

The title of my keynote is, "*What I've Learned From Meeting With My Enemies.*"

But, before I get into some of that, I want to thank each of you for taking the risks that you did to be here today to meet “the other side.” I appreciate your trust in taking those risks and I hope it’s a fruitful engagement.

Now, here’s some history for you:

For almost two decades, I personally have been part of a professional war. Since the beginning of my educational training, I learned about therapists who offered clients hope in changing their sexual orientation. I sided myself instead with therapists who affirmed those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Because I was on that side, I was therefore against “the other side.” My only interactions, either in person or through the media with “the other side” were in debating them, telling them how wrong they were, telling others how wrong they were, and telling them how right we were.

Here in Utah, mental-health organizations became divided because of these issues, and subcommittees died on the vine, with each going into their own camp, protecting and reinforcing their own views, feeling attacked and under-appreciated, and “circling the wagons” to shut out the other side. It was a fear response, but we were also pissed off with each other, with

many wanting to fight organizations, and moving further away from each other.

Professional organizations became more splintered, with some members becoming more extreme, as those who are more in the middle with their views became lost regarding their allegiance and attached themselves to the extremes because they at least had some common views and values and felt attacked by the opponents. Organizations that used to have some diversity became limited in their memberships.

This fragmenting had been happening nationally for the past five decades as organizations and community groups rallied around their own, suspicious and dismissive of the other side and hoping opponents would be eliminated or disappear. The media and certain individuals had an investment in maintaining these divisions.

We each feared that our opponents had too much privilege and power. Recently, political and legal actions have taken to stop conversion/reparative therapists from practicing as those therapists are now working on fighting such actions so that they can keep doing what they feel is most beneficial for their clients.

In the middle of all that, I conducted two studies on individuals who went through such therapy to change their sexual orientation and, in the name of science, I tried to be fair and balanced in my results. I spent time with those who told me they were harmed by such therapy, but I also spent time talking with those who said they had benefited from such therapy. This *Coming Together and Listening to Gain Understanding*, the

theme of this conference, helped me to understand the need to *get a big-picture view*, especially when trying to resolve conflicts.

From my research, I learned how this polarization was causing much harm and making it difficult for many to achieve some kind of peaceful and loving resolution.

Then, a year ago, Jim Struve--a social worker who you will meet later during the panel presentation--he and I were advised by the Southern Poverty Law Center to follow our professional ethics and sit down and talk with these supposed enemies before initiating any direct professional fight against them. We then came up with the Building Bridges Workshop, which was inspired by last year's Circling the Wagon's conference. Many of my "opponents" were willing to come to the Building Bridges workshop and then four of "them" and four of "us" agreed to meet twice a month for the past year to see if we could do something different.

From the very start of engaging respectfully with my enemies, I have felt *surprise* at how wrong I was about them. I kept being shocked about the positive things they were saying and how much we had in common regarding our intentions, desires, and needs. I have really come to like each one of them. They have been so kind and often hilarious. This surprise allowed me to listen more to them and they to listen to me.

Above all else, I have learned that sexual and religious conflicts are not just a religious issue or a psychological issue, but a

relational issue. *How* we respond to these conflicts and to others will influence what happens. Our communities, our leaders, and ourselves have been acting aggressively, passively, compartmentally, and passive-aggressively in dealing with these issues. And this has kept us in a stuck and fragmented place. If we are ever to resolve these conflicts, we need to approach each other with more skills, more openness, more compassion, respect, and more curiosity.

I was able to hear some of the ways that the actions from my “side” had affected “the other side.” Let me give you a little bit more history of these issues. As most of you know, I was part of the American Psychological Association’s task force in 2009 that evaluated the research about sexual orientation change efforts. I say that not to brag, but to explain that the task force did not include anyone who actually practiced sexual orientation change efforts. I still stand by the results and recommendations of that task force. But, in talking with these individuals, I learned that we missed out on collaborating and using their knowledge of these issues.

The problem is that we each think we are right because we know our experience and we trust our viewpoint; however, we don’t know what is outside those lenses. My viewpoint cannot represent the full truth. And, my biases will cloud or distort my view. Our overall results and effectiveness are limited when we fail to get the big picture and fail to understand the views and concerns of “the other.”

I learned that we have misunderstood them as much as they have misunderstood us. The problem is not necessarily in our differences but in the type of relationship skills that we use that keeps us stuck.

However, I realized that *as* my “side” had been focusing on what we do best, these individuals had been focusing on what they know and do best. Each of us has our own unique strengths because we were able to focus on our own tribe first. Bringing our collective viewpoints or pieces of the puzzle together has allowed us to see and understand things I never would have been able to before individually about these issues. As Jim Struve explained to us, the skills learned from each of us are now available for the whole system.

I learned that we need them as they need us if we are ever going to put an end to all this fighting and hurt. As David Pruden has taught me, “We all have a stake in finding better ways of dealing with these issues.”

Justin McPheters, a marriage and family therapist also in this group of 8 therapists, expressed something that really helped me understand more. We all kept saying, my side, and your side, and the other side of the fence, and he spontaneously expressed, that it’s not the “other side” but the “other side of OUR community.” This broad-based fence placed around us really helped me to see that this is a community issue and we are all in this together. What my side does affects others and vice versa. We need to do what we can to honor each other to live the best way we each can.

I have felt *compassion from* them and compassion toward them as we've talked about some of the hurt we've experienced being part of all this. I learned how they felt dismissed and excluded from the APA task force and therefore, *realistically* dismissed our recommendations. Our exclusion of them on the task force shut down the process of change.

As I heard their reactions to this process, I needed to quiet my own defensiveness so that I could really listen to them and therefore understand the problem better. I learned how they were not surprised about being dismissed because it was par for the course. For the first time, I understood their rejection and realized how wrong it was to leave them out, especially people like Shirley Cox and David Pruden who have such a long history of earnest desire, wisdom, and caring dedication to these issues. We on the task force missed out on co-creating a plan that we all could agree on.

But, when I had expressed feeling excluded *from them* when I had requested to present at an Evergreen conference, David Pruden expressed regret and he was tearful. Seeing his tears, compassion, and sorrow for leaving me out really changed me and of course changed my perception of him and them. This happened during our first meeting. Throughout our subsequent meetings, they have been willing to hear more about my pain and the pain of the others in this group and the hurt of other LGBTQ individuals and families who have been rejected. These four have expressed true compassion for our suffering. This change reflects what the writer Iyanla Vanzant expressed, "A wound needs a witness."

A lot of people have been hurt and are feeling angry for how they or their loved ones have been unfairly treated. There has been a lot of wrongdoing, inaccuracies, and false judgments expressed in these issues. This unfairness and hurt need to be heard and only a restoration of power and truth will help us move on to something better. David Matheson may describe in his keynote how he was willing to face humiliation and restore justice with the BYU Support Group.

For me, I can't imagine ever again agreeing to sit on a panel that would debate Shirley Cox or any of the others. I'm glad those days are over. And, I trust them to have my welfare in mind. I feel a lot of *tenderness* toward them and I'm *committed* to not saying or doing something that would harm them.

I'm still *cautious* because there are more differences for us to discuss. Who knows, by next year we may be enemies again. But I doubt it, because I now *trust* these individuals and I trust that we will be able to work out something that is respectful and truthful for each one of us. The change seems to be more internal and deeper now than external. It's a slower change but a real one.

Now, I must explain that none of these changes would have been possible if any one of us in this group felt unsafe. We had established prior a set of safety guidelines in the Building Bridges Workshop that involved respect and openness. As I mentioned, all of our prior interactions had involved debating and side-taking; none of which provides safety. I have come to learn, from being with these individuals, *the necessity to accept*

responsibility for my role in the deterioration of the relationship between us. Each person involved in the conflict needs to make it safe for the other person and also make it safe for her or himself. If there is no safety for all involved, progress and healing and a positive relationship cannot happen.

So, let's now turn to you:

- Think about the conflict you have with your loved one and whatever the dynamics are. Look at the movie in your head of when you are in conflict with this person. Notice how you respond to the conflict and to your distress, how do you respond to their distress when these conflicts come up? Do you act passively? Do you turn away and avoid the hurt or their anger? Do you respond aggressively, getting louder, trying to get them to change their view? Or do you act, as many of us do, passive-aggressively by making the other feel guilty for their feelings and views?
- Now, if you were to make this interaction safer, what would **you** need to do to make it safer for the other person? Think about **their** distress, what does that person need from you? What could you bring to the interaction that would bring safety to how the other person feels?
- Now, what would you need for yourself from this other person so that **you** could feel safer to express your view? For some of us, it's difficult to ask for what we need, especially if we know the other person won't or can't provide that safety. But, think about it, what would you request from that person?
- So, finally, if that person is not able to give you what you need to make it a safe dialogue, what can you do for

yourself to make it safer for you? Many of us would flee the conflict, but what could you do to make it safe for you to stay in the discussion?

- Now, watch the movie clip again in your head and see how the interaction would go if any of this safety were in place.
- We asked these questions to the participants in the family workshop last night, and here is some of what they said:

We take it a few steps at a time
we established boundaries

I always respect their beliefs

they approached *me* with questions
they acted like it was normal
they said, “I love you no matter what. We are in this together.”
they felt regret for when things got out of control
my ward accepted my transgender child and friend

I smile at those who offend me

I went in the direction that is more meaningful for me

I try to have patience to allow them to be where they are at

I want to ask to set up a time to just listen (instead of talk to the other person) so that I can understand him better.

Do to them what you want from them: empathize with them.

We are both committed to being better listeners.

As you can see, safety really comes in two ways: from yourself or from the environment and people around you.

Now, I don't know about you, but one of the most difficult things for me is to accept someone as they are. It sounds easy, doesn't it? Just accept them. But, this is especially difficult if the person you are to accept is someone you care about and you want to be close to you.

For me, one of the biggest hurts has been my Mormon mother telling me that she will not attend my marriage ceremony if I had one for my boyfriend of 17 years. Each year, I casually ask her if she would, and each year she says she will not. This is especially hard for me because she has been my biggest support. I love my parents dearly and I know they love me. Because of that love, I am always surprised and hurt, and then I get angry and pout and distance myself from them, each time she declares her religious beliefs to me about these issues. Each time, I have to keep learning to love her for who she is. She is as Mormon as I am homosexual. That defines her, as being gay orients my life. With this Group of 8 therapists, I have also come to accept that they are living the lives they are supposed to lead and want to live, as I am living the one that fits me most and makes me happy.

I have held a deep belief that my mom could change or would if I just gave her the best argument or convinced her of "the truth." I suppose I get this from when I was a missionary and wanted others to experience the benefits of the gospel. We want *them* to know and do what we know makes *us* happy. We want them to

be closer to us in thought and action. But, I continually learn that not everyone is like me or wants to or can live like me. We each have our own needs as well as our unique *limits* that we cannot cross over.

I've needed to learn that when I feel rejected it does not represent my self-worth but the other person's limit of who they are. Let me say that again, *when I feel rejected it does not represent my self-worth but the other person's limit of who they are*. And, this limit does not represent their self-worth. This boundary and reality is our best friend.

Each one of us has his or her or own free will, even if we give our power and choice away, it is ours to give. Trying to control the will of others causes harm. But, this is what I love about the intersection of psychology and Mormon theology, which is the importance of the gift of agency and protecting self-determination. Who knows why, but self-determination and diversity are part of the larger scheme of life.

Along these same lines, I'm learning how hierarchies are harmful. I can't rank my life better than my mom's or better than David Matheson's or even Jerry Buie's, who is a gay social worker and another therapist of this Group of 8. Their lives fit best for them, and mine fits best for me. Neither is better when you compare the life to the individual. I learned from one of my clients, and throughout my discussions with this group, that this idea of "do not rank" fits with the commandment of "do not judge."

We are more powerful when we are loving than when we are judgmental and aggressive. I learned this from an Aikido Master, Paul Linden, who works with trauma survivors. He taught me that when we embody and express love, than we are most powerful. We can protect ourselves more effectively and make it more possible to have an influence on others. When we embody and express love, we are open to understanding more. This doesn't mean to be passive and let aggressive people walk over you or to deny your needs. But, rather than fighting evil, it is more effective to *start good* in moments of conflict.

With my mom, if my agenda in interacting with her is to change her to think and feel like I do, then I shut down any chance of connecting with her. *Starting good*, when we face our differences, may mean to give others autonomy and independence and the space to be the best person they want to be. The final relationship outcome at least may be a peaceful coexistence and celebration of each other. David Matheson phrased it in our Group as “*dignify* the other.” This is a very different agenda than “eradicate or change the other.”

One of my teachers, Dr. Lorna Benjamin implied the same when she taught me the proverb, “Good fences make good neighbors.” This means that we each are responsible to know our own boundaries, limits, and needs while we also respect and protect our neighbor's boundaries, limits, and needs. When two neighbors build a fence between them, it can allow for positive communication between them. As we strengthen our own identity and our neighbors' identity, it allows for more peace and

thriving in the neighborhood. Good fences make good neighbors.

I have one final piece of advice. This one I heard from someone who I think was inspired to receive it. The advice she heard was “Take your place.” This could mean many things. Take your place in your community, take your place in your family or work or ward, take your place in your relationships. This does not mean to take other people’s places but take *your* place.

Some of you here may be very lost and confused and not know your place or which direction to go for your life. My hope for each you (and myself, too) is to do what you can to discover more about who *you* are and what *you* uniquely offer and then offer more of that in your relationships.

As you take your place, others will have a better chance of connecting with you. Most of us, if not all of us, want to be loved in the place where we are. Differences will always exist. Nature loves diversity. As Jim Struve has instructed us these many months in this Group of 8, the machine needs opposition to work. Growth and evolution require conflict, tension, and release.

I’m so *excited* about what we all can do together. I’m *very hopeful* that we can use these conflicts to expand viewpoints and establish a new paradigm of how to interact with each other and benefit from each other.

It is time that the LGBTQ community and the SSA community and our collective allies join together for our united welfare. This united welfare will benefit the majority as well.

I'm not sure exactly *what* all this will lead to, so stay tuned in for that. But, my thanks to each of you for being part of this new creation.