



Selected Recent Media Features

Since early 2017, Better Angels has been featured in the media more than 150 times. These selections are a few of the most recent.

For a full list, visit www.better-angels.org

'We must not be enemies'

Peters travels across Iowa's 99 counties, including Jasper, to promote bipartisan initiative

Christopher Braunschweig

Newton Daily News

October 3, 2019



A two-time challenger of Iowa's second congressional district seat is traveling through all 99 counties in the state to encourage elected officials and the electorate to work together with the opposite party and end the pervasive political polarization that continues to overwhelm day-to-day conversations and social media news feeds.

Former candidate Dr. Christopher Peters, who unsuccessfully campaigned against incumbent Congressman Dave Loebsack, is a volunteer for the Better Angels Iowa Outreach Project, whose mission is to promote civil dialogue between elected and constituent party members, especially in a time where civil discourse seems to largely revolve around the topic of politics.

“We can still have our differences — that’s fine — but we should be able to get along while we do it,” Peters said, noting that although he ran as a Republican candidate he sees himself more as a Libertarian. “So that’s kind of what Better Angels is all about.”

Last week, Peters held a screening of the “Better Angels: Reuniting America” documentary (not to be confused by the similarly named documentary, “Better Angels,” by Malcolm Clarke) and coaxed a brief discussion with some of Jasper County’s elected officials, 2020 campaign workers, candidates and voters at the Newton Public Library.

The name, Better Angels, derives from President Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address:

“...We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

A little more than a month later, the Confederates attacked Fort Sumter in South Carolina, igniting the first shots of the American Civil War, which would rage on for nearly four years. Peters said, “I don’t think we’re headed toward a civil war but I think you would agree there’s been a lot of really ugly events nationwide. And, fortunately, we’re not seeing that in Iowa that I’m aware of. But we are having this division where it’s ‘us against them,’ and I think we need to try and restore that a little bit.”

There are many factors that lead to political polarization. As both major parties shift to extremes, he added, that polarization increases. Constant national news media attention and social media also play a part. However, Peters is convinced people will “come out of it.” Better Angels’ methods and workshops, he argued, could be a solution. The first step? Watching the documentary.

The 50-minute film is presented like a case study or social experiment showcasing how Better Angels Red/Blue workshop is facilitated. This particular film featured a workshop full of both Republican and Democratic voters in Waynesville, Ohio.

At first, both groups are skeptical of one another, but they eventually find common ground and see the nuances in their stances regarding certain issues. They still may not agree with each other politically, but both groups seem to get along by the end and appear more relaxed and enlightened to healthy discussion.

Better Angels Iowa Outreach Project, Peters suggested, works the same way. “I think there’s a ton of demand in Iowa for a different way forward,” Peters told Newton Daily News. “We like our politics in Iowa, and ‘Iowa Nice’ is something that we generally adhere to. That’s why I think Better Angels has just been so well received in Iowa.”

The Iowa branch of Better Angels is also led by a full-time state supervisor, Christian Sarabia, who has been accompanying Peters' statewide visits. Several Jasper County attendees seemed interested in the group's mission to set up Better Angels workshops in their respective communities.

From his experience campaigning in Iowa's second district and interacting with its elected leaders, Peters remarked that Jasper County's lawmakers work well together despite their differences in ideologies and political party. He said this is especially true for local elected officials like county supervisors and city councilpersons.

"They're generally more pragmatic and get things done that need to get done, and I think that's largely true with statehouse, too," Peters said. "Less true once you get up to the federal level." Peters' presentation a week ago was co-sponsored by both the Jasper County Democratic Party and Jasper County Republican Party.

Both chairpersons of the local parties — Michelle Smith and Thad Nearmyer, respectively — have organized and embraced bipartisan events in the past, such as the annual bipartisan soup supper. Held in early December last year, the fundraiser attracted several party leaders to the Jasper County Community Center to raise money for the local food pantry.

Nearmyer agreed Jasper County's elected officials make efforts to work together, but said the divide comes more from constituents. But based on the reception and higher-than-expected turnout of last week's event, Nearmyer isn't ruling out the possibility of another type of workshop in the future.

"I feel like we had a lot of people interested enough to come to the first event so maybe that's a possibility," Nearmyer said.

Smith said there are certainly political differences between herself and her GOP counterpart. "It doesn't mean at the end of the day there aren't things we can agree on and work together on, and that's something we really try to showcase," Smith said. "I think there's so much we can do to improve our communities and things that are important to us."

How to respectfully disagree

Emma Benson

The Daily (Salt Lake City) Universe

October 3, 2019

“No offense, but ...”

“I don’t want to be rude, but ...”

“Don’t take this personally ...”

Is it obvious what might come next?

Despite good intentions, these commonly-used phrases may lead to offense. Whether it’s a conversation with a family member or a friend, a classmate or a co-worker, everyone has varying opinions and beliefs.

Is there a good way to disagree with someone while still being respectful of their thoughts and opinions?

BYU persuasive writing professor Erin Blackmun teaches her students that sharing their opinions with each other is an opportunity to be enlightened. Blackmun, along with former vice president of the BYU Speech and Debate Club Benjamin Braden and Better Angels coordinator Erika Munson, shared ideas on how to respectfully disagree during a conversation or an argument, whether with a friend or foe.

Have a well-researched opinion

“The best way to express an opinion is to have one,” Blackmun said. Braden suggested the importance of researching topics and understanding both sides before arguing an opinion.

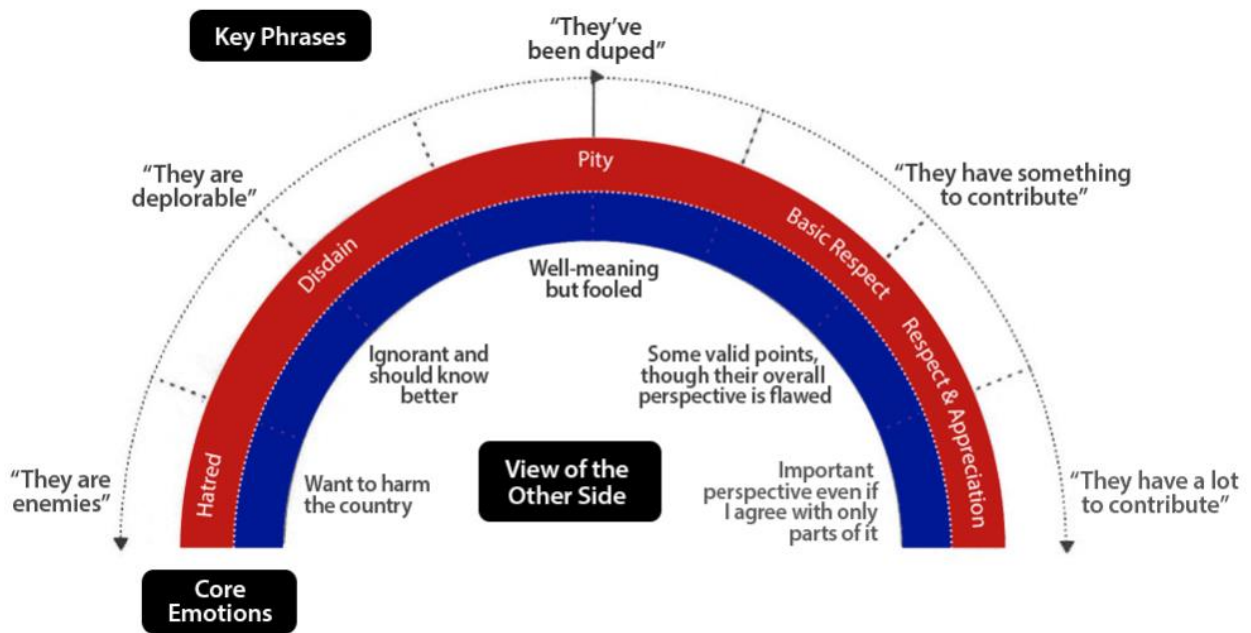
“One of the biggest issues I see with people is they establish an opinion without any research,” Braden said. “If people are more informed and actually research topics more and understand what went into it, they’d have a better understanding of both sides and not be as contentious in the issues, rather than just attacking their opponent.”

Agree to disagree

An article from the American Psychological Association suggests the importance of agreeing to disagree. “Having conversations, specifically on sensitive topics, will not always be easy going. Recognize that you may not be able to change their viewpoints. Use the conversation as an opportunity to share views, not to convince anyone that your view is best,” it says.

Blackmun concurred. “Oftentimes, those ideas are different, and we don’t have to agree,” she said.

Braden also noted the importance of realizing most people won’t change their opinion because of a single conversation. Before reaffirming one’s own position, Braden suggested one should reiterate what the other said first, then point out that there’s another side to it. “Try to come to a mutual understanding first, then you can expound on your points without sounding aggressive,” he said.



Better Angels uses this chart to help people recognize where they land when arguing with people either in-person or online. (Better Angels)

Treat an argument as an ‘exchange of ideas’

Blackmun said she discusses the meaning of an argument with her students. She said “argument” often has a connotation of involving contention and disagreement, but it should be portrayed as an exchange of ideas. “Contempt doesn’t ever solve anything,” she said.

Blackmun said that when people have conversations about controversial topics, like abortion, politics, same-sex marriage or immigration, people tend to come in being defensive from the start, thinking they have to defend their stance. But Blackmun said she doesn’t think an argument has to be like that when people think of it more in terms of the “exchange of ideas.” Blackmun, Braden and Munson capitalized on three main points to treat an argument as an “exchange of ideas.”

Listen

It may be intimidating for some to share their opinions — they may fear how the other person might react. Blackmun said it's normal to feel this way, especially walking into a conversation with somebody they don't know — but it's the delivery that makes all the difference.

"I think so much has to do with the way that we receive them," she said. "Oftentimes in a conversation, it's better to listen first, especially when you don't have that prior relationship and when you're not sure what the reaction is going to be."

Blackmun frequently holds debates in her classes to help her students learn how to express their opinions. She said it's an eye-opening experience to help them see why they have the opinions they do and where those opinions came from.

"I think that as teachers, even as parents, it's more beneficial for us to help our people to see why they feel the way that they do instead of asking them to adopt the opinions that we have," she said.

Ask questions and speak in "I" statements

Munson works as the Utah State Coordinator for Better Angels, an organization largely made up of volunteers. The organization is based in New York and it teaches people to talk about politics in a productive and respectful way. Better Angels hosts workshops around the nation to facilitate positive discussions between Democrats and Republicans.

When trying to respectfully disagree, Munson suggested asking reflective questions, such as, "Can you tell me what you mean when you say ..." and, "Is it possible for you to say more about ...?"

"Be curious and interested in their experience," she said. "That leads to the kinds of questions that people will welcome."

Munson noted that it's easier to not be as respectful online since "our natural breaks tend to be off because we're not seeing how the person is reacting personally." But she said the same principles of respectfully disagreeing in-person, like being curious and asking questions, can also be applied online.

"If somebody has a rant about this or that, first say, 'I don't agree with you, and I'd like to ask some questions about this. Would you be open to that?' and then see what they say," Munson said. "And then ask your question and see what the answer is. And if that person isn't up for civil conversation, I say go away. I say go and find a human (in-person) and have a conversation that way. But it's totally worth it to keep trying."

Munson also encouraged speaking in “I” statements instead of general statements. “Phrases like, ‘Everybody knows,’ and, ‘You don’t want to,’ can feel preachy and make others defensive. By speaking in the first person, ‘I feel,’ ‘In my experience,’ you are speaking for yourself and not assuming anything about anyone else,” she said.

Show respect through body language

Braden said what is said matters, but even more important is showing one is paying attention through body language. Poor body language like rolling eyes can show one is not open to an actual discussion, but rather just trying to dominate it.

“We all get caught in this trap where we’re so anxious to prove our own point that we completely ignore and don’t acknowledge the valid points others have,” he said. “I think the best way to show respect is to understand that everyone does have valid points, that although you may disagree with them, from their perspective, what they’re saying is true and has merits.”

Velis and Humason act to bridge political gap

Hope E. Tremblay

The (MA) Reminder

September 25, 2019



*State Rep. John C. Velis, a Democrat, and state Sen. Donald F. Humason, Jr., a Republican, will discuss government and how they work together Sept. 30 at Southwick Town Hall. The event is sponsored by **Better Angels** of Hampden County.*

SOUTHWICK – Bringing together people with opposite political views often creates a volatile situation. To keep the peace and bring back civility, open discussion, and understanding, Better Angels is bringing political parties together in Western Massachusetts at their Sept. 30 bi-partisan public event.

Chapters of Better Angels began forming around the country, including Better Angels of Hampden County, spearheaded by Granville resident, John Meiklejohn, a liberal. He joined forces with Southwick conservative Russ Fox, and the pair began bridging the local gap between blue and red.

The national Better Angels organization was formed in 2016 to unite “red and blue Americans in a working alliance to depolarize America,” according to its website. A group of Clinton

supporters and a group of Trump supporters gathered for a weekend in Ohio following the 2016 election to try to respectfully disagree after the election divided the country. Family therapist and community organizer Bill Doherty created a program for the weekend and the result was Better Angels.

Better Angels is named after a speech given by President Abraham Lincoln where he stated, “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Better Angels of Hampden County is hosting their bi-partisan public event Sept. 30 at 6:30 p.m. at the Southwick Town Hall featuring Westfield mayoral candidate and Republican state Sen. Donald F. Humason Jr., and Democrat state Rep. John C. Velis.

Meiklejohn hopes people from all political affiliations come to the event and bring “questions, curiosity and an open mind.”

Fox said he hopes hearing from local legislators that work across party lines will help spark the same from citizens. “We want to get people of different political opinions together to talk,” Fox said. “It’s not political and no one is there to change anyone’s mind – it’s about bringing back civility. It’s about bringing back civil discord.”

Meiklejohn and Fox know it’s no easy task to bring liberals and conservatives together, but they hope Better Angels of Hampden County will do just that and attract more members to the group. “We want to grow, and we’d like to have younger people join us,” said Fox.

Better Angels requires an equal number of members from the left and right and calls for a 75-percent majority before taking any action. The approach is guided by the Better Angels Pledge, which states, “As individuals, we try to understand the other side’s point of view, even if we don’t agree with it. In our communities, we engage those we disagree with, looking for common ground and ways to work together. In politics, we support principles that bring us together rather than divide us.”

Meiklejohn and Fox encourage area residents to attend the free Sept. 30 event and learn more about Massachusetts government and Better Angels of Hampden County.”

FEATURED

Osceola pair joins Better Angels effort

Suzanne Lindgren

The (Osceola, WI) Sun

August 31, 2019



Wisconsin delegates to the National Better Angels Conference, Lisa Erickson and Kim Gearin.

When Kim Gearin heard about a grassroots movement to depolarize America, she thought of her friend, Lisa Erickson. “We both come from different political viewpoints but we’ve managed to be open to each others’ thoughts and ideas over the last 20 years,” Erickson explained. The two Alden residents met shortly after Gearin and her husband had moved to the Osceola area.

“My husband met Lisa’s husband at the bank and they hit it off,” Gearin recalled. “He thought we should all get together, so when we were in town one day we stopped by the bank. I saw Lisa in the office with an infant in her backpack and I thought, ‘Oh yeah, I like her.’ I knew we would have things in common.”

Where Gearin leans blue, Erickson leans red. Like many, their positions are nuanced and not fully described in a single syllable. Beyond that, they have always put their friendship before political philosophies.

“We’ve always had different political backgrounds but we’ve never tried to change each other or convince each other to think anything different,” Erickson said.

“We were both really concerned about how polarized things are,” Gearin said, “and both attracted to the idea of bringing into the community the idea that if our communities are going to work we have to be able to talk to each other and jointly solve problems.”

That’s the whole concept behind the Better Angels organization, which started a couple days after the divisive 2016 election. David Blankenhorn and David Lapp brought a small group of Trump supporters and Clinton supporters together for a weekend. Bill Doherty, a family therapist and community organizer, developed the structure for what became the first Better Angels Red/Blue Workshop. Participants were surprised to find that, when they focused less on changing someone’s mind and more on understanding what informed the other’s political philosophies, they liked each other.

The organization’s name, Better Angels, is a reference to Abraham Lincoln’s Civil-War era inaugural address: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature. “

The key, as Lincoln implores, is seeking to understand rather than agree.

“A lot of it is being curious and interested to learn how people came to believe what they do,” Gearin said, “and being willing to enter into conversations where you’re not trying to convince people to believe what you do.”

“It’s learning how to ask really good questions and just listen,” added Erickson. “You focus more on what you have in common and less on what you don’t agree on.”

The pair hopes to start hosting Better Angels debates in the community. They are not debates in a conventional sense, but public conversations between people of divergent viewpoints. For instance, as Wisconsin delegates to this year’s National Better Angels Conference, Gearin and Erickson watched a debate between a member of Black Lives Matter and the head of the Ohio Tea Party.

“They ended up having more in common than not,” Erickson said. “There were no arguments. There was laughter. These people had never met before and we were all on the edge of our seats waiting to hear what they had to say. You walk away not thinking about whether you’re red or blue.”

“It was so powerful,” Gearin said. “You think you can anticipate what someone is going to say based on whether they’re blue or red. You realize there’s a lot of nuance. There’s a lot of complexity.”

Gearin and Erickson emphasized the need for such understanding locally and nationally.

“Families are being torn apart,” Gearin said. “People are saying, ‘For the first time ever I’m concerned about our democracy.’ ...

“We’re so divided, and so evenly divided across the United States and Wisconsin,” Gearin continued. “Neither side is going to vanquish the other. Even if an election changes the party in any given year, there’s still this enormous underlying difference that remains and has implications for how the community functions. No matter who wins we need to be able to talk to each other and engage.”

Added Erickson: “It’s almost like people see it as a battle they need to win. ... All the rules of engagement have been thrown out the window. We’re all human. We all have families. We’re all in this together. How can we understand where others are coming from? Just be open and listen. You’d be surprised how it actually changes you.”

“When the purpose of talking to someone shifts from, ‘I want to make you see things my way,’ to, ‘I want to know more about where you’re coming from,’ it changes everything,” Gearin said. “You can actually physically feel it,” Erickson said. “And you can’t help but want to be part of it.” “It’s refreshing,” Gearin said, “and it gives me hope to see that there’s a way forward.”

Stay tuned to the Sun for updates on Better Angels debates and workshops organized by Gearin and Erickson. Learn more about Better Angels at www.better-angels.org.

OPINION

Sounds simplistic, but in uncivil times, try to let 'better angels' guide you

Britt Kennerly

Florida Today

August 5, 2019



Jack Downs, left, and Jim Kennedy talk during a Better Angels skills workshop at Unitarian Universalist Church of Brevard in West Melbourne. Downs said of the event: "After the training, it's nice to know I don't have to 'win' or 'lose.' Listening isn't surrender. It can just mean, 'I love you anyway.'" (Photo: Craig Bailey/FLORIDA TODAY)

An 80-something grandmother who watches conservative TV for hours on end. A young man whose Republican parents consider him a left-wing activist. A first-time voter stuck in the middle of political uproar with many questions for friends who don't seem to listen. How — in campaign season and at any other time — do they and others with conflicting views best communicate without acrimony but also, without sacrificing their values?

A group of about 50 Brevard residents got a chance to learn just that at an Aug. 3 "skills workshop" organized by FLORIDA TODAY's Civility Brevard project and led by Better Angels.

A nonpartisan nonprofit, Better Angels was created after the 2016 elections to reduce political polarization in the U.S.

Florida coordinator Paul Witte stressed that Better Angels' objective "is not to change minds or political views."

"Our goal is to change hearts, how we perceive people who hold very different political views, to discover common ground and to rediscover our common values and common goals," he said. To achieve these goals, workshop participants — through role-playing exercises and established goals and principles — focused on listening and reflecting rather than debating and persuading.

FLORIDA TODAY organized the workshop at Unitarian Universalist Church of Brevard "because communication and civility, just like anything else, require practice and skills," said Isadora Rangel, engagement editor and creator of Civility Brevard.

"We don't think a workshop will fix all of our problems with hyper-partisanship," Rangel said. "But it provides a path for those who are looking for ways to have better discussions with their loved ones who are on the opposite side of the political spectrum." Joan Majid attended for that very reason.



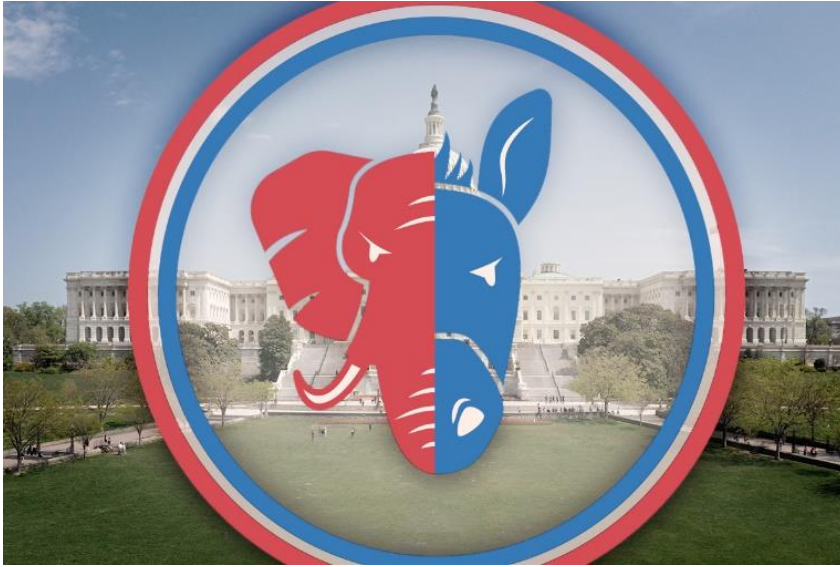
Moderator Paul Witte speaks to the crowd during Saturday's Better Angels Skills Workshop at Unitarian Universalist Church of Brevard in West Melbourne. The event was organized by FLORIDA TODAY's Civility Brevard project.

Reaching Across the Political Divide

Cindy Kyser

Arkansas Business

July 29, 2019



One only needs to spend a few minutes on social media to see that America is becoming a “house divided.” The rancor between liberals and conservatives is at a level that many of us have not previously experienced.

Historically, our country has survived divisive times over issues such as slavery, the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. As a nation, we have previously demonstrated our capacity to heal by setting aside our differences and working together for change.

The very essence of democracy is that we agree to disagree. We understand that a free exchange of differing ideas leads to better solutions. We also know that a government elected by a majority means that our own side does not always win.

The current era of polarization is dangerous to us as a nation and as individuals. When we stop listening to each other and begin to perceive “the other side” as dangerous, the interchange of ideas grinds to a halt. We lose the synergy that comes from “e pluribus unum.” When our government ceases to function because political leaders are more interested in “winning” than in legislating, our democratic structure begins to falter.

The health of our society depends on each of us being a contributing member and caring about each other. If our hearts are filled with hate and we demonize our neighbors, then we are spiritually damaged. Our focus is distracted from solving American problems and we allow inequality and injustice to continue.

At times it is overwhelming. A reasonable starting point for change is to first focus on ourselves. As children, we learn that stereotyping groups of people is bad. We are taught to view others as individuals and to not make assumptions based on preconceptions. However, much of the country has fallen into the trap of stereotyping each other based on political affiliation or voting record. Conservatives perceive liberals as “snowflakes,” “fiscally irresponsible” and “socialists” who want to destroy the country. Liberals perceive conservatives as “racist,” “homophobes” and “selfish” capitalists without compassion for those in need.

Better Angels is a bipartisan citizens movement founded in direct response to the extreme polarization that surfaced around the 2016 election. The name is taken from Abraham Lincoln’s 1861 inaugural address, in which he stated that “we are not enemies, but friends” and appeals to the “better angels of our nature” to heal a divided nation. The organization has grown from a handful of concerned individuals to almost 7,000 members in all 50 states.

Through workshops, education and media, Better Angels focuses on bringing those with different viewpoints back into conversation. We do not seek to change anyone’s political views or bring us all to the center. Instead, we are counting on creating a ripple in the social fabric of our country by healing one relationship at a time. If we can restore civility at an individual and community level, then we can begin to pressure our politicians to behave in a more constructive manner.

If we stay within our own comfort zone, it is easy to assume that all liberals or all conservatives mirror the loudest critical voices in Washington. We can slip into categorizing half the country based on what we hear from political leaders and what we read in news sources that are trending away from objective reporting.

Alternatively, if we take time to listen to each other, we will find that conservatives and liberals, as individuals, have a wide range of opinions and solutions. We have different life experiences that shape our priorities and our passions. We will discover shared values and concerns, and in doing so, we will recognize the humanity of each other, regardless of politics.

Better Angels, in collaboration with the Central Arkansas Library System, will be presenting an overview of the organization on Aug. 24 from 1-3 p.m. and a workshop on Sept. 7 from 1-4 p.m. in the Darragh Center of the Main Library in Little Rock. An additional overview session will be held on Aug. 19 from 6-7:30 p.m. at the John Fletcher Gould Library in Little Rock. These events are open to the public and are free. Our purpose is to build community awareness of alternatives to polarization and to provide an opportunity for learning how to interact across the political divide.

Cindy Kyser is the Arkansas state coordinator for Better Angels. Email her at CKyser@BetterAngels.org.

“We the People” — meeting polarization and other challenges

By Harry C. Boyte

St. Paul Pioneer Press

July 19, 2019

A week before last month’s presidential debates, when politicians’ rhetoric threatened deepening polarization, a movement to depolarize America called “Better Angels” held its second annual convention. Equal numbers of Republican and Democratic delegates participated, 130 from each side and from every state, June 20 to 23 in St. Louis.

Participants included Hawk Newsome, president of New York’s Black Lives Matter, and Ray Warrick, a leader of the Tea Party in Cincinnati. “I’ve never been a part of anything where you don’t really have to recruit people,” co-founder David Blankenhorn told reporter Megan Mertz, writing for *The Federalist*. “People want to be involved.”

Blankenhorn, founder of the Institute for American Values, had long worried about deepening polarization in the country. After the election in 2016, he joined with David Lapp, a colleague in Ohio, to organize meetings between Trump and Clinton supporters to see if any common ground could be found. They called William Doherty, director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Minnesota.

Doherty drew on his experiences in family therapy to plan the meeting process, designed to allow participants to “bring their best selves forward, listen to the other person and not just immediately get into an argument, and reflect on their contribution to the problem.”

All the participants – 10 Trump supporters and 11 Clinton backers — agreed to a statement that read, “A number of us on both sides began our meetings convinced that the other side could not be dealt with ... We say unanimously that our experiences of talking with rather than at or about each other caused us to abandon our belief.”

After a broadcast on National Public Radio with Doherty and two women participants, one “Red” and one “Blue,” communities across the country wrote in to ask for similar meetings. Out of these early efforts Better Angels was born, named for Abraham Lincoln’s phrase, “The Better Angels of Our Nature,” calling Americans on the verge of Civil War to remember that “we are not enemies but friends.”

The organization has grown rapidly with more than 7,000 members. It is now active in 35 states, with Minnesota a leader. Their program of workshops, skills-building sessions and other activities is designed not to change opinions, but to allow people bitterly divided along partisan lines to listen to each other and break down stereotypes.

The convention in St. Louis adopted new initiatives with the media to challenge polarizing approaches, allow local alliances to take policy stands when there is Red/Blue agreement, and partner with kindred organizations.

A mission is also emerging complementing depolarization: The idea that “the people” need to take up the largest challenges facing the nation. Media director John Wood, a young man of mixed racial background and an eloquent spokesman for Better Angels philosophy, described this aim in a mailing: “To weave and re-weave the social fabric of this nation, even as our politics threaten to tear it apart.”

The platform, passed by an overwhelming majority, declared the intention “to dedicate ourselves to the great task before us – to safeguard the spirit of our republic.” Invoking “We the People,” it elaborated, as goals, seeking “to renew our trust in one another and build our civic muscle” and striving “for the ‘beloved community’ of Dr. Martin Luther King ... and the ‘more perfect Union’ of the Founders.”

The United States was, indeed, founded as a “constitutional republic” with three branches of government. Better Angels points to another dimension with the phrase, “We the People.” Unlike governments handed down from antiquity, the Preamble to the Constitution begins with “We the People,” a different authorship of government than kings or revolutionary vanguards. We the People continued to generate wellsprings of civic power and energy throughout American history, based on work by the people on common challenges across differences. This citizenship is far more than a trip to the ballot box.

“We the People,” in the Preamble, described the people’s aims in the active language of such work: “Form”; “establish”; “provide for”; “promote”; “secure”; and “ordain and establish.” In a debate in Virginia about the Constitution, James Madison defended such language against critics who preferred “We the States.” “The existing system has been derived from the ... authority of the legislatures of the states; whereas, this (Constitution) is derived from the superior power of the people.”

As the late political theorist Sheldon Wolin observed, “Americans ... introduced an entirely new conception of democracy as rooted in, and corresponding to, the democracy of daily life.” Such a concept of democracy, in which politicians play important roles but common people’s work is at the center, was embodied in everyday experience. Reflecting on his travels in the 1830s, the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville compared European nations, where citizens relied on great leaders, with self-organizing citizen efforts in America. “In democratic peoples, associations must take the place of the powerful particular persons,” he wrote in “Democracy in America.” “In democratic countries the science of association is the mother science; the progress of all the others depends on the progress of that one.”

I saw real progress in the “science of association” in the constructive nonviolent politics of the civil rights movement as a young man. Martin Luther King, in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in 1963, described the movement’s approach as “bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.”

When Dorothy Cotton, my boss in the movement’s citizenship schools, helped us to launch civic engagement through the Humphrey School at the UMN in the late 1980s, she expressed constructive nonviolence in a song, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. Nobody else is going to rescue us.”

I asked Bill Doherty about parallels between such historical experiences and Better Angels. He saw many. “Leaders in Better Angels (half red, half blue), though daunted by the polarized state of the Union, are the most hopeful group I’ve ever been around,” he said. “They are not waiting for national leaders to change — they are the change they want to see.”

What I would call the constructive nonviolent politics of Better Angels needs to spread to other great challenges we face, such as climate change and growing inequality. This is the key to re-awakening democracy and creating a sustainable future.

Harry Boyte, senior scholar in Public Work Philosophy at Augsburg University, is the author of “Awakening Democracy through Public Work.”

Locals attend 'Better Angels' conference

The Sheridan (Wyoming) Press

July 1, 2019



Courtesy photo — Kris Korfanta | Better Angels Co-Founder David Blankenhorn, right, moderates a discussion between Black Lives Matter of Greater New York Leader Hawk Newsome, center, and Cincinnati Tea Party Leader Ray Warrick Friday, June 21, 2019, at the Better Angels Conference at Washington University in St. Louis.

SHERIDAN — When it comes to politics, the only thing everyone seems to agree on is that no one can agree on much of anything.

Everyone also seems to agree that intractable political conflicts are doing more harm than good.

In March, a Pew Research Center study found that most Americans, regardless of political affiliation, anticipate the country's global influence will decline while partisan and socioeconomic rifts expand over the next 20 years.

Two local residents recently attended a workshop in St. Louis hosted by Better Angels, a national organization dedicated to reversing trends that have caused political polarization to grow worse over the last 20 years.

Kris Korfanta, Sheridan County team leader for Wyoming Promise, and Rustin Burr, who works for Sheridan Media and hosts “Public Pulse,” described themselves as on opposite sides of the political spectrum, but share the belief that solving problems requires input from different perspectives. Because of that, when Korfanta learned about the Better Angels conference, she thought to invite Burr, whose program she’d been on several times to discuss her work with Wyoming Promise. “Somewhere in there, Kris realized I was interested in talking with people who didn’t share the same views of politics as I did,” Burr said. “Actually having conversations about politics that weren’t contentious.”

The two ended up being the first people from Wyoming to get involved with Better Angels, Korfanta said. The conference focused on promoting understanding between differing political viewpoints through listening, rather than trying to reconcile or disprove them.

Korfanta highlighted a moderated discussion between Hawk Newsome, a leader in Black Lives Matter, and Ray Warrick, the leader of the Tea Party in Cincinnati, during which the two men were asked to discuss the formations and goals of their movements.

What struck Korfanta about the discussion was that the two groups, which she’d assumed would be diametrically opposed, shared certain fundamental anxieties.

For instance, both groups were the product of people feeling voiceless and under-represented in national politics. “They both felt like they needed to take ‘We the people’ back, and get more civically engaged,” Korfanta said. Burr said he came to a similar realization after attending a series of “debates” that ran the gamut of hot-button issues — abortion, gun control, health care and climate change. The object of the debates, though, was not to convince the other side. Each side was given an opportunity to present their views on a topic, while the other side listened, without chiming in.

“The idea of meeting with someone who doesn’t agree with you on some really hard issues, and being able to have a conversation where you give them the benefit of the doubt — you assume what they’re saying is in good faith — ...helped me learn a lot,” Burr said. “Sometimes it’s hard for us to not demonize one another, when in reality what people believe is almost never motivated by malicious reasons.”

Korfanta and Burr said they want to share their experiences and plan on working together to organize similar events and exercises in Sheridan.

This group got Black Lives Matter and Tea Party leaders to talk. Can the rest of us?

Megan Mertz

The Federalist

June 24, 2019

'I don't know at what point we moved from disagreeing with the argument to hating the person, and that scared me. I decided I have to do something,' says this Better Angels delegate.

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, the growing divide between Americans was visible everywhere—in hateful rhetoric on social media, between longtime friends with different political affiliations, and even around the Thanksgiving dinner table. In some cases, two minutes in the voting booth radically altered relationships spanning many years.

Among the organizations working to repair these divisions is Better Angels, which was founded in late 2016 and just held its second national convention June 20-23 in St. Louis, Missouri. Better Angels takes a different approach to the problem of polarization. It doesn't try to change opinions; it simply brings people from opposite sides together to listen, combat stereotypes, and find common ground.

Using a Family Therapy Model

When Better Angels co-founders David Blankenhorn and David Lapp began planning the first gathering in late 2016, they enlisted the help of William Doherty, a professor and director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Minnesota.

Doherty drew on his expertise in family therapy to “create a process where people can bring their best selves forward, listen to the other person and not just immediately get into an argument, and reflect on their own contributions to the problems.”

“The reason why people come is because they are concerned about the country and they are concerned with their own relationships with people across the political aisle, their family members,” he said. “So, there is a transcendent reason why they are there, just like when a couple comes in [to therapy].”

It's not that Better Angels' members don't care about politics—in fact, it's quite the opposite. Lively, but respectful debates on topics like American identity and political correctness were a centerpiece of the recent convention. There was even a session where Hawk Newsome, president of Black Lives Matter of New York, and Ray Warrick, a leader of the Cincinnati Tea Party, shared the stage to talk about the experiences that shaped their beliefs.

Juan Torres, 29, a “red” delegate from Estes Park, Colorado, said he was skeptical of Better Angels at first, but he came to the convention with a liberal-leaning co-worker and loved the debates.

“Many times, people with specific political affiliations disagree [with each other] on the motions,” Torres said. “So, I think it’s a revelation to realize how much variation there is even within the groups. We’re not these monoliths that sometimes we make out each other to be.”



The name Better Angels might not seem to fit an organization concerned with political discourse, but it harkens back to another highly polarized and devastating time in American history. Abraham Lincoln used this phrase in his first inaugural address in March 1861, when he pleaded with the seven Southern states that had just seceded to remember that “we are not enemies, but friends. ... The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Can America Bridge Another Gulf Today?

Nearly 160 years later, the chorus is swelling again. From that first meeting of 10 Trump supporters and 11 Clinton supporters in Ohio, Better Angels’ programming has spread to all 50 states. The organization now has 7,000 dues-paying members. Dues are set at just \$12 a year to make it accessible to as many Americans as possible.

Chief Marketing Officer Ciaran O’Connor said the organization seeks to evenly reflect reds and blues in every way. Of the 266 delegates at the convention, 133 sported red name tag lanyards, and 133 wore blue ones. The organization also seeks to have an even split on its board, in its staff, and even in its funding sources.

“I came to the convention because I wanted to be able to contribute more to solving the problems of this world,” said Miles Eddy, 59, a “blue” delegate from Bloomington, Indiana. “Being able to walk into a group that you know is equal your color and the other color, and knowing you can say what you need to say and that everybody is going to be respectful, that’s very empowering. It lowers the defenses enough that you can have real conversations.” During the convention, delegates discussed and overwhelmingly adopted a platform to guide the organization during the next year. The platform focuses on grassroots efforts to depolarize interpersonal relationships and public discourse in education, the government, and the media. It’s a lofty goal, especially for an organization with only 7,000 members. To have this kind of nationwide influence, Better Angels’ research suggests that the organization will need to reach more than 1.5 million Americans.

But Blankenhorn is optimistic. “I’ve never been a part of anything where you don’t really have to recruit people. People want to be involved in this,” he said, noting that they are working to develop more online offerings, and establish resources that can be taken into high schools and colleges. Most of Better Angels’ members have joined in the last year and a half, and word continues to spread.

As the organization grows, it will need to remain welcoming to both reds and blues, while making room for those who don’t fall neatly into either of those categories. Delegates also discussed the dangers and opportunities of moving forward with public policy and partnership initiatives—two areas of the platform they debated that have the potential to destabilize the organization’s precarious balance.



Next Steps for De-Polarization

While waiting to vote on the platform, Carolyn Mendenhall, 67, a “blue” delegate from Evanston, Illinois, talked about why she came to the convention, even though she’s still not sure how involved she wants to be.

“My political experience is informed by the death of John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. I grew up during the Vietnam War. I really wanted nothing to do with [politics],” she said. “But at some point, I opened my eyes and saw where we are as a country. I don’t know at what point we moved from disagreeing with the argument to hating the person, and that scared me. I decided I have to do something.

“Philosophically, I believe in what they are doing here,” she continued. “I’m struggling with how you translate this to action, but I’m still open to learn what’s going on.”

Only time will tell if organizations like Better Angels can gain enough momentum to help Americans on both sides restore civility and respectful debate to the public discourse in the years to come.

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Abraham Lincoln, 1861