

Arthur Brooks (00:00):

When I say the word vulnerable, what do you picture? Someone who's scared or weak? What if I told you vulnerability was actually a strength that it makes people and community stronger Allstate, along with the Aspen Institute and facing history in ourselves created the better arguments project and initiative that teaches people the importance of embracing vulnerability in order to build trust and have constructive disagreements learn more@betterarguments.org.

Tricia Johnson (00:40):

This is Aspen ideas to go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson, political and social division is running high. These days, deep rifts cut through the social fabric of our nation, our communities, and even some families conversations, devolve into arguments. Civility is oftentimes scares. Long-time radio hosts. Krista Tippett says to begin to heal and return to civility. We need to be curious and ask questions of those we don't agree with, and then really listen to their answers.

Krista Tippett (01:10):

No human beings in history has ever changed because someone told them do stupid. You all need to confront the question in ourselves of whether we want to keep being right or feeling like we're on the side of right, or whether we want things to change

Tricia Johnson (01:26):

Aspen ideas to go brings you compelling conversations from the Aspen Institute. Tippett says calling out hate and creating policies to stop. It is important, but just as important as determining what love can mean as part of the public good, that isn't love as a weak sentiment, but love defined as how we are present with others. We need to see how love can break down the differences that create separation. And we can start practicing this week around the proverbial Thanksgiving table, Tippett's radio show On Being explores, faith, ethics, and moral wisdom. She speaks with Harvard professor and social scientist, Arthur Brooks. He writes the how to build a life column for the Atlantic in this special episode, Tippett and Brooks share advice for changing the conversation at our family tables and larger society. Here's Brooks. Hi Krista,

Krista Tippett (02:14):

What a momentous year, what a momentous month, what a momentous cherry. And at the same time, it's just another day

Arthur Brooks (02:23):

And savoring. The day is the most important thing that we can do, whether it's election day, the week after election, whatever it happens to be

Krista Tippett (02:31):

One of the many very strange aspects of this time. We had a habit, is that the word civility and actually the word healing that these have become controversial. This that's become controversial language. And, um, so I I'm interested and yet I, I don't think civility is the word we can do without. And I think it's problematic when it is simplistically understood. And so many of the words we need the most, uh, like civility, like love, um, get very watered down by the way they're used. So maybe one thing we can do for

a few moments is revived them for this post 2020 world that we're going to step into and the work to be done. I mean, what, what, what does civility mean to you? What must civility be now

Arthur Brooks ([03:35](#)):

You started off, I think correctly, you said, you know, civility become controversial. And the reason is because we have this misbegotten idea that, uh, the, the, the Mark of moral courage is showing sufficient outrage toward those, with whom we disagree and that's completely wrong. I mean, this, it might be a good thing to do, but the truth is that moral courage comes not from standing up to the people with whom you disagree. It comes from standing up to the people with whom you agree on behalf of those, with whom you disagree. And, and that actually, for me, it means it's true that civility is controversial, but it's controversial in the other direction. It's not that it's, it's, it's too weak and because we should be more outraged on the contrary, I just think it's too low, a standard for, you know, good people or people that actually want to build a good country in a better world.

Arthur Brooks ([04:26](#)):

You know, if I told you Krista that my wife asked her and I are civil to each other, you'd see me. You'd say we need counseling, right. Or that, or that, or that my employees tolerate me. You'd say I have a huge HR crisis on my hands. No, the truth is if we want to make any gains, any progress, we need to take the, in the 2000 year old transgressive injunction of willing the good of the others, even when we don't agree with them. And even when we don't like them, because liking is Martin Luther King, one time said to like, as a sentimental, something we need the iron will of love you. Agree.

Krista Tippett ([05:06](#)):

I agree. I, I think the word civility is equated with niceness and politeness and what is before us and what is alienating us from each other is serious and important and politeness and niceness. And tameness aren't big enough or serious enough to meet that. Um, you know, in my mind also though, we we've come to think that civility would mean, um, indulging or compromise in and of itself, um, compromising on really important values. And, um, you know, we we've come to equate. Um, how does Arlie Hochschild say caring with capitulation? Um, but that obscures the large question before us, which is how do we share life and how do we recreate politics and civil society, which I don't think is a statement that I don't think I dissatisfaction with politics and civil society as they exist. Now, it is a statement or a question that is restricted to any side of our political spectrum.

Krista Tippett ([06:28](#)):

No, maybe, maybe at the extreme end, but most of us don't want to live this way and reframing what civility should be. I mean, for me, civility has got to me that we accept and assume that there are significant passionate differences between us and yet, how can we come to a place where those differences do not define what is possible between us, what we can create? Hmm. I think you moving to love. I, I love that love is another really water downward. Um, but in my mind, in a society in which we have learned to call out hate and name it in public and create legal categories around it, then we are also called to figure out what love can mean as a public. Good

Arthur Brooks ([07:33](#)):

Look, I completely agree. I completely agree. And once again, this reminds us that the greatest leaders throughout history have always talked openly about love, but they haven't talked about it as a, as a sentiment, as a feeling as a, as a weak thing, quite the contrary. Uh, and you said you made a point that I

really agree with deeply just a second ago, which was that it's important that we, we hold on to passionate differences while being actually able to be civil to one another, or I would prefer to love one another. I mean, that's what the best relationships are able to do. You can actually be hammer and Tom's with somebody forever and still love that person and still have a relationship with that person. The idea that we must agree my way or the highway it's all or nothing, that, that, that, that way of thinking is actually destroying our society.

Arthur Brooks ([08:25](#)):

And by the way, as a social scientist, I can tell you, it destroys marriages. It destroys friendships. This is the reason that one in six Americans have stopped talking to a family member or friend going back to the 2016 election and getting worse through the 2020 election. We can do a lot better, but, but it actually, it, it sort of raises the next question, doesn't it? Which is the how part, you know, how do we, whether it's civility or love, how do we, how do we love our political foes? Because I think we agree that it's okay for us to have political foes. We also agree that we need to love each other. So let's talk a little bit about the, uh, the how to on this, right? So what is your heart telling you? What is your head tell you about how we can actually make some progress in the next couple of years? How do we love our political enemies?

Krista Tippett ([09:18](#)):

So I think that we possess deep intelligence on what love actually is about how it actually works in life, that we don't apply in public life. And, and so I, I think actually the answer to this question is more readily at hand than, than we imagined. Um, you know, when you talk about people across time who have shifted the world on its axis, you know, Martin Luther King jr, was constantly criticized for talking about love. And he, you know, he said, I am going to keep talking about love. And he said, I'm not talking about emotional BOSH. I love that because that's mostly how that, how that word is understood. I'm talking about a hard demanding love. So if I think about what are the ingredients of love that might apply to our public life, I think what are the ingredients of love as we live it?

Krista Tippett ([10:25](#)):

And we know so many things about love that fly in the face of how we're behaving with each other right now love is so in a, in our most intimate relationships, love is it's very often, perhaps most often, not about how we feel. It's about, it's about, it's about how we are present. It's about, it's about small routine actions. It's also not very often about feeling perfectly understood or perfectly understanding or agreeing with the other person. Um, we, we tend to turn the other side of our political spectrum into caricatures. And we imagine that everybody on the other side is exactly alike. When we know in our circles of beloveds, that that is a spectrum from, from perhaps if we're lucky one or two soulmates, but then this, this array of people on whom we disagree about much on whom with whom we quarrel on much. And yet we find ways to stay in relationship because we have decided to love them.

Krista Tippett ([11:47](#)):

And it often means not talking about certain things right now. There's there's we apply emotional intelligence. And I think that a lack of emotional intelligence in our public life writ large is perhaps the most urgent thing that we have to rectify. And we have to rectify it. Whatever is happening in the white house or in Congress or in our media of choice that we're mad at. I'm very mad at my immediate choice right now, but we can start behaving like grownups and modeling that for our children in our neighborhoods, in our communities, in the civil society, on the ground.

Arthur Brooks ([12:38](#)):

If you look up the word vulnerable in the dictionary, it says susceptible to attack or injury. Yikes. It sounds like something you'd want to avoid. Right? In fact, most of us do avoid vulnerable situations like arguments that puts us in positions where our opinions might be rejected or challenged by avoiding arguments and keeping our guard up. We ensure our feelings don't get hurt, but ultimately we end up hurting our ability to connect with others. That's why Allstate along with the Aspen Institute and facing history in ourselves created the better arguments, project and initiative that teaches people, the importance of embracing vulnerability in order to build trust with others and have constructive disagreements that can unite us after all part of protecting a community is bringing it together, learn more@betterarguments.org

Arthur Brooks ([13:34](#)):

Coming up to Thanksgiving. Aren't we, uh, it's a perfect practice ground. So let's talk. I think we're going to talk in a second about literally on the ground, what advice that we can give to people at their Thanksgiving dinner with, you know, aunt Marge, who's a leftist or uncle bill who's right way. And, and, and when we can't, we can't stand it. But in the meantime, look, I mean, you, you, you said something really important here, which is that if it's too much to feel loved towards somebody with whom you disagree, it doesn't matter because at st. Thomas Aquinas, one time said to love is to, will the good of the other, uh, Abraham Lincoln said, I, I destroy my enemy when I make him my friend, another by will, by commitment, by hard edge sometimes by intellect, I one time asked, believe it or not the Dalai Lama about that because he quoted Abraham Lincoln and said, I, he loved it.

Arthur Brooks ([14:27](#)):

He said, I destroyed my enemy. When I think of my friend who said your holiness, why would you want to destroy anyone? I mean, even your enemy. And he said, no, you don't understand when I love somebody. When I make somebody, my friend, I destroyed my illusion that he or she was my enemy in the first place. So your point stands what we need to do right now to learn to our political enemies, to learn to love them is to love them is to make our commitment is to commit ourselves to the act. You know, this is interesting because Mary's therapists, I would say that the, the most important way to repair a marriage is to pretend that it's repaired, fake it till you make it. Okay. So now it's Thanksgiving dinner. Yeah. So Chris, so Thanksgiving dinners coming up in a lot of people were watching us and they just, ah, you know, after the election it's, so was brutal, has been brutal for years. And by the way, it wasn't, it was before 2016, I've got data as a social scientist that you go that, you know, going back to at least 2012, we have these motive, attribution asymmetries for both sides to the political conflict, believe that they were motivated by love and the other side by hatred. So this is not a specific to the current politicians. It's an endemic problem. How does healing begin and how does it begin at the Thanksgiving table? In a few days?

Krista Tippett ([15:56](#)):

I think the image of the Thanksgiving table is so important to reflect on. Um, as I watch that map of our country on election night, you know, the goal was to get to filling in every state with red or with blue, but what you saw as they pulled the camera out or in is that there, this, this is an illusion, there are no red States and blue States like these lines of fracture run through all of our States. They run through our counties and they run through our families. So the other side that we turn into a caricature is it's much closer than we think, and, and much more contradictory and perhaps just as maddening as before.

Krista Tippett ([16:59](#)):

But again, we can take in, um, the reality that humanity on the ground of these divisions. So I, you know, when I think about Thanksgiving dinner, I, I, I, I, um, I was influenced at the beginning of my project by some Benedictans who learned, um, in inter-religious dialogue, which was much more fraud in the mid 20th century than we can imagine now, um, to ask people to answer an important question through the story of their life. And you could still get to very high, complex, sophisticated places, but it's a very different way. The intro question, and ever since the 2016 election, I thought about that after the 2016 election, I wished that, that we could compel everybody to sit down with someone who voted the other way. And instead of, and ask the question, you know, why did you vote this way? But instead of answering it in terms of policy or issues, um, which always simplifying to ask, you know, why did you build it this way? Answer the question through the story of your life. I think that would be a new beginning, but in terms of that, we can't probably do that around a Thanksgiving table, but I promise that is a fascinating exercise. I think,

Arthur Brooks ([18:38](#)):

No, I'm just saying, you know, I asked my students, um, at the Harvard business school to tell me the story of their lives in five years, tell me what's going on in your life in five years. But first of all, I want you to be happy. I want you to imagine yourself happy, tell your son, tell your story five years from now, they're 27, 28 years old. So they're in their thirties and you know what they tell me, Krista, they, and I say, put T tell me the F the story of your life with the five reasons that you're happy in order. Cause that's a really interesting story. And you know what they tell me, number one, love, and number two, love down. Number four and five is like, you know, career and money or something, but it's love, love, love, and then stuff. That's the story.

Arthur Brooks ([19:30](#)):

And if we went to our Thanksgiving table and we said, what makes you happy? They would talk about love, love, love, and way down to the bottom of the list of your politics and the problem that we have and our Thanksgiving tables. We're talking about the ninth and 10th, most important things to us, which we don't agree on as opposed to our shared loves. It's funny because you know, in my family, we don't agree on politics. We don't, you know, I'm kind of the outlier. The truth is I'm the weird one. Um, I can't lie. I'm the odd ball, but we never get the politics. Not because we avoid it, but because we talk my brother and I, we talk about our, our beloved parents of blessed memory. We talk about, you know, the things that we grew up with and our shared faith in God, that we, the things that we care about the most and, and those shared loves are what we really need to focus on.

Arthur Brooks ([20:23](#)):

And so my advice, which is what you were getting at too, is that we're going to have an opportunity to be an opportunity, an entrepreneurial opportunity to be around people who are different than us, so that we can't, we don't have to disagree less. We disagreed better by sharing our loves with each other and in, so doing reuniting ourselves and the bonds that really make us human. And the reason that we value each other, the first place, I guarantee that the people do that at Thanksgiving and make an agenda of talking about the loves that they have, their kids, their God, their friends, the people who've passed on. They just won't have time. They just won't have time to talk about the politics. It just will get crowded out.

Krista Tippett ([21:06](#)):

You know what we're so aware of what's in the room. And even at Thanksgiving tables is anger for us. And, and, and, and one thing I know is that behind and beneath anger always is fear and pain. And I think it would be a great step forward. If we could perhaps restart that political conversation within our families. It's, it's going to be hard. We need to get to this point in public life as well, but that's, that will take us some time because we haven't created a safe, trustworthy space to speak about what has beneath the anger to speak about, again, not positions, not issues, but the hopes and fears that underlie the places we've come to politically, you know, distinct to demystify love, right? Again, to hit it to the ground of how it works, the people that you love the most we can be fierce with. Right. We can fight with, we can try, we can hold them accountable. We ask a great deal of them and all the, while we stay in relationship and we figure out how to do that.

Arthur Brooks ([22:44](#)):

That's right. That's right. And, and, you know, before, you know, this is, we need hours to talk about these things about to make them execute the executable, to make them more tangible. But I do, you know, before we finish this conversation, I do want to see if we can each give the people who are watching one really, really tangible thing to do. Right. And, and, um, and, and, and as opposed to saying, do this, actually, let's talk about what we can unlearn because you know, the truth is you talked about the anger that we have. And I talked an awful lot about my work, about the contempt that we have for each other, which is to take anger. And you mix in disgust and contempt is a complex emotion. That's what you just said is worthless that therefore you're worthless. This is the number one driver of divorces is contempt when people express contemporary each other. And these are the risks that break people apart. They're largely driven by bad habits. So in just the little time that we've got left, Krista, let's see if we can make a suggestion for everybody watching us on the one thing they should not do at the Thanksgiving table that they might've done otherwise, that would make things worse, such that they can leave the Thanksgiving table and the Thanksgiving dinner with things better. So what's the one thing to not do

Krista Tippett ([24:06](#)):

Well, what are you going to hear your answer? Wow.

Arthur Brooks ([24:10](#)):

My answer actually, believe it or not, it actually comes from the brain science research on how people perceive each other. And, you know, we have a, uh, a million ways to read the emotions of other people. And most of it is not verbal. And when we perceive that somebody training with us, with us, with the contempt, with this stain, that th that is the, that's basically somebody saying to us, I hate you because what you, you are worthless. And what you're saying is worthless. The number one way that we convey that to others unintentionally, okay. And this is what John Gottman, who is a, you know, uh, one of the greatest marriage therapists ever. He says, he can tell if a couple is going to be divorced within five years with something like 97% accuracy. You know, he's looking for eye rolling eye rolling. It's the, it's the love killer.

Arthur Brooks ([25:04](#)):

Why? Because it says that is the stupidest thing I've ever heard. And it's a habit. Now, look, I, I, you know, I have, I have young adult, a young adult children. So I S you know, they roll their eyes so hard. They're going to fall backwards in their chairs. But, but, but when somebody is your peer in an OSU love, and, and you say something that you really believe in, they roll their eyes. That kills the discourse that

kills the communication that, that cuts the bonds of potential love that we're trying to foster. And so my very practical suggestion, I mean, it's just as practical as it can be, is vowed to yourself that no matter what you hear, you will not be sarcastic. You will not be derisive. You will not be dismissive. And most of all, this Thanksgiving, it will be a no eye-rolling zone. And if you make that commitment, Thanksgiving will be better and we'll make progress. Okay.

Krista Tippett (25:59):

Yeah. I liked that. I, I, I, I can't prove this, but I think it's true that no human being in history has ever changed because someone told them they were stupid and you all need to confront the question in ourselves of whether we want to keep being right, or feeling like we're on the side of right. Or whether we want things to change. And I don't think that's a partisan question. I don't think the vast majority of us like to meet a real silent majority, it's all of us on left of center, right. Of center who don't want to pass on this way of being political to our children. Um, I think the, the advice I have is pre-work to your no, eye-rolling ask questions that are really questions. Like we are so skilled. I miss our questions, our arguments with Dan conclusions and really being present, really creating that space for relationship, um, needs real curiosity, like really wanting to understand.

Krista Tippett (27:10):

I don't think many of us have turned up every Thanksgiving table in that posture. We've pretended to understand we've wanted to have the conversation or the debate mustering, real curiosity. It's something that you may have to go away in a room before the party starts, um, to really get settled in yourself, to, to put this New York to one side, to assume good intent, to imagine that there was pain and fear mixed up with the anger. And to get curious about that, to care about that, to know how contradictory you are and the people you agree with most are and give the other person the benefit of the doubt that they are that interesting and that full of contradiction. Um, and ask a real question and, and, uh, uh, uh, a measuring stick of whether you're really feeling curious is when that conversation starts, are you really ready to be surprised? And if you are that the consecrated venture

Arthur Brooks (28:24):

That's right. And the greatest thing about love is it truly is the adventure that life promises when we're living up to our highest standards, and we can have it, it's open to us. We just have to take it Christa. What a delight it's been to be with you. I hope that you have a happy and lung filled Thanksgiving.

Krista Tippett (28:46):

Thank you, Arthur. It's wonderful to see with you.

Tricia Johnson (28:53):

Krista Tippett is the host and creator of on being a radio show that embraces complexity and conversations with thought leaders from all backgrounds. She receives the national humanities medal for thoughtfully delving into the mysteries of human existence. Harvard professor and writer, Arthur Brooks is a social scientist who uses science and philosophy to provide people with strategies to live their best lives. Their discussion was recorded in October and as part of unfinished live and online event series produced in collaboration with Aspen ideas partner, unfinished, learn more@unfinished.com. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen ideas to go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow us on social media at Aspen ideas. Listen on our website, Aspen ideas.org, and sign up for our newsletter. Today's show

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was produced by Shauna Lewis. Our theme music is by Wanderly I'm Trisha Johnson. Thanks for listening.

Arthur Brooks ([29:47](#)):

Let's be honest. No one likes to feel vulnerable, but as the saying goes, what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. That's why Allstate along with the Aspen Institute and Facing History and Ourselves created the Better Arguments project and initiative that teaches people the importance of embracing vulnerability in order to build trust and have constructive disagreements that can strengthen our communities, learn more@betterarguments.org.