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### Breaking the Cycle of Mutual Hostility

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# Daniel Frost

## Breaking the Cycle of Mutual Hostility

The Pew Research Center recently released [findings](#) on partisan hostility in the United States that were disheartening but not surprising. Pew reported that the rates of people with positive feelings about people in the other political party had been sliding steadily downward for decades. The percentage of Democrats and Republicans with “very unfavorable” views of people in the opposite party nearly tripled between 1994 and 2022. But over the past six years, there has been a change: the slide has turned into a cliff. The percentage of Democrats who agree that Re-

publicans are “immoral” rose from 35% in 2016 to 63% in 2022. The percentage of Republicans who agree that Democrats are “dishonest” rose from 45% in 2016 to 72% in 2022. Both Republicans and Democrats saw a 19-point increase over this same period on the question of whether members of the other party were “unintelligent.”

What caught my eye was the fact that the increases in negative feelings were in many cases almost identical for Democrats and Republicans. It wasn’t that one party simply started

hating the other more, it was that both parties despised each other in tandem. The contempt manifested by each side became yet an additional reason for the other's disdain. Locked in an escalating conflict in which there can be no winners, only losers, the two sides contribute to a dynamic that makes dialogue unlikely and compromise impossible.

What should we do in the face of such seemingly intractable conflict? How should we speak and write about crucial topics, including marriage and family, knowing that opinions are often polarized and disagreement runs deep?

In a seminal address on [nonviolence](#), Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. explains that we must not "seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding." When we are wronged and "retaliate in kind," we "do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe." He continues: "Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives."

This is much easier said than done. The "natural man [or woman]" (Mosiah 3:19) in each of us would often rather seek revenge than reconciliation. But the ethic of "an eye for an eye" leaves us all blind, as Gandhi is reported to have said. We can only

see clearly when we respect others as who they are: children of God, our brothers and sisters, beings with immense potential and promise.

This does not mean that we downplay the depth of our disagreements or assent to beliefs we do not hold. Only superficial friendships are possible when people are afraid to say what they really think. But in all our striving and wrestling with difficult issues, we must not indulge the temptation to hate or carry contempt for our brothers and sisters. We must have a will toward reconciliation in the truth—an insistence on recognizing the humanity of others combined with a willingness to see and follow the truth wherever it leads.

Is this a reasonable hope? Is it possible both to stand up for what we think is right and to be friends with "them," our political or ideological opponents? The answer is yes! Famous examples include [Michelle Obama and George W. Bush](#), professors [Robert P. George and Cornel West](#), and former U.S. Supreme Court Justices [Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia](#). In each case, a friendship was forged across deep differences of opinion. Even though they disagreed profoundly about issues each thought were very important, they did not allow this disagreement to blind them to the humanity and goodness that could be found in the other.

In fact, an [opera](#) has even been written about Ginsburg and Scalia, friends who became icons for competing legal movements. The opera highlights many of their legal differences, but near the end the singers who play Ginsburg and Scalia sing, "We are different, we are one." No downplaying of the differences, but also no contempt because of the differences. [Speaking](#) of Ginsburg, (the real-life) Scalia once said, "What's not to like? Except her views on the law."

Abraham Lincoln perhaps [said](#) it best in his first inaugural address, a moment with even more partisan strife than the present. After laying out the case for why the South should not secede, Lincoln said, "I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart

and hearth-stone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Though the temptation to dismiss or disparage others can be strong, we need not succumb to it. We rightly try to defend what we think is true, but we must never lose sight of the truth that "they," like "us," are children of God, made in the image and likeness of God. As professors Robert P. George and Cornel West [write](#), "Whether you are a person of the left, the right, or the center, there are reasonable people of goodwill who do not share your fundamental convictions." We should be willing to get to know such people and listen to what they have to say. And who knows? Maybe they will teach us something we do not know. And maybe, just maybe, we might find a friend.