

Hands Across the Hills Appalachians and New Englanders Build Bridges of Understanding and Care

In Whitesburg, Kentucky, county seat for a coal mining region, there are fourteen churches for a population of 2000. Most are Evangelical, including varieties such as Primitive Baptist, Old Baptist, and Southern Baptist. Seekers must travel out of town for a Catholic Church, and should anyone wish for a synagogue, the closest is about four hours away. In Leverett Massachusetts, also with a population of 2000, there are three churches, one Quaker Meeting, two Buddhist communities, and a small Sikh community. The nearest three synagogues and one mosque are about half hour's drives away.

For the 2016 election, Whitesburg voters chose Trump by about 85%, while Leverett voters chose Clinton by the same percentage. A group of progressive voters in Leverett, seeking to comprehend how our country had become so divided, searched for a Trump-voting population with whom they could dialogue and deepen their understanding. Through a community organizer working in Whitesburg and publishing online, Leverett discovered Whitesburg and a partnership was proposed, struggled over, and eventually accepted. This article is a tale of two cities, towns actually, where some residents came together across deep chasms of distrust and suspicion. Although our purpose was not interreligious, our spiritual beliefs and practices are embedded in both our differences and similarities. Three years later, with three weekend visits exchanged and a fourth planned, approximately thirty participants are in relationship with each other, stretching and growing.

I am a member of the Leverett community that proposed the idea of bridging divides and am also a professional dialogue facilitator and international peacebuilder. Over the past several decades, I have led dialogues across differences in race, religion, ethnic identity, gender, geography, history, culture, and just about every other imaginable division, in countries intent on preventing war, engaging in war, recovering from war, or seeking healing and wholeness across boundaries and perceptions. I'm a believer in the power of structured dialogue to shift prejudices and stereotypes, but I am way too experienced to be naïve about easy outcomes and long-term impact. The Leverett group, which named itself Hands Across the Hills, invited me to be its chief organizer, project designer, and facilitator, which I've been doing since its inception in early 2017.

Most attempts to create bridging activities in the US since the Trump election have developed half or full day events for dialogue or a combination of work projects, meals, and conversations. From my international experiences, I learned that one-day and one-off encounters are too brief to support substantial change. Additionally, our two groups are 1000 miles apart, so the long trip to meet each other necessitated more time together to justify the journey. We settled upon three-day weekends, the first in Leverett, with the Whitesburg group arriving on a Thursday night after a fifteen-hour van ride and returning the same way on Monday morning. This model offered us the luxury of three full days to be with each other within and beyond our formal dialogues.

In order to create intimacy and also to keep our expenses minimal, we elected to offer our guests home-stays rather than hotels. This decision became a major contributor to the building of relationships and, in fact, much of the bonding that continues arose from the guest-host pairs. Staying in someone's home, meeting their family, and drinking coffee at their kitchen table is a perfect vehicle for knowing the other. There is not much hiding; the intimate setting offers an opportunity for stepping into the life of the other, if not into their shoes.

Another lesson learned in my decades of dialogue practice is that we cannot develop relationships through dialogue alone. It's too exhausting, too concentrated, and leaves out too much of life. In Hands Across the Hills, we engaged in structured dialogue for three to five hours a day, leaving ample time for music, art, theater games, dance, sightseeing, walks, meeting each other's communities, and endless potlucks. It's also true that we each learn differently, some through verbal forms like dialogue and others through these different means of expressing our humanity. I know that participants bonded deeply through the various activities on offer, opening their hearts to each other as they danced, sang, hiked, and broke bread together.

We were unlikely soul mates. The differences between a predominantly progressive and privileged community in Western Massachusetts, where college education is the principal regional business, and an economically impoverished community in Eastern Kentucky, where mining coal is the only business and one that is fast disappearing, are pretty stark. Group members delved deeply to find common ground despite the differences in educational opportunities, income levels, political outlook, health indexes, life experiences, religious practices, family relations, and more.

I wondered how to design the first encounter, seeking an entry point that would reduce the host of fears I assumed everyone was silently carrying. I selected family stories as the initial topic, since all of us, for better or worse, have families. I thought this might offer us a base of commonality upon which to later explore differences. It did not take long, however, to discover that family stories from these two communities are pretty dissimilar. In Leverett, most families are small and live scattered across and beyond the country. None of our group members, in fact, had been raised in Massachusetts and none of their grown children live permanently in Leverett. In Whitesburg, most families are large, live close to their parents, and everyone in the dialogue group came from that region and had their adult children living nearby. Folks in coal country generally remain there, as their Scots-Irish ancestors have done since arrival perhaps two-hundred years ago. Folks in Leverett are more frequently second or third generation descendants of Europeans and quite mobile.

Despite the differences, family sagas created a great deal of bonding. As it turned out, two of our women members were first generation Holocaust survivors, one with a parent who escaped from Germany in 1938 and the other with a parent from Paris who also fled the Nazi occupation. The women shared intimately and emotionally, leaving many group members in tears. Our Kentucky counterparts had never heard direct Holocaust stories and in fact had limited historical knowledge of the Nazi era. Afterwards one confessed that she had never met a refugee or immigrant but would no longer oppose their human rights because these two group members were also immigrants and she liked them already. The Kentucky stories, focused on the endless tragedies of coal mining accidents and diseases stripping families of fathers and sons, husbands and brothers, were equally emotional. Our group members on both sides had a fulsome and memorable experience of empathy and compassion, a wonderful way to acknowledge their different realities and build connection with each other.

Over the three days of this first encounter, and again when the Leverett group went to Whitesburg six months later and yet again when the Kentuckians returned to Massachusetts a year and a half later, we dialogued about provocative issues, and we made time to sing, dance, walk, chat, and feast. We talked politics and hot button topics like guns and immigration, we explored gender roles, north/south history, racism, religion, xenophobia, injustice, perceptions, media choices, and more. The group members disagreed a lot. We promised early on that we were not in this initiative to change each other, but to understand and to honor the truths of each other's lives and challenges. Although keeping that promise was often challenging, violating it would have harmed of tenuous trust.

Over time, group members came to appreciate each other's life journeys. I began to hear the language of love. Emails and Facebook messages affirmed the other, who was no longer "other" but was a complete individual with a biography and a heart. I call this humanization. Its opposite, dehumanization, operates almost universally as an essential component of psychological preparation for armed conflict. For me this shift in perceptions and stereotypes becomes the foundation of protection, inclusion, and concern. Participants not only perceive each other differently but can extrapolate that shift to accommodate those who resemble the new friend in religious, cultural, or political orientation. If I care about you, the story goes, I can also affirm those who are similar to you, who vote the way you did, who worship the way you do, who look and think like you. And if I care, I can defend your right to be you and to hold your values, even when those values compete with mine.

What are the lessons learned from this experiment in intergroup relations?

- We have the internal capacity to dethrone the prejudices and stereotypes we have accrued throughout our lives

- Changes in beliefs about others prefigures changes in attitudes and behaviors
- Attitudinal and behavioral changes are slow and require reinforcement over time
- A carefully crafted dialogue creates a container of safety in which cherished values and beliefs can be explored and adjusted to conform to new sensibilities
- Communication guidelines and practices are essential for creating a safe dialogue container

Intergroup or interfaith dialogue provides the opportunity for the kind of “aha” moment described above whereby a woman from Kentucky met first generation descendants of immigrants from Massachusetts whose stories and presence touched her heart. If that moment of awakening is reinforced with future contact and positive encouragement, her behavior toward other immigrants may shift. My own experience of Hands Across the Hills gave me the opportunity to meet women and men whose male relatives without exception worked in the mines for generations. While familiar with US stereotypes about “hillbillies” and “hicks,” I had never known coal mining families personally. Now I find myself not only speaking up against prejudices about rural Kentuckians, but also about other conservative Trump voters, acknowledging that each person has a history, a social and religious community, and a media environment, all of which profoundly impact their voting choices.

A successful dialogue, especially one called upon to bridge sharply divided group members, is neither casual nor accidental, but rather a specifically designed format led or co-led by trained facilitators. My experiences confirm that informal attempts at bridging quickly derail, with participants blaming each other for starting a war, voting ignorantly, or somehow being irresponsible. Guidelines for dialogue, presented and agreed upon by group members, control inappropriate and blame-based communication, require significant verbal discipline, and eschew arguments, interruptions, side comments, cell phones, and dominance. Questions for the dialogue, shaped by facilitators, encourage new and unexplored responses, allow for ambivalence, encourage fresh thinking, and take participants deeper than the level of opinion or position. Dialogue is discovery, both within the self and with the identified “other.”

We are challenged to sustain the gains made during dialogue. Participants frequently leave encounter groups of all sorts with a “high” born of our longing to see and be seen, to be affirmed for our authentic selves, to feel the joy of community. Sustaining such rare feelings is impossible; we are called to come down from the mountain back into the marketplace where we live. But we can take some of our insights with us, expressing our solidarity by educating others and widening the circles of awareness. Without reinforcement, we gradually slide back into the communal norms we left behind in this journey, norms filled with stereotypes and prejudices born of ignorance of our fellow travelers.

In Hands Across the Hills, we reinvigorate our relationships and commitments through full group and individual communications, especially in times of ill health or political crises. We currently have shared committees promoting online youth exchanges and a joint speakers bureau. Interreligious and intergroup dialogue members in geographic proximity have even more opportunities for exchange and reinforcement. Research shows the positive results of enlarging the conversation to include more members and key members, such as leaders of communities who can widely facilitate changes in attitudes, behaviors, and structures using media and political outreach. Dialogue is an essential step, but only a step, in the process of social change, one with transformative outcomes that in the best of times builds communities across so many divides that “division” ceases to be operative. We are then on the way to honoring, celebrating, and treasuring our multiple diversities and common ground, creating safe passage for each valued life.

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