

Cultivating a Circle of Colleagues

As a nation, we are divided. We are divided by age and sex, by disability and national origin, by religion and race. And although we legally prohibit discrimination based on these divisions, abundant examples—from #MeToo to #BlackLivesMatter—remind us that divisions persist. We are also divided culturally. Although the hills and hollers of the Appalachian Mountains are geographically close to the ivy-covered halls of higher education in Boston, there exist real differences in local cultures.

Our current political polarization makes it too easy to demonstrate disdain for “others,” and contempt eventually creates walls between us, both personally and professionally (Hochschild, 2016). When I’m asked, “How do we overcome our cultural divisions and political tumult?” I respond, “Get personal!” Not offensive or disrespectful, but personal. I urge everyone to view “others” as unique individuals with their own experiences, thoughts, emotions, and politics.

To understand the feelings of individuals who are different from us, we can try to imagine ourselves in their shoes (Hochschild, 2016). We must ask questions authentically, so we can learn their stories. We must listen. It is possible, without changing our beliefs, to see reality through our neighbors’ eyes. To understand the link between their lives, their values, and their feelings, and to cross our empathy wall. *Empathy wall* can be defined as an “obstacle to the deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 5). When we

learn to listen to individuals with whom we might not agree, we often find common interests.

One way I am intentionally trying to overcome my own empathy wall is by cultivating a wide circle of nursing colleagues who do not think the way I do. I am enough like most of my nursing colleagues that we agree on 85% of life, but the more I interact with people on social media, the more I realize I bring “this-cultural-belief” or “that-cultural-norm” to every discussion. Through social media—including Twitter®—I have gained a better understanding of my own cultural biases, including my values, assumptions, and preferences. For instance, one tweep (i.e., person who uses Twitter) helped me realize that Missouri is among the worst states nationally in maternal deaths. After a Twitter discussion, I brought my new understanding to the attention of the Missouri Nurses Association and promoted reducing maternal deaths as an advocacy priority. My nursing colleagues on Twitter—who have helped me in seeing my own cultural bias—are the colleagues I have begun to value the most.

My intentional approach to social media started by following an increasingly diverse group of nursing colleagues. I found that when you connect with someone from a different viewpoint, the possibility opens for a calm exchange of ideas and opinions. Then something significant—a mutual understanding—can take place. I have found that my own opinions have been changed, because in taking a different view, my colleagues have not tried to browbeat or humiliate me. Instead, I have felt listened to and understood, even if not agreed with.

I intentionally seek and follow individuals who differ from me politically, racially, economically, nationally, and culturally. This has been a great way for me to stay informed on any topic of immediate interest to me and to learn about new topics (Shattell & Darmoc, 2017). As an added benefit, I am also learning that if I have a larger, more diverse circle, I get breaking news about things happening across geographical barriers and in near real-time.

I would like to continue this conversation beyond this editorial. Do you need to cross your own empathy wall? How are you cultivating a wide circle of colleagues? Please follow me on Twitter (@sarahoerther) and let me know how you are intentionally widening your circle of colleagues who think differently than you. What stories grab your interest? Please use the hashtag #CultivatingMyCircle. I would love to write to you 12 months from now with a summary of self-awareness-raising conversations on Twitter.

REFERENCES

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