1. Healing and Bridging Our Divides: Creating a Democracy that works for all

Cherie R Brown

April 18 2022

We are living in increasingly divisive times with rigid position taking on all sides. Individuals and groups are continually being set up against each other. People are being asked to choose sides on so many issues: Are you Pro life or are you pro Choice; Are you for Covid vaccinations or are you an anti Vaxer? Are you for teaching the history about racism in schools or are you worried that your children will unfairly be labeled racist. Are you in favor of calling Israel an Apartheid State or do you think that label is antisemitic? With so many of these issues, the rising rhetoric and attacking each other’s integrity when we hold a different position is leaving little room for real conversation, honest dialogue, and open spaces for disagreement, learning and growth. And a vibrant democracy requires having these open spaces and conversations between our peoples.

I would like to first examine two inter group struggles and then offer a coalition building approach to reaching greater unity between all of our groups.

The first issue I want to address is the divisiveness that has sometimes existed between Black people and Jews. A major function of Antisemitism is to divide Jews from our natural Allies, other oppressed peoples. Understanding the intersection of Antisemitism and racism can strengthen these relationships. Ideally, White Jews and Black Gentiles would be natural Allies. There have been many historic moments of cooperation between Jews and peoples targeted by racism, particularly people of African heritage. Over time, Black Gentiles and White Jews, particularly in the U.S. have come to recognize that they have experienced oppression that links our peoples in a common struggle for social justice. But there have also been too many moments of mistrust and division between Jewish people and Black African Heritage people on both personal and political levels. Understanding what I call the “Hook”, the intersection of Antisemitism and racism is key for decreasing this divide. Jews ( White Ashkenazi Jews in particular ), are sometimes scared and panicked as a result of a long history of betrayal and genocide. This panic has sometimes left Jews wanting to take charge of situations, exert strong leadership, and even interrupt or take over if it feels to us as though something could go wrong. This is not our fault. I have sometimes call these behaviors being ”scared active”. It is connected to 2,000 years of Antisemitism when things going wrong could mean imminent death. In turn, Black people have learned over a long history of oppression and enslavement that when White people get scared, Black people’s lives can be in danger. In the U.S. for example, many states have what are called “stand your ground laws”. Under the application of these laws, when a White person is afraid of a Black person, their fear may be considered a justifiable defense for shooting and killing the Black person. As a result, Black people understandably may not want to be around a person showing panic and fear. This is the ”Hook”. A history of Antisemitism has lead Jews to seek out security and in so doing, sometimes act out scared active behavior. A history of racism has led Black people to protect themselves and in so doing abandon Jews when we show how panicked we are.

Understanding the history of oppressions of both peoples can strengthen the relationships. Jews can work on healing from historic trauma and not act out of panic and urgency. Black people can work on healing from historic trauma and not disengage from Jews when our panicked behaviors show.

The second coalition building issue I want to speak to is strengthening intergenerational alliance building. There have been many issues in these divisive times that have pitted young adults and elders: young adults fighting for equality for transgendered people have been seen by some elder feminists as wanting to dismantle all the hard won victories for females fighting against sexism. Some Black Lives Matter young adult activists have been seen by veteran Civil Rights activists as abandoning the commitment of the Civil Rights movement to a non violent resistance movement. And on Israel Palestine issues: many Jews who were born during or right after the Holocaust have seen Israel, however oppressive it’s policies may be, to offer world Jewry a needed refuge against Antisemitism. For many young adult Jews, who were born after 1967 and only know Israel as an occupying force. they may less and less see Israel as a refuge for Jews but are urgently wanting older Jews to fight harder against the oppression of Palestinians.

There can be a tendency among elders to discount important fresh thinking and organization building of young adults. This disrespect for the brilliance of young minds is called adultism. And there can be a tendency among young adults to sideline elders, thinking they have had their chance and now it’s time to get out of the way. This disrespect for the wisdom and life experience of elders is called ageism. Combatting adultism, the discrimination of young people and combatting ageism, the discrimination of elders is key now for reducing divisions amongst groups, Intergenerational collaboration in movement work will require each of us to build many authentic peer relationships across age divides

I will now offer 7 coalition building practices that can be used to decrease divisiveness and increase unity across all of our groups.

1). The first practice: Learning to listen where it is totally unbearable to listen. Listening is a revolutionary coalition building tool. A number of years ago, I was speaking with an Arab colleague at a conference on Arab Jewish cooperation. The ballroom was packed. In the course of my presentation, I said I was proud of the Israeli people. I never got to finish my talk. A Lebanese woman from the back of the ballroom, stood up and started shouting at me: “ How dare you say you are proud of the Israeli people”. For the next fifteen minutes, she screamed at me about all of the atrocities Israel was committing against the Palestinian people, I agreed with some of the things she said. I disagreed with others. And letting her shout at me for 15 minutes with others listening was not easy. But I did not interrupt her or try to refute her comments. I just listened. At the end of her fifteen minute outburst, she looked up at me from the back of the room and said, “ you’re the first Jewish person who has ever listened to me. Can we meet for lunch’? The room was electric in that moment. The lunch led to many months of conversation and eventually we led together some of the very first meetings ever held between members of the Israeli Knesset and the PLO. Listening where it is unbearable to listen is now necessary if we are going to strengthen democratic institutions.

2). The second practice: Decide to stay in coalition, and not go silent, but also not leave even when hurtful, oppressive things get voiced. An invited speaker on a panel about Israel refused to be on the panel when he learned there would be speakers on the panel from organizations he disagreed with. And a Palestinian group on an East Coast campus refused to hold any dialogues with Jewish student leaders who had reached out to them, saying that any dialogue at all with Jews who support Israel in any way was paramount to colluding with the Occupation and therefore should be forbidden. Agreeing to stay in Coalition and dialogue together no matter how hard things get between our peoples is the only way forward. If we won’t even stay in the room when there are strong disagreements, we won’t be able to strengthen democratic institutions.

3). The third practice: When there are intergroup conflicts, learn to listen to the heart felt concerns underneath each side of the divisive issue. A number of years ago a controversial speaker was invited to a campus and during his talk, he was alleged to have said, “The only good Zionist is a dead Zionist”. A Jewish student stood up and said he was proud to be a Zionist. The Jewish student was slugged by another student. My organization, NCBI, was invited to campus to help reduce tensions. When I arrived on campus, ABC, CBS, and NBC camera crews were setting up. During the workshop, the Jewish student who had been slugged that day was invited to talk about what it had been like for him. The student said his father had left Germany in the 30’s and always tried to impress upon him the horrors of those years. But the student went on to say, ” I could never relate to my father or understand his fears until that day when I heard this speaker”. The student burst into tears. A Black student then reached out to him, saying, “I feel like I could remove your face and put a Black face there and the stories would be so similar.”

We next taught the group how to listen to the heart felt concerns underneath the issue: We framed the issue: Should controversial speakers with possible hate messages that can divide our groups be welcomed on campus? The group was divided. Some thought yes. Others thought no. The person saying yes was a Black African Heritage man. He said: “ Do you think we are stupid? Do you think we can’t decide what makes sense in a speech and what is oppressive? Don’t insult us. That’s racist”. The person saying no was a Jewish student and he spoke next. He said, “Don’t tell us to just trust You. Our whole history has been one of trusting those around us and then being betrayed. We need more concrete assurances before we can trust you.” The group then came up with a reframed question that would take both sides concerns into account. Their reframed question was: How can we support the Black students right for self determination on campus while at the same time acknowledge the trust Jews will need to move forward. A powerful Black Jewish coalition that lasted many years on campus grew out of that meeting.

4). The fourth practice: Condemning and shaming people when they make mistakes will not create an opening for change. The current environment of cancel culture is totally counterproductive for democracy flourishing and helping people change oppressive behaviors. If people keep getting cancelled whenever they say hurtful things, pretty soon there will be no one left. As an example, ugly racist flyers were circulating on an East Coast campus. The Dean cancelled classes and held a campus wide forum led by NCBI. At one point in our program, we brought up in front of the group a white male who said he was ashamed to be White. We encouraged him to leap in the air and say, it’s great to be a White man” with everyone else applauding him. The next day, the Dean of the campus called and told me that she was pretty sure she knew who had been passing around the ugly racist flyers on campus, but they were unable to prove it and then to press charges. The next day, that student came to her office and said, “ If white men can also get applauded in Diversity work here on campus, then I want to be a part of leading diversity work on campus. We can and hopefully will end racism. And there will still be people with different skin colors. Making a space in the coalition for all groups, even those whose peoples have perpetrated oppression, is key for maintaining flourishing democracies.

5). The fifth practice: Building one on one close, authentic relationships across group lines is ultimately the most effective way to defeat divisive, divide and conquer politics. Many years ago I was leading a program in Birmingham Alabama in the 16th Street Baptist church where in 1963, several Black children were killed in a ratially motivated bombing. At one point in my program, a White woman who taught at the University of Birmingham put up her hand and asked pointedly, “ Cherie, can you help me. I feel like the Black students in my class let me into the living room but not into the kitchen.” I never forgot that question. After all, living rooms are places of polite conversation with neighbors. Living rooms are formal places where we are on our best behavior. In contrast, kitchens are where we come uninvited because we already know we belong. Kitchens are also places where we can fight openly with each other, disagree, and still come back, never doubting that we are welcome. Coalition Building work is ultimately about increasing the diversity of folks who are comfortable being with us in our kitchens.

6). The sixth practice: Attacking people’s positions, and often with tones of righteous indignation is rarely a formula for effective coalition work. A couple were guests at a Bed and Breakfast and noticed a large statue in the lobby of an Indian mascot that was associated with the local University. They were totally offended by the statue and thought it was demeaning to Native, Indigenous peoples. The couple went to the manager and demanded he remove it. The manager became defensive and refused to remove the statue. A month later, an NCBI leader was staying at the same Bed and Breakfast and also found the statue offensive, She also went to the manager, but she approached it differently, She first appreciated the hotel management and staff. She expressed her concerns about the statue but also assumed the best of the manager. Within hours, the manager removed the statue, When we come at people with our own painful emotions, it’s often very hard for them to hear the legitimacy of our concerns.

7). And the seventh and last practice: In every situation, when we can remember to treat people as human beings and reach for the higher ground with them, no matter how difficult they are being, we will be able to transform adversarial relationships into coalition building ones. I was returning home to DC a few years back after leading a program in the Midwest. While I was waiting to change flights, I saw a mother with two young children, and the mother smacked the girl across the face. The daughter began to shriek. I went up to the mother and said, “ Having a hard day?” The mother said, “ I’m having a horrible day. My husband couldn’t travel with us. The kids are fighting and driving me crazy”. I listened to the mother a bit more and then went over to the girl. “Hon- Having a tough time?” The girl sobbed harder. ” My mother blames me for everything. It was my brother’s fault!” I listened without offering advice. It only took 5 minutes. Their flight was then announced. I whispered to the girl as she left for her flight, “You take good care of your little brother.”. She beamed as she joined her mother and brother to board the flight. We can’t always control what comes at us. But we can control our response. Treating each person humanly and respectfully can often turn around the most challenging situations.

Yes, these are very divisive times. But following these 7 practices will help us to sustain democratic institutions:

1) Listen where it’s totally unbearable to listen.

2). Stay in a coalition, don’t go silent, but don’t leave even when oppressive things get said.

3) Learn to listen to the heartfelt concerns underneath a divisive issue and then reframe the issue in a way that takes both sides concerns into account.

4) Refuse to condemn or shame people into changing when they have oppressive patterns but listen to the hurt underneath the oppressive behavior.

5) Build one on one close relationships across group lines. One on one relationship building is the most effective tool to defeat divisive, divide and conquer politics.

6) Attacking peoples positions often only creates increased defensiveness and rarely results in sustained change. Find a way to address changes needed in an upbeat thoughtful tone.

7) In every situation, no matter how difficult someone is being, decide to reach for the higher ground and treat them with humanity and care.

Utilizing these coalition building practices can reduce divisiveness between our groups and strengthen democratic principles.