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ON BRIDGING

Evidence and Guidance from
Real-World Cases

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john a. powell



Othering & Belonging
Institute at UC Berkeley

The Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley brings together researchers, organizers, stakeholders, communicators, and policymakers to identify and eliminate the barriers to an inclusive, just, and sustainable society in order to create transformative change. We are a diverse and vibrant hub generating work centered on realizing a world where all people belong, where belonging entails being respected at a level that includes the right to contribute to and make demands upon society and political and cultural institutions.

About the authors

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ON BRIDGING

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INTRODUCTION



As the pace of change in our world accelerates and intensifies, humanity is confronting unprecedented global challenges and uniquely transformative opportunities. Urgent threats in this moment meet long-standing, ever-appalling underlying injustices: the climate crisis, economic inequality, endemic military conflict, the coronavirus pandemic, police brutality, systemic racism, and more. At a deep, primal level, this degree of transformation triggers insecurity regarding our fundamental mortality and our ability to survive. These concerns are so significant, it is no wonder that a permeating sense of unease seems to be growing. As we approach uncertain futures, there are many paths we can take: some encourage greater cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity, while others incite more fear, polarization, scarcity, and competition.

Leaders play an oversized role in giving energy and meaning to the stories and strategies we collectively and individually tell in response. Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Narendra Modi in India, and Donald Trump in the US, for example, rose to power with authoritarian agendas, taking advantage of this uncertainty to:

- propagate concerns of moral and physical “purity” as a condition for in-group membership, exacerbating beliefs that some people or groups are less pure and therefore deemed less worthy and even less human
- perpetuate existing prejudices and expand new ones that encourage people to: a) view individuals and groups as threatening “others” and b) continue to alienate, disparage, and oppress them
- use divisive or dehumanizing rhetoric such as describing individuals or groups as pests, using labels like “thugs,” or framing migration as an “invasion”
- scapegoat groups to externalize blame
- call on the public to discriminate against, demean, attack, and/or harm groups and individuals they deem inferior
- use media to share propaganda, spin myths, and boost unsubstantiated theories as “truth”
- suppress all critique and claim that dissenting opinions are unpatriotic

These tactics cause us to deny the full humanity and mutuality in one another—what we call “breaking.” They impact our accepted cultural norms, our ways of participating in society, and our very sense of self. These practices are not just seen in interpersonal interactions, but are embedded in our structures and cultures. When we turn inward and recoil in a fear-driven response, we not only miss opportunities to build new connections, but we weaken existing relationships and networks, destabilize democratic processes and institutions, and disrupt our ability to boldly address the challenges we face today.

This is the time to discern between actions that can instigate more suffering through breaking, and those that can lead to compassion, cohesion, and inclusion through bridging. Breaking causes fractures; bridging creates solidarity. Through the lens of bridging and the examples explored in this paper, we can understand what is required, from an individual to an institutional level, to strengthen practices and principles that offer a path forward to help us realize a world where all belong.

BREAKING: US VS. THEM

Breaking describes the fracture lines we create or maintain when our cultural or social orders propagate a fabricated notion of separateness between individuals and groups. Actions, behaviors, policies, and programs oriented around breaking pit us against one another along lines of difference, such as race, gender, religion, citizenship, education, and political party. Breaking is often rooted in a sense of scarcity and threat. An “other” is identified and separated out or scapegoated, and then made to seem either dangerous or in competition for limited resources, which can be material or symbolic. The apparent threat need not be real for breaking to take hold. Civil society is weakened by these efforts that diminish our trust in one another, loosen social connections, and disrupt our ability to cooperate and compromise, which ultimately threatens democracy itself.

The hard breaking story:

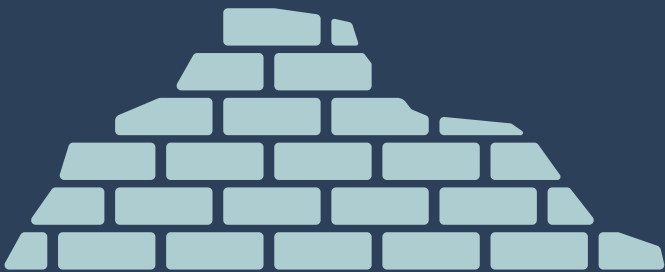
Hard breaking creates exclusion through “tribal” belonging that leverages strict in-group membership where access is based on holding a specific, narrow identity and hating non-group members. For millennia, white cis-gender heterosexual males have accumulated disproportionate resources and power through a “dominate and destroy” strategy. The white supremacist/white nationalist resurgence in the past several years is an example of hard breaking on the rise. Today, this group engages in hard breaking tactics like hate crimes, placing migrant children in cages, building walls, and inciting genocide.

One story at the root of this stems from a claim that demographic and social change will facilitate minoritized groups to take over the privileges of the dominant group through a “great replacement.” It has proven appealing to extremist fringe groups as it can be applied effectively in every nation around the world in conjunction with a call to return to the past, such as “Make America Great Again” (Bolsonaro and Modi have similar calls in their respective countries). It is also compelling to more mainstream conservatives and to white lower and middle class people worried about losing their economic and social privileges in the face of growing inequality. Undoubtedly this drives an impulse for high-status groups like white male Christians to protect “what’s theirs.” Anxiety about declining social status, for instance, was a greater predictor of support for Donald Trump in the 2016 elections than declining economic status.⁽¹⁾

The underlying idea is that the future is fearful and uncertain, so it should be rejected in favor of a past that never really was and certainly will not be. Once the intolerant environment is created and fomented with the aforementioned strategies, it is possible to pursue discriminatory and hateful policies directed at out-groups who are considered less than human. Fear and discontent are channeled into political gains with a vision that is intolerant, exclusionary, and backward-looking, with millions galvanized around it.

TYPES OF BREAKING

As an institute, we explore this concept on a spectrum that ranges from soft to hard breaking.

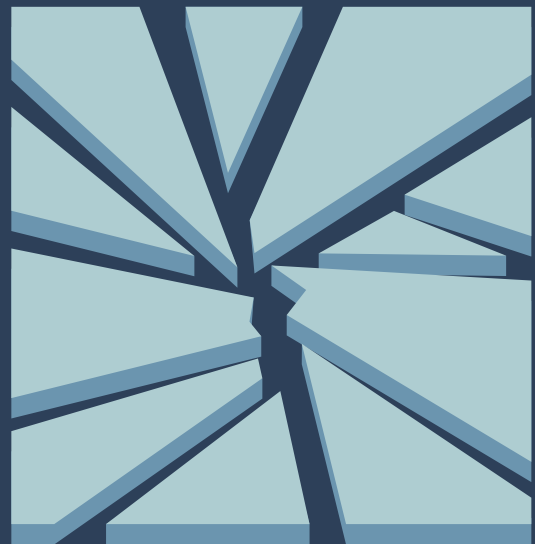


SOFT BREAKING:

- creates hierarchies and believes in inferiority/superiority
- limits participation to certain individuals or groups
- assigns roles with restricted access or opportunities
- leverages segregation as a strategy
- requires “other” individuals/groups to surrender their differences and/or their sovereignty

HARD BREAKING:

- denies the full humanity in others and sees them as a problem or threat
- is associated with authoritarianism and ethnic populism
- promotes hatred and disgust of others; proposes violence against them



BRIDGING: A BIGGER WE

Recently popularized and evolved by Robert Putnam in his book "Bowling Alone," bridging and its related concepts have been explored across numerous disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, human geography, and theology, as well as through theories of Black feminism, social capital, Buddhism, and cultural Marxism, among others. As a concept, bridging helps us investigate concepts of trust, social cohesion, reciprocity, civic bonds, collaboration, cooperation, communalism, and mutual aid.

Through its unique ability to cross socioeconomic and power differentials, as well as social boundaries, bridging helps us turn outward to form connections and partnerships between dissimilar individuals and groups, while maintaining and growing a greater inner awareness. Bridging thus increases empathy and acceptance of diverse peoples, values, and beliefs while giving us greater access to different parts of ourselves. Building bridges to unite diverse groups can help expand our social networks, revitalize our communities, and establish a more fair and equitable society.⁽²⁾ Bridging reminds us that we are inextricably interconnected and it helps us build a large “we” that does not demand assimilation.

Just as some leaders play an outsized role in exacerbating breaking, others support bridging by:

- promoting principles of inclusion, resilience, cooperation, and mutuality
- prioritizing the well-being of all via practices like targeted universalism⁽³⁾ to address inequalities
- maintaining open dialogue, encouraging debate, addressing critique, and engaging questions via the media or directly with the public
- leading with honesty, compassion, and a long-term vision for well-being

- direction-giving, meaning-making and empathy⁽⁴⁾
- developing transparent frameworks for decision-making
- encouraging action for the collective good

Covid-19 is revealing our world’s strongest leaders to be those who exemplify the qualities above. For example, the swift leadership of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern helped stop the virus’ spread in her country and temporarily eradicated it entirely. Her strong, compassionate, unifying, and trustworthy approach has reinforced the reputation she earned following the 2019 white supremacist mass shooting attack on a Christchurch mosque. In daily televised briefings and Facebook Live sessions, Ardern urged her “team of five million” to respond through common humanity, solidarity, and interconnectedness, recognizing their responsibility and duty to keep each other healthy. The “we” in Ardern’s circle of human concern includes every New Zealander.

By contrast, other leaders have dismissed or harmed entire populations within their nations, like Brazil’s Bolsonaro whose government has been accused of “flagrant disregard of the epidemiological risk” when entering vulnerable indigenous villages during the pandemic without respecting quarantine protocols.⁽⁵⁾ Ardern acted decisively and swiftly, provided a clear plan of action and data-driven response frameworks, made meaning for the public through clear messaging about collective responsibility to break the chain of transmission, united the population to protect each other, and engaged in humanizing dialogue through empathetic, transparent communication.⁽⁶⁾ She demonstrates the power of leaders to surmount unprecedented crises by promoting solidarity and unity through bridging.

Types of Bridging

Below are important concepts to frame our understanding of bridging:

Bridging is not same-ing.

One pitfall of a common liberal response to change is to smooth over difference as though it does not matter, which bypasses needed reparative work caused by the harms of disparate treatment and impact of prejudice and discrimination. This shows up, for example, as:

- Colorblindness
- Assimilation
- Erasure
- Hollow or superficial changes
- Lack of accountability to systemic injustice

Bridging contains multitudes.

Bridging takes countless forms, and though they all link individuals and groups across a chasm of difference, not all bridges are equal. Examples of bridge types:

- Short — long bridges
 - Short bridges: a university student in a college town and their elderly neighbor
 - Long bridges: an abolitionist and a member of the Trump administration; someone who is gay and someone who is homophobic
- Weak – sturdy bridges:
 - Weak bridges: a bridge between a member of the Occupy Movement and members of the Tea Party – this is possible but can be fragile
 - Sturdy bridges: 12 members of the Occupy Movement and 12 members of the Tea Party unite toward a shared goal. In order for this, numerous actions would need to occur to reach agreement, making for a strong bridge
- Transactional – transformational bridges:
 - Transactional: Coalitions of interest that unite to accomplish a shared goal, like a group of tree farmers and mountain bikers working together to keep nature trails clean and safe.

Once the objective is accomplished, the group may dissipate.

- Transformational: A friendship between a former KKK member and a Black person. To form a relationship across this chasm requires healing, deep understanding, a change of mind and heart, an appreciation for one another’s shared humanity, respect, and more.

Transformational bridging creates true belonging.

Given the level of breaking occurring, bridging at a transformational level is needed to respond effectively. The reality is authoritarian movements target our deep, ingrained, automatic fear-driven responses, governed by our amygdala and limbic systems. Transformational bridging can actually help us go toward those same primal aspects of our human nature—but instead, encourage the opposite response. We can work to heal the ways we have been programmed or indoctrinated by systems of power and oppression to find “others” when there were only always allies and kin. Creating transformational bridges can help us carve a path toward mutuality by:

- reaching a deeper, ontological level of our human experience by truly seeing, hearing and respecting someone, and making space for one another requiring attention, not agreement
- altering neuropathways from viewing someone with disgust, revulsion, prejudice, and self-absorption to see the common humanity in their fellow person, and growing toward compassion and care from there
- representing the essence of the South African term “ubuntu,” often translated as “I am because we are,” or “the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity”
- allowing us to co-construct a larger “we” that has space for differences and similarities to co-exist in common humanity



BRIDGING STORIES

Now, we turn to a deeper exploration of bridging through research, narratives, examples, and efforts that can be fuel to not only override the compulsion and the dogma that incite us to break, but to create deep transformation toward a society of true belonging. Bridging examples include:

- Arms trade activists that have linked arms with human rights campaigners to stop the flow of weapons to places like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel
- Sustainable farming advocates who partner with indigenous communities and environmentalists
- Anti-corruption forces that cooperate with economic justice advocates pushing for greater regulation of global financial institutions

Here we explore more bridging stories to bring this concept to life and help us strengthen practices and principles to embody and make real in our society. The following examples are bridging interventions and their long term impacts as studied by researchers and scholars.

EMPIRICALLY STUDIED APPLICATIONS

The Second Chances Florida Campaign demonstrates how universal human values can unite diverse groups to expand human rights.

The Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRRRC), an organization run by returning citizens (people with past felony convictions) and led by Desmond Meade, launched the Second Chances campaign to restore voting rights to Floridians with felony records upon completion of all sentence terms. In Meade's work leading up to the 2018 election, in which he tirelessly gathered the 800,000 signatures needed to place the Voting Restoration Amendment on the ballot, he recognized Republican support was essential. Florida voted for Trump and has not elected a Democratic governor in nearly 20 years. Meade reached out to Neil Volz, a former Republican lobbyist who also holds a felony conviction. They formed a powerful partnership across their differences—Meade, a Black progressive, and Volz, a white conservative—to amplify the felon voting rights restoration movement. Volz collected signatures at Trump rallies while Meade gathered support from Bernie supporters, leveraging a unifying message to attract people from all walks of life bonded by a universal human desire to receive a second chance at life with the message: “Floridians believe in second chances, we need to make sure the law does too.” The multicultural, multilingual campaign garnered support from the ACLU, Catholic bishops, veterans, NFL stars such as Warrick Dunn, entertainer John Legend, and the evangelical group Christian Coalition of America.⁽⁷⁾ Amendment 4 passed with 65 percent of votes in favor. On January 8, 2019, an estimated 1.4 million ex-felons in Florida became eligible to vote.

The Vietnam Women's Union and Dutch environmental groups form a cross-cultural, cross-national alliance, called ResilNam, to combat the climate crisis by planting mangroves and mitigating gender inequality. Hué, Vietnam is on the frontlines of the global

climate crisis: rising sea levels, deadly floods, temperatures so hot that farmers plant rice at night, and rainfall so low that waters are now too brackish for rice and many fish to thrive. In response, Pham Thi Dieu My, director of the Center for Social Research and Development (CSR D), partnered with the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) to mobilize her community to take action. In 2017, she co-founded ResilNam, a unique cross-cultural, cross-national partnership between the VWU and two groups from the Netherlands: the Institute for Environmental Studies and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.⁽⁸⁾

ResilNam strengthens the role of women in disaster risk management and resilience through ecosystem based adaptations (EbA), specifically planting, conserving, and sustainably managing mangroves on the coast of Vietnam. EbA is innately participatory and inclusive because it leverages existing community assets versus implementing top-down measures, thus offering a powerful means of boosting the role of women and other vulnerable groups. ResilNam estimates that 12 coastal communities of approximately 12,000 people will directly benefit from the new mangroves they have planted, with an additional 180,000 people benefiting indirectly in surrounding communities. Since its founding, ResilNam has hosted capacity building workshops for 300 women, established a microcredit program for local households, provided training to host income-generating tours of the mangroves, and more. The project has transformed the women of Hué, says Tran Thi Phuong Tien. “The women are more confident. They have more skills and knowledge,” she said. “They are better equipped to take action before, during and after a flood. They are equal with men.”

The California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative galvanized labor organizers, AAPI communities, and environmental justice organizers to pass legislation that addresses workers' rights, economic injustice, and environmental issues simultaneously.

The California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative is a joint effort between Asian American Pacific Islander, labor, and environmental justice organizers who mobilized at the intersection of environmental and economic justice. This was motivated in 2005 when Asian Health Services' (AHS) community healthworkers noted an epidemic of health issues, such as asthma, chronic rashes, and miscarriages that nail salon workers experience. In response, AHS established the Collaborative to advocate, develop policy, conduct research, and build coalitions for a healthier, more sustainable, and more just nail salon industry.

Their efforts led California Governor Gavin Newsom to sign AB 647 into law in 2019, which requires cosmetics manufacturers and importers to post online information on occupational safety and health for a substance or product, a critical step in transparency and access to information for workers exposed to toxic chemicals. The movement has also grown, leading to the formation of womensvoices.org, which organizes women for environmental and economic justice to eliminate toxic chemicals from our environment.

Racial integration during the Korean War led to long term neighborhood-level racial integration and reduced prejudice.

One of the largest, most rapid desegregation events in American history was the racial integration of the US Army during the Korean War (1950-1953). A recent study investigated the impact of this significant episode by matching veterans to social security and cemetery data. The author found that “wartime racial integration between white and Black soldiers caused white veterans to live in more racially diverse neighborhoods, to a degree that in present-day context can be understood as the difference between Central Harlem and the Upper East Side. They also married spouses with less distinctly white names. These results provide evidence that large-scale interracial contact reduces prejudice on a long-term basis.”⁽⁹⁾

BRIDGING STORIES AND EXAMPLES

We now turn to examples of bridging that have not yet been studied or evaluated, but which offer inspiring stories of belonging in practice. Transcending identity-, issue-, and movement-based silos enables cross-movement collaborations to develop agendas that address complex, intersectional issues of mutual concern. This shows us how bridging can be valuable in disrupting social, political, environmental, and economic power imbalances that shape and perpetuate inequities.

Since the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in May 2020, global protests against police brutality display tremendous solidarity and demonstrate countless bridging actions for unprecedented societal change.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement started in 2013 to highlight the brutality and injustice inflicted on Black communities by the US society and state, particularly through law enforcement. In mere weeks since May 25, 2020, the BLM movement has galvanized breathtaking changes that are sweeping the nation and the world. Here are a few highlights that exemplify bridging in action:

- The National Football League (NFL) was once a powerful and bitter rival of BLM, but it has now fully embraced the movement—though even in this moment, such transformation did not come easily. League commissioner Roger Goodell released an ambiguous statement following George Floyd’s murder that angered both the NFL’s players and team owners. Within a week, some of the NFL’s biggest stars wrote a new script for Goodell via their own video statements demanding action from the NFL. Goodell responded with a new video, repeating their statements nearly verbatim: “We, the National Football League, condemn racism and the systematic oppression of Black people,” Goodell

said. “We, the National Football League, admit we were wrong for not listening to NFL players earlier, and encourage all players to speak out and peacefully protest. We, the National Football League, believe that Black lives matter.”⁽¹⁰⁾ This has already notably influenced public opinion: opposition to kneeling during the national anthem has declined by double digits since 2018, when 51% considered this “unacceptable,” to now 39%.⁽¹¹⁾

- Republican/conservative politicians, like Mitt Romney and George W. Bush, have professed newfound support for BLM. Romney marched alongside protesters in Washington, DC. Former president George W. Bush, along with his wife Laura, released a statement stating they “are anguished by the brutal suffocation of George Floyd and disturbed by the injustice and fear that suffocate our country,” and called threats against protestors “a shocking failure.” Both Romney and Bush’s actions are noteworthy efforts toward unity and solidarity with protestors in the pursuit to end systemic racism.⁽¹²⁾
- BLM receives wide support from Americans: two-thirds of US adults say they support the movement, including majorities of white (60%), Hispanic (77%), and Asian (75%) Americans. The growing diversity within the movement is illustrative and informative for bridging practice, as recent research suggests that public support for BLM from non-Blacks leads co-racial individuals (those of the same race) to view the movement more positively, thus increasing support for the movement overall.⁽¹³⁾

These examples are just a few of countless since late May 2020 that symbolize a sea change for both individuals and institutions, dislodging entrenched belief systems and ideologies, abandoning norms and rebuking pressure to “stick with the party line” toward unification and solidarity. While they may not represent a sufficient level of change, these are important representations of bridging in this historic moment to abolish longstanding systems of oppression.

Jewish and Arab women defy voter suppression of Arab Bedouins in the Israeli election by helping Bedouin women get to the polls.

The grassroots organization Zazim, a group of “Jewish and Arab citizens working together for democracy and equality,” led an initiative to protect Israeli Bedouin Arab women’s right to vote. With anti-Arab sentiment and Arab voter suppression on the rise, Zazim organized a mobilization plan for the fall 2019 Knesset elections to connect Arab Bedouin women in remote villages to polling stations through a complex minibus system. Just three days before the election, the head of Israel’s Central Elections Committee, under guidance from Prime Minister Netanyahu’s Likud party, suddenly implemented a new rule that prohibited an organization like Zazim from busing voters. To stay above the law, Zazim was forced to cancel its efforts.

Yet within hours, a rapid response plan spread through social media connections and volunteer email listservs. Despite threats of violence from the extremist right-wing group, Im Tirtzu, hundreds of volunteers sprung to action using Waze and their personal cars instead of mini buses to bring hundreds of Bedouin women from remote villages to their polling stations.⁽¹⁴⁾ Voter turnout in Arab communities rose to 60 percent—10 percent higher than the spring elections.

“The Jewish volunteers gave us hope,” said Ghadir Ghadir, a Palestinian feminist activist, “and showed us that the only way to bring change for the better for everyone is for Jews and Arabs, and especially Jewish and Arab women, to work together.”

‘How can you hate me when you don’t even know me?’ A Black musician befriends KKK members, helping 200+ people leave the organization.

Although Daryl Davis has played across the globe with world-famous musicians like Chuck Berry and Little Richard, in his free time he meets and befriends members of the Ku Klux Klan. In an age of

disconnection, Davis engages in face-to-face interactions, seeking to understand and ameliorate hate, one by one. “When I respect that right and sit down and listen to them, they in turn reciprocate and sit down and listen to me. I’m not trying to convert them. I’m just setting an example and letting them make up their own minds,” Davis said in an interview with *Complex*.⁽¹⁵⁾

His approach is rooted in dialogue and understanding. Davis studied the Klan and demonstrated his knowledge of the organization in conversations with Klan members that began to chip away at their belief systems through conversation that sought to uncover commonalities. “...when two enemies are talking, they’re not fighting,” he said. “It’s when the talking ceases that the ground becomes fertile for violence. If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy—it doesn’t have to be about race, it could be about anything...you will find that you both have something in common. As you build upon those commonalities, you’re forming a relationship and as you build about that relationship, you’re forming a friendship. That’s what would happen. I didn’t convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves.” To date, Davis is responsible for an estimated 200 members leaving the Klan.

Neighbors form a human chain to protect a Tennessee man from ICE.

In an era of unexpected and frequent ICE raids across the United States, one man in Nashville, Tennessee was barricaded in his vehicle with his son as ICE agents attempted to detain him. Neighbors arrived at the scene to support the man and his son by bringing water, gas, and wet rags so they could remain in their van.⁽¹⁶⁾ Neighbors reported their concern and outrage, as some had known the family for over a decade.

Eventually, after nearly four hours, a coalition of diverse neighbors gathered large enough to form a

human chain that allowed the father and son to run into their home, creating a literal network of protection to keep them safe. The neighbors once again formed a chain of protection later that evening when the family needed to return to their car. Stephanie Teatro, co-executive director of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC), tweeted that she was “in awe of the fierce response in Nashville today by the family, their loving neighbors, committed and trained organizers, and accountable elected officials.”

Somali youth and a longtime high school soccer coach work together to integrate refugees in the overwhelmingly white former mill town of Lewiston, Maine.

Within one decade, the small, overwhelmingly white town of Lewiston, Maine swelled with over 7,000 Somali refugees. Anti-immigrant and racist incidents spiked, fueled by the intolerance of longtime residents, ultimately leading the mayor to publicly ask Somalis to stop coming. Mike McGraw, a local high school biology teacher and soccer coach, saw an opportunity: as the Somali youth filled the town’s parks with pick-up soccer games, McGraw believed that their passion for the game could help heal divisive wounds and growing tension by bringing these young players onto Lewiston’s high school soccer team.⁽¹⁷⁾

Though the youth and the Somali community at large continued to receive racist messages at first, McGraw held the team together, integrating the players across racial lines. “This is how a team plays. This is how I want you to be on the field and off the field: together,” he told the boys. “Sometimes our communities don’t understand each other, but you can show the adults how it’s supposed to be. By playing together, that’ll send a message that our cultures can get along.” Lewiston ultimately became a powerhouse team, winning the city’s first state championship in soccer. Their thrilling victories drew large crowds and brought the divided town together toward a more unified, inclusive “we.”

“Social Kitchen—the Other Person” is a free food for all program that combats isolation, increases acceptance, and unites people in common humanity through cooking and eating together across Greece.

“Social Kitchen—The Other Person” is a program that began in 2011 when the founder, Athens resident Konstantinos Polychronopoulos, observed the indifference of his fellow citizens to children searching through trash bins for food during Greece’s economic collapse.⁽¹⁸⁾ Polychronopoulos distributed prepared sandwiches to the city’s poor. Although at first they were hesitant, when he sat down and joined them to eat, they became more relaxed. This small exchange showed him that alienation can feel worse than even hunger, but common humanity can bring people closer. The idea came to him to cook in the streets for everyone, using donated pots, pans, portable stoves, and food provided by the community, what he calls “live cooking,” “as an act of solidarity and a manifestation of love for all people with the hope to awaken consciousness.”⁽¹⁹⁾ The initiative has served more than 11 million meals and 15 similar programs have launched across Greece to fight alienation using food. The kitchens help people find meaning, fight depression and isolation, and learn to accept one another. During the height of the refugee crisis, The Other Human served over 3,000 meals daily.

Farmers, landowners, university students, ministers, and environmentalists find common ground in the fight against a pipeline.⁽²⁰⁾

A growing coalition of diverse lowans are uniting to fight the proposed Dakota Access pipeline, which would cross 18 counties in the state of Iowa and move up to 570,000 barrels of oil from North Dakota's Bakken oil fields to Patonka, Illinois. Angie Carter, an Iowa State University graduate student who has helped organize the coalition, explains, “we have members who have really diverse perspectives and normally wouldn't be in a room together, but they're united in their opposition to this project...We have a lot of farmers, private-property folks and

some county supervisors who are probably conservative about a lot of issues but are upset about the eminent domain issue," she said. "People are mad about this for a lot of reasons," including reliance on oil, possible environmental damage from the pipeline, land rights and damage to crop and livestock operations.” This unique collection of allies share concerns that span a spectrum of issues. “There are issues that transcend political parties and transcend the left-right continuum...and this is one of them," said Ralph Rosenberg, executive director of the Iowa Environmental Council.

The Greater Good Science Center's Bridging Differences initiative mixes science and storytelling to help address political and cultural polarization.

The two-year initiative by Greater Good Science Center highlights and disseminates research-based principles for fostering positive intergroup relationships.⁽²¹⁾ Through articles, videos, podcasts, activities, and exercises, the Center calls attention to common themes, best practices, skills and social conditions that are critical to reducing polarization and promoting more constructive dialogue. Further, the initiative aims to reach the “gatekeepers” on the front lines of efforts to bridge divides between various groups. This includes not only mediators and people leading organizations exclusively devoted to cross-group understanding, but also K-12 educators, local politicians, workplace managers, and leaders of faith-based groups and other community-based organizations.

Weave: The Social Fabric Project of the Aspen Institute aims to repair our social fabric by highlighting stories of people working across America to end isolation and loneliness and weave inclusive communities.⁽²²⁾

The Aspen Institute defines weavers as those who make the effort to build connections and make others feel valued, view their community as home and try to make it welcoming, treat neighbors as family regardless of outward differences, and find meaning

and joy in caring for others. One example of a weaver is demonstrated by the story of Aisha Butler, a resident of Englewood, Chicago who recalled “almost giving up on” her community. Butler was saddened by fellow residents that tried to leave for another community with different opportunities. She used this as a catalyst to grow a coalition of residents with many different views, but with the common desire to see their community succeed. RAGE, or Residents Association of Greater Englewood, was formed, and together they created the Large Lot program where residents could purchase vacant lots near their homes and turn them into beautiful community spaces. Butler created a space of healing for community members to gather in times of tragedy and in joy and leisure. As a community organizing effort, RAGE encouraged over 300 residents to apply for the first cycle of the Large Lot program. RAGE helped preserve and revitalize spaces for existing residents to enjoy, prevented many spaces from staying empty and decrepit, or from being purchased by an investor or corporation.

StoryCorps: The US’ largest oral history project captures stories that unite us through common humanity and a shared understanding that every story matters.”(23)

StoryCorps was founded to honor the importance and impact of storytelling and oral history. Its mission to “preserve and share humanity’s stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world” strengthens bonds between people, deepens our appreciation for listening to one another, and reinforces an understanding that “everyone’s story matters.” StoryCorps has collected almost 75,000 interviews with 150,000 participants across the US to become the largest oral history project of its kind. The organization has been committed to bridging since its inception, but shifted its content after the 2016 election to respond to the “incivility” of the presidential race, said StoryCorps CEO Robin Sparkman. In 2018, they launched the One Small Step initiative to help match people with opposing

political views to share civil conversations. StoryCorps founder Dave Isay explained that, “the dream of One Small Step is basically to remind people that people who they disagree with politically are actually living, breathing human beings, and just get them together, not to talk about politics, but to see the humanity in someone who they might have forgotten was a human being.”(24)

The Welcome to America Project (WTAP) helps refugees start their new lives in America with critical resources and a compassionate welcome.(25)

WTAP was borne from tragedy transmuted into love. Terrence Manning was one of many lives lost in the World Trade Center terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. Shortly after his death, his sister-in-law Carolyn was inspired by a story in their local paper about a refugee family that fled persecution in Afghanistan and struggled to resettle in America. Carolyn recognized the common humanity in this family seeking universal needs: safety, housing, and a future free of fear for themselves and their children. She and her husband created the Welcome to America Project in Terrence’s memory. WTAP has since helped over 2,000 refugee families through donations, warm welcomes, and meaningful, continued connections. Their intention is to help celebrate refugees and accelerate their self-sufficiency through community support.



CONCLUSION: BELONGING IN ACTION

We can turn our attention to one version of our current reality: that our common bond is wearing away and that we must fear one another to survive. Or, we can pivot toward ever-present examples of hope and find that solidarity is the true healing modality that enables us to thrive. The threats we face today, from climate change to Covid-19, cannot be survived without collaboration and cooperation through bridging. A profound commitment to bridging is essential to counter the narrative of hard breaking that has captured the hearts and minds of millions through fear.

Stories and case studies of bridging, as illustrated in the previous pages, not only offer a critical salve in an increasingly fractured world, but also provide tangible frameworks and replicable strategies illustrating how to unify across difference, build coalitions, boost collective resilience, and support community revitalization. These stories teach us that oneness is not sameness, and that we can overcome the false illusion of separateness by acknowledging and honoring our differences to weave toward common purpose. We can transcend the notion that difference divides us, and instead see that diversity makes us stronger and more resilient.

As an institute dedicated to exploring both the intuitive and intricate nature of belonging, the concept of bridging helps us crystallize a collective understanding of this essential notion. As we continue to facilitate societal belonging, we are inspired by trailblazing research on compassion through the work of Dr. Tania Singer, who developed “heart-centered listening,” also known as “contemplative dyads,” where two people participate in meditative listening and connection.⁽²⁶⁾ This interpersonal practice is proven to reduce cortisol stress in both participants by 50 percent.⁽²⁷⁾ More tangibly, we have also explored the power of shared sacred sites as one of the most profound illustrations of peaceful coexistence across different backgrounds and beliefs—a potent example of bridging toward belonging.⁽²⁸⁾

We look forward to expanding this collection of research and stories to channel this moment of radical transformation and help nurture a society that recognizes the humanity of all people, cares for the earth, and celebrates our inherent interconnectedness. This moment finds us on a precipice, and we can choose to either continue the well-worn path of exclusion, supremacy, and othering, fueled by narratives of fear and threats, or we can elevate existing stories and write new ones of mutuality and interdependence toward a more inclusive “we,” ripe with possibility.

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