

MHCC

Escaping the echo chamber – reflections on an extended conversation

Paul Gioia, November, 2018

Earlier this year I caught up with some dear friends I hadn't seen in decades. They were an important part of my church and home group, and it was lovely to reminisce about old times, and hear our life journeys since we parted all those years ago. But as the night went on, it became apparent that at least one of us wasn't quite the same person that left our shores.

Exercise: on a board, divide into two: left wing and right wing: write down on- or two-word descriptions of what those terms mean to you

To understand this, I need to say something about our church at the time. Henderson Memorial was a pain in the arse for the Presbyterian State assembly; we were a thorn in the side of a male-dominated and conservative leadership. Under Graham Chipp's teaching women shared in leadership, and we attracted young people keen to hear about God's option for the poor, about social justice, about the here-now-but-not-yet of the Kingdom of God.

With the exception of the older members, who graciously put up with us, you could have predicted, to a person, how we voted. We chose parties whose policies most aligned with our values. I remember one Sunday, after what must have been a long and impassioned prayer, Graham sidled up to me and said "Paul, that sounded like a political broadcast for the Labor Party!" I haven't really changed. I still see leftist parties as best aligning with Jesus' teaching. And I suspect I'm not alone here today.

Forward to January this year, I'm sipping chardonnay with my friend Scott, catching up on twenty years of births, deaths and marriages. And I'm hearing little push-backs on a range of different fronts. At first, I thought I wasn't hearing correctly, but the more I probed, the more it became apparent we weren't on the same page.

A few days later, at the pub, we'd both had a few Kilkennys, and were enjoying that lovely glow you get. Scott was clearly the person I remembered and loved from his time here in Perth. We picked up where we left off, and shared joys and sorrows, and how it felt being a stranger in a strange world. What was also clear was that his world view had undergone a dramatic upheaval, that I can only describe as going from left wing to "some other wing". What could have possibly happened that so shifted his world view to one that I had major problems with?

There wasn't enough time left to explore this further, and by then the Kilkenny and completely taken over my rational thinking processes. But Scott's journey intrigued me, and I wasn't willing to leave it there. And so we started a conversation that we have continued over the course of the year; email after email, thread after thread.

The answer Scott gave wasn't what I expected. There was no one cataclysmic event, rather a series of vignettes that gradually challenged his received truths about politics and social organisation. As Scott has shared with me, so I've had challenged some of my fundamental assumptions and prejudices that I was only barely aware of.

One of the first things I learnt was that chatting with a philosopher is not like other conversations. Philosophers take no prisoners. Words are important. Behind each word lies a meaning. In my case I assumed that meaning was shared. I was wrong. With deftness and gentleness, Scott left me feeling many times like Jon Snow. I. Know. Nothing.

It was during the Gore-Bush Florida recount in the presidential election of 2000 that Scott seriously questioned the information and analysis he was getting from media outlets. He said, "...I couldn't find a journalist who even knew the right questions to ask. Their cluelessness about USA politics was staggering."

You'd think, at this early point in our conversation, I'd have asked some open questions, like "tell me more". But no. I was on the front foot, rabbiting on about ABC bias, and how that was all bollocks. Looking back, I never actually considered the question of whether the ABC was stacked with left-leaning journalists (perhaps because I liked it that way).

In fact, I was convinced that visiting conservative or right-wing sites was unlikely to change my mind. The arrogance! Scott had every right to jump on me, but he didn't. Fortunately, he persisted, and what gradually unfolded was his questioning of the way stories are recounted through the press, and how bias is a major issue that prevents from coming to informed understanding. Our echo chamber – our choice of who we listen to - dramatically affects how we make sense of things.

And so we fell into a rhythm. I tried asking shorter, open-ended questions, tried to understand the answer, rather springing onto my soapbox. We covered a lot of ground: climate, the oil crisis, poverty, free speech, big government. In many cases, the knowledge available to understand these big issues is inadequate, and therefore our predictions can be way off (remember the peak oil scare?).

Probably the single most contentious topic we've discussed is climate change. Scott views much of the debate as group-think – research funding granted to projects that support "in" thinking, while neglecting the "out" thinking that challenges assumptions, or model reliability, or ecosystem resilience, or the precautionary principle. I've really struggled with this. I just don't buy it. Having worked in a science-based organisation for nearly four decades, and knowing the scientists and the publication process, I find it inconceivable that they would avoid the hard questions, or be biased by career opportunities, either deliberately or subconsciously. Scott believes there is a subtle but demonstrable bias in which research is conducted.

This is a tough issue. There's a lot at stake. If we are right about predicted effects of climate change, our children will inherit a different earth to the one we've enjoyed, and we did nothing about it when we could have. On the other hand, if the models are inaccurate, and the earth happily rolls along with the punches, we could be imposing a lot of unnecessary change and anxiety, and diminishing the credibility of science.

So the need for a civil, sustained conversation is absolutely essential, so that we make the right decisions. The current conversation is anything but civil. Climate advocates dismiss those who don't accept anthropogenic climate change as idiots; they're tired and impatient of explaining again and again what is self-evident. The term "denialist", which my friends use often, has "belief" overtones - you either believe in climate change, or you don't. Sites like the Climate Council or Climate Sceptics contain talking points for winning arguments, not having conversations. On the other hand, anti-science trolls and Christian evangelicals dismiss the science, absolutely convinced there is a global conspiracy amongst scientists, that it's all a big con and an affront to God. (Knowing how disorganised and competitive scientists are, I find the notion of a global conspiracy laughable.)

But it's worse than that. Most of us lack the skills to evaluate the science. Climate science is complex and technical. We have to rely on experts. But which experts? Who do you trust? The scientists funded by renewable energy foundations, or the ones by oil companies?

Scott and I went back and forth, back and forth. Every argument I put that climate change was real and caused by us came back with a rebuttal “yeah, but we don’t actually know what will happen. We don’t really know the extremities of the change, and we don’t really know the resilience of ecosystems”. At some point I became exhausted. Not by the conversation, but by the existential dilemma it presented: how are we meant to live and act in the face of inadequate or equivocal knowledge? Reacting for the sake of doing something can do more damage than good. There can be a very high cost to the precautionary principle.

This was a bit of turning point for me. It was no longer about whether I was right, and Scott was wrong: it was about acting responsibly and appropriately in the face inadequate knowledge, which is what our conversation turned to.

We rarely have, or we underestimate, the knowledge needed to address problems. Even if that knowledge exists, there is no one person who knows it all. What’s more, local circumstances can confound how knowledge is applied.

The idea that you can design a solution to every problem by throwing more money at it flies in the face of experience. And yet, isn’t that our typical response? Policy designed from afar that wastes millions of dollars, all because we have to do something! The expectations society places on politicians, that politicians place on public servants, creating more and more regulations that either don’t work or make things worse. Think about the government intervention in response to sexual abuse within northern aboriginal communities. How well has that worked?

Wait. What have we just been talking about? Unnecessary regulation, the size of government, and – hang on – aren’t these the things right-wingers bang on about? Logical, rational arguments for challenging the size and function of government. Who’d have thought.

I’m not saying there is no role for government. What I’m pondering is that we might be looking in the wrong place to solve our problems. As life becomes more complex and uncertain, expecting governments to manage complexity and provide certainty may be wishful thinking. Lefties do have a tendency to place more and more responsibility on the collective, at the expense of the individual. Thinking outside my tribe has given me the opportunity to evaluate whether this is always the best strategy.

There is so much more Scott and I went on to talk about: the marketplace, collectivism versus individualism, government safety nets, wealth accumulation, taxation, government versus private education, public versus private health insurance, and gun control in the US (with someone who was actually born and raised in the US).

Looking back, I’m staggered at how much ground we’ve covered. We’ve had much more in common than I expected. Despite the contentious issues, we’ve been able discuss without rancour or name-calling, with civility and patience, even when parochial blinkers or cultural assumptions were at play (i.e me). We’ve remarked, on more than one occasion, how rare this kind of conversation is this.

Why is that? Why are there so few sustained conversations between those who believe collectivism is the best strategy and those who advocate for individualism. Where are the sensible people to point out that it’s not either-or, but both-and? Extending that to my faith community – where are the sustained discussions between those who see the Bible as holy writ, and those who see Jesus as the word and the Bible as a compilation of human experience? Here are some suggestions as to why:

1. Surrounding myself with my tribe is easier. It validates my world-view. It is exhausting to be challenged on a belief or view that I gain value or joy from. Unfortunately, this easily leads to group-think, and dismissing ideas purely by association with a particular wing, be it left or right, fundamentalist or liberal.
2. If I'm brutally honest, I treat views and ideas outside my tribe as deficient in some way. I don't always consider there might be someone as clever as me who just landed in a different place.
3. We have lost the capacity to discuss issues civilly and are therefore afraid to have discussion at all. Public conversation on FaceBook are pointless - too many of my friends are hotheads. I only have private conversations now - friendship is far more important to me than agreement on social or political issues. Even then, the conversation peters out quickly.

Hopefully, by now, you've got my point that while tribes are safe, in the long run they can give a warped view of the world, whether your tribe is determined by politics, religion or whatever. Closed tribes can become echo chambers, where the same ideas get bounced around, reinforcing their strength to the point we wind up congratulating ourselves. The fact is, our tribe is a choice we've made, based on our knowledge and experience. No one person or tribe has all the knowledge. We can debate whose tribe is best 'til the cows come home. It's all good.

There's one exception I want to make, particularly within the context of politically based tribes; it's worth spending a little time here, so we can develop productive conversations. At the extreme end of what we call right wing in this country, is a group of views centred around race and minorities that come under the banner of alt-right, or extreme right, views that many of us would find repugnant.

Alt-right is currently a global phenomenon, but it's been there forever. This may be a controversial, but for me, right-wing politics is too often tainted with the faint whiff of racism and intolerance, in a way the left is not. This current government smells to high heaven of it.

This is all very unfortunate. Right-wing does not, and should not, mean racism, and I'm sure the Liberal and National Party voters in this church would be highly offended at the idea that it was. Left-wingers need to get off their self-righteous high horse – they don't have a monopoly on the high ground. Lots of Labor Party voters drifted to One Nation. Why alt-right ideas have nestled in conservative politics is a conversation in its own right, but it's important we tease things apart so that we don't inadvertently pigeon-hole people.

Framing a debate just in terms of racism is often simplistic and unhelpful.

Firstly, calling someone racist when they don't see themselves as racist just backs them into a defensive corner. You're not actually achieving anything.

Secondly, the place where racism arises from is nuanced. White males in Western industrialised countries have been displaced from their jobs over the last twenty or thirty years, from improvements in automation and technology as much as competition from cheap overseas labour. Car factories in Michigan and Elizabeth lie dead and disused. The companies invariably survive while the workers lose out. Who's to blame? Well, it's so much easier to blame those outside our tribe – the refugees, the Muslims, the foreigners. That blame has been aided and abetted by successive governments (and thank you Clare for pointing out that in Western Australia successive Labor governments targeted racial minorities over employment, so not just a conservative behaviour), but not always, who regularly blow opportunistic dog whistles to capitalise on fear and uncertainty, for the sake of power.

Perhaps a more nuanced interpretation of the racism is that it's an expression of at least two powerful emotions: grief, and fear. Grief over the loss of once-held power, while still feeling entitled to that power. And fear of where this will all end.

This is true not only for those angry white males, but also for white Christians. We have to share our space with other minorities. By all means advocate for the world we want, but if we don't want democracy to descend to mob rule that is intolerant of minorities, we have to let go of our sense of entitlement.

If we can see and attend to the underlying emotions of grief and fear, perhaps we'll come up with better strategies for addressing racial intolerance. And religious intolerance for that matter.

So, what does all this mean for us here at MHCC fellowship? How do we deal with the effects of the echo chamber? How do we cultivate civil conversations that last long enough to get to the real issues? I suggest the following:

- Well, to quote Scott, "by getting out more": How often do we go to other churches? How often do we strike up conversations with people we disagree with? Do we know anyone we disagree with? What media do we subscribe to? What papers do we read? What friends do we filter out on FaceBook?
- When we do strike up those conversations, what do they look like? Do we try to hear the fear, the grief, the loneliness, the genuine grievance at social inequity? This applies as much to religion as politics. I believe fear and grief are the core of many of the stronger statements made by religious leaders. Grief at having lost their once powerful influence in society, and fear that in a changing society they not be able to live according to their beliefs. Recent conversations with conservative friends about free speech actually resulted in changing my mind.
- Recognise that within our own fellowship, there are several many tribes, including right-wingers, liberal party voters, national party voters, liberals, evangelicals and fundies. We should be respectful of all the tribes that people have landed in. After all, we might be wrong!
- If we do need to call out ideas, address the idea, not the person. Make sure our criticisms aren't just knee-jerk name-calling. Make sure we avoid typecasting particular countries or races. It is not cool to bag Americans. That's their job.

And here is the thing: it is possible to do all this while still being true to ourselves. Yes, listening to those we disagree with is hard, because authentic listening means hearing what they're saying, not just preparing a response. That means letting down our guard, and inviting the possibility we might be wrong, or that we might learn something. If those views don't line up with our moral or ethical framework, we have every right call those views out, in love. If we believe those views will bring danger or harm to the earth and its people, we should advocate strongly against those views. That's what democracy is about. It's not about the largest mob ruling over all the other mobs, it's a letting all the mobs live together without killing each other.

However, if we stay hidden in our tribes, we will never develop the relationships we need to have honest conversations. It's only through honest, safe conversations that people will be in a position to face reality and make the hard decisions. Let me encourage us all to step out from our safe tribes, and get to know those on the other side. I believe that's what Jesus did.