

You should talk about politics this Thanksgiving—here's why, and how

November 24 2016, by Stacy Branham

After one of the most divisive presidential elections in American history, many of us may be anxious about dinner-table dialogue with family and friends this Thanksgiving. There is no denying that the way we communicate about politics has fundamentally changed with the proliferation of technology and social media. [Twitter bots](#), [fake news](#) and [echo chambers](#) are just a few of the highlights from this election season. Much of how we're conversing online can't – and shouldn't – be replicated around the family table. We are getting out of practice at conducting meaningful, respectful conversation.

There's not a quick fix. We need more [empathic communication](#) – the slow, deep (inter)personal discourse that can nurture identity and build and strengthen relationships. Yet contemporary [communication](#) platforms [can make it harder](#) to build empathy with conversational partners. Even the phrase "conversational partners" seems unfitting in the world of 140-character limits, followers, likes and shares. In many ways, our devices help us talk at (@?) instead of with one another.

Literally meaning "in-feeling," [empathy](#) is a process of internalizing another person's perspective. Empathy-building is unselfish; you suspend your own sensibilities and try to fully imagine and embrace those of someone else. You can gain empathy by learning about other cultures from different media, by experiencing what others have gone through personally, or by having deep conversations with others.

My research into cross-cultural communications has taught me that

empathy is not only the key to feeling connected – "I understand you" – but also the foundation for [changing our narratives](#) about one another – "now I see we are not so different." That's an important point to remember after such a difficult political experience. Building empathy requires communication, specifically talking to one another. But, not just any talking will suffice – especially not the type of talking promoted by today's highly popular communication technologies.

American disconnection

Americans are [more digitally connected](#), yet [less interpersonally connected, than ever](#).

For an increasing number of us, feeling connected – to family or otherwise – is becoming more difficult. A [review of empathy research](#) from the past 30 years revealed that college-age Americans were less able to imagine others' perspectives and feel sympathy for their plight. The trend has been accelerating since 2000. At the same time, the number of [Americans who report](#) that there is no one with whom they discuss important matters nearly tripled, to roughly 25 percent of the population, between 1985 and 2005.

Technology may be part of the problem, making it harder for us to build and maintain strong relationships. It may be breeding increasing individualism, self-importance, loneliness, depression. The theories behind this link vary. In "[Generation Me](#)," psychologist Jean Twenge argues that cellphone ownership – once a luxury for the elite – promotes illusions of grandeur. In "[The Lonely American](#)," two psychiatry professors suggest that communication technology encourages us to remain physically isolated by providing remote connectivity. In "[Alone Together](#)," social scientist Sherry Turkle offers that we are drawn to our devices more than to those in our presence. In "[The App Generation](#)," information scholars Howard Gardner and Katie Davis claim that

communication apps promote transactional rather than intimate exchanges.

Words matter

Talking is more than just exchanging information. Substantial personal communication [can build empathy](#). Therapist Peggy Penn's research has explored [the power of language](#) to connect family members in this way.

When you talk, or even write, you reflect on your own position. But, more importantly, you also reflect on the position of your audience: What is she currently thinking? How does my story fit into her experience? How might she respond? This is what Penn (referring back to philosopher [Mikhail Bakhtin](#)) calls "double-voiced" communication; it's relational. Moreover, when you talk and write, you are crafting a narrative, even if a short one. Sometimes, you can surprise yourself when the words come out, gaining new insight into the meaning of your life and hers. In this way, talking can deeply change people, building and shaping mutual identities.

Yet, our written interactions through technology are [increasingly short, with less sophisticated language](#) or no language at all (think: Instagram). More and more, our thoughts are broadcast to everyone instead of intended for someone special. Back-and-forth exchanges [can be difficult](#) to engage in or follow. All of these may be playing into the tendency on social media to [consume others' content](#) but not to directly communicate with friends one on one. The "double-voiced" communication that spurs empathy is short-circuited.

How to achieve empathy

We can improve our communication with each other, both face to face

and via technology, if we focus on building empathy in the following ways:

— Get personal. Make sure you are communicating in a private or semi-private space with one or a few dedicated others. This environment encourages self-disclosure and intimacy toward [relationship-building](#). That's different from seeking to impress others or be validated by them, as is often the case with [social media](#) postings. Further, in small groups or in one-on-one conversation, it becomes possible to imagine each others' individual perspective. When your communication is focused on or intended for another person, it can [catalyze empathic connection](#) because you have to imagine and capture the other person in your text.

— Write it down. Talking is great, but writing encourages more deliberate wording. Consider writing your thoughts out before you bring them up in conversation at the table. Or, if your face-to-face conversation did not go so well, consider writing a letter after the fact to better communicate your intentions. Personal writing is a form of [self-reflection](#) and narrative crafting. Simply writing your thoughts out can change them. This is why therapists sometimes recommend [journaling or writing letters](#) to your conversational partner as an intervention that encourages both partners to realign their perspectives.

— Take your time. Whether you are engaged in a face-to-face dialogue or communicating through Skype or email, investing time into the conversation is important. The more time you spend in conversation, the more time you spend getting to know each other and the more able you are to share complex thoughts, relatable stories, or convincing arguments. From a linguistic perspective, without back-and-forth dialogue there is simply no opportunity to negotiate meaning and come to [mutual understanding](#). For relationship therapists, without [ongoing discourse](#), there is no way to try out new narratives, change your mind and theirs, and reconnect empathically.

When we have an opportunity to spend time with people who matter to us, we should embrace it, seeking to understand them and to present ourselves openly, to be understood as well. When we are apart, technology can be used to connect us. But, the types of technology we use and the ways we choose to use them really matter. When you're at the dinner table this Thanksgiving, and especially when you go back home, keep [empathy](#) and the perspectives of others in mind.

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