

CHAPTER 7.

CIVIC COMMUNITY LISTENING: THE NEXUS OF STORYTELLING AND LISTENING WITHIN CIVIC COMMUNITIES

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Although research shows that listening is a key ingredient in building relationships within conflict situations, minimal research exists on how listening is used within civic communities of divergent groups. This ethnographic case study of a Braver Angels alliance, an organization that has successfully created community amid the American political divide, explores the community practices that have influenced their growth. The Braver Angels organization functions, in part, by teaching and practicing focused, empathic listening. The organization also encourages opportunities for individuals to explain how they developed their currently held views through narrative storytelling. Our study examines how such moments create greater understanding and acceptance across the political divide, in the context of community listening in civic communities. Our research holds the potential to locate practical ways individuals can build communities of dialogue across differences through storytelling and listening, which can be instituted in personal, professional, organizational, and political contexts.

Political polarization has been growing in the United States and other democracies for some time (Carothers and O'Donahue 257), with “affective polarization” rising. This polarization has been illustrated by recent elections in the U.S., in which citizens have become more hostile to each other (Lyenger et al. 129). Citizens and organizations alike have begun to heed the call to help alleviate this polarization, including the Braver Angels organization.

As a non-profit with over 11,000 citizen members, the National Braver Angels organization attempts to provide opportunities for people to talk about and

through their differences at both national and local levels. Because of the nature of this organization and its emphasis on what happens at the local level, the ensuing dialogue is typically not just about politics but also about relationships within their civic community. The founders of the non-profit and the volunteers that bring the mission to specific localities work to create place-based communities of people across political divisions, who respect and listen to each other. This chapter uses the work of one of the local chapters (termed “alliances”) of this organization to demonstrate how interpersonal communication practices can be used in the public communication context when you bring divergent groups together to work and engage in thoughtful dialogue with each other. The key in these contexts is for the participants to learn to engage in “civic community listening,” defined as listening that operates in a civic context in which individuals openly share their diverse perspectives and listen to others with the goal of understanding, as they work across their political differences.

Viewing the work of one local Braver Angels alliance, located in the South-Central region of the United States, we attempt to identify and illustrate specific communication practices found in civic community listening. In this chapter, we demonstrate how this type of communication can expand civic communities, by focusing on the discursive storytelling and listening practices used to build such a community.

CASE CONTEXT

The local Braver Angels alliance of focus in this study started unofficially in August 2018, with an initial meeting of 11 people. The alliance’s goals were initially to (a) establish and extend trust among their participants, (b) organize effective work to progress their mission, and (c) grow membership and impact.

In September 2018, the Braver Angels alliance hosted an initial Red-Blue workshop, one of the first workshops to be developed by Braver Angels. After that, they formed an official charter and created a leadership board for the alliance. One of the key criteria Braver Angels used for membership on the board was a balance between Red (conservative-leaning) and Blue (liberal-leaning) leaders, with approximately equal numbers of each. The Braver Angels alliance also distinguished between “voting members” and “members.” “Members” are defined as anyone who has paid their \$12 annual dues to the national organization. By contrast, “voting members” must have organized some type of workshop or event or contributed their time and efforts to the alliance in some other way. During the first 6-9 months of meetings, the original 11 group founders did most of the work. By 2024, the Alliance had grown to over 300 members and over 1900 subscribers, with approximately 75 members with voting privileges.

Along with regular meetings, the alliance hosts Braver Angel’s standard workshops, in addition to locally-developed experiences, such as “Coffee and Conversations” and “How Ya’ Doing” sessions, to keep people in touch with the alliance and each other. They also sponsor a Media Action Group, which works on creating action plans based on alliance discussions and input. The Braver Angels Alliance creates multiple structured and unstructured opportunities for community participants to build relationships across the political divide. These types of experiences allow members of the organization to have conversations in pairs, small groups, and large groups, sometimes all within the same meeting, depending on how the meeting is designed.

To gather information on this Braver Angels alliance, we, the authors of this chapter, attended and participated in various meetings and workshops offered by the alliance. In addition, we held semi-structured interviews with alliance leaders and members, following an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved protocol,¹ and created field notes of our own experiences of participating. Across our fieldwork and interviews, our goal was to identify how community was built across the political divide within this alliance. Overall, our data consisted of seven interviews held virtually (totaling 6 hours and 47 minutes and 305 transcript pages) and field notes from nine workshops/meetings hosted by this alliance (totaling 86 pages of field notes). We then worked independently and in teams to code our data for practices that contributed to building community across the political divide and identified *empathic listening* and *narrative storytelling* as two factors that contributed to a sense of shared community across Braver Angels alliance members. Along with discussing the nature of communities, the following sections of our chapter will examine each of these in turn. Then, we highlight existing literature in these areas to demonstrate how both listening and storytelling practices can ultimately contribute to community listening taking place within politically divergent civic groups.

FROM COMMUNITY LISTENING TO CIVIC COMMUNITY LISTENING

This study defines a community as “a group of individuals who share a mutual concern for one another’s welfare” (Vogl 9). For individuals to truly feel they belong to a community, they need to feel like their voices and input are being heard. They often do this in “civic communities,” or communities in which individuals work together to try and improve their communities, political institutions, and/or communication around some issue (Putnam). When a civic

1 IRB protocol number: # 21-020-R1

community, such as Braver Angels, fosters and encourages hearing individual voices, they can accomplish goals as a collective better. However, topics such as politics are often seen as inherently dichotomous, with the assumption that political affiliations represent a set of beliefs or values one must either support or flat-out reject. The same dichotomies can be applied to religion, lifestyle choices, or even child-rearing—the assumption is that you must either be for or against a cause or topic, and that choice will determine your community. This dichotomous assumption can make individuals wary of speaking up (avoid contributing their voice) or can foster unproductive dialogue where individuals are pitted against each other to argue who is right or wrong on a said topic (competing voices). Ultimately, this dichotomous assumption interferes with building a civic community across these differences, an obstacle the Braver Angel organization aims to overcome.

Community leaders of such groups, which include members with differing beliefs and value systems such as those found within Braver Angels alliances, are therefore tasked with figuring out how to make each individual feel heard and valued to accomplish these collective goals. One way to approach such a task is to engage in “community listening,” which Jenn Fishman and Lauren Rosenberg argue involves, “deep, direct engagement with individuals and groups working to address urgent issues in everyday life, issues anchored by long histories and complicated by competing interpretations as well as clashing modes of expression” (1). Moreover, Fishman and Rosenberg argue community listening is more than simply paying attention during the listening process, and instead also includes

awareness of, as well as responsibility for, being part of an evolving process [which] demands alertness to different interactions and openness to being changed by them . . . [creating] an element of risk to community listening because responding in an ethical and engaged way to others means being willing to change. (1)

The Braver Angels organization encourages community listening as their workshops and meetings place equal emphasis on individuals sharing their perspectives and listening to the viewpoints of others, to increase the likelihood of understanding each other and create change in their relational and group dynamics.

Indeed, when members of a group share stories and employ listening practices to actively engage with each other across their differences in the context of a community, they are participating in community listening. Put simply, storytelling and listening become an entrée or an invitation for others to enter their co-constructed community. As we share and listen in community, we willingly

approach the community's world of hardship and pain, or accomplishment and joy. This type of communication can lead to change and to the building of what Bordone calls "conflict resilience," or "the ability to sit with and be fully present around those with whom we have fundamentally different views on critical issues" (70). Communities that encourage personal storytelling and teach listening practices are more likely to have members who feel valued and are less apprehensive to speak on controversial topics, typically viewed as dichotomous or intractable conflict issues.

Existing studies on community groups have noted the importance of incorporating structures for dialogue into communities, as members work to bridge their differences to create action and change. For example, Robert R. Stains, Jr. argues that in these types of settings, there is a "generous openness" from listeners to each other (3) and the power of such listening becomes clear as it occurs:

Participating in a dialogue may be the first time someone has had a conversation with people of different identities that does not begin with making someone wrong because of who they are. . . . People who experience being seen more fully in terms of how they experience themselves in their identity apart from the limiting and often demeaning stereotypes attributed by others report feelings of liberation and connection. This experience opens their own curiosity to more complex stories and deeper feelings expressed by "the other." (Stains 3)

When applied in the civic community context, such as the one we studied in Braver Angels, one activity that appears to be successful for such purposes is to front-load a mini-experience that demonstrates and reinforces the power of the bridging organization's methodology and structure, before doing the organizational part of a meeting. The organization we studied aims towards having a conservative (Red)-liberal (Blue) balance in the facilitation of meetings, as well as breakout sessions, in "an attempt to get Reds and Blues talking back and forth and listening back and forth" (Participant Four; interview participants identified by assigned number only). They also detail and emphasize Braver Angel's ground rules early on in their meetings and hold people accountable for abiding by those ground rules throughout a workshop or meeting. Along with the ground rules, the meetings are also structured with a clear agenda, starting and ending times, and whole-group share-outs. There are often opportunities for smaller group discussions within breakout rooms or groups as well. Through their workshops and meetings, and the structures guiding them, the Braver Angels alliance of focus in this study utilizes storytelling and listening, as civic community listening practices, to build and sustain community across the political divide. They have

found that experiencing the other (i.e., the opposing political affiliation) means that members sit with each other, amid their differences, and learn to understand each other in the context of their civic community.

DISCURSIVE PRACTICES TO BUILD COMMUNITY

Community listening fosters the type of active engagement with and across differences to allow civic communities to be built. Discursive practices such as storytelling and listening can be used to both build and sustain such communities.

STORYTELLING

Previous research has pointed to the benefits that emerge from storytelling, particularly regarding fostering a sense of community amongst groups (e.g., Andolina and Conklin; Lemmie et al.; Lohr and Lindenman). This research can be connected to what we observed in this civic community, in terms of its communication practices. Communication scholar Walter Fisher developed the narrative paradigm, a theory that describes how human beings use storytelling. Fisher believed storytelling was intrinsic to human nature, calling humans, *Homo Narrans*, or storytelling creatures. In the narrative paradigm, we see a “theory of symbolic actions, words and/or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them” (“Narration” 2). For Fisher, narration is more than telling a story; it involves collective culture, history, and personal, corporate, and national stories that already exist and are already known. Telling stories thus is the way human beings co-construct our social worlds. It also becomes an optimal method for creating a civic community, one that holds oft-competing tensions of displaying care for its members while discussing political differences. This is done for the joint purpose of finding common ground across differences and building an even greater sense of community amid differences.

One research effort by scholar John Higgins illustrates themes Fisher revealed as he described the effects of disseminating stories of various groups from Cyprus in potential conflict on the island. The deeply personal stories provided an avenue that allowed workers to navigate tense situations in Cyprus by sharing personal stories of its people. Higgins described such storytelling as valuable in establishing a community (3). He devised a way for individual stories of the oppressed to be heard by other communities through media. Higgins emphasized that when people tell their stories, they become socially empowered. The story itself “encourages meaningful dialogue among participants” (3). Ultimately, Higgins determined that stories develop community by fostering interpersonal relationships, empowering the people who are telling the stories, creating

understanding and empathy between those in the community, and constructing a fertile framework for deep listening that can build strong relational bonds within the civic community.

In our research, *storytelling* emerged as an optimal method for creating unity and empathy in the Braver Angels alliance, like what Kim Peters and Yoshihasa Kashima, as well as Joy Hackenbracht and Karen Gasper, found when they investigated the role of emotional self-disclosure in increasing persons' motivation for listening. Importantly, Braver Angels ground rules create a fruitful space for storytelling. The positive climate established in a Braver Angels meeting is conducive to open discussion as members are asked to listen when others are speaking, to respectfully acknowledge a contribution to the group, to probe with curiosity for more information, and to phrase their opinions in "I" messages. At one meeting, as they discussed mask-wearing amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the host explained to the group "I" messages vs. "You" messages as "explaining how you feel versus casting a wide stereotype net on others." At another point in the meeting, the host thanked a person for using "I" statements but said to focus on the current activity's emphasis on hope and asked the group to give suggestions for how to foster hope. These ground rules and their enforcement of them throughout alliance meetings/workshops foster a space more conducive to personal storytelling and the kind of empathic listening that may be invoked by such storytelling.

Indeed, Braver Angel's participants often come to organizational meetings already aware of the climate that surrounds the meeting. For example, Participant One, a Red leader in the Braver Angels alliance, said, "I think everyone who goes through those [Red-Blue workshops] has the same reaction, that it gives you a safe space to talk about how you see things and to speak about them and listen really to people with, you know, different views ... based on the politics, you know, the political situation."

Such an environment carefully crafted by Braver Angels encourages people to participate, and to share those deeply held feelings, attitudes, and ideas, with the knowledge that what they say will be well received. Although not all participate at the same level, it was clear from our interviews and observations that some do and find relationships built to be richer as a result. One participant in a workshop sponsored by the alliance described one such moment, as she shared her own experiences that led to her views on abortion.

An important moment for me was gaining the courage to give my comment on abortion, and then to hear [a Blue-leaning individual] say that he found the way I put it resonated with him. Part of me wanted to hold back, because it was the kind

of statement that could alienate some viewers, especially from a Blue perspective. But, I felt drawn to say it, because it seems to me that if this project of honest civil engagement is really possible, then it should be possible for me to express my true thoughts on an issue that has primary importance to me in the realm of politics, despite it being a divisive and polarizing issue. And it was so encouraging, therefore, to see the comment well-received, and to see that it actually revealed something commonly valued. I felt a very real and good human interaction.

Allowing these types of values to be shared within the context of our experiences illustrates the need for the type of “sitting with” across our differences that Bordone calls for when noting how storytelling can help us understand each other and see each other as human beings deserving of respect (70). This type of storytelling, when accompanied by empathic listening, can lead to the building of individual relationships, as well as the trust and vulnerability needed to build a healthy civic community across political differences, prompting community participants to engage in meaningful dialogue where there had been no dialogue before.

Participant Two, a Blue Alliance member, discussed storytelling by explaining a Braver Angels podcast she heard where the moderator was interviewing two people from different sides of the political spectrum. She found it comfortable to hear the stories of why each person became “a Red” or “a Blue.” She said that telling the story “is a more connecting way to know someone. I mean our human brains are designed to resonate with stories. You know, we had storytelling long before we had anything, any written word.”

Typically, though, Braver Angels meetings involve thoughtful dialogue and respectful listening, which tends to create a receptive climate where people feel free to share their ideas openly, similar to what Molly W. Andolina and Hilary G. Conklin found, as well as Valerie Lemmie, Kathy Quick, and Brian N. Williams, in their work on building communities through dialogue and listening. In the community we studied in these meetings, the impetus to delve deeply into issues seemed to erupt spontaneously, at times, and other times it was unspoken. In one alliance meeting, for example, participants discussed the statewide power failure in their state during a severe winter storm. As temperatures plunged, their state power grid failed, leaving people without power, heat, cooking, appliances, and lights for several days.

This open discussion of an event directly affecting their local community eventually evolved into a structured activity later on in the meeting. That activity

required Reds and Blues to talk in small groups, with people from their color group, about the monumental power failure that gripped their state. In their intra-group discussions, each color group described the values each group held, their concerns about the issue, and finally, the policies that both Blues and Reds needed to address to both understand the situation and to offer suggestions to prepare for the future. The Blues reported their discussion first:

We feel the public and private services in our state should be accountable for disasters like this, including agencies like the Railroad Commission and [a local electric reliability council]. The welfare of people should be of higher priority than profit. People's lives, wellbeing, and property were negatively affected. Fixing this will require weatherization, tracking, and using the best technology to avoid damage, and to investigate technology from other places like Canada to help us avoid freeze damage of solar and other power services.

Then the Reds summarized their discussion:

We all want cost-effective, reliable power with a wide spectrum of sources for Energy. [Our citizens] like being independent, but being able to step in when needed. We need some regulation, but moving to excess regulation will cause problems. Yes, we are concerned about the human cost of these problems. We have to advance the perception of safety of nuclear power, winterize all electrical energy. Find storage facilities for natural gas and research new energy forms. Everyone should be accountable.

The discussion continued, both groups speaking forcefully from their particular perspectives as Reds and Blues. However, they had all collectively experienced the same power outage. Every single member of the group had suffered loss of electricity for days while the state and the responsible energy companies worked feverishly to solve the problem. In this telling and retelling of the suffering endured with biting cold, no heat, no food, no lights, a participant quietly brought up an example, that reached something decidedly human, an archetype so strong only the barest mention was enough to evoke a profound, albeit silent, response from everyone involved. It became, as theorist and philosopher Martin Buber might say, "a moment of meeting," and as Buber further emphasized, "all real living is meeting" (26). This is a moment of real living, of profound meeting where empathy was naturally present in the electricity of the moment. She said, "The cold was intense, biting, shivering cold. We ran out of food, we were

freezing, just, couldn't get warm." She paused, "and I heard a baby froze to death on my street."

Not much seems as devastating as a child who died because of lack of heat. Across cultures around the world, the image of the dead child is universally wrenching. In this community, in this meeting, the group fell silent for an interlude. No one spoke. Although diverse in their beliefs for how each political side should prevent a disaster like this in the future through policy, the telling of this story reminded them of their collective humanness, of how this topic extends beyond politics and can evoke silence from anyone no matter their affiliation. The moment showed how this topic was particularly important to them, their alliance and its members, and their surrounding community. In the silence, storytelling connected Reds and Blues and deepened the shared community of these participants, despite their affiliation; they were beginning to co-construct a positive sense of shared meaning. The discussion eventually resumed as the group of Reds and Blues wrestled with the immense problems of rectifying a system that had gone terribly wrong.

While Braver Angels participants often do rely on traditional forms of argument and logical reasoning, it is with the personal and rare moments of storytelling and resulting empathic listening that the group builds cohesion, continuity, understanding, and relationships. Storytelling is enhanced by Braver Angel's intentional structure for meetings and workshops, which foster a climate conducive to storytelling through established and enforced ground rules. In short, storytelling is accomplished through the organization teaching and practicing good listening skills as a hallmark of their process. In the next section, we review this key factor in storytelling as we explore how listening is encouraged and embedded in the Braver Angels alliance of focus.

LISTENING PRACTICES

Throughout Braver Angel's workshops, the role and importance of listening are heavily emphasized, alongside storytelling, making it difficult at times to separate out the influences of listening and storytelling. We agree with the argument made by Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, that we need a more holistic approach to communication rather than just isolating listening out as a separate behavior. We found that civic community listening, as observed in the settings of this community, occurred in specific moments in workshops but also happened where there were multiple sequences of exchanges between individuals in a group, with time allotted for both parties to be listening and telling stories.

However, since there is a big emphasis placed in the training of this organization on listening, this section looks specifically at how listening was directly

taught through instructions provided before and during workshop activities, as well as how listening was also emphasized indirectly to build community across political divisions as the organization encourages participants to listen to understand and listen to learn.

The Braver Angels organization makes a point to provide a clear definition for listening at the start of workshops and alliance meetings. Collectively across activities, the organization encourages participants to “listen to understand and find common ground,” similar to work done by those in the democratic education world (e.g., Andolina and Conklin). This description is often provided when reminding alliance members or workshop participants of the mission of the Braver Angels organization. For example, before a mix of Reds and Blues went into breakout rooms on Zoom to discuss that week’s political concerns during a weekly “Coffee and Conversations” meeting, a Braver Angels Red leader stated, “Remember we are seeking to listen to understand, not to argue... Our goal is not to convince the other or change opinion, but seek to find common ground.” Similarly, a Red leader for a “How Ya’ Doing” meeting clarified, “The mission is not to change political views, but be open to understand others and not rebut what they say or why they are wrong – to truly listen with empathy and in good faith.”

Braver Angel’s leaders also instruct on how to accomplish this definition of listening by providing clear ground rules for workshop activities, similar to suggestions given by others who lead community-led efforts (e.g., Lemmie et al.). For example, a Blue leader in a workshop observed instructed participants to “Put a hand in the air or wave if you feel like the other isn’t giving you time to speak” and to remember that “If there are four of you in a room, you should be listening 75% of the time and talking 25%.” Additionally, leaders and workshop facilitators are asked to encourage participants to listen with the intent to ask questions back for clarity, implying participants should focus not just on hearing another but being able to paraphrase their statements back to them to make sure their interpretation is accurate. Braver Angel’s leaders are strategic in providing a clear definition for listening, and enacting and enforcing rules throughout activities to ensure this definition is practiced.

Such practices are at the core of this Braver Angels community’s philosophy and workshop activities, as they encourage community members to engage together actively with and across their differences. In this context, like work done by Justin Lohr and Heather Lindenman, listening within their community looks like showing responsiveness and empathy towards others, with listeners trying to understand the speaker’s own experiences without inserting their own biases.

When we are communicating with someone with whom we assume to have little in common, we often engage in closed listening, where we are focused on

our next rebuttal or defensive argument instead of attending to and actively listening to what our counterpart is saying. Listening behaviors, such as those identified by listening textbook authors Debra L. Worthington and Margaret E. Fitch-Hauser, are important to consider when identifying how to better build environments conducive to civic community listening. For example, learning the role of listening, the importance of sharing speaking time, listening to paraphrase and ask questions in return, and practicing these concepts throughout the workshop and meeting activities allows participants and alliance members to take a proactive instead of reactive stance in their communication with someone on the other side of the political divide. In short, listening to understand allows individuals to resist listening to refute, contest, or argue. Participant One, a Braver Angel's Red founder, put it simply:

You can listen in different ways. You can listen to rebut and build up your arguments, so then when it's your time to speak, you go for it. Or you listen to really, sincerely understand or try to understand where that other person is coming from And that's what we emphasize hugely, and I think that's a distinguishing feature of what we do - listening to understand not listening to develop your counter arguments.

The Braver Angels organization not only encourages listening to understand in hopes of mitigating defensiveness and rebuttal, but their philosophy of listening, coupled with the various events and workshops, provides an opportunity to sit with others who are different from them. Many participants echoed that their fear or disgust of the other side hindered them from even reaching out to or having conversations with those who were politically different from them. For many, the Braver Angels workshops and meetings catalyzed to break this fear or lack of opportunity to talk with those of a different political affiliation. A workshop participant explained, “[The workshops] showed you could talk about serious questions or issues in a respectful listening space where people don't agree, but they respectfully share their perspective, and I think many people are really surprised that can happen.” Similarly, Participant Three, a Blue alliance leader, reflected:

[being part of this organization] has definitely given me a real understanding of how living in an insular, within-my-own-bubble way [has been] actually unhealthy and perpetuates stereotypes and makes it easy to create characterizations of people . . . I'm very Blue [and] went to [a] workshop, and was paired up with a woman who is Red and she was talking

about being pro-life and, like, I have very strong opinions about that, but to hear her perspective about why she's pro-life, saying that it was because she's concerned about protecting the vulnerable and those who can't protect themselves ... that just made total sense to me, you know, like it really was like an Aha moment of "like oh, she's not out to regulate a woman's body and tell them what to do, like she is really out to protect the vulnerable who don't have somebody you know working for them." I feel this way about many things too you know!

When we self-select to associate with one group versus another group, such as we do with political beliefs in the U.S., we often loathe to talk to those we consider to be on the "other side" about their opinions, afraid of entering intractable conflicts (Jenkins 38). This loathing or even fear of engaging in such discussion can hinder the conflict resilience Bordone mentioned. Bordone states:

When we sit in the presence of others with whom we may disagree strongly but with whom we can maintain civility and curiosity, we inevitably discover domains of shared interest and connection. And, even when we do not find these, we can often develop an appreciation for why our fellow citizens may hold the views they do. This "sitting with" does not solve an immediate problem; but it prevents the kind of demonization and othering that can escalate and cause new problems down the road while promoting humanization and connection. (70)

This sitting with and conversing with someone "on the other side" allows participants the opportunity to truly understand where someone with opposing views and beliefs is coming from and can have positive implications for their relationships. This outcome is impossible without understanding and encouragement, which comes from truly listening to another.

Through establishing ground rules for activities and defining listening to understand one another, participants at Braver Angel's workshops develop a working understanding of the role listening should take in dialogue related to politics or any other divisive, dichotomous, or intractable conflict topic. Moreover, members and workshop participants are provided the opportunity to practice listening throughout workshop activities and alliance meetings. As a result, participants can take this new knowledge and experience with them outside workshops to their everyday conversations with others who may be of an opposing political background or any other identifier. In essence, Braver Angels

participation also helps individuals grow and learn how to be better listeners as citizens. Participant Two, who identifies as a Blue, put it this way:

These calls and Zooms give me an opportunity to practice, if nothing else, to listen [to a] different point of view. . . . I still get into polarizing behavior when I'm with my Blue friends. But I'm less comfortable with that now. And I make some effort to use some of my new tools.

In the end, participating in Braver Angels workshops and meetings allows individuals to learn (and practice) new habits and possibly break old ones. Through structured activities, grounding meetings with a clear definition for listening, and encouraging listening practices during activities, the Braver Angels organization is helping build more collaborative, less reactive communities of individuals, despite their differing political beliefs. However, it went beyond just the official meetings of the group where such civic community listening took place. It also took place in individual connections made with each other outside of the large group meetings.

THE NEXUS OF STORYTELLING AND LISTENING WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

Combined together, an organization that encourages and allows its members to practice both storytelling and listening will likely build and sustain a strong community, with practices that are consistent with civic community listening. Charles H. Vogl identifies four features that are instrumental in building healthy communities: (a) shared values, (b) a clear membership identity, (c) moral prescriptions on how to treat others, and (d) an insider understanding of what the community is like (10). Community building is one of the goals of the Braver Angels organization nationally, as it is with the Braver Angels alliance of focus in this research. Braver Angel's work, centered around the building of relationships across differences, with the use of storytelling and listening practices, provides a good context for civic community listening to take place.

In community literacy practices, communities, such as the alliance we studied, often have to face "incredible differences in power, in perspectives, and in discourse styles" (Higgins et al. 11) when deciding how, as a community, they can work together. To understand how they do that, as Lorraine Higgins and her coauthors stated, we need to look at the "distinctive features of these discursive spaces, the discourses they circulate, and the literate practices that sustain them" (10). As we explored how the alliance did this at the local level, we found that they (a) created safe spaces for difficult conversations with the ground rules and structures they used

in their meetings, (b) focused on understanding each other and finding common ground, and (c) built respectful relationships across the political divide by doing work together and building trust. These elements are discussed in turn below.

SAFE SPACES CULTIVATED THROUGH GROUND RULES

One of the keys to the Braver Angels alliance enabling civic community listening to happen was to create safe spaces where people can talk honestly. As noted previously, this alliance does this by setting up structures within meetings and enforcing ground rules for civil discourse, both of which contribute to civic community listening and the willingness to share stories. One of the original Red co-founders of the alliance, Participant Four, said this about the ground rules: “We’re here to only speak for ourselves, not represent others. Stick to the task at hand. Be respectful. Watch the nonverbal stuff.” If a person violates these rules and is corrected, but is not willing to change, they will be uninvited to future meetings. As Participant Four put it, “The alliance members know we’re going to enforce ground rules, and the new people see real demonstrations that we do that.” Having these structures is necessary for creating safe spaces that allow people to have “difficult conversations on hard problems that are meaningful” and “minimizes emotional reactions” (Participant Four). The alliance leaders also acknowledged they must do this as well in their own conversations with people on both sides of the political aisle.

It’s to the point where when I see a Blue exhibiting what I know in my gut is bad behavior – they haven’t thought through their position as well as I think that I could have, or if they are not doing a good job of listening – I just take a step back and start remembering the ground rules to talk to them.
(Participant Five, Blue co-founder of alliance)

Participant Three added this about the leaders of the alliance: “They model good listening, and I think that that really helps everyone feel comfortable and understand how we’re supposed to behave in that space.”

UNDERSTANDING CULTIVATED THROUGH COMMON GROUND

A second area that the interviewees noted was important for building a civic community was looking for common ground when interacting within the community of the alliance. The common ground was seen as something that could be used as “a prelude to action,” according to Participant Four. Participant Four went on to acknowledge that there was a recognition that people come at things

in different ways, and that “this is not a ‘one side wins, and the other side loses’ kind of thing; this is both sides agree that here’s something, and it doesn’t have to be in the middle.” In the process of listening to understand and practicing “good habits of civic discourse . . . you’re realizing shared values with people who will not agree on policy positions” [Participant Four]. Participant Six, a Red alliance member, explained: “I think people believe in the same thing and they see some virtue in civil discussion and working with others to reach some common ground rather than reiterating your own viewpoint over and over again.” Braver Angel’s members in this alliance were better posed to understand “the other side,” once they were encouraged to seek and locate common ground throughout a workshop, meeting, or other organizational activities. The importance of seeking common ground was then instilled in their mindset throughout additional interactions with those within the alliance activities and beyond, further aiding in building community across the political divide.

TRUST CULTIVATED THROUGH SHOWING RESPECT

Several interviewees also mentioned the importance of trust being built in the context of showing respect for each other in the types of safe spaces set up by the alliance as a third way of building community. Participant Four explained it this way:

Our goal was to inspire trust, organize effective work, grow membership and impact. Up until now, I would say the work is doing workshops and other experiences that grow membership, and then by the experience of it all, we’re building trust amongst the people in the community of the alliance.

This type of trust was often built by working side by side with another person in the alliance on activities. Two of the interviewees, who are on opposite sides of the political aisle, both acknowledged that they became good friends through such work. Participant Four stated:

M and I didn’t have a political discussion until after we had organized at least two Red-Blue workshops. We worked shoulder to shoulder on really difficult tasks, and we learned to trust and respect one another, and then we talked about politics.

Participant Five agreed:

I think that’s what builds the community, more than anything else is. We’re not talking about politics necessarily. We’re

working to accomplish something . . . I think that's what builds the trust you know, . . . it's working side by side to accomplish something.

Another aspect of building trust within relationships was the behaviors related to respecting one another. Participant Three said: "It is a lot about that respect, like he's always made me feel like I'm smart and I have things to offer and contribute, that I'm being heard." This interviewee, who came into the alliance later than the founding members, explained further: "The original founding members of [the alliance] - they just have so much respect for each other. They're different from each other, but because they have such mutual respect, it really helps everyone feel that same way." This type of respect and trust can lead to finding common ground with each other, across differences, as Participant Four stated:

It's impossible to acquire enough knowledge to really be an expert on all these things so that you can have a true opinion of the right thing to do here. The only way to get to this is to have a variety of friends that are trusted, that come at these things in different ways. That will maximize the kind of common ground, you can all agree to get something done. It's the trust factor that is driving this for me.

Our observations and interviews suggest that listening and storytelling play key roles in developing a positive civic community listening climate in the Braver Angels Alliance. Good listening, as we have shown, provides the foundation for the honesty and authentic communication we saw in the excerpts of storytelling that emerged in the meetings. Below we provide final thoughts about Braver Angel's success in terms of its communication practices.

FINAL THOUGHTS

To communication scholars like us, it is no surprise that the efforts of Braver Angel's workshops work. The success of Braver Angels, though, particularly in this time when Americans are so highly divided, is noteworthy. As communication scholars, we see, in the development and execution of Braver Angels programs, an almost perfect model of an overarching theoretical perspective described by Pearce and Pearce, in the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory. Those who designed the Braver Angels sequence of meetings probably did not consult a textbook on how to make a better social world. But still, we see in the organization an almost intuitive understanding of that process.

For example, an initial question many CMM theorists ask is, “What are we making with our communication?” Note that this question implies “making” and “creating”—we make something with our communication. The “we” implies everyone involved. This suggests that together, *we* make or co-construct something with our communication. As all of us communicate together, we are making, or co-constructing, something real. Some have called the U.S. political situation Americans have made in the last few years toxic. The call for an organization like Braver Angels came because people recoiled at a bubbling stew of dissension in political rhetoric, news commentary, and bitter arguments that pushed friends and even family apart.

The second question in the CMM sequence is “What do we want to make?” Here the originators of Braver Angels sought a world where civic community listening could take place across our political disagreements—where people could learn to sit with each other and be fully present while hearing the experiences and stories that have led them to their views on issues, where equal emphasis is placed on individuals sharing stories and listening to understand, and where relationships are built which lead to joint action.

The last question of the CMM sequence is “What kind of communication will get us to where we want to be?” This is where Braver Angels shines. The founders of the group focused on elements of something as simple and yet seemingly out of reach as good, reflective, empathic listening. They trusted that if individuals have an audience where they can tell their stories and share their opinions and thoughts about issues important to them in respectful ways across multiple venues, they may be able to effect real change. Threads of storytelling naturally erupted from the moments of authentic listening that grew in the groups and various meetings. It was storytelling, described in this chapter as defined by Walter Fisher, that provided the glue that connected one human being to another and ultimately created a community where listening became the norm rather than the exception.

The U.S. is currently experiencing an uncommon degree of political polarization. Some writers even argue that the U.S. is more divided now than it has been at any time in its history, except for the years before the Civil War. The barrage of telltale propaganda flooding the news channels, radio stations, newspaper outlets, social media platforms, and even among individuals and families, testifies to the turmoil roiling just under the surface in American politics. This makes it imperative that we discover ways to ease the barriers separating polarized groups in the U.S. The research into this Braver Angels alliance offers insight into how one local organization has used communication practices to diminish the prickly distance between political camps and create a civic context in which community listening could take place. The listening and storytelling that is taking place within this group demonstrates that civic community listening opens other conversations and

opportunities for relationships, from which civic community work can take place, as members work together in their local communities. It is clear from our research that it is possible for “interpersonal dialogic communication” to be “scaled up for public communication contexts” (du Coudray 38).

The guiding principles we observed included establishing a climate of authentic listening which fostered, above all, an accepting environment for stories to be told. In this positive setting, participants were poised to listen respectfully to thoughts, attitudes, and opinions shared by alliance members and nonmembers without interruption and judgment. Authentic storytelling emerged from that openness. The leadership for each of the meetings encouraged civic community listening through the speaking and listening practices employed.

This study shows that community listening is often not accomplished within a singular event or activity, but instead is most likely cultivated across multiple interactions and activities. Many participants felt open to sharing stories and were more apt to listen actively and without judgment after they had built relationships with other members and attendees across multiple events, workshops, or meetings. These repeated interactions and events, all of which included leaders who encouraged community listening through establishing ground rules, seeking common ground, and building trust, culminating in a community that felt safe in discussing political topics that are often seen as inherently dichotomous.

As such, we note that the success of Braver Angels depends on its attention to communication skills, particularly listening and storytelling, which encompass the whole of civic community listening happening within the organization. The snippets of storytelling that emerge when people explain their feelings and ideas about events and issues put a human face on alternate ways of viewing the same reality, lending diverse opinions and individual texture and richness that calls for thoughtful attention. Plus, storytelling encourages individuals to share reasons behind their thinking through story form. The personal story has the added value of helping people to understand a worldview that is different from their own. Combining these efforts with establishing firm ground rules for respectful communication, creating “safe places,” and continually seeking common ground, inch members forward toward creating true community, and they serve as examples for other communities who are attempting to bridge differences using civic community listening.

Braver Angels illustrates what communication practices can bring people together in this fraught political environment. They have an enthusiastic membership, a membership that respects the views of others, although they may not share those views. What makes this membership unique is that each person is accorded their time in the process to detail the arguments, reasoning, and personal experiences that bring unique perspectives to the group. If we could suggest

anything to enhance how Braver Angels works, it would be for the organization to find ways to integrate more storytelling into workshops and meetings, as well as to include more diverse stories from people of differing backgrounds. As we have mentioned here, many benefits grow from the stories people tell, especially by putting a human face to those people whose thinking may be so different from our own, something even more important to members of marginalized groups who may be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or systemically misrepresented on a national level. In a real sense, storytelling allows us to sit with, truly listen, and embrace those who are different, which may be the point, after all.

Braver Angels proves that solid and careful attention to listening works because it enables honest talk and storytelling. Encouraging the hearing of all voices in the group, as they both teach and practice listening skills, works to build relationships. Respecting all contributions to the discourse works to build their civic community. Our study found that it is possible to create deliberative moments while engaging in politically polarized discussions in local civic communities, by participating in discursive practices such as “a reason-giving exchange marked by disagreement, stance indicators of listening and respect, and inclusive discourse” (Sprain and Black 8). These types of practices foster perspective-taking of the other side, which Muradova notes is necessary for creating understanding within citizen deliberations (648).

This study of a specific alliance of the Braver Angels organization and the practices that foster the building of community within it provides more information on how this work can be done within such an organization, where the goal is to build relationships and community. We believe that encouraging more groups with similar aims to follow these principles might begin to make some small difference in our public discourse universally, regarding politics and beyond.

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