



Courageous Citizenship: The And Way

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

When community members commit to relationships rooted in shared humanity despite differences, we have a greater chance for democratic renewal. In an environment where tribal loyalty is currently incentivized, we risk relationships and a sense of acceptance by choosing unpopular dissent and engagement with “the other side” using the proposed model “The And Way” for the sake of long-term rewards: peace and justice. This model addresses the greatest threat to world peace: psychological rigidity. Kelsey often references the “good-bad gridlock” mindset rampant in our political life as a battle between moral opposites. By challenging the gridlock, she advances a both/and model of engagement that pairs curiosity and conviction, accountability and empathy, dissent and belonging.

Introduction

In preparation for the 250th anniversary of the American experiment, licensed therapist and author of [*The And Way: Assertive Peacemaking in a Divided World*](#) Kelsey Blahnik proposes a model for courageous citizenship. Kelsey has been operating from her deep passion for peacemaking and community healing through co-leading Love Anyway gatherings and a career across a broad spectrum of behavioral health services. Amidst our current landscape of political polarization, her approach to politics is informed by her extensive experience working with diverse populations, where she witnessed firsthand the transformative power of empathy, dialogue, and collective healing.

When community members commit to relationships rooted in shared humanity despite difference we have a greater chance for democratic renewal. In an environment where tribal loyalty is currently incentivized, we stand to risk relationships and a sense of acceptance by choosing unpopular dissent and engagement with “the other side” for the sake of long-term reward: peace and justice.

The model is named to embody evidence-based tools from harm reduction, Internal Family Systems (IFS), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), attachment theory, and more. The And Way model is teachable, practical and timely so we can equip ourselves with the mental flexibility to navigate this discomfort. Bridge-building through humanizing one another rather than agreeing with one another is the necessary element for our recommitment to democracy.

This model addresses the greatest threat to world peace: psychological rigidity.

Kelsey often references the “good-bad gridlock” mindset rampant in our political life as a battle between moral opposites. By challenging the gridlock, she advances a both/and model of engagement that pairs curiosity *and* conviction, accountability *and* empathy, dissent *and* belonging.

Conviction and Curiosity

With an “and” lifestyle we can defuse the tension of either/or/but and allow ourselves to intersect controversy with curiosity. Since all of us experience some version of pain, we can relate to having defense mechanisms that both help and hurt us and others. Shared humanity is available to us on every level when we hold awareness that each of us has goodness within. Humanizing one another as innately good with the potential for bad or even menacing behaviors begins with compassion in two directions: inward and outward.

Separating our behaviors from our whole identity (the worth-within approach) allows us to reduce shame and do the same for others so that we can lead with curiosity and compassion before judgment or dehumanization of others. This is the foundation of peacemaking. I often reflect on Desmond Tutu’s quote, “To relegate someone to the level of a monster is to deny that person’s ability to change and to take away that person’s accountability for their actions and behavior.”

The more we lean into nuance, humility and curiosity, the more we come to recognize our own inner conflict and biases. One does not have to dissipate their passion to invite curiosity. Beliefs rooted in wisdom rather than regurgitation allow us to learn from one another-not just debate or educate others. Dignity, rather than pity, for “the other side” allows us to humbly engage one another.

Accountability and Empathy

Accountability exists when members atone for their actions in an effort to restore trust. Let’s imagine how a culture based on accountability rather than blame and shame would look. In order to set up our society for movement out of this devastatingly repetitive cycle of violence, we need to offer rehabilitation alongside accountability.

History has shown us that in a transition or reconstruction period, governments need transparency and accountability in order to reform effectively. We must continue to assess and measure the impact of new policies and structures, especially after their implementation. In the wake of polarizing state laws around vaccines, abortion and gun rights to name a few, consider the drive to prioritize states’ rights and the potential impact on our sense of unity. If citizens continue to flee their home states because they’ve lost freedoms there, will we further segregate geographically by political ideology?

Partisan legislative stalemates are the macro version of good-bad gridlock. Accountability and transparency activate members toward shared goals. If we foster this ethos as a country, we can confront challenges directly. While people in power may need to be called out, try calling in when possible so that your words have the best chance of being digested without them heel-digging.

This starts at a micro level interpersonally. Empathy and accountability are critical, interconnected forces in healthy relationships. Calling out or “canceling” may cause a loved one to stubbornly dig their heels in deeper. They may further view the one calling out as “extreme” or “sensitive.” Separating people from their behaviors (the worth-within approach) is how we

shift from shaming to simply holding someone accountable. This is one reason why dehumanizing labels can be so damaging.

Guilt, or accepting responsibility for the way someone acted outside of their values, is relevant to accountability. Relationships without accountability are not intimate. When accountability is managed with compassion, responsible parties may have the potential to actually absorb more feedback.

Without a platform to address challenges, injustices, and misunderstandings, we remain stuck as a society. Ignoring harm offers us the illusion that we are experiencing peace just because we experience an absence of conflict. True peace exists when we're experiencing intimacy, when we're feeling safe and trusting in a deeply connected relationship.

Peaceful communities don't mask unresolved wounds with the status quo. They thrive *because* mutual understanding and repair are their priorities. By promoting emotional expression and acknowledging truth, not the sanitized "I'm fine's," communities maintain a culture of resilience, empathy, and emotional safety.

We do not need to erase accountability to access harmony, either. Harmony isn't compromise, and forgiveness isn't a superficial apology in an attempt to save face. We can access harmony when, starting with self-healing, we are individually engaged in a restoration cycle. We are capable of naming our feelings and how actions, not just words, may repair.

On the other end of the wound, we can create reconciliation when we are humble enough to acknowledge responsibility and have a tolerance for another's big feelings. Harmony is led by goodwill, empathy, and cooperation. Politicians can do this by acknowledging their mistakes. Voters can offer this stance by disagreeing with the candidate they put in office. Family members can display this by recognizing harm even inter-generationally rather than shoving it under a rug.

During this recommitment to democracy, let's call ourselves into a restorative justice model with a less violent, more equitable outcome using empathy *and* accountability. With an expansive tolerance for discord, discussed in the next section, we will continue developing skills to repair interpersonal conflicts and elicit transformation around us.

Dissent and Belonging

Connection and belonging are two basic needs of our species. Belonging according to *The And Way* is when everyone feels valued, even in disagreement. They don't have to fit in by conforming. Belonging, however, asks us to remain assertive—expressing our wants—rather than adjusting course to please others.

Culture is held in our bodies through habitual movement, feelings, senses, and consumption that are meaningful to us. Culture may be more influential than law in terms of historical impact. When a culture includes rituals that evoke intense sensations and feelings (and fitting in is prioritized over belonging) it's reasonable to put your guard up and start asking questions. Be wary of groups that insist you surrender your values or your voice to participate.

Consider the types of leaders that hold nuance. A passionate activist who is open to dialogue or a decisive boss comfortable with dissent from their teammates. When leaders isolate themselves on their pedestals, it's a recipe for organizational collapse. That includes anyone from political leaders and elders within a family. Leaders may choose to repress their pain about their own imperfections, hide in shame, use condescension as a cover-up, or resort to an assortment of other harmful protective behaviors.

Punishing leaders for their mistakes with absolutes, call outs, and scandal without structural or cultural changes will not improve outcomes because these inhibit growth. Expect and respect their humanity. Call them into a culture of accountability. Challenge leaders of your board, your place of worship, and your home to regularly receive feedback and make improvements while modeling vulnerability (versus appearing to have it all together).

Deepak Chopra describes the public deception we face when leaders perform to gain our favor. We as a public tend to feel comforted and stabilized by decisiveness. Leaders who are “certain, stable, and decisive at every moment— in other words—unconflicted,” project a false narrative that strength lies in an endpoint. True strength lies in leadership defined by humility and a stamina for uncertainty.

Leaders are often expected to have everything “figured out” and clearly decided. This stresses the weakness of their own inner conflicts instead of highlighting the beauty and intentionality of noticing them. When leaders lean into the unknown while demonstrating vulnerability and openness to nuance, they build trust within their system. Conflict is not an obstacle. It's an opportunity to impose meaningful change. Just as we can expand our internal capacity for distress, our institutions can support a culture of leaning into growth and offering transparency, especially for our leadership.

When we're curious, we have a willingness to be wrong, and there's an awareness we bring to the table that is something outside of ourselves. We don't hold all the answers. We can model respectful diplomacy on a community level by refusing binary classifications for our leaders and members too.

Conclusion

A study at Columbia University Press by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan proved that a successful nonviolent campaign is sustainable specifically when there is “a large and diverse participation.” This means that cloistering off into groups of people with the same traits and beliefs is not as effective as diversely participated, nonviolent efforts where we share common ground.

The study also requires dense variation in the methods used in the campaign. *The And Way* challenges us to reach across party lines to promote justice. Some ways we do this nonviolently on a mezzo and macro level involve deciding when to continue involvement or when to leave an institution. We also must determine who to maintain business relationships with while protesting nonviolently and calling for policy changes. Since it's clear we need many voices in a movement, promoting peace *and* justice will require discernment and engagement, not moral absolutism nor constant passivity.

Withdrawal may feel instinctive and aggression, particularly online, is often rewarded. In this setting, assertive communication marked by clear conviction *and* openness to others can feel unnatural. Non-dualism guides us toward repairing the fracture we currently face. Rejecting apathy, we choose dialogue. Taking risk, we bravely engage. Avoiding rigidity, we embrace nuance. From these practices, a shared humanity breeds shared goals and problem-solving.

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