

# Let's strive for civil civic dialogues

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By Grace Tarr and Peter Sly

*The Ellsworth American* published Grace's short letter on Black Lives Matter in early December, 2016. That letter sparked the two of us, prompted by Peter, to talk informally about deeper issues.

Grace aligns most closely with conservative/libertarian values. Peter is an independent liberal. Grace's core values are: faith, freedom, understanding and responsibility. Peter's core values are: accountability, honesty, dignity and liberty. A core value we share is commitment to family and community.

Neither of us expects to convince the other about how to vote. Rather we chose to explore areas of disagreement and to learn about and respect opposing views. And, most of all, to develop friendship that is bigger than the political, religious and moral issues that divide us.



Our discussions began with racism and moved on to issues of abortion, faith-based politics, media accountability, guns, religion, gender, health care and polarization. We wrote this piece together to describe the process we developed for a personalized civil discourse in divisive times. Our hope is that others might find the process useful.

Each party should be prepared to re-examine their own reasoning. This is essential to prevent power from being applied unilaterally. Any time we can't persuade other parties who share deep moral and ethical values to join our decisions, we'd better re-examine our reasoning. Knowing each other's core values can help us stretch to do what is right even when we feel emotionally wronged and might want to be defensive. When one side tries to overpower and push the other to "change their way of thinking," there will be a later price to pay in resentment and/or retaliation. No participant is going to endure unilateral domination without resisting at some point.

Empathy is essential. Conversations about deep issues and values must start small and initially be confidential with direct eye contact. An Arab-Israeli peace negotiator once noted that the only successful agreements that can last are made when the negotiators on each side had empathy for the other side. He added, however, that any discussion on public issues eventually has to reach beyond a small room. Empathy, he said, "is when the negotiator realizes what the other can do and cannot do to be ethically accountable to their own constituents."

The hardest part of any negotiation is not coming up with a creative solution along with other negotiators in a small room. The biggest challenge is to "sell" that solution to the other participant's constituents. This requires that each party think about how to help the other party "sell" the discussion or agreement. Only in this way can an agreement hope to eventually bring along the other participant's constituents to accept and eventually endorse an agreement. In other words, without empathy, negotiations will fail.

To sum up, one person's needs cannot overwrite the other person's needs or deep moral values. We must allow the other to change their views, or not, with dignity. Particularly in a time of upheaval and change, it is our job as citizens to remove the blinders worn by many of our elected public servants. If Americans truly want to build a more perfect union — e pluribus unum — we must start at the bottom and truly explore deeper values at the individual level. This can help both sides be strong, thoughtful and available for civic dialogues.

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots."

— Marcus Garvey

Grace Tarr (b. 1999) grew up in Brooklin, where she was home-schooled before entering Grove City College in the fall of 2017. She interned at the Leadership Institute and has been active in her church and as a docent and education coordinator at the Wilson Museum in Castine. Peter Sly (b. 1946) moved to Brooklin from Oakland, Calif., in 2003. As a lawyer, he has been involved with governments at all levels. A “secular Protestant,” he has been active on Palestine-Israel, guns, government conflicts of interest and campaign finance.

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