

MY TURN

Repairing the fabric of American democracy

By DAVE ROITMAN

How do you feel about the political other side? Are you afraid they're out to ruin the country? Do you sometimes resent them or think they're the enemy? Do you wonder "how could they believe the way they do?" If so, you're not alone. This kind of partisanship is very common today.

In a 2019 paper called "Lethal Mass Partisanship," Nathan Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason reported that over 42% of both Republicans and Democrats view the opposition as "downright evil." How do you think this affects our country? According to Mason, "If citizens use parties as a social dividing line, parties can keep citizens from agreeing to the compromise and cooperation that defines democracy." (From "Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity, by Lilliana Mason," 2018).

I believe our political polarization is at a point where yes, it does threaten our democracy. That's why I joined Braver Angels, one of over 350 organizations working to bridge our political divide. Braver Angels stands out because its workshops and debates quickly get people talking to each to build understanding, not to convince or convert. This is important since many people these days are used to being lectured or scorned and shy away from talking to the other side.

On Oct. 23 and 30, 21 people from our region attended a Braver Angels "Red/Blue Workshop." Ten

were active participants (five "Red" and five "Blue") while the others observed. First the participants identified common stereotypes of their side and why they weren't accurate. After sharing this with the other side, they talked about what they'd just learned about them and what they see they have in common. Next, they merged into mixed groups, asking questions to understand the others' views. Then they worked together "across the divide" to find common ground and generate ideas to work on together.

After the Oct. 30 workshop ended, 17 people stayed to learn more about Braver Angels and talk more about what they'd learned. Here are some of their comments:

"I believe now that people on the other side care about our country, instead of what leaks into my brain from the TV and social media I consume every day." "How did we become who we vote for and not just ourselves as individuals? Classifying each other is just wrong." "From now on when I'm talking to my friends, I'll start taking the opposite point of view to help us open our minds. A lot of the time we wallow in our righteous indignation. What good is that?" "The people who ran this were really fair. Our democracy needs this kind of talk. I felt like I could speak my mind. If you love your country, you'll do this, even if it's hard." "I was surprised to see how much we have in common and how wrong my stereotypes were about the individuals I met today."

"The media is doing us a disservice by pushing us apart. We're all in the same boat, we just have different solutions. It doesn't matter if it's Fox or MSNBC, controversy sells commercials, we need to get beyond that." "I'm in a divided family. I have grown sons who don't like my politics and my wife and I don't see eye to eye. What I did today increases my resolve to keep going." And finally, "I didn't realize until today that I actually don't know anyone from the other side well enough to talk to. I want to change that."

The good news is that you can change that. These workshops were sponsored by two local Braver Angels groups, one based in Greenfield, the other in Northampton.

The Greenfield group is well established and hosts monthly meetings with topics proposed by its members covering today's hot button issues. For information, contact Bill Richardson at bill.richardson2323@gmail.com.

The Northampton-based group is new, and if you join you'll be able to shape what it does. To learn more, check out its website at <https://www.braverangelspioneer-valley.org/> and fill out the Contact Form, or email Dave Roitman at droitman@braverangels.org.

The organization is called Braver Angels for a reason — it takes courage to talk to people from "the other side." But if you care about our democracy, maybe, just maybe, you'll take that step.

Dave Roitman, a Florence resident, is the co-chair of Pioneer Valley Braver Angels.