

**WHY DO THE CONCERNS THAT MATTER
TO PEOPLE ON THE RIGHT USUALLY SEEM
EITHER STUPID
OR WRONG
TO PEOPLE ON THE LEFT
AND VICE VERSA?**

WHAT IS THIS?

In response to the growing political divide in our country, I decided I wanted to talk directly with conservative people about the difference between our political beliefs. As the 2012 presidential election approached, I toured the United States inviting conservative and libertarian strangers and acquaintances to discuss their views of American democracy. I was always upfront about being from a very liberal background. My family, friends, the places I have lived, and the art world where I was educated all consider it a given to be on the left side of the political spectrum. We take this so much for granted that I have often heard people, even sometimes myself, write off those who are on the right side of the spectrum as being morally wrong, stupid or incomprehensible. Something about the ease with which we can discredit people and beliefs that don't align with our own unsettles me.

More and more we live in a world where we only interact with people who resemble ourselves. We are increasingly able to move to places with like-minded populations, and the internet provides us with the ability to tailor the information we consume to confirm our pre-established beliefs. Given this reality, it took some work to step out of my everyday life and come face-to-face with people who disagree with me politically.

I conducted these conversations for my own learning, but also as a public gesture. Each time someone agreed to talk with me we became a small test of the crucial but tenuous possibility for civic dialogue. This publication presents the documentation from a selection of these conversations.

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THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR PERSONALLY QUESTIONING POLITICAL QUESTIONS
publicwondering.com

Deep thanks to Katy Asher, Amber Bell, Dirk Kinsey, Sam Lohman, Khaela Maricich, Forrest Martin, Mack McFarland, Anna Gray & Ryan Wilson Paulsen, David Scherer, Jason Wall, Lexa Walsh, Shannon Wiannecki, my family, and all of the people who have talked with me throughout this project.

Lexa Walsh, Oakland-based artist, took most of the photographs.

This project was supported in part by RACC, The Tacoma Art Museum, Disjecta, Artspace New Haven, The Walker Art Center, Southern Oregon University, and by selling my personal property.

DID WE GIVE OUR CONSENT TO BEING GOVERNED?

Multnomah Village OR | December 2011



We met after he and our mutual friend's christmas tree cutting trip. We talked about how, over the course of his life his political beliefs developed into libertarian anarchism, or voluntarism as I learned he called it. He explained that he perceives progressive/liberal politics as being based on force. He claimed society would work without the use of so much regulatory and military force if everything was clearly owned by someone and all disputes could be resolved by paying the owner their rightful market price for exploiting their property. As a way of trying to show me how property rights are at the core of society he explained that fundamentally each person's relationship to their self was one of ownership, which I wouldn't accept.¹ I also did not grasp how it made sense to him that people could live in society without a system of governance that transcended their individual choices. That said, he got me thinking about how we justify democratic government through the idea that we as citizens have consented to being governed this way, when many of us have never actually consented - we were just born into an already established system. ♦

WHAT IF THE TEA PARTY AND OCCUPY UNITED?

Beaverton OR | December 2011

After being out in front of the Beaverton Library in the cold fog for too long, a man who described himself as an evangelical christian came and spoke with me. He said he had been a Rush Limbaugh follower when he was young in the 1990s, but that it had stopped appealing to him. Now he believes that the tea party and the occupy movement are both working against the same enemy, which he says is corporate control of government. He hopes other people realize that too. When I asked him what had made his political beliefs move away from the far right he told a story about being called to jury duty and watching first-hand as the tough-on-crime measures he had previously voted for put a man in jail for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, leaving his family dependent on government assistance to survive. ♦

WHY DO WORKING CLASS PEOPLE VOTE REPUBLICAN?

Gun Show Ridgefield WA | January 2012

While searching for Republican Meet-up groups on the internet, I came across a listing for a gun show at the Clark County Fairgrounds. I set up in the parking lot by the entrance to the event. For a while no-one would talk with me, but then two men came over thinking I was a Ron Paul campaigner because I was sitting next to a car with his logos. When I explained what I was doing and said I was left leaning in my politics one of them replied "Well then I have nothing to talk with you about.² We have nothing in common." In my mind I thought, 'Don't we have a country in common?' but I didn't get it out of my mouth. Somehow I managed to keep up a conversation with him anyway. He told me how he had raised his family and put his kids through college without student loans by adjusting his lifestyle to fit his means, and how he didn't want the money he earned to be taken from him to give to welfare recipients who didn't work and had just as big a TV as him. Then they both walked away quickly reiterating that they had nothing to say to a left-winger.



This conversation is the clearest example so far of what I am learning is a common belief among people on the Right: that the Democratic Party is about taking money from working people to support a welfare class who doesn't contribute to our country, but who will always vote to keep the ruling Democratic elites in power - leaving tax paying working-class Americans squeezed out in the middle. ♦

CONSERVATIVE POLITICS AS THE LOCAL APPROACH?

Medford OR | February 2012

On the first morning of my road trip to the Southwest in search of conservative people, I stopped by the Jackson County Republican Office in Medford, OR. I felt nervous and self conscious carrying my modified American flag inscribed with an invitation to talk written in the stripes. I said "Hello" and told the two men inside the Main St. storefront that I was a left-leaning person who for the most part lived around people with similar political perspectives. I explained that I wanted to talk with conservative people about their political beliefs. They replied with warm, relaxed hellos and one of the men invited me to sit down at a desk with him to talk.

He was my parents' age and his way of speaking was humble but confident. He looked right into my eyes when he spoke and had an exacting memory for dates and statistics. He worked with both the Republican Party and with Freedom Works Oregon, which is a Tea Party group, and said he didn't really like any of the major candidates in the Republican primaries. He stated that "corporate cronyism" was one of the major problems in politics right now. In that, he perceived common ground between his position and some of the motivation for the Occupy movement.

He described a number of situations where local people tried to come up with their own economic innovations only to be stopped by a combination of government regulation and the big businesses who give major political contributions. He noted that people of my generation and his own children have a hardship that he didn't have, namely job scarcity. He explained that with less government regulation, American businesses could produce products at more competitive prices. This would lead us to purchase less from third world companies who pollute and mistreat workers in worse ways than Americans would allow. I didn't really dig into this argument in the conversation, but it rings in my head afterwards. In my opinion, while it may be the higher level of worker and environmental regulation in the US that makes China's products cheaper to import, it doesn't seem that taking away our regulations and allowing for higher worker exploitation and lower pollution standards would be a solution Americans would really want to live with.



Since many of his beliefs were close to those of progressive people, I asked why he chose to identify as conservative. He said he wasn't simply conservative or libertarian, he voted and acted according to whatever he thought would help small business people and individuals be able to take care of themselves as best as possible. His basic premise was that the rights of the individual should rule over collective interests. Because whoever gets to decide what is in the best interests of us all becomes someone assuming they know better than he does about what is good for him. ♦

WHEN DOES HELPING PEOPLE MAKE IT HARDER FOR THEM TO HELP THEMSELVES?

Fresno CA | February 2012

I had tried contacting various people associated with different tea party organizations around Fresno, but hadn't been able to set up any meeting times. For the most part tea party groups seem to have little centralized leadership and meet only periodically at restaurants or churches. There is however, an actual physical office for the Tea Party Regional Office in Fresno, but when I went by there was nobody was around. The room seemed set up as a gathering space, not as an organization's office, with stacking chairs in rows, lots of big rally banners on the wall, and recycling containers by the door labelled Tea Party Recycles.

From there we went to the Fresno County Republican headquarters, a few long, business-center blocks away. The woman at the desk in the small, tidy room was friendly but said she couldn't talk and told me another woman would be back from lunch in half an hour who I should meet with. But when I came back and found her and another woman in the office, the secretary told me, "This isn't the woman I was talking about and we are not allowed to talk to you," then gave me the phone number of the county spokesman to call. I explained that it wasn't policy I was interested in, but people's personal reasons for their political beliefs. I kept asking very gentle questions and after a little while they seemed to relax and the second woman offered me a seat.

They were both volunteers and part of a Republican Women's evening group. My impression was that they were involved in the organization more as a social group than anything else. The secretary said she had been conservative her whole life. The other woman had grown up outside of Baltimore in a family that voted democrat, but she said that was because back then the Democratic Party was the party of the working class, and she almost laughed, continuing that she didn't think that was true anymore. She also said that she voted Republican because she was Christian and that Christians vote according to values. I tried to delicately question that by telling her that I was brought up by a Quaker family, which is also Christian, but that Quakers tend to vote for Democrat because of their different religious values, including Pacifism. They seemed genuinely surprised.

The political issue that concerned them the most was that they believe Democrats are making the country into a welfare state. They had both worked in schools and each told stories about how negatively welfare practices affected their students. One told a story of trying to convince a sixth grader that he needed to learn how to read, arguing that he would need to read to have a job, only to have the student object by saying he did not need to get a job because, like his mom, he would just get a check from the government each month. The other woman had mentored a 13 year old year girl who told her brashly she wanted to get "knocked up" so that she could get on welfare and move out on her own.



I agreed with them that to the extent that welfare becomes a disincentive for people trying to make a good life, it does them and society a disservice. The most common argument I hear against the Democrats is that they want to create more of a welfare state, which is also described as making the US more like Europe, with its higher tax rates, higher levels of social programs and state funding, and its economies collapsing under debt while its citizens riot against national austerity measures.

The two women also cited gangs as an important political issue. The secretary said the Hmong are the worst here, but in other parts of town they are Hispanic and African American. I couldn't tell she was talking specifically about gang activity or just neighborhood demographics. She couldn't remember the word for it, but said they had just started writing on buildings in the neighborhood, in reference to graffiti. At the end of our conversation the secretary still didn't want to be photographed but the other woman said she wasn't ashamed of her politics and consented. ♦

HOW MUCH OF EXPERTS DO WE NEED TO BE TO DECIDE WHAT IS GOOD FOR OUR COUNTRY?

Beverly Hills CA | February 2012

In Los Angeles a friend recommended I try stopping by the Beverly Hills sign on my search. I asked the first person I walked up to whether he was politically conservative, and the man replied that, yes, he was as conservative as they come. So I asked him to tell me why. He said he was concerned about the US becoming a welfare state, like so many of the people I've talked with, so I asked him what he thought we should do to help poor people out of poverty if he didn't want to give them government subsidies. He said we should get rid of the minimum wage and pay people as little as they would take. That way, in his view, business would be willing to hire more people and they would be able to compete better in a global economy, which would help the US economy in general and then more Americans would be able to have jobs. I asked him what would happen if people took these jobs for such low wages only to be unable to afford their own costs of living. He replied that if people had jobs and they still were not able to support themselves then they could be given government support on top



of their income to survive. If having a job was necessary to receive benefits there would be more incentive for people to work instead of just expecting benefits.

He stated that every time the US has lowered taxes our government revenues have gone up instead of down, because businesses make more money and then pay larger sums of tax even though their rates are lower. He also brought up what I am learning is a standard conservative perspective on the great depression and the effectiveness of FDR's make-work policies. He said that after ten years of FDR's presidency the unemployment rate in the US was still at basically the same terrible level as when he took office, around 25%, and that the second world war actually pulled the US out of that recession, not the WPA putting Americans to work with government funds.

He went on and on, with warm gusto. He explained how the housing collapse³ was the Democrat's fault because they had supported policies that allowed banks to give loans to people without any proof that they had the means or the credit rating to pay them off. He said that it would be better if the US had continued to support the un-democratic leaders in Egypt and Libya. In his opinion that region has no history with democratic self governance and that their elections will become mechanisms for hard-line Islamist strong-men to take even more control. And he said more.

After a long, spirited and friendly conversation I asked him what he was doing hanging out at the Beverly Hills sign. He said he was a pastor who had owned a chain of Christian bookstores on the East Coast but a few years ago he'd realized that bookstores were going under because of the internet and started looking for a new direction. He believes that god spoke to him and told him to go to Hollywood and minister to people. He thinks that the US is the biblical Babylon, exporting our cultural filth of pornographic movies and TV to the rest of the world and that this indicates that the end times are near. He hangs out in that park waiting for tourists to ask him to take their picture with the iconic sign and then that gives him a chance to talk with them and sometimes spread his mission.

I had a good time talking with him but felt discouraged at the end. I have heard that both conservative economists and progressive economists claim that FDR's depression economic stimulus policies prove their vision of how the economy works. If experts can make cases for both beliefs how can it be more than our biases that make us chose one political perspective or the other? I recognize I don't know enough to argue with his description of how economics and politics work, and that is a problem. ♦



In Yuma, AZ we saw this guy by the side of a busy road with his homemade campaign signs. He told me US foreign policy oppresses brown people like him, and that Ron Paul would help end that by bringing home all American troops.

IS THE US A DECLINING SUPERPOWER?

El Paso TX | February 2012



Our hosts were the parents of a former classmate who is a political activist. She arranged for us to stay with her family and have her father talk with me about his beliefs, although I had the sense that he was not entirely comfortable with doing so. He and his wife are both civilian lawyers who now work for the military hospital representing soldiers seeking medical benefits. They had recently moved from Detroit for this job, in part because the economy in Detroit was hit so hard by the recession.

He described living in El Paso as being like living in a suburb of a foreign city, with a wall dividing the smaller American sector from the giant and volatile Mexican city of Juarez. The El Paso paper had been regularly listing ten to fifteen murders each morning: casualties of the Mexican drug wars. As you drive the main highway that cuts through El Paso you can look across the dividing wall into Juarez at the beat-up cinder-block buildings covering the hills.

In our discussion he focused on foreign policy as the political issue that had shifted his allegiance from the Democratic beliefs of his union leader father towards his current stance. The occupation of the American Embassy in Iran in the 1970s and Jimmy Carter's ineffectual response had concerned him deeply and pointed him in a more conservative direction. He is worried that the US is no longer projecting an image of itself as a strong nation to the world, and that this makes our future as a safe, stable country more vulnerable. He was supportive of the Iraq war because he felt that after 9/11 the US needed to take decisive action to show the rest of the world that we would not allow anyone to get away with attacking us. He felt it was appropriate for the US to attack Iraq at that moment because Saddam Hussein was continuing to defy US diplomatic agreements and the US could not stand for such treatment at that point in history. So, because of his defiance at a critical moment, Saddam deserved what he got, even if he wasn't responsible for the attacks. For the most part he thinks Obama has done a great job with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan by increasing the use of drones and special forces. But he didn't like it when Obama tried to open up diplomatic relations with Iran without getting any promises before hand. This, in his opinion, made Obama seem naive and he worries about Obama representing America as if he is conceding that The United States is a declining super power. Nevertheless, he doesn't feel that positively about any of the Republican candidates at this point, and because he does supports much of how Obama has been handling foreign policy he says he might even consider voting for him in the presidential election.

Since there were many places where his views corresponded with Democratic positions, including being a strong supporter of developing alternative energy, I asked him what concerned him most about progressive agendas. He replied that he would be resistant to any cuts to the defense budget and that he questioned the level of optimistic idealism on the left. He said, "there is a lot of risk in the world today." ♦

HOW CAN DEMOCRACY WORK IF PEOPLE WITH DIFFERENT POLITICAL POSITIONS DO NOT EVEN SHARE THE SAME FACTS?

Austin TX | February 2012

He gave me two choices of places where we could meet for lunch, and I picked the French restaurant thinking I would be able to just get some soup. When we arrived he was sitting at a table across from the entrance with a cup of tea. The wait staff treated him, and by extension us, as honored family members – with warm, comfortable



humor and ample graciousness. He had been coming there regularly since they had opened, thirty years ago. I asked him if he had always had conservative political beliefs and he began responding by telling me what life had been like in Brownsville, TX when he was growing up. The way he described it everybody in the town was in the same boat together across lines of race, economics, and family background. All his peers had grown up speaking Spanish when they were together, English in school, and then whatever language their family spoke at home. They lived in multiple cultures at once. He said that if you wanted to get drunk as a kid, you could just walk across the bridge into Mexico and they would sell you anything. But also across the bridge there wasn't always even running water. So, he and his peers had direct experience with the benefits and drawbacks of more and less regulated society. His father had immigrated to the US from Germany. He had grown up working in his dad's shop helping him machine parts. But at some point in his teens his father had been hit in the head by a part flying off the machines and was left seriously injured in such a way that slowly, over a number of years, he died. After his father's death he tried going to college, but he didn't take to it and it didn't take to him. He did however do well in all his professions, first as a waiter, next in the Navy working on nuclear submarines, later in his career with Bell Telephone, and now with his own DVD production company.

When he was working for the telephone company he got an inside look into how much access the government has to whatever information it wants. He implied that after what he experienced he assumes that someone is keeping tabs on pretty much everything. He followed that by saying that since he is aware of how much the government knows it only makes him wonder even more why they would allow Obama to be president, since they must know that the birth certificate he released was faked. I was a little taken aback by this statement and tried to challenge him, saying that in my understanding the issue had been solidly refuted. He insisted⁴ with poise that there was clear evidence that the serial number on the birth certificate had been faked and that when you open that image file in Photoshop it was obviously composed of multiple layers, not a simple photograph of the original document. I had not heard those claims and had no way to counter them directly. An unsettling feeling came over me, as I sensed the distance between our two perceptions of reality and my inability to provide any argument that would bridge that divide. That feeling sat uncomfortably with me for the rest of our conversation, and beyond, right next to my admiration and respect.

I have since looked up his statements and found articles, even in the staunchly right news magazine The National Review, debunking the multilayered file claims. But there are still many, many people – even people who have read those articles, which should clear up these questions – who continue to find evidence to support their belief that the birth certificate is fake. Some people might find it easy to write off people who persist with these doubts, but what I wonder is: which sources of information they consider to be credible and why? How has it happened that knowledgeable people like this man believe those sources over the generally accepted consensus? Or am I mistaken in believing that such a thing as a credible consensus exists these days? At the end of our meal, after the wait staff brought us extra appetizers and desserts, the restaurant refused to even let us pay for the meal. It seemed like this was a common ritual between our host and the restaurant, seeing who got to have the chance to be more generous on each visit. Looking back on how much I enjoyed talking with and listening to this man, and how that appreciation has no bearing on whether we can agree on what to accept as evidence for our understandings of our country, leaves this conversation with a bittersweet taste. ♦



A few times I have been told by security to stop talking with people in public places, like at this park by the Alamo. I wandered away and found these people who would talk anyway. She used to be a Republican but she said politics was too messed up and she wasn't going to vote.⁵

IS AFFIRMATIVE ACTION RACIST?

San Antonio TX | February 2012

We met at a McDonald's in Stone Oak, a newer suburb just outside San Antonio – at his suggestion. When I entered the restaurant with my flag he got up immediately and walked us into the empty kids' playroom, so we could talk in privacy.

He didn't want to be photographed because he said he had been persecuted for being conservative and non-white in his college days, when he was actively opposing Affirmative Action. He had agreed to meet me because he was childhood friends with the father of one of my friends. They had grown up together in Brownsville, in the southern-most part of the US, right on the Mexican border. His family was Mexican-American, although he pointed out that for the most part the Spanish-speaking people of the Americas were largely Native American in ancestry. He said he had been, and still was, personally offended by affirmative action because it is disrespectful of his ability to succeed on his own merits. Fighting against affirmative action had started his shift from the Catholic Democrat beliefs of his family towards his current conservatism. He said even as a very young child he had willed himself to excel in school, had fought hard to always be the head of his class and that this competition to succeed was good for society. Later in the conversation he told me how he had been taught to read and write before going to elementary school by his grandparents, who had learned literacy from the Catholic Church. I noted that this gave him an advantage in school from the very beginning, and probably allowed him to get on his academic success track.

He had ended up going to the University of Michigan after being in the military, and was now a successful Lawyer. While he was in school one of his classmates had been Michael Moore, who went on to become a well-known documentary film maker.

He said that the two of them would dominate their classes arguing with each other. He ended up losing respect for Moore because his arguments were not based on evidence, but on ideology and inference.

His definition of conservative was to conserve, in the sense of preserving traditions. He had ideas for improving the country's economy, education system and military that I had never considered, or even ever heard of before. He suggested that the US pay the same price for foreign made goods as it would cost to make the item in the US, with out wages and benefits. This would both keep more business in the United States and bring up the standards in other countries. I asked him whether that would be called protectionist and he responded emphatically, no. This was such a foreign idea to me that I cannot be sure I understood him fully. When I try to think through this proposition after our conversation it seems impossible to implement. But if it were to hypothetically happen it would actually level the playing field of global capitalism and eliminate exploitation based on economic disparity between the first and third world. Maybe in a world like that I would agree with the logic that says people get what they work for and deserve in a capitalist economy.

He believes that primary education, from kindergarten to third grade should be fully nationally funded, and that it should all be bilingual, in English and Spanish. A solid bilingual education has been shown to give students strong academic advantages in the long run. With that foundation they would all be prepared to compete for success. Those who won would be the best qualified people for the positions they rose to fill, and society would benefit from having their competency and authority.

He also believes that there should be mandatory conscription into national service. If people did not want to serve in the military they could work in hospitals, or some other institution for the public good. This time of service would provide tangible benefits to American society and it would also generate in young people a sense of love for their country, since the act of giving develops a sense of dedication and good will. He said "right now our country is just like my church: 30 percent of the people do all of the work and the other 70 percent just receive benefits and never raise a finger."

His version of conservatism looks very little like what I see being represented by conservative politicians, and he admitted he likes none of the top Republican candidates. I was grateful for the chance to get to hear such a different vision of conservative political perspective, and one that was both compassionate and articulate. ♦

WHAT'S UP WITH HALF OF AMERICANS PAYING NO TAXES?

Lubbock TX | February 2012

I wanted to stop in Lubbock because it is listed as one of the most conservative cities in the US. We pulled into town just after sunset, and decided, at that hour, a bar would probably be a good place to find people. We found a block lined with bars and chose a smaller one with neon lights in the window and at least a few people inside. I ordered beers and asked the bartender for advice on where to find conservative people who would talk with me. He asked some questions about my project, suggested some other bars in town, and seemed both genuinely curious and probably liberal leaning. The couple sitting next to me at the bar were also curious, had suggestions, and didn't identify as conservatives themselves. Right about the time we finished our drinks the very drunk lady at the end of the bar decided she wanted to talk with me about how Facebook wouldn't let her post anti-Obama links, but I decided to move on.

The next bar we went to was supposed to be a college hang-out, but the clientele was very mixed, both in age and race. In general Lubbock flouted my expectations when it came to diversity. I again told the bartender what I was doing, to which he responded by staring at me for a moment and then saying "politics and drinking don't mix. It always leads to trouble."



Next to me at the bar were two middle aged men standing talking to each other with their backs to me. I decided to just break into their conversation with my questions, assuming it probably wouldn't go too well, but that it was worth a try. I said, "Excuse me, I live on the west coast and I am trying to learn about what our country's political situation looks like to people who are more conservative than me." And they bit. Especially younger of the two, who luckily, was also less drunk.

He fired questions, arguments and statistics at me, with an almost angry enthusiasm. He said 41% of Americans receive some government subsidy and 50% do not pay federal tax. He said he thinks the US is heading in the direction of total bankruptcy, like Greece, because of the growing culture of entitlements.³ He told me to look into which states businesses are moving to, and which they are moving away from, and implied that the states with more liberal policies are closer to bankruptcy and have businesses fleeing them—using California and Michigan as examples. He said he doesn't think social issues should be dealt with in federal politics, that they should be decided on a state level, and that states should be able to function as their own semi-independent experiments with democracy. That way we would be able to compare how more conservative and more liberal political systems would play themselves out and see what ways are more successful. He said, if government can't run the Postal Service without going bankrupt, why would we ever trust it with something as complicated and important as our health care? He believes there should be a safety net, but followed that up by saying he thinks most people who are demanding benefits are just whiners. He reminded his friend, who had been focusing quietly on his drink, about when he had laid off one of his employees — who had been making over

\$200,000 a year — how annoying it was that the former employee hadn't even tried to get another job, and had instead just kept collecting benefits for as long as he could. At some point, maybe right after talking about his ex-employee's salary, he described himself as the 1%, with a what seemed to me as a defensive pride.

After finishing my beer I thanked him for talking with me and excused myself, leaving with questions in my mind about whether his information was accurate and how to make my own sense out of it. Were his statistics correct about the percentage of people to receive benefits and pay taxes? (They were according to my research.) What actually caused the Greek debt crisis and how does it relate to our economy? Is there any truth the claim that the liberal states are less economically viable than the conservative ones? (The left and the right have different answers to this questions, and either way I'm not certain that the political leadership of a state is the main factor of the state's economic success.) Before going back to our hotel our stomachs directed us to the awesome food cart Big E's BBQ. I woke up in the morning with memories of my delicious brisket wrapped in a tortilla and haunted by with the questions raised the night before. I'd be glad to go back to Lubbock. ♦

ARE WE MAKING IT HARDER TO PULL OURSELVES UP BY OUR BOOTSTRAPS?

Crescent City CA | February 2012

On my morning walk down to see the harbor I past a trailer covered in wood figurines, American flags and a hand painted sign that said OBAMA: One Bad Assed Mistake America. I knew I wanted to talk to whoever lived there, but I was shy to impose myself without knowing whether my interest would be seen as offensive. There were two men standing across the parking lot, so I walked over, told them what I was doing and asked whether they knew the person who lived there. I was hoping that maybe one of them did, and feeling that somehow it was more socially acceptable to approach a person outside than to knock on their door. They knew the owner, and told me he was often around. Just then they saw him walk out with his dog and called to him. He was a grey haired man with skull and crossbones on his red shirt. I said hello, explained that I was trying to learn more about how conservative people think about our country, and asked him whether he would be willing to talk with me. He told me I wouldn't want to hear what he had to say. I insisted I would. I read my flag sign to him and he seemed pleased with the statement. He started raging against liberals, but in a blustery way that didn't feel personal at all — actually it just felt like he had so much to say he could barely make himself stop once he got started. He definitely seemed to want to be listened to. But he had to take his dog for a walk first, so we agreed to meet back at his place in 30min and I went and ate breakfast.

When I returned he saw me from his window. He came out and asked me to sit down at the picnic bench on the sunny side of his place. He was from Scotland, and said he had traveled all over Europe before deciding to move to the United States, because he had concluded it was the best country in the world. He said growing up in Scotland there was no way for him to change his position in society and the work that was available for poorer people like him was dangerous, like mining and fishing the North Sea. He said that after living expenses and taxes there was no way for a person to get ahead there. His dad had started a motorcycle club in their town when he had retired from the air force, and as a young man he had decided to one-up his father by joining the Hells Angels and moving to California. He had spent most of his adult life as an artist and biker, and he was proud to have his carved and painted wooden artworks in Hells Angels clubhouses around the world. He had made his living selling his wares on the side of the street in cities he traveled through, but he couldn't do that anymore because you need a permit to sell things anywhere now. He felt the United States was heading away from it's former glory because everything was becoming more and more regulated. His motorcycle had gotten impounded a while back and he had asked the guy who ran the towing company if he could work off the fines by doing something around the lot, but the guy claimed he couldn't let him do any work because he wasn't properly licensed. I agreed that we are becoming a more and more regulated country, but questioned whether it was really the Democrats and Liberals fault. He said even the Republicans weren't doing a very good job these days, but at least they have the right idea about less government, less taxes, and less regulation. He had left the Hells Angels at some point and found god. He said the devil is always right there with you encouraging you to do bad things, but then he's nowhere to be found when you have to pay for the consequences of your actions. He said he felt a calm he'd never before known, because he didn't need to worry anymore if every cop was out to get him since he has been living right with Christ.

He spoke with fury in his voice most of the time, as if he would be more persuasive the more furiously he spoke. But he seemed really glad to talk and shook my hand warmly when I said I had to go, even though he had a hard time stopping the flow of his rant.

I looked into statistics on social mobility, and while this guy was right that the US offers a better chance of moving up the class ladder than his home in Great Britain, kids from poor American parents have a harder time getting ahead than kids in almost every other developed country, and some studies show this has been getting steadily worse since the 1980s. ♦



DID BIG MONEY RUIN POLITICS, OR WAS DEMOCRACY FUNDAMENTALLY FAULTY FROM THE START?

Minneapolis MN | April 2012



After getting a bit lost in downtown Minneapolis we found our University Ave meeting place on a warm spring evening. We sat at a cafe table on the sidewalk as the city got dark around us and had a very full conversation about some of what he described as the “axiomatic” differences between the left and the right. He had majored in Economics and described his political beliefs as Libertarian. He said that while Libertarianism contains elements that are generally considered conservative and liberal, at this time in history he aligns himself more with Republicans because he feels that the Democrat’s agenda is causing more long term harm to a Libertarian vision of our country. He cited the federal government taking charge of more aspects of society – like healthcare – and the erosion of constitutional protection for personal liberties as issues that concerned him.

As an example of what he thought politics should avoid he brought up campaigns to save libraries. He stated that when people value something they recognize its worth by supporting it, and claimed there are lots of private libraries we use all the time, which are actually are very affordable, like Netflix. I said I thought there should be some things that we support for reasons other than economic efficiency and not everything that matters to us can be provided by purely economic means. I pointed out that Netflix’s selection is only a certain especially commercially viable spectrum of the history of film and video, and it has no equivalent of a Rare Book Room where resources people use infrequently are kept as important historical records. His response was that even for things like that, which can’t translate directly into economic viability, someone still needs to decide what their value is, and that our political system is not the best agent to make those decisions. I acknowledged that government can be cumbersome, but when I asked him to explain more why he thought government was unqualified to decide what is a valuable aspect of civic society we hit on a contrast of perspective that was really illuminating to me.

He explained that the amount of incentive individuals have to make a well informed political decision is very low and contrasted that with how much incentive a person has to make an informed consumer purchase: when you buy a product you hold full responsibility for whether you bought something of good quality or good value and you are directly aware of whether you made a good choice or not. Whereas with politics even if you are informed your efforts have only a minuscule effect on the outcome and political results have a less immediate effect on your life, therefore it is less apparent whether your efforts were worth it or well considered. In his understanding this makes it so that people simply are less invested in politics because there is very little incentive to put in the work.

This explanation was super interesting to me because it was a totally new angle on the question of why so many people are disengaged with politics⁵ – and an explanation that in some way makes more sense to me than my own. I have thought of citizen based politics as being a mechanism that has broken down, and he sees it as being fundamentally too dispersed a mechanism to be effective. I believe that our lack of action is largely because government is more accountable to big money than to citizens, so we don’t feel like our voices are being heard against the boom of big money, and we stop trying to speak up. I still think this is true, but there is something very psychologically insightful about the understanding that politics rarely shows us much direct effect from our actions and therefore it isn’t an arena that offers much reward for being active.

He agreed with me that politicians are beholden to moneyed interests, and that it is a problem, but he believes that the best way to deal with that would be to make the levers of power impotent themselves: meaning take away the government’s power and then each individual’s power would grow in relative strength.

I told him if I imagine our government with less power it would leave money to be pretty much the main source of power, whereas now government is at least a strong enough body to act as a counterweight balancing against the force of straight capital. This became a point we kept disagreeing about because he thinks that since money is beholden to consumers it is really pretty weak, and people have the power to change their situation through where they put their money. As he sees it, the market is more responsive to people than the government is, because you can’t just choose a different government if the one you have isn’t working for you. This seemed ironic to me, and I told him so, since the premise of democratic government is that it is justified by the consent of the citizens and regularly changes according to their vote.

He acknowledged that in a market economy there will always be losers, but said that he believes the things government does to try to fix that inequality are more destructive than the disparity that naturally occurs. He thinks there is so much empirical evidence that government instituted solutions don’t create the socially beneficial results that Liberals intend for them to, and he doesn’t understand why they – we, I, don’t recognize that. ♦

HOW MUCH DOES WHO WE TALK WITH SHAPE WHAT WE THINK?

Mason City IA | April 2012

We left Minnesota and drove through the north-eastern corner of Iowa on a very windy day, without knowing where we would find people to talk with. We stopped in Mason City for lunch and were directed to Walmart if I wanted to find everyone on a Sunday afternoon. On our way to the Walmart we drove down a street that turned into an endless big box store corridor and by the time we came across a mega-store for farming supplies we decided to stop there instead. I was antsy and worried about whether anyone would talk with me. I stood by the sliding glass exit doors and asked the people leaving if they would tell me about a Midwestern perspective on our country’s politics. It didn’t take long to find people willing to talk. A man in his sixties stopped, heard me out and gave me a chance. He was well spoken, reserved, but direct and made solid eye contact. He said he works full-time in an office at a factory and has a farm, which is also considered to be a full-time job in this area. He said he sleeps four hours a night to keep up with the work. Most of the other men in his office have served in the military and, even though he is older than them, he turns to them for perspective on foreign policy because he respects their direct experience. He told me there is just one liberal guy in his office and he has fun riling him up by pushing all the liberal issue buttons. He considers that fellow to have a stake in being liberal because most of the his family members are on entitlement programs, like food stamps and medicaid.



He said he cares about conservative foreign policy and economic issues, but doesn’t care about the social issues like abortion. When someone starts talking about abortion he just lets them talk and doesn’t respond. I asked what he thinks is problematic about liberal politics and he said we shouldn’t be apologizing to other countries. I wondered whether he was referring to the Koran burning incident a couple of months ago in Afghanistan. He concurred, saying those books were being used as devices for spying, and that they were just books, and that over 20 servicemen were killed in the rioting that followed the book burning – why should we apologize for that? I nudged a little further by saying, “But wouldn’t Christians have been pretty upset if the tables had been turned, and it had been a Bible burning?” He said he hoped Christians wouldn’t have killed anybody in such a situation, but his solemn voice seemed to leave room for considering that possibility.

He told me two of his adult daughters had lost their factory jobs because of downsizing and outsourcing. One had been hired back but lost all her seniority and benefits and had to start at the bottom of the ladder again. I said that I associate those kinds of business practices, ones that make sure the company is making money without regard to the employees, as being more a part of the conservative economic policy. He responded by saying that he feels badly about how working people are treated in this country in general, and that he doesn’t vote Republican across the board.

He has always actively participated in the Iowa caucuses, but didn’t this year because he wasn’t interested in any of the candidates. He said liberals don’t acknowledge how smart it was of Sarah Palin to stay out of this year’s presidential race and that maybe this is the year conservatives are just throwing the election to the liberals.

After thanking him and letting him go back to his rare Sunday afternoon free from work, I got back into the car. I thought about the group of veterans at his work, and how strongly the community of people we talk with affects our political opinions. In my own life, and through this project, I see how we form mirrored chambers² in our lives where the people with whom we talk reinforce over and over again certain ways of thinking, and we find so few chances to even hear any other thoughtful points of view. ♦

ARE OUR MOST PRECIOUS VALUES PROTECTED BY EITHER GOVERNMENT OR THE ECONOMY?

Financial District Chicago | April 2012



I emailed the Chicago Young Republicans, and for the first time ever someone from one of the official conservative organizations wrote me back. (I've been writing Republican and Tea Party organizations in towns wherever I go without any luck getting anyone to agree to talk with me.) The leader of this organization responded saying the invitation sounded interesting and to meet him after work at a Starbucks. But when we arrived to meet the coffee shop was closed – so we went down the street to a bar that was run by somebody he know from his frat days and had a drink.

He was from a Mexican immigrant family and grew up in the suburbs of Chicago. He wasn't very interested in politics when he was young but during college a friend asked him if he was going to vote, and he promised that he would – but then had to figure out who to vote for because he had no opinion yet about which party was better. He went to the different political clubs on campus to research what they stood for and decided that the Democrats were too much of whiners, and that while the Republicans were nerds, he agreed with what they said. Since that time he has gotten more and more involved in politics. He has become one of the main go-to people for a conservative points of view in Chicago since he is willing to speak up and he likes the limelight. He considers himself to have a very pragmatic approach to politics and strongly believes that less government = more liberty. He said that at heart he is probably a libertarian, but he is not willing to be a martyr for his ideals – he wants to see a more conservative president elected and that means throwing his weight behind the Republican candidate, whether or not he thinks they are that great personally.

He explained how growing up in an immigrant family there was never any government assistance for him or his family or community and implied that this life experience provides personal proof that people don't need to be coddled by government services to succeed. He said he understands why minorities were pro-government/pro-Democrat in the sixties, because there was serious racism then, but he believes that it is less prevalent now. He claimed that if states were allowed the freedom to have racist policies, over time those states would fail because they would be financially uncompetitive and it would become obvious that racism was not in anyone's interests.

He talked a lot about the local charter school called Uno, where they focus academic excellence for Hispanic students. He used this as an example of how a more privatized, libertarian model of education could do a better job than state-run public schools. This led down a path in our conversation into what looked to me like the vision of a society where all of our institutions would have to be financially successful primarily, and only then also serve a public good. I asked him whether he really believed that all of the things that we value in our lives could be accounted for under purely economic logic. He responded by asking me whether I thought government really does a good job protecting those precious and intangible values – which seemed like a fair retort to me. ♦

IS GOVERNMENT MORE RESPONSIVE TO THE INTERESTS OF ITS CITIZENS OR TO ITS OWN SELF INTEREST?

Uptown Chicago | April 2012

Lexa and I met her cousin's husband, who she hadn't seen in years and years, at an open air restaurant on Clark St. He is a warm, gregarious man who was very open to talking about political matters from multiple angles. He works as the president of one of the worlds largest leather tanning companies, an industry that has a long history



in Chicago. We talked for a bit about the world of his business, which I knew nothing about, including the news scandal over "pink slime," or as people in the meat industry call it, "extruded beef." He told us that this kind of processed meat allowed for more of the animal to be used and was therefore less wasteful, continuing that if extruded meat products are banned because of public outcry, a huge number more animals would need to be slaughtered each year to keep up with customer's demands.

Then we talked about how Chicago's political climate has affected his own stance about politics. He said that, in Chicago, at some point in any person's career they have to make a choice about whether they want to work for the city government, since it is such a big player in the economy. He decided he never wanted to go that route because he felt that would mean always being under someone's thumb. He feels that Obama is a corrupt politician in the way so many Chicago politicians are: in it for personal gain. He is distressed by the stories of Obama and his family taking luxurious personal trips on the public dollar.

He considers himself to be pro workers, but feels that the union administrations are corrupt and ineffective. He told the story of trying to negotiate directly with workers in a plant that he was restructuring. He tried to ensure that they got what they deserved from their working conditions, and developed a really good relationship with the employees themselves, but that the union only made things harder. He told another story about how within one year of opening up the American shoe manufacturing market to Taiwan, a majority of American jobs in that business were lost. He used this story to illustrate that the government doesn't have the perspective to make intelligent decisions about the economy. He explained how all six members of government responsible for this decision had voted in favor of opening up that trade market, and then just a year later, after watching all those jobs disappear, they all voted to end it. But the damage had been done. He also admitted, though, that the companies had their own stake in advocating for manufacturing moving out of the United States, because they made more money – even when their workers lost out.

He, like many people with more conservative beliefs, is worried about the US heading towards socialism. To him this means a society modeled on the former USSR: economically stagnant, bureaucracy laden, and domineered by centralized power. He asked me what I thought would be a strong enough counterbalancing force to protect citizens interests against the government's self-interest if it took control of our social programs, like health-care. I replied that I didn't see the government as being a single monolithic interest, but a combination of competing interests that, hopefully, represent the interests of its citizens. But I do also agreed that every organization has a tendency to become self-interested even when its mission is to serve others, and this is part of the compromised reality of democratic government as an institution. ♦

WHAT WOULD THE CONSEQUENCES BE OF EQUALIZING WEALTH?

Waukesha WI | April 2012

We went to Waukesha because a friend from Milwaukee told me this suburb had suspiciously turned up with thousands of extra Republicans votes. Driving from downtown Milwaukee out towards the western suburbs we passed through the divided territories created by this state's recall election. The core parts of the city were covered with anti Scott Walker signs and then as we passed into neighborhoods beyond the city limits the signs changed to showing strong support for Walker.

The Waukesha Republican headquarters is in a sleepy-looking strip mall, but when we were there people were coming and going all the time. I hoisted my flag onto my shoulder and went into the office to see what would happen. I chose one of the people bustling around the office to say hello to, explained that I was from the West Coast and asked if they would please tell me about a more conservative, Midwestern perspective on our country. The older man at the desk gave me some looks but went to get someone to talk with me. I noted that they didn't offer me a seat.

A younger man came from the back room, and I explained to him again what I was doing. He wore a t-shirt and work pants, spoke fast, and while he immediately outed himself as an employee of the Republican Party, he was very open about his own point of view and didn't come across as a person who was sticking to anyone's script. He said that while personally he was against abortion he believed in the political liberty for people to have abortions on the basis that government shouldn't be regulating people's lives on that level. He stated that Keynesian economists are wrong: the government doesn't make jobs, and they make bad mistakes when they try to subsidize businesses according to their ideological view of which industry should succeed – such as the current subsidies of various green energy companies. When I responded by arguing that the government also subsidizes the oil industry the older man at the desk turned to the man I was talking to, smiled and said, "Look, she's been drinking the liberal kool-aid," and then asked me if I knew anything about how the oil industry gets subsidized.

At first I laughed out loud, realizing that it was true that I was using points I'd heard other liberal people make when criticizing the right and that I didn't really know what I was talking about beyond the most superficial level. But when he continued to talk about me as if I everything I had said was predictable sound-bytes I felt both offended and dismayed: I hated being written off. I asked the younger man if he too thought I sounded like I was just repeating the lines he expected to hear from liberals. He shrugged his shoulders and sort of agreed. I pushed back, saying that I was trying my best to be as sincere and un-jargon-y as possible and that everywhere else in the country I had always been able to find some common ground and learn something from these conversations across difference. It seemed to open up the conversation again, but I felt how charged with conflict the atmosphere was in this state and it made me wary.

He agreed that business shouldn't exploit their workers to make a profit and that it is government's job to regulate industries so that they don't become monopolies. He believed however that with additional regulation government quickly starts to kill the vitality of capitalism, which to him corresponds with the strength and freedom of the United States. He talked a lot about the importance of the incentives that capitalism provides for people to innovate and work hard. I agreed that incentives for individual effort are important but said I was concerned with how there are always losers in a capitalist competitive economy, and how capitalism seems to lead to a society of greater and greater wealth disparity with power concentrating in the hands of the wealthy. He responded by saying to me with visible anger, "You want to keep people down." He assumed I meant that I wanted everyone to be middle class, and to him that meant a society where there was no reward for people's personal effort or creativity – and that would be a society where he wouldn't want to live. Honestly, in that moment the vision of an economically equalized society looked to me like a country of trust fund kids, and I know I would not be my best self under those conditions.

continued



I said I wish I could envision a system that had both incentives to excel and mechanisms to lift people up out of poverty and into power. He replied that he considered American capitalism to be that system, and that we need to think about the effectiveness of political systems over the long term, over generations. As evidence he stated that our poor are less poor than the poor of the past, or the poor of other countries. While I disagree in some important ways about contemporary poverty being easier than the poverty of the past, it still was striking to me that actually we both saw the goal of our ideal political system to be providing the opportunity for empowerment to ordinary people.

I asked both him and the older man if they had any left-leaning friends, and the old man smiled slyly and said all his kids had turned out to be Democrats. The younger guy said almost everyone in his life was conservative, but at a political convention he had gotten to be really good friends with someone in the Democratic party. They would call each other up to check about what the other guy's take was on different issues. They would give each other the floor to say whatever they thought and just listen – then swap. It wasn't about arguing, just about trying to understand.¹

This was one of the hardest conversations for me personally, because of that moment of being perceived as an unthinking agent of the other side's propaganda. But it is so delicate to talk about these issues without perceiving each other as oversimplified examples of what we have already decided is the problem. It really sucks to be categorized and dismissed that easily. ♦

HOW DO WE DECIDE WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE WELL?

Artspace New Haven | June 2012

I was invited to live in a non-profit gallery called Artspace in downtown New Haven, Connecticut and talk with conservative people in this predominantly Democratic city. I began asking around for where I could find some conservative conversationalists. One of the gallery staff helped me by inviting her boyfriend, a Yale senior and member the student political debate societies, to come meet me in my makeshift “campaign office” in the exhibition space.

He had been very involved with the political culture at Yale and recounted the solid history of conservative intellectuals who have studied and taught at Yale throughout this last century. He grew up in a deeply conservative family in the Midwest. Recently, one of his four cousins had become a Democrat because of her feelings about health care issues and her belief that people in difficult circumstances should have support



accessing health care. I asked if his family talks about these subjects or if it just passes unspoken. He emphatically replied that in his home everything gets argued and debated. He has one brother who has become a Ron Paul supporter and noted how intense the family discussions have been around that difference of opinions. He says that while he supports many Libertarian stances he calls himself a conservative instead because it communicates his political ethos more accurately, since the term conservative conveys an emphasis on traditions and morals. He explained that being Libertarian is about how to organize a government, but being conservative implies also a way to live well – and a particular vision of how to do that, which includes family, Judeo-Christian traditions and moral certainty.

He said that through being involved in the extracurricular political culture at his school he had been able to clarify his own political beliefs, which has included returning to being a practicing Christian. I asked him what had compelled him to turn to religion.

He said that through political discussion he had noticed that his own metaphysical systems of belief presupposed a god. He then realized that to be Christian did not require a felt presence of god. Returning to Christianity he believes gives him “a leg up” through the conscious inheritance of its long intellectual history and practical traditions.

He sees it as important to acknowledge that in everything we do, we are “standing on the shoulders of giants,” meaning that the people who have come before us make what we do possible, and they too have thought through many of the same quandaries we wrestle with in the present. He says the most important political question is, “How do I live rightly?” (He acknowledged his use of word play in how he phrased the question.) He considers the political structure of a country to be a way to create a context in which the most people possible can have their own responses to that question. He perceives the Left's way of answering questions about how we make a life worth living to be based on the existentialist path: reject any pre-established meaning to life and attempt to start all over again from scratch based on one's own intuitions. I thought that seemed fairly accurate to me, and proposed that maybe this is because it is important for people who are liberal to live a life according to their own conscience instead of always in relation to some historical precedent, whether that be religious or legal codes, or simply cultural conventions. He rebutted me by saying that from the Right's perspective, “we know that our conscience doesn't come into the world fully formed, but instead is constructed through the context of people being products of traditions. The very sensibilities that give us our intuitions about how to act come from centuries of thought.” I totally agreed, but was also a bit confused



since his argument about our individual intuitions being the product of shared cultural traditions is an argument that I use myself to advocate for a more collective vision of identity, which is a Leftist model of personhood.

I tried to ask him more about this, describing the divide I have noticed between a sociological understanding of identity held by people on the Left⁵ – which for instance makes us see poverty and crime as functions of the conditions of society – and an individualistic understanding of identity on the Right – which sees crime as being the personal responsibility of the perpetrator. He responded by saying that he would hope that, when pressed, people on the Right would acknowledge the importance of the community as an entity, but said that in each decision we get to either reaffirm or reject the larger narrative of the community and insisted that the bottom line is fundamentally personal choice. ♦

DO LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES SHARE THE SAME BASIC HUMAN VALUES? OR NOT?

Chapel Street New Haven | June 2012

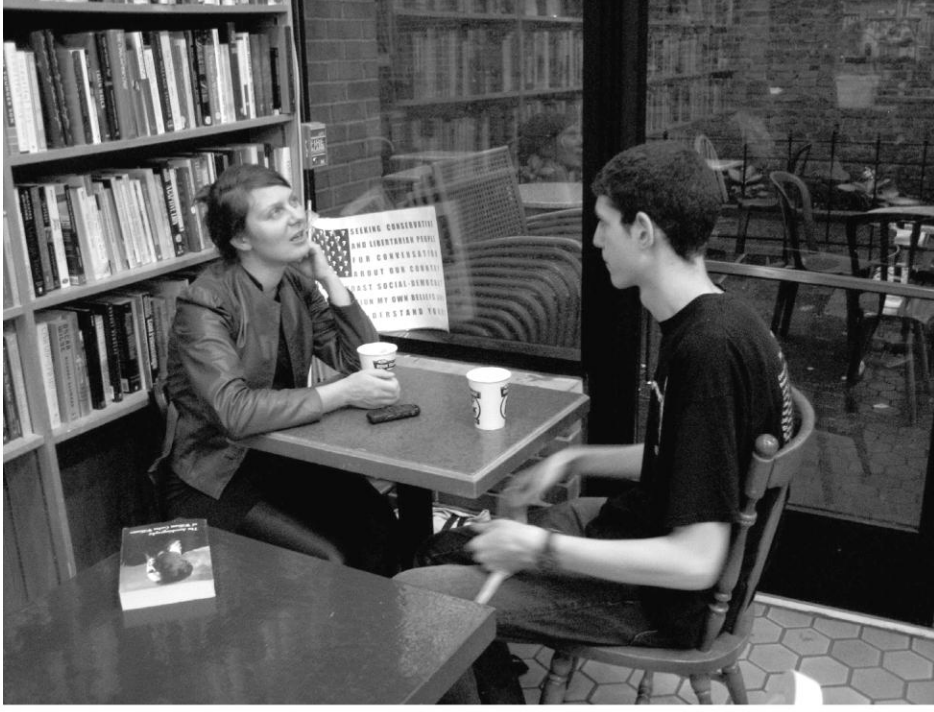
I contacted some of the people involved with the more right-leaning debate societies within the Yale Political Union and got pretty strong interest in response. Unfortunately, most of these students had left town for the summer. Luckily, some people were still around. One young man who just completed his freshman year and was still in the area because of his summer job kindly agreed to meet me after he got off work.

He is a 4th generation Jewish New Jerseyan and says he plans to move back after school, joking that he hopes to carry on the tradition by marrying a Jersey girl with roots as deep as his family's. He was gracious and modest and thanked me for the opportunity to talk about political ideas, as if it were a food group he was missing on his summer diet. He described his family's political position as being “huge” to the left, vocal and articulate. Since he has started to think along more conservative political lines he has taken to arguing with them all at once when he goes home for holidays. He says he usually loses the debates – because they are smart and older than him – but he enjoys the challenge.

In high school he started reading about economics. He thinks that this was probably what started shifting his political beliefs to the right. He is now majoring in economics and mathematics and hopes to do tax policy for his life's work.

His grandparents gave him stock in Johnson & Johnson as a present when he was born, and have continued the gifts as an ongoing birthday tradition. Throughout his upbringing they brought him to the annual stockholders meetings, which gave him a sense of how possible it is for the shareholders of a company to affect how the company operates. He told me about having a group of nuns at the meetings year after year pressing for the company to give more to charities and how he saw the influence these women's voices actually had. This for him showed that everyday individuals, and not just the rich and powerful, can affect the way companies do business. He considers this evidence that corporations are more responsive to people than government agencies.

I asked him “why do we keep dividing as a society along the same left/right fault lines, between a vision of society based on the individual⁶ and a vision based on the collective?” He began saying that he thought the differences between the right and the left are fundamental, but then admitted he isn't totally sure about that. He said sometimes he wakes up in the morning and thinks the left and the right are different kinds of people with different values. But this morning – and he admits most mornings



– he wakes up and thinks that the left and the right share the same values, they just make different calculations about how to best approach those values. The values he stated as mattering to everyone regardless of politics were: the ability of individuals to control a substantial portion of their lives, and the desire to avoid poverty, discrimination and oppression. He considers the basic calculation tools we use to achieve these fundamental values to be different according to your political allegiance, with optimism being held up by people on the left, and by the people on right, caution. He thinks the Right is right about the premise that free markets work better than governments in almost all cases in terms of efficiency, although he came right out and admitted they don't necessarily work the best in term of fairness of results. He thinks the Left is overly optimistic about the government's ability to act as efficiently, equitably and non-corruptly as they hope. Another premise of the Right that he thinks is important is that good results should not be arrived at by force, which is why wealth redistribution ends up being a bad idea, even if you want to help people in poverty, because it means the governments role is to forcibly take from one group of people to benefit another.

We went back and forth discussing the pros and cons of privatizing social security. He advocated for the premise that people should be able to choose to invest with companies instead of the government, since companies are more accountable than government agencies, which have a complete monopoly and therefore are neither responsive or efficient. I tried my best to advocate for public social safety nets based on the idea that they make sure companies do not attempt to make a profit off of the basic needs of people, and that an entity that is accountable to the interests of all citizens is the very definition of the common good. We didn't resolve this subject and I felt like I need to learn more out how social security actually works.⁷

In the upcoming election there is only one issue that matters to him, which is the long term financial solvency of the United States. He says that this issue shouldn't be a something that belongs only to the political right because it is not a question of values, it is a question of math: we need to take in more money than we spend and that social security and medicare are mathematically flawed in the long term. I questioned him on how, from the Left's perspective, it often seems that cries for balanced budgets are public opinion ruses used by the right to eliminate social services and cultural support: an insincere means to achieve other political goals. He responded by saying that if Obama were to propose a budget that included raising taxes and balancing the budget he would vote for him. He cares about having a long term balanced budget; whether that comes from raising taxes, cutting spending or a combination of both matters deeply to him, but is irrelevant in comparison to just getting it done. He thinks the best way to achieve this would be by coming up with an economic plan that would move us toward balancing the budget over the next twenty years, but he recognizes the way that government changes every couple of years means that future congresses could undo even the best laid economic policies. ♦

IS DEMOCRACY JUST A WAY TO GET PEOPLE TO BELIEVE THEY DESERVE TO BE RULED BY THE POWERFUL?

York Street New Haven | June 2012

Word got around to Yale students that I was looking for Conservative people to talk politics with me. On a warm, damp night I trekked across town after a delicious and charming dinner at the infamous Sally's Apizza to meet a member of Yale's Party of the Right. He seemed a little suspicious of my motives at first, maybe in part because he had only heard of what I was doing second or third hand. I asked him what it meant to him to be a conservative. He said it came down to having a belief in the individual rather than what he described as a fictitious notion of the collective⁶. I was surprised that he laid this statement on the table right away – and told him so – because it has come to be the way I also describe the fundamental difference between the way people on the Left and people on the Right, only I align myself with the collective. Somehow my acknowledgment that I agreed with him seemed to only increase the argumentative tenor of the conversation, instead of creating any feeling of common ground.

I asked him about his background and he told me that he is the son of a Yale Architecture professor and he majors in Philosophy with an emphasis on Continental Philosophy. His family is Liberal, in keeping with the majority of the Yale community. When I asked him about what factors had lead him to align his personal beliefs with the Right he said that growing up he was exposed to too many stupid liberal people and that had inspired him to move in the other political direction. He said everybody at Yale is so arrogant, they haven't ever really suffered. I wasn't quite sure what had motivated him to say this and wondered if there was some background story that I had no idea about. I asked him if that statement also applied to him and he replied, "yes, I've pretty much got everything I've wanted so far in life."

Then he made a statement that really stood out to me, by saying, "Democracy is a sham." He explained that what he meant was that power is not really in the hands

of the population, nor does he think it should be. He doesn't believe that the general population is smart enough to be trusted with the responsibility to govern the country. Instead he thinks that faith in Democracy is actually a mechanism to have citizens consent to being governed by the people with real power through making them believe that they have some say in Democratic governance.⁷

He told me about how he had worked for a charity in New Haven that provides healthcare services to people who fall into the difficult midzone where they aren't rich enough to buy adequate health insurance but they aren't poor enough to receive government assistance. He said charities can do a better job taking care of people than governments and asked why people continue to expect the government to take care of them when it doesn't do a good job. He said he thinks that liberals grow up believing that government is good and is going to take care of them. I disagreed saying that I think many liberal people grow up feeling that the government is "The Man,"



even though at the same time as we recognize it is an essential institution that can do some important things that no other institutional entity can do.

He has recently become interested in what he sees as the real way that power operates, which is behind the scenes, through relationships and backroom conversations. I agreed with him that politics and power often function informally through personal persuasion, networks of influence, and raw charisma, but luckily that is not the only way things get done. He started talking about the internal politics of Yale student organizations and I decided to take my leave. It was notable to me how little interest or respect he seemed to have about the world beyond the sphere of Yale, which to me supports an argument for a Democracy where all citizens have a political mechanism to advocate for their own interests. If one group, no matter how educated or intelligent, were to be in charge they would likely be unable to even perceive the crucial concerns that matters to people who do not share their conditions of life. ♦

WHO DESERVES TO VOTE?

Woodbridge CT | June 2012

An Artspace volunteer stopped by to see the group of us living in the gallery, and happened to mention that his dad was conservative. I asked him whether his dad might be willing to talk with me, and he said he would ask. After a couple of days, a few emails and some phone calls we had made a plan for me to meet in Woodbridge, a small town just outside of New Haven where he lived with his wife on her parent's property.

When I arrived he invited me to sit on their spacious covered porch, and offered me soda. I asked him about how he feels about the current state of our Democracy and sipped my drink. He responded that he doesn't like the term democracy very much, and that "to the best of his understanding the US was meant to be a Representative Republic, and not a democracy." In my mind Representative Republic has a bad ring because it invokes the discouraging history of our leaders fearing the general American population can't be trusted to govern themselves, and believing that instead the wealthy should be tasked with governing on our behalf. In response to me expressing my worries about an elite governing class, he said that from his research there was never meant to be a cap on how many representatives made up our government. This would mean that as the population grew there would be more representatives, maintaining a direct relationship between each local population group and their representative, and providing a clear path for the range of American's interests to be well considered by the government. He contrasted this to an image of Democracy as a tyranny of the majority, ruled by a potentially uniformed and irrational mob, where individuals and minority groups are disregarded because of their lack of voting block.

In an attempt to counter this and show how important it is for all citizens to directly advocate for their own interests, I brought up the ugly history of how voting, and therefore full citizenship, used to be limited to landowners. His response surprised me when he said he thought elections should still should function that way. He explained that people without property have nothing to lose when they vote for more taxes from propertied people to fund services for themselves, so they continue to vote for more and more benefits without consideration of the consequences. I said that I found the idea of basing voting rights on owning land particularly hard to swallow since the cost of buying a home has gone up so much in my lifetime, and has become simply an impossible dream for many people who work and would want to be homeowners. He said that these unattainable prices are in large part because of the increased building regulations that have forced housing costs up.

I agreed that we have an awful lot of regulations these days, and that some of them seem ridiculous, but that all those rules are put in place to try to prevent mistakes and swindles that have happened in the past. In his opinion the government trying to solve problems through more and more regulations makes a bad economic environment for business and people. He explained that instead of forcing everyone bear the weight of endless layers of regulation, in a libertarian model of society, if one person built a faulty building they would be made to pay through the legal system – and they would be shamed from persisting in those bad practices through public opinion spread by the media. I noted that this libertarian model of making people pay for the harm they have caused on an individual basis doesn't have any mechanism for prevention – things have to go wrong and then you can sue for compensation, but you can't try to put anything in place to avoid people making that kind of mistake again.

continued



He told me that historically the church has taken care of disadvantaged people, and not the government. He volunteered that he admits the church has fallen down on this responsibility and in their absence the government has stepped in, but it does a bad job being the caregiver.

We started talking about religion and the role of the church in society. He said with calm modesty that when he tries to be as reasonable as possible he thinks intelligent design makes more sense than the idea that the Universe assembled itself through purely random means. This was the first time in my life where I have had a direct conversation with someone across the creationism/evolution divide, and it felt vulnerable and potent. He brought up examples that he saw as evidence of divine design, such as the uniqueness of each person's finger print, and I brought up examples that I thought showed how no consciousness is needed to create order and beauty, such as the patterns that waves carve into the sandy shore. But he saw my examples as more evidence of God's presence in the background, and I saw his examples as being equally plausible through complex natural systems. After a while he asked me with dismay what I saw as the purpose of my life, if it is just the result of random processes. I replied that I was comfortable not having any fixed purpose and that I thought it was meaningful enough to try understanding my life as one example of the history of people trying to make sense of living in relation to other people and the course of human civilization. I appreciated that he was willing to ask me such fundamental questions. ◆

WILL YOU LEAVE ME ALONE?

Wall Street New Haven | June 2012

At an informal political discussion group that happens every morning in a coffee shop down the street from where I was staying I met a man who is nominally a Republican, but seemed to express all my liberal stances on current events. He gave me the contact info for his friend who is the chairman of the local Republican chapter, who also agreed to talk with me. We met on a rainy afternoon and he told me about what it means to him to be a Republican in this overwhelmingly Democratic city. He described himself as moderate and a little right of center, but he feels committed to the Republican party, in part as a resistance the growing extremism that he sees happening in national politics. He said that he considers listening to be an important skill that is dearly lacking in the political sphere. He came from a family that encouraged their kids to be politically active, but didn't talk about being liberal or conservative. He doesn't know how his parents voted but he knows they did – and they encouraged their children to take voting seriously.

He became involved in politics by being a small business owner and having a stake in how the city was managed. At first he got assigned to a political committee that was responsible for the local dog pound but he now heads the committee that takes care of the downtown area in hopes of making a more hospitable environment for small business customers. One of the political moments that solidified his commitment to the Republican party was when one of Connecticut's Democratic Congresswomen – a woman who was very pro-choice even though she was also Catholic – made a big deal out of supporting the defense of marriage act because gay marriage was against her faith. He found that hypocrisy aggravating, and is generally frustrated about how much hypocrisy he sees in politics. He believe less intrusive government is better government. He thinks someone should introduce a simple piece of legislation that says the federal government will recognize any legal union between two people that has been recognized by State law, and that if people want to protect the institution of marriage they should make stricter divorce laws. He gets frustrated with his own party trying to make decisions about people's personal lives, which includes most of the social conservative positions. He said, "The conservative thing to do is to leave people alone."

He sees a growing shift in union members towards the Republican party because those people see that the government prioritizes the economic interests of public union employees over private unions. He says there is a real difference between the trade unions where people get paid more as they gain more skills, versus a clerk in a government office who gets regular raises but offers no increased labor value as the years go by, just costs the taxpayers more.

He is disappointed in Obama for not taking a personal stand clearly stating what kind of healthcare reform he wanted to see. Instead Obama evoked the general idea of change but then left it up to congressional committees to decide what that would look like. He would like to see political leaders take a stand for what they believe instead of making vague statements and then deferring responsibility to other people so that they can avoid blame.



He would like to see transparency in all campaign funding and thinks it is fine for people or corporations to advocate for their preferred issues with money but thinks it should all be out on the table.

So many of the issues that mattered to him and his political and ethical reasoning matched what I would personally want from a political candidate. And yet I could see how he was coming from classically conservative perspective to arrive at similar conclusions as I arrive at with my lefty assumptions. ◆

ARE REGULATIONS PREVENTATIVE MEASURES, OR SOLUTIONS LOOKING FOR PROBLEMS?

NE Portland OR | September 2012

On an early September morning I met with a self described dapper chap, who was also one of Multnomah County's delegates to the Oregon State Republican Convention in 2011. There, he had made national political waves by successfully leading a coalition to strike all anti-gay statements from the Oregon Republican Platform. He arrived to meet me with his mustache waxed upwards, his cap pulled down and a big scab over his eyebrow from a bicycle accident he'd had after his recent performance in a burlesque review.

I asked him why he chose to work to eliminate anti-gay policies from the Oregon GOP's platform. His response indicated that he considered it was both the right thing to do, and a strong strategic act to move his party – which prides itself on being against government intrusion into people's lives – toward walking their own talk. In reference to the people in his party who are attached to anti-gay political policies he said, "They can go ahead and furrow their brow at whatever they find distasteful, but they should not be legislating against this kind of thing as Conservatives."

He is the kind of person who talks about American history with the familiarity that most people have with only their own life story. For him being a Republican is about upholding what he sees as the long, proud party tradition of supporting equal right under the law using limited government. I told him it was confusing to me that he saw the Republican Party as an agent of equality. He replied by reminding me that the Republican Party's origins was as organized political opposition to slavery and that they voted more solidly in favor of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 than Democrats. He also pointed out that the Republican Party brought us the first female Hispanic Governor, the first Black Governor and the first woman in Congress. He acknowledged that there are more people of minority groups in the Democratic ranks but was proud that his party had been the political mechanism through which minority politicians had first been able to rise to power and noted that the current Republican party has many prominent minority members in elected office. From having these conversations I am beginning to understand how the idea of equality before the law looks more fair to some conservatives than affirmative action laws, which legislate a form of positive inequality in an effort to overcome historic disadvantages.

He grew up in California with a mixed Mexican-American family and had considered himself to be a progressive Democrat. But since moving to Portland and living within the forest of left leaning people and policies he has swung away towards the Republican party and become very politically active. His temperament also seems to lean a bit toward the contrarian, but in a gracious and good natured way. And while in his cultural life as a performer he has many lefty friends and associates, his profession thrives in a civic landscape with room for wildness and carving one's own way. He sees Portland's well intentioned Democratic governance as being disappointingly invested in piling on more burdensome laws and and costs. I asked him about this recurrently sore issue for conservatives: the burden of excessive regulations. I agreed that rules and regulations can make things cumbersome, bureaucratic and expensive but I also wondered aloud, "Isn't the reason we have these laws because we've seen something go wrong in the past and we learned that we want to avoid having that happen over and over again?" He responded by saying, "Not so, sometimes regulations are just 'solutions looking for a problem'." He explained a recent scenario in Portland where the laws for fire-dancing were changed it ways that were unnecessary and almost completely prohibitive of these characteristically Portland performances.

His story was a convincing counter argument to my generalized defense of regulation, but thinking back on it I wish I'd asked him whether he thinks the same way about environmental regulations. To me there are some problems that we need to try to regulate against before irreparable damage is done, since there is just too much at risk. I know whatever he would to say about this issue would be worth considering and give me new questions to ponder. ◆

HOW CAN WE FIND A BRIDGE BETWEEN OUR BELIEFS?

Downtown Medford | October 2012

I was invited to come down to Southern Oregon University to speak about this project and open my tent in Ashland and Medford. The trip coincided with the first presidential debate, and the morning after that discouraging event I set up with some of my questioning political lawn sign in the plaza in downtown Medford. The people walking by gave me weird looks and asked me what I was trying to do – whose side I was trying to persuade them towards. It was strangely satisfying to have people not immediately know how to categorize my political position and try to puzzle it out. I explained that I wasn't trying to convince anyone of anything, that I instead wanted to hear what they had to say. A man stopped to talk who described himself as fairly conservative, but open minded. He mentioned right off the bat that he didn't care much about the gay marriage issue and I assumed that meant he fell within the fiscally conservative and socially libertarian camp of conservatism – where people pride themselves on trying to keep politics out of people's private lives. He told me he had been in Berkeley in the 1960s and that he took part in the student protests, but that afterwards he had noticed how none of the protesters wanted to clean up the ruckus they had made. He felt that everybody just wanted the excitement and the glory of their righteousness, not the mess they had taken part in making. His sense that the protesters weren't doing their own dirty work, and were letting it fall on others pushed him towards becoming more conservative.

He continued on, saying that he didn't believe in being forced to give to others, by which he meant government assistance is a way of forcing people, through tax code, to give to their fellow citizens whether they want to or not. He said he thought people should only give through love, when they feel in their heart they want to. I said that sounded good to me, but what about giving out of a sense of duty to what is good for the greater group of us as Americans in the long run? He said sure, but he didn't think redistribution of wealth was good for us. We went back and forth for awhile on this and other issues and it started to feel more and more like we were both re-hashing the common stances of our respected political allegiances. At some point he asked me whether I believed in evil and told me that if I didn't I was a relativist. He followed that up by saying that according to relativist logic there could be no line drawn between gay people consummating the love in their hearts with marriage and people who wanted to marry their brother, or their animal. I tried to respond by saying that it was clearly different and that there is a biological basis for being gay, that it isn't just a choice, but he said, "There you go with that liberal gay agenda logic." I was confused. I noticed my heart was rushing. I said to him, "It feels as if we are just hearing each other as examples of the media spin about people on the other side." I tried to pull us back from that predictable dance a couple of times and find more substance, but we just kept sounding clichéd to each other and it got too frustrating.

Afterwards I thought about how many times during this project I've felt that reason has let me down, either because I lacked a good enough grip on it, or because it didn't matter whether I had it or not. Often I cannot construct a convincing enough argument for my point of view to get through to someone who doesn't believe what I do. Partially this is just my personal lack: I am not actually that great at rhetoric, at saying my opinion in a persuasive way, nor am I a policy person with all of the political facts to back me up. But most of us are not rhetoricians and policy wonks, and the problems are more basic than that. Do we even know what we believe and why we believe it? And if we do, how clearly can we say it? And if we can speak it, will it be in language that someone who doesn't share our beliefs can hear? And are they even really listening to us, or more to something they have already heard?



This past summer me and my good friend recorded ourselves trying to explain why we are pro-choice, and while we obviously believe and respect our own explanations, listening to that recording I could hear how both my logic and my wording were not entirely solid. Articulating what we believe in our own way – and knowing why we believe what we do – is not so straightforward as it sounds.

The hope is that the clear expression of reasoned perspectives can function as a bridge between different people's points of view, but that is rarely how we relate, or what forms ties between us in normal life. Is it even realistic to expect ourselves to reason out the beliefs that we hold in ourselves as felt forces?

Still, for however little this man and me got through to each other, I respect some of his points, like what he said about the importance of cleaning up after protests. I am all for taking responsibility for the boring work as well as the exciting stuff. And I agree with the feeling that we should be helping people out of love and not out of governmental compulsion. But I don't think that the real inequities of American society can be dealt with on a personal level, I think they need institutional change. ◆

WHAT IS THE GOAL IN THE END?

Beverly MA | October 2012

I was invited to bring myself and my tent to the symposium on art as activism at Montserrat College in Massachusetts, where the Guerrilla Girls were the headlining speakers. I set up in the mostly empty town commons and waited for people. Some of the other attendees at the conference came by to talk with me, but none of them were conservative at all, as can be expected in art focused groups.

After a bit, a local guy came by on his bmx bike and asked me what I was doing. When I explained my deal he said he had just come from the Republican campaign headquarters where he had been volunteering and offered to help me talk with those people. I asked him about his own political beliefs. He said he was a Conservative because liberals don't get anything done, they just throw money at things instead of actually getting up and doing anything themselves. He had grown up with a Liberal mom and a Conservative dad who had lived in different households. He told me how the school buildings in the area are all in such a state of decay that they were a degrading environment for learning. He was dismayed that the state's Democrats kept giving money to the schools to try to fix them up even though the funds just kept disappearing without any results. He said, "Why can't someone just do something to actually fix them?" Another issue he said he was concerned with was homelessness. He implied, in a story he told about traveling out to California, that there had been times when he may have lived on the streets. He thought he could help solve homelessness, and at the same time improve city litter problems by making a 5 cent return on losing lottery tickets – like bottle deposits. He knew the margins for how many winning lottery tickets go unclaimed and said the cost for the returns would barely eat into all that money.

While we were talking another group of people from the symposium showed up, including the two Guerrilla Girls – without their masks on. I attempted to facilitate a conversation between that group, myself and the guy on the bike by restating some of the issues he had shared with me. One of the Girls quickly and forcefully questioned him, and when he was unable to come up with any response to defend himself, he rode away. After he left the other Girl noticed aloud on how they had shut the conversation down instead of taking the opportunity to hear out or speak with the guy. I agreed that it was more interesting - and maybe more important - to try and understand the way he viewed political issues than to point out how his beliefs sounded illogical.⁸

Throughout this project people have often asked me how I can have these conversations without having them turn into fights. I think it comes down to considering why I am trying to talk with someone. Is it to check whether what I think is true? Is it to determine if the other person is part of my team or not? Is it to try to persuade someone to my opinion and form a stronger coalition for making political change? Is it to test and sharpen my thoughts in the arena of somebody else's mind? Is it to see a new view from the different vantage point of another person's perspective? Is it to cultivate the strange, fragile material of relationship between myself and someone else? Even in really brief interactions with strangers it takes some focus on the relationship taking place between us to make the conversation work, although there are usually many other motivations in play at the same time. One of the main forces that drives me is a curiosity about how other people make sense of things: what are the assumptions, arguments and allegiances that hold together their beliefs. Considering this gives me a sense of who we are in relation to each other even though it rarely resolves any disagreements. ◆

END NOTES

1. Disagreement is actually an interesting starting point for a conversation. It really gives you something tangible to talk about.

2. The people who we talk with regularly, and take the time to listen to, shape and reinforce what we believe. Even though there may be few places or situations in our daily lives where we could open up conversations about how we fundamentally disagree with someone, taking those opportunities makes it harder to write other people off.

3. While we were driving around Texas we ended up hearing Michael Savage, a conservative radio talk-show host, dishing out the argument that Democrats had caused the financial crash by trying to make housing loans available to everyone regardless of whether they were poor, or had bad credit. The argument goes that the Democrats pushed for two changes to mortgage laws that then precipitated the housing collapse. The first of these legal moves was to stop banks from "red-lining" certain neighborhoods as higher risk for loan default, and the second move was to get rid of the requirement that borrowers need proof of sufficient income to cover their future mortgage payments. This was exactly what the pastor in Beverly Hills had told me, and it was also reiterated by the fast talking businessman I spoke to later in Lubbock, TX. It was useful to me to hear a media source propagating this explanation, because it was so faithfully repeated, point by point, by people all over the place, driving home how much the media sources we choose affects how we talk and think about what is happening in our country. Almost everyday someone in my life starts talking by saying, "So, I heard on NPR..."

4. Our brains work in such a way that we automatically try to fit new information into the ideas that we already know. This phenomena is called confirmation bias and people are studying how we can try to resist it. Because of confirmation bias, it is hard to even hear, let alone consider, evidence that doesn't match our current understandings. A book came out while I was on my tour that addresses political confirmation bias called *The Righteous Mind* by Jonathan Haidt.

5. A lot of us don't care much for politics. Politics can seem boring, irrelevant, corrupt, disappointing and persnickety. On average in the US only 50% of people vote – more of us are divided between voters and nonvoters than between conservatives and liberals. Honestly, it isn't politics that interests me the most, it is more how we are shaped and limited by our allegiances and our beliefs, and how even opposing beliefs position us in relation to each other; if just as enemies. But enemies who recognize and respect the tension between us as holding us together and making us who we are.

6. During the course of this project I became really aware of how those of us on the Left use sociological explanations for behavior; and we tend to see identity as being collective, whereas people on the Right see behavior and identity in individualistic terms. This distinction makes me so curious: why does a whole mode of understanding seem to correspond to political stances? The risk of sociological explanations is that they can be deterministic and minimize each person's ability to affect change in their life and the world. The risk of purely individual explanations is that they don't acknowledge how deeply contingent we each are on our circumstances and each other.

7. I deliberately approached this project without any special political expertise, since most Americans are not experts in these matters, and it is with this limited knowledge that we play our role in deciding how we will be governed. But at times on these tours I have wondered whether democracy is really a form of self governance when most of us are only barely informed about the actual substance or implications of our political decisions. If we know we are under-informed, that we tend to be persuaded by the opinions of those around us, and that the media does not provide us with an unbiased source of factual information how, can we believe that we are upholding the responsibility of governing ourselves? Walter Lippman and John Dewey famously debated these questions in the beginning of the 20th century. I think both sides of their argument are worth considering still.

8. Here are my instructions if you decide you want to something like this. I find someone I disagree with, take an interest in thinking about how they think, ask about their life, how they grew up and what experiences changed their beliefs, listen for differences between how they understand something and how I do, ask about what actually makes me curious or confused, and hold off on considering whether or not they are right. Sometimes it is very boring or feels like it is not working, but that is part of it. Once I have noticed the differences between my way of understanding and theirs I describe them as plainly as I can.

**HOW MUCH DOES WHO YOU
TALK
WITH SHAPE WHAT YOU
BELIEVE?**