

The Assault on Truth—and What to Do About It

A conversation with Cherie Harder (president of Trinity Forum), Peter Wehner (Senior Fellow at Trinity Forum and contributing writer for *The New York Times*), and Jonathan Rauch (Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and contributing writer for *The Atlantic*)

Introduction by Prof. Marie Griffith, Washington University in St. Louis

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Griffith:

Greetings, everyone, and welcome to this evening's program: "The Assault on Truth and What to Do About It." My name is Marie Griffith, and I am the director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, the sponsor of tonight's event, and before we go further, I just want to thank our terrific center staff for all the work they've put into this event. Debra Kennard, our assistant director, Sheri Peña, our administrative coordinator, and Molly Harris, our administrative assistant who manages the macro and micro logistics of our public events. We're also very honored tonight to have Senator John C. Danforth with us, in person.

[Applause]

This is really the first time we've been able to have him in person since the pandemic, since the beginning of the pandemic, so it's really great. And I know he'll be eager to greet many of you after tonight's conversation. Let me just remind you to silence your phones and your buzzing devices before we get started. This event is the latest in the Center's decade plus-long deep engagement with contemporary problems relating to religion and politics in American society and culture, as well as our ongoing attempt to offer insights about ways that ordinary people can address these problems and contribute to their broader solutions. It is no secret that we are living in a time of extreme political polarization and social mistrust. Our events at the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics have addressed this reality from many angles in the past in hopes of shedding new light on ways we might all make our way through this moment and promote a more just and peaceful society. We want to understand how we got to the particular place where we stand today, and we also want to encourage practical action for responding to current conditions and improving our social institutions, our political norms, and our relationships with other people in this country, both those with whom we tend to agree on big moral issues, and just as importantly, those with whom we disagree. Tonight, we are extremely fortunate to have three political experts with us who have thought deeply about these issues, and in particular, the many assaults on truth in our society that have brought us to this place. Cherie Harder serves as president of the Trinity Forum, where she leads the initiatives and operations at that organization. During her tenure, the Trinity Forum has significantly expanded both programming and organization reach, grown their donor base and mailing list tenfold, launched new lecture series that have been featured on C-SPAN and public television, launched many social media efforts, developed a new membership model, developed new curricula, and much, much more. She's done a tremendous amount of work in the 14 years, I think you said, you've been there. Prior to joining the Trinity Forum in 2008, Ms. Harder served in the White House in the George W. Bush administration as Special Assistant to the President and Director of Policy and Projects for First Lady Laura Bush. Earlier in her career, she served as Policy Advisor to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, advising the Leader on domestic social issues and serving as liaison and outreach director to outside groups and also Senior Counselor to the Chairman of the National

Endowment for the Humanities, where she helped the Chairman design and launch the *We, the People* initiative to enhance the teaching, study, and understanding of American history. She holds an honors BA in government from Harvard University and a post-graduate diploma in literature from the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, where she was a Rotary Scholar. She is also a Senior Fellow at Cardus, an editorial board member of *Comment* magazine, and has served on many boards, Faith and Law, Gordon College, the C.S. Lewis Institute, and the Convergence Center for Policy Resolution, so we are so honored to have you with us tonight, Cherie.

Our second participant is Jonathan Rauch. He is Senior Fellow in the Governance Studies Program at the Brookings Institution and is the author of eight books and many articles on public policy, culture, and government. He is a contributing writer to *The Atlantic*, and the recipient of the 2005 National Magazine Award, the magazine industry's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize. His many Brookings publications include the 2021 book *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, as well as the 2015 e-book *Political Realism: How Hacks, Machines, Big Money, and Back-Room Deals Can Strengthen American Democracy*. Other books include *The Happiness Curve: Why Life Gets Better After 50*, I'm glad to know, and *Gay Marriage: Why It Is Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for America*, published in 2004. He's also authored research on political parties, marijuana legislation, LGBT rights and religious liberty, and much, much more and I just want to mention to you all that copies of the latest book *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* will be on sale at our reception after this event and he will gladly sign your purchased copy for you.

Our third conversant is Peter Wehner, here on our stage at the Danforth Center for the second time. He is currently a Senior Fellow at the Trinity Forum, which he joined after serving as a Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. He has written widely on political, cultural, religious, and national security issues for numerous publications: *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, where he's a contributing editor, and many, many more. In 2015, he was named a contributing opinion writer for *The New York Times* where he writes a monthly column that is always worth reading. He has also appeared frequently as a commentator on *Fox News*, *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *CBS*, and *C-SPAN* television. Relevant for us here, in particular, Mr. Wehner has deep political experience. He served in the Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush presidential administrations prior to becoming Deputy Director of Speech Writing for President George W. Bush. So, he's worked in three Republican Administrations. In 2002, he was asked to head the Office of Strategic Initiatives, where he generated policy ideas, reached out to public intellectuals, published op-eds and essays, and provided counsel on a range of domestic and international issues. He has spoken and written widely on Christianity and culture, and also the current state of the Republican party under President Trump, and I know we will hear more from him. He is the author of several books, most recently *The Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump*. This book, too, will be on sale at our reception following this event, and he will be delighted to sign your copy as well. Our three guests had a wonderful lunch with our undergraduate students earlier today and dinner with Senator Danforth, and I'm just so thankful to each of you for being with us today, so please join me in welcoming Cherie Harder, Jonathan Rauch, and Peter Wehner to the stage.

[Applause]

Greetings to you all, again, it's just great to have you here, and I've really enjoyed getting to know you better. Pete, I've met you before but my first time with Jonathan and Cherie, and it's really been a real delight. I think we want to start out here by just talking about the assault on

truth in sort of a general way. How we got here, what do we mean when we talk about the assault on truth. I'd like to start with you, Jonathan, if that's okay, and then maybe Pete can make some comments and Cherie, just to get us started.

Rauch:

Gladly. First, of course, thank you so much. I'm so flattered to be here chosen for this column and thank you all for coming out and being with us tonight. I so look forward to hearing what all of you have to say. So, how we got here. Let me just say a word about where "here" is. You've probably...Raise your hand if you've heard the term "epistemic crisis." Quite a few of you. That's probably almost half the audience. Yeah, this was a term that was unknown in say, 2016 or 2017. Now, former President Obama has, among others, used it, said we're entering an epistemic crisis, in which people no longer operate in the same reality which makes it very hard to govern. What are we talking about in specific terms? Well, I'll give you two indicative kinds of numbers, both of them without precedent in the United States. The first type of number is that about two thirds of Americans, according to a lot of different polls; upwards of 60 percent of Americans say that they are reluctant or afraid to state their true beliefs about politics for fear of the social or professional consequences. A third of Americans say that they are worried about losing their job or professional opportunities if they state their true beliefs about politics. And by the way, that's not just conservatives. That number, a third worried about losing their jobs, is the same across ideologies, from left to right. Those numbers that I just cited are as best we can tell hard to compare but as best we can tell, three to four times the level of self-censorship and chilling as in 1954 during the McCarthy era. That's a lot of chilling. And over 40 percent of Americans, young Americans, say that an executive who donated, a business executive who donates to Donald Trump should be fired as a result. This is an atmosphere of widespread chilling. Same among students, by the way. Two-thirds of students on our campuses say they're afraid to say their true beliefs about politics, and campuses are where dialogue is supposed to be most open, right. So, these are unprecedented amounts of chilling in America that make it hard for people to speak their minds, to feel heard, to be heard, to know what other people are really thinking. Second kind of number, and this one you all know. About two thirds, depends on the poll, 60 percent, 70 percent, of Republicans believe falsely that the 2020 election was stolen. In other words, they believe that America is no longer a democracy and that number has stayed quite level over the last two years, despite the fact that no evidence has emerged that anything like the theft of the 2020 election ever happened. That number, as well as, I think it's 40 percent or so of Independents who say they're not sure who actually won the 2020 election, that number is incompatible with the democracy, with people believing that election results are actually true. So, on the one hand, you have chilling: people afraid to speak, and on the other hand, you have people living in a different political reality and an unreal political reality. Both of these make it very difficult to govern a democracy. These kinds of splintered realities and widespread chilling are the here, where we are. How did we get here? Well, that's a longer story and it's a bunch of things. It's extreme polarization and partisan animosity is a big piece of it. Emergence of social media is a piece of it, I think kind of a small piece of it. Others think, Jonathan Haidt says it's a big piece. The emergence of a conservative media model which is not truth-based in many instances is another chunk of it. The biggest piece, this may sound partisan, I apologize if it does. I'm center right, I've voted for many Republicans, admired many Republicans, but the MAGA movement has imported wholesale Russian-style mass disinformation to American politics, the first time that's happened ever or at least since the 1850s, which as you recall, did not end well.

That is something American democracy is not prepared to cope with. Nor is it prepared to cope with widespread chilling campaigns in which anyone who gets out of line can lose their job or their reputation overnight whether in social media or in their professional world or in their academic community. These things combine to create an environment for truth and truth-telling that is often troubled and sometimes menacing.

Wehner:

Thank you, Marie, for hosting this. It's great to be with Cherie and Jon, who are friends and people I respect a lot. Thank you, Senator Danforth, for this great center that you helped create but also for being a model of integrity in public life. You always need that, but we need it more now than ever and those things matter. Also, my daughter Christine is here. She actually traveled to St. Louis with me, so it's great to have her here. I'm a pretty good writer, but she's the best writer in the family, so it's great to be with you. I mean, I agree with what Jon said. I'd say that there are a confluence of factors that have happened to lead to this assault on truth. Maybe the first thing I would say is it's important to bear in mind that human nature hasn't changed. That what we're seeing is more acute than has happened in the past, but there is a human tendency to be susceptible to this and the founders knew it, Lincoln knew it, a lot of people, political philosophers, have known it, and I actually think that what has happened to us over the last half-dozen years show this validation of the wisdom of the founders to create a political system that is probably as well-prepared as any to withstand the assault on truth or at least to hold up to it. But in the end, a country doesn't succeed because of its Constitution; it succeeds because the people it creates and the character of the citizenry to be able to uphold the principles of the Constitution. So why now? What's different? Jon touched on some of them. I'd say one important thing, just as a starting point, is I don't think you can separate the assault on truth from the collapse of trust in institutions. Because if you talk to people who are truth deniers, let's just say objectively they are that. If you talk to them and insisted look, the importance of truth, they wouldn't dispute you, they would simply say "we agree with you, but we have different sources of information." So, we've seen across the board a loss of authority and trust in institutions which means it's a sort of a grab bag, and so people now are able to go to sources that they want. You may believe the Centers for Disease Control or the National Institutes of Health on matters having to do with COVID. Somebody else may believe a conspiracy website and you just get into this battle. Second is social media and Jon had mentioned Jonathan Haidt who's at New York University and is a social psychologist. Jon puts a huge amount of the responsibility on social media in terms of both how it's reshaped our brains but also the sort of Niagara Falls of misinformation and disinformation that we have access to now that we really didn't have before. You could have a lot of people who were conspiracy-minded, but they didn't have the easy access to going to conspiracy sites, places that have false information. And they also couldn't congregate together and form groups and institutions so I think that's a big deal. Polarization. The polarization in this country has been going on for decades and those are deep currents. We've had it under Republican presidents and Democratic presidents. It's a complicated set of reasons but the kind of, Senator Danforth I know could testify, you had at one point sort of conservative-leading Democrats and moderate Republicans and they worked a lot together. There was what Bill Bishop, a journalist, calls the "Big Sort" that happened in politics and in life. People began to sort according to lifestyle, according to political ideology, and so the crossover effect, the good pollen-ization that may happen with parties sort of broke apart and each side got more polarized. If you have a political system that is polarized, that's essentially creating the soil for conspiracy

theories and truth deniers to take up. Also, we live in a deeply populist age, and I'm a conservative, I'm not a populist; I think they're very different, in some ways they're antithetical. And populism historically it can have...it can contribute to particular moments in time because it can give voice to legitimate grievances, but populism unchecked can be a dangerous thing because it ignites the passions of the people, and again, this is what the founders were concerned about. Abraham Lincoln, when he was 20 years old, gave a speech, the Young Men's Lyceum Speech, where he talked about mob mentality and what that could do to this republic and the threat of law and truth. So, this is a populist age, it's an anti-establishment age, it's an anti-elitist age, so that is out there as well. And then I agree with Jon, which is, I had been a lifelong Republican until the Trump presidency. As Marie said, I worked in three Republican administrations. But it's with some degree of lament and disappointment and even pain that I said that the Republican party to me has become a kind of wrecking ball in many respects on truth. It's not isolated only to that, because I think you have a sort of pincer movement on the Progressive left, you see it on campuses and journalism and elsewhere, they too want to shut down truth, they too want to shut down debate. And the last thing I'll say is just there's been a kind of grievances that have grown up especially on the American right. I think some of those are overstated. I think some of them are legitimate, people feeling that they've been dishonored and disrespected, that they've looked condescended to, their values are under attack, and you have these huge changes: economic changes, cultural changes and that's a lot for a country and for people to adjust to. It leaves them vulnerable when they feel either under attack or vulnerable to fear, to charges of fear. So, all of these things have sort of come together and, I think, given us this moment, and we'll get to this. It's not as if we can't come out of this moment, but it's a precarious one and I think we have to be honest about that, name it, and then begin to take steps to get out of it.

Harder:

Well, first of all, thank you for being here. It's a real pleasure, it's also a real honor to get to appear alongside two people I've admired for a long time, Pete Wehner and Jonathan Rauch, and not surprisingly, they covered the landscape very well. So, I'll just ladle a little bit of additional thoughts on top of that, and since we're in a center that talks a lot about religion and politics, in addition to the factors that Jonathan mentioned about an epistemic crisis that we're facing, what Pete talked about, a crisis of trust and a political crisis, I'll also just mention that part of this is also a civic crisis, that I would argue has some of its roots in a spiritual deformation. And what I mean by that is a couple things. One, I think that part of the problem is that politics has actually become too central to our identity. And what I mean by that is that even 20 years ago, or so, it was far more likely for the average American to marry outside of their party than outside of their faith. Religion was considered one of the unmoved movers of identity. That is, your faith background often shaped other parts of your identity. That has all flipped. People are now far more likely to marry outside of their faith than outside of their party. One's political orientation forms more and more of what one thinks about oneself and one's kind of place in the world. And there's very real consequences to that. Relatedly, and further exacerbating this, is that we more and more look for truth from sources that are both personalized as well as highly politicized in social media. There's good reasons, of course, for people to have some doubts or distrust about traditional, you know, media forms, institutions; institutions have failed from time to time, but one of the unsettling things is that distrust has not made us in the aggregate more discerning and more shrewd. It's actually made us, in the aggregate, more gullible, more easily taken in by

streams of information that confirm our biases and play to our grievances, rather than challenge some of our biases or unsettle some of our grievances. And a third area that I think speaks to kind of the combination of spiritual deformation that's fueling a civic crisis is that we are not only looking for more of our identity in politics, so our politics is getting more, more central and more polarized as well as more apocalyptic. We're looking for truth in fundamentally unworthy and distorting means and information streams. But we're also increasingly looking for purpose in political combat. And a lot of our faith-based institutions: churches, organizations, there is a syncretism between political combat and ultimate ends, and of course when you try to fuse the two, you're kind of left with a holy war that's largely fought online where courage is often equated with belligerence, the refusal to listen or to compromise is somehow seen as principal conviction, and where giving quarter to one's antagonist is seen not as mercy or grace but as cowardice or spinelessness or capitulation. So, I do think that in addition to our epistemic crisis, the crisis of trust, there is a deeper both civic and religious crisis that is fueling this as well.

Griffith:

Thank you, all three. So very much and maybe to stick with the religion theme a little, I really appreciate you raising that. You know, one of the issues, and Pete, you and I have talked about this, there's a lot of attention to white evangelicals these days and what's been called white Christian nationalism. The role of evangelicals in believing and spreading conspiracy theories and so I...this movement that's supposedly about truth seems to have in many sectors, at least, gotten so caught up in all of this assault on truth, and I just wondered if...I know Cherie and Pete, you both come from an evangelical, I know Jon, you speak as an outsider to that but as someone in conversation with a lot of evangelicals. Maybe we could have you speak to that, a bit. Pete, do you want to start?

Wehner:

Sure, yeah, I'm happy to do it. It's an important issue. And I should say, I am a person of the Christian faith. That's central to my life and the fact that not only has the assault on truth found its way into the Christian church but the fact that in many instances I think the church is accelerating that assault on truth is the most painful thing in terms of this political and religious moment. Why is that happening? Several things, I would say, that is at play. One is the history of the white Evangelical Church is important to bear in mind and even the history of Christianity and science and truth over the last hundred years. Yeah, the Scopes Monkey Trial and you have this sort of skepticism that exists, Tim Keller and others have talked about within the evangelical movement that, I think, makes it more susceptible to conspiracy theories. And then you have certain branches of Christianity, Pentecostalism, which I think can fall into that. There's also a fusion of a fundamentalist sensibility with the Evangelical faith, Mark Labberton who is the president of the Fuller Theological Seminary has talked about that, and if you're familiar with the fundamentalism movement and it has some things to recommend to it, but it tends to be anti-intellectual and very skeptical of authority and that tension of science and faith is something that's almost intrinsic, at least in some quarters of Christianity. The other thing that I would say it's just been a...I think something of a...not a revelation exactly to me...something that's hit me more forcibly, which is when I started my Christian journey, which was in high school and college, one of the things I was taken at was the notion of the transformative effects of faith and how that would become core to who one should be, and all of those falling short of the glory of God, as Paul says in Romans, but there was a sense that that was core to who one should be, that

if you gave your allegiance to faith, it should influence and orient the rest of your life. I think what I've seen more vividly in the last half-dozen years, decade or so, is I think a lot of people of the Christian faith, their core identity is actually not in faith. It's in culture, it's in sociology, it's in politics, or it's in partisanship. And they've sort of engrafted faith upon it. And if you asked people whether that was happening, most of them would say no. They're not cynical about this. But we're all formed by our family of origins, cultural experiences, country we live in, the race we are, the gender we are. All of those things sort of form how we interpret things including our faith and so I think for a lot of people, the core identity are these other things and when you engraft faith on that then you sort of proof-text the Bible because you can justify...Shakespeare said that "the devil can quote scripture for his own purposes. 66 books, thousands of years, lots of circumstances and characters. So, people begin to say "what are the verses that can reinforce what I already believe?" And then the danger of that is politics is already a passionate enough enterprise by itself, and when you superimpose on that the notion that I'm arguing not just for my beliefs in politics but I'm arguing on behalf of God and this is the children of light against the children of darkness, that adds an element to politics which is really dangerous because then you get into this Manichaean mindset and this is part of the checkered history of Christianity throughout world history. Which is, that a lot of times in the name of truth, churches and people of Christian faith have done terrible things. That isn't for a moment to overlook or denigrate how faith has been an engine of justice throughout world history, as well, and in this own country. The abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement, the pro-life movement has many aspects of it that's admirable. And then, just the good that is done by millions and millions of Christians and churches on a daily basis to help people in the shadows of society, and that needs to be recognized as it doesn't always get its attention. But there's no question in my mind that rather than being a healing agent in this political moment and in the context of truth, in far too many instances, the church, the Christian church, and the individual Christians, are actually doing harm and that's harm to the country and that's harm to the witness of the Lord to whom they say they've given allegiance.

Harder:

Just to double click on that, C.S. Lewis talked about the temptation of what he called "Christianity and," you know, in that there's great power in faith, and it's not surprising that lots of people would like to instrumentalize or hijack that power towards ends that they consider important. And so there's long been a temptation to try to claim the mantle of faith for one's political project or cultural project or the like. But, I think one other thing to kind of just ladle on to what Pete was saying is, you know, where are people spending most of their time? And to what are they giving most of their attention? We often think about kind of things that are going wrong within evangelical Christianity as being you know a few well-known, highly politicized pastors who are leading people astray, and there's certainly a few of those. But, you know, there's also a recent Barna study out that found that over 40 percent of pastors within the kind of broad evangelical tradition had seriously considered leaving the pastorate within the last year. That's up from just 29 percent on a poll taken on January seventh of last year. You know, when things were not good. And it's gone up that much just in, you know, a year and a half's time. And a lot of that is because of what's happening not just on the grass tops level but on the grass roots level among the laity. And many pastors talk about it's very difficult when you have, you know, two hours a week with someone who's spending, say, forty hours a week listening to right-wing or left-wing radio or social media or the like. You know, essentially, they are being

catechized by something very different than a faith tradition, but investing it with that same kind of energy.

Griffith:

It's chilling to use it in those [inaudible]. John did you want to speak to this issue also of Christians, evangelicals?

Rauch:

I think I'll leave this one to my better.

Griffith:

Okay, sure [laughter]. Well, we're going to get to what to do about it soon, and we're also going to open it up to you all, so have no fear. But I do want to get into a couple more issues about where we are now, which I think are important. And one is, you've mentioned, I think Pete and John both, those on the right but also those on the left, and I sort of want to ask, you know, you all to delve in, Jon maybe I'll start with you this time, you know, who's more at fault on the far left or those on the far left, or really what has each side contributed to the assault on truth and our country's polarization? How do you think about that? I mean I'm not a big fan of both-sidesism when it doesn't fit but maybe it fits in this case.

Rauch:

It does not really fit, and the reason it does not fit is that there are problems on both sides but in my view, others will disagree, but in my view, the threat from the left is kind of like cancer; it's eating away at institutional values including at universities where you're seeing, for example, I was just hearing today a university...a recent university graduate saying that her Women's Studies program had been more interested in indoctrination than teaching. But those tend to be more slow-acting problems, that kind of infestation of one-sidedness and politicization in parts of universities. I think the political problem on the right, the direct attack on our democracy, the use of mass disinformation to distort democracy, undermine democracy, making that actually the price of admission if you're a republican politician, that's a heart attack. That's here, that's now, that's immediate. It is not clear where we are, even in five years, if we have a political class that is lying to us about the results of elections, acting on that basis, so I do not want to suggest that these two things are equivalent right now. That said, they're both serious, they feed off each other. Each one justifies its actions based on its perceived threat from the other side. They're in that sense, kind of symmetrical, and they're both kind of right about the threat about the other side. So, the challenge is, can you ratchet down the environment by bringing forth enough moderates in politics, and in intellectual life and institutions like campuses and corporate HR departments and news rooms, who will assert the center. And that means asserting for example, the primacy of actual truth over whatever it is people would like to believe. In other words, the primacy of truth over truthiness. You all know truthiness, right? Colbert coined it, but it's a pretty sophisticated idea, which is the notion that if we think something should be true than it probably is true. We've got to forswear that on the left and right, in places like newsrooms and academia. We have to do a better job of making sure there's viewpoint diversity among other kinds of diversity that's sorely lacking in, for example, a lot of anthropology and sociology departments, and that's distorting scholarship. It's costing those departments and academia a lot

of public trust. It means, on the right, standing up to MAGA. It means that Liz Cheney is correct in principle, not saying there's the power to do this at the moment, but in principle, all election deniers should be denied office. It should be made clear that if you are lying about our democracy systematically for political gain, that should not be acceptable, and that's going to be up to the voters. We'll find out something about that in three weeks, so not quite symmetrical, but both sides are involved.

Griffith:

Pete, do you agree with that?

Wehner:

Yeah, I do. I do. There is a problem, I think, on the left, I think it's confined more to certain institutions, and they're important institutions. It's not true, I think, as we've discovered, even in our time here and with students, so much this university. But a lot of universities, there's just no question there's kind of a though-police and a quasi-totalitarian mindset. Both John and I know people in journalism and media, where there is sometimes stated and sometimes unstated pressure of places that you can't go, things you can't write, things you can't do, otherwise there's going to be sort of a mob, a social media mob, a left-wing mob, and it's real, but I do think that the assault on truth from the right is more immediate and more urgent and I feel like that's in part because the Republican party nominated person who has a...I think is sociopathic in many important ways, which on an individual level is tragic. But when you nominate a person and then elect a person with those tendencies, who has not just a disregard for truth, but almost actively enjoys assaulting it, and then you give that person the power of the presidency, and the political party, it basically stays with them. So, if he blows through all of the barriers that have traditionally existed in American life and American politics, and then the question becomes at what point does that party say no to that? And so far we've tested that proposition and the Republican Party hasn't said no to it. That's really dangerous. I do want to say one thing that's at least tangentially related to this point. We talked about this some with the students earlier today, but I do think that it has to do with the nature of the polarized, angry state of our debate, confirmation bias, the sense that, you know, we're in a fight to the death to defend what we believe in. And I think that all of us as citizens need to recalibrate a little bit. What is the point for political dialogue, dialogue in any realm, theological dialogue as well? I think, and I'm speaking for myself here too, often as we get into these debates because we're convinced at the outset that we're absolutely right and our task is to overwhelm the other person and convince them that they're wrong. At first that doesn't work. That's just not...if you know human psychology, the more you overwhelm people just with the data and arguments, the more likely they are to dig in their heels, to push back. I feel like especially on important issues. If you feel like your core identity is under attack, then you're going to lash back. But in fact, what is really the purpose of dialogue and debate? If you believe, as I think we should, in the sort of epistemological modesty, this notion that we want to find truth, but none of us can do it on our own, because of the limitations of human reason and human insight, and so we need each other to be in conversation, to help each other see our blind spots, and so we can actually apprehend truth. We were talking earlier today, but there's this lovely description in *Surprised by Joy*,

which is the autobiography of C.S. Lewis, and Lewis talked about first friends and second friends, and the first friend is to Lewis Arthur Greeves, someone he had met when he was very young, and Lewis described the first friend as the alter ego—you start the sentence, your friend can complete it. It's a person who has a similar worldview, and he uses the lovely description of raindrops on a pane of window in which they come and join together. And we all need first friends. That's part of what it means to be part of a community. Then he describes something called second friends, who's not your alter ego, but your anti-self, and Lewis said that's the person that you read the same books and the other person draws all the wrong conclusions from them. And for him, it was a person named Owen Barfield, and they had gotten into these debates on somewhat esoteric issues, but they were real intense debates, and so when Lewis is writing about his second friend, he describes that they would go at it "hammer and tong," late into the night, and how almost imperceptibly, they would begin to shape each other's views and this was a lovely friendship for both Barfield and Lewis. And the reason that they loved the friendship and loved each other was they felt like they were better because they were in each other's lives, helping them to see blind spots they had, and Barfield said later, he said "when Lewis and I debated, we never debated for victory. We debated for truth." And it's a huge difference. If you go into a conversation with somebody and it's to beat them or for victory, or is it to engage in a back and forth so you can better see truth. And I just think that kind of recalibration of what dialogue is in our daily lives and our national life could help a lot to depolarize and get us back on the right right now.

Harder:

Pete and Jon are the real experts on this, but one thing I'll just add that kind of bounces off Pete's point about friendship is a factor that makes us all more susceptible to the..., especially what's going on the right, is one that we haven't named exactly; we've sort of danced around it, and that's loneliness. And that may seem a little counterintuitive, like what would loneliness have to do with it? But there is a fairly, I think, direct connection to making us vulnerable to this kind of hunger for misinformation as well as gullibility to it. And there have been a lot of studies showing how not only are kind of like the thick institutions to which we belong kind of in decline, different associations, but friendship itself is in decline. We are much less likely to say that we have any close friend you know than we were twenty years ago. And that does leave us looking for community, you know, we are wired, we're not made to be alone. We're wired for community, and the combination of the breakdown of institutions and neighborhoods and communities and the decline of friendship, as well as a pandemic that's kept us all quarantined at home at various times has had us looking for love in all the wrong places. You know, we've gone looking for community online and the kind of community that's formed online is rarely about, you know, deep knowledge and personal knowledge and caring for another person. It's almost always about shared affiliations or associations and one of the first rules in politics of course is it's much easier to rally people around a shared hatred or grievance than it is a shared love or proposal. And, you know, algorithms have gotten very good, internet companies have gotten very good at keeping our attention and usually the way they do this is by feeding us information that confirms all of our biases or gets us really riled up at how evil or stupid our antagonists are. And we go kind of further and further down that hole where we're losing actual human contact while getting more and more confirmed of our own correctness and the utter

venality and idiocy of those who disagree with us. You know, Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, talked about how it was a people who were kind of disassociated with each other that were the most susceptible to misinformation, and I think that's kind of where we are and part of why the misinformation heart attack that John describes has had...has been so effective.

Griffith:

I think that's a wonderful point. The social consequences of loneliness, you know, as being really critical and something that probably doesn't get enough attention in conversation. I'd like to continue, I think Pete, you kind of got us going here. Today at lunch, one of our wonderful Religion and Politics minors, I think it was Carly, I don't know if she's here with us or she may be on the zoom, but she asked you all a question about talking across these complicated lines and she had a story. She recently went to her brother's wedding and got into, it sounds like, a very painful argument with her uncle over abortion. She's very strongly on the pro-choice side, and her uncle was not, and they started out trying to have a conversation about this and it just avalanched, as she put it. And she wanted to know, you know, what are some tools...this kind of helps us get to what do we do about it, but what are the tools? You all had some really thoughtful answers, I think, for that, on how to talk across these difficulties. Jon, maybe I'll start with you on that.

Rauch:

Sure, there's a lot of, as you all will imagine, a lot of research in the last few years that's been initiated on this question of, you know, various versions of "so what do I do about my QAnon relative who's completely out of touch with reality? Is there a way to retrieve this person?" And what the research seems to show is that what does not work is to approach them with the idea of correcting their facts. That seems to actually make people more defensive and make them dig in. What seems to be more effective, although challenging at a personal level, is to initiate a conversation from a point of view of genuine curiosity and interest in that person. There's a saying that I've seen attributed to Dale Carnegie, the author of the famous *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, I haven't verified this, but it sounds right, which is "You cannot make people agree with you, but you can make people *want* to agree with you." And a way to do that is to express curiosity and interest, do listening before talking. I'm associated with a wonderful group called Braver Angels which is a national grassroots depolarizing movement, and the head of that, the founder, David Blankenhorn, says the most effective way to begin one of these conversations is with the question "What life experiences have led you to this belief?" Which has a couple of effects. First, it personalizes the conversation. It's genuine interest. Opens people up, and second, it translates the axes away from facts and warring facts. It's the world of storytelling and experience where people are naturally more comfortable. This will be a way to ease into the conversation and to put both people in a frame of mind where they're more interested in learning. And it turns out that's actually better for getting the person you're talking to to start asking themselves the hard question "does it really make sense?" You know, that there was a conspiracy by Hillary Clinton to traffic children and eat them or whatever. A second thing, which is very helpful, is to try to restate in the best way you can your interlocutor's position, to say something

like “So Cherie, am I understanding correctly that your view is X, Y, and Z?” Because if Cherie feels heard, if she feels like I'm really making the effort to understand, that will also lower those defenses. So those are the kinds of things that make for better conversations. But of course, it's going to be hard because we're all working against the media environment which is, as we've said today, is in the business of triggering outrage, putting defenses up, demonizing the other side. The good news is that Braver Angels, for example, is getting really good results. The most common statement that people make after walking away from a Braver Angels debate or workshop, these are not designed to change minds or even common ground, they're just designed to help up re-establish the civic habit of engaging with people you disagree with, and showing us how to do that. It's based on family therapy. The most common reaction is “We're not as divided as we've been led to believe” and that is, in fact, true. All show that people overestimate by about double the policy differences, the actual substantive disagreements that they have with the other side. We are not as divided as we've been led to believe and a lot of what we can do is just understand that about each other.

Wehner:

Yeah, I think that really was well put. I'm just going to underscore some of what Jon said and then share an anecdote which I think maybe helps illustrate it. But this idea of being heard is a really big deal, and whether you've experienced that in political debate, almost everybody has unsure experience that just in life and you think about if you're in a marriage with your spouse or friendship and if you have an area of disagreement, if the response is, you know, if one person mentions the things that have hurt them or upset them, and the response, the spouse or the friend, is to go through the litany of grievances you have against them, you're not going to get anywhere at all. So, people have to feel heard and there has to be a genuine interest, curiosity about where these people are, so Jon had mentioned that. I think also that there is a real virtue to a pretty simple discipline, which is to think for yourself or even to have conversations with other people, of what is the best argument, good faith argument for the other side. I was a visiting professor at Duke, and one of the assignments that I gave students was I listed several issues...gay rights, guns, race, and abortion, and my assignment was choose one of those topics and write the best paper you can against the view that you hold, and then I would grade them to see on how strong of an argument that they made. By the way, some professors have warned me against doing that because they thought well these topics are too hot to do on campus, but I went ahead and did it, and it wasn't a problem. So, on the issue of abortion, there was the NARAL representative, pro-choice representative, on the Duke campus, who wrote her paper on a pro-life perspective. So, when we gathered after those assignments were done, and we just talked, I talked with the students, and I asked this woman about how that experience was, and she said it was very painful, but she said “I actually felt that I understood the other side better.” She didn't change her mind, but she did understand it better. And the last point that I'll make on this and I don't know exactly how to scale this up but at least on an individual basis, this kind of thing is important and can work, and that is, that if you have standing in other people's lives and the realms beyond politics, then that opens the way for genuine and authentic political discussion. If people feel like they can trust you and that you have an interest in their lives beyond the political. There's a person that I know who's a right-wing radio talk-show host. I've known him for several years,

I've written a piece in the New York Times critical prompts. He was upset, wrote me an email, we had a back and forth, you could tell the temperature was going up. You know, ten years earlier, I would have written a ten page, point by point rebuttal to everything he said, and as Cherie, we used to work together, can tell you, I'm capable of doing something like that. That would have achieved precisely nothing of good. It wouldn't have convinced him he was wrong, it may have been temporarily therapeutic for me, but then I would have had to have circled back to repair the friendship because I know what that would have catalyzed, so instead, I wrote him and I said, because he made some charges against me, and I said "I'm not going to really answer those unless you want me to, but let me tell you why I think we're talking past each other," and I did the best good faith job I could, to say "I think this is how you view me, as a critic of Trump. You feel like I've been a lifelong Republican, that I've sort of become a traitor to the cause, you feel that Trump is being waylaid every single day in the mainstream media and you're not going to throw logs on that bonfire. You feel like the success of Trump is tied to the success of the country, and even if he's an imperfect person, he still needs to win. You feel like I should know better than that because causes that I've believed in are ones he largely is championing and I should be there." So, for him, it was this notion of loyalty, sort of, Trump's the quarterback, we're the offensive line, our job is to protect him, and you feel like I'm not only not protecting him, I'm actually trying to sack him. And so for him, it's loyalty. I said, for me, the thing was that I'm trying to achieve or at least trying to think about myself in the context is intellectual integrity, which is I asked the question "If Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama did the same things Donald Trump had done, and I had criticized them harshly, then what am I going to say if somebody on my team does it? Am I going to use the same standard of judgment or does the R or the D beside your name determine the arguments that I make, and I said, for me, what I'm trying to achieve is to say what is the honest thing to do here. And so when I described those two different views in a couple of paragraphs each, and I did it in as dispassionate way as I could, he wrote me back, and he said "I've read this now two or three times. It was like a lightbulb going on" and I remember the line that he used he said "You know, you're right I'm not interested in objectivity," he said, "I'm an advocate, that's what I do." But it opened the way for a conversation that we continued to have and then months later I was driving GW parkway in DC and there had been a shooting, a high school shooting, and one of the high school students was leading an effort on the Second Amendment for gun control, and the guy said on a show, and I was listening to it, he said it's fine to argue for the Second Amendment, but he said don't go after the students. These students had been through a trauma, he said I have socks that are as old as some of these students. Basically, back off. And when I heard that, I got to the office, I wrote him an email, and I said, "Thanks. I heard what you were saying and I appreciate the fact that you were telling your audience not to go after high school students and I thought that was an admirable thing to do." And he wrote me back, and he said "Thanks, I appreciated that," and he said "that voice you heard on the radio wasn't just mine, it was yours too." And what he meant by that was it was a product of sort of the conversation that we had. And he called me as recently as probably two months ago, just to share his own sort of dark fears about Donald Trump. Because he's not doing it publicly, I wish he would, but it did say something about how the fact that we had a relationship, we knew something about each other's lives, sort of calmed things down, the barriers went down, and he feels like "I can share some of this stuff." If we had just

had an argument, and I was just pounding him with facts and evidence, and that was all, you know, we wouldn't be there.

Griffith:

Yeah, as Jon said, it's part of these models come out of family therapy, marriage counseling, some of this sounds a lot like techniques there, and this is about these relationships, right, building them up, Cherie?

Harder:

You know, I'll just add, and this sort of piggybacks on some of what has been said already, one thing that's worth keeping in mind is whether the engagement is essentially about understanding or about domination. And so many of our conversations around politics are really about trying to win victory, dominate, embarrass, triumph over someone else, even the language that we use. And, you know, there's a lot of research on this, you've mentioned family therapy, you know, many of you are probably familiar with John Gottman, about essentially expressions of contempt are one of the best predictors of divorce, you know, usually expressions of domination or contempt will kill any possibility for understanding. There's evidence to suggest that essentially expressions of contempt make us almost unable to understand what's being said because essentially, we get an adrenaline rush, we go into a fight or flight mode, and it shuts down the possibility of real communication, much less connection. One of the challenges, of course, is one of the primary modes of discourse that we have, social media, a lot of this really rewards expressions of domination, expressions of contempt, the quick, snarky takedown, and doesn't reward, you know, longer, more gracious attempts at understanding and connection. There will be times, I think, when one has to choose between wanting to understand and wanting to connect and the quick hit of attention, likes, retweets, whatever else one might get through that particular form of discourse.

Griffith:

I'm just going to ask one last question for each of you to reflect on, and then we will open it up to you all. We have two mics, so I'll make sure you all get to ask your questions too. You've all talked now about what to do on an interpersonal level which I think is crucial, and we know things start there, on the interpersonal. But I know from this audience, our conversations in the past, people are also concerned about what to do for the larger society, and I just wondered, you know, you've kind of mentioned social media, you know, Braver Angels is sort of a model, but could you all just maybe offer your best ideas for what ordinary people can do to really help improve our politics and society at larger levels as well. Jon?

Rauch:

Well, that's a big question, and there's a chunk of a book about it, which by the way, is available to you today. The short answer is that there's no short answer because there are two levels of things that need to be addressed. One is the personal level and that's the things we can do in our own epistemic environment to support the constitution of knowledge, the rules, the norms, the institutions that keep us anchored to truth, but the other, just as important, are changes at the

institutional level. That's places like mainstream media, social media, academia, law, and other places where changes need to be made. So, what are we talking about? Well, lots of different things. At the personal level, there's something each of us can do in our own environment, if we're part of the reality-based community, that's academia and science and research number one, journalism number two, law number three, and government number four. These are the institutions that must be anchored to reality or else society goes off an epistemic and governmental cliff. There's something each of us can do in that environment, whether it's at a faculty meeting, resisting politicization or saying we need to make sure we're friendlier to conservatives in this environment, or for example, in a newsroom. I was at a gathering like this one a couple months ago and someone raised their hand and said "So I am a specialist in Chinese diplomatic relations. What can I do in my world to advance the values of truth?" And I said, well of course I don't know the answer to that, you do. Sit down with a legal pad and I'll bet in thirty minutes you can come up with things that will make your environment safer and more hospitable to truth, that will, for example, support a culture that is open where cancellers are not rewarded, for example. So, I turn that question about individuals back to each of you, because there are things you can do in your environment and only you know what they are. At the institutional level, here again, there's no one answer because all of these institutions play different roles, but we're talking about stuff like social media has been designed to propagate outrage at high speed because outrage is engagement, you get clicks that way, you sell ads. A lot of the social media platforms now realize that that's a toxic formula and so there need to be changes in the way the algorithms work, more transparency. They need to slow things down so people are more reflective, for example, before they retweet and repost. They are increasingly doing things like putting up what are called interstitial warnings, so if you try to tweet something without reading it, you'll get a sign that says "you sure you don't want to read this first?" Just slowing people down turns out to help engage our non-lizard brains, our thoughtful brains. So, there's things like that in social media and mainstream newsrooms we need to do a better job of bringing in points of view that are not on the left because if everyone in the newsroom is on the left, we're not going to be telling the whole story. Academia has a ton of work to do, places like Heterodox Academy, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education are working hard to make academia more welcoming to diverse points of view and to make sure they defend free speech on the values of free speech on campus, adopting the Chicago Principles on campus, those are free speech principles, those kinds of institutional changes. I could go on and on, the point is, you don't want to hear me list lots of stuff because it's really boring. The point is that all of us as individuals and institutions, there is stuff that we can do and you guys out there are the best people at figuring out what those things are in their environment. And the good news is, the Constitution of Knowledge, the system we have that anchors us to truth, that prevents us from going to war over truth and falling victim to totalitarian lies, has been under assault for 300 years. This is just the latest iteration, and if we do our job, if we defend it, the system that we have that anchors us to reality is the only system that can produce knowledge. It is the only that can put into my arm the vaccines that are protecting me from COVID right now. The other systems that we're talking about today, the cancelling, the mass disinformation, are purely nihilistic, parasitic, and opportunistic. They cannot make knowledge. They cannot find truth. They can only tear it down. And that means if we do our job of figuring out how to defend these

institutions and then doing it, we squash the other side like a bug because we are the only ones who can offer freedom, knowledge, and truth. I should have said freedom, knowledge, and peace. Freedom, knowledge, and peace.

Wehner:

That's beautifully said. I think about it in some ways like Jon does. I think about it institutionally and then individually. On the institutional side, he named some of them. I do think, you know, social media reforms is a big part of this. Jon knows more about...he's studied it more than I have. There are others. But, in that great book you can buy after this event that Jon wrote, he goes through, actually Jon, I think, I'm right in saying that if you compare 2016 to 2020, there has been some degree of improvement.

Rauch:

Significant improvement, yeah.

Wehner:

So, this is us kind of catching up in terms of technology with what the problem is. We're sort of back on our heels in the mid 2010s and we're making changes there. I think there's some reforms to look at that are potentially hopeful in politics. Again, politics is driving a lot of this problem and polarization, but there's ranked-choice voting and open primaries that seem to be showing early signs of success. There are things like voluntary national service which I find appealing and I think there's early evidence that that can help, and the idea of voluntary national service is that you get people from different walks of life: different race, different income, different class, and they work together on a common project and the anonymity that is necessary to create the hate, the assault, the antipathy that we have toward one another begins to fade when you actually are dealing with real people, particularly in a common cause. I would say that there's one institution, partly because of my history, but partly because I think it's important to look at, is the church. And there are two people, friends of mine, Curtis Chang and David French, who are going to start an initiative, which they want to try and help toward a, Cherie mentioned, catechize, people of Christian faith not from the pulpit, I think through adult education classes, on how the proper way for people of faith to engage in politics, and it's not the what of politics, not the issues, but the how. Eugene Peterson has a lovely phrase, he talked about the Jesus truth and the Jesus way. He said you can't support the Jesus truth if you're not using the Jesus way. And we're not seeing much of the Jesus way within politics, so Curtis and David want to work on curriculum and videos and helping people within churches to say "Look, we've got a problem. We want to name this problem; we don't want to turn our eyes from it. We don't want to be partisan as churches, but we want to try and give a way for people of faith to engage with integrity in politics and in culture, so we can be light and salt and healing agents to a world that needs it. And the last thing that I would say...it's not a reform, but I suppose it's a mindset of sorts, which is to keep in mind that one person acting alone can't make a difference, but a lot of people acting together can make cultural change. And things that look impossible can become true. Whatever you think about the argument for same-sex marriage, Jon Rauch, along with Andrew Sullivan, made a whole series of arguments in the late '80s and early '90s, mid '90s for the case for same-sex marriage. And

one of the things I appreciated about Jon in that debate is he never tore into his opponents, never went *ad hominem*, he sort of went through, made the case for his view, and so an issue that you would have thought was impossible in the late '80s, early '90s became now 70 percent of the country believes in it, more than half of Republicans do. Again, whatever your views are on the merits of that particular issue, my point here is that the capacity to change minds and hearts can happen and sometimes it can happen quicker than you think. And then the last thing that I'll say in this regard is I think the way to think about any large and important endeavor in life is that you're called to be faithful, not necessarily successful. Now, we all would rather be both, but often, you don't have control over whether your efforts are successful or not. That depends on circumstances you can't fully control. But all of us have the capacity to be faithful, to act with integrity, to act with honor, to be agents of healing to a broken world, and for standing for truth even in an age of lies. That's all anybody can ask of you as an individual, and after that, it's you know, we'll see how life unfolds. But it's important to do that and it's important that people who care about these issues not become cynical or fatalistic or withdraw from the field. There's a lot of people who care about the same issues you do and I think Jon is right: truth will prevail, but it will only prevail if there are people who are willing to defend it and defend it in the right way. So, I guess it's just a caution against fatalism.

Harder:

Well, it's hard to improve on the litany of suggestions you've just heard, so I'll just add one quirky suggestion, as well as a comment. And the quirky suggestion I would have is communal, not just individual and not institutional, but it's start a reading group. And that might sound really odd, but here's why I say that. You know, we have been talking a lot this evening about the ways in which loneliness and the ways in which our preoccupation with social media, our distraction, superficiality, and over-reliance on politics has all helped fuel the assault on truth. And what is a small book club or small reading group? It's a group of people united in paying close attention to a worthy text in the spirit of hospitality and community. In many ways, it is a tiny little cultural antibody to the toxins that we have been talking about coursing through the body politic, and it's something that is small that just about anybody can do, and is a little microcosm of a better body politic, a better polis. I would also kind of encourage read literature, read really good literature rather than a political book. And that literature necessarily requires kind of empathy and imagination as opposed to just kind of going straight to reasoning and analysis and the like. It engages the right brain as well as the left. So again, quirky, but in many ways, it is.... I guess one could almost call it a civic liturgy. It's an embodied, formational practice that orients us in a very different way. And then the comment that I'll make is that you know, again, we're in the Danforth Center. I do think, my own faith tradition is Christian, I do think the church will play....*has* to play a really important role in being the institution that does orient us towards what we believe is ultimate truth and should be forming what we love, and of course, you know, the essence of Christianity: "but love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself." What does it mean to love one's neighbor? I think it's fair to say that the assault on truth, the polarization that we're seeing, the contempt, all of this is antithetical to that. So, I hope, and do believe, that the church will play a role as well.

Griffith:

Very incredibly thoughtful, answers, thank you. Now it's your turn for questions. I'd especially love to hear from students if any have...So we've got Jared Adelman, one of our other wonderful R&P minors here. Get us going.

Audience Question 1 (Jared Adelman):

Awesome, thank you to all three of you. To kind of touch on the points of effective polarization, loneliness, sorting, kind of along cultural cleavages, a lot of, kind of, solutions have been along like the response to *Bowling Alone* and that sort of thing, you have to get more social fabric and cross-cutting institutions to bring people together. Maybe it's a reading group, I love that idea. One question I've kind of had and have thought on is: is religion a necessary part of that or are religious institutions a necessary part of that? If it's sufficient for you, I'd love to hear to hear that take, but I'm not sure that's going to be there. And if so, what do people, given increasing secularization, who are not involved with the religious faith do and what is a good substitute for a religious institution?

Rauch:

Well, I'm going to volunteer for that one because I'm not religious. I'm an atheistic, homosexual Jew, so I think I'm ideally qualified to comment on religion.

[Laughter]

So, I'm grabbing that, you guys can be quiet. You're biased. So, the founders did not expect liberal democracy to answer our spiritual needs, give us fulfillment in life, and settle the big questions like why are you here. They just expected it to set up a system that arbitrates our disputes in a fairly regular way, and turns us towards compromise and persuasion instead of coercion and violence and they succeeded in that. But they counted on a substrate of what they called Republican virtue and for that they counted on the propagation of those values in, especially, not only, but especially, in religious institutions. And so, is it possible to have a liberal democracy without a functioning substrate of pro-social, civic-minded, pluralistic religion? It's possible but it's much harder. I think the answer is that there really is...let's put it this way: 20 years ago, I wrote a piece for Atlantic lauding what I called "apatheism," which was the idea, you know, actually, people don't care much about God anymore, one way or the other, and that's a real advance, because now we don't have to argue about religion. Probably the dumbest thing I've ever written. Because it turns out that if American religious institutions are not doing their job of providing a greater vision, a thicker sense of community, a sense of purpose in life, and undergirding civic values, the substitutes are worse. Everything from SoulCycle to QAnon, Wokeness, these divide us further, but they don't provide that civic substrate. They actually do the opposite, so what we're discovering now is that if religion falls asleep at the helm, the boat starts to sink. Can it survive? Yeah, it probably can. But it's way harder if people like Cherie, and Pete, and their friends in the religious world don't step up.

Cherie:

I agree with the atheist.

Griffith:

Other questions? Raise 'em high. Okay, I see you back there.

Audience Question 2:

Hi, thank you to all three of y'all and Dr. Griffith for moderating.

Griffith:

Another Religion and Politics minor, I would say. I can't see you with the lights coming in, but thanks.

Audience Question 2:

This question kind of just stems from my own interests and what I'm studying here. I'm a psychology major and like Dr. Griffith said, a Religion and Politics minor, so I understand if you may not have an answer to this, but going back to when y'all were discussing conversations with relatives who have fallen into QAnon conspiracies and also just have very polar political beliefs from your own, so one of the things you were talking about was actively listening to what they have to say and demonstrating interest and genuine curiosity, which are kind of aspects of psychotherapy. Do y'all know if any research has been done on the effectiveness of psychotherapy with people who have fallen into the QAnon rabbit hole or who have caused major tensions in families and relationships?

Wehner:

You want to start?

Rauch:

I don't know of any research, and I would say it's the wrong way to think about it because these people are not sick. Therapy is a disease model, right? And I think persuasion is an allyship model where even if you disagree, you don't assume the other person is broken and needs fixing. You assume that maybe you're both broken and imperfect and you, although working in contention, that you're working toward an allied goal, so I wouldn't locate it on the clinical psychology grid.

Wehner:

I'll just add, because I agree with what Jon said there, I would say that understanding politics in the prism of psychology has been a huge help to me. I think I have a much better appreciation for what's happening in the world of politics and honestly in the world of faith by understanding better how the human mind works and how human psychology does. My daughter I mentioned earlier graduated...her major is in psychology, she's going to go on to do her PhD in psychology, and we've had a lot of conversations where I've been asking her questions while I'm driving and she can take notes on her answers, but it's helped me understand what is happening, what's the dynamic, what's going on. And the whole areas of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias, what it means when your core identity...you feel like it's under attack, how do you listen well?

What provokes people, what triggers people to keep them from listening? All those things is much more helpful to me, and as I was alluding to earlier, I think I've changed, not as much as I should, but I think I've changed my own personal interaction with people in the realm of politics and theology. Not as a trick to get them to believe what I believe and to say, well here I'm going to go through the side door rather than the front door, but actually, to sort of understand them more fully, and again, you know, the easiest thing in the world is to see the blind spots of another person. I mean, I can see them instantaneously, and you probably can too. One of the hard things in life is to know what your own blind spots are. That's why they're called blind spots. Because we don't see it. And that's just something that I think we have to, again, epistemic modesty. It's this notion that truth exists but, as I alluded to earlier, we need each other, to try and apprehend it. The best any of you in this audience, or any of us, has, is we have a slice of truth. We have an angle of truth that is deep and true, but that's limited, and it's combined and mitigated by all sorts of experiences that we have, so I just want to come back to underscore that notion of being in community with one another and listening and being open to recalibration of our own views, not just recalibrating the views of others.

Rauch:

That's a much better answer than the answer I gave. I've learned huge amounts from psychology about the position that we're in.

Griffith:

And is there a book you would recommend to Walker and others who are thinking about....

Rauch:

There is! It's called *The Constitution of Knowledge*, and it's available after this meeting.

Wehner:

I would actually recommend *The Righteous Mind* I've read both.
[Laughter].

Rauch:

That one's good too.

Wehner:

He's not kidding, actually. I've learned a huge amount from Jon's....one of his gifts as a writer and a journalist is the ability to synthesize complicated stuff in an accessible way but that is actually sophisticated. So, the two books that I would recommend would be Jon's *The Constitution of Knowledge*, and *The Righteous Mind* by John Haidt.

Griffith:

H-A-I-D-T is how you spell that. Last question?

Audience Question 3:

Hi, I don't know how to phrase this as a question, so if you could just comment, but I share your apprehension about populism, but it seems to me the current state of affairs is from an over-empowerment of minority view, because as you said, we're actually not as divided as it seems, but it's this megaphone to minority view that...I think it's twofold: low voter turnout, but also something that nobody talks about which was the Permanent Apportionment Act that capped the House of Representatives at 435, and we tripled out population and we still have the same number of representation despite these population centers that get much less of their point of view represented in the Electoral College and in the House of Representatives.

Rauch:

There's a case for that. It's a different conversation, I think.

Griffith:

Okay, I guess we have time for one more.

Audience Question 4:

Thank you so much. Ooh, I've never asked a question.

Rauch:

Are you a student?

Question 4:

I am a student; I'm a minor in the Center. I guess I wanted to say a couple things. One, there were several things that you said which I agreed with about interpreting each other at our most charitably and, you know, pro-social communities, and all of that I find extremely compelling and resonant with my own view. I guess something that I'm wondering about is the angle of power here, which is...I feel like this is something that I noticed when you were talking about, I think Jonathan, when you were talking about sort of change in institutions to sort of, you know, propel I guess or...I guess you mentioned like HR departments or changing institutions to help there be more sort of cross-talk I guess or a little more padding for helping people to feel comfortable in all sorts of environments which I do think is important. I guess something I'm wondering about is...about white evangelicals and sort of the conservative or a conservative...sorry I'm not being very articulate but I guess what I'm trying to say is I don't know how much people from the left are willing to give up on sort of racial progress or equity or human rights when it concerns identity from the perspective of white conservatives in the country who may feel a perceived loss of power and I think that the perceived loss is also real and comes along with demographic shifts as were mentioned. But I guess for me, that's an elephant in the room of sort of who has had power and who has not and I really appreciate all of you being here today. I'm just curious to hear what your comments would be so thank you.

Rauch:

Who has power and who does not? I don't think anyone loses power by having a conversation and seeking to learn. I think we gain power that way. I approached a lot of people about same-

sex marriage at a time when it was such a crazy idea. My father warned me not even to get involved with it because I would ruin my reputation as a serious writer and thinker and I found that I gained power by having difficult conversations with people who didn't necessarily want to hear what I had to say. Every civil rights movement: African Americans, Women, gay people, now trans people and everyone else. The source of their power for social change has been fundamentally speech and ideas. Approaching people and changing their mind. No guarantees and it doesn't work quickly, but that is the most empowering single thing that minorities have always had and that is why authorities, whoever they may be, black or white or straight or gay, in an environment, once they get power, often the first thing they will try to do is shut down people who disagree with them. So, if you care about a fair society and about minority rights, I think that you want to defend the open society where hard conversations can happen and where we have to encounter people we deeply and fundamentally disagree with and even think are bigoted and unpleasant because first, they may have something to teach us, and second, we may succeed in teaching them.

Harder:

I think that was a mic drop moment.

Wehner:

I'll just screw up the mic drop moment and add one thought to it. I actually have sympathy very much for what you say and I think that has to be taken into account and I do think part of the dynamic which we're seeing in this country and specific to what you talked about, to white Evangelical churches, is the loss of power. And that's not a good testimony to it, number one because, here I'm just overlaying my own theology on it, I would say Christianity is closer to anti-power than to power. I don't think the cross is a symbol of power. It's a symbol of a lot of other things, but it's not a symbol of power, so I think that needs to be taken into account. I also think that power has the ability to corrupt people's judgments because you will do what you want to maintain power over other people. But I would also say that power itself—people who have positions of power, or people who don't have positions of power, that doesn't necessarily validate whatever their views are. I don't think the powerless by definition necessarily have better ideas, or what they're advocating may be right or it may be wrong. I think that experience has to be taken into account. I think if there's injustice, it has to be taken into account. But you can be in a position of less power and advocate things that could be harmful, and you can be people who have power and exercise power in a responsible way and in the case of what you talked about, even acknowledging what you're hinting at, or not hinting at but really stated, which is that white evangelical churches don't want to...or people who are white evangelicals....lose power, acknowledge that that's true. It's also important to acknowledge that there are a lot of very good and decent people who care about their country and they care about their children and they care about a lot of good things, and they have concerns. And some of those are legit concerns, and they deserve a voice too, and they need to be able to be heard, and to have their arguments and their case judged in the same way that anybody else does. So, it's a balancing act but it's all part of this larger enterprise which we're talking about, which the

Danforth Center is committed to, which is faith and politics and the search for truth. And none of us is getting it right but I think all of us can get it more right than we've got right now.

Griffith:

Thank you so much. We're about at the end. Do you have any final words?

Harder:

Just, first of all, I really appreciate the fact that you're having a forum on this. And that I do think the more attention that is sort of paid to the assault on truth and what we can do about it, the better. One of the challenges, I think, has been that for the last several years, people who often do speak up, especially those who are in public life and may seem from the outside to have a lot of power, but it can also be a very vulnerable and precarious position. You know, often saying one thing or the other can get you doxed, threatened, you know, your children threatened and the like. All of that has, you know, the effect of driving some of the saner more epistemically modest you know, kind of wise people from the public square and leaving that whole arena to people who essentially kind of thrive off of the, you know, negative adulation that their aggression will kind of spawn. So, you know, I think it's really important to be there, to seek understanding, to be willing to say things that you know might receive push back and to engage with that and that is I think how we learn to grow, both as persons but also as a people.

Griffith:

Wonderful. That's a great place to end it. Thank you all for joining us in person and online. And yes, thank our guests. And please join us for our reception right outside these doors. You don't have to buy a book to stay for the reception, but you can greet our guests and each other, so thank you all.

[Applause]