DIGITAL, DIVERSE & DIVIDED

How to Talk to Racists, Compete with Robots, and Overcome Polarization

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Berrett–Koehler Publishers, Inc

People fail to get along because they fear each other;
they fear each other because they don't know each other;
they don't know each other because they have not
communicated with each other.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

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Closer Than We Appear

I've been researching and writing about cultural intelligence for twenty-five years. But a taxi driver summed up the essence of cultural intelligence for me in one statement: "You are not American, and I am not Pakistani. Those are just government labels. We are brothers; and if we stick together, we'll be okay."

His words really struck me. I know. It sounds rather Pollyannish. But context is everything. Just minutes before, I had walked through the lobby of my Dubai hotel where a group was gathered around a TV watching the first presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The group burst out laughing as Trump taunted Biden, saying, "Every time you see him, he's got a mask. He could be speaking two hundred feet away…and he shows up with the biggest mask I've ever seen." The group was equally amused when Biden called the sitting president a clown and said, "Will you shut up man?"[1]

I scurried by hoping no one would "mistake" me as an American. We were in the worst pandemic in a hundred years and the two guys vying for the top job in the US were clowning around calling each other

names. When I jumped in a taxi a few minutes later, I felt a bit reluctant to answer my driver's question, "Where are you from?" After I eventually told him I'm from the US, I jokingly said, "But don't hold that against me," which prompted his response: "We are brothers."

We had a fascinating conversation, as so often happens with taxi drivers. He told me his favorite thing to do on the weekend is to watch sports with a group of Indians and Pakistanis, who are supposed to hate each other, but instead consider each other best of friends in their home away from home. I was so struck by our conversation that I shared an excerpt on social media. People immediately responded with likes, hearts, and shares. And the enthusiastic affirmations came from both extremes of the liberal-conservative divide.

It doesn't take much to tap our desire to connect as humans. So why does it feel like polarization is worse than ever? Before we can address the differences that divide us, we need to see how much we're alike. Our shared humanity is the antidote to hate. Rest easy, this isn't going to be an overly simplistic "we're all the same" kumbaya treatise. But the journey toward cultural intelligence begins with seeing one another's humanity.

Same DNA

Ahmet and Jonas grew up next door to each other in the 1940s and 1950s. They lived in Potamia, a farming village just outside Nicosia, Cyprus. They did everything together—playing in their adjoining yards, walking to school, and working for a nearby farmer. Ahmet is Muslim and Jonas is Christian, typical of their respective Turkish and Greek Cypriot families. Ahmet's mother routinely shared extra loaves of the special bread she baked for Muslim holidays with Jonas's family. Jonas's mother reciprocated during Greek Orthodox celebrations. This was typical life for many Cypriots prior to 1974. But suddenly the island that had been a nexus of East and West was divided by a buffer zone stretching more

than a hundred miles across the country. The birthplace of Aphrodite, the island of love, sunny beaches, and charming villages became a place guarded by the United Nations. And friendships like Ahmet's and Jonas's were ripped apart.

We all come from Africa—Ahmet, Jonas, you, and me. And for $99, you can find out how much African descent remains in your DNA. Ancestry tests have soared in popularity with people discovering surprising links and tracking down unknown relatives across the world. The success of these tests is rooted in the tacit assumption that our DNA can sort us into five races: African, European, Asian, Oceanic, and Native American. While the ancestry industry taps our curiosity about where we're from, there's no scientific evidence that race is a biological reality. What the research actually tells us is that the basic DNA of all human beings—Black, Indigenous, white, immigrant—is the same.

The decisive scientific study that put a nail in the coffin of race was the Human Genome Project (HGP), a massive project led by an international team of researchers that attempted to sequence and map all the genes of humanity. The result was detailed information—about three billion letters of genetic code—which essentially gave us the instructions for how a human being is made and a map for how we function.[2]

The completion of the HGP garnered worldwide attention. Perhaps the most striking finding was that our DNA is 99.9 percent the same. Men, women, short, tall, blonde, brunette, tongue-curlers, color-blind—we all share an almost identical sequence of nucleotides in our DNA.[3] Upon completion of the Human Genome Project, President Bill Clinton stood in the East Room at the White House and declared: "I believe one of the great truths to emerge from this triumphant expedition inside the human genome is that in genetic terms, all human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99.9 percent the same.…The most important fact of life on this earth is our common humanity."[4]

The Human Genome Project stood in contrast to "science" that al-

legedly proved racial differences. In the 1700s, Swedish physician and taxonomist Carl Linnaeus was at the forefront of creating four utterly reprehensible and indefensible biological categories:

> *Europaeus albus* (European): White, serious, and strong people with flowing blond hair and blue eyes. Linnaeus described this group as active, smart, and inventive.
>
> *Asiaticus fuscus* (Asian): Yellow, melancholy, and greedy people with black hair, and dark eyes. They were classified as severe, haughty, and driven by desire.
>
> *Americanus rubescens* (Native American): Red, ill-tempered, and subjugated with black, straight, thick hair, wide nostrils, a harsh face, and a scanty beard. Linnaeus described them as obstinate, content, and free.
>
> *Africanus niger:* (African black): Black, passive, and lazy with kinky hair, silky skin, a flat nose, and thick lips. They were identified as crafty, slow, and foolish. Linnaeus speculated they might not be fully human.[5]

Linnaeus's reprehensible categories gave colonists just the rationalization they needed to prove that some people are more human than others. When the Dutch first colonized Africa in the seventeenth century, they referred to the locals as animals, who on occasion need to be shot and eaten. Political leaders used this shoddy science to defend saying things like: "[These people] are not fit to live among us. They are animals, and they behave like animals.…Inarticulate sounds pour out of their bestial skulls."[6] The problem is, that quote is from Zsolt Bayer, a contemporary politician in Hungary who consistently alerts Hungarians to the "ills" of the Romani people. Three centuries after Linnaeus's ludicrous "findings," we're still dehumanizing people from different worlds.

Ahmet left Cyprus to attend university in Turkey, where he stayed for many years. He eventually came back to Cyprus. His family was now

living in a modest home in a Turkish Cypriot village on the far east side of the country. Ahmet rented a small flat on the Turkish side of Nicosia, less than a mile from where Jonas lived with his wife and children, but the boyhood friends were separated by a border that neither of them was permitted to cross. Ahmet attempted to contact Jonas but never received a reply. He felt invisible in his own country and as if he was the enemy. He wondered if his childhood soulmate agreed with what online newspapers repeatedly wrote about Turk Cypriots—"backward, nonentities" who must not be allowed to hold the country back.

Two men who started out as childhood friends had their lives ripped apart. There's very little about us that's different biologically. Yet we so easily sort ourselves into us-versus-them groups.

Human Universals

When I was working on my PhD, I was interested in discovering similarities in how people from different cultures learn. My adviser immediately corrected me: "The real discoveries are found in the *differences*, not the similarities." She said: "You need to remove that objective from your proposal. The committee will never approve something so superficial." As a social scientist, I was trained to focus on cultural *differences*. Any emphasis on similarities and common themes was considered superficial and missing the point.

Diversity experts are known for saying, "Break the golden rule. *Don't* treat others the way *you* want to be treated. Treat others the way *they* want to be treated." Differences are the holy grail of sociology and anthropology. Yet I sometimes wonder if our overemphasis on differences has gone too far. And I'm not alone. Kimberlé Crenshaw, the originator of the enormously useful concept of intersectionality, worries that her work has been misinterpreted and used to divide people into more and more subgroups while missing the point of what she was after. Intersectionality highlights the inadequacy of broad descriptions like African American or female by showing that we all have a mosaic of

identities. But Crenshaw says her work has been taken too far and become "identity politics on steroids."[7]

We're right to caution against group blindness (e.g., "I don't see color"), but we seem to have lost the value of seeing our shared humanity. There's so much about us as humans that we have in common. The *MIT Encyclopedia of Cognitive Sciences* lists hundreds of characteristics that anthropologist Donald Brown has cataloged as human universals. These are features shared across every nationality, race, gender, faith, and political group. Maybe our differences have been overplayed.

Human universals include core characteristics like our shared need for food and rest or the ubiquitous presence of love and romance across all cultures, but we also share universal quirks. We dance, marry, style our hair, use weapons, and adorn our bodies with jewelry and tattoos. People from nearly every race, place, and faith do these things. But animals don't. Your dog doesn't put on makeup.[8]

As a shameless foodie, I'm particularly interested in Brown's analysis of our universal connection to food. I've always thought about food as a profound difference between cultures—how we eat, when we eat, and what we eat. But while other animals simply capture their food and eat it, humans season it, think about what to pair with it, and cook it. And not only are we universally epicurean in how we prepare our food, we make eating an event, sitting down to share a meal at certain times of the day—a uniquely human phenomenon.[9]

Another fascinating universal on Brown's list is gossip. Whether I'm running around the lake by my house, sitting in an airport overseas, or working from a coffee shop, I consistently hear people around me gossiping about coworkers, family, and friends. Oxford researcher Robin Dunbar says our universal tendency to gossip isn't so much about the person being talked about; it's about the bonds created by gossiping. A shared annoyance brings people together. Complaining to a fellow passenger about the inept airline, texting a friend about the annoying group chat, or complaining to a colleague about incompetent leadership creates

a bond around shared irritations. Many of us think that peace, love, and cooperation bring us together. But gossip and complaining might do it better.[10]

There are hundreds more human universals. A human universal doesn't mean no group or individual ever contradicts it, but these are characteristics that nearly everyone has in common regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, or any other dimension of identity. We're the only creatures that have sex in private. We share a fear of snakes. We process information logically, marry each other, develop grammar and syntax, and create visual arts.

Stop and think about a group that feels utterly foreign to you. It might be a tribal group in the Southern Hemisphere, or it may just as easily be people in your own community who couldn't view the world more differently than you. List what you have in common with these individuals. I guarantee you'll discover some commonalities. Write these down as the first step in reframing the way you see your Other.

I met Ahmet when we were both visiting London. He and I come from very different worlds. When we sat down together at a café, I wondered if I'd be able to establish rapport with someone twenty-five years my senior who has lived most of his adult life as a second-class citizen in his own country. He insisted on buying my coffee and immediately asked about my wife and kids. We both have daughters, which gave us an instant bond. His bulging blue eyes welled up as he shared his enormous regret for the years he stopped talking to one of his girls because she refused to "stop being gay." There we sat, two men from entirely different worlds, yet as two fathers we understood the joy and pain we feel for our kids.

Emotions are another universal we all share. But our cultures teach us to express emotions differently, something that is exceptionally difficult to decode online. Parents teach children the appropriate emotional response for various occasions, which is reinforced at school, through the media, and with peers.

A few years ago, I had the misfortune of seeing a Chinese man jump from a building in Shanghai to his death below. My heart stopped. *What could possibly lead this guy to such immense despair?* But what happened next alarmed me almost as much as the suicide. Several people gathered around the body, looking at each other and quietly giggling. I was so unnerved by the response. After reflecting on it further, I realized that the giggling may well have been a way for the onlookers to disguise their horror. Fake laughter and giggles are a common response to nervousness and discomfort among some Asian cultures.

Our various cultures teach us how to manage our feelings, which can lead us to wrongly interpret others' emotional reactions. But at our core, we all experience the same set of emotions, a bond that offers us a way to reach across the polarizing divides.

Degrees of Humanity

In 2010, Ahmet made his first trek across the buffer zone in Nicosia. It had been decades since he had traveled to the other side of the capital. He was stunned as he walked along the chic promenade filled with brand names he had seen on the streets of Istanbul and London. Here they were, just a mile from his home. Ahmet heard that Jonas was a professor at a university in town. He recently came across an online article quoting Jonas as saying, "Any true Muslim is a jihadist." Ahmet couldn't believe Jonas would say such things. This was not the gentle kid who joined Ahmet's family for iftar, the evening meal eaten together during Ramadan. But war and politics change people. It would be understandable if Ahmet had opted out of interacting with Jonas. It's not on the oppressed and marginalized to make the first move to reach across the divide. The emotional labor and disproportionate impact of polarization on marginalized groups is something we will repeatedly consider throughout the book. But Ahmet was determined to pursue contact with Jonas.

The two men, now in their sixties, eventually met for coffee. They

started by awkwardly catching up on the past forty-five years and avoided any discussion of politics. They reminisced about a girl they both had a crush on when they were teenagers. This was the first of many coffees, text messages, and email exchanges, which eventually led the men to discuss religion and politics. They traveled back to their neighborhood in Potamia together. Jonas was not the man he appeared to be when only reading his edited comments in click-bait news articles. Much of Jonas's career had been spent striving for reconciliation among fellow Cypriots. The quotation Ahmet read had been printed out of context, as so often happens in the digital world. What Jonas actually said was, "While some say *any true Muslim is a jihadist*, we all know that to be completely untrue." Many news and social media companies profit by dividing us. But we have the power to stop it by forging relationships with the other side. Ahmet and Jonas began to spend time together weekly and rekindled their childhood bond. They eventually invited their families and other friends to join them.

Discrimination is rooted in believing that some people are less human than others. The Nazis called Jews "rats," the Hutus called Tutsis "cockroaches," and the US Founding Fathers decided enslaved Black people counted as three-fifths of a person. Labels that dehumanize are continually broadcast into our minds: crazy libs, country bumpkins, homophobes, and deplorables. Sean Hannity, one of the most conservative newscasters in mainstream media, opened his February 5, 2020, show on Fox News with big red letters on the screen that read: "Three Year Tantrum." His opening monologue started with this: "The three-year tantrum led by the Schumer Schiff Sham is over. The bitter do-nothing Democrats have been defeated and President Trump is acquitted."[11] Meanwhile, MSNBC newscaster Rachel Maddow says that the Republican party has become a "fringe, violent, extremist criminal movement." Her underlying message is, if you defend Trump, you're a violent extremist. Rather than news, we get a lot of personal commentary that pits Americans against each other, slowly but steadily questioning the humanity of the other side.

What happens when a society views some members as lower life forms? The result is not only war but the justification of suicide bombings and soldiers killing children. Dehumanization is a mental trick that gives us permission to mistreat others. Ntou Kteily, a Lebanese American psychologist, is hopeful, however. His research shows that our brains can be rewired to forge trust and understanding through contact and collaborative problem-solving.[12] This is what Ahmet and Jonas began to experience together. They rediscovered their childhood friendship and applied their renewed understanding to other Cypriots.

Reclaiming our shared humanity is as simple as slowing down long enough to see each other beneath the surface of polarizing issues. When you see a neighbor displaying a flag that rubs you the wrong way, stop to think beyond the symbol to consider who they really are. *What keeps them awake at night? Why might they support a cause that is so offensive to me?* You don't have to agree with someone to openly consider what brought them to the perspectives they have. When you see an Internet meme that mocks people who have a different opinion about immigration or vaccines, stop and think about whether resharing it does anything to make things better. Consider how someone you love might be hurt by this caricature and whether the "likes" and laughs it gets from others are worth it.

Same but Different

One of my favorite pastimes is to watch people. I look at a family of five riding by on a motorcycle in Phnom Penh and I wonder where they are going, how they get along, and what their lives are like. I drive by wide-open farms across rural America and wonder what stories exist behind the people driving the tractors across the sprawling fields. And I scroll through photos on social media and wonder what was really going on for the people in a picture.

We're all so different—the foods we like, the things we find funny,

the ways we communicate, and the things that upset us. Yet we're all so much the same. We all eat and sleep, seek meaning and purpose in life, care for our kids, and enjoy a little bit of gossip. It sounds so simple. Our biological core is 99.9 percent the same. So why is it so incredibly hard for us to get along?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID LIVERMORE PhD (Michigan State University) is a social scientist devoted to the topics of cultural intelligence (CQ) and global leadership and the author of several award-winning books, including *Leading with Cultural Intelligence*, *Driven by Difference*, and *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*.

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David loves to make social science accessible to practitioners. He has been interviewed and referenced by myriad news sources, including *The Atlantic*, CBS News, *Christian Science Monitor, The Economist, Forbes*,

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David and his wife, Linda, have two adult daughters, Emily and Grace. Emily is embarking on a career as a litigation lawyer, and Grace is a graphic designer. Some of their favorite family activities are traveling (fortunately!) and discovering new foods together.

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