

Preparation for Common Ground

In this polarizing time, the idea of “common ground” is elusive and difficult. We have grown accustomed to comfort and feeling “right,” to the extent that we often practice selective consumption or outright block views and ideas we find uncomfortable or challenging. When we are in public spaces like parks or restaurants, we are more likely to be focused on our phones than in conversation with our neighbors. It is easy to see the decline in common ground.

But what is common ground? The term involves both agreement and disagreement. The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as “shared interests, beliefs, or opinions between two people or groups of people who disagree about most other subjects.” The idea appears in Corinthians when Paul discusses finding common ground with those he is trying to win over to Christianity. Finding common ground also relates to the ancient Greek concept of the Golden Mean (finding balance) and Buddhism’s Middle Way. It requires that we focus on what we share and not on extremes as a way to move forward.

So how do we find common ground? Scott Savage suggests that we “listen more, talk less” and “seek to understand more than to be understood.” He recommends that we “anticipate the discomfort” because finding common ground is not easy. Krista Tippet, interviewing Arlie Russell Hochschild for her Civil Conversations Project, talks about finding specific issues for agreement: “even among the most ardent and extreme people you met over five years of research, you found specific issues on which there was potential for coalition: safeguarding children on the internet; reducing prison populations for nonviolent offenders; ... pushing for good jobs; rebuilding our rail system, roads, and bridges; and our social infrastructure.” Looking for issues like these may be an easier way to begin those hard conversations. We all carry beliefs that are bigger than ourselves, even when we have different perspectives on the “right way” to do things. That is where we will access common ground.

These points seem natural, but how do we actually do them? One way is to meet around a dinner table, or a diner counter, or anywhere where there is food. Sarah Grey, who helps host Friday Night Meatballs in Philadelphia, says, “Some of the conservative folks who are absolutely wonderful and kind in person might be total trolls online ... but there’s something about looking somebody in the eye and talking to them face-to-face that tends to bring out the best rather than worst in most people.”

Common ground seems so easy, yet we struggle with it, nearly daily. There is not a fairy tale wand or a magic potion to get us to see eye to eye, and maybe that’s good. Because ultimately, we don’t have to see eye to eye on everything, we just need to find where we can get along and move forward.

We don’t think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.

Richard Rohr

But I think there has got to be another way. A third way, if you will. A way that is not me convincing you, nor you convincing me, but somehow us finding a way to honor, respect, and listen to one another. *Erin Dunigan*

As with everything else, the more we separate ourselves from each other, the weaker we become.

Teresa R. Funke

This deeply free and public space plays a vital role in our world, equally important in our digital age as in Greco-Roman times, when they were marketplaces for goods and ideas. As common ground, squares are equitable and democratic; they have played a fundamental role in the development of free speech. *Catie Marron*

I use the word “empathy.” It’s something we’re all capable of, and we, in a way, carry around empathy maps of who we should and shouldn’t feel empathic with. And we need to enlarge those maps and shift them. Maybe there are different kinds of empathy. *Arlie Russell Hochschild*

In listening to the voices of those who suffer, we can listen to each other. *Rev. Dr. Serene Jones*

[from *Heather McGhee interviewing “Gary” on C-Span*] ... Gary does something that I think is really powerful and anyone can do. He would see a person ... And if it was a person of color, he would ... note to himself what his immediate reactions were, what he thought ... how intimidating or scary they were. And then he would ... say something to that person. “Oh, the traffic was really bad.” “When’s this line gonna move?” “How’s the weather?” Banal stuff. And get into a conversation. It wasn’t always easy, depending on the person. And then he would think again, and sort of like a sliding scale of how much less intimidating that person seemed, or frightening, or anxiety producing after ... a basic, everyday conversation. This practice has been something that Gary has then done by really creating more relationships in his life across difference. *Heather McGhee*

Questions to Ponder

1. Reflect on an experience, either recent or in the past, when there was tension within yourself because you disagreed with someone’s view. How did you handle it?
2. Share an example of a time when you were successful at finding common ground with someone. What did that look like?
3. Growing up, how did your family respond to different people from different backgrounds?
4. To reach common ground, we often are asked to look for shared values. Consider an issue that you find polarizing in our society. What common values might you share with the other side?
5. The path to common ground can include sharing interests or stories related to common values. Reflect on a time when you have used one or more of these paths to common ground.

Words of the Day

Consider some issues in our society such as climate change, immigration, gun control, infrastructure, voting rights ... On what issue might you find common ground with the “other side”? For the Gathering, complete this sentence: “The issue on which I would like to find common ground is ...”