


# BRIDGING THE POLITICAL DIVIDE



A Guide to Help University  
Students Engage Productively  
in Conservative Hometowns

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# Table of Contents

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Chapter 1: The Story of Us..... 1

Chapter 2: Who is this for..... 7

Chapter 3: Our Goal & Purpose..... 9

Chapter 4: Defining Our Terminology..... 13

Steps..... 15

    Chapter 5: Get the Heck off your High Horse..... 16

    Chapter 6: Check your motive & adjust accordingly..... 18

    Chapter 7: Be willing to Explain your Current Stance..... 20

    Chapter 8: Depoliticize the conversation..... 22

    Chapter 9: Not Everyone Cares..... 25

    Chapter 10: Monitoring ‘maximum capacity’..... 29

    Chapter 11: Reflect, Adjust, Plan, Repeat..... 31

Chapter 12: Conversations in Practice..... 33

Chapter 13: Conclusion..... 35

Annotated References..... 38

# Chapter 1: The Story of Us



Welcome! Before jumping into the thick of our resource guide/toolkit/book, we wanted to introduce ourselves – providing some background on why we’ve done what we’ve done, and how we came up with this project idea in the first place.

## **Michelle Marcus**

For the first 18 years of my life, I grew up living on the same suburban street in Cambridge, Ontario. If you don’t know where that is, that’s okay: you’re not missing much. But for context, Cambridge is about an hour west of Toronto, and part of the Waterloo, Ontario tri-city, if you’ve heard of that. Cambridge is a quirky place for a few reasons: despite its proximity to Toronto, its relative multiculturalism, and representation by a Liberal MP, it’s still managed to take pride in doing things the way they’ve always been done with minimal cost or investment. Secondly, Cambridge is kind of socially (and awkwardly) constructed: it used to be three

separate towns, Galt, Preston, and Hespeler (listed in order of superiority, in my not-so-humble Galt-Girl opinion), but even after their conflation, each managed to keep its own distinct feel and traditions, which makes you feel like you're living in a town a bit more than in a city. It's also just a bit sleepy; there are always efforts by local libraries, parent councils, and city hall to make things a bit spicier and attract some Greater Toronto Area foot traffic, but (all due respect to our courageous community leaders!) they usually don't succeed in that regard, and typically end up serving the local Cambridgites (which, cringey enough, is our official title). So that's a bit about where I come from physically, and where I'm coming from conceptually. It's not that Cambridge is super rural or populist, or that I actively avoid going back to visit. But let's just say I felt a bit trapped in my later years of living there and was grateful that my pursuit of post-secondary education gave me the chance for a change of scenery. Let's also just say that this resource is, in part, a product of my reflections on why I was frustrated with my many friends who stayed; and why, despite no plans of returning long-term, I still feel connected to those who did.

## **Noah Vatou**

I was born and raised in Campbell River, British Columbia - a small town located on Vancouver Island. While my hometown may be situated in one of the most beautiful places in Canada (and in my humble opinion... the world), located perfectly for easy access to pristine lakes, the Pacific Ocean, stunning alpine, and just about anything else you can imagine would be a tree-hugging hippies' dream, it ultimately has its downfalls. Campbell River was, and is, built on industry - mining, fishing, and logging, to name the most notable. As a result, many people who are born in Campbell River never choose to leave, which was always a serious worry of mine. I

knew from childhood that I had to leave in one way or another, and being told by people that pursuing post-secondary education would be a complete waste of time and money only compounded this urge. Unfortunately, the community never allowed me to really feel comfortable in my own shoes, as many residents hold worldviews that limited my ability to express myself and grow into who I knew I wanted to be. Attempting to understand self-expression, gender identity, sexual identity, and at the core - who I am - was no easy task in a place that is the epitome of heteronormativity. Once the clock strikes 6:00 pm, there is next to nothing left to do (unless you consider a trip to Walmart something to do). I felt trapped, misunderstood, and seriously out of place - so I did everything in my power to leave. Yet, here we are: after four years living in Montreal, I can't help but grow fonder of my hometown, and I have learned to start appreciating some of the quirks that I despised for so long. This is why I'm so passionate about this project - I want the opportunity to return to Campbell River and do everything in my power to help foster a community that, all those years ago, I might have felt less inclined to leave.

So, we both come from smaller hometowns with significantly more conservative values than the ones we've learned to adapt at university. We've also both experienced a very similar phenomenon, where conversations about social, moral, or political issues never feel very productive when we return to our hometown during breaks from university, and begin sharing our new perspectives and beliefs. Instead, we've been labeled as elitist and "fancy-schmancy." We've been accused of forcing our newly held views on the community from a position that communicates, "we are better than you because we are more politically correct."

Our intention in talking about current issues with members of our home community has never been to act as if we are more important than others, or to sound elitist. But it's possible that we do. Rather than see these responses to us as an attack on our character or intentions, we have instead come to a point where we can more reflexively understand what we must have sounded like to our friends and family. We probably were speaking condescendingly; we may have sounded like we thought we were right and other people were wrong; We acknowledge that, yeah, that's surely what we sounded like and thought.

As our goals in wanting to communicate with people who might not agree with us and our insights into our own shortcomings in having these conversations have come into focus, we began to shift how we think about, and plan for, having conversations with people of differing perspectives and political positions. Both of us have realized that being in community – and returning to one's home community – requires some skill building in how to live in and with differences, and that doing so is essential to constituting relationships that foster supportive and thriving communities. To do so, we have been learning how to better navigate and value the conversations we have with others across our differences, even when we fundamentally disagree. This is crucial for ensuring everyone's quality of life, because divided and polarized communities are not ones that thrive or foster equality and inclusion.

We've also concluded that, whether we like it or not, and no matter how far we go, we are always tied to our hometowns. We realize we have a unique opportunity to use our experiences productively to foster better relationships with people in our home communities, and ultimately, this is our overarching goal: to share

knowledge about how we can dismantle the conditions of ideological polarization that are reproduced in contexts of communication around the experience of going home. As university students who have left their hometowns, we don't necessarily want to seek to convert the ideologies or worldviews held by members of our hometowns, as we no longer perceive this as the most crucial issue. In a way, our goal is much simpler: We want to make it possible to have more genuine and mutually respectful conversations with people from our hometowns across our political, religious, social, and economic differences and divisions. To do so requires dialogic generosity, and the willingness and ability to listen not only to what people say but what else they might be communicating that we do not often hear or listen for – their fears, their concerns for themselves and others, their prejudices (which can be *difficult* to hear), and their hopes for the future. It means we must listen for people's intentions and look for spaces of common ground and shared concern. We can challenge one another, but first we need to listen to one another in ways that seek to understand what motivates, and underlies, the positions people take on key issues in the community.

Both of us at one point or another found going home to be difficult; we found many of the conversations we had there frustrating and non-productive, in part because of how people saw us and how we saw them. As we've spent more time away from our hometowns and rekindled our love for things there that we may have never fully appreciated about our relationships there, we have come to re-value them. We recognize our own growing desires to build better relationships with friends, family and other members of the community, and some of the work we need to do in order to help foster the kinds of community and communication-in-community we desire to have back home.

For a long time, we believed that it was easier to just *not* engage; to put space between ourselves and ‘them’, and to leave all attachments to our hometown behind. And while this may be easier, it is not the answer for addressing and surmounting this growing struggle to come together (rather than silo ourselves) in conversations on challenging topics.

This resource guide emerges out of our own work developing better skills in having conversations across ideological and other divides with members of our home communities. It is a six step guide to help you navigate challenging conversations on polarizing topics, using questions and tips to help you engage more productively with people in your hometown, even those with whom you fundamentally disagree. While this guide and the insights it provides draw on our own experiences, it is our hope that these steps, and the conversational environments we seek to foster, can be replicated, adjusted, and used flexibly to help you bridge the political divide.



## Chapter 2: Who is this for?



So, now that you've gotten to know us, let's talk about you! Maybe you're here because you, too, come from a rural, conservative community, and were enticed by our project's title by virtue of this commonality; or, maybe you're here because lately, you've found yourself frustrated by, or strategically avoiding, conversations with people whose views on political topics contradict your own. We are also open to the possibility that you read the title of our guide and laughed condescendingly: as *IF* a guidebook could possibly *bridge the political divide* as our title boldly suggests.

Regardless of why or how you got here, we hope you'll take a moment to recognize that you want to transform the conditions for having conversations about difficult topics. We do not mean for this guidebook to be used prescriptively – we are not here to tell you what to do. Instead, we believe that there are some strategies that can be useful for navigating the difficulties of talking about important community issues and that these tools can be modified for the particular contexts in which you are having these kinds of conversations.

Putting together this resource was inspired by our belief that even though each community is unique and takes great pride in its traditions, specific industries, or even peculiar landmarks, and even though each person experiences their relationship to their hometown differently, **there are common threads in the experience of growing up in a conservative community** – and shared sensibilities that come with leaving and returning to them. Community is something that is, *remains*, and *includes* you, regardless of whether you’ve left, and regardless of how long you’ve been away.

We hope this guide is useful to *anyone* looking to engage more productively in conversations with those they may disagree with. We envision that our readers might be students who, like us, have left their conservative hometowns and experienced a shift in their values, perspective, outlook, or general understanding of the world and social issues that challenge our ethical, moral, and (dare we say) political inclinations. In turn, we hope that the approaches and scenarios we outline throughout this guide are applicable to experiences that are somewhat reminiscent of your own; but that even if your experience (or background) differs from ours, you can still find ways to embrace and adapt the overarching goal of our work. That is, the goal of engaging with others for the sake of maintaining and strengthening our sense of community, regardless of seemingly vast differences in ideology and worldview.

You might be coming to this text for different reasons as well, and from different perspectives. We believe that the materials we have created are useful in many different contexts where folks are trying to find ways to have better, less judgmental, and more generative conversations across and through differences. Welcome!

## Chapter 3: Our Goal & Purpose



The purpose of this guidebook is to act as a useful resource for you, and to help you gain a better understanding of (or compassion for) those whose attitudes, perspectives, and policy prescriptions seem to serve as constant reminders of why we left home. This project encourages us to reconsider how we conceptualize community, relationship, and care – by encouraging us to ask: *why* should I engage with the people with whom I fundamentally disagree? In what ways am I still a member of my home community, and how can I use the perspective, knowledge, and experiences I've gained to *strengthen* community bonds without overlooking or undermining my community-members' lived experiences? In changing my goal from 'educating' or 'converting' interlocutors in my hometown, how might we shift our culture from one of irreconcilable division to one of mutual care and respect, in spite of our disagreements?

By considering and grappling with these questions, it is our belief that this guidebook can act as a launching pad for a much-needed

perspective shift, through which we come to accept that the judgment criteria for holding a meaningful conversation should not be, and *cannot* be, complete and unwavering agreement between two parties. Our points of disagreement should not become fundamental, insurmountable differences in the way we see the world. Instead, we approach maintaining community and surmounting polarization as ongoing projects that will take grit and may likely entail some frustrations, but also require us to lean into the more subtle relations that already *are*. That is, if we want our policies to address inequality and care for people, some of us need to take a step out of an academic worldview that poses that “we” are enlightened and right while others are not. If we want our perspectives to be taken seriously and gain any traction in the world, we should start with our communities – each/all of them. We remain in community with those whose perspectives and attitudes may irk us to our core. For if the root of our own frustrations with conservative ideologies is their lack of care for those cast as ‘lazy’, ‘addicts’, or ‘taking advantage of the system’, is it not both counter-intuitive and counter-productive to think we can advance a ‘caring’ progressive or liberal ideology while excluding (or looking down upon) members of our own community?

What if, instead of seeing our conservative hometowns as impossible projects requiring ideological conversion’, we recognized that the people in those towns are our *fellow* community members whose perspectives are shaped by their experiences just as much as ours have been through urban, elite institutions? What if, instead of trying to prove ourselves right or getting frustrated after one conversation on a touchy subject, we accepted that we have just as much to gain from (and just as much bond-strengthening to do through) engaging with our conservative neighbors? And finally, what if we acknowledged that support for policies encompassing a broader

conception of community to *include* those experiencing homelessness or using substances or settling in Canada *first* require that we ascribe *value* to those very community-members whose perspectives and experiences are often excluded or frowned upon in elite discourse?

We ourselves are in the process of undergoing this mindset-shift, so part of this project is doing the work with you. We offer it as a source of reflection for how to go about achieving the goal of building better contexts of communication across political and ideological differences, ones that have been shaped by our experiences moving between university and our home communities. It's a launching pad for articulating what our communities *could* be through a reconceptualization of the purpose behind conversation, and a reconsideration of community itself.

By engaging with this guidebook, we hope that you gain a better, more compassionate, and more reflective understanding of the attitudes and perspectives held by people within your community - regardless of how polarized the conversation is or seems to be. We hope it helps people create a bridge to and with others: a deployable, compact, easy-to-carry bridging tool that can be used in any situation where you may see a valuable opportunity to build stronger ties with your community. The conversations we hope you'll engage in are not easy - and we acknowledge how draining and even emotionally taxing it can be. But we also believe it is worth it. The work and time that these conversations take can lead to results so positive that they are *more* than worth having: they are essential to being in good relation with others. We need strong communities: we need to care for our neighbours, our elders, our sick, and our children; and, we all want strong, reliable support systems. For this to happen, we need to understand the power of collectivity, which demands establishing

mutual respect and trust – it is our hope that this guidebook can help with that, even if it's in the smallest of ways. We encourage you to return to it, too, as you have more conversations on which to build your skills in doing this work. As you spend more time *actively* working to gain a better understanding of the people you're talking to, the more habitual these practices will become.

## Chapter 4: Defining Terminology



### Care:

- A mindset and practice through which people *feel* and *are* deemed valuable, worthy of compassion, and unashamed in their current state.
- An active recognition that we are all learning and deserving of patience and support.
- A commitment to build systems and practices that dismantle hierarchies of inequality and status.

### Community:

- A web of relations and associations that connects us to the people surrounding us.
- A state of existence that is not chosen, but which can be improved and strengthened by engaging with those around us, and by seeing their ideas and states of being as crucial to our own life experience.
- A crucial necessity to ensure, above all else, that everybody is looked after and cared for, as a means to supplement flawed structures of power that exclude certain members of society.

### **"Successful" Conversation:**

- An exchange during which both parties critically engage with and consider the perspectives and emotions of one another, without becoming aggressive or defensive at points of disagreement.
- Where neither party seeks to ‘convert’ the other party’s ideology, but lays the groundwork for future discussions during which common ground may be uncovered.

### **Polarization:**

- A conceptual division between two groups / people who disagree on certain topics, issues, or ideas which seem impossibly incompatible.
- A mindset created by political and capitalist ideologies that benefit from individualism, fear, and hierarchy, rather than community and shared space.
- A destructive social force that affects our ability to (and our belief in the possibility of) identifying with those who have different worldviews or experiences than us.
- A very real, and very dangerous threat to building strong communities capable of overlooking ideological or partisan differences.



# Steps



The following steps articulate the process we have been using to realize the goal of having more generative conversations across political differences in our own communities. These steps might also serve as a kind of pep-talk prior to a social gathering or family dinner. Here we outline and identify strategies, approaches, and steps you can follow or apply as you breach topics that tend to prompt hostile disagreement. Remember the goal is not to prove yourself right or convert someone's ideology, but rather to create the conditions in which people can talk about the motivations behind their positions in order to come to better understanding. Better understanding can lead to the recognition of common concerns and shared investments that make it possible to work together, to learn from one another and to find solidarity. Through these steps you might be surprised to learn things you didn't expect.

If we can find hope and fulfillment in walking away from conversations feeling like seeds have been planted or watered or pushed closer to the sun, we have already begun our journey towards a more comprehensive notion of community. Let's start by considering these steps to inch a bit further away from the perceived division between 'urban elite' and 'rural conservative' worldviews.

## Chapter 5: Get the Heck off your High Horse Step 1



We get it. You've left home and you've gone through the rigorous process that is university. You've likely learned from some of the most impressive, accomplished experts in your field, and you've had the privilege of accessing knowledge and ideas from across the world. You've likely been exposed to a much wider range of culture, nationalities, experiences, and perspectives than you ever were back home, even just walking to campus or chatting with your peers between classes. All this to say: you think you know better, and you think you know best.

Higher education does expose you to more expanded views of issues like homelessness, addiction, and mass migration. The theoretical and interdisciplinary nature of higher education has probably enabled you to understand these issues beyond face value as products of larger systemic forces (capitalism, biopolitics, state-surveillance). But guess what? The only thing distinguishing you from having a more comprehensive view on these topics is the fact that you left your town, and you gained a formal post-secondary education in an urban location, whereas your hometown counterparts did not.

**Ask Yourself:** *Do I recognize that my worldview is shaped by my experience just as much as other people's is shaped by their experience? Have I recognized that they see my perspective as the product of liberal brainwashing just as much as I see theirs as siloed and lacking?*

**Do:**

- **Come to terms with the fact that you may not know it all.** If you enter into a conversation thinking you know best, you've already screwed up. Take a step back and put yourself in the shoes of your co-conversationalist. Maybe they're already feeling a bit hostile that you had and / or embraced the opportunity to leave when they did not. Maybe they're tired of being cast as 'uneducated' and thus without meaningful contributions to make. Or maybe, they see you (because of their encounters with you or other university educated folk) as flat out condescending and a know-it-all from the get-go. So, get outta the 'superiority saddle' and back in your hometown 'boots on the ground'. Check yourself prior to entering the conversation so you don't shut down the chance for a great chat by virtue of thinking: 'here we go again'.

## Chapter 6: Check your motive & adjust accordingly

### Step 2



Are you about to engage in this conversation because you just wrote a paper on this topic and just can't help yourself? It's fine to *want* to discuss issues you're passionate about and informed on, but passion can be easily misread as conceit, so you need to check your tone and jargon. Just because you know academic buzzwords doesn't mean you should use them. If you want to convey openness and a genuine interest in discussing the topic with your co-conversationalist, don't open the chat with: I just took a course on this! Because they probably didn't, and this is asking for an immediate eye roll & 'oh, here we go, the elitist is back in town!'. Instead, humble yourself, and engage with the issue or idea itself as it pertains to the particular context or scenario, rather than trying to prove a pre-established thesis. Of course, you can (and should!) draw on your knowledge to explain your perspective, but don't go into the conversation if your goal (even subconsciously) is to flex your intellectual muscles.

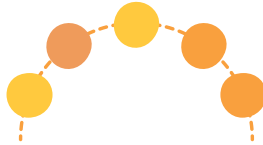
**Ask yourself:** *Am I open to hearing new perspectives on this issue? Am I open to learning new things about this issue? Am I ready to respect different takes on the issue, even if I find them problematic?*

**Do:**

- **Avoid appearing ‘overly eager’** to jump into the conversation: this could come across as you pouncing on any chance to use your education to disprove or belittle your peers.
- Use words you knew before spending substantial time in a university lecture hall. Remember, the people you’re talking to are not stupid and can, just like you, understand concepts and theories; but they probably don’t know the terms coined by academics. And that’s okay. Don’t assume they know or don’t know anything – be clear and concise in conveying your knowledge, but try not to change your tone, especially when asking questions like: “have you heard of” or “have you read”.
- **Start by asking questions!** This is probably *the* best way to get a feel for where others are coming from and how they perceive certain issues. If you assume they hold a classic ‘conservative’ stance, you’ve already boxed them into a certain identity by virtue of their upbringing and residence. Don’t do that. Instead, ask them questions that will allow you to gain the most insight into what factors may be forming or reinforcing their views. This way, you can know more about what *they* know, and adjust your talking points accordingly from the get-go.

# Chapter 7: Be willing to Explain *How* you came to hold your Current Stand

## Step 3



By attending university, you may have spent more time theorizing this topic with people whose views challenged your own.

**Ask yourself:** *Have I always viewed this issue in this light, or did my time at university lead me to hold this view?*

Most likely, the answer is the latter. So, try to go back to that time when you had a different view on the issue, and try to remember why you had a different opinion. You may be a full-blown Marxist, but hammering down dialectical materialism is not going to help your case. You don't have to compromise or 'de-radicalize' your view, but you should explain the steps or lessons that led you to hold your current beliefs or outlook. This will bolster the likelihood of your co-conversationalist seeing you as a rational opinion-holder rather than a 'brainwashed' idealist; and, may even allow them to identify their current stance on the issue in one of your 'here's how I came to hold this belief' explanation points. In turn, even if the two of you do not see eye to eye right now, you've humanized your learning experience and demonstrated

that you (likely) came to hold your current belief incrementally through experiences / conversations outside of academic settings. This can increase the likelihood of them wanting to engage with you in the future, which gives you the opportunity to build meaningful relationships.

**Ask yourself:** *How can I explain my stance on this issue in a way that will not come across as ‘inaccessible’ or as ‘the product of academia’? Which relationships and / or experiences can I draw on to explain how I came to perceive or engage with this issue?*

**Do:**

- Include personal experiences that affected your stance on a given issue, including conversations and interactions beyond your university classrooms. Avoid presenting your current view on an issue as being ‘fixed’, or the outcome of a ‘linear’, ‘formal’ learning process. Instead, verbally acknowledge that you are *still* learning and allowing your experiences to shape your way of thinking. This can reduce the likelihood of them feeling like you’re looking down on their current views on an issue, and humanizes your thinking process in a way that makes the conversation feel more accessible.

## Chapter 8: Depoliticize the conversation

### Step 4



So your friend or family member wants to chat about the newly passed bill at the dinner table. On its surface, the conversation seems to be about policy; it's the outcome of a political negotiation, after all. But if you take a step back, the reason they support or detest the bill really has nothing to do with the party or politicians who supported it, even if that's what they claim or have been led to believe. Instead, their view on the bill is much more likely a reflection of whether they see its provisions as threatening to their wellbeing or prosperity; and whether they view its targeted beneficiaries as deserving of aid or support.

So what do you do? **Get the conversation focused on the issue itself**, rather than the means that have been proposed or implemented to solve the issue. It's a lot harder to agree with someone on the percentage of taxpayer dollars that should be redistributed from a particular socioeconomic bracket than it is to agree on the fact that the costs of living are absurdly high and something needs to be done about the housing crisis, for instance. You can later explain why you agree with this proposed solution



or the reasons you do, but it is not a productive place to start. It is imperative to believe that we can share common ground with those on the other side of the political spectrum.

Consider, for instance, how ironic it is that many members of smaller conservative towns take great pride in caring for others following a traumatic event, like a house fire, but would adamantly denounce state-imposed welfare programs like subsidized housing. If your conversation is focused on the *politics* of the welfare regime, and you're advocating for higher market intervention, you might be written off as a 'radical socialist' (as we have been). This might lead you to get defensive and, in turn, less generous in your choice of words and approach. Giving in to defensiveness will increase the chances that the conversation will end up going nowhere.

Instead, **focus on the fact that care is at the root of both community cohesiveness and state-funded support programs**, to demonstrate how the act of caring is not politically left or right, but fundamental to living in communities where people support one another. Some interlocutors may still proceed to bash the policy by virtue of their deep-rooted hostility for the 'scum-bag no-brains politician' who imposed it, but that doesn't mean you didn't succeed in creating conditions that might come to convince them, even slightly, that maybe it's *not* the desired outcome of the policy they disagree with; and, that maybe this polarization isn't actually inevitable, but something we're pushed into for the benefit of greedy politicians and corporations reliant on echo chambers of hostility. If this revelation leads them to be less hostile in another situation where a 'radical lefty' shows interest in discussing something political with them, you've already made some progress, **even if this progress does not bring the *immediate* satisfaction of**

**political conversation we may dream about as nerdy world-changers.** Important conversations take time. So does changing our minds. So, depoliticize the conversation! It might just inch you and your interlocutors closer to where you wanna be.

**Ask yourself:** *Can I identify and agree with part of the problem that's bothering this person, even if I support the policy solution they detest (or vice versa?)*

**Do:**

- (As outlined in step 2) **Ask clarifying questions to better understand what part of the problem they take issue with.** *Why* do they feel bothered or (maybe, but hopefully not) enraged by the perspective / policy being advanced? Then, actively listen to what they have to say. This way, you can understand prospective areas in which you relate to them.
- **Follow up by talking about that common ground to try and expose polarization for what it is:** a social construction with detrimental, real-world consequences, as outlined in our dictionary. Think about what outcomes of the policy might be really similar to something your town works towards or in which its people take pride.
- **Remember that your interlocutors might not ever like the policy, and they may still see the issue through a political lens.** That's okay. By trying to highlight shared values underlying different perspectives, they might end up with a less hostile view towards alternative perspectives.

## Chapter 9: Not Everyone Cares, and you GOTTA just accept that Step 5



As in, sometimes you will be having conversations about specific topics or social issues, and the person you are talking to might just not care – that’s entirely possible, and okay. It might be extremely difficult to believe (as someone who cares enough about learning and the world to pursue higher education) that *not* everyone spends every constant second of the day worried about the many social issues that the world faces, but it's the truth, and this guidebook is all about delivering the truth. So, while it is true that some people just don’t care about social issues in the same way that you might, this does not mean that they do not care about the same things as you (family or community), they just may care for different reasons.

It is important to not make the people you are talking with feel like you’re mad at them for not caring, even if it *bothers* you that maybe they don’t. Suggesting to them that they need to care about an issue that you care about can come across as elitist and could make them feel as though you view them as lesser than yourself. Depoliticizing the conversation can be extremely beneficial in these situations – because it's quite possible that you will find out that

your partner in conversation does in fact care about the problem itself, just maybe not the reason the problem persists. You can work with this!

For example, you may be having a conversation regarding homelessness in your community. You believe that it needs to be addressed because every human being deserves the right to shelter, and you understand that people aren't on the streets because they are lazy, but because of an array of external (often intangible) factors actively working to suppress their social mobility. So, your conversational counterpart might not care about the social problem of homelessness itself, as they may believe that those people have put themselves into the situation and don't deserve aid. But they could still care about the effects of homelessness within the community – as in, they may believe that having a large, unhoused population in the downtown core makes them feel unsafe; that it's an “eyesore” on the community. So no, they don't care about the social issue of homelessness quite like you do, but you're both looking for a solution to the same problem, even if you have different thoughts about why the problem needs solving.

While this may be extremely disheartening, and make you want to write them off as ‘un-rallyable’ allies for the cause you hope to pursue, you can still work with this. Because the truth is, them ‘not caring’ about the situation may stem from them thinking that ‘caring’ for others requires ‘less care’ for (or takes away from) hard-working families they deem deserving of social support, as exemplified in our previous allusion to the community supporting a family that experienced a house fire while simultaneously opposing welfare policy. If they can start to see how systemic factors influence marginalized people in a way that shifts their conception

of ‘deservingness’, it’s possible that they’ll start to see welfare recipients through the same lens as that family devastated by a fire.

So, even if in the beginning the person you are talking with wants to solve a problem for a very different reason than you do, along the way they may begin to see and care about the larger social issues that create and perpetuate the problem in the first place. Prepare for this: prepare for the fact that people can and do change their perspective in conversation with others. Remain open to this; try to disrupt the default position of getting frustrated, hostile, or giving up because you think they don’t care. Even if that other person doesn’t ‘care’ in the way you do or you would hope they would, avoid excluding or discrediting their own reasons for caring about the issue. Accept their understanding of care as something shaped by their environment and experiences just as much as yours is. It might be the case that the small-town emphasis on hard-work and self-sufficiency has led them to believe that welfare recipients are lazy or taking advantage of the system.

**Ask Yourself:** *Am I prepared to talk about the issue without getting frustrated by (or worked up about) the fact that I am potentially more invested in the issue we’re discussing? Am I ready and willing to respect the fact that at this point in time, the people I am speaking with may have a different vision of what ‘care’ entails?*

**Do:**

- **Try to take a step back:** Don’t immediately try to push for a certain course of action to be taken to address the issue. Instead, verbally recognize the fact that you both see the issue as being an issue. If you skip this step, they may miss the fact that the two of you share any common ground at all, which will hinder conversational development.

- **Remind yourself of the likely *reason* behind why they articulate care/concern differently.** Their conception about who is deserving of aid is likely shaped by their experience of learning the value of hard work, which affects their perception of what parts of the issue are relevant to consider in theorizing solutions. (For example: them seeing the need to remove ‘tent cities’ without caring where the people go – they may think: ‘if the people are lazy, why would we owe them shelter? So yes, at this point, they care about homelessness, but maybe not the people experiencing it. But this isn’t because they’re not as ‘morally superb’ as you: it’s probably because they’ve been led to believe and internalize that unhoused people have had the same life chances they did (due to the invisibility or subtlety of systemic factors) and therefore don’t deserve government aid for failing to work hard and stay afloat.
- **Use this reminder as a self-check:** Make sure you haven’t allowed yourself to start judging or condescending them because of their level of caring, or their perspective on the issue (even throughout the conversation). If relevant and true, tap into the fact that you were raised on similar value-systems, and therefore have a better understanding of where they’re coming from and why they hold their perspective(s).

## Chapter 10: Monitor when the conversation has reached 'maximum capacity' (aka: know when to walk away, at least for now)

### Step 6



As we mentioned in step 2, it is so important to check your motive and adjust accordingly. This is something that can be particularly important when reaching the potential end of a conversation. There is only so much that should be said at one time; and remember, the reason you are having these conversations isn't because you are looking to change someone's ideology in one sitting, but rather to build connections, coming to a lived realization that polarization is not the insurmountable system it's portrayed to be, because we're a lot more alike than we're conditioned to believe. Engaging in a conversation past the point at which it is still productive does not help anybody, so be conscious of the fact that sometimes you should just wrap up the chat. But be careful: this step doesn't *just* pertain to the conversation itself. It's also very possible that you feel as though you've reached your *own* maximum capacity, whether that be intellectually or emotionally – and that's okay. Sometimes these conversations will be hard, especially if you have a personal connection to or identification with the issue you're unpacking. If you feel like the discussion is taking more away from you than what it will give to others (or just taking too much away from you *in the first place*), then allow

yourself to create a boundary. Unfortunately, you can be doing all the right things to approach your fellow-conversationalist with compassion and respect, but you will likely encounter people in these conversations that you simply *cannot* engage with because of their uncompromising perspective of *you*. If the conversation is harming you for this reason or another, don't.

**Ask Yourself:** *Am I staying in this conversation because it is actively contributing to my overall goal, or am I pushing the conversation because I'm unhappy about the last thing that was said, and feel the need to prove my point through a debate about the topic? Is this conversation making me feel upset or anxious to a point that I deem unhealthy or harmful to myself? Have I given myself permission to stop engaging, even if this feels frustrating or counter-intuitive?*

**Do:**

- **Prioritize your well-being in these conversations.** You are likely passionate about an array of social issues, and you think about the progress that needs to be made on these issues often enough to jump on any chance to discuss your perspective and concerns. Still, your desire to educate and discuss should never trump your self-preservation. \**Tip:* If you struggle to maintain healthy boundaries in this regard, remind yourself that if you hope to have another conversation on this (or a similar) topic, which could broaden your potential to mobilize a wider audience, you need to have the energy to engage in other conversations of this nature. Of course, we emphasize the importance of quality over quantity when it comes to these types of discussion, but that *too* could be compromised by overextending yourself. Check in with yourself, and actively respect your boundaries.



## Chapter 10: Reflect, Adjust, Plan, Repeat (with intention)!

### Step 7



One of the most important things we want to emphasize within this guidebook is that nothing is ever certain when trying to break new conversational ground. If you feel as though a conversation wasn't very successful, go through the steps again: think about which ones you prioritized, and which ones may be more important to focus on the next time. This isn't always going to be easy. It is going to be difficult, tiring, and potentially mentally-draining. But, if you succeed in strengthening your ties to your community, as we hope this guide helps you to, it will also be incredibly rewarding. It's okay to take a break, and it's okay to feel like you aren't making any progress. But over time, you will learn what works for you, and what doesn't. Don't rush things, and don't lose your motivation when things don't work out, even if you need a break before you try again. You've got this.

**Ask Yourself:** *What can I do differently next time to decrease possible points of disagreement? Was that conversation productive? How do I feel after that conversation? How can I help this person continue building community with me and the other people I'm engaging with?*

**Do:**

- **Follow up:** building a community that can thrive and care even in difference is an active and intentional process, and transformation doesn't occur through a single conversation. Because let's face it: even if someone is starting to think that maybe your worldviews *aren't* so different from theirs after all, or they're actually becoming *convinced* by your perspective, they may feel like it's too late or too 'weird' to actively or vocally embrace that change. But what if you strategize ways to keep the conversation going, connecting people who you think are genuinely open to having these conversations and may be at similar points in their journey? Follow-up will look different for everyone, depending on their towns and the outcome of their conversation. That's okay! Yet again, we want to emphasize that how you implement these steps is ultimately up to you, and your educated evaluation of what will help push you towards building and upholding stronger community bonds. Brainstorm ways to keep up the conversation, and act on them!

## Chapter 12: Conversations in Practice



### Entering into a Conversation:

“You know, I’ve been thinking a lot about x recently, and I’m really interested in hearing your perspective on it.”

“I’m good, thanks! I [read / watched / listened to] this really neat [article / show / podcast] which talked about how...”

“Hey, I noticed what you posted on your social media the other day, and I haven’t really considered this perspective on the issue. I’m super curious to know what led you to post / repost that”

“That’s a great story. It really makes me think about how this [topic / policy / system] affected someone I know...”

“Have you ever thought about how...”

### Disagreeing during a Conversation:

“Wow, I’ve never thought about it that way before. That’s really interesting. How I see the [problem / policy / etc]...”

“I agree with x part of what you’re saying, because I also think that x is an important factor to consider. On the other hand, I think it’s really important to think about how...”

“Hmm, that’s interesting, and I’ll have to think about that a bit more. The way that I’ve been seeing this is more like...”

## **Wrapping up a Conversation:**

“I’m really glad we had the chance to talk about this. I enjoyed hearing your perspective and ideas.”

“This has been a really interesting conversation; thanks for chatting with me! If you’d like, I’d be happy to share that [book / podcast / article / etc] with you; maybe we could discuss it another time?”

“I appreciate your willingness to share your experience with me. Even though we disagree on x, I think it’s really cool that we have so much in common.”

“Wow! This has been a lot to unpack; I might have some questions for you once I’ve had some time to think about your ideas a bit more. We should arrange to see each other again soon!”

“Your perspective on x is really similar to my friend’s; we should all hang out sometime! I think we’d have some really interesting conversations...”

## Chapter 13: Conclusion



We hope this guidebook has provided some valuable insight and inspiration to begin building a bridge across the political divides that distance you from folks you disagree with in your hometown, to help you and others build a stronger, unified community. It is not easy, but it's worth the effort. Taking on the challenge to lessen these divides will be *rewarding*, because there is immense value in gaining compassion by discussing and unpacking the things that leave us frustrated, confused, and angry.

Working on this project was a learning opportunity for us, too, and required us to reflect on past conversations and experiences to identify patterns, mistakes, and possibilities. Now that we've identified these tangible steps, we feel better prepared for future conversations, and look forward to doing this work and adjusting our approaches alongside you.

So, thank you. Thank you for taking the time to read our guide; whether that was from start to finish, or just a quick scan over some possible lines to use in conversation. Once again, we hope you'll use

this guide in any way that is useful to you, because this is not easy work, and you can always try something new!

It is okay if you have conversations that don't get anywhere. It is okay if you would rather not have relations with people you profoundly disagree with, because sometimes those relationships are damaging and harmful. Quite frankly: it is okay to HATE the views of those who you are speaking to. But to give ourselves the necessary space and privilege of these things being okay, and to truly embody and live out the tolerant stance we preach, it must *also* be okay for our hometown community members to hold views and beliefs that we think are too narrow, based on hierarchies of deservingness, and even politically incorrect. Because really, that's what this guide has been all about – recognizing that it is *in spite* of our divides that we exist in community; and working with these divides to find points where we actually *do* share commonalities.

We acknowledge that polarization can seem insurmountable, because it is upheld by powerful political and capitalist forces that shove self-reliance and anger down our throats. Nevertheless, *we* see these conversations as a form of resistance: because if we accept that community persists in spite of structures and ideas that seek to divide us, we've uncovered a source potential – our prevailing community relations. While there aren't necessarily explicit answers to the issues we're seeking to tackle, learning and listening are crucial to growing with and caring for one another. We need to make intentional, respectful space for different opinions and worldviews – and to realize that polarization is only surmountable if we actively seek out solidarity and solicitude; even when compassion and community are not the easiest or most convenient options.

Let's bridge the political divide by fostering opportunities for a collective recognition that maybe the divide isn't so entrenched after all. Let's lean into *our* conception of community, and actively commit ourselves to building relationships with some of the same people who made us eager to leave home. Because if we think we don't need them or their worldviews, why should we expect them to take our ideas seriously? Let's seize this opportunity to evade the adoption of a hypocritical, and ultimately progress-hindering, stance. Instead, let's opt for strong communities grounded in relationship and sustained by respect. Because we may have left, but prospects for social progress *demand* a refusal to abandon. It's time, friends, to engage in productive conversation. Let's get this dirty-work started.

Sincerely,  
Michelle Marcus & Noah Vaton

## Annotated Resources



As you may have noticed, this guide did not include any citations throughout - there is a reason for this. Ultimately, this project was built from scratch. Through months of conversation, we crafted this guide to become something that has never been created in the way we choose to do so. There are no citations because there was nothing to cite; all of the work you just read was the result of trial and error, countless hours of conceptualization, and most importantly, our lived experiences. Instead, we have opted to include an annotated resources section, in which we bring light to some incredible work that inspired us and shaped how we viewed both this issue and this project.



***The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*** - Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg, and Lynne Segal

The Care Manifesto started everything off for this project - inspiring us to redefine our notions of community and care. The book emphasized the importance of creating a community that is there to care for one another when other societal structures fail to provide this support. It re-installed our understanding of the need to build strong and healthy relationships with those around us. It also reminded us of just how careless the world currently is. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the world needs community more than ever. How can we accomplish this? We care for those around us - regardless of the extent to which we deem them 'our responsibility'.

***Turn This World Inside Out: The Emergence of Nurturance Culture*** - Nora Samaran

This book was one of the most pivotal in shaping our entire project - it was actually this book that prompted the longest and most in-depth conversation about how we want this guide to turn out. It challenged our preconceived notions of who we choose to be in relationships with. We do not need to become friends with everybody to build a community - we just need to build relationships. Relationships can still exist despite differences or disagreements; it's actually crucial they do. It reminded us of the oppressive structures within society that shape our individualism and hierarchies of deservingness. It also provided frameworks to directly engage in conversations that are difficult. We utilized Chapter Four: On Gaslighting, as a tool to learn how to introduce concepts to people who may fundamentally disagree with what you are saying; this shaped a significant amount of the work we did. But, most importantly, it taught us the importance of nurturance.

*Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* - adrienne maree brown

Emergent Strategy taught us about, well, most importantly, the concept of emergent strategy itself. The values preached by brown were pivotal in allowing us to understand the necessity of building the “right” relationship with everything around us - both people and the spaces we find ourselves in. It motivated us to continue conceptualizing the project, specifically, understanding how we can form inter-relationships across our differences. It taught us how to work within spaces of tension and how to engage with vulnerable reflection. It also reminded us to set goals (any goal is okay, no matter how big or small), to listen with love, and that it is okay to step away when you reach your maximum capacity. We want to highlight one of our favourite passages in the book that speaks to core principles brown has learned to utilize emergent strategy within the world:

Small is good, small is all. (The large is a reflection of the small.)

Change is constant. (Be like water).

There is always enough time for the right work.

There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it.

Never a failure, always a lesson.

Trust the People. (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy).

Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass - build resilience by building the relationships.

Less prep, more presence.

What you pay attention to grows.

Pages 41-42

***A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*** - Rebecca Solnit

This book acted as a critical reminder that thriving in community is at the core of human existence. It shone light on how structures and motives to build resilient community already exist, and it is only the bounds of societal structures that keep us from being able to properly engage in building healthy networks that care for everyone - regardless of social class, political identity, or race/gender. It also prompted our ideas surrounding willingness to help local families in tragic events while simultaneously opposing larger social aid programs. People are willing to care for those around them; We just need to break through the structures that exist to instill division and polarization to create opportunities for building resilient communities.

***Burn It Down! Feminist Manifestos For The Revolution*** - Breanne Fahs

This absolutely incredible collection of manifestos encouraged us to harness our own voice when crafting this guide. It instilled the importance of the subjective experience, and reminded us that not all writing has to be academic in nature. It is okay to get personal, informal, and ANGRY. These issues frustrate us, and that is okay. This guide was created just as much for us as it was for our intended audience. *Burn It Down* is the book that made us feel comfortable to write this guide through our own vision, voice, and experience.

## ***How to Talk to A Difficult Conservative - Better Angels***

This guide acted as the starting point for shaping how we might design and format our project to be digestible to our readers. We took inspiration from the guide's use of bullet points and neatly organized chapters to help our readers grasp and quickly refer back to our text.

## ***Campbell River Rant, Rave and Randomness - A Facebook Group***

We were actually able to utilize the Facebook group for Noah's hometown to analyze and observe what conversations are currently taking place that are facing significant hostility. By documenting how controversial and potentially polarizing topics are being discussed, we were able to highlight talking points and responses that were met with hostility versus the ones that were successful in allowing a civil discourse to take place. This shaped our "Conversations in Practice" section as well as our overall framework for our steps. It reminded us that some conversations are just too much, and it is okay to step away to take some time for yourself.

