differently. Say something like, "If I heard you correctly," and then summarize key points. For example, "If I heard you correctly, you believe the government should tax and spend less. Charity is a personal choice."
- **Wait** for the other person(s) to confirm or clarify what you thought you heard. Pause to gather your thoughts.
- **Ask if you might share a different viewpoint.** If they say no, then drop it and move on to a different topic. If they are willing to hear you, state your viewpoint with respect. Do not attack or in any way put down their viewpoint. For example, "My experience in working with the poor in our town leads me to support government programs that provide more services to the less fortunate. I see charity as both a personal and community/government responsibility."
- **Check in to see if you were heard correctly.** Answer any questions and ask more questions, provided the conversation is civil.

- If the discussion turns polarizing or the temperature is rising, **use empathy and compassion** to diffuse the situation and introduce a new, non-controversial topic. For example, “I really appreciate you sharing your viewpoint. You’ve given me much to think about. Let’s continue this at another time. Meanwhile, any plans for the weekend?”

I’m still learning about all the good work being done in this area (and apparently work that began several decades ago, so not a new challenge at all). I hope this article has spiked your interest in learning more. I am ever thankful to have found common ground with my neighbors here in EV, enjoying all that Mother Nature provides year-round, along with our caring community!