

2021 Issue 2 | Free

# SPARK

The magazine of Humanities Washington.

## Re:building Democracy

*A special issue on the  
state of democracy, voting,  
and our civic health.*

humanities  
WASHINGTON |  $\frac{h}{w}$





*Spark* is a publication of nonprofit Humanities Washington, our state's affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Online and at community venues across Washington, we hold hundreds of free events each year where scholars, authors, artists, and activists discuss everything from Washington State history to current social issues.

Published twice per year, *Spark* is a free magazine based on those conversations. It's available at cultural organizations throughout the state, or you can have *Spark* delivered for free to your door by signing up at [humanities.org](http://humanities.org).

*Spark* is dedicated to publishing a variety of perspectives. Opinions expressed are those of the author and may not reflect the viewpoints of Humanities Washington's staff, board, funders, or partners.

EDITOR:

David Haldeman

LAYOUT & DESIGN:

Tarsha Rockowitz

COPYEDITOR:

George Abeyta

More stories online at [humanities.org/blog](http://humanities.org/blog)

Find a free event at [humanities.org](http://humanities.org)

FOLLOW US ONLINE:



Cover art by Pamela Howell.

---

---

# INSIDE

---

---

## SACRED CIVICS

*by Eric Liu* ..... 6-9

## UNCOUNTED

*a Panel Discussion* ..... 10-12

## SCHOOL BONDS

*by Johann N. Neem*..... 13-15

## THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

*by Rena Priest* ..... 16-17

## THE BIGGEST SOURCE OF MISINFORMATION IS US

*by David Haldeman* ..... 18-22

## THE ART OF ARGUING

*by David E. Smith* ..... 23-25

## UP FOR DEBATE

*by Mellina White*..... 26-28

## NEWS

*from Humanities Washington* ..... 28-29

## HUMANITIES WASHINGTON

*Staff & Programs* ..... 30-31

On Election Day 2008, I stood with Anne on Fremont Avenue in Seattle, waving signs supporting then-candidate Barack Obama. It was a marathon of a day that began at 8:00 a.m., with last-minute canvassing and sign waving straight through until the evening. But Anne, a longtime friend, was up for it.

We had been friends for nearly a decade at that point, but gradually the spaces between our conversations, texts, and emails grew longer. She moved from Seattle to a town near the Canadian border. Then in January 2017, she posted to Facebook that she had voted for Donald Trump. Surprised, I arranged to meet with her to ask about her political evolution. At a bar in Marysville, I did my best to listen rather than argue. The conversation was friendly, and while I still struggled to grasp why her views had changed so significantly, we left on good terms.

Though I approached that initial meeting with the intention simply to understand her opinions, my anger grew as time went on and I thought about some of the arguments she'd made. For years afterward, especially after some major news event, I wrote emails to her in my head: perfect slam-dunk arguments, or withering insults, or masterful shaming. I knew sending them would be petty, but

the catharsis was tempting. When the insurrection at the United States Capitol occurred, I decided I'd finally do it. I opened an email to her and began to type, but then slammed my laptop shut again.

On March 16, a friend texted and told me that Anne had died. At 44 years old, she had succumbed to cancer a few days earlier, leaving behind a husband and a three-year-old daughter.

The battle with cancer had been long—two years. Anne had become such an avatar of the other side, a stand-in for everything I felt was wrong about the country, that instead of checking in about her life, I had only thought about the searing emails I could send her. I had no idea she had a new daughter. No idea she had cancer. More than a decade of shared experiences and personal conversations were forgotten. For me, Anne's opinions had replaced Anne the person.

To be part of a democracy requires two profoundly hard and often conflicting tasks: to be passionate and knowledgeable about your country's problems, yet still listen to, care for, and respect people whose opinions and actions you think are making your country worse. "Seeing each other's humanity" can feel like a flowery proclamation, but on a personal level it's vital

---

to healthy relationships. On a political level, it can be the only thing standing between a functional society and profound suffering and violence.

We are in a period where these hard tasks are of particular importance—a period of turmoil, polarization, reckoning, and uncertainty. Public confidence in democracy is at the lowest point on record in the United States, according to a 2020 report from the University of Cambridge. It's times like these that make us more likely to view other people as cartoonish avatars of things we don't like.

So this issue of Spark is Humanities Washington's attempt to understand some of the forces that led us here, and how we might move forward. It's part of a larger series we held this winter called Re:building Democracy, consisting of live events and radio shows presented in partnership with Spokane Public Radio, Northwest Public Broadcasting, and KUOW Public Radio, produced with the support of the Mellon Foundation and the Federation of State Humanities Councils. In these pages, you'll hear about disinformation and voter suppression, forces pushing against civics education, tips for having better conversations about important topics, and much more. I was working on this magazine when I found out Anne passed away and was struck by how

many of the topics in this issue intersected with the story of our friendship.

For a couple of weeks after we met in Marysville, we emailed a few times about our points of contention. I revisited them after Anne died. Although I hadn't seen her emails for four years, I remembered them as unhinged. They weren't. I disagreed with their arguments, but their reasonableness surprised me. In the intervening years, I had made Anne into a cartoon.

After one particularly long email rant I'd sent, full of carefully sourced links and laboriously made points, Anne wrote back: "I don't really have the heart to hash out politics today, but will respond when my feistiness comes back."

It was the last thing she ever said to me. It didn't have to be.

—*David Haldeman, Editor, Spark*

# SACRED CIVICS

---

*It helps us find meaning, community, and shared purpose—should we approach our civic life more like religion?*

By **Eric Liu**



▲ Photo by Elias Castillo/Unsplash.

**H**umans are wired to seek belief and belonging. For billions of people, religion takes the form of church or mosque or temple. In 2016, our team at Citizen University launched Civic Saturdays, a regular gathering where people connect to explore how to live as powerful, responsible citizens: that is, how to practice American civic religion.

I've been asked from time to time why we talk about Civic Saturdays as a civic analogue to a faith gathering. Why do we speak of civic religion when some people are uncomfortable with any kind of religion? And what do we mean by that term, exactly?



Civic religion is the set of beliefs, texts, practices, rituals, and responsibilities that shape our ideal of civic life—that is, our best lives as citizens, as political actors and authors of our community and country. It is not religion as God-centered worship. It is about our secular creed, deeds, and rituals of citizenship. It is the creed of values and norms stated at the founding of this nation and restated whenever our fragile republican experiment has teetered toward failure (as it does now). It is the record of deeds that have fitfully and unevenly brought those values to life. It is the rituals that memorialize those deeds and that make the deeds repeatable across the generations.

That creed starts with the Declaration and the Constitution, but it extends in every direction and dimension that evolution and inclusion have taken it. The proverbs of Poor Richard's Almanac. The psalms of Walt Whitman. The parables of Zora Neale Hurston and the lamentations of Nina Simone. The homilies of George Bailey.

American civic religion is every time we march for justice. Every time we sing for justice. Every time we lie down in a die-in at city hall to protest the death of our homeless neighbors. Every time we stand up at a town meeting with our member of Congress to show them who's boss. Every time we pick ourselves up after

we lose an election or a policy fight. Every time we reclaim our agency and rediscover our power through acts of widening the circle. And every time we recall those acts in a catechism of historical reckoning.

I call this civic religion rather than just simple citizenship because our entire American experiment is an audacious statement of civic spirit and a continuous act of civic faith. We are nothing but promises on parchment and a willingness to keep things going. After their fateful actions, activists like John Lewis and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Gordon Hirabayashi and Edith Windsor had no idea what would happen next, just as the signers of the original Declaration had no idea when they pledged their lives, their fortunes, their sacred honor. They each took leaps of faith.

Many who leapt were felled. Many who leapt were lynched. Many who leapt were deported. All who leapt, leapt not alone, but with others.

Not just with thoughts and prayers but with lawyers and organizers. And in none of their cases was that faith redeemed in a clean, immediate way. And still we leap. It takes years, sometimes decades, and we fight and lose and win and then fight again.

We also believe that it's necessary in the face of such unending uncertainty to provide a ritual structure for belief in the possibility of democracy.

Why do we deliberately echo the elements of a faith gathering? Because that language, those forms, these rituals and habits all resonate on a deep level. We believe at Citizen University that all people yearn for the fellowship of neighbors and strangers. Isolation breeds despotism, as Tocqueville knew. When the soul of our country is threatened by hate, we invoke love. We kindle a connection to common purpose and a bigger story of us.

In these darkest of days, in a time when politics is so fiercely polarized, when traditional religion fuels so much fundamentalist fanaticism, we want to appreciate anew the simple miracle of democratic citizenship. Look at the world. Self-government is a miracle.

This stuff matters not simply because it answers a universal and timeless yearning for shared purpose. It matters here because it locates us atomized, amnesiac Americans in the broad scheme

“

*We have too much righteous certainty now, too little understanding. There are no infallible original meanings and no inerrant interpretations. There are only broken, irrational, half-blind humans.*

”

of history and in a larger weave of morality. It matters because the norms and institutions of democracy are being corroded from within and without.

A healthy American civic religion challenges us to live up to our creed, to reckon with the tensions and the hypocrisies, to do so with a knowledge of universal truths and the universality of human dignity, to be inclusive of every kind of person who is willing to abide by those truths and precepts, yet to maintain a sense of uncertainty about how best to do that. As Lincoln said in his Second Inaugural, “with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right.”

So how do we practice it so that its effects are truly beneficial? First, believe in tension. American civic life is a set of built-in tensions, of perpetual arguments that cannot and must not be resolved. Liberty and equality are in tension. Effective national government and strong local control are in tension. Pluribus and Unum, diversity and unity, are in tension. So are rights and responsibilities. Inhabit the tension. Know how to argue both sides. Know that elements of both are always necessary. Know that better arguments can bring us together.

Second, believe in doubt. Lincoln’s phrase, “as God gives us to see the right,” is a statement of humility, echoed half a century

later by Judge Learned Hand, who spoke of the spirit of liberty as “a spirit that is not too sure that it is right,” that seeks to understand the minds of others. We have too much righteous certainty now, too little understanding. There are no infallible original meanings and no inerrant interpretations. There are only broken, irrational, half-blind humans. The Founders are proof. And they asked not for the idolatry of future generations but for our skeptical commitment.

Third, believe in gradations. Fundamentalism, whether of the left or right, is the greatest threat to American civic life today. Dismissing people as insufficiently woke or as fake conservatives—purging for purity—is both a cause and an effect of our contemporary tribalism. The writer Anand Giridharadas puts it powerfully: “Is there space among the woke for the still-waking?” We’ve got to make room. Otherwise, we silence and alienate too many bystanders. We stop too many journeys of mind-changing before they can start. And the only beneficiaries of that are Trumpian authoritarians, who depend on moral flattening, on this obliteration of a citizen’s capacity to discern shades of gray.

Fourth, believe in coalition. The last national election and the special Senate elections in Georgia showed that a “coalition of the decent” is emerging. It cuts across race and region and party. When democracy is threatened by illiberal bigots at home and abroad, ideological litmus tests become secondary. Coalition is a necessity.

Fifth and finally, believe in justice for all using methods from all. That means nurturing a spirit of mutuality and interdependence. It means combining your civic power with that of others to change the systems and structures of law and policy so that more people can flourish and thrive.

I am not a practicing Christian. I am not a practicing Jew. I am not a practicing Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu. I am not a practicing atheist either. I am a practicing citizen of the United States. I know my own mind. I know what part I have inherited from being Chinese, what part

I have inherited from being American, and what part I have inherited from being Chinese American. I know what I believe and why. I know how to put those beliefs into action. And I know how to amend those beliefs and actions, as the evidence of my eyes and yours gives me to see the right.

All of us can do this, if we take seriously the opening words of the Constitution. And all of us must.

*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*

We do it together. Our Union is imperfect. Justice comes first. We do it for posterity. Imagine a society that operated on these principles. Imagine a country that lived by these ideals. We have the power to make such a miracle happen. It just takes practice.



Eric Liu is the co-founder and CEO of Citizen University. He also directs the Aspen Institute’s Citizenship & American Identity Program, and is a regular contributor to *The Atlantic*. He is the author of several books, including *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*; *The Gardens of Democracy* (co-authored with Nick Hanauer); *You’re More Powerful Than You Think: A Citizen’s Guide to Making Change Happen*; and his most recent, *Become America: Civic Sermons on Love, Responsibility, and Democracy*.



This article ©2019 by Eric Liu. Excerpted from *Become America* by permission of Sasquatch Books.



# UNCOUNTED

*This year, 361 bills have been introduced  
in 47 states that would restrict voting.  
Why can't we simply ensure that every  
vote—and every voter—counts?*

▲ Photo by Element 5 Digital/Unsplash.

American democracy is often spoken of in lofty language, but between the lines is a troubling story of exclusion and discrimination. Voter suppression has taken many forms, including limiting eligibility to white male landowners, Jim Crow-era methods like poll taxes and literacy tests, and modern-day disinformation campaigns.

The conspiracy theory about a stolen election in 2020 is proving useful to bolster support for another round of restrictions. Legislators have introduced 361 bills to restrict voting in 47 states as of late March—108 more than the 253 restrictive bills counted in mid-February of this year. That's a 43 percent increase in little more than a month, according to the Brennan Center for Justice.

In March, Humanities Washington held an online discussion that explored the forces that push and pull on our right to vote. The panel featured **Angelique M. Davis**, an associate professor of political science and African and African American studies at

Seattle University, whose recent work has focused on how we can make invisible racism visible; **Representative Debra Lekanoff** (Tlingit name Xix chi' See), 40th Legislative District and currently the only Native American serving in the Washington State Legislature; **Josué Estrada**, University of Washington doctoral candidate in history whose research focuses on the issues Latino people face in the United States, including voter suppression and the challenge of political mobilization; and **Terry Anne Scott**, director of African American studies at Hood College who focuses social violence, lynching, social movements, and the intersection of race and sports. The panel was moderated by **Johann N. Neem**, professor of history at Western Washington University.

The following excerpts, edited for length and clarity, are only a small part of a much more expansive conversation. Check out the whole conversation on Humanities Washington's YouTube channel.

### On the myth of widespread voter fraud:

**Angelique Davis:** There was a study in 2012 by political scientists at Stanford and the University of Wisconsin that concluded the proportion of the population who would impersonate someone at the polls is indistinguishable from the number of people reporting abduction by extraterrestrials. So this [voter fraud myth] is really absurd if you look at the studies that consistently show what a lie, what a fraud it is. People are choosing to believe a lie.

**Terry Anne Scott:** I think much of that psychology is white privilege and white entitlement. There's a notion that white entitlement should govern politics and who can vote. Which is why [voter suppression] laws are so clearly racist, and why it was so easy for the last administration to turn large numbers of people against entire cities like Atlanta and Detroit and Philadelphia. Because of this idea that these people, these brown people shouldn't have the right to determine the election. These other people should have.

The question is, how do you sell what you're trying to sell? One tactic is a sales pitch, and one that is completely false: The GOP sells this notion that there is widespread voter fraud. That fraud is unproven—out of three million votes they'll find one case. But we know what the subtext is, and the subtext is what all of us are getting: [the aim is to] limit, restrict, or remove the power of Black and brown people.

**Josué Estrada:** This reminds me of a Daniel Martinez HoSang book called *Racial Propositions*. He writes about racial liberalism and the language that is used to put forth these laws. These propositions don't use race at all, they use this language: "equality," "liberty," "protection of voting rights." Then every day, ordinary people look at these laws and think, "Oh yeah this is good for our voting process." And they vote for that proposition. But the intent, the underlying message, is to deny, to exclude.

### On new voter laws being applied "equally:"

**Josué Estrada:** The idea of color blindness is within these laws to suppress the vote. English literacy tests were one of those laws—they were supposedly administered fairly, equitably, but we know that in the South, they were absolutely used to limit and restrict Black people from accessing the ballot.

I've been doing a lot of research on the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It is significant legislation. I'll just give three points. It added some teeth behind the 14th and 15th Amendments: that race couldn't be used to disenfranchise voters. It suspended literacy tests. It also prohibited new laws from coming into place without a preclearance measure. And then it also allowed federal examiners to go into the South and make sure elections were fair. Now the debate leading into the Voting Rights Act is fascinating, because in the South you have these states that are saying, "No, our tests are fair, our tests are equitable." But in the northern states, those states that have literacy tests in place, they're saying, "Well, you all in the South are using race to discriminate against voters. We in the North, no, we don't have an issue. We administer fairly, equitably," when that was absolutely not the case.

**Terry Anne Scott:** The point you're making about not having Southern exceptionalism is really important. Because historically and today it's very easy for people to look and say, "Well of course that happened in the former Confederacy. That's what happened down there." And we have to understand that those kinds of tactics, as you pointed out, existed in other spaces. Those tactics required sanctioning from the federal government to exist. There were a series of court cases that went before the Supreme Court, like in 1898 *Williams vs. Mississippi*, that said, "Oh, it's okay. You can continue to have a literacy test and a poll tax and all of these kinds of things." And so, this is a national problem. This is not just a Southern problem.

**Rep. Debra Lekanoff:** You're right, Terry, it's not just an issue in the South. You talk about the First Americans and Native Americans. This is our country. This is where our blood, our roots, our names are—this is our people. When the US ratified its constitution in 1788, it wasn't until 136 years after that that Native Americans could vote. When Black Americans won citizenship through the 14th Amendment in 1868, the government specifically said that that law did not apply to Native Americans. We would have to fight up until the '60s. And Utah was the last state in 1962 to allow Native Americans to vote.

### On voter suppression efforts in Washington State:

**Josué Estrada:** In Washington State there was actually a law that said Indians who weren't taxed could not vote here in Washington State. And literacy tests were adopted here in our state in 1896. [They were mainly] targeted at Chinese people—there was a strong anti-Chinese segment here in Washington

State—but there were also used to disenfranchise a number of Indigenous people, who, according to the state literacy test, were unable to read English or speak English. And when that law was written off the books in 1970, the Yakima Herald published an article of a Native woman from Yakima registering for the first time to vote. It was a very powerful image.

#### On how to fight voter suppression efforts:

**Terry Anne Scott:** Listening to all of the things we are all talking about can be very discouraging and disillusioning. One of the things that we have to remember is to fight against that. History has also demonstrated that while there are these historical parallels in the types of tactics and ideologies and motivations for voter suppression, we also know that they've been fought. Things like the 1965 Voting Rights Act were brought about because of foot soldiers who got up every day, put one foot in front of the other, and said, "We're not going to allow this." We have to remember that progress has been made, that new moral paradigms have been established.

And there's a culture that you can create in your communities, in your family and in your neighborhood, when you understand that voting is your power. One of the things that I'm not above doing—I do it all the time with my own children, who are twins who are 18, first time voters in the fall, as well as with my students—is that I tell them people have died for you to have the right to vote. So you owe it to others to make sure to take that precious gift and to use it properly.

**Josué Estrada:** It's so crucial for local governments to create a culture where voting is encouraged by everybody. In 1968, the Mexican-American Federation sued Yakima county to eliminate its English literacy test. One person that was part of that court case was Jennie Marin. She was a US citizen. Her son was in the Navy. She wanted to vote for Democratic presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey, and the city clerk there denied her the right to vote; ripped her registration card and threw it in the garbage. She was upset and mad because even after that English literacy test was wiped out, she had to go and pay her water bill and still meet that same person there. It's so important that these local governments create a change in those communities that encourage bringing Latinos, bringing Native American people, bringing African American people and encourage them to participate in electoral politics.

**Rep. Debra Lekanoff:** There's great hope in Washington State. We have incredible people who are serving all of you every day. We're seeing laws that we've never seen before. I've heard voices on the People's floor and values and cultures that weren't there 20 years ago. Don't be afraid to stand up. Look for the change. Identify the change and find your place. Your voice matters. You matter. Get out and recognize and help others to vote. If you have a strong heart and spirit on a certain particular topic, get out and share your voice. Because that's what being an American is about. I'm your First American saying welcome to my America. Uplift and get the vote out, remove those barriers, advocate, be strong.

A little bit of hope to leave you guys with: we have redistricting coming up. It is an enormous decision to be made for the state of Washington. Our redistricting committee for the first time has a Native American woman coming out of the Yakima area, and who's the chair. It has a Native American man, who also sits on the board. It has a woman of color, April Simmons, who's sitting on the board. The redistricting was predominantly one color, one gender, up until this year. So, you have to own that hope and you have to live up to it. And you've got to remove the barriers to get out to vote. And don't forget to run for office. 



Angelique M. Davis  
Political Science Professor,  
Seattle University



Rep. Debra Lekanoff  
40th Legislative District,  
Washington



Josué Estrada  
History Doctoral Candidate,  
University of Washington



Terry Anne Scott  
Director of African American  
Studies, Hood College



▲ Children at the Raphael Weill Public School in San Francisco in 1942 recite the pledge of allegiance, 1942. Photo by Dorothea Lange/Wikimedia Commons.

## SCHOOL BONDS

---

*As an immigrant, the civic lessons and shared American culture taught in school made me feel at home. Now, forces on both the left and right are pushing back against what I learned.*

By Johann N. Neem

**I**'m an immigrant from India, and I'm an American. When I meet you on the street, I hope you see in front of you another American, just like you.

Growing up in the East Bay suburbs of San Francisco, I went to public schools with native-born and immigrant children from diverse backgrounds. In school, we learned about American history and culture. We were all introduced to American traditions and holidays. We carved pumpkins on Halloween, sang carols during the Christmas season, and exchanged Valentine's Day cards in spring. I learned that I should wear green on St. Patrick's Day or face the consequences! Public schools brought us together and made me feel part of the nation.

For an immigrant like me, being welcomed into America's common life allowed me to be at home in my new country. As we have become more divided, this common life has fractured. I don't feel at home anymore. The same is true for millions of Americans. As the Black Lives Matter protests made clear, Black Americans continue to face discrimination and structural inequality. The spread of anti-immigrant rhetoric has made many immigrants, especially nonwhite immigrants like me, fearful and anxious. Even white Americans, confronting demographic and cultural change, are uncertain about their place in the nation.

These experiences have transformed our politics. From the right, Donald Trump and his partisan allies have enabled white nationalists to come out into the open. They have deployed racist and xenophobic rhetoric to appeal to voters. The former president fomented hatred and violence, never more so than on January 6 when he encouraged his followers to invade the Capitol, a building dedicated to the sovereignty of the American people. Too many on today's right, in the words of poet Amanda Gorman, "would shatter our nation rather than share it."

There is no equivalent on today's left to the lies and violence unleashed by the former president and his defenders. Yet, in response to our country's history of racism, many on the left have embraced a constricted vision of the nation similar to Trump's. They argue that the essence of America's history and culture is "white," and thus we must reject much of who we are. We see this in, for example, the San Francisco school board's recent decision—which, for now, is on hold—to remove the names of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln from their buildings, as if Washington and Lincoln speak only to white Americans rather than to all Americans.

If we can't share Washington and Lincoln, it's hard to see how we're going to find a way to share America. We can recognize Washington's contributions to our country's founding while acknowledging that he participated in and benefited from racial slavery. We can also recognize the Black activists and their allies who made the country Washington helped establish more democratic and just, often in the face of violent resistance. As Americans, this is all part of *our* past, and thus part of all of us.

If there is one institution that we depend upon to bring us together, it is the public schools. The civic function of schooling can be divided into two goals. The first is what we traditionally think of as civic education: ensuring that all young people are provided the knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities to be effective participants in our democracy. Washington State's recent requirement that all high school students take a stand-alone civics course is a welcome contribution to this aspect of civic education.

The second civic function of schooling is about socializing young people into the life of our nation—its ideals, culture, and rituals—and encouraging patriotism. In a diverse country like ours, students must learn to live with and respect people different from themselves, but it is essential that students also learn to see beyond their differences to their common Americanness.

Today, it's not clear that we are able to, or even want to, see beyond our differences. It is as if we have become so diverse that we have convinced ourselves that we cannot be a people. Many on the right, especially conservative Christians, want to opt out of public schools that they believe no longer represent their values. On the left, many educators and activists argue that because every group has its own culture and history it's racist for schools to try to forge a common American identity.

The challenge is that democracies depend on shared culture. If we were brains in a vat, maybe we could all agree to get along, but for real human beings, governed by emotion as much as by reason, society is held together by culture, from big things like celebrating holidays or reading canonical literature, to mundane things like how we greet each other on the streets, the games we play, the shows we watch, or the food we eat. I grew up loving my mother's home-cooked Indian food. I also learned to love American food—hamburgers and hot dogs, tacos and pizza, clam chowder and chili. And how could I resist the allure of Thousand Island dressing?

It is through these shared things that we sustain ourselves as a political community. It is through culture that we can see each other as fellow Americans. That's one reason why I believe deeply that we need to revitalize the public schools' commitment to integration. It will be hard, especially in a country as polarized as ours. But it has always been hard.

We need to agree that public schools are places where we come together, not where we come apart. This means challenging segregation. Sadly, public schools are more segregated today than when I was growing up. As federal oversight of school integration waned since the early 1990s, the number of racially segregated schools increased across the nation.

According to a report by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, the rate of Black children attending white-majority schools in the South increased to 43.5% by 1988, but, following the end of court-mandated desegregation, declined to 23.2% by 2011. Despite these setbacks, the report's authors point out that, for Black students, the South remains more integrated than other parts of the country. Here in the West, the number of Latino students attending segregated schools increased dramatically since the 1960s. As a result, in America today, white students are the least likely to attend public school with children from other racial groups.

We need public policies to reverse these trends. This means rejecting the conservative effort to expand school choice and voucher programs. But that is not enough. We must also challenge school and district boundary lines that separate us racially, ethnically, and economically. We should support housing policies that encourage mixed-income and racially integrated neighborhoods.

We must also resist efforts to divide our children based on their backgrounds, whether those efforts come from the right or left. While many school choice advocates on the right argue that parents should choose schools that reflect their pre-existing family values, many educators on the left proclaim that public schools should reinforce students' pre-existing ethnic and racial identities. But what about American values and culture?

When I was growing up, my teachers took seriously the integrative function of schools. I am so grateful that they did. They respected my Indian background, but they did not treat me as a brown-skinned outsider. Instead, they were inclusive.

American history and literature in all their diversity and complexity belonged to me as much as they belonged to any native-born kid. American holidays were mine to celebrate. My teachers respected me enough to share America with me.

A segregated curriculum and segregated institutions threaten our democracy by keeping us divided. They exacerbate existing inequalities and make it harder for us to find the common ground we need to seek greater equality. I could become American in part because the public schools encouraged me to do so. I seek that American Dream at a time when many on the right and left have abandoned it. Our public schools must be able to perform their two essential civic functions: to provide an education that fosters critical thinking citizens and to socialize the next generation of Americans. They go hand in hand.

I think there are lots more Americans like me who still want to believe that our story is not finished, that a flawed but beloved nation can be made more perfect. This is not a naïve position. I know that America has relied on law, legal and extralegal violence, and even terror, to maintain its racist order, and still does. For much of the 20th century, South Asians like me were not allowed to become citizens because we were not considered white. In my current home of Bellingham, in the 1907 "Hindu" riots, white workers violently drove South Asian migrants out of town. I do not pretend that white Americans always wanted people like me in their country. They did not.

But, in 1965, in the wake of the civil rights movement's call for racial equality and justice, America opened itself up to migrants from around the world. Americans realized that any person could become American. Today, it's unclear what will become of that aspiration. 



Johann N. Neem is author of the book *Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America*. He teaches history at Western Washington University. He explored his experiences as an immigrant in today's divided America in his essay, "Unbecoming American," which appeared in the *Hedgehog Review*.

# The Forest *for the* Trees

By **Rena Priest**

Rena Priest is the 2021-2023 Washington State Poet Laureate. Priest's literary debut, *Patriarchy Blues*, was honored with the 2018 American Book Award, and her most recent work is *Sublime Subliminal*. She is a member of the Lhaq'temish (Lummi) Nation.

*I have seen a tree split in two  
from the opposing weight of its branches.  
It can survive, though its heart is exposed.  
I have seen a country do this too.*

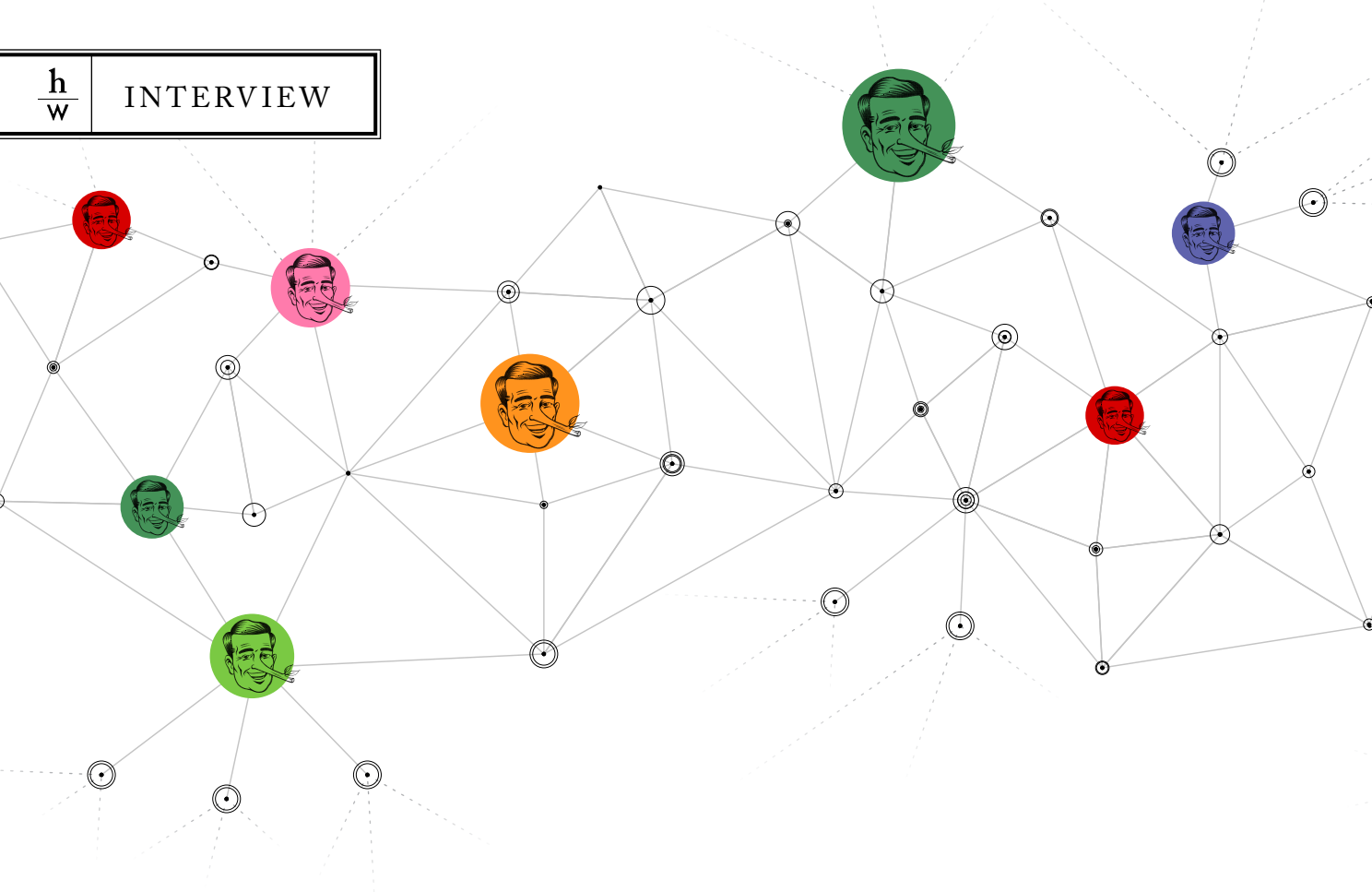
*I have heard an elder say,  
That we must be like the willow—  
bend not to break.  
I have made peace this way.*

*My neighbors clear-cut their trees,  
leaving mine defenseless. The arborist  
said they'd fall in the first strong wind.  
Together we stand. I see this now.*

*I have seen a tree grown around  
a bicycle, a street sign, and a chainsaw,  
absorbing them like ingredients  
in a great melting pot.*

*When we speak, whether or not  
we agree, the trees will turn  
the breath of our words  
from carbon dioxide, back into air—*

*give us new breath  
for new words,  
new chances to listen,  
new chances to be heard.*

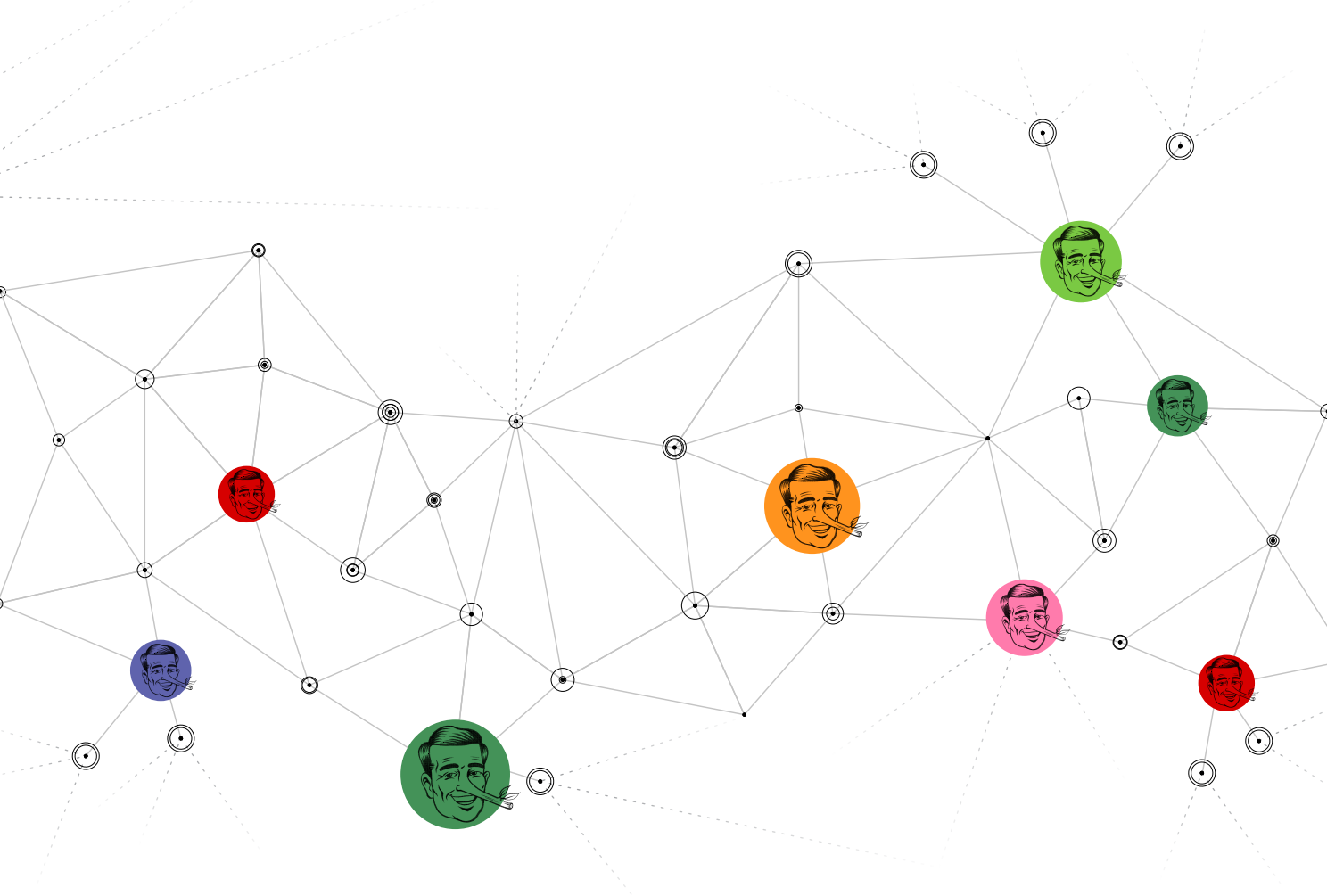


# The BIGGEST SOURCE of MISINFORMATION is US

---

*Misinformation researcher Jevin West on  
how we all contribute to its spread, and  
what that means for democracy.*

By David Haldeman



Jevin West spends his days wallowing in B.S. In fact, he, along with Carl Bergstrom, literally wrote the book on it—*Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-driven World*. The book was based on a class of the same name at the University of Washington they created that went viral a couple years ago, taking them both by surprise.

But now that surprise would be less warranted. Misinformation has gone from a minor concern in the public eye to a full-blown crisis as QAnon, vaccine skepticism, and COVID conspiracy theories seem to be gaining an unsettling amount of traction. When so many of the factors required for a peaceful, functioning democracy rely on a shared sense of reality, what happens when new technologies, bad actors, and our fallible human minds merge to the point where we can't agree on basic facts?

This interview was edited down from a much longer video interview available on Humanities Washington's YouTube channel. Other minor word edits were made for clarity.

### **Humanities Washington: Is misinformation genuinely worse now than it has been in decades, or even centuries, past?**

Jevin West: That's a great question. First of all, it's hard to measure how much misinformation is out there. We're having lots of discussions about this among researchers. If you asked me for a quick answer, I'd say I do think it is worse, but that certainly doesn't mean there wasn't misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories in times past. [We've had misinformation] since the dawn of human communication. But in the past, there were gatekeepers who could control information to a greater degree, and you could make an argument that they were able to manipulate information more—those who were in control of the information channels were the clergy or the kings and queens or whoever was in power at the time.

Now anyone can be a gatekeeper. Anyone can be an editor, a producer, and consumer of misinformation. The difference now is the speed at which information can travel, and the

ways we can scale it if we want to manipulate it. Let's say I'm a person that wants to manipulate opinion, and I want to push misinformation out. It used to require me to own a print magazine or have established a bunch of followers in a newspaper. There's an investment there—it took time to gather that audience. These days I can jump online, sign up for a new account on Twitter, and if I'm sophisticated enough, I can send out messages, gain influence using a lot of the tricks of the trade that are used in the misinformation space, and get things to go really fast.

### **What are some of the biggest sources of misinformation?**

The biggest source of misinformation is us, and a lot of times we spread it unknowingly. Certainly, if you look at a lot of the research, you find bad actors like the high school students in Bayless, Macedonia, who during the 2016 election were pushing out fake news. They didn't care whether Trump won or Clinton won, they just were getting clicks and making a ton of money! Some of them were making \$100,000 a year when the average salary in that town was \$5,000. That's 20 times the average salary just to make up the news! They had the most shared fake news story of the time, which was that the Pope endorsed Trump.

### **Which I fell for. I absolutely fell for it.**

Yeah, so many people did! There are groups and individuals [like that] that are creating fake news because there's money to be made. But there are also some people that are pushing propaganda, and then there are some bad state actors that are just pushing misinformation to cause divisiveness, in order to make people distrust the institutions on which we rely. But ultimately, it comes down to *us* sharing it. So, we need to pause. "Think more, share less" as we always say at our center.

Now that said, we just put out a report through our election integrity partnership that showed that the real drivers of misinformation in the 2020 election, when you compare it to the 2016 election, were *verified* accounts. The ones spreading misinformation [used to be] sort of hidden accounts—people who weren't showing their true selves, or were bots, etc. In 2020 it was verified blue check accounts who were responsible for the majority of misinformation around the election. So, the misinformation landscape is constantly changing and evolving.

### **How does disinformation generally affect civic engagement and voter turnout? Do people kind of go, "Oh, I don't believe anything, so I'm not going to go vote?" And how did it affect the 2020 election?**

I'll speculate a little bit because it's an interesting enough question. A lot of the tactics of the earliest papers describing disinformation say that the goal of disinformation is to generate apathy and distrust in all institutions. I do think those kinds of tactics will likely have an effect [on civic engagement]. I can't point to anything yet because it's too soon to say, at least for the 2020 election. I will say that in the build-up to that election, and certainly on Election Day and afterward, the attempts to delegitimize the election, as well as the accusations of voter fraud, certainly had to have some effect. Particularly on January 6th, because most of the people there believed the election was truly rigged. And I just think more generally, for democracy, this is an issue. You saw a lot of Republicans, too, being concerned about these arguments about voter fraud and delegitimization. They affect everyone. Even some Republicans have been concerned that [claims of a rigged election] affected their losses in Georgia. Disinformation hurts both parties, hurts all of us.

### **A lot of the focus on misinformation has been aimed toward the right, and for understandable reasons. I also wanted to ask a little bit about misinformation on the left. What are you seeing from the left side of the political spectrum in the US? Is it as big of an issue as it has been on the right? Or is one party a bit more concerning to you at this moment?**

A researcher at the University of North Carolina, Deen Freelon, has been taking this issue very seriously and saying that, yes, there is a lot of misinformation on the right, but that's not all. There was misinformation [on] the left around, for example, efforts to claim that the lines [on election day] were too long, or there were issues with the voting booths, or claims that people were being disenfranchised, and that type of misinformation could discourage voting. And there are specific issues on the left that are more prone to misinformation spread, like vaccination misinformation. We see that in the state of Washington in particular. Even before the pandemic hit, we were seeing rises in measles.

In our class at the University of Washington, because we really take a nonpartisan stance, when we get examples from



▲ Left: Tear gas at the January 6th riot at the U.S. Capitol. Photo by Tyler Merbler via Wikimedia Commons. | Right: QAnon supporter at an Idaho election fraud rally. Photo by Geoff Livingston/Flickr.

right-wing media, we also pull things from the left to try to balance it. Not to say that there's an equivalence, but as educators we need to make sure that people on both sides of the political spectrum don't think they're immune to misinformation.

**From your perspective, what do we do now? Where do the solutions need to come from?**

I think one of the most important things we can do is engage with each other, in good old-fashioned one-on-one discussions, and try to remove ourselves sometimes from the vitriol that we see on social media. I'm a huge advocate of education. I know that media literacy isn't the panacea, but we need to help people understand the tactics that are used to manipulate us.

I also think that technology companies should be forced to the regulatory table, even though that's not in and of itself the solution. When technology companies say, "Ah, we'll solve it! We got it taken care of!" That for sure I don't trust. They may change some design things, they may create the banners that they now have, they might hire fact checkers—I think that's movement in the right direction. But not all their efforts are good. I suspect with some things they may have gone too far. But if I had to choose one thing it would be to improve civic engagement and civic discourse, online and

offline, and most importantly, to spend more on education about misinformation.

**Is there a generation gap in susceptibility to misinformation? There's a stereotype out there of this older Boomer who grew up with Walter Cronkite, or two or three news sources that were more-or-less reliable, then suddenly now they start to see news items come across their screen, and to them screens have the implicit stamp of truth.**

Partially. There's been mixed research that has come out on this. There was a research study that came out of NYU a year or two ago that found there was a difference in the amount of misinformation between different demographic groups. The people over 65 were sometimes a little more susceptible, not being digital natives. Maybe like you said, screens carry a kind of truthiness for the older generation.

But part of the issue is just in critical reasoning, and a lot of students in the younger age group struggle with the difference between a fact piece and an opinion piece. That's disturbing, though perhaps to be expected as students and the younger generation start to read more primary literature and more news items—but that mistake is so basic. The older generation might have slightly better critical reasoning skills—they've been

“

*It can lower your view of humanity sometimes when you go into these dark corners of the internet.*

”

around longer, they're retired engineers, and business owners and teachers and librarians, etc., but they need to do more what is called horizontal reading. So instead of just staying and trying to use all their critical reasoning skills, or trying to dissect an individual article, they need to go into a new tab in their browser and move across like fact checkers do and then try to corroborate and see what other sources are saying.

**I wanted to touch on the personal effects of digging into misinformation all day. Has it affected your perception of reality? Are there certain checks you have to put in place? I sometimes come across very brief moments of misinformation, and it feels genuinely disorienting. And you just start thinking, “Wow, is this true?”**

I'm so glad you asked this question. It's a topic we've been discussing more and more in the center because we have students who work with this content every day. It can lower your view of humanity sometimes when you go into these dark corners of the internet. We've been tracking a lot of the rise of QAnon for several years before it was even pizzagate back in 2016, and then we saw this accelerative rise. And it is disorienting, and we have students that really are disturbed and question things differently. It's really, really important that we address the mental health part of this if you're a researcher, or a fact checker, or a journalist, or even just someone in the public that's engaging with this content because you might have a family member that's a part of a QAnon group, or a neighbor that's really engaged in some

conspiracy theory about some topic. We want to help people address their friends and neighbors about this.

I think for me, I've seen so many great things happen that I'm overall positive, but I have to take breaks and walk away from it sometimes as well.

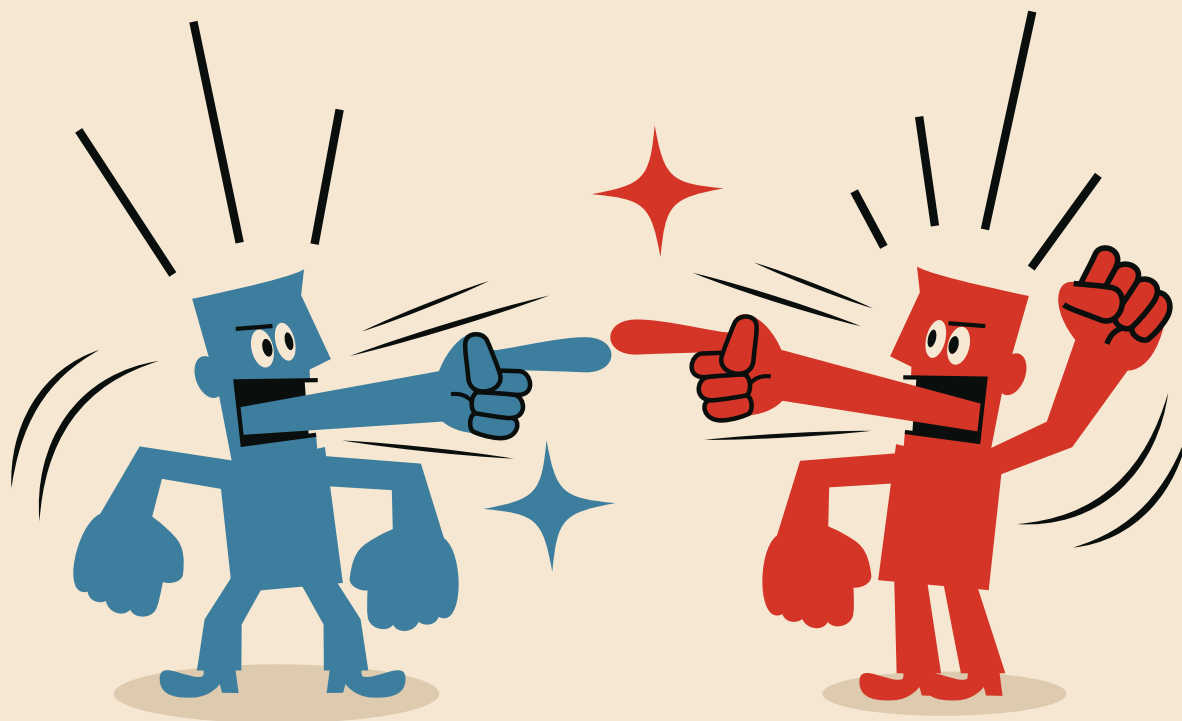
**Do you start to see certain mainstream journalism occasionally through the lens of the disinformation that you see? Like your muscles of skepticism are working in overdrive, and when you open the *New York Times* or some generally credible news source and you immediately ask, *is that really true?***

Yes! Actually, I see this when talking to students, sometimes even middle school students. The comment that disturbs me the most is when they say, “Well, I don't believe anything.” They're skeptical of everyone and my answer is, “No, that's not how you want to be!” But then I see it sometimes in myself. I'm training the public to be skeptical of what they see, but that can go into overdrive. Then you don't know what to believe because you feel like [some piece of information] could be another example of someone trying to manipulate you in some way.

In class I try to say, “Despite some of those things we talk about, democracy still does and can work. It has some growing pains right now, but you can trust in experts. They don't get it right all the time, but you still want to trust your doctors about whether to take a vaccination or not, and trust experts that do research on coronavirus.” We have to have trust in someone because we can't be experts in everything. At some point we need to check our skepticism, and that tradeoff depends on the topic and the person and everything else. It's a skill that needs to be pushed and prodded sometimes, but you have to pull back and have trust in each other at some point too. Yeah, that's a tough one, to figure out what that balance is. 



Jevin West is an associate professor at the iSchool at the University of Washington, and the director of the Center for an Informed Public. View the extended video interview with Jevin on Humanities Washington's YouTube channel.



# THE ART of ARGUING

*Democracy depends on disagreement without demonization, but that's easier said than done. Philosopher David E. Smith has tips for how to talk with others about things that matter.*

By David E. Smith

**D**avid E. Smith is an expert in disagreement. As a member of Humanities Washington's Speakers Bureau, Smith presents a talk online and at community at venues around the state, "Civil Conversation in an Angry Age." His talk explores where conversations about important issues go wrong—why opinions inflame our emotions, leading to anger, fights, and even the end of relationships.

It's a subject Smith knows about firsthand. His father was a fundamentalist Baptist preacher, and Smith grew up with deep religious convictions and a missionary's zeal for converting lost souls. But over time, he began to have serious doubts about the faith. On the eve of getting tenure at an evangelical liberal arts college in Indiana, he decided he couldn't, in good conscience, affirm the inerrancy of the Bible—which was a requirement for tenure.

"I did it to be authentic, to be free," he says. He moved to Seattle and since then has devoted much of his time to helping people interrogate their own convictions, and have better, more productive conversations in the process. Here are his suggestions for discussing life's most important questions, especially with those we might disagree with. — *David Haldeman, Editor*

### **1. Engage in deep reflection first.**

Before having a conversation with someone who disagrees with you about something important, I recommend engaging in deep reflection first about your own preparedness for the conversation. Ask yourself, *"Am I really ready for this?"* I have personally jumped into difficult conversations without any real reflection ahead of time, assuming that I was ready emotionally, but was not. Those conversations did not go well!

Deep reflection involves assessing our own emotional state in general and, in particular, how the issue at hand affects our emotions. Is this a good time to talk about something that stirs up emotion? In general, am I experiencing inner peace? Am I going through a hard time right now and might that experience make a difficult conversation unwise? And does this topic stir up too much emotion within me at this particular time? Deep reflection also involves a conscious decision ahead of time to demonstrate self-control and respect no matter what.

### **2. Pick your conversation partners carefully.**

Not everyone is a candidate for civil disagreement on every topic. We want so badly to be able to share our perspectives on things that matter with everyone in our lives, but that is just not realistic. Not everyone can handle our views of things, and sometimes sparing them is an act of love—toward them and toward ourselves. How do we know who is a good conversation partner and who is not? If there is a history of interaction, then we probably have a good feel for whether this person is able

and willing to have a difficult conversation, but sometimes it depends on the topic. How have they handled disagreement in the past? Have they indicated a willingness to discuss difficult topics? Have they expressed their perspective on the topic at hand and what impression have they given us about the potential for meaningful dialogue? We may not always know who is and who is not a good conversation partner, and we will certainly have to take some risks along the way.

### **3. Serve an "appetizer."**

Not sure who is ready for your beliefs and who is not? Share your view of an issue that you consider to be minor—something with which they will probably disagree but will not react too negatively. If they handle that well, then share your views of things that matter more. If they choke on the appetizer, do not serve the meal!

### **4. Identify the purpose of the conversation.**

Why am I thinking about having this conversation? What is the goal? Do I want to persuade, win a debate, dialogue, or clarify? We can wander aimlessly if we have not figured this out ahead of time. We want our conversations to be productive, not just civil, and knowing the purpose can help with that.

### **5. Be open-minded and agree more.**

Many of us have deep convictions about religion, ethics, politics, and other topics. There is nothing wrong with that, if we recognize that the depth of our conviction has no necessary connection to the truth! I can feel certain about something and be wrong. Do we value truth more than our own beliefs or our own beliefs more than truth? If the former, then we should be willing to listen to others because they may turn out to be right. Our beliefs about truth are not synonymous with truth because we are all wrong about something. The problem is, we do not know what we are wrong about! A desire for truth in every area of life helps us to acknowledge when we are wrong and to grow personally. And if truth matters more than winning a debate, we should be able to acknowledge when others are right about something. Agreeing with the other when we honestly can goes a long way toward removing tension from the conversation. After all, we don't disagree with them about everything, do we?

## 6. Understand how beliefs are formed.

How can *they* believe that? Sometimes the beliefs of others are astonishing to us! Remember that with rare exceptions, people do not choose their beliefs like they choose their behaviors. Our beliefs form naturally within us as we live our lives and are exposed to many different influences—like upbringing, education, evidence, and all our life experiences. If you had lived that person's life, you just might believe those things, too.

## 7. Be intentionally respectful.

I have come to see respect as a recognition of the full humanity of the other regardless of identity (race, gender, age, etc.) or belief system (political, religious, etc.). Underneath our differences, we are all human with the same basic needs. We all need food, water, shelter, clothing, opportunity, respect, and love. We need to display belief in our common humanity in our interactions.

## 8. Let go of the need to win.

I am learning that I do not always need to have the last word. I do not have to win the debate. This is hard for me! If other people do not or cannot see where I am coming from, so what? We want others to agree with us or at least affirm our reasonableness, but not everyone can or will do that for us. If the people in your life will not affirm you, find new people! We generally cannot find new family, but we can make new friends who will be supportive.

## 9. Listen more.

Many of us love to talk. We love to share our opinions about everything! I am amazed at how often we interrupt each other. Sometimes interruption is fine. If someone will not stop talking, if waiting will cause my point to lose its effect, or if I am afraid that I will forget, then interruption is usually appropriate. But I think that we interrupt each other too often. We just cannot wait to respond to the other person's point! Perhaps we could all slow down and listen more. What's the hurry?

## 10. Monitor our emotions and display virtue.

If we only had more self-control, humility, forbearance, and courage! Developing these virtues is a lifelong pursuit. Our emotions can take over so easily and the virtues fall by the wayside. I am not talking about virtue signaling. I am talking about displaying virtue sincerely. Self-control will help with our emotions. Humility will inspire us to listen to others. Forbearance will cause us to overlook some offenses. And courage will help us to share our perspectives with others who may be dominant. The Buddha said that we become what we think if we think about it a lot, and Aristotle said that we become what we do if we do it a lot. I suggest combining those insights to strengthen the virtues.

These suggestions should help all of us to have respectful and productive conversations. Despite our best efforts, however, not all conversations will go well and not all relationships are destined to last forever. Do your best. Can anyone do better than that? And remember that people sometimes surprise us with their willingness to dialogue, even change their minds. Perhaps the person you have in mind fits that description. Perhaps you and I do, too. 



David Smith holds a PhD in religious studies from Temple University and currently teaches at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Washington. He is on Humanities Washington's Speakers Bureau delivering a talk, "Civil Conversation in an Angry Age."

# UP FOR DEBATE



▲ Mellina White. Photo by Kristin Leong.

*Mellina White is a queer person of color—and a conservative—in one of the most liberal cities in America. She reflects on the struggles of being the contrarian at the table and going against the political grain of your friends, your community, and your home.*

By **Mellina White**

There I was, once again, sending shockwaves through the city I call home. I was sitting in a packed house on stage at the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute in the Central District of Seattle. I, along with my debate partner, was discussing how the city's homelessness crisis impacted our housed and unhoused citizens, drug addiction, culture, economy, and overall quality of life in the region. The crowd was in an uproar, all because of a comment I made regarding structural racism. The moderator asked me a question. The question was raised to me as if this idea was no longer up for discussion. It was an undisputed fact that everyone in the theater agreed on. I was asked my opinion about how structural racism impacted Seattle's homelessness crisis. I countered, asking if structural racism actually existed in Seattle in the first place. We have a history of indigenous displacement and redlining that most definitely has had lasting impacts on our neighborhood demographics. But to make a blanket statement about structural racism in a city that was the first major school system in the country to initiate a desegregation plan and no history of African slavery should at least be questioned. I am always up for a spirited debate.

My challenge sent the crowd into an angry outburst. A crowd, that I might add, was majority white liberals. I sat there, the female, gay, POC, welcoming the wrath of my mostly white and privileged audience. One older white man was so angry with me that he went on to scream the definition of systematic racism from his seat. It was difficult to share my opinion on stage in front of hundreds of strangers, but it needed to be said. As a person who grew up in Florida, a state built upon slavery, a state with a storied history of racial segregation and one that had zero LGBTQ anti-discrimination protections in 2020, I think it is appropriate to at least debate where Washington State stands in comparison with the rest of the U.S., and to what degree race issues could be considered structural.

Being the contrarian at the table, or on a debate stage for that matter, is nothing new to me. Living in the very progressive city of Seattle means that I am often at odds with my neighbors about solutions to our modern-day problems. That's because I am a right-of-center libertarian—a political identity that I did not arrive at lightly. Couple my politics with being a mixed-race queer woman and you can imagine how I confuse and sometimes anger others in my community.

It's never bothered me to be politically unusual because, well, I am unusual in every other way. I am also, at my core, a very curious person. Being different has allowed me to fuel my curiosity and engage in inquisitive conversations with all kinds of people, helping me grow my ever-evolving perspective about life. But sadly, I started to see a shift in people's openness to civil debate some years ago, no doubt leading up to that explosive moment on stage in 2019.

There is no doubt in my mind that former President Trump's destructive and divisive rhetoric lead to unprecedented political polarization nationwide. But what is more frightening to me is the lasting division I have seen creep into everyday life, even in a place like Seattle. Everything is political. Many people subscribe to the "You vs. us" attitude, pushing out any opportunity for thoughtful and challenging dialogue. This attitude traps us in an echo chamber, stifling social evolution, economic innovation, and the ability to simply be better as a community.

I began to see the first signs of dangerous groupthink not long after Trump was elected as President. In June of 2017, City Councilmember Kshama Sawant spoke up at a meeting to state that she didn't have any Republican friends. This was a statement that garnered cheers from the crowd. Sadly, it was in response to the fact that both Republican and Democratic citizens in Washington state were speaking up publicly to support a different approach to incarcerating juveniles in King County. An opportunity for dialogue, debate, and finding common ground was instead turned into a moment for welcomed cheap shots. Fast forward to 2021, and this would be considered a mild incident if any.

The growing societal schism pushed me to start writing publicly about my political views, getting published everywhere from *The Evergrey* to NPR-affiliate KUOW. The response has varied. Some people feel it's their duty to tell me I am so naive I don't even know I am being oppressed by society. Some have accused me of carrying internalized racism and homophobia. Others, though, have been so fascinated by my unorthodox views they have invited me out for cocktails to discuss further. That is where the magic happens. That is where true progress begins.

You see, if I could leave you with one single idea from this essay, it's this: I truly believe that most humans share the same values. We all want a healthy society. We want our friends, family and

neighbors to be safe. We want people to have access to housing, food, education and healthcare. Conservative or progressive, we all want this. I often use healthcare as an example. When I tell people I am not a fan of the Affordable Care Act or universal healthcare in general, they assume I don't care about people who struggle to access affordable healthcare. That couldn't be further from the truth. I believe that a different, more competitive and free-market approach to healthcare will both increase access and drive down costs. More importantly, I think the ACA misses the mark on what should be our ultimate healthcare goal: a country with fewer people suffering from preventable health conditions like type 2 diabetes, obesity, heart disease and high blood pressure. But make no mistake, I believe all Americans should have access to affordable health care. Where things begin to fall apart is in agreeing on the execution. That is, how we create solutions. If we were all willing to come to the table with an open mind and in agreement that we want the same outcomes, the opportunity for collaboration and solutions would be endless.

I have many good friends who are progressive, as well as coworkers I respect and with whom I collaborate daily. My ex-partner is *very* progressive. Our hours of pillow talk debating the benefits of equality versus equity or the best healthcare system were some of the best conversations I had ever engaged in. But none of this magic will ever happen if people are unwilling to come to the table and engage in conversation. When a person is labeled as the enemy simply because they want to propose different methods to the same problems, we are doomed to failure. If the past four years are not evidence of this, I don't what is.

Let's all use the events of this past year as a catalyst for true self-reflection and an opportunity to hear the other side out. Let our goal always be to carry out the best solutions and not just for our side to win. Let's make space for all in the discussion. Everyone deserves a seat at the table: women, minorities, queer folk. Even libertarians. 



Mellina White is the founder of *The Seattle Conservative* and a writer on politics and culture whose work has appeared on KUOW and *DapperQ*, the popular queer style community.



## Re:building ★ DEMOCRACY

### THERE'S SO MUCH MORE ONLINE.

This magazine is only one part of a larger series of radio programs and video conversations about democracy, voting, and civic engagement from Humanities Washington, KUOW (Seattle), KPBX (Spokane), and Northwest Public Broadcasting.

WATCH AND LISTEN AT  
[humanities.org/rebuilding-democracy](http://humanities.org/rebuilding-democracy)



*Re:building Democracy* was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and administered by the Federation of State Humanities Councils.

# NEWS

from Humanities Washington

---

## Rena Priest appointed the new Washington State Poet Laureate

Humanities Washington and ArtsWA/The Washington State Arts Commission are excited to announce that poet Rena Priest has been appointed the sixth Washington State Poet Laureate by Governor Jay Inslee.

Priest's literary debut, *Patriarchy Blues*, was honored with the 2018 American Book Award, and her most recent work is *Sublime Subliminal*. A member of the Lhaq'temish (Lummi) Nation, she is the first Indigenous poet to assume the role.

Priest's term began April 14 and will run until March 31, 2023. She succeeds Claudia Castro Luna, who served as Poet Laureate since 2018.

## American Rescue Plan Grants available soon

Thanks to the American Rescue Plan, Humanities Washington will offer grants to Washington State cultural organizations affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. More details will be available in May. Check [humanities.org](https://humanities.org) or sign up for our email list for updates.

## The Center for Washington Cultural Traditions launches *Rites of Green*, an online journal of Washington State folklife

*Rites of Green* aims to document the rich and wide-ranging spectrum of culture, tradition, art, music, and craft that can be found throughout Washington State. Initially launching with six

short films and six podcast episodes, the journal hopes eventually to have contributions from just about anyone working to document the culture of Washington State, whether modern or traditional.

Why the name *Rites of Green*? "I wanted to summon a sense of folklore, tradition, and heritage, without actually using any of those words," says Center director Langston Collin Wilkins. "Rites of passage, too, because knowing the traditions of a region allows you to be a better citizen of it."

The journal will have a strong focus on practitioners of indigenous traditional arts, like weaving, carving, and music-making.

## New Speakers Bureau roster begins July 1

Speakers Bureau presenters give free public presentations on history, society, literature, identity, film, spiritual traditions, and everything in between. Starting July 1, we will have a new slate of nearly 40 Speakers presenting on topics as diverse as science denialism, gentrification in rural Washington, the ethics of biotechnology, lessons from the post-pandemic 1920s, Bushido, and much more. View the full list beginning in mid-May at [humanities.org](https://humanities.org). And while we miss seeing Washington's communities gather for these events in-person, you can now catch nearly all Speakers Bureau events from anywhere online. Find an event on our website calendar.

## Save the date for Bedtime Stories 2021

Join Humanities Washington for our annual celebration of food, wine, and words on October 1 in Seattle and on October 22 in Spokane. More details available soon at [humanities.org](https://humanities.org).

Stay up to date at [humanities.org](https://humanities.org)



## IT'S NEVER BEEN EASIER TO SUPPORT HUMANITIES WASHINGTON.

Give monthly by becoming a Humanities Sustainer today. You'll help ensure that Humanities Washington continues to provide free programming statewide.

To join, simply set up a monthly recurring payment online at [humanities.org](http://humanities.org).

---

### WHY JOIN?

---

**IT'S CONVENIENT.** Automatic deduction from your bank or payment via your credit card means no reminders to renew. Simply call our office to change or suspend contributions.

**IT'S POWERFUL.** Monthly contributions add up! By spreading your pledge over 12 months, you will be able to make a larger impact than a single gift can accomplish.

**IT'S ENDURING.** Streamlined administration means more of your contribution can be used for long-term programming, strengthening communities across the state.

humanities  
WASHINGTON | 

## Board of Trustees

Shandy Abrahamson, *Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*

Julieta Altamirano-Crosby, *WAGRO Foundation*

René Baca, *Wenatchee Valley College*

Annmarie Caño, *Gonzaga University*

Xavier Cavazos, *Central Washington University*

Andrew Chanse, *Spokane Public Libraries*

Peter Danelo, *Heller Ehrman (retired)*

Eric Davis, *Bellevue College*

Senator Karen Fraser, *22nd District, Thurston County (retired)*

Betsy Godlewski, *Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture*

Beth Hudson, *Walla Walla Public Library (retired)*

Dan Lamberton, *Walla Walla University*

Eric Lawson, *University of Washington*

Tammy Miller, *Aldarra Foundation*

Mark Miyake, *Western Washington University*

Clarence Moriwaki, *Bainbridge Island Japanese American Community*

Mary Pembroke-Perlin, *Community volunteer*

David Powers (chair), *Seattle University*

Bradley Richardson, *Clark County Historical Museum*

Joe Ross, *Gates Archive*

Colleen Rozillis, *Moss Adams*

Carli Schiffner, *Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges*

## Staff

Julie Ziegler, *Chief Executive Officer*

Shelley Saunders, *Chief Resource Development Officer*

Eric Sanders, CPA, *Chief Financial Officer*

Dustyn Addington, *Director of Programs*

David Haldeman, *Director of Communications and Content*

Langston Collin Wilkins, *Director, Center for Washington Cultural Traditions*

George Abeyta, *Program Manager*

Asia Lara, *Program Manager*

Antonio Gómez, *Associate Folklorist*

Tom Beasley, *Technology and Special Projects Manager*

Rachel Jacobson, *Program and Development Coordinator*

# OUR MISSION

---

*Humanities Washington opens minds and bridges divides  
by creating spaces to explore different perspectives.*

---

## OUR PROGRAMS

---



FAMILY READING uses storytelling and discussion to explore cultural and ethical themes in children's literature and emphasizes the importance of families reading together.



WASHINGTON STATE POET LAUREATE builds awareness and appreciation of poetry – including the state's legacy of poetry – through public readings, workshops, lectures, and presentations throughout the state. Managed in partnership with ArtsWA.



GRANTS assist local organizations in creating opportunities for their community to come together to discuss important issues using the humanities.



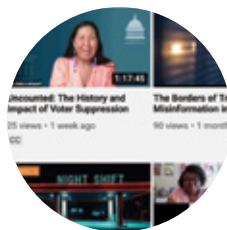
CENTER FOR WASHINGTON CULTURAL TRADITIONS is a new effort to amplify our state's rich, diverse living cultural treasures through research and special programming. Managed in partnership with ArtsWA.



SPEAKERS BUREAU draws from a pool of leading cultural experts and scholars to provide free conversational lectures in communities throughout the state.



THINK & DRINK brings hosted conversations on provocative topics and new ideas to pubs and tasting rooms in Bellingham, Spokane, Seattle, Tacoma, and Yakima.



---

### Check us out on YouTube

*In the absence of in-person events, Humanities Washington is producing more online discussions. Join us on YouTube for recorded conversations with scholars on everything from hip hop to the sociology of clutter.*





130 Nickerson St., Suite 304  
Seattle, WA 98109

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
SEATTLE, WA  
PERMIT NO. 2389

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

*Changes? Please make the corrections on your address label, check the appropriate box below, and return to Humanities Washington.*

- ☐ *Name misspelled*
- ☐ *Contact person changed*
- ☐ *Address wrong*
- ☐ *Duplicate mailing*
- ☐ *Remove from mailing list*

*Or send changes via email to  
info@humanities.org*

