

Every month since February 1987 the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation has produced one-hour TV programs on issues related to peace, social justice, economics, the environment, and nonviolence. The Olympia FOR's program airs several times every week for the entire month on Thurston Community Television (TCTV), channel 22 for Thurston County's cable TV subscribers. You can see TCTV's schedule at www.tctv.net.

You can also watch the program described below (**and many more than 100 of our previous interview programs and special programs**) at the Olympia FOR's website, www.olympiafor.org. Simply click the **TV programs** link, scroll down, and click the program you want to watch. Many of our website's TV program listings also include links to documents describing the program in Word and/or .pdf format.

SEPTEMBER 2015

“How to Talk Politics with People Different from You”

This article by Glen Anderson, producer and host of this TV series, summarizes most of the things our guests said during the TV interview, and also includes a few additional points that we did not have time to say during the hour.

The Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's September 2015 TV program deals constructively with our nation's political polarization. We explore practical ways to communicate across the political divide, so we can all move forward.

When Americans have such sharply different values and worldviews, we lack a common starting point about what is real and true. This makes it hard to have rational conversations about controversial issues – and hard to solve public policy problems.

Are we stuck with escalating polarization? Or can we find better ways to respect the basic humanity even of people with whom we disagree?

Of course, when we advocate for particular public policies, we want to convince people on the other side. But before we can persuade anyone, we need to find starting points, strategies and methods that will allow us to become more effective in persuading the public, the media, the politicians, and other decision-makers. Some kinds of strategies and methods work better than others. Let's learn from what works!

Three guests help us explore this topic. All have decades of skilled experience and many wise insights:

- Michael Savoca has volunteered as an advocate for a variety of public policy issues and draws from a variety of other experiences. I have enjoyed hearing Michael share his experiences and his wise insights into how to discuss political issues effectively.
- John Van Eenwyk is a Ph.D. clinical psychologist and an Episcopal priest. He has solid experience working with people who have suffered from political and physical violence in many parts of the world. He also founded the International Trauma Treatment Program, which this TV program has featured several times over the years.
- Regon Unsoeld draws from decades of experience as a highly dedicated and creative classroom teacher who has helped students grapple with controversial issues. He has volunteered at the local, state and local levels of the teachers' union, and he has volunteered in many community level issues and activities to support democracy and human rights.

Our Politically Polarized Society

Why has this polarization occurred? What are some of the root causes?

John pointed out that when Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, one of his first acts was to have the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) eliminate the “equal time” rule that previously had made TV stations provide some balance for opposing views. Also, at about the same time, TV networks stopped subsidizing their news programs and started making news programs be self-supporting through paid advertising. In order to attract viewers, this change led to more “infotainment” and superficiality instead of substantive news coverage.

Regon pointed out that mainstream news media also use “false balance” that undermines solid information (*e.g.*, the scientific consensus about the climate crisis) by giving equal prominence to opponents who do not have facts on their side (*e.g.*, the “climate deniers”). This promotes polarization and publicizes some bias rather supporting reality.

In our increasingly complex society, people specialize and become more separate. Years ago many people’s lives had much similarity. With fewer shared experience we must use language to bridge these gaps to protect civil society.

Decades ago nearly everyone read the same newspapers and watched the same TV news broadcasts, so many folks shared more of a common world view. Now people seem to get their news from sources that reinforce their own positions, and they avoid reading or listening to viewpoints that are different. Each side tends to regard its own positions as based on rational thoughts and values, but its opponents’ positions as based on lies and biases. This is a very fragile foundation for democracy.

Mainstream media are failing to report honestly and accurately. Giant corporations own media and exert bias into how issues are covered – and which issues to ignore altogether. This leads to public ignorance, misinformation and **dis**information. Alternative sources (both good and bad) are filling in the gaps.

Perhaps people recognize that the ordinary political system no longer works – that “big money” and other powerful forces really make the decisions, so people feel powerless. When people feel powerless they lash out and blame others.

John, a Ph.D. clinical psychologist, mentioned some research that has shown that someone who is polarized tends to have an absolutist assumption that there is only one workable solution to a given problem, instead of being open to alternatives and nuances. At the same time, he said, people who are polarized do not think they are extreme, but rather tend to think of themselves as moderate. People holding polarized views think they are more moderate than even people who hold their own similar views.

Regon said that polarized adversaries tend to feed off each other and actually need each other. Another person added that we see this in the wording of fundraising letters from political parties and issue advocacy groups that lambaste the opponents and plead for donations to counteract those nasty people on the other side.

If we disagree with someone who is on the opposite side of an issue, why should we behave in a civil manner? This just works better, as our guests explain during the remainder of this TV interview.

Remedies to Reduce Polarization

Michael urged us to recognize that people differ from each other in various ways – and that is OK. His experience – and research he has read – show that people differ in various ways. People organize their desks, their houses, their thinking, etc., into various ways. Likewise when we observe one event, different people will see and understand the same event differently.

From person to person – and from culture to culture – behaviors such as eye contact can mean very different things. For some people, direct eye contact is a way to engage and connect, but for other people it is perceived as a confrontation against the other person's authority. It is best not to make assumptions, but to look to the other person for clues and cues about how best to interact.

Michael, drawing of his professional experience working with teenage juvenile delinquents, saw that respecting the other person's humanity was a first step toward creating a bond, and only later might behavior improve as a result of this mutual respect.

Scientific research shows that the brains of liberals and conservatives function somewhat differently.

Regon explained an interesting way to help people recognize that each person has filters through which each person sees the world. He brought an empty cardboard roll from toilet paper on which he had written words such as “values,” “beliefs,” “experiences,” and “etc.” and put one end of the cardboard to his eye and looked through it. Each person does this from his or her own perspective, so each of us filters what we see, so we perceive and understand things differently.

Our filters operate 24-7 without our awareness. They filter out anything that challenges what we believe and reinforce what we already believe.

He used this prop and metaphor at the start of each school year to help his students appreciate and respect differences. He found it helped his students deal with controversial issues in the classroom. He asked students to be curious about why other people think and feel differently instead of jumping to judgments against them.

All three guests agreed on three very important remedies for polarization: See other people as worthy of a civil conversation. Honestly seek to understand them. Practice good listening skills.

John urged us to “see the people on the other side as people of good will who are worthy of having a conversation with.” He suggested ways to proceed.

Regon said people want to be understood and valued, so we should listen for the emotional aspects of what they are saying and not put them on the defensive. He differentiated between language that is “assertive” vs. “aggressive.” We should have a genuine interest in where the other person is coming from, not simply hammer them with our facts and viewpoints. We owe it to the other person (and to the success of our conversation) if we listen attentively to the other person – especially for feelings and emotional parts of what they are saying – and affirming those feelings, clarifying understanding, etc., so we do not put the person “on guard” or feeling attacked or defensive. Then we can look for possible common ground

Michael suggested that early in the conversation we should seek a “buy-in” for engaging in a real conversation. He also suggested ways to proceed.

Glen mentioned that when the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's Committee for Alternatives to the Death Penalty sets up a canopy booth at public events, the banner across the front of the booth does not command a demand, “Abolish the death penalty.” Instead it asks a question, “Are you troubled by the death penalty?” We chose this wording specifically to be more welcoming, to invite people to come and talk with us, because we are good listeners.

Glen told of an experience a few years ago when the Olympia FOR's death penalty committee had set up this booth at a large public event in Tacoma. Glen had just finished briefing a new volunteer about our "good listening" approach when the next person who came along was a middle-aged woman who said she supported the death penalty although – as a strong Catholic – she recognized that Catholic social teaching opposed it. Our new volunteer listened and interacted in a friendly way throughout their 15-minute conversation. At the end, the visitor felt comfortable moving into a more neutral position and said she would further study Catholic social teaching about the death penalty.

Michael emphasized the need to reach across various kinds of divides. He uses neutral words and images that do not "put down" or antagonize the other person. When people differ in religion or politics, he pays attention to using a positive tone of voice and body language, because these can be even more important than the actual words.

Through decades of teaching high school, Regon helped students grapple constructively with controversial issues and find common ground. He summarized how he did this. He guided the students in using consensus to adopt some "operating principles" to create a safe space for exploring ideas open-mindedly rather than trying to change other people's minds, and prohibiting accusations and name-calling. As a result, class after class was able to choose highly controversial topics, explore them rationally, and find common ground that everyone could agree would be good ways toward solving the public policy problems.

In public life, people tend to argue in ways that attack and bully each other, with the intent to dominate and win. All three of our guests have long experience using better ways to discuss issues. They ask questions, listen attentively in a friendly way (including listening to the emotional or experience-based content), seek to understand the other people, practice a supportiveness rather than put the other person on the defensive, and explore the issues together toward finding common ground on at least some aspects of the topic.

Often the other person's values, experiences, and emotional needs are more important than the facts. If we are alert to these and address the other person's interests and needs, we will be better able to make progress on the facts and the public policy solutions.

Sometimes it is helpful to do a "reality check" by asking what the other person understood that I have just said. If we "test the water" in this way we can clarify each other's understanding.

It's easy to find where we disagree, but it's harder to find where we do agree. We need to look for – and focus on – areas of possible agreement.

Regon said that his high school students usually start out skeptical and disbelieving that they can find common ground on a controversial issue, but they actually develop the skills and do reach common ground.

Of course, there are some situations when we do not have the time or place for the kind of conversation we'd like to have. And there are some individuals who – for whatever reasons – are not willing or able to discuss in this way.

But if we do have a conversation with someone and we can't find any common ground, at least we can leave the impression that – even if the other person still thinks we are wrong – at least that person will appreciate that we are nice people to talk with.

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Effective Persuasion: Strategies, Methods, Examples

Discussing something with another person is useful simply to improve mutual understanding. Also, in many cases we would like to persuade the other person to agree with us about the issue. Our three guests discussed some strategies, methods and examples for doing this.

The practices that we described thus far during the TV interview would open up space to make it easier for the other person (and ourselves) to move farther along toward wise solutions. Usually such progress is incremental, so it is not realistic to expect a hard opponent to flip totally onto our side, any more than we would flip totally onto the opponent's side.

We won't turn a strong opponent into a strong supporter of our viewpoint. People's feelings and thoughts about an issue exist along a spectrum from opposition to support. Seek to move the person slightly along that spectrum. Examples: If the other person is a moderate opponent, create space for them to consider moving toward a more neutral, undecided position. If the other person is undecided, seek to warm them up to becoming moderately toward your view.

Often we can find something that the other person said that we can agree with, even if we disagree with most of what the person has said. We can express agreement with that particular thing, and build from there.

Based on the other person's values and worldview, perhaps we can find some approaches or reasoning that the other person will be able to understand and accept.

Sometimes people who are religious could be approached through exploring religious values that we share in common with them, and then proceeding. (But it does not work to do this insincerely from the outside or without real understanding of the other person's faith.)

Recently Nebraska's state legislature abolished the death penalty in that heavily Republican state. Conservative state legislators were able to explain to their constituents why they voted to abolish the death penalty, using reasoning that conservative Republicans would understand. For example, because conservatives do not like expensive "big government" programs that don't work, these legislators showed that the death penalty was an expensive waste of their tax dollars that failed to reduce crime and actually was sentencing innocent people to death. Some "pro-life" legislators explained that the death penalty violated their "pro-life" values. And so forth.

George Lakoff and others have written thoughtfully about how people "frame" and "re-frame" issues to influence how other people perceive them. "Frames" are clusters of consistent images or narratives that guide how people process information. Each "frame" relates to a deeply held value or worldview, so we are more effective in persuading other people when we describe our issue in ways consistent with the other people's existing "frames."

- **EXAMPLE #1:** People who oppose governmental services "frame" taxes in terms of the "tax burden" and "tax relief," which makes them seem oppressive. But folks who want governments to provide services that the public needs recognizes that this requires tax revenue. Therefore, we could "re-frame" the concept of taxes as "dues we pay for the shared costs of living in a civilized society."
- **EXAMPLE #2:** Our political and economic system has allowed some people to become extremely rich. It is only fair that when extremely rich people die, an "estate tax" should recycle a modest portion of that wealth back into the public treasury. But politicians who cater to the extremely rich oppose an "estate tax," so – in order to persuade people who are NOT extremely rich – they refer to it as a "death tax." Everybody dies – rich and poor alike – so politicians who cater to extremely rich people deceive the general public into opposing an "estate tax" by making the public think it is a "death tax" that pertains to everyone, when actually only a very few extremely rich people would pay.
- **EXAMPLE #3:** Mainstream politicians and media keep promoting the image that the U.S. is entitled to be the world's leader, so the U.S. is entitled to make other countries do what the U.S. tells them to do. This

“frame” is so thoroughly ingrained in the American political culture that many Americans support the U.S.’s military attacks on other nations.

There are many other examples of “framing” and “re-framing.” For example, the military budget is commonly – but inaccurately – termed the “defense” budget. Very little of the military budget is really for our “defense,” but most of it is for “offense,” but “defense” sounds better to the public, so the government and hawks feed it to us with that term, but we should insist on calling it the “military” budget.

The abortion debate is framed with two positive sounding words, “life” and “choice.” Each side uses its preferred term to refer to itself and uses negative words against the other side.

While discussions and arguments about public policy typically focus on facts and logic, many people are more likely to remember – and be moved by – stories of people’s first-hand experiences. Sometimes a human being’s own personal story will be more memorable and persuasive than facts. Be alert to opportunities to share our own experiences and stories, and to invite other people to share theirs. This can humanize an otherwise difficult conversation.

John shared two stories that illustrate how recognizing the other person’s humanity can help us transcend polarization:

- Decades ago a small church had a minister who was politically “left” at a time when this made him unpopular with the upper economic class. Among the people in the congregation who wanted to fire their left-wing minister was a rich, powerful man who pressured the congregation’s president. But the congregation’s president replied that when his own wife was dying, the minister held her hands during the final 24 hours of her life, and when she died the minister held this man’s hand for the next 24 hours. His human touch was more important than his politics.
- During Mohandas Gandhi’s long campaign for India’s independence, he supported some labor strikes. During the first labor strike at a mill, the workers were suffering badly without any income, and they were near to giving up because of their severe financial need. An anonymous donor donated enough cash to keep the workers’ labor movement alive. Later it was discovered that the anonymous donor was the owner of the mill, who donated it because he felt the workers’ movement had validity and he wanted to support it so see what fruits it might bring.

While emotions are important factors, we should pay attention to whether they are useful or not in a particular setting. Some people enjoy getting angry and venting, but sometimes this can be utterly ineffective – or even counter-productive – in persuading someone. There is a big difference between venting and organizing.

Regon said it can be useful to come up with tough questions for people on each side of an issue – including ourselves – to challenge each person to “shake our certainties” and to think more deeply and wisely.

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Closing Encouragement

Our society seems to be suffering from escalating polarization. Are we stuck with this, or can we find better ways to respect the basic humanity even of people with whom we disagree?

The Olympia FOR invites each of us to practice more humane, nonviolent communication in our person-to-person conversations and at the larger community and national levels.

Of course, we who advocate for particular public policies do want to persuade people on the other side. But we can find better ways to raise our issues so that we will be more effective in moving the public, the media, the politicians, and our society's other decision-makers. Some kinds of strategies and arguments work better than others. Let's learn from what works!

We invite people to explore resources such as these:

Glen recommended four good sources of information about what we've been discussing:

- The "Nonviolent Communication" method developed by Marshall Rosenberg offers books, videos, and workshops through various websites. A web search will find many resources.
- The "Public Conversations Project" helps communities discuss controversial issues in civilized ways. Visit www.publicconversations.org
- George Lakoff's "Rockridge Institute" closed a few years ago, but resources about "framing" and "re-framing" are still available through www.rockridgeinstitute.org
- "Creating a Culture of Peace" is a comprehensive training in various aspects of nonviolence, including some of what we've discussed here. A decade ago the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation conducted several training workshops, and we could do more. See www.creatingacultureofpeace.org

You can get information about a wide variety of issues related to peace, social justice and nonviolence by contacting the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation at (360) 491-9093 or www.olympiafor.org