

## MY TURNS

### Learning to listen in Braver Angels

By JENNIFER HALL-WITT

On July 31, I attended a Braver Angels picnic in Northampton that included time for an extended conversation with someone whose political orientation is very different from my own.

Before I discovered Braver Angels (BA), I did not know a single conservative in the Valley, and discussions across the political divide were essentially confined to heated arguments with my father. In 2018, I joined our local BA alliance, comprised of right- and left-leaning members (“reds” and “blues” for short), attended the first annual BA convention in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and co-organized a daylong red-blue workshop, a structured dialogue that allows liberals and conservatives to listen to each other’s perspectives and reflect more deeply on their own.

Currently, I am leading a research project for BA that involves interviewing alliances across the country. I have found that one of the most transformative experiences for members are the friendships they develop with people from the other side, even as they continue to disagree heartily with their political views.

Now that a local Pioneer Valley alliance is being revived, I find myself reflecting on what Braver Angels has taught me about listening. Braver Angels programs often use a fishbowl format where an inner circle of reds talks about a political issue while the blues listen. Then the groups change places.

Experiencing a fishbowl for the first time made me aware of how often, when in conversation, I half-listen while part of my brain thinks about what I want to say next. When one is in the outer circle in a fishbowl exercise, there is nothing to do but listen. My full attention is focused on what is conveyed through words, tone, and body language. I remember these conversations in an especially full and embodied way.

A foundational principle in Braver Angels is that we engage in dialogue to better understand others’ perspectives, not to change their mind. Learning to listen in this way has been healing for me in a way I did not expect when I joined Braver Angels.

For most of my adult life, I approached conversations about politics with my father, who is a lifelong Republican, with the goal of persuading him of the value of my (Democratic) views. To his credit, he defended his views without ever trying to change mine, but these conversations eroded our relationship rather than nurturing it.

Once I decided to approach them differently, and get curious about what in his life led him to develop his views, suddenly we were able to have conversations about politics that still move me when I think back on them; they were rich conversations where I learned new things about

his life experiences and where he began speaking about his politics in a more nuanced way because he was no longer defending himself from my criticisms. These conversations built a new level of emotional connection and respect between us.

Braver Angels has also taught me to listen for the values underneath people’s political positions. When I do that, I often discover how similar our values are. In the conversation I had with a local Republican official at the recent picnic, the words she used to describe what “respect” means to her were nearly identical to the words I would use. Through listening to each other’s views on topics like welfare policy and abortion, it became clear that we both care deeply for others and value freedom, autonomy, justice, and community, even if we express those values in different ways and support different policies.

At the picnic, I also saw my friend Anthony Tormey, the founding red co-chair of our alliance, and immediately felt a sense of care, respect, admiration and camaraderie. That he is conservative was not at the forefront of my mind. It is that warmth of heart that makes me unable to see him, or other conservatives I have gotten to know through Braver Angels, as the enemy.

The level of political polarization in our country today is putting a strain on our democracy, but organizations like Braver Angels offer a path forward. Because most Americans over-estimate the degree to which the other side dislikes, dehumanizes, and disagrees with us, cross-party contact and friendship at the local level, spread through alliances across the country, can make a difference.

The simple act of listening can help us see the humanity in our political adversaries once again. If you are interested in the Pioneer Valley Alliance, please reach out through the “contact” tab at <https://www.braverangelspioneer valley.org/>.

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**Editor's note: Earlier this summer, a group of Valley residents from both sides of the political spectrum gathered to break bread and discuss the vital topics of today. Organized by Braver Angels Pioneer Valley Alliance, the picnic served as a way to start bridging the political divide in this country. Here, two participants representing both “sides” – liberal and conservative – explain what they took away from the discussions.**



SUBMITTED PHOTO

**The Pioneer Valley Braver Angels Alliance recently hosted a picnic for individuals, pictured here, who were hungry for hearing from others who thought differently than their typical circle of friends.**

# We have more in common than we think

By ANTHONY TORMEY

It is often said, nothing establishes friendship so forcefully as eating together, not a conversation, not a handshake, not even a hug. All are often the outcomes of a good meal and new friendships.

And so it was at Look Park on July 31. Conservatives and Liberals, Reds and Blues, Democrats, Republicans, Independents, and others who didn't need a label to define themselves, we came together to break bread, chat, and listen to each other. We came as strangers and left as friends, or at least that's how it was for me.

A couple of weekends ago the Pioneer Valley Braver Angels Alliance hosted a picnic for individuals who were hungry for hearing from others who thought differently than their typical circle of friends. We were openminded, interesting individuals who looked for goodness in others and diversity of thought. What those who attended got was all that and then some.

Like I often do at parties and events, I seek out people I don't know. I spotted a couple sitting at a picnic table and asked if I could join them. What's interesting about that is to just look at them across the pavilion I had no clue if they voted for Trump as I did — or not. If they think like I do or not. If we share the same values ... or not. What I did know is, if I listened to their story and convey what I heard accurately, with empathy and interest, they might do the same.

We made some small talk and then discussed politics, or more accurately issues. Did we resolve issues pertaining to immigration, race, gender identity, voting, or the myriad of other issues facing this great nation? No. But we discovered we had a lot more in common than we thought — on immigration, race, gender identity, voting, and a myriad of other issues. We also talked about local and personal issues — police funding, cherry trees versus street paving, COVID masks, and vaccinations.

I also shared a story with those present that day and I wish to share it with you today. It's an analogy, an analogy I believe that represents our wonderful country — what it is and what it could be. It's about the difference between a fruit smoothie and a fruit salad. With a smoothie, we take a mix of fruit, throw them in a blender, mix them all so the flavor and texture of each fruit blended into a single smoothie. Many nations around the world are more like smoothies, everyone is the same, a single language, a single religion, a single culture. Having traveled a lot, I can tell you this is a wonderful thing — amazing people, cultures, and customs.

The United States of course has been built by people from these countries and those native to the U.S. It is also what makes the United States like a fruit salad where every piece in the bowl maintains its own flavor, taste and texture and together is wonderful. And so it is in the United States where every individual with their background, experiences, culture, and custom are together in the same community, the same nation.

So like the bowl of fruit salad we each bring our individual flavor and texture (looks, perspectives, beliefs, values, strengths, etc.) complimenting each other with an explosion of delicious, wonderful tastes that are shared and celebrated together as a single nation called the United States of America.

However, I believe there are forces among us, inside and outside our great nation, which benefit from keeping us divided, including Braver Angels. Braver Angels were born out of the divisiveness of the 2016 election. But, unlike those who choose to perpetuate the divisiveness of our neighbors (career politicians, the extreme right and left, the media — mainstream and otherwise, and individuals who have made it a career to keep the divisiveness alive), Braver Angels members from across the nation, conservatives, liberals, independents, and others are committed to coming to the table, perhaps as strangers but leaving as, if not friends, respectful neighbors, and acquaintances.

If you want to know just how much others share in your love for this country, meet others outside your bubble, and explore the diversity of thought, visit the national Braver Angels organization at <https://braverangels.org/our-story/> and our new local Alliance at <https://www.braverangelspioneervillage.org/>.

*Anthony Tormey is a leadership consultant and the former “red-leaning” co-chair of the Easthampton Better Angels Alliance (before the name was changed to Braver Angels.)*

