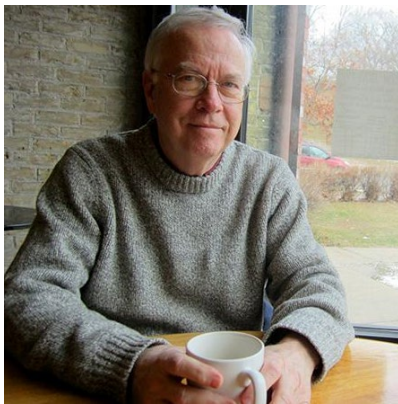




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**Conversation Corner: Dr. William J. Doherty
A Column Throwback to the AFCC Newsletter of the 90's**



William J. Doherty, PhD, (WJD) is the keynote speaker for AFCC’s 60th Anniversary Conference. He is a professor at the University of Minnesota, a family therapist, co-founder of Braver Angels, an organization dedicated to opening dialogue and depolarizing, and chief architect of the Braver Angels workshops. He is also a practicing marriage and family therapist and co-founder of The Doherty Relationship Institute, LLC, a new venture designed to help engaged couples through couples on the brink. Bill is a past-President of the National Council on Family Relations and has received the Significant Contribution to the Field of Marriage and Family Therapy Award from the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

AFCC: Polarization in society seems to be everywhere right now. We see it with political differences, value and ideological differences – and it bubbles up and over in all aspects of our lives. Why are people digging in their heels over what seems like everything?

WJD: A lot of factors that have been converging and increasing over the past 35 years or so (media silos, social media, gerrymandering, money in politics, income inequality, etc.) with the effect that politics have been central to personal identity for many people—and those with a different political orientation are the “Other”—strangers not to be trusted.

AFCC: You and your colleagues started *Better Angels* (now *Braver Angels*) following the 2016 presidential election. What is *Braver Angels* and what inspired you to begin this endeavor?

WJD: We are a national nonprofit membership organization with a mission to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic. Our leadership is half red and half blue. We have chapters in most states. We work on our mission through workshops bringing reds and blues together to understand each other beyond stereotypes and look for common ground, through workshops where we teach skills for communicating across the political divide, through Braver Angels style debates, through social media, and other ways. We are now doing workshops for elected officials (Braver Politics) and developing partnerships with civic,

religious, any other organizations concerned about polarization. Of importance is that we don't aim to change anyone's mind about policy (we are not promoting "centrist" political views), but to change how they regard each other. We want to move from demonization to humanization.

AFCC: What are some of the key sources of polarization we encounter?

WJD: Those I have already mentioned, plus the decades-long decline in overall social trust which leaves Americans prone to form ideological silos.

AFCC: What is the connection between family conflict and the bigger picture conflicts you are describing? What are the similarities? What are the differences?

WJD: Polarization has invaded families and increased conflict. The red/blue divide has an analogy to marital conflict. Reds and blues are responsible to run the country but can't get along and they both see it as mostly the other side's fault. Unlike marriage, we can't have a civic divorce (one side can't all move to Canada).

AFCC: Extreme differences come up all the time in our conversations with colleagues, friends, and even family members – whether the differences stem from political alliances, or personal beliefs over controversial issues – should we avoid "hot" topics before conflict compromises our relationships?

WJD: Better than avoidance is to engage with curiosity rather than try to convince someone to change their mind. Vigorous persuasion and defense are what generally trigger conflict over hot topics. Let avoidance be the last resort after trying to engage via listening, not using jargon (racist, socialist), and looking for some common ground. There is usually *some* ground at the level of aspirations for the country (for example, all kids having good schools) and concerns (the immigration system is a mess). Start there rather than with specific policies.

AFCC: Is it possible to stay true to our strongly held personal convictions without seeming to deeply offend anyone who does not share them?

WJD: Yes. We live in an era where differences of opinion are labeled as "offensive" even though the viewpoint is expressed without personal attack. Using "I-statements" (this is how I see the issue, and these are my sources and my story behind my view) are less apt to lead to personal offense than "Truth statements" (here's how it absolutely is!) We can hold strong values and not see particular policies as beyond discussion. Example: the value of equal opportunity and the policy of affirmative action; those are not the same thing.

AFCC: What specific advice would you offer for managing polarization in our personal and professional lives?

WJD: Lots of advice is already incorporated in this conversation. Overall, see yourself as an "engager" in political conversation, not a "gladiator" or a "defender of the truth." Develop the skills needed to do this.