

How to Talk to “Middle America” about Progressive Issues

by Douglas Orbaker

This article is about how people who hold progressive ideas about government, economics, or the world at large can talk to people who don't already share these ideas. If I have any competence to write about this, it probably comes from two sources. First, I grew up in a fairly conservative Republican family in a small town where everyone (as far as I knew) held pretty much the same opinions, and the only diversity of opinion was between the Presbyterians and the Methodists. Second, I have more than thirty years as the pastor of small-town, relatively conservative churches in Ohio and Pennsylvania. During this time, my own political and social convictions have moved further and further to the left, but I have continued to love, trust, and work with people who hold far more conservative ideas. I have usually managed to maintain working relationships and still have social, political, and economic discussions which have helped people to change their ideas. Although my work has been primarily in a Christian context, I hope some of my experience may be helpful to others whether they share that context or not.

I find many of my progressive friends becoming increasingly frustrated as they try to talk to people who disagree. It is even more difficult for progressives if people don't even want to think about an issue, but trust elected officials to do the right thing about the issues of the world. Other progressives don't even try to talk to people outside of their movement for social change, because they are so convinced that everyone outside their group holds opposing viewpoints. The problem, of course, is that this isolates us from many of the rest of the people whom we need as supporters, and who might very well become supporters if they were helped to understand the issues. Most people are not likely to have their minds changed by mass demonstrations or protests unless they can understand the reasons for the actions. This is not to discount the importance of direct actions such as vigils, protests, street theater, marches, etc. However, such actions serve to create discussion and to demonstrate to the power-holders the size and commitment of the people who want change. Such actions will never change the opinions of the average person on the street unless we can follow up the action with good discussions of the ideas and convictions that led us to the action.

Example: The anti-nuclear power movement succeeded in changing the opinion of many people who thought that nuclear power plants were going to bring us an unlimited source of cheap, safe electrical power. During that time, I lived near the proposed Zimmer power plant in Southern Ohio; in fact, the local anti-nuclear group “Zimmer Area Citizens” met in the church of which I was the pastor. There were some mass demonstrations at Zimmer, and these served to awaken a lot of discussion. There was also a lot of behind-the-scenes legal work which presented the case that the plant was not in compliance with safety codes. The real work of changing public opinion, however, came in other places. PTA groups talked about what danger there might be to school children in case of an accident, the local Fire and Police Departments questioned their ability to manage and provide help for any such emergency. These are the venues in which people who are “on the fence” are helped to move into a position of taking some action for the betterment of their community.

Remember, most people get their news from the mass media, especially television. They will always see only the most extreme parts of any direct action, and never hear any explanation of why people are protesting. This is pretty simple: TV stations and networks and newspapers are owned by the same people and companies who own other businesses and who make money from war, hunger, child labor, unfair trade, and all of the other things that bring about mass protests. The mass media are not likely ever to be our ally in telling of the need for social change or explaining any issue from a progressive viewpoint. Forget it! You must be prepared to talk to people who are not part of the movement; the media are not going to do it for you.

Whom Are You Trying to Change, and Why?

It is helpful to be pretty specific here. Are you trying to challenge the head of the local right-wing militia on racial issues? It probably is a waste of time! But if you are trying to talk to other people about the same issues, you might find some success. George Lakey (see

<http://www.trainingforchange.org>) suggests dividing the community into five sections, from the most conservative to the most progressive, from those most likely to agree with us to those who disagree most strongly. He suggests that to change public policy, it is **not** necessary to bring everyone into the group that is most like ourselves. Instead, if each group moves **one step** on a scale of 1 – 5, that is enough to change a community or a society. If the center moves only one step to the left, those on the right are increasingly isolated. Our protests against the plans for war against Iraq are not likely to change the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld supporters. However as the center has moved to oppose this war before it started, they have found themselves isolated from the majority of public opinion — a place in which no politician wants to be. It is helpful to be specific about whose opinions you are trying to change.

Most of us will be talking to our neighbors, co-workers, family members, and the occasional person who asks us a question during some kind of direct action. It probably is not helpful to begin to try to change the attitudes and ideas of people we don't know. We can sometimes reach a larger audience through letters to the editor of our local newspapers, but that serves mainly to awaken public discussion. It is through talking to people and groups of which we are a part that we can probably change the most people. I admit that being the pastor of a congregation has given me an automatic group of people with whom I can talk about my ideas. Others may not have such a group. However, almost everyone who holds progressive ideas can find someone who holds different ideas. Focus on the people and groups around you. Just because people aren't willing to walk a picket line with you, don't assume that they don't agree. It may be that they have very good reasons for not taking a particular action and are expressing themselves in ways that you don't know.

Get to Know the People You are Talking To

In focusing on the people around you, the first thing to do is to **listen** to them, care about them, and learn about and share their concerns. If you don't care enough about them to hear their concerns, why should they waste their time listening to yours? Almost everyone, no matter how uneducated or politically conservative, can spot a phony. If your care for them and their concerns is not genuine, they will recognize it immediately and probably reject your ideas in the process. Most people change their political and social ideas only very slowly, and only in the context of shared experiences with people whom they trust and care about. They are not going to trust and care about people who don't trust and care about them.

Every community has its own set of special events and local groups that are an important part of that community's life. It is often important to be a part of community center

fund-raisers, church suppers, high-school athletic events, and other events. These are the events by which small town communities identify themselves. If we expect people to care about our special events for progressive causes, we need to show some interest in many other such events that have no consequences for social change whatsoever. Participating in such events helps to prevent those who hold progressive ideas from being seen as too “different” or as not a participating member of the community. This is an important part of establishing trust and becoming a friend to the people around us with whom we will talk.

Example: I am not a great sports fan, and eventually everyone in the congregation came to know it. However, when three of the high-school boys from the congregation were on the basketball team, I went to a lot of games. I did not try to show a false knowledge of or interest in basketball, but I wanted to show an interest in the young men whose families were important to me. Not the most interesting way of spending an evening, but a great way to come to know people.

We also need to confront our own class-based attitudes toward those who hold more conservative ideas or are not so politically active. Those who were raised in progressive or highly educated homes need to be especially careful about the things which separate them from the people with whom they need to talk. Too often progressives assume that people who do not share our concerns, passions, and political ideas are either uneducated or ignorant. If “they” were only smart enough to see things from our point of view they would agree with us. We need to be careful of our class and educational biases. If we are talking to people who have less education and more limited experiences, we should not expect them to share our worldview. If we are speaking to people who have never visited any foreign country, the use of foreign words and “in” jargon will only serve to show off a division between what we know and they don't. There are few things that are more likely to make people turn off our ideas.

Finally, most people consider the community which they love to be part of the nation which they love. Criticism of U.S. policy is often seen as a verbal attack on the United States. However, there are obviously many policies which progressives will oppose. It is important to express this opposition in ways that do not seem to attack the U.S. if we are to change the attitudes of most people.

What Do You Say after You Say “Hello?”

OK, you are a part of some community or group where you feel that most others disagree with you. You have participated in the activities and cared about the people of

this group. How do you start the conversation? What do you say?

1. Find the things that connect people before we find the things that separate us. We have many common concerns, even though we express these concerns in different ways. All of us want the best for our children and grandchildren, and very few people define the “best” only in materialistic terms. All of us want to build stronger communities where we and our children can be safe and secure. All of us want to know that we and our families will have a safe home and enough to eat. What we need to see is that everyone in the world wants many of the same things for themselves and their families. If we can begin to explain the national and international issues that concern us in the specific and sometimes local terms of these common concerns, almost everyone can begin to understand and agree with them. Establish some sense of common values and mutual trust before you try to change anyone’s opinion.

2. When talking about international issues, try to use specific, local, and personalized examples. Whether we like it or not, many potential allies have never been outside the U.S. and don’t have a sense of international concern except when they see news footage of some natural disaster. However, anyone can understand local examples which compare the actions of nations to the actions of individuals.

Example: During the first Arab Oil boycott of the early 1970’s, Henry Kissinger was saying that if the U.S. needs that oil, we have the “right” to go over there and take what we need, by force if necessary. When one very conservative retired businessman told me how strongly he agreed with this, I asked, “When you were in the coal business, if someone’s family was cold did they have the ‘right’ to come into your business and take it by force?” By comparing what is acceptable behavior for a nation to what is acceptable behavior for an individual, I was able to change his support for the extreme position of Mr. Kissinger.

3. Most people think locally, not globally. Start with where they are and help them move into new ways of seeing the world. If people are concerned about the hazardous waste dump proposed near their community, they are in a “teachable moment” to begin to learn about environmental damage around the world and the great profits being made by the companies which collect and dump garbage and toxic waste. If local farmers are losing money because of the contracts they are forced to accept from big processing companies, they are ready to learn how the global control of our food system is being concentrated in fewer and fewer companies and how this results in increased hunger around the world. Look for those moments when the world situation imposes itself in harmful ways upon your community. These are the moments when people

are ready to learn and do more. They will try to act in what they perceive as their best self-interest. Your job is to help to enlighten and widen that sense of self-interest. Work from their experience in order to make your points.

4. Sometimes it helps to reverse the situation. If we can help people to see things from the point of view of the other side, all situations will look different. An attack on Afghanistan sounded like a great thing to many people after September 11, 2001. However, those who could also see that it means the destruction of villages and deaths of people who had nothing to do with Al Qaeda had a very different viewpoint. If all you see are bombs dropping on someone else’s town it looks much easier to accept than if you think about them dropping on your own town.

5. It is usually best to avoid personal attacks. In many small communities almost everyone is related to (or at least a friend of) everyone else. Anything that is seen as a personal attack will offend not only the one person you are speaking about, but many friends and relatives as well. This is also true on a national scale. I regularly participate in a Saturday morning peace vigil in the small town where I live. Some of the participants have signs which call George Bush a “warmonger” and “oil baron.” I happen to agree with this, but I prefer to hold other signs. Many of the people who see the vigil voted for George Bush, and these signs put them in the position of a teenage girl whose parents dislike her boyfriend. The more the parents complain, the more the girl feels forced to defend him. Likewise, the more we attack George Bush personally, the more those who voted for him will feel forced to defend their choice. Don’t put people in the position of feeling that they have to defend George W. Bush.

6. Be careful in your use of language. There are jargon words that some groups use commonly which carry a very different connotation for people who are not in that group. Many people, including a few who define themselves as “Christians,” do not believe in the traditional theistic concept of God. However, the use of the word “atheist” conjures up for many people images of Satanic cults or Communist cells, neither of which are very popular in Middle America. In recent years, the word liberal has become burdened with very negative connotations. Progressives often react the same way to words other groups use. We may not understand it, but many people who call themselves “Conservative Christians” are not part of the radical right, and some people consider themselves to be followers of “family values” without being homophobic and opposed to all divorce. It is important to use words that clearly express what we believe and work to understand others as individuals. “Liberal Atheist Leftists” and “Family Values Christians” are never going to be able to talk to each other until they learn to get past the labels.

Some Examples: The same words and symbols mean different things to different people.

Family Values:

Homophobic; wives submit to your husbands
-OR-
Working for a stable home for our children

Government Spending:

For the military; wasteful
-OR-
For welfare, people who don't deserve it

American Flag:

Symbol of imperialism; feelings of anger
-OR-
Symbol of justice and democracy; feelings of pride

Demonstrations:

People standing up for justice and right
-OR-
Angry people making fools of themselves

Free Trade Treaties:

Major cause of hunger; destruction of democracy
-OR -
Good for business; good for everyone

7. Be careful about things that seem to provoke conflict. Many people have never learned that conflict can have positive results, and see only the destructive possibilities. This is especially true in small-town and rural societies. In many areas, almost everyone is related to (or at least friends with) everyone else. People depend on each other in ways that people in urban settings don't. When I lived in an apartment in Columbus, Ohio, I never knew any of my neighbors. When I moved to a small town in Pennsylvania, my next-door neighbors brought coffee and cookies over before I was done unpacking. People in these relationship-oriented societies are often very afraid of conflict. If they dislike what I have done, they will talk to someone else who is close to me about it, almost never to me directly. To those with an urban consciousness, this looks like backbiting and a failure to communicate. In some places, however, it provides a non-threatening way of dealing with people while keeping friendly relationships intact. Remember, some people value the relationship more highly than the issues on which they disagree.

Example: For many years, I was a pastor in a small town in Southern Ohio. This community had been a hotbed of anti-slavery and Underground Railroad

activity, and there had been many free black families in this community long before the Civil War. However, until the mid-1980's there was still a "Black" cemetery, and no African-Americans had ever been buried in the large community cemetery. When I asked black families about this, I discovered that they all knew that such discrimination was illegal and that their family members could be buried anywhere. At the time of a death in the family, however, no one had ever wanted to take the chance of breaking the precarious relationships that they had with white families. It was not until every gravesite in the "Black" cemetery was filled that people were willing to take the chance rather than have to take the bodies of their loved ones out of town.

8. Whatever you do or say, think about how it looks and sounds to those who are outside of the movement. Are you using all the in-words that you use as verbal shorthand in meetings? Are you using a lot of initials and abbreviations which some people don't understand? Just because your listeners know that WTO stands for World Trade Organization (assuming they do know that) doesn't mean that they understand how the WTO was formed or what it does. Does the vocabulary you use help to explain or does it serve to separate you from those who didn't take college preparatory classes in high school and who have never been outside the U.S.? Does your manner come across as a friendly person who shares their concerns, or as a know-it-all who wants to change their lives?

9. Don't assume that just because someone is not active in your movement that they are on the other side. As hard as it is for us to understand, many people don't read the news and think about international events in the same way we do. They may not know what lies behind the headlines. There are also people who do have a little understanding of the issues, but don't want to understand them any better for fear that their worldview might have to change. Most of us want to believe that the people who hold power around us are good, honest, and have the best interest of the whole world at heart. It is frightening to think that our government, which we all learned was so interested in truth and justice, has been responsible for outrageous violations of human rights around the world, has supported cruel dictators, and trained the very soldiers who are the instruments of oppression. Don't expect that anyone will make a complete change of worldview in one event. My own process has taken many years and probably is not yet finished. I first found my conservative ideas challenged by the Civil Rights Movement, then by Vietnam. It was many years, however, before I found that I needed to probe more deeply into every issue, and that I almost always came to a progressive position. This is far more difficult than simply believing that those who hold power will do the right thing.

10. Be careful about overwhelming people with the issues. Sometimes people see how bad things are, but see no way to change anything. The problems seem too big, those in power seem too powerful, and we seem so small. Therefore, they are afraid to try to challenge the power that seems so huge. For these people, it is important to present a range of possibilities and actions. If the only way to work towards a safer food supply is to demonstrate in the streets, then not many people are likely to do it, and the nation's food supply will become even less safe. But there are many other options. People can write to Congress, demand that the government allocate more funds for meat inspectors, avoid fast-food chains, buy local meat, and keep their local school cafeteria open instead of leasing it to McDonald's. Remember, not everyone has to do what you do. Just divide the whole range of options into five groups, and think about moving each group only one step. There is seldom a situation in which there are only two options. Even though you may pick one of those options, help others see the possibilities of acting in different ways.

Many people will work in these ways who would never think of joining a demonstration or picket line. It is also very important to show examples of success. Sometimes David really does slay Goliath, and sometimes corporate or military power really does buckle under the pressure of ordinary people. (See "Doing Democracy" by Bill Moyer for many examples.)

11. Talk when people are ready to listen. I know a person who was at work when she heard about the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. She responded by saying, "What did we expect? We've bombed enough other countries, why are we surprised when they bomb us?" Needless to say, her co-workers were shocked and angry with her, and if she had not had long-term trusting relationships, it would have been difficult to stay at that job. September 11, 2001 put our entire country into a time of shock and grief. At such a time it is impossible to carry on that kind of discussion. At that time, I joined several public events that expressed grief, shock, and fear. A few weeks later I felt that people were beginning to be able to have the kind of discussion that should have been engendered by that event. At that time, I began to speak publicly about the need for building and maintaining peace as a just way of responding to the attack. Even then, however, I never asked, "Well, what did we expect?" Many people are not able to hear that question. Build long-term relationships of trust, and speak to people when they are able to hear and what they are able to hear from within these relationships.

12. Everybody needs support. There are a few people who are individualistic enough to try to live their lives completely alone. The rest of us ordinary people live and work in groups. To help newly changing attitudes become long-term patterns of belief and action, most people

need to be part of a supportive group. People need to be a part of their local lodge, club, union, church, or whatever other group may exist. They find comfort and reassurance in those groups. If people are to adopt new ideas which lead to new attitudes and actions, they will either need to find new groups to join, or begin to change the attitudes of the groups to which they already belong. It may be necessary to build new community groups around the issues that people are feeling locally. It is also important to connect with people in the surrounding region who share these concerns. You didn't form your political views in a vacuum, and you work with others to express and uphold your views. Don't expect anyone to accept new ideas without others around who agree.

Example: Since 1999 I have taken several groups from the little town in which I was living to Nicaragua to help rebuild and to learn about the reality of life in Central America. I have also led similar groups of people who were from a variety of communities all over our area. With a few exceptions, the people who were part of the regional group have gone one time, but not returned. Many of the people who were part of the local group, who see each other regularly throughout the year, who know each other's families, and who share other activities have gone back to Nicaragua year after year. They are beginning to understand some of the ways in which economic corporate globalization is hurting their friends in Nicaragua. I believe that a part of this is due to the supportive continuing conversation they can have in their local community.

Finally

All of my examples in this article have been about small town or rural life. This is because I have lived and worked in small towns. If you live and work in cities or suburbs, there will probably be more groups of progressives (who are easy to talk to), and different groups of "Middle America" people (with whom you may have difficulty talking.) I believe that many of these same ideas will work in those contexts.

I have a great trust in the wisdom of common ordinary people. I have been learning from them my entire life. If progressive people can move out of their comfortable "bubble" with an attitude of exploration, there is much to learn and gain. We can approach people as friends and help them to see progressive ideas clearly, instead of the distortions they hear on TV news. We can show them a variety of ways in which they can be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. I believe that most people will make intelligent choices. Don't be afraid that "they" are so different. Talk to your friends and neighbors about the issues that concern you. Good luck.