

I NEVER THOUGHT OF IT THAT WAY

How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times



WE THINK WE HAVE THE ANSWERS, BUT WE NEED TO BE ASKING A LOT MORE QUESTIONS.

Journalist Mónica Guzmán is the loving liberal daughter of Mexican immigrants who voted—twice—for Donald Trump. When the country could no longer see straight across the political divide, Mónica set out to find what was blinding us and discovered the most eye-opening tool we're not using: our own built-in curiosity.

Partisanship is up, trust is down, and our social media feeds make us sure we're right and everyone else is ignorant (or worse). But avoiding one another is hurting our relationships and our society.

In this timely, personal guide, Mónica, the chief storyteller for the national cross-partisan depolarization organization Braver Angels, takes you to the real front lines of a crisis that threatens to grind America to a halt—broken conversations among confounded people. She shows you how to overcome the fear and certainty that surround us to finally do what only seems impossible: understand and even learn from people in your life whose whole worldview is different from or even opposed to yours.

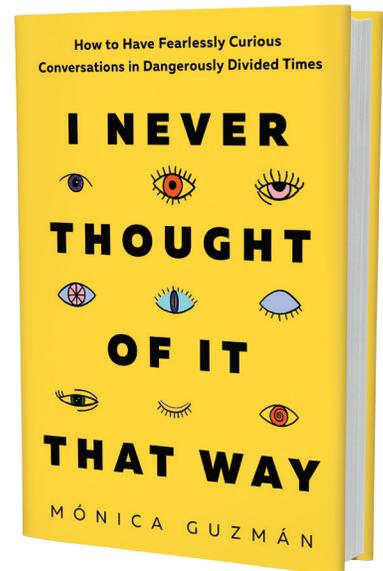
Drawing from cross-partisan conversations she's had, organized, or witnessed everywhere from the echo chambers on social media to the wheat fields in Oregon to raw, unfiltered fights with her own family on election night, Mónica shows how you can put your natural sense of wonder to work for you immediately, finding the answers you need by talking with people—rather than about them—and asking the questions you want, curiously.

In these pages, you'll learn:

- How to ask what you really want to know (even if you're afraid to)
- How to grow smarter from even the most tense interactions, online or off
- How to cross boundaries and find common ground—with anyone

Whether you're left, right, center, or not a fan of labels: If you're ready to fight back against the confusion, heartbreak, and madness of our dangerously divided times—in your own life, at least—Mónica's got the tools and fresh, surprising insights to prove that seeing where people are coming from isn't just possible. It's easier than you think.

MÓNICA GUZMÁN is a journalist and entrepreneur who lives for good conversation sparked by challenging questions. She's the cofounder of The Evergrey, an award-winning newsletter and community in Seattle, and serves as an adviser to Braver Angels, a national organization out to depolarize America, and Together Washington, an organization building collaborative local relationships among leaders in Washington state. Mónica is a former columnist at *The Seattle Times*, *GeekWire*, and the *Columbia Journalism Review*. She studied social and political division as a 2019 Henry M. Jackson leadership fellow, and spent the 2015-2016 academic year studying how journalists can evolve to better meet the needs of a participatory public as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard. She is an immigrant, a Latina, a dual US-Mexico citizen, and the mom of two bilingual kids.



BOOK DETAILS

Title: *I Never Thought of it That Way*
Subtitle: *How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times*

Author: Mónica Guzmán

Publisher: BenBella Books, Inc.

Distributed by Penguin Random House

Publication Date: March 8, 2022

ISBN: 9781637740323

eBook ISBN: 9781637740330

Price: \$ 26.95 US / \$ 35.95 CAN

Format: Hardcover

Page Count: 288

MARKETING REQUESTS

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BenBellaBooks.com

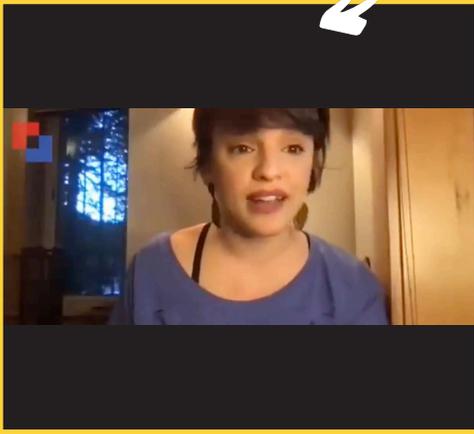


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Mónica Guzmán on the "4 Steps to Curiosity in 2 Minutes"



SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Why did you write this book? And why is this book so critical right now?
2. What sets this apart from other books on bridging gaps and navigating difficult conversations?
3. You're the daughter of Mexican immigrants who voted for Trump. You're also a liberal Seattlite. How's your relationship with your parents now?
4. You say that curiosity can save us from our dangerous divides. What do you mean by that?
5. You also suggest that no politician, group, or institution can bridge us the way that 1-on-1 relationships will. How did you come to believe that?
6. What stands in the way of curiosity?
7. What is an INTOIT moment?
8. In your book, you talk about a powerful trip you took to Sherman County in March of 2017. Tell us more about that experience.
9. What are the issues you're most concerned about?
10. Any practical tips for approaching family gatherings when you don't agree with your loved ones?
11. Do you have any advice for facilitating curious conversation online?
12. What would you say to people who are so silo-ed that they don't have connections with "the other side"?
13. If you're trying to have a curious conversation and are hitting a roadblock, how can you change your approach to get more out of the interaction? And how do you know when to lean in?
14. Readers will likely be challenged by your book. What's a good first step toward having more conversations that make you say "I never thought of it that way"?

CONVERSATION TOPICS



- › The good, the bad, and the knock-down-drag-out everyday conversations that have helped Mónica cross political divides to better understand her parents (and vice versa)
- › Why we must become radically curious across cultural, social, and political divides in order to be able to truly see each other and the world
- › Rejecting certainty and fear of what the world tells us about the other side and start asking "the other side" for ourselves
- › Why curiosity in 1-to-1 conversations will save us (like no politician, group, or institution can)
- › Tips for navigating challenging conversations and building bridges over the holidays with family you may not agree with
- › Actionable steps for more curious conversation, such as:
 - » determining what kind of questions to ask (asking what you really want to know)
 - » approaching someone in an attempt to find common ground
 - » processing tense interactions, online and off
 - » maintaining balance in the midst of a conversation that becomes fraught or divisive
 - » listening to understand (rather than being "right" or "wrong")
 - » understanding when it's the right time to lean in



WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT I NEVER THOUGHT OF IT THAT WAY



Bloomberg

BIG THINK

glenn beck
PROGRAM

Maria Shriver's
SUNDAY PAPER

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David Brooks

David Brooks
@nytdavidbrooks

This is one of the best TED talks I have seen— by @moniguzman. Really. Check out her book "I Never Thought of It That Way." youtu.be/PSLOzNREHAE via @YouTube



youtube.com
How Curiosity Will Save Us | Mónica Guzmán | TEDxSeattle
For Mónica Guzmán, curiosity isn't a muse that flits by when we wonder about something. It's the most powerful tool we...

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AllSides

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Ready to fight the confusion, heartbreak, and madness of our dangerously divided times?

The first book from our friend @moniguzman of @braverangels comes out next week, and will help you find answers by talking with people—rather than about them.



ABOUT THE BOOK
Discover how to have a conversation that is both honest and kind.

ENGAGE WITH MEDIA
Read the book and watch the TEDx talk to see how the author uses her own experiences to help us understand our current moment.

CHALLENGE OF EVENTS
Join the author for a live event where she will answer your questions and share her own experiences.

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New York Times

NONFICTION

Can We Empathize With Our Enemies? One Author Wants Us to Try.

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By Lisa Selin Davis
March 7, 2022

I NEVER THOUGHT OF IT THAT WAY
How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times
By Mónica Guzmán

New York Times

EDITORS' CHOICE

12 New Books We Recommend
This Week

I NEVER THOUGHT OF IT THAT WAY: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times, by Mónica Guzmán. (Ben Bella, \$26.95.) In her timely call for civilized discourse, Guzmán issues both a clarion call and a guide for finding common ground. "Just as the road to better health is often disappointingly low-tech," Lisa Selin Davis writes in her review, "the cure for polarization is the simple and underappreciated art of conversation. But, of course, simple doesn't mean easy."



PRAISE FOR MÓNICA GUZMÁN

"Your talk was incredibly insightful, timely, and well-delivered, and it inspired a lot of great follow-up discussion and interaction. The framing of the six good and bad questions is brilliant, and there is so much depth, richness, and wisdom encapsulated nicely in those."

— PHILIP WELKHOFF
THE BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

PRAISE FOR *I NEVER THOUGHT OF IT THAT WAY*

"Lots of books explain how to have hard conversations about politics, but this is the one you need to read--right now. It's honest, funny, surprising and actionable. Take it to the beach, bring it on the bus. Hand it out at family reunions; leave it in your office cafeteria. There's no time to waste."

—AMANDA RIPLEY, AUTHOR OF
HIGH CONFLICT: WHY WE GET TRAPPED AND HOW WE GET OUT

"In clear and lively exposition Monica Guzman lays out how we have become unlikely and increasingly not interested in talking to people with whom we don't agree. It's hard to run a family, a school, or a democracy that way. Here we get no simple remedy, but a sensible, straight talk toolkit. It begins with what I consider to be the most important: curiosity. We need to return to our basic curiosity about what other people think and feel. That's our most human, most empathic, starting point."

—SHERRY TURKLE, MIT PROFESSOR, NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR, RECLAIMING CONVERSATION: THE POWER OF TALK IN A DIGITAL AGE AND MOST RECENTLY, THE EMPATHY DIARIES

"At a time when Americans feel overwhelmed with toxic polarization, Mónica Guzmán gives us a book we desperately need. In *I Never Thought of It That Way*, she elucidates the transformational power of curiosity, coupled with empathy, to change hearts and shows us practical ways to adopt these vital principles for the sake of a more perfect union."

—NATHAN BOMEY, AUTHOR, BRIDGE BUILDERS: BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER IN A POLARIZED AGE

"In this warm and thoughtful book, Monica Guzman offers a wonderfully simple recipe to heal our partisan divide: curiosity and conversation. We should all give her approach a try."

—BILL ADAIR, CREATOR OF POLITIFACT

"This beautifully written book delivers a challenge wrapped in compassion for how hard it is to be curious and open-minded when we 'know' we are right! By being inspiring and intensely practical, Monica Guzman has written an essential guide for living in a pluralistic democracy."

—WILLIAM DOHERTY, PH.D., PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA AND COFOUNDER OF BRAVER ANGELS

"Monica Guzman brings bad news and good news. The bad news is there is no answer for the problems of our polarized, toxic politics. The good news is, we don't need answers. We need more questions. In this perceptive, wise, accessible book, Guzman shows us how to ask more humane questions of our fellow Americans. She shows us that by seeking truly to understand rather than judge, every one of us can improve our country's civic culture. Curiosity cures. Read this book, then live it."

—ERIC LIU, CEO, CITIZEN UNIVERSITY AND AUTHOR, YOU'RE MORE POWERFUL THAN YOU THINK: A CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

"If you sense something 'wrong' in the way we've come to interact, Monica Guzman shows that you're right—and offers actionable guidance on creating change. With clarity and balance she points to a new path: one where we respond rather than react, that diverts outrage and invites empathy and resolution. This book guides more than new ways of bridging divides. It sparks a curious, higher-level way of thinking that supports healthier thoughts, emotions, relationships, and decisions. Highly recommended."

—ELLEN PETRY LEANSE, STANFORD UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTOR, LEADERSHIP COACH, AUTHOR OF THE BEST-SELLER *THE HAPPINESS HACK*

CON'T PRAISE FOR *I NEVER THOUGHT OF IT THAT WAY*

"Mónica Guzmán offers us a practical guide for a path forward: reclaiming an appreciation of the basic humanity of our fellow citizens, and remaining open to the possibility that we may be able to learn from people we differ from. Anyone who cares about healing our national conversation should read this book."

—ALEXANDRA HUDSON, AUTHOR, SPEAKER, AND FOUNDER OF CIVIC RENAISSANCE

"A vivid account of polarization from the inside out by someone who has experienced the fracturing of our country more intimately than most, this beautifully crafted narrative takes you inside the most vexing political divisions and makes them not only seem understandable, but leaves you with even more empathy for the other side. Readers will appreciate the depth of connections Guzman created with her subjects, and even moreso the book's many excellent recommendations about how to begin to repair our national divide."

—DR. CHRISTOPHER BAIL, HEAD OF THE POLARIZATION LAB AT DUKE, AND THE AUTHOR OF *BREAKING THE SOCIAL MEDIA PRISM*

"There aren't many books you can pick up and instantly apply to every difficult and frustrating conversation you're having in life, but that's exactly what Monica Guzman has given us with this brilliant, approachable, and enjoyable book. If you've ever felt frustrated and trapped by a dead-end conversation, or too tired and disillusioned to even have enter the fray in the first place, the questions-first methods and simple tips in this book will help you see others, and yourself, with more curiosity and compassion than before."

—BUSTER BENSON, AUTHOR OF *WHY ARE WE YELLING?: THE ART OF PRODUCTIVE DISAGREEMENT*

"Monica's book is an ode to the beauty of connection and understanding between people. She wants to heal a nation divided by rigid ideology, distrust and misunderstanding. But her lessons might have the biggest impact in your family, friendships, and even professional relationships. This book will make you a better person to everyone around you, and they to you."

—MARKOS MOULITSAS, FOUNDER OF *DAILY KOS*

"A rare book about our divided times that's neither doom and gloom nor empty platitudes. Mónica Guzmán does a masterful job of acknowledging and grappling with the immensity of our divides, while also offering hope and an actionable roadmap for building bridges across those divides. This is a clear-eyed and refreshing read that'll leave you craving more."

—ANNAFI WAHED, FOUNDER OF THE FLIP SIDE

"Our polarization isn't a condition that descended upon us and that we must accept, it emerged from our behaviors and emotions. *I Never Thought of it That Way* shows us how we can change and redirect those. Guzman's tools for understanding without judgement and for being curious are precisely the ones we need to build a bridge over the chasm. That is a bridge we must build if we value our democratic republic and our relationships with people we love and disagree with."

—BILL BRYANT, FORMER WA REPUBLICAN GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATE

I Never Thought of it That Way is a critical read for critical times. Every word on every page reflects Mónica's ebullience, generosity, and sincere love for humanity. Her approach has a disarming vulnerability—and that's the point. We need to be vulnerable. We need to be open. We need to ask ourselves, "What am I missing?" And we need to be willing to go where the answers lead us, divisions be damned. It is difficult, it is disruptive, it may even be dangerous, but curiosity is how we can undivide. Thankfully, Mónica's is contagious."

—ANGEL EDUARDO, CULTURAL COMMENTATOR AND WRITER FOR IDEALIST.ORG, CENTER FOR INQUIRY, AND THE FOUNDATION AGAINST INTOLERANCE & RACISM (FAIR)

"A treasure trove of proven tips to ward off toxic polarization in our everyday lives. This book is a gift for Americans hoping to rise above division and unlock the riches of conversation and relationships across differences. Moni's own raw and humorous experiences bring her wisdom to life and illuminate a better path for all of us."

—PEARCE GODWIN, FOUNDER OF LISTEN FIRST PROJECT AND THE #LISTENFIRST COALITION OF 400 BRIDGING ORGANIZATIONS

"Books like this don't come along very often—and neither do writers like Monica Guzman. *I Never Thought of it That Way* is more than just a self-help book on how to have better conversations (though the advice this book offers will absolutely help you achieve that goal). Guzman has authored a tour de force that takes the reader deep into the reasons we are polarized, gives life to these reasons through profound illustrations of compelling human stories, and uses her own fascinating life and career to illuminate our shared path forward towards a democracy of conviction, compassion and curiosity. *I Never Thought of it That Way* rises far above the genericism that threatens to define the genre, adding depth and originality to our understanding of what it will take to bridge our divides."

—JOHN WOOD, JR., NATIONAL AMBASSADOR FOR BRAVER ANGELS

EXCERPT FROM

I NEVER THOUGHT OF IT THAT WAY

On the morning of Election Day, 2020, I was driving east from Seattle to my parents' house in Redmond, Washington, wondering if I should turn around.

About a week earlier, I'd asked my parents if I could watch the results of the presidential election from their house. Mom blinked over her plate of carnitas tacos from the food truck down the way. She looked at Dad, then back at me.

"Claro, Moni," she said in Spanish. Of course, Moni. Then her eyes held mine a moment, asking what I was silently asking myself: But are you sure you want to?

After all, I'm a liberal who voted for Joe Biden, and Mom and Dad are conservatives who voted enthusiastically—and twice, now—for Donald Trump.

I drove their way in silence, my hands gripping the steering wheel of the sturdy 2004 black Nissan Altima they sold me for a dollar when my Civic felt too clunky for our kids, a mere four months before Trump's 2016 victory shook the world. I preferred the too-loud rumble of the Altima's wheels on the road to any music that could make the day feel too normal. Would my parents end the day happy and relieved, or would I? Who would feel at home in our country tomorrow?

Up ahead, a big American flag waved by the conifers along the highway. Seeing it brought me back to my mother's naturalization ceremony twenty years ago. "Did you notice I dressed in red, white, and blue?" Mom had texted this past Independence Day when Dad dug up and shared a family photo from the New Hampshire state courthouse. In the photo, Mom's in a red cardigan with white buttons and a blue skirt, clutching a small American flag as she poses next to me, my younger brother, and my dad, who'd been naturalized a month prior. I was seventeen then, my long hair draped over a purple sweater, light glinting off my braces. Being under eighteen meant my brother and I were automatically naturalized along with my parents. It was our first family photo as American citizens. We were beaming.

Later that year, I slung my high school backpack off my shoulders in our home office to see a Bush/Cheney sign tacked to the bulletin board above Mom's desk. Republicans? I thought. Really? We erupted about Clinton's welfare policy one night, the spoons rattling in our gray Tupperware ice cream saucers when my hand hit our tile-top wooden table too hard. And I'll never forget the drive home from Hoyt's Newington Cinema 12 after seeing the Michael Moore documentary Fahrenheit 9/11. "Liberal bias? It's the truth!" I yelled in Spanish from the back seat, frustrated that house rules meant I couldn't use my bigger English vocabulary to trounce their puny arguments once and for all. I remember thinking then, How could they not see?—echoes of that long-ago conversation now filling the silence in the



Altima.

By November 3, 2020, I'd found myself a new, strange party trick in true-blue Seattle: admitting to roomfuls of fellow liberals (after a swig of whatever drink is in my hand) that my parents—who I see most every weekend and call about everything from cooking tips to the kids' latest swim lesson—are "Mexican immigrants who voted for Trump."

It would always stun the room for a second. People needed time to square this reality with what they know of the wall on the southern border, the talk of Mexico sending rapists and criminals, all that seemed to them like an endless string of hostility aimed at immigrants from Latin America.

I'd watch and wait for someone to ask the first question left hanging in the air: "So, why did they vote that way?"

Then I'd feel their eyes probing me as, silently, they asked the other: And why are you still speaking to them?

With the stars and stripes long faded from my rearview, I steered the Altima into my parents' cul-de-sac, wondering, one last time, if I should just go home.

I parked the car in the driveway of their two-story Craftsman, inches from the closed garage. Grabbing my phone and overnight bag from the passenger seat, I stepped out of the Altima, passing on my way to their covered front porch the faded "Choose Life" bumper sticker Mom had stuck proudly on its left back bumper years ago, and that I, for reasons I don't fully understand, refused to scrape off.

I took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

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If there's one thing that most people on the Left and Right can agree on, it's that the way we treat and talk to the other side is broken. We can't stomach the ideas across the political divide, let alone the people who hold them. In one 2021 poll, most Americans thought the biggest threat to our country's way of life was "other people in America." By June, US voters rated "division in the country" as the number one issue facing them personally.

If you're reading this book right now—whether you consider yourself conservative, liberal, something in between, or something off that spectrum altogether—I bet you've wondered, as I have, how long we can hold it together while our differences threaten to wreck our relationships, our country, and our ability to share our lives, really, at all.

Maybe you're like Sophia, a woman in Boston who lost several deep friendships when she switched from supporting Hillary Clinton in 2016 to Donald Trump in 2020. Growing up in a communist country, she sees something dark and destructive in the Left's agenda and is convinced that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president. "The facts are different, the values

are different," she told me as she described her preferred solution: a Conservative States of America and a Liberal States of America. "Peaceful divorce might be the only way."

Or you might be more like Marcus, a young man in Portland who feels a spiritual connection to his nation's ideals and its imperfect pursuit of them. The results of the 2016 election threw him into a state of confounded despair that made him want to both reach conservatives and fight like hell for a country he sees them shoving toward authoritarianism. "That's where there's two modes in me," he told me. "It's the political vigilance and the need to understand."

Or is it Eddie you relate to, a man in rural Kentucky who told me he's tired of turning on the news to "watch them lecture me on what kind of racist I am"? The way he sees it, the liberal mainstream media are responsible for the hate he sees tearing America apart, and he feels helpless to stop it. "They don't consider us human beings," he said.

I could hardly believe what I heard from Barbara in Knoxville, Tennessee, a mother of five grown men whose families got so fired up clashing over politics at her 2017 Thanksgiving dinner, it was like a bomb went off. One of her sons is very conservative, another very liberal, a third and fourth moderately conservative and liberal, respectively, and a fifth son is more centrist. Yes, really. "I think my family is a microcosm of the country," she told me.

Barbara, who describes herself as a conservative libertarian Christian, had tried to keep the peace that holiday. "Can't we just have a nice family dinner?" she'd begged. When she walked through her house to survey the damage, one young family was packing up to leave early, two of her sons had stormed off, a pair of her daughters-in-law were comforting each other in the kitchen, and a third, then six months pregnant, sat crying on a low brick wall out back while Barbara's two-year-old granddaughter patted her mother's hand, saying, "Everything's gonna be all right."

"I went out to the mom with the little girl, and you know what she said?" Barbara recounted to me. "She smiled and she said, 'You know, when anything happens to her, I hold her and pat her and say, Everything's gonna be all right. That's what I do for her!'"

I didn't meet Sophia, Marcus, Eddie, or Barbara thanks to friends or family. We connected instead through our shared determination to find some answer to the challenges these dangerously divided times present in our lives.

Determination can turn easily into desperation, which is how I opened my email one day to find a new message in my inbox from a man named Leo. Opening the email, I learned that Leo is liberal and that he lives in rural Montana. After a series of quickly escalating text messages from his conservative son about several heated political issues, he explained, his son had just told him that he didn't want him in his life anymore, that he was afraid he might indoctrinate his kids.

Leo had seen a talk I'd given about my politically divided family the day after the 2020 election and reached out. "I really don't know where to turn," he wrote.



But somehow, he'd found his way to me.

Each story I hear from Americans of all political stripes about the ways these divides are pulling them apart—each of the fallings out, the declined invitations, the tweetstorms, the dialed up villainy, all these ways that people are no longer speaking to people—brings me face to face with that question:

Why am I still speaking to them?

Even after the tense three-hour conversation about race and law enforcement with Mom in June of 2020 where neither of us changed our minds. Even after the two-hour argument with Dad about how the White House handled the coronavirus pandemic where I definitely went too far and he was about as mad as I'd ever seen him. Even after all that, why am I not only speaking to my parents, who are way on the other side of a political divide, but listening to them, learning from them, and enjoying their company? And why, when I say that my parents are Mexican immigrants who voted for Trump, do I not say the rest of it? Why am I both eager and afraid to tell my fellow Seattle liberals that I not only speak to my parents, but that I understand them? That if I were them, I would have voted for Donald Trump, too?

I hear people say the answer to all this division is more education and information—but trustworthy information, not that other junk. I hear them say the answer is persuasion, that no conversation is worth having with someone who disagrees with you if you're not challenging their ideas and trying to show them where they're wrong. I hear them say the answer is simply action: stop yammering and do something to build a more sensible world, ignoring or defeating whoever's standing in your way.

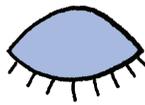
I say an answer, though it might include all these things, won't give us what we need. What we need are more questions.

As a journalist, I've asked a lot of those. I used to be awful at it; I still remember my terror as a kid the day Mom made me march up to the cashier at the Burger King near our house and ask for another packet of salt. What if I sounded stupid? It took all my courage at my first newspaper internship just to pick up the phone and call a stranger. My heart would stop when they picked up.

But then I fell in love with what they could show me.

Given the chance to ask anything I wanted about who people are, what they do, or what they think, I realized what for years I'd been too petrified to notice: everybody's so goddamn interesting. I stopped being afraid to ask questions; I was too impatient to hear the answers. Soon I developed an incurable addiction to people—our stories, our passions, the totally unique way each of us sees the world—and to conversation itself, that unpredictable meeting of minds where individuals with wildly different lives can surprise, delight, and ultimately learn from each other.





It didn't occur to me until recently, but every one of my now thousands of interviews was something everyone craves but rarely encounters: a conversation bent on understanding without judgment. In the best ones I was in a state of hyper-observation, desperate to see someone's perspective so fully—in an hour or two—that I might have a chance at passing it on, real and intact, to strangers. It didn't matter what side of an issue someone was on. I had to know why they saw their world in whatever way they saw it—whether it was the young Muslim girls in Michigan whose lives turned upside-down after 9/11, the small business owner in New Hampshire who was obsessed with vintage lunchboxes, or the man in Texas who was convicted of killing two taxi cab drivers and told me, two weeks before I would witness his execution, that he didn't do it. I found myself walking alongside him, her, them, everyone through their vastly different stories—my heart so stunned, giddy, or broken I couldn't hide it; my initial judgments so distant, they grew faint; and my mind so locked on learning that it could take all my restraint, in the heat of conversation, not to shout a question like a demand.

One of my favorite questions to ask in any interview is, "Why you?" Why did you start a church in a bar, become your community's most beloved nurse, or decide to study crows for a living, and not, you know, somebody else? So I guess I should answer that question for myself. Why did I write this book about how to stay curious across divides, and why should you bother to read it?

If I can sum up the work I've done in my seventeen years of listening to people professionally, it's been one big, evolving experiment on how we can better understand each other. I don't do it for fun, though it's the most fun I've ever had. I do it because connecting with other humans is what makes our lives rich and meaningful. Especially when so much can pull us apart.

Seeing people across divides seems daunting, so I've tried over the years to make it inviting. In Seattle I fell in with the young, booming, all-things-are-possible tech crowd, demystifying its magic and mayhem in my journalism. Then I pivoted as the runaway growth warped the city I'd grown to love and divided us over red-hot crises around class, density, homelessness, the works. I found myself joining eager partners to span what divides we could—young and old, rich and poor, local and transplant, housed and homeless—with stories, yes, but also dinners, outings, events, whatever might get us to see past the caricatures. When the political divide became too big to ignore, we organized a bus trip to bridge urban and rural America in a way that seemed impossible until it happened. That visit still echoes, years later, for several participants—and it changed everything for me.

I began to see political polarization as the problem that eats other problems, the monster who convinces us that the monsters are us. I saw its claws everywhere—in my city, in my networks, in the assumptions we were making about people we didn't know who'd made choices we didn't understand.

I tried to call it out, but I could barely find the words. And with so much to fight for in the world—the movements and conflicts shaping and challenging us—who would listen?

But I wasn't alone. One after the other I stumbled onto fresh projects working to fix this—



to name it, confront it, and find the tools to overcome it. I began to participate in ongoing conversations, workshops, and experiments about how to cross the political divide, then advise them. I got to know a growing and downright inspiring network of people who also refuse to believe that we're helpless against this beast of a divide, who know that it's our job—all our jobs—to find a better way. And in 2021, I joined the leadership of a network that's become the largest grassroots, cross-partisan organization in the country dedicated to political depolarization—a group called Braver Angels.

Coming from the field of journalism, I feel like I'm supposed to be rahrah for information as the cure for everything. But I'm not. I'm tired of us throwing out links and throwing up our hands. Ranting to our people, who get it, while raging at those people, who don't. I'm done, too, going along with the idea that if we could just rid the world of "misinformation," everything would be fine. As if mowing down weeds would keep new ones from sprouting. False stories soar because good people relate to something in them that's true: a fear or value or concern that's going unheard, unexplored, and unacknowledged. Every time? Yes, every time! Why do we ignore that?

I think of my mother, who was so afraid I'd lose my perfect Spanish living in the US that too often, her first response to something heavy and vulnerable I'd tell her as a teenager was to correct something I'd gotten wrong in my grammar. I'd howl, "You're not hearing me!" She'd snap out of it, apologize, and try again—listening not for my words or how well I followed some rule but for my own unique meaning.

We know what happens when the people we love don't think we really see them: they go find someone who will. Someone who might exploit that basic need we all have to belong, to matter. We're desperate to correct the lies that make bad divisions worse. I get it; I am, too. But we're missing something big here. Misinformation isn't the product of a culture that doesn't value truth. It's the product of a culture in which we've grown too afraid to turn to each other and hear it.

None of this seems right to me. More to the point: none of it seems curious. I see us treat our curiosity—our built-in hunger for understanding—like it's a sweet little muse, like it just happens to us, flitting by when we're joyfully inspired. No. Curiosity is big and it is badass. At its weakest, it keeps our minds open so they don't shrink. At its strongest, it whips us into a frenzy of unstoppable learning. Take it from the once-shy inquirer at countless charged conversations. Nothing busts through the walls we've built between us like a question so genuine and perceptive it cannot be denied. Nothing.

Our monster of a divide, meet our brawny beast of curiosity.

I'll let you two take it from here.

At my parents' place on Election Day 2020, the three of us watched the results of the presidential race stream in on Fox News, then CNN, then back and forth for hours. We had our first shouting match, about immigration, over sips of the sangrias Mom mixed. We had a

bigger one, about race, late into the night, with me standing cross-armed in front of the TV, Mom taking my side for a fun, hot second, and usually reserved Dad leaning forward in his recliner, not giving an inch, his voice booming.

Earlier in the day, on a walk with Dad around their neighborhood, he told me about something that happened to him the previous week.

He'd gone out with his camera—he's a bird photographer, and a good one—and run into a fellow photographer he recognized from Instagram whose work he loves. They got to chatting, and out of nowhere the photographer insulted Trump in that buddy-buddy way that made it abundantly clear to my Dad that the photographer assumed that he, too, couldn't stand him. A Seattle-area Latino with a Mexican accent? It wouldn't be the first time.

My Dad slowed down as he told me the next part: He nodded along with what the guy was saying. In fact, he said, looking down at the pebbled path, he heard himself mock his own conservative beliefs along with the other photographer.

This hung in the air between us a bit. I thought about how hard it must've been for Dad—a guy who will not be talked out of his midday nap, let alone any of his opinions—to hear himself lie like that.

"You know, *Mónica*," he said in Spanish, breaking the silence, "I've heard that some people who don't share their parents' politics . . . they stop letting them see their grandkids. And I've wondered if that'll ever happen to us."

I have two kids, now eight and six years old, and they see their grandparents all the time. My Dad's written songs for them. Songs he plays on his guitar and they memorize then launch into singing at full volume from the back seat of my Altima when I least expect it. I didn't hesitate. "*Jamás*," I told Dad. Never. "That'll never happen, Dad. That'll never, ever happen to us."

Back at their house, after all the night's results had been reported and we had one more political clash about . . . well, who knows what it was about, I was sitting at their kitchen island eating butter pecan ice cream Mom had served me in the same little gray Tupperware cups I'd used as a kid.

By the time I picked up the last bite, Mom had changed into her long red nightshirt. She sat down next to me, patted my hand, and said she was glad I'd come. I put down my spoon. I was glad I'd come, too. Neither of us knew who'd won, whose views would hold sway in the months and years to come. But I was grateful that for that moment, at least, it didn't matter.

