## INTRODUCTION

If we want to live in a civil society, we must be willing talk with those with whom we disagree. This is the premise with which I begin. But how do we do that? Particularly when the likelihood is high that it will go awry?

Conflict, disagreement, and misunderstanding can arise unexpectedly during the course of anyone's day. We may get triggered, sucked into an argument we didn't see coming, propping one set of facts up against another with neither side listening, and eventually wondering what the hell just happened.

After spending the last three years focused on this topic, I'm more convinced than ever that (1) we all benefit from ideas that challenge us and get us to think anew and (2) no matter our political, religious, or philosophical beliefs, we can disagree without being disagreeable.

As important as political conversations are, the ideas given here can be applied to any conversation you deem "difficult" from marital disagreements and parent-teen clashes to neighborhood standoffs and workplace disputes. We can disagree with someone we love and still love them. And so, perhaps a more inclusive subtitle would be, *How to hold a difficult conversation at a difficult time*.

In any case, the first goal of the conversations I describe here is understanding. A difficult conversation need not question the other's judgment, engage in name calling, diminish the other person's self-worth, or resort to threats or bullying. Of equal importance, these conversations are not intended to convert or convince.

Not intended, that's the important point. One or the other of you may wind up changing your point of view. This is not to be negated but, it is important to understand this booklet will not work if you set out thinking one of you just needs to change.

Instead, think of your disagreement as a mystery that intrigues you both. Strive together to discover just where your impasse is, why it is you disagree so vigorously. What have each of you not understood until now? If you can think of it as an adventure you're undertaking together, you'll go further.

The need for people of diverse views to be able to talk together has a history as long as democracy itself, back to the Greeks. Socrates taught that civil discourse was a "dialectic" -- a public dialogue to uncover truth -- and would resolve conflicts within a society.

Later, Cicero, the Roman orator and statesman of the first century BC, introduced the term civil society (*societas civilis*) and held that human beings are inherently rational and have the capacity to gather for a common cause to maintain peace. That era ended when feudalism arrived and the idea of "Just War" preoccupied political thought until the Enlightenment of the 18th century, theoretically at least.

Civil conversations are hard to find these days. Someone says to us, “We have to talk” and we look for ways to run. But, if the idea of holding a difficult conversation for the purpose of healing our divided world seems too frightening or unrealistic at present, know that it has been done before.

Think of the negotiations in the early 1990s between the African National Congress (ANC) and South Africa’s ruling National Party, initially in secret, which led to the end of apartheid.

Think of Northern Ireland, and their seemingly endless internal wars between the Protestants and Catholics, the Loyalists and the Republicans.

Think of the drug war years in Colombia, and the way in which two warring factions came together: FARC and ELN.

Think of our own Civil War and of Lincoln’s call to find our “better angels.”

Three generations later, in the 1930s and ‘40s when fascism threatened to land on our shores, deep disagreements over electrical expansion into rural areas led to USDA programs we still have. Do you know how? Urban politicians went to rural farms across the Midwest and listened to them.

When I was growing up in the 1950s and ‘60s, the Emily Post books on etiquette taught that, in polite conversation, we must stay away from two topics that are central to how we see ourselves: politics and religion. (I later learned that sex and money were equally taboo, but I digress.)

In those days, we’d have guests of divergent belief systems and opt for dinner party civility over possible discomfort among our guests.

These days, politics and religion are no longer taboo for we tend to surround ourselves with those who think and live and vote and perhaps even worship as we do. Ideological bubbles, some call them, and we all live comfortably within their familiar walls.

Today, the United States is struggling with countless issues -- “God, guns, and gays” someone once alliterated. These issues have long been about who gets to decide who holds the power, and how porous the boundary is that separates the Haves from the Have-nots. Yet, our conversations too often get hung up debating semantics or proving who is right.

Gaps among our various demographic groups widen with each new poll. But we can meet these challenges, I believe, and we begin by learning to talk to one another.

If we don’t start today, then when? If not you, then who?

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LEAPFROG, the title of this book, is an acronym, which grew from my notes on civil discourse that my colleague Jeff Kay and I presented to a local League of Women Voters group in early 2017. Those notes became a series of ten posts on my weekly blog, And So It Goes. In short order, my readers convinced me they should be gathered into a book for wider distribution. Here we are, three years later.

The eight letters in LEAPFROG include four verbs and four nouns. The verbs, Listen, Empathize, Assess, and Paraphrase, help us as we listen to the other person. The nouns, Facts (Forget them for now), Respect, Observation, and Gratitude, guide us as we present our ideas in a way that will increase the likelihood that we will also be heard. Yes, it's all about listening and being heard.

I present these eight elements linearly only to form an easily remembered acronym. Feel free to leap, jump, or bounce around, taking turns and repeating the elements as your conversation continues, leapfrog fashion, back and forth, taking you deeper into understanding, civility, and, ideally, connection.

At the end of each chapter, I'll present questions for you to consider. I hope you'll take the time to reflect on them before you move on.

I also hope you'll take advantage of the resources I've collected as I put this booklet together. You'll find them at the end of each chapter plus a broader list at the end of the book. The links are live in the eBook version and on the LEARN MORE page of my website, *janetgivens.com*

**Resources used in putting my initial LEAPFROG acronym together:**

The National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona

The Scheinman Institute on Conflict Resolution at Cornell University

*Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center*, more specifically their blog post, *Toward a More Civil Discourse*, April 2016.

Holly Weeks. *Failure to Communicate: How Conversations Go Wrong and What You Can Do to Right Them*. Harvard Business Review Press. 2010

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

For this introduction, I want to honor the fact that there are cultural as well as individual differences in how we deal with conflict. To that end, please consider these questions before proceeding:

How were disagreements managed in your childhood home? How did your family get news? How were current events discussed?

How have those early rules changed as you've matured? Are any subjects "off the

table” automatically? How must someone behave for you to engage with them in a debate? How do you talk about current events with people who disagree with you?