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Bridging Divides: Perspectives on Grit, Resiliency and the Four Commonalities

“Make America Great Again.”

Of all the slogans tossed around during the last twenty-four months, this one has had the most profound meaning. For some, the phrase represents the difference between identity and isolation.

For others, it's a dog whistle to rally “us” against “them” or “Other.”

The Election of 2016 and its aftermath brought to the surface resentments and attitudes that many had believed were things of the past. What will this mean as we go forward? How can it be that we are seemingly so divided according to geography, race, religion, LGBTQ status, gun rights, and a host of other things?

The answer lies with looking in the mirror.

Humans are “hard-wired” to be with others who look, think, and act like they do. This “tribal” tendency pervades many things in day-to-day life.

On the other hand, we're also hard-wired for empathy, even for altruism. As I like to say, 99 percent of us want to do the right thing; it's just that most people don't know what the “right thing” is or they're afraid to engage for a variety of reasons.

I believe in our ability to bridge the divide between “us” and “them” that seems to pervade America today. That bridging takes honesty, mindfulness, fearlessness, compassion and a darn lot of work. Hard work. I've undertaken that work but so often, it's overwhelming. Yet, my idealism always pushes me forward.

You too can bridge divides. I just know it!

1. Our Internal Divisions: The Five Constants

- The absence of a “Human Owner's Manual.”
- We are what we are—genes and family (or how for many, our “human house” is built with faulty blueprints, cracked foundations and tilting roofs). Despite how we're different, we all have at least Five Constants in common.
- Constant No. 1: Our absolute clinging to **Core Fears**—fearing aloneness or the loss of a loved one (more aloneness); fearing health problems or

poverty; fearing that “Other” will take away from “us”; fearing stigmatization; and of course, the fear of dying alone. Everyone is afraid—we need to be honest about this. Core Fears drive us both consciously and subconsciously.

- Constant No. 2: The effects of **Binary Thinking**—good vs. bad; right vs. wrong; success vs. failure; gender and sexuality are immutable, one-way streets.
- Constant No. 3: Everyone has personal **Mantras**—the Muzak-ish chatter of our lives. Those mantras can either push us forward or hold us back.
- Constant No. 4: The invisible hand (and power) of **Authenticity**; like water, you can’t grab it, but for sure it’s inside us, alive. The reality is that everyone needs to live authentically.
- The last Constant, No.5: **Grit and Resiliency**—everyone has both in varying degrees. The key is reminding people of these critical assets.
- Other Factor No. 1: Confidence building or destruction.
- Other Factor No. 2: Heart speaking—how others are attracted to people who are vulnerable and willing to say the things that others fear saying (e.g. “My heart is hurting because of...” “I’m struggling due to...”). (Or, do you know about the work of Brene Brown?)

2. The External Divisions: How the Deck is Stacked toward Grouping and Labeling

- The concept of tribalism—insider vs. outsider.
- Neurobiology at work: Fight or Flight?
- Awareness that explicit bias and implicit bias are hard-wired despite our best wishes.
- Humans want to do the right thing—hardwiring for empathy and compassion (or, how rats can teach us a thing or two!).
- Fear holds us back.
- When shown examples of how to be empathetic, humans will show up in droves (Google “Breakfast with Dads Dallas” <https://www.today.com/parents/dallas-school-needed-stand-ins-dads-600-men-showed-t121019>).

3. Getting Past Internal and External Divisions Via Bravery, Human Familiarity, Commonalities and Mindful “Shallow Water” Conversations

- It takes bravery to engage with someone from across the divide—but everyone has the grit to do it.
- Remember the **Four Commonalities**: (1) a desire for our children (or nieces or nephews) to succeed; (2) the need to be free of physical or emotional violence; (3) a desire for twenty minutes of personal peace; and (4) the need to love and be loved. Thus, anyone you speak to will have each of these desires and needs.
- Employ Ellie’s trick: “Hey do you have kids?” Or, “Do you have a pet?”
- Familiarity breaks down barriers.
- State a Core Fear using “I”—focused statements: “I’m worried about our country/my children’s futures/my ability to retire.” (As opposed to “Our

country is falling apart” or “The Republicans don’t care about people from marginalized communities.”)

- You don’t need to dive in head first. Instead, start any discussion in shallow water: acknowledge that things are difficult right now relative to speaking; “Can we talk about just one subject that’s important to me and one that’s important to you?”
- Recognize that underlying the conversation is fear—fear of one or the other person (or both) losing their temper; fear of learning that one’s family DNA isn’t as enlightened as you’d hoped; fear of being hurt by words.
- Employ the Shiny Objects Technique: if things aren’t progressing or are headed off the rails, go back to one of the Four Commonalities: “Let’s take a break from this for now; tell me about your trip last week.”
- Appeal to a critical commonality—we need to be able to talk to each other, to get past our tribalism, *for our kids*. At the rate America’s going, we will leave our kids with a broken system that won’t at all allow them the opportunity to thrive.
- Finally, just as the Heineken ad shows, gaining exposure to “Other” makes it easier to understand where that human is coming from; with understanding comes tolerance. Given time, tolerance can turn into respect and acceptance.

4. Approaching “Other” Differently via Gray Area Thinking®

- Societal/cultural biases for black-and white (binary) thinking.
- Many persons “live in the gray” relative to gender, sexuality, race, religion, careers, relationships—and in 2018, politics.
- The key is understanding when we’re thinking black and white; the goal is to pivot to gray in response.
- Hallmarks of **Gray Area Thinking®**:
 - (a) Awareness of human vulnerability (or suffering);
 - (b) A willingness to take risks to soften or lessen another’s vulnerability (or suffering);
 - (c) Compassion/kindness.
- Day-to-day awareness, risk-taking, and the payoffs from compassion.
- Strangers, Weirdos, and “Those People”—the value of openness.
- ARC (Awareness, Risk-taking, Compassion/Kindness).
- Get to know people’s stories: “Tell me your story.” In the process, understand commonalities; this is how we learn to accept (or at least understand) others. It’s all about familiarity!

5. More on Grit, Resiliency and Hope

- Grit—you (and those you interact with) have it.
- Resiliency—looking in the rearview mirror to see how far you’ve come.
- Hope—it’s real, it exists, and it works.
- Normalizing the un-normal: where will it end?
- Guarding against fatigue—we’re back to the reality that bridging divides takes a darn lot of *work*.
- An order for self-care. (Talk, touch, therapy and an occasional drink...)

6. Specific Ideas on Bridging and Outreach to “Other”

- Understand that “Other” is broader than race, religion or LGBTQ status—it encompasses introverts, persons with mental health issues, gender queers (non-binary people), persons with disabilities, persons with addictions, and veterans and crosses class and income lines.
- Critical to outreach is the use of imagination—real imagination—and understanding that many institutions, for the most part, are imagination-phobic. This includes the legal profession.
- Think differently (more imagination) about potential collaborators—the social worker/psychotherapist community as partners; the gamer community (not only to reach introverts, but to provide access to justice—they have a huge network and can transmit critical legal access-related information); partnering with United Way 211.
- The value of “Talking Circles” as a way of opening avenues for everyone to have a voice; there can be different Talking Circles for different constituencies (culture leaders to address tough topics they refuse to address; staff/team members to get a read on how people really feel).
- The value of real allyship, which is a form of action and not simply a status.
- Mentoring and sponsoring on steroids—Big Brothers/Big Sisters, training on how to be a real sponsor.
- “Reverse mentoring”—pairing a culture leader with a team member from a marginalized community and then immersing that culture leader into that community. Seeing is believing; believing is feeling; feeling produces real, lasting change.
- Accountability—so incredibly lacking in our society and in many workplaces/organizations.
- Finding those who inspire and then empowering them regardless of their station. People won’t act out of compulsion, but they will act out of inspiration and hope. We need to nurture and empower natural leaders.
- We can’t change if we don’t admit things about ourselves and are open to hearing unwanted things from others.
- Remember the power of vulnerability—it draws us in and keeps us close.
- Investigate and join organizations promoting reconciliation/communication across divides, such as Better Angels (<https://better-angels.org/about>). See their paper, “Talking Across the Political Divide,” <https://better-angels.org/features/talking-across-the-political-divide>

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Nationwide consulting services include assisting employers with employee on-the-job gender transitions and on-site trainings relative to diversity/inclusion (Gray Area Thinking®), LGBTQ issues, "Transgender 101" presentations and inspirational talks (we need hope!).



My Standing Offer: any human can contact me relative to gender or sexual identity or anything else related to the human condition. I'm a good listener and willing to meet with anyone in a public place or speak on the telephone for up to an hour. My email is elliekrug@gmail.com.

Thank you. Please have compassion for yourself and for others!

ellie

Encouraging Open Hearts and Thriving Human Spirits

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