

“The authors are model bridge builders with no-nonsense tools. They’ve walked the walk, and this book’s the map.”

—Mónica Guzmán, author of *I Never Thought of It That Way*

SAMPLE

BEYOND *THE* POLITICS *OF* CONTEMPT

Practical Steps to
Build Positive Relationships
in Divided Times



DOUG TESCHNER

BETH MALOW

BECKY ROBINSON

PRAISE FOR *BEYOND THE POLITICS OF CONTEMPT*

“As someone who has long advocated that we elevate our values to sacred status, I was excited to see these authors bring this approach to addressing the national political divide. Living our values is an important first step to better understand how we treat and lead others and how we are being manipulated in unhealthy ways. This book includes practical ways to manage difficult conversations with courage and perseverance and help create a better political environment that can benefit us all. If you want to find ways to feel better about yourself and our country, read this book!”

—Scott Mautz, author of *The Mentally Strong Leader*

“Packed with insight, grounded in facts, and bursting with practical actions, this book hands citizens the keys to take control, step up, and make a difference in their communities. Feeling overwhelmed by the toxic polarization in our country? Tired of the stress, the division, and the urge to retreat? This book is a wake-up call. It doesn’t just explain how we got here—it shows what we can do, starting now. No more doom-scrolling. No more sitting on the sidelines. This is a roadmap to bring us out of the chaos—and toward a better way forward for all of us.”

—Gary Holland, Braver Angels director of the
Office of Field Operations and Connecticut state coordinator

“These are challenging times for our country with declines in trust of both neighbors and democratic institutions. But, as Robert Putnam and I have documented, we faced similar difficulties a century ago. But we overcame them then, and we *can* do it again. The authors of *Beyond the Politics of Contempt* lay out clear steps to help make it happen!”

—Shaylyn Romney Garrett, coauthor of *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*

“During my years in politics, I have witnessed firsthand the decline in voter trust of government and elected officials. This led me to invite Braver Angels to conduct a series of workshops to help legislators work better across the aisle and more constructively manage difficult conversations with constituents. I am excited that Doug Teschner, who led this effort, has stepped up to author this book and take this important work to people across the country. We all need to find better ways to engage respectfully and listen to each other, and this book offers many positive suggestions that can make our lives and politics better.”

—Hon. Sherman Packard (R),
Speaker of the NH House of Representatives

“Doug Teschner and Beth Malow bring their formidable experience to bear in this timely and helpful book, including Doug’s experience in politics, diplomacy, and consulting; Beth’s experience as a physician helping children with complex neurological problems; and their work with Braver Angels. They offer guidance and resources to help people move from intense disagreement and hostility to find common ground and common purpose. Thanks to them for their courage and wisdom.”

—The Rt. Rev. Mark Beckwith, retired bishop of Newark (Episcopal),
Braver Faith of Braver Angels co-chair, and author of *Seeing the Unseen:
Beyond Prejudices, Paradigms, and Party Lines*

“Having served in politics since the 1980s, I have had a front-row seat to the growing polarization and distrust of government. Having served with author Doug Teschner in the NH House of Representatives some years ago, I was not surprised when he stepped up to volunteer with Braver Angels. This included leading workshops to help citizens and elected officials work better together. And now he and his colleagues have authored this book, which is so needed in these challenging times!”

—Hon. David Scanlan, New Hampshire Secretary of State

“Beth and Doug are such model bridge builders. They’ve inspired me and so many others with their no-nonsense tools and the thoroughly disarming way they share them with divided communities. They’ve walked the walk, and this book’s the map.”

—Mónica Guzmán, author of *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times*

“In the past 25 years I have had a front row seat as we have witnessed the decline of public discourse in America. It is easy to become discouraged, but the authors of *Beyond the Politics of Contempt* offer a hopeful alternative to this trajectory. The steps they describe are both practical and vital for our country’s future. I encourage everyone who cares about the future of politics and governance in the United States to read this book!”

—Steve Driehaus, former state legislator, member of Congress (D-Ohio),
and founding partner of Good Government Group LLC

“Teschner, Malow, and Robinson draw from a deep field of researchers, bridge-builders, and democracy reformers to craft a work of clarity and conviction. *Beyond the Politics of Contempt* rejects the notion that division is inevitable and reminds us that it is, in fact, a choice. For those who have chosen to devote their efforts and talent to healing a fractured republic, this book stands as a clear and compelling blueprint.”

—Stephen Hawkins, global director of research at More in Common and
lead author of *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America’s Polarized Landscape*

“This book is both a master class in strengthening personal relationships threatened by political disagreements and a call to citizenship for all of us who want a better society. It’s brimming with humane insights and practical wisdom. In these troubled times, it’s just what we need.”

—David Blankenhorn, founding president of Braver Angels

“All of us are capable of feeding the rancor and division that dominate our politics. The authors point to a brighter alternative. *Beyond the Politics of Contempt* provides a much-needed breath of fresh air to a world often suffocated by anger and animosity. It’s a welcome invitation to transcend the forces that paint your fellow citizens as the enemy.”

—Seth Gillihan, licensed psychologist and author of *Retrain Your Brain: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in 7 Weeks*

“Having served in politics, I have witnessed firsthand how division and polarization led to a decline in trust of government and our fellow citizens. This led me to join the citizens’ organization Braver Angels where I helped lead a national initiative to bring people together to increase voter confidence in trustworthy elections. People need to find better ways to connect and listen to each other, and this book includes many practical suggestions to do just that!”

—Lenny Mirra, former Republican state legislator, Massachusetts

“In *Beyond the Politics of Contempt*, Teschner, Malow, and Robinson offer nourishment for America’s hungry soul. You’ll discover, in invitingly bite-sized chunks, a cogent analysis of how we became so polarized. Diverse in their politics and rich in expertise, these authors add in generous dollops of storytelling where they examine their own assumptions and biases, often with surprising outcomes. Then, they challenge us with intriguing exercises to explore our own role in today’s political dynamic. Take them up on the challenge. Use this book to get together with colleagues or cousins, neighbors or strangers, friends or frenemies, and explore the art of listening to understand.”

—Susan Clark, coauthor of *Slow Democracy: Rediscovering Community, Bringing Decision Making Back Home*



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Build Positive Relationships
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DOUG TESCHNER
BETH MALOW
BECKY ROBINSON

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For our children, grandchildren, and future generations

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*“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I will meet you there.”*
—Rumi, 13th century Sufi poet



Introduction

IN THIS MOMENT, WHY THIS BOOK?

“The only policy likely to succeed is to try to make the future.”—Peter Drucker

On November 6, 2024, the morning after Election Day, Americans awoke with an array of emotions, ranging from jubilant and relieved, to despondent and uncertain. Then came the inauguration and subsequent presidential actions that further stirred a range of viewpoints and reactions.

While competing ideas and opinions are vital for democratic governance, disdain and demonization of those with different political views has grown significantly in recent years. Friendships have dissolved and family relationships have become strained. Is politics *really* more important than friends and family? How did this happen? And how do we fix it?

We need to find a way to turn the politics of fear and contempt into the politics of hope.

The fundamental idea of our book is this: In a climate of widespread contempt and even hatred for people who disagree politically, we can each make important contributions to better our lives, our relationships, and our country. We can stand up for what we believe while also building bridges across the political divide. While many fear for our nation’s future, there are practical steps we can each take to build hope for a better America.



The view of Mt. Moosilauke in the White Mountains from North Haverhill, NH. Courtesy of Doug Teschner.

A POST-INAUGURATION REFLECTION BY DOUG

One Saturday, I drove forty miles north to Woodsville, New Hampshire, to attend the wake of a ninety-five-year-old farmer. His antique tractor was idling outside the funeral home, bringing joy to those gathered. I had known this man, who always had a smile on his face, and his son and grandchildren when I lived for thirty-six years in nearby Pike. Both Pike and Woodsville are villages in the town of Haverhill that I represented in the state legislature more than twenty years ago.

With a population of forty-six hundred, Haverhill is wedged between the Connecticut River and White Mountains and has a rich agricultural heritage. When I first moved there in the 1980s, it was the largest dairy-producing town in New Hampshire. While many fields are still mowed for hay, family farms are largely gone, as the economics of agriculture have changed dramatically in recent years.

While celebrating that heritage and beautiful scenery on my drive, I also felt a deep sadness for current and future generations who won't have the

opportunity to make a living off the land (and experience the lifestyle and pride that go with it). It is also hard not to notice boarded-up businesses and homes needing repair.

I contrast Haverhill with Lebanon, New Hampshire, where my wife and I moved in 2023 to be closer to our son and grandson. This small city (population fifteen thousand) has a major medical center, prosperous manufacturing businesses, and Dartmouth College in nearby Hanover. There are many good jobs in Lebanon and Hanover, but most people from Haverhill and other towns cannot afford the high-priced housing so they get by with longer commutes.

According to New Hampshire Employment Security, Haverhill's 2022 median household income was \$59,000, with 10 percent below the poverty line and 18.5 percent of adults ages twenty-five and up with bachelor's degrees or higher. That compares to Lebanon with a \$91,000 median household income, 8.4 percent below the poverty line, and 55.8 percent with college degrees.¹

In the 2024 Presidential election, Haverhill voters went 60 percent for Donald Trump and 39 percent for Kamala Harris, while Lebanon voted 25 percent for Trump and 74 percent for Harris.

Two communities, so close but so different.

This is a microcosm of the national geographic siloing trend—where people tend to live and primarily interact with others who have the same ideas about politics. I am sure there are some in prosperous communities like Lebanon who think of people in Haverhill as backward rural people who aren't educated or smart enough to know how to vote in a way that best meets their needs. And there are rural folks from places like Haverhill who view people in Lebanon as elitists who look down at working-class people.

Having lived in Haverhill and Lebanon, I know there are many caring, thoughtful people in both. Sadly, there aren't enough opportunities for people to better get to know those from different communities. People easily fall into stereotyping and oversimplification. If we are going to get past this country's division, we need to find ways to facilitate connections

so that people better understand those with different life experiences and perspectives.

IS POLITICS CAUSING YOU PAIN?

Are you losing sleep after watching or listening to the national news? Do you feel helpless at times, not knowing where to turn? Are you noticing that your health and well-being are affected by political events? Are you finding you can't talk with your brother-in-law or other relatives? What about friends and neighbors? Do you want to do something to improve our country, but aren't at all sure what that might be? This book includes many practical suggestions to help you take specific steps to better your life and our country, too.

WHAT WILL YOU LEARN FROM THIS BOOK?

Many books identify the problems facing our nation. We appreciate the thorough and thoughtful approach these authors bring to the conversation. Our approach is complementary and builds on their ideas. We offer practical steps for addressing the nation's challenges, including:

1. Creating greater self-awareness about how your reactions to political events may impact your health and well-being, and realizing how you can act in ways that can help you feel better and more in control;
2. Finding ways to mend relationships torn apart by politics and ways to empower yourself and others when difficult conversations arise;
3. Understanding how you can stand up for what you believe while also building bridges across the political divide;
4. Identifying actions you can apply to help build a national culture of kindness, dignity, and respect, including citizen-led solutions as antidotes to the nation's unhealthy division.

We will provide many examples of these approaches throughout the book.

WHO ARE WE, AND WHY DID WE WRITE THIS BOOK?



From
Beth

I hail from the Northeast (Long Island, New York), born to parents who consistently voted Democratic, and I have lived in the North most of my life. However, I spent twenty-one years in a suburb of Nashville as a neurologist at a large medical center. My husband and I recently relocated to Quechee, a community in the upper valley of Vermont and New Hampshire. The sense of civic engagement in New England is palpable, and although I appreciated the political diversity in Tennessee, I am grateful to be part of this region now. I volunteer with Braver Angels, a grassroots national nonprofit that brings Americans together to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic (see more about this organization in the appendix). I have moderated events, designed workshops, and served as a debate chair. While I identify as a Democrat, I have developed close relationships with many Republicans, and I relish conversations with people who view issues differently than I do. As a physician and medical researcher, I have come to understand the importance of communicating science and health to the public in ways that they can relate to. I recently added that component to my career by earning a graduate certificate in science communication, and my interest in this area was influenced by my work with civil discourse.



From
Becky

I grew up as an Army brat, but I've spent my entire adult life in the Great Lakes region, with the last fifteen years in Michigan. As a high schooler, not even old enough to vote, I made posters and worked to welcome George H.W. Bush to my small town's square during his 1988 campaign. My parents and

grandparents voted Republican, and I voted Republican all the way up until 2020. Raised as a conservative, evangelical Christian, and continuing in those communities as an adult, I experienced some shifts in my perspectives during and after Trump's first term. I joined this book project just after the 2024 election, when I counted myself among those feeling desolate about the election's outcome, especially because of the fear and disappointment I felt about the President's anti-LGBTQ policies and initiatives, which directly affect my family. I am the CEO of a book marketing and production company, Weaving Influence, and the author of *Reach: Create the Biggest Possible Audience for Your Message, Book, or Cause*.² I want to use my talents in book production and marketing to get the messages of our book out into the world and reach as many people as possible.



From
Doug

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to serve our nation in various ways, including as an elected Republican member of the New Hampshire House of Representatives. I represented our country overseas in the Peace Corps, as a volunteer in Morocco and country director in Ukraine and several African nations. Now I volunteer with Braver Angels, serving as New England regional leader and helping elected officials to develop the skills and commitment to work together. This initiative, known as Braver Politics, facilitates opportunities to develop the skills and commitment to work together in goodwill across political differences. I'm especially proud of a three-year effort that led to the creation of the Granite Bridge Legislative Alliance, a caucus of Republican and Democratic legislators in New Hampshire working to foster positive relationships. While I could have chosen to enjoy a relaxing retirement, I instead feel called to help address the stark problems of division and polarization facing our nation.

WHY DID WE CHOOSE TO SELF-PUBLISH?

Doug began this book project in January 2024, and Beth joined him in the summer. We went through multiple drafts together and made the decision to self-publish because we wanted to get our message out to the public as quickly as possible. (Traditional publishers have a long queue of twelve to eighteen months between signing a contract and publishing a book.) We also wanted control over our content and decisions related to elements such as the book cover. We were thrilled when Becky Robinson joined us as an author, adding valuable perspectives and stories while also sharing her book production and marketing expertise. We are also grateful to multiple writers and thought leaders who read our early manuscripts and provided excellent suggestions on style and political balance; they are recognized in the acknowledgments.

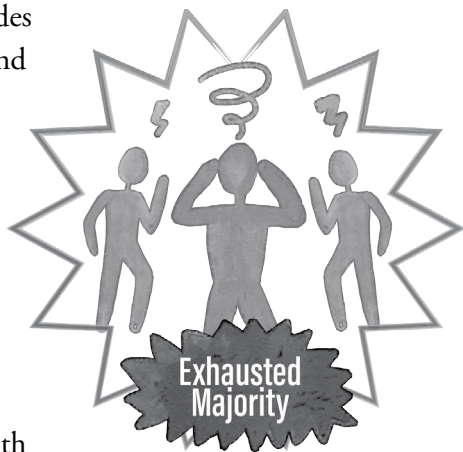
WHAT IS IN THE BOOK?

In Section I, we make the case for why we should embrace hope in these challenging times. Hope is such an important motivator for building bridges that heal division. We emphasize the importance of going beyond an “us versus them” framework and moving toward better ways to think about others with kindness, dignity, and respect. We reflect on how we see friends, family members, neighbors, and strangers with different political perspectives.

In Section II, we explore the roots of unhealthy conflict and the differences between healthy and unhealthy conflict. Healthy conflict is when we debate issues and ideas, and sharpen our policies. Unhealthy conflict is when we move toward demonizing those we disagree with. Then we outline the factors that drive us to engage in unhealthy conflict and the politics of contempt. Finally, we discuss how polarization is perpetuated as a business model via social media algorithms and conflict entrepreneurs.

In Section III, we begin moving toward solutions. We identify the power of the exhausted majority. Coined in a report entitled *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape* by the nonprofit organization More in

Common, the exhausted majority refers to Americans who are fed up with our nation's polarization. "They know we have more in common than that which divides us: our belief in freedom, equality, and the pursuit of the American dream. They share a deep sense of gratitude that they are citizens of the United States. They want to move past our differences."³ We discuss the gap between thoughts and values, and how we can change our mindsets, starting with reflection on core values. We move into how we can work with others to create citizen-led solutions starting at the community level.



In Section IV, we focus on specific skills, including self-leadership, braver conversations, critical thinking, positive engagement with those with different opinions, and leading others. These are discussed in the context of creating a culture of dignity and respect, which in turn strengthens our politics and empowers us to build positive relationships while also benefiting personal health and well-being. Change can happen by promoting practical steps that begin with Gandhi's insight: "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change."⁴

In Section V, we emphasize the importance of finding your path and embracing the courage to make a difference. This includes analyzing how you can better understand and effectively influence the various factors driving the politics of contempt.

The appendix has a practical checklist to develop a personal plan based on the key ideas shared throughout the book. That section also includes background information on Braver Angels and other organizations working to bridge the political divide.

WHAT ISN'T IN THE BOOK?

This book is not about kumbaya and compromise. If people engage respectfully, finding common ground is possible and compromise might happen, but that is not the central point of our book. Disagreement and conflict are an inevitable part of democratic governance. People need to advocate and fight for what they believe. The problem is when those disagreements cross over into unhealthy conflict, demonizing people with different views. We need to respect those who disagree with us, to honor each person's humanity. Through engaging together across differences, we can strengthen our nation and ourselves as well.

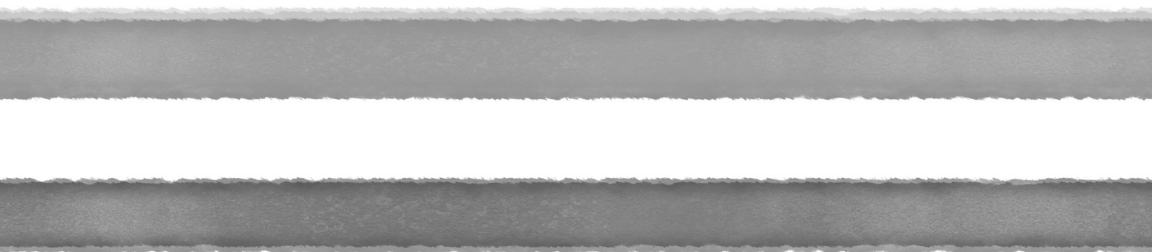
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

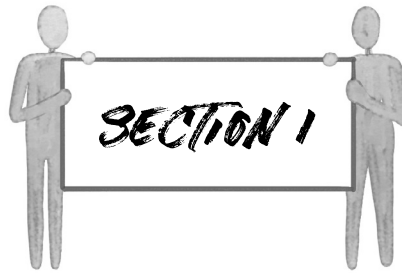
As you work your way through this book, we encourage you to ask yourself a few key questions:

- Do I sometimes view those with different political views as misguided, duped, or maybe even as enemies?
- Can I consider that those with different viewpoints might help me to view contentious issues through a different lens, offering perspectives from which I might learn and possibly even grow?
- What role do silos (also known as tribes, in-groups, and echo chambers) play in my interactions, or lack of interactions, with fellow citizens with different perspectives?
- What actions can I take so that political issues do not affect my health or undermine relationships with family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors?
- How can I be an effective political activist who fights for my beliefs while also reaching out to those on the other side?
- What can I do to help rebuild a national culture of kindness, dignity, and respect?
- What might the answers to these questions help me to understand about myself?

Stepping out of silos and engaging in curious ways with others—rather than demonizing them from a distance—takes patience, humility, and courage. But, as we show throughout this book, it is possible and worth it.

We each have an extraordinary opportunity to make a difference in people's lives, including our own. When enough of us act and demand better, fellow citizens and politicians will follow. Do not underestimate your potential to make a positive impact!





EMBRACING HOPE, DIGNITY, AND RESPECT IN THESE CHALLENGING TIMES

*"The occasion is piled high with difficulty,
and we must rise with the occasion."
—Abraham Lincoln*



Chapter 1

FINDING HOPE AMID DESPAIR

*“Once you choose hope, anything’s possible.”
—Christopher Reeve*

Are you discouraged by events in our country and the world? Does consuming the news bring you down and compel you to shut it off? Have you experienced unpleasant incidents and unkind behavior that affect your daily morale—such as drivers riding your bumper or making disparaging gestures?

Have your relationships with friends or family been negatively affected by politics? Do you feel helpless to do anything about it?

We sure feel that way some of the time.



From
Doug

I recall an unpleasant conversation in 2017 at an outdoor community concert where I set up my lawn chair near a couple I had known for many years. One of them had served (like me) as a state legislator. As you might expect, the conversation turned to politics. Sadly, it quickly became a bit nasty as we expressed how we had voted in the 2016 presidential election, with brusque comments exchanged back and forth. Neither of us

convinced the other, and I remember being upset and dissatisfied by that conversation, thinking it had been a lose-lose situation. I left that evening disappointed in myself and vowing to do better.



From
Beth

I remember talking with a friend who no longer called her son who had voted differently from her in the 2020 presidential election. They had previously been very close, but they hadn't communicated in more than a year. Falling out with her son meant that my friend hadn't seen her daughter-in-law or grandchildren either. It was sad to see a family separated by politics.

Braver Angels (<https://braverangels.org/>) provides one model for bridging differences and finding hope amid despair. Founded in 2016, this national organization seeks ways to get beyond what cofounder Bill Doherty describes as making someone's policy positions a fundamental test of their humanity and integrity.



From
Doug

I was introduced to Braver Angels by folksinger Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul, and Mary fame, whom I had first met in Ukraine in 2010. Peace Corps Volunteers had invited him there because his nonprofit Operation Respect promotes anti-bullying in schools using music—including an incredibly powerful song titled “Don’t Laugh at Me.” In November 2019, I reconnected with Peter at the Lebanon Opera House in New Hampshire after his concert with long-time partner Noel Paul Stookey. After a big hug, Peter made a pitch for Braver Angels (then called Better

Angels). Given my concerns about where our country was headed, this turned out to be exactly what I was looking for. As we were writing this book, I was sad to learn of the death of my friend Peter.



Author Doug Teschner and Peter Yarrow singing "If I Had a Hammer" in Ukraine in 2010. Photo courtesy of Doug Teschner.



I first became involved with Braver Angels in 2017 after hearing about the organization on NPR. I helped recruit “Blues” (Democrats or left-leaning voters) for workshops they were planning to hold in Nashville that summer that included a mix of “Reds” (Republicans or right-leaning voters) and “Blues,” and I attended one of the first “Red/Blue” workshops myself. I found hope through interacting with others who held different political views from mine and realizing how many values we had in common.

In July 2023, Doug and Beth attended the Braver Angels national convention on the sacred ground of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Attendees were

asked, “Why are you here?” Doug wrote on his 3×5 card: “I am worried that my grandchildren will not experience the benefits of this country that I have.” Beth wrote on hers: “I want to engage with other like-minded people who love this country and want to bridge divides.”

Others among the nearly seven hundred Braver Angels convention attendees responded with comments including these to the question of why they were attending:

- “We need to trust each other again, and trust begins with communication and relationship.”
- “I’m here to dig deeper into my own biases and judgments.”
- “For personal inspiration and practical ideas to rebuild unity in our divided and rancorous democratic republic.”
- “To build relationships with people with different experiences and perspectives than mine.”
- “To leave the word better than I found it.”
- “I am deeply concerned about the country I love. My grandkids deserve to inherit a better country.”
- “I am here because, if we don’t change how our politics is done, we’ll see ourselves in another civil war. Except this time, it won’t look like Gettysburg—it’ll look like Rwanda.”



Having worked in Rwanda in the early 2000s, that last comment really caught my attention. I led a US Agency for International Development-funded project to strengthen the parliament in that nation, which was so scarred by the 1994 Hutu genocide against the Tutsis. Neighbors killed neighbors, even people they knew well, just because they were in a different tribe. The killers were emboldened by leaders who exploited

difference and fear. I remember feeling grateful that we didn't have political tribalism in the United States.

In 2014, I was working in Guinea during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa that touched many other nations. I recall thinking that Americans, unlike many Guineans, would have faith in our public health system in the event of a national medical emergency.

I was obviously wrong on both counts. We find ourselves today in political tribes, and the COVID pandemic severely tested our ability to communicate with each other and trust what the government was telling us. While that pandemic may be behind us, it has clearly left deep scars.

People are being torn apart by politics, often engaging in unpleasant conversations and feeling increasingly suspicious of those with different viewpoints. In *The Age of Grievance*, Frank Bruni describes the potentially devastating erosion of civility, common ground, and compromise that are so necessary for our democracy to survive.¹ And some of us are so hooked on political division and anger that we hold on tight because it makes us feel righteous and safe.² Therapists ask this question: When people are angry, what are they protecting?

A 2023 Associated Press–National Opinion Research Center poll found 62 percent of adults felt that the US democracy could be at risk depending on who won the 2024 presidential election.³ Democrats (72 percent) and Republicans (55 percent) agreed. While this wasn't part of that study, it seems that members of the two parties had very different reasons, with Democrats worrying that we were at risk of electing an authoritarian president and Republicans concerned that a Democrat leader could promote government overreach and threats to fundamental freedoms.

An April 2024 *PBS News Hour*/NPR/Marist Poll survey found that one in five US adults believe Americans may have to resort to violence to get our country back on track.⁴ Another study found that 49 percent of

Republicans and 33 percent of Democrats would feel “displeased” if their child married someone outside their party—compared to only 5 percent and 4 percent in 1960.⁵

The old bumper sticker “Question Authority” feels so inadequate to describe where we stand as a nation these days. Once that phrase seemed like a quaint assertion inviting us to ask questions, verify information, and hold leaders accountable. Today, that same message (if anyone chooses to use it) would likely convey total disdain: Throw the bums out, no questions required.

These are difficult times with wide-ranging national (and international) challenges, including these:

- Inflation, taxation, and tariffs
- Economic disparities
- Affordable and accessible health care, childcare, education, and housing
- The national debt
- Climate change
- Immigration
- Racism and antisemitism
- The urban-rural divide
- Distrust of government and other institutions
- War and political unrest in many parts of the world
- Uncertainty about the expanding role of artificial intelligence

In addressing these challenges, we often differ on how to react to the issue. Take, for example, climate change. While most Americans agree that climate change is man-made and accelerating, we differ on perceived urgency, trade-offs (giving up our current way of life for electric cars and vegetarian or meat-reduced diets), and the role of government regulation versus innovations in the private sector. We differ on our language, too; some of us refer to the climate crisis while others talk about clean energy job creation.

In addition to the longer list above, there is also:

- Growing distrust of fellow citizens
- Declines in kindness, respect, humility, and decency in how we treat others
- Political polarization

This is all a lot to be worried about, but we believe that real change can start by focusing on the shorter list: distrust, how we treat each other, and polarization. We can begin with ourselves and how we engage with others, especially with people who might have different perspectives from us. People vote the way they do for any number of reasons, and every person is an individual with their own needs and aspirations. We can resist making assumptions and putting people in boxes.

Polarization was selected as Merriam-Webster's 2024 Word of the Year, which was no surprise given how much it has dominated our national culture.⁶ Political polarization has two aspects. Disagreements over ideas and policies (called ideological polarization) is one aspect that can be healthy for our society. In contrast, dislike and distrust of people with different views (called affective polarization) is toxic and interferes with healthy disagreement about ideas and policies. It creates an "us versus them" mentality.⁷ This latter kind of polarization is what concerns us. Journalist, author, and Senior Fellow for Public Practice at Braver Angels Mónica Guzmán describes this political polarization "as the problem that eats other problems, the monster who convinces us that the monsters are us."⁸

Hope starts with believing that, despite our differences, we can find a way to hold our country together. This is both necessary and possible, despite the obvious challenges. Embrace the idea that hope and despair are connected and that we can hold on to both at the same time.⁹ Finding something meaningful to accomplish, often with others, is a critical aspect of hope as well. Take stock of your skills and interests, and find a path forward, however large or small.

Being stressed about politics is increasingly common these days, so it is important to take care of your mental health by focusing on healthy habits, staying socially connected, and doing things that bring you joy.¹⁰ Ongoing self-reflection, including a deep understanding of how your actions and behavior impact others, can be coupled with a commitment to ongoing personal development and relationship building. We each can make a personal investment to earn the trust of others by acting with authenticity and openness. Benjamin Franklin once said, “No one cares what you know until they know that you care!”

The same PBS News Hour/NPR/Marist poll we mentioned earlier that indicated the increased likelihood of violence also struck a positive note, with 81 percent of respondents saying they had friends with different political beliefs than theirs and 68 percent saying they believe the American Dream is still attainable.¹¹

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin offered this hopeful perspective reflecting on her book *An Unfinished Love Story, A Personal History of the 1960s*:

“America has been at odds with itself before. I’ve been drawn to such turbulent times—the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, World War II. This is the story of one of those times, of my husband and myself, and our generation shaped by the cataclysms of the 1960s. We see what historic opportunities were seized, what chances were lost, what light those years cast upon our own fractured time. ‘The end of our country has loomed many times before,’ my husband often reminded me, ‘America is not as fragile as it seems.’”¹²

America is not as fragile as it seems. We believe that, but it is up to us to live it and embrace it. If we don’t like what we see, it is our responsibility to act with a hopeful spirit.

Author Thomas Friedman writes, “Pessimists are usually right and optimists are usually wrong, but all the great changes have been accomplished by optimists.”¹³ But hope is possible without being optimistic. Journalist and author Krista Tippett observes that hope is distinct from idealism or

optimism and unrelated to wishful thinking.¹⁴ We can look at the world and insist that it doesn't have to be that way.

Yuval Levin, the author of *American Covenant: How the Constitution Unified Our Nation—and Could Again*,¹⁵ commented in an online conversation:

“I think optimism and pessimism are both dangerous vices, and between them sits a virtue of hope. Hope is different from both of them in that it is not passive. It invites us to act on the potential for good, and it calls on us to be deserving of good, and to be capable of it, to actually take up the work of making it happen. I think looking at America, looking at our history, looking at our people, looking at the world we live in now, we should be hopeful about it. There's no society you'd rather be in this world. And I think in a lot of ways, there's no time you'd rather live in than this time. It's not without its troubles, very serious and grave troubles, but we have a lot to work with in addressing those. And I absolutely am hopeful about the future of this country, because I think we're up to the challenge.”

Finding ways to connect with others helps us build hope. We often pass by people, barely noticing them (while often remaining engrossed in our phones). Listening to others is an important skill that has largely been lost in our busy times. This is hard work, but it's so important.



From
Beth

After the 2016 election, I was invited to attend a rally at our city library in Brentwood, Tennessee, focused on bringing down the Trump administration. Flocked by bullhorns, signs, and knitted hats, I didn't feel that I was in my element. I wanted to understand why my neighbors had voted for Trump—what appealed to them and what their values were.

I received one lead for what I should do—a friend of a friend suggested that I visit “Common Ground Nashville.” I loved this civil discourse group and ended up co-leading it for five years. We held monthly meetings on national and local topics. One memorable meeting featured a woman who was a gun owner and trainer. When she was growing up in a rural area, her parents were often away at work, and she needed a gun to protect her younger brothers and sisters from trespassers. That story changed my thinking on gun rights—I remember thinking, “I get why she feels guns are important.”

I now have a more nuanced position on guns. While it was intellectually rewarding to create a welcoming space where my neighbors could discuss controversial issues, I also felt a *palpable sense of hope* after I left these meetings. We saw humanity in others who were different from us, and we understood—and truly felt—that people who disagreed with us were not necessarily ignorant, misguided, or evil.

We know from our volunteer work how, when you bring people together with strong political views (and set ground rules that ensure respectful discussions), they agree on much more than they expect to at the start. This can seem incredibly hopeful. For example, at the end of a Braver Angels workshop focused on finding common ground on promoting trustworthy elections, one participant commented, “We agreed on more things than I would have thought, and people in this room were hungry.”

Yes, people are hungry for something better, and we need people—such as *you*—to help build hope and show us the way. Embracing positive change is fundamental to growing as a person, and while growing as a person, you can make our country better, too.

Yes, there is hope, but change is up to us.

This book offers concrete ideas for making valuable changes in yourself, in your family and relationships, in your community, and in our country.

At the end of each chapter, we'll invite you to reflect on how you can apply the book's ideas to your life. You may find it helpful to write down your responses and action steps as you read the book.



FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

- What concerns do you have about our country's future?
- When have you had unpleasant conversations about politics with family, friends, or work colleagues? What might you want to do differently?
- Would you like to develop ways to better engage with people who might have different ideas from yours?
- What would make you more confident in situations when difficult conversations arise about politics?
- What information and ideas could make you more hopeful about our country's future?



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DOUG TESCHNER

I have been incredibly blessed with a good life, including growing up in a loving family in Westborough, Massachusetts. This special community really cared, as was on full display after my father died in a car accident when I was only fourteen years old. I attended church and Sunday school from an early age, which has had a lifelong impact. My mother always communicated to me and my two younger brothers that we could do whatever we wanted in life. She was an amazing influence on my life in so many ways.

I had a good education, earning a BS in forestry and a doctorate (EdD) in administrative leadership at the University of Massachusetts, as well as a master's degree in botany at the University of Vermont where I studied mountain ecology.

I am a mountain lover, hiker, skier, and climber. In my younger days, I had the opportunity to make numerous ascents of major peaks in North America, Europe, and Africa, and once played a role in saving the life of a severely injured man on Mount Washington, New Hampshire, an event that shaped my life in profound ways. I still volunteer with the Appalachian Mountain Club, giv-



Doug on right with former President of Ukraine Leonid Kravchuk. (Photo courtesy of Doug Teschner.)



Doug in California's Sierra Nevada.
(Photo courtesy of Doug Teschner.)

ing naturalist talks and serving as a contributing editor for the *Appalachia* journal.

I have had diverse and satisfying work experiences both in this country and overseas. I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco doing forestry projects, and I worked for many years in nonprofits. Inspired by Executive Councilor Ray Burton, I ran for office and was an elected New Hampshire Republican state representative for six terms. I also served as a New Hampshire assistant secretary of state.

Later in my career, I went back overseas, leading US Agency for International Development projects to strengthen the Rwanda and Morocco parliaments and serving as the Peace Corps country director in Burkina Faso, Ukraine, and Guinea. I speak fluent French, intermediate Moroccan Arabic, and some Russian.

When I think about these overseas experiences, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to represent the United States, and I recognize how much these opportunities increased my appreciation for our country when I came back home. I hope that writing this book is an extension of this service to our nation.

Today, I run a small consulting business, Growing Leadership LLC (<https://www.growingleadershipllc.com/>), but, given concerns about our country, I find myself spending much more time volunteering with Braver Angels and promoting the ideas in this book.

I am blessed to have been married for forty-four years, and we have two wonderful sons and three delightful grandchildren.

Since 2018, I have written the “Growing Leadership” column in the NH Business Review and have increasingly incorporated aspects of this national polarization crisis into my writing. A 2023 column elicited many positive responses, including this one:

“Your ‘Living with Optimism Amid Our Nation’s Challenges’ article was great. You should be on 60 Minutes to talk about the things you wrote about. I have been saying for several decades that we need thought leaders who can convey a vision of a better future. You are one.”

Soon after receiving that message, I decided to write this book.

Some years ago, I developed my why: “*To inspire myself and others to achieve a higher level of personal and professional performance.*” I have brought this spirit to the book, wanting to explore more deeply how each of us can touch hearts and give people hope in these challenging times.

BETH MALOW

My story shares some commonalities with Doug’s, and also differences. I grew up on Long Island, New York, to two Jewish middle-class parents who worked hard to support their children. I will always be grateful for their generosity in supporting my medical school’s steep tuition, but even more so for instilling in me a love for learning and a belief that I could accomplish anything I wanted to.

My parents were solid Democrats, although later in life my dad listened to Republican talk show hosts. That baffled me at first, although I now appreciate his being open to listening to diverse viewpoints (as I have worked hard to do as well). My parents, who were married almost seventy years, saw the good in everyone and could get along with anyone. My dad also had a strong love of country and service, and worked as an engineer on the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, during World War II.

I feel blessed to have lived in a lot of places, which contributed to my seeing different perspectives. This included medical training in Chicago, New York City, and Boston, where I met my husband. I chose neurology because I was fascinated by how the brain worked and what made people tick.

Work brought us to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where our kids were born, and then to Tennessee. We lived in Williamson County, just south of Nashville, because it was close to work and had strong public schools. It also has a strong Christian conservative community, which I grew to appreciate and admire. I made many close friends who respected my faith, even though it differed from theirs. Nashville was a fabulous city for work (Vanderbilt Medical Center employs both me and my husband, and I currently work remotely) and also for music. I sang in three different choruses and a quartet before COVID put singing on the “high risk” list.

Through music and other activities, I met and befriended many conservatives and progressives, especially after the 2016 election. It was hard to leave the mild weather in that state for New England winters but I’ve embraced skiing, ice skating, and snowshoeing. Getting outdoors both calms and invigorates me. I’ve also enjoyed participating with my husband, Steve, in community theater.

Returning to New England has fostered my participation in local civic initiatives. I’m honored to work with energized people in my new state of Vermont, along with those just over the border in New Hampshire. It’s a great place to be part of a movement focused on citizen-led solutions.



Beth and her husband Steve participating in community theater.



BECKY ROBINSON

I am the founder/CEO of Weaving Influence (<https://weavinginfluence.com/>), a digital marketing agency supporting nonfiction authors since 2012. Our team provides authors, thought leaders, and executives with comprehensive strategic and implementation support, helping them connect with new audiences through their books. Weaving Influence has a strong team of employees and contractors across the United States, working

virtually and flexibly to serve our hundreds of clients with excellence.

In the past thirteen years, my team and I have supported more than 235 book launches. I host *The Book Marketing Action Podcast* and teach book marketing strategy through one-on-one sessions and a live course. I am also the award-winning author of *Reach: Create the Biggest Possible Audience for Your Message, Book, or Cause* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, April 2022).

My husband and I live in Lambertville, Michigan, and have three wonderful young adult kids. I have lived in the Midwest all my adult life. I graduated from Miami University in Ohio in 1992 with a BA in English/creative writing. In 1994, I earned an MA in intercultural studies from Wheaton College Graduate School in Wheaton, Illinois.

I'm always thinking about my next book idea. When Doug Teschner began sharing his vision with me, I immediately recognized the importance of this work for our country at this moment. On the morning after the 2024 national election, I stepped up to join Doug and Beth as coauthor.