

NONFICTION

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

By Lisa Selin Davis

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

By Mónica Guzmán

“Unfollow if you disagree.” It may sound like an innocuous social media phrase, but Mónica Guzmán suggests that, in reality, it reflects the brokenness of a world in which divergent viewpoints preclude relationships. Rejecting someone for their class, race or sexual orientation remains taboo, but ditching people — or doxing, threatening or shaming them — for their political beliefs? It’s not only acceptable, it’s the ultimate virtue signaling.

But Guzmán, who works in communications at the nonprofit Braver Angels, which seeks to depolarize America, sees conflicting ideas and ideals not as the end but the beginning. Her book, “I Never Thought of It That Way,” is a manual for difficult conversations between people who find themselves at opposite ends of the political spectrum, an investigation into the sources of polarization and a road map for marching out of dicey territory.

The first section, “S.O.S.,” details how we got here. If you’ve seen “The Social Dilemma,” this part won’t feel too revelatory. The gist is, we’re sorting ourselves into tight groups, stuck in our ideological silos and “othering” people who disagree. We’re helped along by technology, but the analog world is just as divided. Few Republicans and Democrats even live near each other anymore, Guzmán reports; we’ve sorted ourselves into blocs where we rarely have to confront those with different ideologies, making it easier to dehumanize them.

The other four sections, “Curiosity,” “People,” “Paths” and “Honesty,” combine interviews, examples, graphs and bulleted sections with key phrases to remember, like “state your concerns” and “pause and persist.” They detail how and when to engage in discussions with those of different blocs (and, importantly, when not to). Guzmán’s prescription for what ails our society is to replace certainty with curiosity, to stop seeing people as representatives of groups we can dismiss and to see them instead as individuals whose backgrounds inform their beliefs. She writes, **“If there’s one question I want to persuade you to ask more often, it’s ‘What am I missing?’”**

Then, Guzmán says, it becomes possible to have what she calls INTOIT moments (for “I Never Thought of It That Way”), in which we see the person behind the politics. Just as the road to better health is often disappointingly low-tech — no silver bullet but the boring and difficult mundanities of sleep hygiene and mindful eating — the cure for polarization is the simple and underappreciated art of conversation. But, of course, simple doesn’t mean easy.

Guzmán writes of getting happily lost in interviews with people she has little in common with, seeing their different opinions as invitations to learn instead of direct threats to her beliefs. I would have liked more cathartic stories of connection, more direct examples of what that looks like; I didn’t have as many INTOIT moments reading it as I’d hoped. I was drawn to the title because, as a frequent op-ed writer, that’s the reaction I hope to

elicit. Not “You’re right,” so much as “Interesting point.” But while I am professionally bound to consider points of view that depart from my own, and love the emotional and mental workout this can provide, interpersonally I’m often intractable, demanding that close friends see things my way.

Guzmán’s lesson seems to be that I should give up the need to be right and focus on the need to stay connected. The book’s greatest offering, I think, is permission to reclaim people we might have dumped for ideological reasons; such connections won’t sully us but may in fact enrich us. I can see this book helping estranged parties who are equally invested in bridging a gap — it could be assigned reading for fractured families aspiring to a harmonious Thanksgiving dinner.

Would these same techniques work on a larger scale, in a country where 62 percent of Americans feel unsafe expressing their political opinions, when the right and left are so extreme that more people declare political homelessness each day? Perhaps in part because I live in such a politically segregated world, my disagreement is often with members of my own party. Can a book like Guzmán’s push us past intraparty battles over race and gender? National shouting matches over infrastructure and abortion?

If people want to seek peace and friendship instead of dox, threaten or shame, it’s possible. Right now, though, that still feels like a big if.