From the President – 1/24/25

Thoughts about Polarization

The inauguration has taken place, and we move forward. The future is uncertain. Of all my fears and worries, I am particularly concerned about the degree to which our country, our community, indeed, even some of our families, continue to be deeply polarized – and the impact that has on our ability to interact respectfully and peacefully with people with whom we disagree. Today I am thinking about how I contribute to the polarization around me.

Braver Angels teaches that we become agents of polarization when we Stereotype, Dismiss, Ridicule, or speak with Contempt about people on the other side. I have become aware of how often I enjoy the fellowship of other like-minded folks when we bash the "other side" using any of these mechanisms. Through Braver Angels workshops, I am learning to draw on some strategies to offset polarizing thoughts and feelings when I notice them arising. These are ways to "edit the story" I tell myself about people on the other political side. You may have other strategies that work for you.

1. Challenge My Stereotypes - Stereotypes are how outsiders over-simplify, dismiss, lump together, and disparage the "Other." Based on Braver Angels Red/Blue workshops where we ask each side to identify the most common stereotypes they run into **about their own side**, these are the most common stereotypes that have emerged:

- **REDS** think that **BLUES** tend to believe that **REDS** are racist, anti-immigrant, uncaring about those in need, homophobic / transphobic, anti-woman, anti-science, "bible-thumpers".
- **BLUES** think that **REDS** tend to believe that **BLUES** are arrogant/elitist, favor big government for its own sake, and are fiscally irresponsible, unpatriotic, anti-religious, against free speech if it's not politically correct, and hypersensitive "libtards".

I've started to practice using the four strategies below when I find myself holding stereotypes of people on the other side. Does it work? Well, certainly not all of the time!!

1. Remind myself that the other side is more varied than the stereotype – just as "my" side is diverse in opinions and views.
2. Acknowledge that their political views and motivations are no doubt more complicated than the rhetoric I've been hearing.
3. Recognize that the life experiences informing their views are likely different from mine.
4. Another strategy that I haven't had much success with is to develop relationships with a variety of people who differ from me politically. While I am aware that relationships tend to undermine stereotypes, my life typically brings me into relationship with people with whom I agree and rarely with those with whom I disagree.

2. Depolarizing Distinctions – I'm also finding that it's very helpful to make "depolarizing distinctions". I try to remember to distinguish between positions and people. That is, I can believe that a viewpoint is completely wrong without believing that everyone who holds it is stupid or ill motivated. Here's an example:

Blue - “Climate change denial is the riskiest idea I’ve seen in my lifetime because we’re running out of time to prevent lasting damage to the planet.” **VERSUS** - “I can’t believe that people still don’t believe in climate change research! Climate change deniers care more about the fossil fuel industry than about the planet.”

Red - “Climate science is uncertain enough that I don’t think we should start overhauling our way of life”. **VERSUS** - “Climate change supporters are driving me crazy! Clearly, they have a liberal agenda to over-regulate the economy and tax us to death.”

In my calmer moments I also try to remind myself that there is a distinction between policies and core values - policies are means to ends, ways to support or enact values, not the values themselves. I can differ sharply on policies and still have similar ultimate goals for the country and its people.

3. Eavesdropper Thought Experiment: Reflect for a moment on this interesting question: “How would a rational and well-intentioned member of the other group feel when listening to you describe their side?” Would they feel respected (even if strongly disagreed with) or disrespected? Would they feel understood (at least partly) or grossly misrepresented?

I am learning a lot through my work with Braver Angels. I am certainly not even close to where I’d like to be in changing my inner polarizer, nor at the skill level to have productive conversations with people from across the aisle (not that I know many people with whom to even try such a conversation).

If anyone is interested, I am co-moderating a national Braver Angels online workshop, “Skills for Disagreeing Better”, on February 1, from 2-3:30pm (EST). You can learn more and register here: Skills for Disagreeing Better - Braver Angels

Onward together,

Nancy