



Consensus

Volume 45
Issue 1 *Finding Common Ground in a Time of
Polarization*

Article 7

1-25-2024

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Recommended Citation

May, Elizabeth (2024) "Making Our Society Whole: Can Interfaith Conversation Counter Rage-Farming with Love-Farming?," *Consensus*: Vol. 45: Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: 10.51644/IGNL7685

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol45/iss1/7>

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Making Our Society Whole: Can Interfaith Conversation Counter Rage-Farming with Love-Farming?¹

Elizabeth May²

I want to begin by thanking you for the honour of delivering this keynote address to such an important conference. I want to give particular thanks to Darren Thomas for his opening. Darren mentioned the Dish with One Spoon Treaty, and I was reminded of the words of one of my friends, who is an Indigenous Elder, who always says that the dish has one spoon “because there is nothing sharp—no sharp words, no sharp edges.” I hope that this Indigenous wisdom will inform all the conversations that happen here over the next few days.

I wanted to share a few thoughts with you this evening about increased polarization in our society. I believe that this is a threat to our democracy. It is a threat to our society—even a threat to our families. And as was said in the introduction, we have seen an increase in polarization. I have been a Canadian parliamentarian for many years—and before that an environmental activist and lawyer—and I always believed that, in Canada, we can disagree without being disagreeable. Well, we seem to be a lot more disagreeable lately.

So I want to look at polarization as a threat and see the role that organized religion might play to confront it. More broadly than that, I want to look at the role that we can all play, whether people of faith or not, to confront polarization. It’s not a small thing; it’s a threat—it’s a growing threat to the very fabric of society.

Yes, we can say that these divisions have increased. And if you want to look at one of the causes, you have to consider the pandemic and associated lockdown. Being forced to work in isolation or being forced to work in an essential service—putting yourself at great risk—was really difficult. Those who were isolated were more susceptible to social media coming at us from many places.

In Canada, we witnessed issues around the convoy on Parliament Hill. But the fractures in our social cohesion predate the convoy and obviously extend well beyond Canada. In the United States, we watched the January 6 riots in Congress—witnessing events that none of us ever thought were possible on US soil: rioters running rampage and threatening to hang the Vice President or seek and kill Nancy Pelosi. It was deeply shocking, and I’m sure many of you watching it unfold, on what in my tradition is Epiphany, were asking yourselves: “where did this hate come from?”

For my remarks this evening I specifically took the term “Rage Farming” because I find the current situation terrifying. And perhaps most troubling are the individuals who engage in this activity, not merely to foment hate and anger, but because they find it politically helpful. There are people who are making money over hate, division, and polarization—dreadful, dreadful people.

¹ A version of this article was presented as part of the conference “Our Whole Society: Finding Common Ground in a Time of Polarization” held at Martin Luther University College, Waterloo ON, May 7–9, 2023.

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In trying to understand the origins of why this is happening—in peeling back the onion, so to speak—you need to go back to the Reagan administration in the US and a simple change to the US Federal Broadcasting Act that they instituted. Under this change, US broadcasting would no longer need to be “fair and balanced.” This change to FCC regulations gave birth to Fox News and the beginnings of an environment where the media could publish stuff that simply wasn’t true. They could promote news items that weren’t true by arguing that it was simply an opinion—simply a viewpoint.

This was a significant change to the way we reported news, and it helped to create our current polarization. Now, I don’t want to over-romanticize the past as I describe what it was like when I was growing up, but generally, we had a shared agreement of what constituted good conduct—what kind of behavior would be rewarded in public life. And in that regard, I want to acknowledge my friend Mike Morrice, MP for Kitchener Centre. Mike tries to be an exemplar in Parliament. He tries to be a bridge builder. He works hard to be fair and kind to everyone. That is not that common in Parliament, but it is appreciated by others.

But what happened? Across religions, across all the major world religions, there is a commonality: love each other and treat others as you would want them to treat you. These basic precepts transcend any one religion. And more than that, we have the notion that we are connected through a web of mutual obligations as a society, as a community, as a human family—a shared web of caring. When did we start losing that?

I think I started thinking about this question of virtues and vice when I studied theology at Saint Paul University in Ottawa. I took a course in ethics that shed light for me on the notion that society can habituate people to virtue or habituate people to vice. And through a system of rewards and punishments—setting expectations—you can take a very good group of people and transform them into a bad group. With enough habituation you can turn a good Germany into Nazi Germany. You can create a society where you turn in your neighbor because that’s what’s expected of you. You can create a world where standing up against fascism and racism and hatred is to break the law.

When you go all the way back to Plato, you encounter virtues that are so beautifully expressed. Wisdom is the chief and leader of the divine class of goods. It’s not language we hear every day. You learn of temperance, and that from the union of temperance and wisdom and the addition of courage springs justice. Together you had seven virtues: humility, liberality, chastity, meekness, temperance, brotherly love, and diligence. And it doesn’t take much of a jump to get to the Catholic Church’s cardinal virtues.

Contrast the virtues of Plato with the actions of Donald Trump. He violates every single one of those words. He has no humility. He has no meekness. He certainly doesn’t seem to believe in brotherly love. His self-aggrandizement, bravado, selfishness, greed, nastiness, and incitement to violence would have condemned him to never being electable in another era—and yet he is running again.

In 590 AD, Pope Gregory decided to set out the seven opposites to the virtues—lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. There stands Donald Trump. Societies can habituate the population to engage in good conduct or to engage in vice, and yet we never have that discussion. How often have we had a public conversation about virtue in the last, say, zillion years? Try to talk about the common good and public service. As soon as people hear the words good and service, they talk about the Goods and Services Tax.

If we talk about ethics, it's a codified set of rules for MPs of what you should and shouldn't do. They're often irrelevant, and it seems like those who wrote them don't for one minute expect us to be ethical. It's a set of rules like, "don't hire your sister in your parliamentary office." The first time I read the rules of ethics once I was elected, I thought, "they think they need to tell us this?" And then they parse them and decide which action by which politician is ethical.

I've seen some very unethical conduct that I've reported to the ethics commissioner. I won't get into the details because they are long and sad, but a colleague, a sitting Member of Parliament, was hired by a US corporation suing Canada. This MP took the gig—never revealing how much money he made on this particular assignment—and spoke in a secret NAFTA Chapter 11 tribunal. His evidence as an expert witness in environmental law led to Canada losing and the Canadian public paying out 8 million dollars. And because of this challenge by a US corporation, our environmental laws were significantly damaged forever.

And the ethics commissioner reported back to me and said that this doesn't violate the code of ethics at all because MPs are entitled to continue their previous work in whatever other profession they had. What about the oath of office? There are duties tied to the Government of Canada, to the people of Canada, and yet this was not seen as unethical because ethics has been reduced to a list of "don't do this bad thing over here." But if we haven't mentioned it, I guess you can do it.

I'm sure there are some professors of ethics in the room who would like to scream at this point, but I think this is a deep concern. When did we start losing the basic shared understanding of good conduct—to be a decent human being? Darren Thomas, you're so right on. We are a people who don't know why we're here. So, as a species we're kind of dangerous, "because we are on the lam" and we have to ground ourselves. What are we here for? We have started losing the thread of taking care of each other—of love yourself, love your Lord, love your neighbour as yourself. Love God above all.

Look at Pope Francis, who's an extraordinary Pope. His encyclical on climate change called *Laudato si'* equates what's happening to society and this loss of purpose and meaning with the rise of consumer culture. And it's not just an encyclical for Catholics in fact, or Christians, or people of faith from any faith. It's a pretty good read for an atheist. The people who wrote this with Pope Francis broke it down into sections. So there's climate science, there's understanding of a basic call to justice that would appeal to anybody (regardless of faith) who is committed to justice in this society. The encyclical talks about consumer culture in the context of a throwaway society. The volume of stuff we throw away. The waste of food—a third of all food produced on the planet is thrown away. The relationships that get thrown away. A society that doesn't value things—a society that is prepared to say: "I'm just going to throw the garbage someplace."

The rise of the consumer society is definitely postwar—post Second World War. The ethics of my grandparents during the Second World War were, of course, "save everything"—save every piece of string, save every tin can, save and reuse whatever you can find. It took a while, actually, to get society—particularly here in North America, but around the world—to decide that it was a good idea to spend money on something you were going to use once and throw out. Kleenex was first. Everybody carried a linen serviette. Kleenex had to convince people, and their slogan at the time was "Don't carry a cold in your pocket." So, then they got their Kleenexes.

The green Glad garbage bag was first piloted in Ontario in a community where they said: “we're going to give you these; it's going to make garbage day so much simpler.” And they had to convince this particular sample neighborhood to use green garbage bags. To put their garbage in it and therefore no muss, no fuss. Throw it to the curb. They went through all the training for this, but they forgot to tell the garbage men how this was supposed to work. So, the first garbage day, all the empty green garbage bags were left on the curb—the garbage had been dumped into the truck. Well, that defeated the whole purpose, didn't it? Union Carbide and Dow Chemical had to go train everybody.

We have become habituated to being a throwaway society through a whole bunch of not particularly evil methods. But one thing that's really pernicious, that I think speaks to why we have become so polarized, is the way they broke down consumer units. In the old days, say 1950s suburbia, not everybody had to own a washing machine and a dryer because you'd go to a laundromat. You had shared communal access to things. So, they began to break down the neighborhood into individual households.

They then realized that you could sell a lot more stuff if you broke down the family into individual consumer units. You needed to get the teenagers wanting one kind of thing and the children wanting a different kind of thing—obvious things like music. You could break down the family dinner to the point where the teenagers are throwing some kind of pathetic and unhealthy excuse for food like a pizza pop in the microwave that they grab and then are gone—and the children as well.

Children, of course, are seduced by ads that tell them they'll have a crummy little toy if they go to McDonald's. A toy made under goodness only knows what kind of horrible conditions by people in China who make horrible little toys that go into the McDonald's meals so that the children can be distracted and eat—again, not the healthiest of foods. We got habituated to this kind of stuff, and it didn't seem like it was a problem. But in breaking down and breaking down and isolating units of society, it became easier for us to become polarized.

Add to that what's happening with social media, where kids in their own bedrooms can be taunted and bullied by kids from school. Where the kinds of messages people get are horrific, personal, and cruel. They're targeted to individuals. And, in terms of social media, there's a tremendous correlation in terms of disinformation coming into Canada from Russia that started quite a while ago. It is called RT—Russia Today—and the CRTC had approved it to go in packages that, believe it or not, reached 7 million Canadians. It's now stopped, but I think that explains why in polling there is an overlap between people who didn't believe COVID vaccinations were safe and people who think Putin is right and Ukraine is in the wrong. There is a remarkable correlation there.

What should be the role of churches in dealing with this polarization? First, organized religion—whether Islam, Judaism, Christianity, or any of the many, many, subsets within the three main theist religions—needs to step back and say in interfaith dialogue, “yes, we have faith.”

I have faith. I believe that Jesus Christ is my personal saviour but I also look forward to seeing my Islamic and Jewish friends in heaven. I think that we are all children of God – however God is seen, understood and loved. But if we are going to enter into a conversation, it has to involve our whole society. I really don't want to leave out my husband, who's an atheist. He is a very good guy, and he has excellent ethics. Nor do I want to leave out friends who are Buddhists, where I find a real foundational font of wisdom, or ignore the spiritual practices of Indigenous peoples. And that is where I see the greatest connectivity of

everything. I've gone to Indigenous ceremonies for years and I've always been honored to participate. And there was always a prayer, often at closing. It would be, of course, to love and protect Mother Earth—the four directions and all the elements. It takes a while to do the prayer properly and respectfully.

During the prayer, my Indigenous friends would say that this is a prayer to all my relations. Initially, and for the longest time, I thought we were talking about mother, father, sister, auntie, brother, grandfather. It wasn't until I was living on southern Vancouver Island, on Tsartlip territory, that I learned differently. One of the Tsartlip Elders began to explain that all my relations include our relatives the whales, our relatives the salmon, our relatives the rocks, our relatives the trees.

And in fact, in the languages spoken by the Indigenous peoples in the territory I'm honored to represent in Parliament, the literal translation of humans is the "human people." The translation for whales is the "whale people." Trees are the "tree people," salmon the "salmon people," eagles the "eagle people"—all my relations. Adam Olsen, who's my MLA, is from the Tsartlip First Nations. He told me about the time his grandmother took his dad and his dad's brothers out in a boat to introduce them to the orcas. They came up to the boat and she spoke to them, saying: these are my sons, please look after them, help them fish. This I totally believe. This is not mythology. The whales and the fishermen fished synergistically—cooperatively. The whales needed certain kinds of fish pushed towards them, and the fishermen were harvesting the fish the whales didn't particularly want. The southern resident killer whales want Chinook salmon. The Tsartlip Fishers want sockeye. They were relations and they spoke to each other. To me, this is just the facts of the territory. That level of connection is massively intimate to all of sacred creation. We are connected. There is no polarization there. How do we achieve the same connection?

In preparing for tonight, I was struck by a phrase from Gabor Maté, and I realized that if we started to challenge polarization, we would also make huge strides in tackling our mental health crisis and in not treating the planet as a garbage dump. Gabor Maté said that *the opposite of addiction is connection*. The isolated, the lonely, the abandoned, the alienated in our society—those who've experienced trauma and pain—turn to dangerous drugs and other distractions and become addicted. If we were to figure it out and restore a sense of connection and a sense of community, if we were able to say that finding the meaning of life is more important than becoming wealthy, I think that mental health issues would be much less prevalent than they are.

Now, becoming wealthy is not evil in and of itself, obviously, but if you think that your whole purpose in life is measured by your economic worth, how demeaning is that? How likely is it that you'll lose self-esteem? I can't believe it, but you can make a really good living on Instagram as a social media influencer. So, you make money if you're young and really pretty by making other little girls or young women who are looking at you feel less confident in themselves and feel that their happiness is going to depend on being able to look more like you—the social influencer. This is how they make money, by convincing people to buy that perfect accessory that will give their life more value—not more meaning.

Some have said that it is a good thing that the role of faith communities—churches, synagogues, mosques—has been reduced, because they themselves polarized everybody. Religion is a source of division and there's no question about that either. I totally adore the writings of Karen Armstrong; I'm sure you've seen them. But the concept that she brings to bear on our three main global religions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism is that the

teachings are the same, but within every major religion there are fundamentalists who actually pervert the sacred word, promote divisions, promote violence, and create conflict. There is no question about that. But it isn't really true to say that Canada has no state religion?

And this next small rant comes from my friend Professor Peter Timmerman at York University, who delivered a lecture at a conference not unlike this one probably 20 years ago, in which he put forward that Canada does have a state religion. We think we're a secular society and that we have no state religion—but we do. It has its complete doctrine. It has its liturgies, its catechisms, a defined and cleared priesthood and hierarchy. This religion is “econo-theism.” We worship the economy. And Timmerman said that the central tenant of this religion is selfish individualism—and, as any great religion could tell you, that leads straight to doom. And yet I hear about selfish individualism every day in the House of Commons. And it is often tied to the concept of freedom—what I would call a new perversion of the word freedom. The way we talk about freedom these days is: “I can do whatever I want.” Selfish individualism isn't a good tenant or a moral foundation or an ethical foundation for any society.

So, here's what I think all of you should think about—whether you are representing a religious organization or are an academic or are a member of civil society desperately wanting to bring us together so we can heal. Here are some ideas.

I think there are two important roles for people of faith and for leaders in faith communities. One is to speak to the faithful. We need to raise in synagogues, mosques, and churches that polarization and a loss of social cohesion is a direct threat to our democracy and our health as a society. Wherever we see it, we should find some small way to confront it. If you see something that looks like rage farming, confront it with love. And that includes everyone, including those who hold absurd views about government—I won't denigrate them by calling them conspiracy theorists. In fact, many of them are lovely people who are constituents of mine.

I have a dear friend who is a local farmer. He is such a sweet man, and he is an extraordinary Christian. I don't think I've ever met anybody who is better at turning the other cheek when wronged by someone. He is just a fine human being. And he said to me that we are losing our freedoms. I said, “well, why do you say that?” and he replied “well, all these vaccinations.” Well, I don't know about you, but I couldn't send my daughter to kindergarten until she had her vaccinations. How has this changed? What's different?

We can't turn away from people who say something that tempts you to put them in a box and think that they can't be reached. We need to talk to everybody, and we need to love everybody. And sometimes it's really, really hard. But we can't allow people to slip deeper into a cesspool of hate—because there are literally people making money off this cancerous growth on our democracy that feeds on hate and anger. We have to find ways to diffuse it. And that can be done, I think, by at least trying.

The second thing we must do as people of faith, of course, is to be a voice that speaks to our greater society and be prepared to say that there are central tenets to the ethics of how we live together. And those need to be reknit. We need to figure out how to do it. We need to be loving and kind. We need to connect. This is an old story. This is where we were 50 years ago, focusing on healing, love—love of oneself and love of each other—being connected. I think that this is a lot of what it is to be Canadian—that sense of sharing of

community, of being together. But somehow, we have to take this old story and make it a new story. It's stories that convince people—not individual factoids.

There are ways to fix social media. We could simply say that there is no such thing as a “platform.” We could tell TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook Meta that they are not platforms. What they are is publishers, and they will be held to the same legal standards as other publishers. And if they slander and libel people with anonymous sources, they will be sued. That would be very helpful, but in the meantime, we have to figure out how to take on this threat, which I think starts with naming it and pointing out that the story of who we are is the story of what we are seeking.

Why are we here? Let's start finding out. Let's start having conversations with young people about what they think is the meaning of life. We don't talk to each other about big questions. We are alive here right now. *Laudato si'* was about the climate crisis. It is galloping. It threatens to destroy the entire life support system that we depend upon. It threatens us with extinction. And for those of us who are older, it mostly threatens our kids and grandkids. It should be something we rally around and say we have a shared commitment to, a duty to protect Mother Earth. Why don't we?

Well, wading into controversy is just so unpleasant. I think that's part of it. Feeling powerless is another part of it. To understand that I am here because I have a purpose in life—that I would rather have meaning in my life than buy something more. You could see this sentiment throughout COVID-19. You could see it all over place. Stories of individuals who rose up with very little resources and started opening kitchens to feed everybody. There was a lot that happened in communities to keep the food banks going. Helping people is what makes us feel good about ourselves—altruism is a really good path to happiness. Selfish individualism is misery making a reality TV show that nobody wants to watch. I don't want to watch reality TV anyway.

I am going to close with a final thought. Canadian society needs to face the reality that we mustn't let people deliberately divide us. We must not let people benefit in the most cynical of ways from making us fear each other or hate each other. We need to confront rage farming and call it out and say out loud: “I'm just going to keep loving everybody possible.”

I'm going to love every single member of the House of Commons. We're a small group. There's only 338 of us. Some of us are a little bit more lovable than others. But on an individual basis, I can tell you that I do in fact love everyone in there with us every single day. I don't always love what they do. And I really disapprove of times where they think they benefit by moving to Trump style politics.

Hold everyone to account. And we need to include ourselves in that. Being judgmental, being sure that we're better than the ones who are trying to divide us, won't help us. We need to pull together as a country, pull together as individual communities, and no longer be ashamed to say out loud:

“I have faith.”

“I believe in miracles.”

“I believe that Mother Earth who gave us life is crying out for us to put our lives in the way of those who would like to destroy her.”

I would like to hear people stand up and embrace each other and say I stand here because I love you. And if you hate me, that's your problem. Thank you.

Questions from the Floor

Question

Whenever I talk about politics and how bad things are, I say that it ultimately ends up with all of us looking in the mirror. If attack ads didn't work, parties would get rid of them. If the anger that we've seen in the name-calling didn't work, we'd get rid of it. So, how do you square that circle when you think about Canadian politics today and the fact that some of these things, which are just reprehensible, are working and seeing politicians go up in public opinion polls?

Response

Attack ads may work—but not in the way that people think. Parties don't put money into attack ads to get voters to like the people paying for the ads. Parties put money into attack ads to reduce voter turnout. They are a legal tool of voter suppression. The Green Party position is that we should ban the use of electronic airwaves, particularly television and radio, for political advertising. Instead of trying to censor an ad and say you can't run it because it's too "mean," just don't allow TV and radio ads in campaigns, and leave it to print or billboards. At least they don't invade your home. We should also change the way we vote. If we want to stop having despicable politics, then we need a voting system that encourages cooperation. If you're in the first past the post voting system, which we are, it's a really good idea to encourage rage, anger, and hatred—to go out and buy an "F blank blank" Trudeau flag that you can get on any website. You get that because the first past the post voting system encourages hatred.

Consensus-based voting systems are better and there are many of them—proportional representation, single transferable voting, mixed member proportional. By the way, I've had friends in the Green Party around the world. Some have gone through both systems like my friends in New Zealand because it is a British Commonwealth Country. And by the way, the only countries stuck with first past the post voting are British Commonwealth countries because nobody else ever used a system so perverse. So we're still drowning in Queen Victoria's hand-me-down clothes that never really fit us anyway, and we haven't gotten rid of them yet.

But anyway, my friends in New Zealand went through first past the post voting, then got rid of it in the 1990s and brought in the same system as in Germany—mixed member proportional. Toxic politics changed. You had the Greens and Labour in New Zealand in 2017 running and saying: "vote however you want, but when the election is over, Greens and Labour plan to work together." That's how Jacinda Ardern became Prime Minister. So, if we want to try to set the rules of the so-called game, if you want to set our democratic system such that it encourages cooperation, collaboration, and respect, we need to get rid of first past the post as quickly as possible and bring in a consensus-based voting system.

Question

I was wondering if, on an individual level, you have experience in manifesting what you were talking about—loving one another? From my perspective, I have been working with a number of people who have very different political positions from myself—particularly within my own religious community—who I've found have been poisoned by the type of media sources that you're talking about. And it is very difficult to help bring them back into reality, even gently and lovingly. I don't try to throw all the truth that I know on

top of their head but instead try to little bit by little bit bring them back into reality and it is extremely difficult. I just want to know if you have had any sort of success with a story like that?

Response

Thank you for the question—I have. It's not easy and I have had mixed success. I've gone into living rooms of people who I know used to vote for me, who said: "I'll never vote for you again," because I didn't stand up for them against the vaccine mandates. I've sat there and listened. I had one meeting that lasted 3 hours with a bunch of people who said that they'd personally looked over the Pfizer and Moderna drug testing protocols and they could see how flawed they were—and these were people who didn't have scientific training. But I realized that they had done some research because they didn't trust Public Health Canada. So they did their own work. And because there is so much misinformation available online, they think that they've actually discovered something.

The only thing I find is that listening makes a difference—because they're so sure that nobody's going to listen. They are so sure that everybody else is lying or has been bought off. And in one of my meetings, somebody said to me that for every single vaccine that's administered, Trudeau makes \$14.00 per vaccine personally. They believe this. I said, well, where did you hear that? I would be upset if it was true. Can you show me where you found that? And then they go and look and then they send me something that isn't actually a newspaper. Something that isn't even news. It takes a lot of unpacking. And it takes a lot of patience.

I think that the worst possible thing is to insult them ... and Justin Trudeau has done it, Hillary Clinton did it ... God knows Hillary Clinton did it. I mean, it wasn't helpful—and I can understand why she felt like that—but referring to Trump supporters as a basket of deplorables was a bad thing to do. It sends a signal that you have no interest in listening to them because they are on the "wrong side." I find that listening helps. And going back to the source. Look at the Youtube video that they may be referencing and say: "okay, a doctor is making some claims but who is this doctor?" "What do other doctors say about this doctor?" "I'm not a doctor, you're not a doctor, but this doctor doesn't know anything about immunology or vaccinations."

I also think as a matter of public policy that we ought to call to account where there has been abuse in our vaccination process, and to me that's Big Pharma. Our governments gave those guys billions of dollars to speed up finding a vaccination, and the resulting vaccines and the intellectual property tied to them should have immediately been generic with no profits to Big Pharma. They got the billions to develop the vaccine. In fact, Oxfam has incredible statistics of how many hundreds of millions of dollars per minute these guys make all around the world.

Those of us in public life would have more credibility saying that vaccinations save lives if Big Pharma weren't profiting in ways that are unethical and, may I say, probably criminal. So, it's being able to take a bit of both and try to say: "I'm hearing you, but I also look at the health stats." I lost some friends who died of COVID, and although I wear a mask a lot less, I do rapid testing every day. I still think it's a threat. I take it seriously.

I know we didn't do everything perfectly, but who could be expected to do everything perfectly? We didn't know what it was. The first bits of health information that we got from our own health agencies and from the World Health Organization were wrong. We were told

that it didn't spread through the air and that we had to wash our surfaces. I don't know how many of you were like me when it came to groceries. My husband and I rent an apartment, and we have a little terrace. And I was taking my groceries out to the terrace and letting them sit there for 12 hours before I washed them down and brought them into the house—that was all nonsense. I was advised to do it, so I did it because I'm 68, my husband's 75, and we don't have a family doctor, so I thought it would be a good thing not to take any chances. But you learn as you go.

I don't know if that helps at all. Praying with people does help if you are dealing with someone in your own religion. Praying for each other always helps.

Question

Thank you for an excellent presentation. My question builds on something I heard a number of years ago from Reginald Bibby. He said that one of the problems in Canada is polarization within religious communities. I'd be interested on how you, as a person of faith and a politician, perceive different perspectives that are brought forward to the public arena from different religious bodies? Some take a position that's very firm and other people—other traditions—take different positions. How do politicians read the religious community when they come forward with seemingly polarized views?

Response

Well, that a question I can't really answer because I'm just one MP. I will say this, though. As a member of the Anglican Communion of faith I am one of the rare—what I would say “out of the closet”—left-wing politicians. I'm a Christian who believes a woman has a right to a safe and legal abortion. I'm a Christian who believes that Two-Spirit and trans people deserve love and respect as much as anybody else. And I know that there are some other people who would describe themselves as Christians who disagree.

I don't want to offend anyone—and I know that there's some extraordinary representative here from the Islamic community and from Judaism and from other faiths. But for the moment, speaking as a Christian, I think that it's important to be out loud about being a Christian so that people don't assume all Christians think the things that I believe Jesus wouldn't find very acceptable. Jesus never talked about homosexuality. Jesus never said that the rich people are better than the poor people. In fact, he said the very opposite. He said that a rich man has as much chance of getting into heaven as a camel through the eye of a needle. He said that if you find someone who doesn't have a cloak, give them yours. Feed the hungry. Heal the injured, the sick, the lame. I mean, Jesus was not judgmental. And the table fellowship of Jesus Christ included women and tax collectors—those who were considered pariahs. He probably would have welcomed even Donald Trump to his table. He was not judgmental.

And that's the Lord I follow. And in my work in Parliament, when I ask a tough question—and I'm really angry a lot of the time at the horrible, disappointing breaking of faith by various politicians for the various promises they've made—I try to make sure that I've taken violence out of my language. I've actually gone and asked a question of a cabinet minister when I know that what they are saying is not based on evidence and tried to frame it this way: “I think it's a shame that the honorable minister has been misled by his talking points into believing that blah blah blah.”

Because I don't want to say—as some people are doing these days in parliament—that you are spreading lies, which is unparliamentary language. That is really so unhelpful. We need to find ways to talk to each other that take the violence out of our language. We need to create a possibility that when it's all over you can go back and find that individual and say: “can I send you more information about the thing we were just debating because I really think if you saw the information that we're getting, you might reconsider your position.”

I find that when faith community groups come to meet with me—regardless of where they're coming from, from which religion or non-religion—I'm just so grateful that people have taken the time to come to talk to elected people. We need to share with them how grateful we are for their activism. How grateful we are for citizens who are not disempowered and apathetic. How much it buoys me up every time I have a group of religious leaders meet. When faith communities, religious groups, and people of all kinds seeking a better world come to see us, I'm just so grateful.

Question

I have a simple but difficult question: why can't we love? We have been hearing about the ethic of love for thousands of years, and yet we have not learned how to love. What is it in us that prevents us from loving? And I think that question needs to be answered if we are ever going to solve the problem of polarization.

Response

I'm not a person to give the answers but it's an excellent question. One hint I would have around it is that when we say: “love God, love yourself and love your neighbor,” the hardest thing might be the middle one, to “love yourself.” We're plagued with doubts and fears, and we're in a society that doesn't give unconditional love. We're okay with conditional love: “I love you so long as you love me.” And if I am in a marriage and I can trade you for a “younger model,” well, obviously I've got a better deal to make over there with the younger model. We are a throwaway society—and that includes how we feel about human relationships.

Many of Gabor Maté's writings go deeper into the question. If you can't find it in yourself to love yourself, you can't love others. And when others try to love you, you can resent them because you think: “why aren't they angry with me?” “How can they love me?” “I'm not lovable.” The message needs to start with the very smallest children. And a society that actually has social cohesion can deal with extreme weather events, with economic downturns. We need to take care of each other. And I think that a society that's dedicated to taking care of each other gives people more confidence to be loving. And when people feel that they are taking a risk, or that they might be shamed or ridiculed for being loving to the world—it's kind of an awkward place to be in politics.

But if we don't do it, we seriously risk othering our neighbors and failing to help those who need us the most—and, of course, letting down our creator. And those are big stakes. But loving is always the right thing to do. And finding ways to love people. And wasn't it Charles Schultz in the old Peanuts' cartoons who had the line: “I love humanity. It's people I can't stand.” So, we can't be too high-minded. Every now and then we're going to fall short as I said. Sometimes it's kind of hard to love people who are heckling you from across the room. But love is always the answer. Regardless of the question.