

Brooks, A., (2022, April 7) A Gentler, Better Way To Change Minds. *The Atlantic*.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2022/04/arguing-with-someone-different-values/629495/>

A Gentler, Better Way to Change Minds

Stop wielding your values as a weapon and start offering them as a gift.

By Arthur C. Brooks

WHAT IS THE POINT of arguing with someone who disagrees with you? Presumably, you would like them to change their mind. But that's easier said than done: Research shows that changing minds, especially changing beliefs that are tied strongly to people's identity, is extremely difficult. As one scholar put it, this personal attachment to beliefs encourages "competitive personal contests rather than collaborative searches for the truth."

The way that people tend to argue today, particularly online, makes things worse. Disagreements can feel like a war in which the fighters dig trenches on either side of any issue and launch their beliefs back and forth like grenades. You wouldn't blame anyone involved for feeling as if

they're under fire, and no one is likely to change their mind when they're being attacked.

These sorts of fights might give everyone involved some short-term satisfaction—*they deserve it because I am right and they are evil!*—but odds are that neither camp is having any effect on the other; on the contrary, the attacks make opponents dig in deeper. If you want a chance at changing minds, you need a new strategy: Stop using your values as a weapon, and start offering them as a gift.

PHILOSOPHERS AND social scientists have long pondered the question of why people hold different beliefs and values. One of the most compelling explanations comes from Moral Foundations Theory, which has been popularized by Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at NYU. This theory proposes that humans share a common set of “intuitive ethics,” on top of which we build different narratives and institutions—and therefore beliefs—that vary by culture, community, and even person.

Extensive survey-based research has revealed that almost everyone shares at least two common values: Harming others without cause is bad, and fairness is good. Other moral values are less widely shared. Some scholars have shown, for example, that political conservatives tend to value loyalty to a group, respect for authority, and purity—typically in a bodily sense, in terms of sexuality—more than liberals do.

Sometimes conflict arises because one group holds a moral foundation that the other simply doesn't feel strongly about. For example, conservatives might oppose flag burning because it represents a lack of respect for authority, and accuse liberals who disagree of being morally bereft. But even when two groups agree on a moral foundation, they can radically disagree on how it should be expressed. For example, conservatives might oppose the harm that abortion causes to an unborn child, while liberals oppose the harm that *banning* abortion causes to women who don't want to carry pregnancies to term.

When people fail to live up to *your* moral values (or your expression of them), it is easy to conclude that they are immoral people. Further, if you are deeply attached to your values, this difference can feel like a threat to your identity, leading you to lash out, which won't convince anyone who disagrees with you. It's hard to imagine anyone saying, "I can't argue with your logic—I *do* want unborn kids to die," or "I guess you're right; I *do* hate women." In fact, research shows that if you insult someone in a disagreement, the odds are that they will harden their position against yours, a phenomenon called the boomerang effect.

THE SOLUTION TO this problem requires a change in the way we see and present our own values. I have known quite a few religious missionaries, who tend to be cheerful despite facing almost constant rejection of their closest-held values. As one told me once, "No one ever said, 'Great news: There are missionaries on the porch.'" What explains this apparent dissonance? The answer is that effective missionaries present their beliefs as a gift. And sharing a gift is a joyful act, even if not everyone wants it.

And so it is with our values. If we want any chance at persuasion, we must offer them happily. A weapon is an ugly thing, designed to frighten and coerce. A gift is something we believe to be good for the recipient, who, we hope, may accept it voluntarily, and do so with gratitude. That requires that we present it with love, not insults and hatred. Here are three steps to make this easier.

1. Don't "other" others.

When people feel excluded from a community, they can become hostile toward that community. Studies of people who lash out violently toward their communities find that they tend to have suffered social rejection. But even in less dramatic cases than actual violence, people know when they are not welcome or accepted.

Go out of your way to welcome those who disagree with you as valued voices, worthy of respect and attention. There is no “them,” only “us.” Bring them into your circle to hear your views, as long as doing so would not invite and reward abuse.

2. Don't take rejection personally.

Because we all establish our identities, in part, around our values, when someone dismisses your beliefs, that can feel like they're dismissing *you*. But just as you are not your car or your house, you are not your beliefs. Unless someone says, “I hate you because of your views,” a repudiation is personal only if you make it so. The first step helps you prove to yourself that you can love someone with whom you disagree; this step is about knowing they can do the same with you.

3. Listen more.

According to research undertaken by social scientists at Yale and UC Berkeley, when it comes to changing someone's mind, listening is more powerful than talking. They conducted experiments that compared polarizing arguments with a nonjudgmental exchange of views accompanied by deep listening. The former had no effect on viewpoints, whereas the latter reliably lowered exclusionary opinions. Empathetic listening, of course, is an act of generosity—a gift, you might even say. If someone is verbally abusing you, the best course of action is not to engage at all. But when possible, listening and asking sensitive questions almost always has a more beneficial effect than talking.

SHOWING OTHERS that you can be generous with them regardless of their values can help weaken their belief attachment, and thus make them more likely to consider your point of view. But for your values to truly be a gift, you must weaken your own belief attachment first. This is the argument of the late Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh. As he taught, we should all promise to ourselves, “I will cultivate openness, non-

discrimination, and non-attachment to views in order to transform violence, fanaticism, and dogmatism in myself and in the world.”

Making such a promise is hard, I know—I struggle with it myself. But if I truly have the good of the world at heart, then I must not fall prey to the conceit of perfect knowledge, and must be willing to entertain new and better ways to serve my ultimate goal: creating a happier world.

Launching a rhetorical grenade might give me a little satisfaction and earn me a few *attaboys* on social media from those who share my views, but generosity and openness have a bigger chance of making the world better in the long run.