



HEALING OUR DIVIDES

ANSWERING THE SAVIOR'S
CALL TO BE PEACEMAKERS

DAVID B. OSTLER

AUTHOR OF *BRIDGES: MINISTERING TO THOSE WHO QUESTION*



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I dedicate this book to the tireless peacemakers and bridge-builders whose efforts shape harmony in our world. While some organize in movements and coalitions, many toil silently within their homes and communities.

Among these champions is my mother, Barbara Ostler, who gracefully nurtured six children with unique personalities and perspectives. From my childhood, I recall her gently singing the peacemaking hymn, “Let Us Oft Speak Kind Words to Each Other.” With unwavering curiosity and compassion, she fosters connections through all our differences. Her peacemaking is a tender imprint on my earliest memories and in the depths of my heart.

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Foreword

Social science research confirms what all of us sense: We live in a time of toxic polarization, with society undergoing a transformation more rapid than any other development in human history brought on by new technologies and changing demographics. Fear of such change has caused many to both retreat to the comfortable and familiar and distrust those who are different—those who are “other.” In many cases, that distrust breeds contempt.

Such a reaction is natural and understandable, and yet for followers of Jesus Christ it is something we must overcome. We are called to be the “salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13), an image that tells us that we are to be deeply involved in the hard work of transforming the world instead of being removed and isolated from its activities. In the Lord’s Prayer, we are first commanded to pray that God’s kingdom—a place where His will is done—will come to earth here and now (Matt 6:10). In fact, for the earliest Christians, the “good news” about Jesus Christ was less about what happens after we die than it was about helping the Risen Lord bring about that kingdom—part of a new creation—while we are yet alive. That kingdom is made up of “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” (Rev. 14:6), and its chief characteristic is that its citizens are of “one heart and one mind” (Moses 7:18).

There is no more urgent task for followers of Christ in any time and in any place than to build that kingdom here on earth, amid the turmoil and contention that is the more natural course of human affairs.

But how is it done?

David Ostler has written a handbook that shows us. As it turns out, becoming a peacemaker is hard work. It doesn’t come naturally. That’s the bad news. But here’s the good news: We can do hard things. As David shows us through his deep knowledge of the social science research and his careful reading of scripture and the teachings of modern prophets, becoming a peacemaker can be learned. It requires a state of mind, a view of others, and a set of skills that each of us can acquire.

Latter-day Saint Christians have been given a special charge by our apostolic leadership to learn these skills because our calling at this time and in this place is to become peacemakers, agents of reconciliation, and builders of bridges of understanding. I’m imagining a conversation ten

years from now with a new friend who discovers that I'm a Latter-day Saint. "You're a Latter-day Saint?" he asks. "Aren't you the people who are the peacemakers? The people who work hard to bring people together?" I can't imagine a more powerful witness we could bear of the divinity of Christ and our allegiance to him.

I'm reminded of a scene from the dramatic television series *The Chosen* in which Peter expresses surprise at a teaching of Jesus. "That's different," says a confused Peter. Jesus replies, "Get used to different." Apostolic leadership has given Latter-day Saints a new and different role to play in the world today. David Ostler teaches us how to "get used to different."

Thomas B. Griffith,
former federal appeals court judge
and fellow at the Wheatley Institute at BYU

INTRODUCTION

Becoming Peacemakers

In the October 2021 general conference, Elder Dale G. Renlund spoke on “The Peace of Christ Abolishes Enmity,” in which he taught that in order to truly follow Christ, we must strive to overcome contention and to be united. This touched me deeply and brought to the forefront a question that had been simmering in the back of my mind for some time: “What skills do I need in order to eliminate contention?”

Two years earlier I had written *Bridges: Ministering to Those Who Question* and saw how religious differences tore apart marriages, families, and friendships. While working on this book it became clear that we often lack the communication and relationship skills to understand others and live peaceably in the differences of our religious and spiritual beliefs. And as I pondered Elder Renlund’s talk, it also became clear that as society is being torn apart with division, contention, and anger (examples of which include responses to COVID-19, the 2020 US presidential election, social values, and racial issues boiling over after the murder of George Floyd), we again often lack the communication skills to counter and prevent this animosity. Families, friends, and communities are divided and polarized, unable to find common ground. People who are politically conservative seldom understand those who are liberal, and vice versa. Increasingly, it seems that almost any group is becoming unable to understand or sympathize with other groups. As humans, we have always had a hard time understanding others. However, it seems more and more that we do not even want to.

Many who listened to or read Elder Renlund’s talk may have said to themselves, *I want to avoid contention, so I just won’t talk about controversial issues*. I don’t think that was his point; today’s issues are too important. For me, Elder Renland’s talk was a personal call to find better ways to address the many challenges that face us without further fueling hatred and contention. It left me continually asking myself how I can better follow the Savior and not just avoid contention but replace it with becoming a peacemaker. I decided to read scripture, the teachings of Church leaders, and the writing and thinking of those who have studied the topic. Soon, my library grew by a couple of dozen books, and I spent hours listening to podcasts and reading online. I tried applying what I learned while engaging with people who have different perspectives.

That is how this book came about.

After I polished my first draft, I asked twenty-two people to be beta readers. Half were people I had never met. They were diverse, with different political beliefs, coming from different age groups and life experiences. I asked them to read the manuscript and help me make it better by identifying areas that were unbalanced, that over-represented a particular ideology, or that might alienate readers with how I expressed myself. Two psychologists reviewed it to make sure I was clear and accurate with my explanations of how our minds work. All these people helped me see things I hadn't previously seen and helped me remove rough spots. I learned from the unique perspectives of others and hopefully made a better book.

In a similar way, I am a first draft. As I wrote and researched, I opened myself to listening and learning from others. In the process, I changed. I'm still a work in progress, and sometimes I am more successful than others. I often fail.

In our increasingly polarized world, we become prone to identifying so much with our political and religious causes and beliefs that they become an identity overshadowing all others. Conversely, we begin to view those who see differently with as villains and adversaries, and we label them with derogatory terms that make it clear they are the enemy. Some of us may at times find that we even enjoy the contention, with an increasing number unfortunately seeing violence as an acceptable response. Through all of this, we burn connecting bridges and instead build fortresses and refuse to productively engage with people who think differently. Sadly, these influences have found their way into our communities and loving families and between fellow Latter-day Saints. "The love of many shall wax cold" (Matt. 24:12).

In that same October 2021 general conference, Elder Quentin L. Cook commented, "In my lifetime, I have never seen a greater lack of civility. We are bombarded with angry, contentious language and provocative, devastating actions that destroy peace and tranquility."¹ In an understated way, Elder Renlund said we have "shown tendencies toward contention and divisiveness."² At the next April 2022 conference, President Russell M. Nelson emphasized these points by emphatically stating, "Contention violates everything the Savior stood for and taught."³ These three prophetic leaders do not ask us to withdraw from the public sphere and re-

1. Quentin L. Cook, "Personal Peace in Challenging Times."

2. Dale G. Renlund, "The Peace of Christ Abolishes Enmity."

3. Russell M. Nelson, "Preaching the Gospel of Peace."

treat from discussing potentially contentious issues. Instead, they point us to the Savior, the Prince of Peace, who commanded us to love. Love is central, for on it “hang[s] all the law and prophets” (Matt. 22:40). Only in him and through love can we find true, lasting, and eternal peace.

Peacemaking may seem daunting and overwhelming, as it requires vulnerability and stepping out of our comfort zones. Sharon Eubank, director of Latter-day Saint Charities and former counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, spoke on this in her October 2020 general conference talk: “This world isn’t what I want it to be. There are many things I want to influence and make better. And frankly, there’s a lot of opposition to what I hope for, and sometimes I feel powerless.”⁴ However, with the right tools and as the Spirit guides and connects us to God, we can find the strength to make a difference.

Perhaps the biggest fear of engaging in peacemaking is that attempts to discuss divisive issues may be counterproductive and may instead fuel more contention. Of course, there are times to be silent, but silence itself can drive contention and polarization under the surface and leave these important issues to those who are trying to further divide us. Unfortunately, our quietness doesn’t stop these toxic forces from infecting our homes and communities. So while there are times when we should be quiet and withdraw from discussions in order to maintain peace, whenever possible, we are better—and the world is better—when we remain connected with others regardless of their beliefs. As we become peacemakers, we help, support, and teach others who are looking for a better way.

In my research, I have found people and organizations that are having meaningful and productive discussions without contention. In this book, I share what I have learned. This path is full of challenges; we will make mistakes, but we also will find more peace and a greater ability to express our beliefs and have meaningful discussions. Through this learning I found myself less afraid of crossing these bridges of difference and even looking forward to talking about them. I’ve become better able to make my views known without creating defensiveness, to give others an opportunity to express the issues that are important to them, and to strengthen relationships while being a more effective advocate for the causes I believe in. Along the way, I have also had to confront my own weaknesses and practice at trying better. I’m learning what it takes to better understand where others are coming from, to find common ground and learn together.

4. Sharon Eubank, “By Union of Feeling We Obtain Power with God.”

Healing Our Divides explores four major themes:

Understand today's division. In American society, polarization and division are increasing and are perhaps worse than at any time since the Civil War. Our level of contention is approaching violence and threatens our institutions. Since the natural man is part of all of us, we have tendencies toward division and contention. It's part of our humanness, and it's exploited by media personalities, politicians, political parties, social media, and other organizations for their personal or organizational advantage. As a society we are increasingly setting aside the skills and commitment to live together in our personal, religious, and political differences. This, in turn, is tearing apart our families, communities, and country.

Learn concrete and practical approaches and skills to reduce contention. We can be peacemakers and better understand others, create bridges, and articulate our beliefs without creating contention. We can discuss divisive issues while building closer relationships and in some cases, changing minds to create better families and communities. Simple but effective tools and approaches that anyone can use are discussed. Becoming a peacemaker isn't some far-off eternal goal; it is something that we must do now.

See how peacemaking is part of religious discipleship and moral integrity. We can use our spiritual and moral values to bring us together to understand and love our neighbors, including people who believe differently. Most of us want to build a peaceful and caring society; indeed, we are called to do so. For many issues, we can find common ground and reasonable accommodation of others without compromising our values. Even when we don't agree or find common ground, we need not see others as enemies.

Learn how to have deep and meaningful discussions. This book is not just about being polite and avoiding arguments. We need to be able to productively discuss today's most difficult and complex issues. Key to this is understanding why others might believe differently and finding common ground toward workable solutions. These concepts apply to anyone, regardless of their political or religious views. Because readers of this book will primarily be US residents, the examples given from multiple perspectives and persuasions are generally centered around the United States. However, they can easily be adapted or applied to the most contentious issues that may divide us among those within the US or abroad.

Likewise, the approaches here are largely from a Latter-day Saint perspective because that is my community, and we as Latter-day Saints have a

unique vision of peacemaking and an imperative to heal the divides not just within our own religious and cultural community but also with our brothers and sisters in the broader community of children of our heavenly parents. (For the purposes of brevity, the term “the Church” is here used to refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and “Latter-day Saint” is used to refer to the Church’s doctrines, teachings, culture, and members.)

As Latter-day Saints, our beliefs should help us reject the vilification and hyper-partisanship that is so common today. We are taught to become peacemakers and to build Zion and its unity. Our baptismal covenant includes promises to “bear others’ burdens, that they may be light; mourn with those that mourn; and comfort those in need of comfort” (2 Ne. 26:33).⁵ Temple ordinances bind our families together in eternity.⁶ These ordinances connect us to God and each other, eventually uniting us in one eternal family. We believe “all are alike unto God.”⁷ Because of all of this, we are a people that should be most able to fight polarization and peaceably live together in our differences.

Thomas Griffith, a Latter-day Saint, retired Federal Judge, and member of the American Bar Association’s task force on American Democracy, notes that leading voices in depolarization see “Latter-day Saints [as] uniquely positioned to be leaders in this effort of overcoming toxic polarization.” He continues, “To hear people like that see, in our culture, unique strengths that we can draw up on, I think that’s terribly exciting. And I think it’s consistent with what our leadership is asking us to do.”⁸

When looking at the contentious divides (or our fear of creating them), it is easy to fall into the trap of immediately placing blame entirely on the other, and so it is imperative to be self-reflective and to adjust ourselves rather than engage in a project of merely “fixing” the other. To help, there are periodical *thought boxes* directed to you as a reader to interrupt

5. “My Baptismal Covenants,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

6. For more information on Latter-day Saint temple ordinances see, “Temples,” Newsroom.

7. See also Mosiah 23:7: “Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another.” The restored gospel of Jesus Christ is expansive and encompasses all people that have lived, are living, and will live. President Nelson says as much: “Each of us has a divine potential because each is a child of God. Each is equal in His eyes.” Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail.”

8. “A New Mission for Latter-day Saints—Peacemaking”, *Mormon Land*. Griffith specifically cites Eboo Patel, Tim Shriver, and Noah Feldman as opinion leaders who recognize our unique ability.

your reading and pose a question or encourage you to reflect on some principle on a personal level. These give you an opportunity to pause and take specific ideas that you can apply to your personal circumstances.

Healing our divides doesn't happen alone; it involves a community. Think about others whom you can involve, regardless of which side of a divide you may perceive them to be. Perhaps join with a friend or family member to read along, considering the *thought boxes* together. We often learn differently when we discuss ideas with others and consider their insights. At the end of each chapter, there are additional questions designed for book groups large or small. The *Resource Guide* at the end of the book contains further questions to engage group discussion, as well as additional readings and links to other groups that are involved in depolarization.

With faith and effort, we start with ourselves, making the changes we need to make, then we extend outwards to those closest to us, our family, our friends, and those who believe in a similar way to us. Although we may impact the stranger, we impact those closest to us the most.

President Russell M. Nelson invited us to this work: “Brothers and sisters, we can literally change the world—one person and one interaction at a time. How? By modeling how to manage honest differences of opinion with mutual respect and dignified dialogue.”⁹ We are taught by Jesus to become peacemakers; we are called by a prophet to change.

Because this is a communal effort, as you read along, I want to hear what you are learning, what things are unclear, and what experiences you are having. In particular, share with me disagreements you may have or blind spots or misunderstandings you see in these approaches. Since we can't be together talking about these concepts in person, I can be reached at healingourdivides@gmail.com or through Facebook at **BridgesLDS**. I hope to respond as I am able. I would love to hear about your journey and what you have learned as you try to become a peacemaker and heal our divides.

David Ostler,
February 2024

9. Russell M. Nelson, “Peacemakers Needed.”

CHAPTER 2

Spiritual Beings on a Physical Chassis

We need to see a reflection of ourselves in each other—our dreams, hopes, hurts, fears, and despairs. Otherwise, we all become strangers and foreigners. Our differences are often used as barriers to divide us, when they are actually an opportunity to enrich our lives. Dignity is a moral obligation we feel toward people, not merely a legal requirement we comply with.

—Elder Ulisses Soares¹

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance.

—Attributed to Confucius

As we commit to becoming peacemakers, it is helpful to know how our physical brains process information so that we can better understand the limits of our own thinking and the natural processes that influence ourselves and others to believe differently. Seeing how our physiology affects our views enables us both to better extend grace to others and to find positive and effective ways to discuss and live in our differences. This chapter examines the following four guiding ideas:

- Our thought processes are often subconscious, meaning we regularly act without actively choosing to do so.
- We filter and simplify the information we receive into patterns and models that we use to make decisions. These models are mostly, but not entirely, accurate.
- Our brains think involuntarily and automatically—without us consciously analyzing each evaluation and conclusion.
- Our individual filters and models—combined with different life experiences, genetics, and eternal identities—cause each of us to see the world differently.

As humans, we aren't just higher order animals; we are unique as a species. Latter-day Saint doctrine teaches us that we are divine children of heavenly parents. God created us and gave us our brains and agency—the ability to choose. Our essence is our eternal spirit that has always existed and has always had an endless future. Yet, we live as *natural men and women*

1. Ulisses Soares, “Foundations and Fruits of Religious Freedom.”

within the biological framework of a human body, with all its constraints and limitations in perceiving, reasoning, and making conclusions.²

Even before birth, our brains create innumerable neural pathways to organize and comprehend the world around us. Spiritually and physically, we see the same information through our unique models, filters, and individualities, and with these we come to different understandings. Even if we arrive at the same conclusions with the same information, our brains use unique neural pathways and individually constructed filters and models to reach them.

A Little About Our Brains and How We Think

Scientists are just beginning to understand how the brain works. Different parts of our brains regulate our bodies, our emotions, and how we think and reason. New technologies, such as fMRI³ scans, allow us to examine the specific brain structures used to sense, process, and respond to specific types of input. We can see in real time how our brains feel anger, fear, happiness, and other emotions.

Without us even knowing or thinking about it, our brains control digestion, blood flow, heart rate, and the myriad functions of our organs. For example, when we physically exert ourselves, our brains increase our heart rates to provide more oxygen to our muscles; during prolonged exertion, we generate body heat that our brains regulate through changes in our skin, sweat glands, and blood vessels. All of these processes happen automatically, without us consciously deciding to speed up our heart rate or cause our skin to sweat. All animals have these inborn neural pathways that regulate bodily functions. We manage these essential biological processes in our autonomic nervous system, which includes parts of our brains, our spines, and even the neurons in our digestive systems.

But as humans we are more than that. We have cognition, “the process by which knowledge and understanding is developed in the mind.”⁴

2. Latter-day Saints believe that as mortals, we are subject to the weaknesses of the flesh, including passions, biases, imperfect perceptions, and other physical limitations. “For the natural man is an enemy to God” (see Mosiah 3:19).

3. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) shows how different parts of a brain are working. It uses a magnetic field to detect brain activity by identifying changes in blood flow. fMRI can detect cognitive processes, including decision-making and memory. Not only is it used for psychology studies, but it is also used to identify strokes, tumors, and other brain disorders.

4. “Cognition,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries.

Our conscious cognition is how we evaluate information and make decisions. Subconscious cognition happens without our awareness, using patterns and models to make complex decisions and draw conclusions based on what feels right. It happens fast and outside of conscious awareness.⁵ However, unlike automatic and inborn brain processes that regulate our heart rate and body temperature, subconscious cognition is developed through our experiences in and engagement with the world. For example, when handed a cup of hot chocolate, most of us will immediately start blowing on the drink to avoid burning our mouths. This is not an innate reflex; it is one we likely learned after previously burning our tongues. Our response is now automatic, and we do it without consciously evaluating the situation. We use this same process to drive our cars, not thinking about coordinating the gas pedal, brake, steering wheel, and windshield wipers. These actions are almost automatic and subconscious.

On the other hand, our conscious cognition occurs when we actively weigh the pros and cons of specific decisions. The choices may be as mundane as considering whether to top our hot chocolate with whipped cream or what roads to take to get home, or they may involve more important decisions such as where to live, what to study, who to marry, and how to live a principled life. We use our conscious reasoning when we analyze a math problem, write a business plan, or even decide which TV show to watch.

Conscious reasoning takes time, but subconscious reasoning comes almost instantly. This is why it takes about 0.9 seconds for a driver to perceive that a car has unexpectedly pulled out in front of them, and another 0.2 seconds to step on the brake.⁶ In 1.1 seconds, the driver's brain has recognized the danger, formulated a solution, and told the driver's foot to brake and their hands to steer out of danger. If driving relied on conscious reasoning pathways for these situations, it would take much longer, and we would have a lot more accidents.

Emotions are a critical part of cognition. According to social psychologist Jonathan Haidt,

Emotions were long thought to be dumb and visceral, but . . . scientists increasingly recognized that emotions were filled with cognition. Emotions occur in steps, the first of which is to appraise something that just happened based on whether it advanced or hindered your goals. These appraisals are a

5. See Robert E. Patterson and Robert G. Eggleston, "Intuitive Cognition," 5–22.

6. Marc Green, "Driver Reaction Time."

kind of information processing; they are cognitions . . . they happen automatically and with conscious awareness of the outputs but not of the processes.⁷

Our emotions provide values and motivation to our thinking. When we see a child fall from their bicycle and try to pick out the sand from their scrape while in tears, we don't dispassionately calculate whether or not to try to help; we immediately feel compassion and concern. Our decision-making isn't used to determine whether to help; it is used to determine how can we help best. Research shows that emotions are crucial inputs into the models that power our subconscious decision-making. We feel something and simply know what to do.

By contrast, studies show that people with damage to the parts of their brain that feel emotions have problems with decision-making. Some make poor decisions; others may just be indecisive.⁸ Our hearts (representing our emotions) and our heads (representing our subconscious and conscious decision-making) are not separate ways to think; they are intertwined, and we can't function well without them both working together.⁹

Challenge

- **Think back to a couple of recent decisions. Identify how your conscious and subconscious reasoning each played a different role in these decisions.**
- **How did your emotional values impact this decision?**

Elephants and Riders

In his book *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, Jonathan Haidt describes the behavior of an elephant rider to further illustrate the difference between subconscious and conscious cognition. Like our subconscious cognition, elephants are big, powerful, and very

7. The full quote is this: "Emotions are not entirely subcategories of intuition: emotions are often said to include all the bodily changes that prepare one for adaptive behavior, including hormonal changes in the rest of the body. Hormonal responses are not intuitions. But the cognitive elements of emotions—such as appraisals of events and alterations of attention and vigilance—are subtypes of intuition. They happen automatically and with conscious awareness of the outputs but not of the processes." Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, 52, footnote 40.

8. Haidt, 39–40.

9. Latter-day Saints believe that revelation is best had when our hearts and minds are aligned. "Behold I will tell you in your mind and in your heart" (see D&C 8:2).

smart. When a rider and elephant go for a walk, the rider decides where to go and signals to the elephant. The elephant picks the path and arrives at the destination. The rider doesn't think about how to avoid rocks and trees; that's the elephant's job. When the elephant gets off course, the rider can redirect the elephant. If the rider gives commands that conflict with what the elephant wants, the elephant usually won't follow the rider's direction.

Elephants represent our subconscious reasoning with all our emotional values, while riders represent our conscious reasoning. So it is with our brains: we can consciously reason what we want to do, but sometimes our subconscious takes over. That's why it is easy to succumb to anger, slip up on New Year's resolutions, or think skeptically of people who aren't like us. Our subconscious is powerful and makes quick, vital decisions like avoiding a car crash. But it also makes simple and seemingly trivial decisions, like scowling when someone says something that we disagree with.

Haidt concludes, "Most of a person's everyday life is determined not by their conscious intentions and deliberate choices [the rider] but by mental processes . . . that operate outside of conscious awareness and guidance [the elephant]."¹⁰ Neither conscious nor subconscious cognition is better than the other; they just have different roles. Sometimes our subconscious, intuitive elephant gives us useful, trustworthy information that has no obvious factual basis. Other times, we are able to make better decisions when our conscious rider is involved to avoid unexamined, elephant-driven decisions.

Reflect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When has your elephant gone off and taken you somewhere you haven't wanted to go? • What kind of decisions does your elephant make without your rider? • What kind of decisions does your rider need to make?

Filters and Models

Our brains receive vast amounts of information—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations—and then use mental models both to filter out what is deemed unimportant and to recognize patterns from the

10. J. A. Bargh and T. L. Chartrand, "The Unbearable Automaticity of Being," 462–79.

information we think is useful. To illustrate this, science journalist David McRaney describes how newborn brains develop:

For brains, everything is noise at first. Then brains notice the patterns in the static, and they move up a level, noticing patterns in how those patterns interact. Then they move up another level, noticing patterns in how sets of interacting patterns interact with other sets, and on and on it goes. Layers of pattern recognition built on top of simpler layers become a rough understanding of what to expect from the world around us, and their interactions become our sense of cause and effect. The roundness of a ball, the hard edge of a table, the soft elbow of a stuffed animal, each object excites certain neural pathways and not others, and each exposure strengthens their connections until the brain comes to expect those elements of the world and becomes better at making sense of them in context.¹¹

As adults we have developed sophisticated neural pathways. For instance, we are bombarded with information when we are driving. At 70 miles per hour, our eyes are seeing a constantly changing world. We are looking for debris on the road, lane markers, exit signs, potential threats, and a whole lot more. We might be listening to our driving partner or background music, but our ears are also open to a horn honk or screeching brakes. Even if we are munching on road snacks, we can pick up an unexpected smell of burning brakes. Pretty amazing to be safely navigating a 4,000-pound car traveling at 100 feet per second in an ever-changing environment. All the information comes in through our senses, but because there is simply too much information for our brains to consider, our brain filters out what it thinks is important and ignores the rest. When something unexpected happens, our mind's model signals a problem. Maybe it is the sudden brake lights ahead of us, an icy spot, or a passenger telling us that we just missed our exit.

The subconscious models are so strong that sometimes they overpower our conscious cognition. To test this, Haidt created a study where researchers offered participants a sip of apple juice poured straight from an unopened bottle. All the participants drank it. A researcher then offered a drink of apple juice in which they dipped a certified sterile cockroach. Despite there being no doubt that the juice was safe to drink, 63% refused. When asked why, most could not give a straightforward answer. Some said,

11. David McRaney, *How Minds Change: The Surprising Science of Belief, Opinion, and Persuasion*, 62–63.

“I just don’t want to do it even though I can’t give you a reason.”¹² Even though the researcher did their best to refute their concerns, only 10% of them changed their minds. For good reasons, the subconscious cognition was so powerful that subjects had a firm mental model against drinking insect-dipped juice, and no amount of conscious reasoning could justify it. The elephant (subconscious reasoning) made the decision, and the rider (conscious reasoning) could not overcome it.

This should not give the impression that our subconscious reasoning (our elephant) is anything other than amazing. Our elephant makes correct decisions automatically and accurately in almost all situations, which is how we are able to drive, walk, eat, and live our daily lives without needing to consciously analyze each bit of information that comes to our senses. However, these subconscious models are only approximate and are imperfect representations of what is around us. They work well for simple and routine things, but they are not comprehensive enough to consider all the information, possibilities, and perspectives for complex issues such as how to take care of the poor, create economic opportunity, or make sense of complicated religious issues. Since we are so reliant on our subconscious models, we are prone to use them with certainty, assuming they are “common sense” and therefore being unaware of their limitations. Unsurprisingly, others may have different “common sense” models that result in opposing beliefs. Thus, peacemaking requires us to be humble and recognize that no one knows everything. By working together, our differing mental models have the potential to increase the pool of ideas and possibilities and decrease blind spots.

Tip

- **When you receive information that supports an opposing position, pause first and give your conscious brain a chance to evaluate whether the information is worth considering.**
- **In a discussion, be open and think about why this is rational to the other person.**

12. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 43–44. This research was repeated with other scenarios, including signing an agreement to sell one’s soul after death and stealing drugs to save a family member’s life. Haidt said, “[Subjects] seem to be flailing around, throwing out reason after reason, and rarely changing their minds when [the researcher] proved that their latest reason was not relevant.”

How We Know Things

Our beliefs form over time, some with thoughtful analysis, others with little to no conscious thought. They come from our values, neural pathways, and mental models. With imprecision, we form our beliefs. So, how do we decide that we know or have become certain about something? Neurologist Robert Burton describes “a general classification of mental states that create our sense of knowledge about our knowledge.” He writes:

For simplicity, I have chosen to lump together the closely allied feelings of certainty, rightness, conviction, and correctness under the all-inclusive term, the *feeling of knowing*. Whether or not these are separate sensations or merely shades or degrees of a common feeling isn't important. What they do share is a common quality: Each is a form of metaknowledge—knowledge about our knowledge—that qualifies or colors our thoughts, imbuing them with a sense of rightness or wrongness.¹³

The *feeling of knowing* is an emotion or state of feeling, embedded in our subconscious cognition (our elephant). We feel comfortable when our subconscious feels something is right, regardless of whether it actually is. We have all experienced complete certainty in believing something, only to later discover that we were dead wrong.

Remember
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can you remember a time when you believed something that you later learned wasn't so?• What happened that let you to reconsider your belief?

Psychologists have studied subconscious reasoning using a technique called the Cognitive Reflection Test, developed by Shane Frederick. The test presents participants simple questions such as: “If it takes 5 machines 5 minutes to make 5 widgets, how long would it take 100 machines to make 100 widgets?”¹⁴ When posed to individuals, many see a pattern and wrongly answer 100. However, when this question is given to a group of people for a shared answer, they always get it right (the answer is five, by the way). Discussing opposing ideas helps group members step out of their intuitive instincts, consciously reevaluate, and come to better a consensus.

13. Robert A. Burton, *On Being Certain: Believing When You Are Right Even When You Are Not*, 3 (italics added).

14. McRaney, *How Minds Change*, 195.

According to Burton, having a strong *feeling of knowing* (certainty) causes our brain to release hormones that make us feel good and satisfied. Without that feeling, we may try to resolve our doubt and uncertainty; we may even become curious and seek new information until our brain is satisfied. Then, with our *feeling of knowing*, we can get locked in and not challenge our belief or decision, since subconsciously we don't want to give up the good feeling of being right. Thus, Burton writes, "the feeling of knowing, the reward for both proven and unproven thoughts, is learning's best friend, and mental flexibility's worst enemy."¹⁵

We know very few things absolutely—such things as $2+2=4$ and that an object will fall when dropped. Instead, most things we believe are approximations of some absolute truth that may be very difficult to prove. Religiously, the word "faith" is used to describe hope and confidence in our religious beliefs; we then express that faith through action—by the way we live.¹⁶ Similarly, our political beliefs generally haven't been formed through rational testing and revising; they have rather evolved informally, based on moral values and what makes sense to us. Thus, they can change when we consider others' experiences and how they interrelate to our own values. Through this process our values usually won't change, but we may learn better ways to achieve them in our lives and in society.

We only grow through change, which includes changing our minds when we are wrong. According to organizational psychologist Adam Grant, "changing your mind is not a sign of losing integrity. It's often a mark of gaining wisdom. Realizing you were wrong doesn't mean you lack judgment. It means you lacked knowledge. Opinions are what you think today. Growth comes from staying open to revising your views tomorrow."¹⁷ This is one way we experience growth through opposition.

Reflect

- Next time you say you know something, pause and ask yourself whether this is a feeling of knowing or whether you have consciously thought through competing points of view to arrive at knowing.
- Ask yourself: what level of certainty do I feel I know this?

15. Burton, *On Being Certain*, 99.

16. See "Faith," True to the Faith.

17. Adam Grant (@AdamMGrant), "Changing your mind is not a sign of losing integrity."

How We Form Our Worldview

Our worldview is everything we believe. Psychologist Alison Gray defines it as “a collection of attitudes, values, stories, and expectations about the world around us, which inform our every thought and action. Worldview is expressed in ethics, religion, philosophy, scientific beliefs and so on.”¹⁸ As Latter-day Saints, we see ourselves as eternal and all of humanity as family loved by our heavenly parents. However, our culture, genetics, and specific life decisions also contribute to who we are. For example, my parents raised me in a deeply devout Latter-day Saint home. As a man, I experience the world differently than a woman. I am white and haven’t experienced what other races and ethnic groups experience on a daily basis. I have lived in relative abundance and haven’t experienced food or housing insecurity. Being invaded by a foreign army has never been on my mind. I have never experienced physical or sexual abuse. I experienced the social upheaval of the 1960s as a somewhat oblivious adolescent; I was living overseas in company-paid housing during the 2008 mortgage banking crisis. As an adult, I have lived in large cities such as Washington DC, London, and Boston, but also in a small rural New England town with two paved roads and just 2,000 people. This all contributes to a personal but limited worldview.

In addition, my unique genes literally shape me as an individual by structuring my body and brain, both of which significantly influence my thinking and my worldview. A study at the University College of London, also replicated in other studies, found that different brain structures correlated with different political views of the world.¹⁹ Reviewing nine studies conducted in six countries, researchers conclude that “the combined evidence suggests that political ideology constitutes a fundamental aspect of one’s genetically informed psychological disposition. . . . Political ideologies are complex, interactive, and environmentally contingent.”²⁰ Similarly, a Pew research team analyzed “data collected from a large sample of fraternal and identical twins, [and] found that genes likely explain

18. Alison J. Gray, “Worldviews,” 58–60.

19. Kanai Ryota, Tom Feilden, Colin Firth, and Geraint Rees, “Political Orientations Are Correlated with Brain Structure in Young Adults,” 670–680.

20. Peter K. Hatemi, et al., “Genetic Influences on Political Ideologies: Twin Analyses of 19 Measures of political Ideologies from Five Democracies and Genome-Wide Findings from Three Populations,” 282–294.

as much as half of why people are liberal or conservative.”²¹ This doesn’t mean we are born with a simple, genetically based political ideology like we are eye color, but the genetic aspects of our personality and emotional makeup help shape the creation of our mental models and point us in a specific direction. This isn’t absolute, and throughout our lives we can and often do change those mental models and political leanings. However, by recognizing the role that genetics has in shaping our worldview, we ought to be more respectful of others’ points of view since they are just as likely to be genetically prone to see the world differently.

Our genetics and life experiences are interrelated, and neither contributes to our worldviews in isolation. This is because no one has the same genetics, eternal spirit, or life experience. No one’s worldview is the same. We are all unique.

Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which unique characteristics and experiences have shaped and influenced how you see the world?

What Is in One’s Worldview

Our worldviews include all the mental models for our entire outlook and what we think is right and wrong in our own lives and in society. Far from abstract concepts, they embody what we believe, what we want for society, and how we see it best organized. According to Lee Camp, a professor of theology, these include questions about our spiritual values and beliefs such as:

How do we live together? How do we deal with offenses? How do we deal with money? How do we deal with enemies and violence? How do we arrange marriage and families and social structures? How is authority mediated, employed, ordered? How do we rightfully order passions and appetites? And much more besides, but most especially add these: Where is human history headed? What does it mean to be human? And what does it look like to live in a rightly ordered human community that engenders flourishing, justice, and the peace of God?²²

21. Rich Morin, “Study on Twins Suggests Our Political Beliefs May Be Hard-Wired.”

22. Lee C. Camp, *Scandalous Witness: A Little Political Manifesto for Christians*, 4.

Such questions are obviously not limited to those who believe in God or affiliate with a religion; all of us have specific beliefs about who we are, what we want, what kind of relationships we desire, and how we want society to be. Our brains don't separate beliefs into categories. We don't have a separate part of our brain that holds our religious beliefs and another part for political ones. Beliefs are formed, stored, and revised in our brains in the same physical way. Thus, the values we use to evaluate specific issues in our community come from the complex interaction of our worldviews and religious and moral values.

I am in awe of how the brain works. To me, it is an almost incomprehensible act of creation and love. When I think about it, I take a mental journey like that night in the Wyoming mountains. Instead of seeing the vastness of space and the powerful hand of the Creator who formed galaxies, stars, and solar systems, I see His fine brush strokes in the minute details of DNA, neurons, and neurochemicals. Choice and agency aren't abstract theological principles but are instead gifts wired into the very structures of our bodies. Even with the limitation of mortal and finite embodiment, we can be peacemakers as we seek to heal our divides.

Book Group Questions

- **Did you find it helpful to consider how we make decisions through both subconscious and conscious thinking?**
- **What are the significant forces that have shaped your worldview?**
- **Can people with the same spiritual beliefs have different political beliefs? Why?**

CHAPTER 6

Preparatory Tools

But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

—Matthew 5:22, New Living Translation

If there are barriers, it is because we ourselves have created them. We must stop concentrating on our differences and look for what we have in common; then we can begin to realize our greatest potential and achieve the greatest good in this world.

—Sister Bonnie L. Oscarson¹

When I was a teenager, I spent a summer doing construction work—more correctly, I was a go-fer (you know, someone who would go fer this, go fer that). By the end of the summer, I could do rough construction and dig really nice holes. Besides learning unique ways to swear without swearing, I learned that with the right tools, the job is easier and the results are better.

When you build a house, a skilled architect works with you to create a design and then translates it into blueprints. Then your contractor takes the blueprints and lays it out on the construction site. They measure exactly where the foundation, walls, and electrical outlets will be so it looks exactly like what you designed. Before they pound a nail, set a screw, or cut a board, they make sure they know what and where they are building.

So it is with peacemaking. With a proper foundation we can have meaningful and productive discussions—even about difficult topics. With the right tools, we can clarify what we want to get out of any conversation and create the right setting to achieve it. While these tools work for planned conversations, with practice we can draw on them even when an ordinary conversation turns unexpectedly heated. The more we use these skills, the more proficient we will be at using them.

These tools are summarized here and explained later in the chapter. Practice them until they become natural.

- **Set your goals**—Step back and decide what you want to accomplish with the conversation. You may want to build relationships, under-

1. Bonnie L. Oscarson, “Sisterhood: Oh, How We Need Each Other.”

stand others, find solutions, or change minds. Clarifying what you want and understanding how to go about it is an important part of eliminating contention.

- **Assess potential disagreement**—Many conversations are about what we agree on. Some topics have minor disagreements, while others have such little common ground that they are very difficult. Just knowing the level of potential disagreement helps you know how to handle the discussion.
- **Determine the potential cost**—Having conversations about difficult topics requires time and energy. You may risk alienation, loss of status, and being perceived negatively when others think your position is wrong. Before you begin such conversations, consider what cost you may need to pay. Some topics are so important that you may be willing to pay a high cost to try creating change; conversely, you may realize a topic is not important enough to risk any costs to yourself or your relationships.
- **Create the right setting**—You can't achieve your goals unless you have the right setting. Set it up right, and you will get better results.
- **Find and use reliable information**—Meaningful discussions benefit from having information that is reliable and trustworthy.
- **Emotionally prepare**—Some conversations are difficult and can tax us emotionally. Prepare when you want or need to have these conversations so that you have the right emotional foundation.

These tools will each be explored in detail below, but come back to this summary whenever you need to refresh and check them off before participating in a potentially difficult conversation.

Set Your Conversation Goals

In the midst of a discussion, we may often find ourselves feeling like Alice talking to the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*:

Alice: Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?

The Cheshire Cat: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

Alice: I don't much care where.

The Cheshire Cat: Then it doesn't much matter which way you go.

Alice: . . . So long as I get somewhere.

The Cheshire Cat: Oh, you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough.²

If we don't think about our conversation goals, we may wander and end up somewhere we didn't want to go. We may find ourselves in contentious discussions, and we may possibly alienate our relationships. Before starting, be thoughtful and decide what kind of conversation is intended, as each objective needs different tools and approaches. If the conversation veers off track, pause and reset.

You may have a particular goal for a discussion, but others in the group may not share it. Consider what they may want to achieve and adapt your objectives to something everyone can understand and support. It is almost always better to be open and clear about your conversation goals rather than silently hoping the discussion sticks to them. Ask everyone by saying something like, "We are talking about something that is controversial. What would everyone like to get out of this conversation?" Then state some possible goals described below. With shared expectations, the conversation is less likely to go off the rails.

Some helpful conversation objectives include:³

Goal: Build Connection and Relationship

We can seek a conversation to learn about others and find out what they think. These conversations build trust, uncover things in common, and strengthen relationships. The ideas can be difficult, controversial, or mundane; the topic doesn't matter as much as how we talk about them. Good topics include those that are important to the other person because they help us understand their concerns, interests, experience, and how they came to believe what they do. Do not be concerned with whether you share their beliefs; instead, simply care to know where they are coming from. Talk and ask questions, but especially focus on listening with interest and curiosity.

Goal: Learn from Others

Regardless of how much we think we know about a topic, always approach conversations with a desire to learn something. We come as active learners, open to developing or changing our opinions based on others'

2. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, ch. 6.

3. Adapted from Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay, *How to Have Impossible Conversations, A Very Practical Guide*, 10–11.

expertise or life experience. This requires being honest to ourselves about this goal. We can't pretend to be learning from another when our actual goal is simply to change their mind by having *them* listen to *us*. Pause, then reflect on whether we are open to examining our own beliefs before setting this as our goal.

Goal: Change Others' Opinions and Beliefs

Trying to change someone's belief is a legitimate and important conversational objective. As Latter-day Saints, we want to heal the world and make it better. Our prayers aren't just for our individual welfare or for that of our families; we pray for others too, even the entire kingdom of God and beyond. Jesus commanded us to love God, and in the same breath asked us to love and care for our neighbors. As followers of Jesus, we are to be kind and civil; at the same time, we are to be "anxiously engaged in a good cause . . . to bring to pass much righteousness" (D&C 58:27).

There are ethical and unethical ways to try to change others. As Latter-day Saints, we honor agency—the ability of a person to choose their own beliefs—and thus we should invite and persuade rather than coerce and control.⁴ Unethical coercion occurs when someone feels they have no choice but to agree or they must face difficult consequences for disagreeing. (It also never works long-term.) Ethical persuasion allows one to disagree and reject others' beliefs without a fear of retribution, punishment, or loss of status by either person. According to David McRaney, persuasion is preferable to coercion because it "lead[s] a person along in

4. See D&C 121:41. Those who use the righteous principles outlined in verses 41–43, including kindness, long-suffering, gentleness, and meekness, are promised they will receive power that comes naturally and almost unseen. "And the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and *without compulsory means* it shall flow unto thee forever and ever" (D&C 121:45–46; emphasis added). Note: some use "reproving betimes with sharpness" (D&C 121:43) as license to argue or tell people what they should believe. But reproving means correcting gently, betimes means speedily, and sharpness means clarity, as in a camera in sharp focus. This scripture then reads "gently correcting speedily with clarity." This completely changes the tone. See "Line Upon Line: Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–43," *New Era*.

stages, helping them to better understand their own thinking and how it could align with the message at hand.”⁵

Reflect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think back to the last conversation in which you wanted to change someone’s mind. Did you use anything you now realize might be perceived as coercive? Or do you think they felt safe to disagree? • Did you feel you could disagree without fear of negative consequences? Was it safe for you to disagree?

Goal: Come to Agreement

Here we all share the goal of exploring a topic and coming to a mutual understanding, where all participants are willing to give up old opinions and correct mistaken beliefs if needed. It requires humility, openness, and a willingness to examine the limitations of how we arrived at previously held opinions and beliefs.

For complex and morally based issues, our efforts should center on understanding others’ moral values and why they believe they do. Ask questions about their worldviews and what events and values led them to their belief. The discussion proceeds with dignity and respect, under the assumption that other participants have sincere reasons for why they believe what they do. Assume that you have common ground and work to find it. Don’t expect to resolve complicated issues in a single conversation; some topics take time and multiple discussions to reflect and consider others’ points.

Complimentary Goals

Despite our best efforts and well-intentioned goals, when we try to change others’ opinions and beliefs or mutually come to agreement, there is still potential for conflict and contention. No one wants to be told they are wrong. When coming to a discussion with these goals, consider the following before proceeding:

- **Consider religious beliefs.** In testimony meetings, we often hear people say they know certain beliefs are true. We come to these beliefs through spiritual processes as we “test the word of God” by planting the seed to see if it grows, not through rational or scientific pro-

5. David McRaney, *How Minds Change: The Surprising Science of Belief, Opinion, and Persuasion*, xviii.

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That is how this book came about.

After I polished my first draft, I asked twenty-two people to be beta readers. Half were people I had never met. They were diverse, with different political beliefs, coming from different age groups and life experiences. I asked them to read the manuscript and help me make it better by identifying areas that were unbalanced, that over-represented a particular ideology, or that might alienate readers with how I expressed myself. Two psychologists reviewed it to make sure I was clear and accurate with my explanations of how our minds work. All these people helped me see things I hadn't previously seen and helped me remove rough spots. I learned from the unique perspectives of others and hopefully made a better book.

In a similar way, I am a first draft. As I wrote and researched, I opened myself to listening and learning from others. In the process, I changed. I'm still a work in progress, and sometimes I am more successful than others. I often fail.

In our increasingly polarized world, we become prone to identifying so much with our political and religious causes and beliefs that they become an identity overshadowing all others. Conversely, we begin to view those who see differently with as villains and adversaries, and we label them with derogatory terms that make it clear they are the enemy. Some of us may at times find that we even enjoy the contention, with an increasing number unfortunately seeing violence as an acceptable response. Through all of this, we burn connecting bridges and instead build fortresses and refuse to productively engage with people who think differently. Sadly, these influences have found their way into our communities and loving families and between fellow Latter-day Saints. "The love of many shall wax cold" (Matt. 24:12).

In that same October 2021 general conference, Elder Quentin L. Cook commented, "In my lifetime, I have never seen a greater lack of civility. We are bombarded with angry, contentious language and provocative, devastating actions that destroy peace and tranquility."¹ In an understated way, Elder Renlund said we have "shown tendencies toward contention and divisiveness."² At the next April 2022 conference, President Russell M. Nelson emphasized these points by emphatically stating, "Contention violates everything the Savior stood for and taught."³ These three prophetic leaders do not ask us to withdraw from the public sphere and re-

1. Quentin L. Cook, "Personal Peace in Challenging Times."

2. Dale G. Renlund, "The Peace of Christ Abolishes Enmity."

3. Russell M. Nelson, "Preaching the Gospel of Peace."

treat from discussing potentially contentious issues. Instead, they point us to the Savior, the Prince of Peace, who commanded us to love. Love is central, for on it “hang[s] all the law and prophets” (Matt. 22:40). Only in him and through love can we find true, lasting, and eternal peace.

Peacemaking may seem daunting and overwhelming, as it requires vulnerability and stepping out of our comfort zones. Sharon Eubank, director of Latter-day Saint Charities and former counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, spoke on this in her October 2020 general conference talk: “This world isn’t what I want it to be. There are many things I want to influence and make better. And frankly, there’s a lot of opposition to what I hope for, and sometimes I feel powerless.”⁴ However, with the right tools and as the Spirit guides and connects us to God, we can find the strength to make a difference.

Perhaps the biggest fear of engaging in peacemaking is that attempts to discuss divisive issues may be counterproductive and may instead fuel more contention. Of course, there are times to be silent, but silence itself can drive contention and polarization under the surface and leave these important issues to those who are trying to further divide us. Unfortunately, our quietness doesn’t stop these toxic forces from infecting our homes and communities. So while there are times when we should be quiet and withdraw from discussions in order to maintain peace, whenever possible, we are better—and the world is better—when we remain connected with others regardless of their beliefs. As we become peacemakers, we help, support, and teach others who are looking for a better way.

In my research, I have found people and organizations that are having meaningful and productive discussions without contention. In this book, I share what I have learned. This path is full of challenges; we will make mistakes, but we also will find more peace and a greater ability to express our beliefs and have meaningful discussions. Through this learning I found myself less afraid of crossing these bridges of difference and even looking forward to talking about them. I’ve become better able to make my views known without creating defensiveness, to give others an opportunity to express the issues that are important to them, and to strengthen relationships while being a more effective advocate for the causes I believe in. Along the way, I have also had to confront my own weaknesses and practice at trying better. I’m learning what it takes to better understand where others are coming from, to find common ground and learn together.

4. Sharon Eubank, “By Union of Feeling We Obtain Power with God.”

unique vision of peacemaking and an imperative to heal the divides not just within our own religious and cultural community but also with our brothers and sisters in the broader community of children of our heavenly parents. (For the purposes of brevity, the term “the Church” is here used to refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and “Latter-day Saint” is used to refer to the Church’s doctrines, teachings, culture, and members.)

As Latter-day Saints, our beliefs should help us reject the vilification and hyper-partisanship that is so common today. We are taught to become peacemakers and to build Zion and its unity. Our baptismal covenant includes promises to “bear others’ burdens, that they may be light; mourn with those that mourn; and comfort those in need of comfort” (2 Ne. 26:33).⁵ Temple ordinances bind our families together in eternity.⁶ These ordinances connect us to God and each other, eventually uniting us in one eternal family. We believe “all are alike unto God.”⁷ Because of all of this, we are a people that should be most able to fight polarization and peaceably live together in our differences.

Thomas Griffith, a Latter-day Saint, retired Federal Judge, and member of the American Bar Association’s task force on American Democracy, notes that leading voices in depolarization see “Latter-day Saints [as] uniquely positioned to be leaders in this effort of overcoming toxic polarization.” He continues, “To hear people like that see, in our culture, unique strengths that we can draw up on, I think that’s terribly exciting. And I think it’s consistent with what our leadership is asking us to do.”⁸

When looking at the contentious divides (or our fear of creating them), it is easy to fall into the trap of immediately placing blame entirely on the other, and so it is imperative to be self-reflective and to adjust ourselves rather than engage in a project of merely “fixing” the other. To help, there are periodical *thought boxes* directed to you as a reader to interrupt

5. “My Baptismal Covenants,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

6. For more information on Latter-day Saint temple ordinances see, “Temples,” Newsroom.

7. See also Mosiah 23:7: “Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another.” The restored gospel of Jesus Christ is expansive and encompasses all people that have lived, are living, and will live. President Nelson says as much: “Each of us has a divine potential because each is a child of God. Each is equal in His eyes.” Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail.”

8. “A New Mission for Latter-day Saints—Peacemaking”, *Mormon Land*. Griffith specifically cites Eboo Patel, Tim Shriver, and Noah Feldman as opinion leaders who recognize our unique ability.

your reading and pose a question or encourage you to reflect on some principle on a personal level. These give you an opportunity to pause and take specific ideas that you can apply to your personal circumstances.

Healing our divides doesn't happen alone; it involves a community. Think about others whom you can involve, regardless of which side of a divide you may perceive them to be. Perhaps join with a friend or family member to read along, considering the *thought boxes* together. We often learn differently when we discuss ideas with others and consider their insights. At the end of each chapter, there are additional questions designed for book groups large or small. The *Resource Guide* at the end of the book contains further questions to engage group discussion, as well as additional readings and links to other groups that are involved in depolarization.

With faith and effort, we start with ourselves, making the changes we need to make, then we extend outwards to those closest to us, our family, our friends, and those who believe in a similar way to us. Although we may impact the stranger, we impact those closest to us the most.

President Russell M. Nelson invited us to this work: “Brothers and sisters, we can literally change the world—one person and one interaction at a time. How? By modeling how to manage honest differences of opinion with mutual respect and dignified dialogue.”⁹ We are taught by Jesus to become peacemakers; we are called by a prophet to change.

Because this is a communal effort, as you read along, I want to hear what you are learning, what things are unclear, and what experiences you are having. In particular, share with me disagreements you may have or blind spots or misunderstandings you see in these approaches. Since we can't be together talking about these concepts in person, I can be reached at healingourdivides@gmail.com or through Facebook at **BridgesLDS**. I hope to respond as I am able. I would love to hear about your journey and what you have learned as you try to become a peacemaker and heal our divides.

David Ostler,
February 2024

9. Russell M. Nelson, “Peacemakers Needed.”

CHAPTER 2

Spiritual Beings on a Physical Chassis

We need to see a reflection of ourselves in each other—our dreams, hopes, hurts, fears, and despairs. Otherwise, we all become strangers and foreigners. Our differences are often used as barriers to divide us, when they are actually an opportunity to enrich our lives. Dignity is a moral obligation we feel toward people, not merely a legal requirement we comply with.

—Elder Ulisses Soares¹

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance.

—Attributed to Confucius

As we commit to becoming peacemakers, it is helpful to know how our physical brains process information so that we can better understand the limits of our own thinking and the natural processes that influence ourselves and others to believe differently. Seeing how our physiology affects our views enables us both to better extend grace to others and to find positive and effective ways to discuss and live in our differences. This chapter examines the following four guiding ideas:

- Our thought processes are often subconscious, meaning we regularly act without actively choosing to do so.
- We filter and simplify the information we receive into patterns and models that we use to make decisions. These models are mostly, but not entirely, accurate.
- Our brains think involuntarily and automatically—without us consciously analyzing each evaluation and conclusion.
- Our individual filters and models—combined with different life experiences, genetics, and eternal identities—cause each of us to see the world differently.

As humans, we aren't just higher order animals; we are unique as a species. Latter-day Saint doctrine teaches us that we are divine children of heavenly parents. God created us and gave us our brains and agency—the ability to choose. Our essence is our eternal spirit that has always existed and has always had an endless future. Yet, we live as *natural men and women*

1. Ulisses Soares, “Foundations and Fruits of Religious Freedom.”

within the biological framework of a human body, with all its constraints and limitations in perceiving, reasoning, and making conclusions.²

Even before birth, our brains create innumerable neural pathways to organize and comprehend the world around us. Spiritually and physically, we see the same information through our unique models, filters, and individualities, and with these we come to different understandings. Even if we arrive at the same conclusions with the same information, our brains use unique neural pathways and individually constructed filters and models to reach them.

A Little About Our Brains and How We Think

Scientists are just beginning to understand how the brain works. Different parts of our brains regulate our bodies, our emotions, and how we think and reason. New technologies, such as fMRI³ scans, allow us to examine the specific brain structures used to sense, process, and respond to specific types of input. We can see in real time how our brains feel anger, fear, happiness, and other emotions.

Without us even knowing or thinking about it, our brains control digestion, blood flow, heart rate, and the myriad functions of our organs. For example, when we physically exert ourselves, our brains increase our heart rates to provide more oxygen to our muscles; during prolonged exertion, we generate body heat that our brains regulate through changes in our skin, sweat glands, and blood vessels. All of these processes happen automatically, without us consciously deciding to speed up our heart rate or cause our skin to sweat. All animals have these inborn neural pathways that regulate bodily functions. We manage these essential biological processes in our autonomic nervous system, which includes parts of our brains, our spines, and even the neurons in our digestive systems.

But as humans we are more than that. We have cognition, “the process by which knowledge and understanding is developed in the mind.”⁴

2. Latter-day Saints believe that as mortals, we are subject to the weaknesses of the flesh, including passions, biases, imperfect perceptions, and other physical limitations. “For the natural man is an enemy to God” (see Mosiah 3:19).

3. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) shows how different parts of a brain are working. It uses a magnetic field to detect brain activity by identifying changes in blood flow. fMRI can detect cognitive processes, including decision-making and memory. Not only is it used for psychology studies, but it is also used to identify strokes, tumors, and other brain disorders.

4. “Cognition,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries.

Our conscious cognition is how we evaluate information and make decisions. Subconscious cognition happens without our awareness, using patterns and models to make complex decisions and draw conclusions based on what feels right. It happens fast and outside of conscious awareness.⁵ However, unlike automatic and inborn brain processes that regulate our heart rate and body temperature, subconscious cognition is developed through our experiences in and engagement with the world. For example, when handed a cup of hot chocolate, most of us will immediately start blowing on the drink to avoid burning our mouths. This is not an innate reflex; it is one we likely learned after previously burning our tongues. Our response is now automatic, and we do it without consciously evaluating the situation. We use this same process to drive our cars, not thinking about coordinating the gas pedal, brake, steering wheel, and windshield wipers. These actions are almost automatic and subconscious.

On the other hand, our conscious cognition occurs when we actively weigh the pros and cons of specific decisions. The choices may be as mundane as considering whether to top our hot chocolate with whipped cream or what roads to take to get home, or they may involve more important decisions such as where to live, what to study, who to marry, and how to live a principled life. We use our conscious reasoning when we analyze a math problem, write a business plan, or even decide which TV show to watch.

Conscious reasoning takes time, but subconscious reasoning comes almost instantly. This is why it takes about 0.9 seconds for a driver to perceive that a car has unexpectedly pulled out in front of them, and another 0.2 seconds to step on the brake.⁶ In 1.1 seconds, the driver's brain has recognized the danger, formulated a solution, and told the driver's foot to brake and their hands to steer out of danger. If driving relied on conscious reasoning pathways for these situations, it would take much longer, and we would have a lot more accidents.

Emotions are a critical part of cognition. According to social psychologist Jonathan Haidt,

Emotions were long thought to be dumb and visceral, but . . . scientists increasingly recognized that emotions were filled with cognition. Emotions occur in steps, the first of which is to appraise something that just happened based on whether it advanced or hindered your goals. These appraisals are a

5. See Robert E. Patterson and Robert G. Eggleston, "Intuitive Cognition," 5–22.

6. Marc Green, "Driver Reaction Time."

kind of information processing; they are cognitions . . . they happen automatically and with conscious awareness of the outputs but not of the processes.⁷

Our emotions provide values and motivation to our thinking. When we see a child fall from their bicycle and try to pick out the sand from their scrape while in tears, we don't dispassionately calculate whether or not to try to help; we immediately feel compassion and concern. Our decision-making isn't used to determine whether to help; it is used to determine how can we help best. Research shows that emotions are crucial inputs into the models that power our subconscious decision-making. We feel something and simply know what to do.

By contrast, studies show that people with damage to the parts of their brain that feel emotions have problems with decision-making. Some make poor decisions; others may just be indecisive.⁸ Our hearts (representing our emotions) and our heads (representing our subconscious and conscious decision-making) are not separate ways to think; they are intertwined, and we can't function well without them both working together.⁹

Challenge

- **Think back to a couple of recent decisions. Identify how your conscious and subconscious reasoning each played a different role in these decisions.**
- **How did your emotional values impact this decision?**

Elephants and Riders

In his book *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, Jonathan Haidt describes the behavior of an elephant rider to further illustrate the difference between subconscious and conscious cognition. Like our subconscious cognition, elephants are big, powerful, and very

7. The full quote is this: "Emotions are not entirely subcategories of intuition: emotions are often said to include all the bodily changes that prepare one for adaptive behavior, including hormonal changes in the rest of the body. Hormonal responses are not intuitions. But the cognitive elements of emotions—such as appraisals of events and alterations of attention and vigilance—are subtypes of intuition. They happen automatically and with conscious awareness of the outputs but not of the processes." Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, 52, footnote 40.

8. Haidt, 39–40.

9. Latter-day Saints believe that revelation is best had when our hearts and minds are aligned. "Behold I will tell you in your mind and in your heart" (see D&C 8:2).

smart. When a rider and elephant go for a walk, the rider decides where to go and signals to the elephant. The elephant picks the path and arrives at the destination. The rider doesn't think about how to avoid rocks and trees; that's the elephant's job. When the elephant gets off course, the rider can redirect the elephant. If the rider gives commands that conflict with what the elephant wants, the elephant usually won't follow the rider's direction.

Elephants represent our subconscious reasoning with all our emotional values, while riders represent our conscious reasoning. So it is with our brains: we can consciously reason what we want to do, but sometimes our subconscious takes over. That's why it is easy to succumb to anger, slip up on New Year's resolutions, or think skeptically of people who aren't like us. Our subconscious is powerful and makes quick, vital decisions like avoiding a car crash. But it also makes simple and seemingly trivial decisions, like scowling when someone says something that we disagree with.

Haidt concludes, "Most of a person's everyday life is determined not by their conscious intentions and deliberate choices [the rider] but by mental processes . . . that operate outside of conscious awareness and guidance [the elephant]."¹⁰ Neither conscious nor subconscious cognition is better than the other; they just have different roles. Sometimes our subconscious, intuitive elephant gives us useful, trustworthy information that has no obvious factual basis. Other times, we are able to make better decisions when our conscious rider is involved to avoid unexamined, elephant-driven decisions.

Reflect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When has your elephant gone off and taken you somewhere you haven't wanted to go? • What kind of decisions does your elephant make without your rider? • What kind of decisions does your rider need to make?

Filters and Models

Our brains receive vast amounts of information—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations—and then use mental models both to filter out what is deemed unimportant and to recognize patterns from the

10. J. A. Bargh and T. L. Chartrand, "The Unbearable Automaticity of Being," 462–79.

information we think is useful. To illustrate this, science journalist David McRaney describes how newborn brains develop:

For brains, everything is noise at first. Then brains notice the patterns in the static, and they move up a level, noticing patterns in how those patterns interact. Then they move up another level, noticing patterns in how sets of interacting patterns interact with other sets, and on and on it goes. Layers of pattern recognition built on top of simpler layers become a rough understanding of what to expect from the world around us, and their interactions become our sense of cause and effect. The roundness of a ball, the hard edge of a table, the soft elbow of a stuffed animal, each object excites certain neural pathways and not others, and each exposure strengthens their connections until the brain comes to expect those elements of the world and becomes better at making sense of them in context.¹¹

As adults we have developed sophisticated neural pathways. For instance, we are bombarded with information when we are driving. At 70 miles per hour, our eyes are seeing a constantly changing world. We are looking for debris on the road, lane markers, exit signs, potential threats, and a whole lot more. We might be listening to our driving partner or background music, but our ears are also open to a horn honk or screeching brakes. Even if we are munching on road snacks, we can pick up an unexpected smell of burning brakes. Pretty amazing to be safely navigating a 4,000-pound car traveling at 100 feet per second in an ever-changing environment. All the information comes in through our senses, but because there is simply too much information for our brains to consider, our brain filters out what it thinks is important and ignores the rest. When something unexpected happens, our mind's model signals a problem. Maybe it is the sudden brake lights ahead of us, an icy spot, or a passenger telling us that we just missed our exit.

The subconscious models are so strong that sometimes they overpower our conscious cognition. To test this, Haidt created a study where researchers offered participants a sip of apple juice poured straight from an unopened bottle. All the participants drank it. A researcher then offered a drink of apple juice in which they dipped a certified sterile cockroach. Despite there being no doubt that the juice was safe to drink, 63% refused. When asked why, most could not give a straightforward answer. Some said,

11. David McRaney, *How Minds Change: The Surprising Science of Belief, Opinion, and Persuasion*, 62–63.

“I just don’t want to do it even though I can’t give you a reason.”¹² Even though the researcher did their best to refute their concerns, only 10% of them changed their minds. For good reasons, the subconscious cognition was so powerful that subjects had a firm mental model against drinking insect-dipped juice, and no amount of conscious reasoning could justify it. The elephant (subconscious reasoning) made the decision, and the rider (conscious reasoning) could not overcome it.

This should not give the impression that our subconscious reasoning (our elephant) is anything other than amazing. Our elephant makes correct decisions automatically and accurately in almost all situations, which is how we are able to drive, walk, eat, and live our daily lives without needing to consciously analyze each bit of information that comes to our senses. However, these subconscious models are only approximate and are imperfect representations of what is around us. They work well for simple and routine things, but they are not comprehensive enough to consider all the information, possibilities, and perspectives for complex issues such as how to take care of the poor, create economic opportunity, or make sense of complicated religious issues. Since we are so reliant on our subconscious models, we are prone to use them with certainty, assuming they are “common sense” and therefore being unaware of their limitations. Unsurprisingly, others may have different “common sense” models that result in opposing beliefs. Thus, peacemaking requires us to be humble and recognize that no one knows everything. By working together, our differing mental models have the potential to increase the pool of ideas and possibilities and decrease blind spots.

Tip

- **When you receive information that supports an opposing position, pause first and give your conscious brain a chance to evaluate whether the information is worth considering.**
- **In a discussion, be open and think about why this is rational to the other person.**

12. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 43–44. This research was repeated with other scenarios, including signing an agreement to sell one’s soul after death and stealing drugs to save a family member’s life. Haidt said, “[Subjects] seem to be flailing around, throwing out reason after reason, and rarely changing their minds when [the researcher] proved that their latest reason was not relevant.”

How We Know Things

Our beliefs form over time, some with thoughtful analysis, others with little to no conscious thought. They come from our values, neural pathways, and mental models. With imprecision, we form our beliefs. So, how do we decide that we know or have become certain about something? Neurologist Robert Burton describes “a general classification of mental states that create our sense of knowledge about our knowledge.” He writes:

For simplicity, I have chosen to lump together the closely allied feelings of certainty, rightness, conviction, and correctness under the all-inclusive term, the *feeling of knowing*. Whether or not these are separate sensations or merely shades or degrees of a common feeling isn't important. What they do share is a common quality: Each is a form of metaknowledge—knowledge about our knowledge—that qualifies or colors our thoughts, imbuing them with a sense of rightness or wrongness.¹³

The *feeling of knowing* is an emotion or state of feeling, embedded in our subconscious cognition (our elephant). We feel comfortable when our subconscious feels something is right, regardless of whether it actually is. We have all experienced complete certainty in believing something, only to later discover that we were dead wrong.

Remember

- **Can you remember a time when you believed something that you later learned wasn't so?**
- **What happened that let you to reconsider your belief?**

Psychologists have studied subconscious reasoning using a technique called the Cognitive Reflection Test, developed by Shane Frederick. The test presents participants simple questions such as: “If it takes 5 machines 5 minutes to make 5 widgets, how long would it take 100 machines to make 100 widgets?”¹⁴ When posed to individuals, many see a pattern and wrongly answer 100. However, when this question is given to a group of people for a shared answer, they always get it right (the answer is five, by the way). Discussing opposing ideas helps group members step out of their intuitive instincts, consciously reevaluate, and come to better a consensus.

13. Robert A. Burton, *On Being Certain: Believing When You Are Right Even When You Are Not*, 3 (italics added).

14. McRaney, *How Minds Change*, 195.

According to Burton, having a strong *feeling of knowing* (certainty) causes our brain to release hormones that make us feel good and satisfied. Without that feeling, we may try to resolve our doubt and uncertainty; we may even become curious and seek new information until our brain is satisfied. Then, with our *feeling of knowing*, we can get locked in and not challenge our belief or decision, since subconsciously we don't want to give up the good feeling of being right. Thus, Burton writes, "the feeling of knowing, the reward for both proven and unproven thoughts, is learning's best friend, and mental flexibility's worst enemy."¹⁵

We know very few things absolutely—such things as $2+2=4$ and that an object will fall when dropped. Instead, most things we believe are approximations of some absolute truth that may be very difficult to prove. Religiously, the word "faith" is used to describe hope and confidence in our religious beliefs; we then express that faith through action—by the way we live.¹⁶ Similarly, our political beliefs generally haven't been formed through rational testing and revising; they have rather evolved informally, based on moral values and what makes sense to us. Thus, they can change when we consider others' experiences and how they interrelate to our own values. Through this process our values usually won't change, but we may learn better ways to achieve them in our lives and in society.

We only grow through change, which includes changing our minds when we are wrong. According to organizational psychologist Adam Grant, "changing your mind is not a sign of losing integrity. It's often a mark of gaining wisdom. Realizing you were wrong doesn't mean you lack judgment. It means you lacked knowledge. Opinions are what you think today. Growth comes from staying open to revising your views tomorrow."¹⁷ This is one way we experience growth through opposition.

Reflect

- Next time you say you know something, pause and ask yourself whether this is a feeling of knowing or whether you have consciously thought through competing points of view to arrive at knowing.
- Ask yourself: what level of certainty do I feel I know this?

15. Burton, *On Being Certain*, 99.

16. See "Faith," True to the Faith.

17. Adam Grant (@AdamMGrant), "Changing your mind is not a sign of losing integrity."

How We Form Our Worldview

Our worldview is everything we believe. Psychologist Alison Gray defines it as “a collection of attitudes, values, stories, and expectations about the world around us, which inform our every thought and action. Worldview is expressed in ethics, religion, philosophy, scientific beliefs and so on.”¹⁸ As Latter-day Saints, we see ourselves as eternal and all of humanity as family loved by our heavenly parents. However, our culture, genetics, and specific life decisions also contribute to who we are. For example, my parents raised me in a deeply devout Latter-day Saint home. As a man, I experience the world differently than a woman. I am white and haven’t experienced what other races and ethnic groups experience on a daily basis. I have lived in relative abundance and haven’t experienced food or housing insecurity. Being invaded by a foreign army has never been on my mind. I have never experienced physical or sexual abuse. I experienced the social upheaval of the 1960s as a somewhat oblivious adolescent; I was living overseas in company-paid housing during the 2008 mortgage banking crisis. As an adult, I have lived in large cities such as Washington DC, London, and Boston, but also in a small rural New England town with two paved roads and just 2,000 people. This all contributes to a personal but limited worldview.

In addition, my unique genes literally shape me as an individual by structuring my body and brain, both of which significantly influence my thinking and my worldview. A study at the University College of London, also replicated in other studies, found that different brain structures correlated with different political views of the world.¹⁹ Reviewing nine studies conducted in six countries, researchers conclude that “the combined evidence suggests that political ideology constitutes a fundamental aspect of one’s genetically informed psychological disposition. . . . Political ideologies are complex, interactive, and environmentally contingent.”²⁰ Similarly, a Pew research team analyzed “data collected from a large sample of fraternal and identical twins, [and] found that genes likely explain

18. Alison J. Gray, “Worldviews,” 58–60.

19. Kanai Ryota, Tom Feilden, Colin Firth, and Geraint Rees, “Political Orientations Are Correlated with Brain Structure in Young Adults,” 670–680.

20. Peter K. Hatemi, et al., “Genetic Influences on Political Ideologies: Twin Analyses of 19 Measures of political Ideologies from Five Democracies and Genome-Wide Findings from Three Populations,” 282–294.

as much as half of why people are liberal or conservative.”²¹ This doesn’t mean we are born with a simple, genetically based political ideology like we are eye color, but the genetic aspects of our personality and emotional makeup help shape the creation of our mental models and point us in a specific direction. This isn’t absolute, and throughout our lives we can and often do change those mental models and political leanings. However, by recognizing the role that genetics has in shaping our worldview, we ought to be more respectful of others’ points of view since they are just as likely to be genetically prone to see the world differently.

Our genetics and life experiences are interrelated, and neither contributes to our worldviews in isolation. This is because no one has the same genetics, eternal spirit, or life experience. No one’s worldview is the same. We are all unique.

Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which unique characteristics and experiences have shaped and influenced how you see the world?

What Is in One’s Worldview

Our worldviews include all the mental models for our entire outlook and what we think is right and wrong in our own lives and in society. Far from abstract concepts, they embody what we believe, what we want for society, and how we see it best organized. According to Lee Camp, a professor of theology, these include questions about our spiritual values and beliefs such as:

How do we live together? How do we deal with offenses? How do we deal with money? How do we deal with enemies and violence? How do we arrange marriage and families and social structures? How is authority mediated, employed, ordered? How do we rightfully order passions and appetites? And much more besides, but most especially add these: Where is human history headed? What does it mean to be human? And what does it look like to live in a rightly ordered human community that engenders flourishing, justice, and the peace of God?²²

21. Rich Morin, “Study on Twins Suggests Our Political Beliefs May Be Hard-Wired.”

22. Lee C. Camp, *Scandalous Witness: A Little Political Manifesto for Christians*, 4.

Such questions are obviously not limited to those who believe in God or affiliate with a religion; all of us have specific beliefs about who we are, what we want, what kind of relationships we desire, and how we want society to be. Our brains don't separate beliefs into categories. We don't have a separate part of our brain that holds our religious beliefs and another part for political ones. Beliefs are formed, stored, and revised in our brains in the same physical way. Thus, the values we use to evaluate specific issues in our community come from the complex interaction of our worldviews and religious and moral values.

I am in awe of how the brain works. To me, it is an almost incomprehensible act of creation and love. When I think about it, I take a mental journey like that night in the Wyoming mountains. Instead of seeing the vastness of space and the powerful hand of the Creator who formed galaxies, stars, and solar systems, I see His fine brush strokes in the minute details of DNA, neurons, and neurochemicals. Choice and agency aren't abstract theological principles but are instead gifts wired into the very structures of our bodies. Even with the limitation of mortal and finite embodiment, we can be peacemakers as we seek to heal our divides.

Book Group Questions

- **Did you find it helpful to consider how we make decisions through both subconscious and conscious thinking?**
- **What are the significant forces that have shaped your worldview?**
- **Can people with the same spiritual beliefs have different political beliefs? Why?**

CHAPTER 6

Preparatory Tools

But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

—Matthew 5:22, New Living Translation

If there are barriers, it is because we ourselves have created them. We must stop concentrating on our differences and look for what we have in common; then we can begin to realize our greatest potential and achieve the greatest good in this world.

—Sister Bonnie L. Oscarson¹

When I was a teenager, I spent a summer doing construction work—more correctly, I was a go-fer (you know, someone who would go fer this, go fer that). By the end of the summer, I could do rough construction and dig really nice holes. Besides learning unique ways to swear without swearing, I learned that with the right tools, the job is easier and the results are better.

When you build a house, a skilled architect works with you to create a design and then translates it into blueprints. Then your contractor takes the blueprints and lays it out on the construction site. They measure exactly where the foundation, walls, and electrical outlets will be so it looks exactly like what you designed. Before they pound a nail, set a screw, or cut a board, they make sure they know what and where they are building.

So it is with peacemaking. With a proper foundation we can have meaningful and productive discussions—even about difficult topics. With the right tools, we can clarify what we want to get out of any conversation and create the right setting to achieve it. While these tools work for planned conversations, with practice we can draw on them even when an ordinary conversation turns unexpectedly heated. The more we use these skills, the more proficient we will be at using them.

These tools are summarized here and explained later in the chapter. Practice them until they become natural.

- **Set your goals**—Step back and decide what you want to accomplish with the conversation. You may want to build relationships, under-

1. Bonnie L. Oscarson, “Sisterhood: Oh, How We Need Each Other.”

Alice: . . . So long as I get somewhere.

The Cheshire Cat: Oh, you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough.²

If we don't think about our conversation goals, we may wander and end up somewhere we didn't want to go. We may find ourselves in contentious discussions, and we may possibly alienate our relationships. Before starting, be thoughtful and decide what kind of conversation is intended, as each objective needs different tools and approaches. If the conversation veers off track, pause and reset.

You may have a particular goal for a discussion, but others in the group may not share it. Consider what they may want to achieve and adapt your objectives to something everyone can understand and support. It is almost always better to be open and clear about your conversation goals rather than silently hoping the discussion sticks to them. Ask everyone by saying something like, "We are talking about something that is controversial. What would everyone like to get out of this conversation?" Then state some possible goals described below. With shared expectations, the conversation is less likely to go off the rails.

Some helpful conversation objectives include:³

Goal: Build Connection and Relationship

We can seek a conversation to learn about others and find out what they think. These conversations build trust, uncover things in common, and strengthen relationships. The ideas can be difficult, controversial, or mundane; the topic doesn't matter as much as how we talk about them. Good topics include those that are important to the other person because they help us understand their concerns, interests, experience, and how they came to believe what they do. Do not be concerned with whether you share their beliefs; instead, simply care to know where they are coming from. Talk and ask questions, but especially focus on listening with interest and curiosity.

Goal: Learn from Others

Regardless of how much we think we know about a topic, always approach conversations with a desire to learn something. We come as active learners, open to developing or changing our opinions based on others'

2. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, ch. 6.

3. Adapted from Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay, *How to Have Impossible Conversations, A Very Practical Guide*, 10–11.

expertise or life experience. This requires being honest to ourselves about this goal. We can't pretend to be learning from another when our actual goal is simply to change their mind by having *them* listen to *us*. Pause, then reflect on whether we are open to examining our own beliefs before setting this as our goal.

Goal: Change Others' Opinions and Beliefs

Trying to change someone's belief is a legitimate and important conversational objective. As Latter-day Saints, we want to heal the world and make it better. Our prayers aren't just for our individual welfare or for that of our families; we pray for others too, even the entire kingdom of God and beyond. Jesus commanded us to love God, and in the same breath asked us to love and care for our neighbors. As followers of Jesus, we are to be kind and civil; at the same time, we are to be "anxiously engaged in a good cause . . . to bring to pass much righteousness" (D&C 58:27).

There are ethical and unethical ways to try to change others. As Latter-day Saints, we honor agency—the ability of a person to choose their own beliefs—and thus we should invite and persuade rather than coerce and control.⁴ Unethical coercion occurs when someone feels they have no choice but to agree or they must face difficult consequences for disagreeing. (It also never works long-term.) Ethical persuasion allows one to disagree and reject others' beliefs without a fear of retribution, punishment, or loss of status by either person. According to David McRaney, persuasion is preferable to coercion because it "lead[s] a person along in

4. See D&C 121:41. Those who use the righteous principles outlined in verses 41–43, including kindness, long-suffering, gentleness, and meekness, are promised they will receive power that comes naturally and almost unseen. "And the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and *without compulsory means* it shall flow unto thee forever and ever" (D&C 121:45–46; emphasis added). Note: some use "reproving betimes with sharpness" (D&C 121:43) as license to argue or tell people what they should believe. But reproving means correcting gently, betimes means speedily, and sharpness means clarity, as in a camera in sharp focus. This scripture then reads "gently correcting speedily with clarity." This completely changes the tone. See "Line Upon Line: Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–43," *New Era*.

stages, helping them to better understand their own thinking and how it could align with the message at hand.”⁵

Reflect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think back to the last conversation in which you wanted to change someone’s mind. Did you use anything you now realize might be perceived as coercive? Or do you think they felt safe to disagree? • Did you feel you could disagree without fear of negative consequences? Was it safe for you to disagree?

Goal: Come to Agreement

Here we all share the goal of exploring a topic and coming to a mutual understanding, where all participants are willing to give up old opinions and correct mistaken beliefs if needed. It requires humility, openness, and a willingness to examine the limitations of how we arrived at previously held opinions and beliefs.

For complex and morally based issues, our efforts should center on understanding others’ moral values and why they believe they do. Ask questions about their worldviews and what events and values led them to their belief. The discussion proceeds with dignity and respect, under the assumption that other participants have sincere reasons for why they believe what they do. Assume that you have common ground and work to find it. Don’t expect to resolve complicated issues in a single conversation; some topics take time and multiple discussions to reflect and consider others’ points.

Complimentary Goals

Despite our best efforts and well-intentioned goals, when we try to change others’ opinions and beliefs or mutually come to agreement, there is still potential for conflict and contention. No one wants to be told they are wrong. When coming to a discussion with these goals, consider the following before proceeding:

- **Consider religious beliefs.** In testimony meetings, we often hear people say they know certain beliefs are true. We come to these beliefs through spiritual processes as we “test the word of God” by planting the seed to see if it grows, not through rational or scientific pro-

5. David McRaney, *How Minds Change: The Surprising Science of Belief, Opinion, and Persuasion*, xviii.