BUSTER BENSON

Why Are We Yelling?

THE ART OF PRODUCTIVE

DISAGREEMENT

Why I wrote this book

I wrote this book in part to discover what the art of productive disagreement meant to me. During the course of my researching and writing, an interesting thing happened: suddenly, disagreements came out of the woodwork! When I stopped avoiding disagreements, because they had lost their spark of anxiety, my conversational world expanded to a new set of questions I hadn't even begun to ask in my personal, professional, and private life. I quit my job, took another job, and then left that one six months later to embark on a creative career change. I started going to therapy to make my marriage stronger and to open (or reopen) questions about how we can connect more deeply. I organized disagreement pot-lucks and conducted other experiments that led to gaining (and los-ing) a couple of friends. There were times when I questioned whether I had gone too far in my pursuit of disagreement. This art is a work in progress and sometimes my capacity to facilitate productive dis-agreements lagged behind my appetite to explore them, and some-times I did go too far and had to do some relationship repair with people. I call productive disagreement an art and not a science for a reason—it's messy! My takeaway is that working on the art of pro-ductive disagreement does introduce some potential for volatility in

our lives, and that's okay too. If we've been listening to the voice of avoidance for a while, there are bound to be certain circumstances that, once opened up, turn out to be dysfunctional and in need of attention. Of course, it's impossible to say what might have naturally happened in the alternate reality where I didn't dive into this topic, and I'm now aware enough of the desire to protect my existing beliefs to say that the "It was all worth it!" position isn't entirely trustworthy (even though I do feel that way).

The biggest change I've noticed in myself, and which I hope readers of this book will experience as well, is the gentle lifting of the burden to fight every battle—not because you are dissociating from the world's problems or avoiding them, but because of the slow dawning of the idea that there's more to disagreement than who is right, and that in many cases the places we speak from are more complicated than a simple policy position or belief statement reveals. Accepting reality over certainty often feels like a more anxious position to take, but I've actually found the reverse. When we allow complexities and uncertainties into our narrative, that feeling of being absolutely certain that we're right, and baffled about how the other side could be so wrong, goes away. Instead of leaping into battle, we have to assume that others are as complicated as we are, and then we can start from a position of curiosity ("Why did you choose not to vaccinate your kids?") instead of a position of self-righteousness ("You terrible person!").

We need look no further than the realms of the head, heart, and hands, which map to what is true, what is meaningful, and what is useful. The voices of power and reason must collapse every disagreement into a conflict about what is true in order to achieve the goal of being factually right. That's the only realm where truth is the proof of a winner. A conflict about what is meaningful can be turned into a conflict of what is true by treating values and morals as purely data-driven calculations. You may have your own opin-

ion about where the best burger is, but if someone else can prove you wrong by showing you restaurant reviews, or by running a survey of close friends, then what you believe is prioritized lower than what can be proven. Conflicts about what is meaningful have been forced into narrow conflicts over what is true for a long time, because the voices of power and reason have found them easier to manage. "You can't manage what you can't measure" is a common saying in the tech world, and has been used countless times to turn a question about preferences and values into a question about data and evidence. This practice dehumanizes us a little bit each time. Conflicts about what is useful can also be collapsed into conflicts about what is true by running an experiment. It's so tempting to make decisions by delegating them to a supposedly impartial algorithm, until we realize that the algorithms are almost as biased as we are. They don't actually determine the truth as it relates to what is meaningful or what is useful any more than we do. But delegating to experimentation is convenient. And it creates pressure to only propose plans that can be easily tested. It's a common enough error among start-ups that the allure of a purely metrics-driven company is starting to grow sour. These companies produce products that are biased toward immediate gratification and are starved of true character and spirit (because these can't be measured).

The voice of possibility gives equal weight to the head, the heart, and the hands, and because it does this without the pressure of being right, the fruits of security, growth, connection, and enjoyment have a chance to take root. This feels unnatural at first, but if we experience the enjoyment of aporia enough, it begins to wiggle us out of that burden to be right and gives us a chance to instead embrace the possibility (and excitement!) of being wrong. To me, it has been such a relief to have more space to remain undecided and curious about the possibilities rather than immediately latching onto the first safe answer and aggressively defending it.

SUPERPOWERS

When I was able to learn to accept reality and participate in it, I was surprised to find it to be such a low-anxiety, yet action-packed, position from which to look at the world. Here's what I noticed:

1. Disagreements are no longer frustrating balls of anxiety. The anxiety of denying what we don't want to know goes away and is replaced by grief for and then acceptance of the passing of our wishful thinking.

2. I see how few disagreements there are and can keep an eye out for them instead of being surprised by them. This works out well, because I can participate in only a handful of disagreements at a time. I can choose them proactively rather than reactively and can resist the temptation to participate in every disagreement at once.

3. The world becomes bigger because I can enter difficult conversations that used to intimidate me or feel futile. At the same time, by participating directly in the disagreements with my own hands, head, and heart, I see the ones I can have a direct impact on—they're the ones with people closest to me and the people I want to become closer to.

HEAD REALM

What Is True?

Is a productive disagreement still a disagreement?

If you remember the definition I gave at the beginning of this book, a disagreement is "an unacceptable difference between two perspectives." What happens if, after following everything we talked about, differences between two perspectives are no longer unacceptable, but expected or even exciting? You could say that the exchange, while having the potential to become a disagreement, becomes something else instead. A thing we barely have words for. A dialogue, maybe? A conversation? The mere exchange of perspectives that results in a reconciled or otherwise improved perspective? At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what we call them, and different people will have different preferences. Call it whatever you want. I personally prefer the label "productive disagreement" because it captures the potential spark of anxiety that still resides within.

HANDS REALM

What Is Useful?

What happens when we're no longer afraid of disagreements but see them as necessary bundles of potential growth, connection, and enjoyment that we can work through one at a time?

In hindsight, I'm surprised it wasn't obvious. If we're no longer afraid of disagreements, then suddenly the world becomes a treasure trove of possibility. Disagreements are in plain sight, once you stop trying to avoid them. You might wonder at first if it's your duty to work through all of these disagreements—but that phase won't last long if you truly don't see them as problems. Disagreements become part of the environment, like millions of thorny blackberries on an overproducing bush. You don't have to eat them all. But enjoying a few that are particularly ripe and ready for more participation makes a lot of sense.

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HEART REALM

What Is Meaningful?

If disagreements aren't scary in themselves, what is?

Okay, yeah—plenty of things are scary in the world! The world doesn't yet meet our expectations on many levels, and in some cases shows little sign of improvement. Unproductive disagreements may no longer be as scary as they once were, but the fact that so many are stuck in an unproductive loop means that until something changes, anxiety and resentment in others is still increasing every day. Political polarization is not a disagreement in itself but rather is the cultural debt and exhaust created by unproductive disagreements running on overdrive. Systemic problems like racism, sexism, the opioid epidemic, gun violence, climate change, abuses of power, etc. are all problems not because of specific disagreements but because those disagreements are stuck in unproductive states or exiled from the table for discussion. Our opportunity is to help them move from their stuck states to unstuck states, so that we can discuss the more interesting questions that lie beyond.

Imagine a world where we are no longer stuck arguing about whether or not climate change is real but instead we are working primarily to build proposals together that ensure Earth's climate will be able to sustain us for the foreseeable future.

Imagine a world where we are no longer stuck arguing about whether or not refugees and immigrants should be allowed into

our country or other countries, and instead we are working to extend a higher quality of life to everyone as quickly and effectively as we could.

Imagine a world where we are no longer stuck arguing about who deserves health care, education, a living wage, a second chance, etc., and instead we are evaluating proposals that ensure that as many people as possible had a support system and opportunities to support their own families, and it didn't come at the cost of taking support and livelihood away from others.

For that matter, imagine a world where we are no longer fighting to appear worthy of basic human rights, respect, and support when we need it, and instead we could have the difficult conversations we need to have in order to figure out how we can best spend our time and contribute back to the whole of society and the world with the limited time we have.

When I began writing this book, a lot of these ideas seemed like far-fetched, unrealistic dreams, but I see things differently now. I think we stop asking these questions only because the voices of power, reason, and avoidance have run out of ways to ask them. We've grown to expect the obstacles between us and productive disagreement to never go away, and we use that expectation to justify not looking at them as they really are. How might the voice of possibility help us begin to see these obstacles as the very thing we need to bring our attention to next?

It looks like we have many open possibilities to consider. Following them to wherever they might lead is our next call to adventure.