

*RE-CREATING  
OUR COMMON CHORD*



*Heather Tosteson & Charles D. Brockett  
Editors*

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## HEATHER TOSTESON

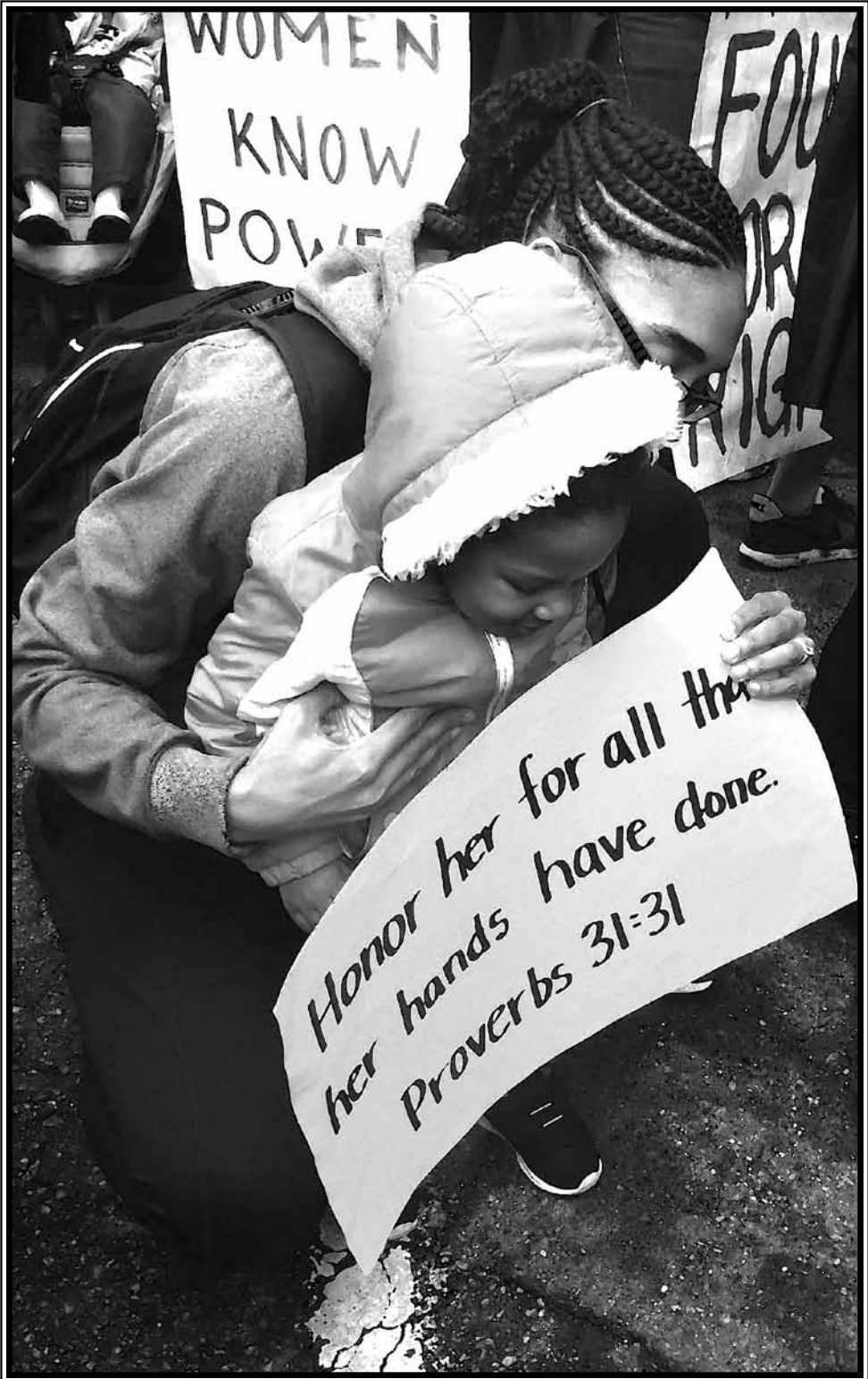
### *RE-CREATING OUR COMMON CHORD* *What It Requires of Each of Us*

Some claim that not since the Civil War has our country been as polarized and divided as it is now. It's certainly true that, as fellow citizens, we are in great need of finding a way back to a fundamental respect for each other and a way forward that makes us feel that belonging to this country—with all its competing visions, loyalties, and priorities—holds enough good for us and for people like us that we genuinely want to be part of it and to do what is needed to sustain its promise.

I don't know about you, but there are many days I wonder whether it's possible. But I can't contemplate the alternatives either. As someone who has a commitment to diversity that is over-determined by temperament, repeated experiences as an outsider, and raw yearning, I am horrified by how deeply I am part of the problem. I hate it, but more days than I like to admit, I can't stop myself from joining, at least internally, in what is clearly a vicious cycle.

Which is why I've asked for help in the form of this anthology so that we can together identify ways in which we are already participating in more virtuous cycles. What are the small steps we're discovering—despite inner turbulence and reactivity—that can draw us back together, help us start building social trust instead of tearing it down? I'm very concrete about this. This isn't about vague intentions. I want to identify ideas, words, gestures, sustained attitudes and actions we can put into practice right now to help us.

This essay begins with various ideas that have helped me in the last few years keep my feelings in check—and ends in story, the real testing ground, where the heart evaluates the mind's sufficiency by opening or closing. If the ideas feel too ponderous, skip to the story, which is the emotional landscape in which I believe many of us find ourselves these days. Then, if you're so inclined, revisit some of the ideas I share here and see if any of them serve for you as they have for me—much needed, but momentary, stays against



WOMEN  
KNOW  
POWER

FOUR  
OR  
FIGHT

Honor her for all the  
her hands have done.  
Proverbs 31:31

## MARYAH CONVERSE

### *THE PEACE OF IRAQ'S MOTHERS*

I moved to Jordan with the Peace Corps in 2004, less than a year after my country invaded Iraq, just before the torture at Abu Ghraib Prison came to light. My fellow Jordanian teachers brought the gruesome images to school, insisting, "You must look at these pictures. These are our brothers." By the end of that year, two devastating battles had been fought in the streets of Fallujah.

Early in my second year, Operation Smile asked if Peace Corps Volunteers could assist their medical mission by staying at an Amman hotel with forty Iraqi children, each with one parent. Most had only rarely left their villages, never stayed in a hotel, certainly never left Iraq. They were asking us, with our Arabic and intercultural fluency, to keep the parents calm and informed, and entertain the children.

I almost didn't do it.

It should have been depressing, living with forty families from the impoverished Iraqi countryside—ravaged by American-made land mines, littered with the remains of radioactive American bomb casings, and now sprayed with insurgent gunfire and IEDs. I was sure I would be so distraught by the deformities of these children that I wouldn't be able to look at them, let alone help them.

I volunteered anyway, because I needed to do something for this country that my country had invaded, for these families in need so close to my new Jordanian home.

My first encounter was in the hotel lobby at check-in with Nour, a chubby little girl, nine months old. Her mother had brought her to Jordan to have a double cleft repaired that divided her upper lip in three. For a moment, she became her deformity. Then she smiled and transformed. "Nour" means light, and a delighted glow radiated from her fat round face and big liquid eyes when she looked up at me and grinned. There was only one thing

## EVE MILLS ALLEN

### *MORE THAN A NAME*

For many years, I believed my skin must be the wrong color. This feeling of *being different* was glaringly acute when I moved into the First Nations community of Oromocto (*Welamooktook*) in southern New Brunswick, Canada in 1991 with my new Maliseet husband and baby granddaughter, Sasha, who I was raising. I did my best to fit in and that included attending every ceremony or powwow in most of the First Nations communities in the province, especially those held in Woodstock, just over an hour away. It was there that my granddaughter received her *spirit name* and I received something even greater – the gift of acceptance.

Lounging in my lawn chair, as the drummers gathered for the naming ceremony on the wooded property of Maliseet Elder Ervin Polchies, I tried to guess what name would be chosen. I could see Sasha was anxious for the music to begin. Jumping up and down, in her red ribbon dress, her long dark hair shimmering with auburn highlights in the sun, she reminded me of a hummingbird. She loved the beat of the drum and now she was clutching a small drum in her chubby hands. It had been given to her by her Maliseet stepfather.

We were no strangers to the Aboriginal gatherings at the home of Elder Ervin. We'd been coming to them since Sasha's first birthday. Now, she was only a month away from her fourth birthday.

The festival atmosphere was intoxicating. From the fragrance of sweet grass infiltrating each ceremony and the smell of fresh salmon as it fried in large black skillets, to the constant beat of drums, repeatedly joined by strong voices in chants that would go on for hours, I savored every minute. When the drumming stopped, ear-pleasing renditions of Neil Young accompanied by guitars filled the air. Most of all, I loved the stories, and the elders had many to share.

I loved the stories about birds and animals the best. They reminded me

## BONNI CHALKIN

### *AN UNFORGETTABLE ACT OF SHARING*

When I was thirty years old, I went through what I think of as an early midlife crisis. I was working at the time in a high-powered, high-paying showroom in New York City's fashion industry. But feeling that something was missing in my life, I decided to sign up for a Voyager Outward Bound course in northern Minnesota. For a few weeks, I lived in the woods, canoed the boundary waters, hiked and rock-climbed, and was left alone on an island for three days and three nights—truly enjoying and living life to the fullest with what some consider nothing. While away, I developed a painful infection on my foot, but dared not say anything because I didn't want to be sent home. I felt so free—so *me*. I had discovered a strength within that I didn't know existed.

Once back in New York City, I saw a doctor who treated my foot. While hobbling home with my new bandage, I passed three homeless men sitting on the street who caught my attention. I was drawn to them, wanting to better understand and learn about their circumstances. I always traveled with a notebook and a camera, and I politely asked if I could spend the day writing about them. One man asked if I was a reporter, and I explained I was just a regular girl.

These three men took me into the fold and couldn't wait to tell me all their stories. I am left recalling the sense of camaraderie they not only shared between themselves, but which they extended to me as well. And I will never forget two experiences from that indelible day.

I had wanted to document my new acquaintances, and asked passersby if they would please take our picture together. Everyone ignored or avoided us fearfully. Some even made a half moon circle to prevent coming too close. I remain struck by the sense of isolation that these men had to endure on a daily basis.

I will also never forget the ultimate act of sharing I experienced that

## JUDY CATTERTON

### *THE TEENAGE KILLER*

*Youth is more than a chronological fact. . . .  
It is a time of immaturity, irresponsibility,  
impetuosity[,] and recklessness.*  
—The United States Supreme Court

It was late. Maybe I was concentrating on reading some legal document or engrossed in preparing a case for trial. So, I hadn't been particularly interested in the darkening sky out the window behind my desk. Perhaps I noticed that the only sound was the usual hum from the refrigerator down the hall in the small kitchen in the suite of offices my law firm rented in a high-rise building in Rockville, Maryland, a suburb of D.C. I was aware but not concerned that the other lawyers and staff had left for the day and that I was alone. Except, I wasn't alone.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he said. He was squatting in the corner behind my desk amid a bunch of wires doing something related to my phone. I must have noticed this repairman earlier in the evening when he arrived and then promptly forgot about him. I had to twist my body into an extremely awkward position and swivel my chair around to see him. Looking down, I saw a large man, mid to late twenties, short brown hair, clean-shaven, dark gray workman's clothes, muddy boots. Nothing about him seemed either remarkable or familiar. I stared at him for only a brief moment before he said, "Gene Miller." Then I knew. My heart raced and my breath quickened. Suddenly it mattered that we were alone.

How many years earlier had it been that I had prosecuted him for murder? Fifteen, ten, fewer? He was a teenager at the time, sixteen or seventeen, legally a juvenile, but able to be tried as an adult because of the seriousness of the offense. He had a juvenile record, for a housebreaking, maybe more than one. His father was a dentist. I don't recall anything about his mother. I knew the family was well off and lived in an up-scale neighborhood, in Montgomery County, Maryland, one of the wealthiest counties in the country.

It was a high-profile case that garnered a great deal of local publicity

## DAVID ARANGO-DIMITRIJEVIC

### *SAM DALCA*

Sam Dalca was the smartest student of my career. He aced every assignment and exam. Reading his papers was a constant revelation. His insight into literature and the humanities was that of a college professor, not an eighteen-year-old high school senior. His comments in class would traverse psychology, history, ancient cultures, sociology, and classical philosophy. In a roomful of hands raised, I would often call on Sam last, because his remarks couldn't be topped by anyone, myself included.

Sam was an unusually tall high school senior. He paid no attention to his appearance: his understated clothes, his blond haircut too short to ever be messy, his bouts with teenage acne. One day he walked in to the classroom, and with his typical intensity told me that he hadn't had a chance to finish his homework. This meant he'd only read the assigned pages *once*, instead of two or three times as usual. When our AP Literature class would flip through a chapter trying to find a specific passage, Sam would not only know the page number, but he would have the lines nearly memorized. If we were stumbling over a difficult pronunciation, we could just turn to Sam and ask, "How do you say 'Ozymandias'?" and he'd tell us. In an e-mail to me, he critiqued the valedictorian's speech at his graduation by writing: "It was truly a masterpiece of vacuous pomposity; verily, 'twas exacerbated in large part by the magnitude of the orator's pathological superciliousness."

Teaching, at its most draining, moves in one direction: I guide the students, I impart knowledge, I make them think, I ask them questions, I create the dialectic and debate, I try to have them absorb whatever I have to give, I struggle to give them energy and enthusiasm to replace their teenage malaise. But Sam reversed it. His comments energized me, and in the midst of a discussion I could feel my neurons crackling with a hundred new thoughts about a piece of literature I thought I'd known completely.

## LORETTA DIANE WALKER

### ***BLACK HISTORY MONTH ENDED YESTERDAY***

*When the sun comes back, and the first quail calls,  
follow the drinking gourd. For the old man is waiting  
for to carry you to freedom—Follow The Drinking Gourd*

February laughs with heavy warmth.  
I swim with slow strokes in a pool of cream  
and caramel faces with sprinklings  
of dark rich chocolate.

Listen. These words are a map.  
The song swirls around the classroom,  
lifting souls into the melody.

*When the sun comes back, and the first quail calls,  
follow the drinking gourd. For the old man is waiting  
for to carry you to freedom*

I parade the book in front of them,  
my fingers a map to the title:  
*Follow the Drinking Gourd.*

Children gather at my feet like seeds  
dumped from a package.  
I read—the characters an ambiguous shade of black,  
an attempt to sanitize slavery.

We are a rainbow shade of people  
my mind roars my mouth, mute.



I flip to a man standing on the auction block.  
Arms folded across his loins, head bowed,  
muscles rippling waves of strength,  
NEGRO FOR SALE.

Your caramel face colors with recognition.  
Eyes fix on the page then dart  
around the room searching for a safe way  
to tell me, "Negro means black."

"Why is he for sale?"  
The seeds are a forest now, tender limbs growing  
with curiosity as they wait for my answer.  
"Slaves were property like animals."

My words drain expression from your face,  
silence settles on us like a gray fog. I read on.

I walk into a red hibiscus with March  
blocked beneath it; your eyes following me—still,  
your question traveling on my shoulder.

Child, this is what I cannot teach you.  
Black History Month ended yesterday,  
but not for me.  
I am rooted in blackness still fighting the past,  
those who blame me, my ancestors  
for everything wrong and evil in the world.

Their names for me are not polite.  
They want me to go back to a place  
where I've never been.  
I inherited America, too.

**SUSAN K. CHERNILO***INTENSE ENCOUNTERS  
OF THE EDUCATIONAL KIND*

I teach English as a Second Language to adults. For the last twenty years I've taught students of all ages from many parts of the world. I've taught young and old, rich and poor. I had a student who grew up in a house with ten kids and dirt floors, and a wealthier woman from the same country whose biggest culture shock here was that she no longer got carted around by limousine. I've had students who were Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Hindu and Jewish; students from Europe, Africa, Asia, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. It's been a wondrous, amazing encounter with so many different kinds of people.

Needless to say, I've dealt with all kinds of issues. One year I had a class that was mostly Protestant with a couple of Muslim old men who always sat together in the back, while everyone else pretty much ignored them. One day I asked the rest of the class what they knew about Islam: pretty much nothing! I did a lesson on the five pillars of Islam. As the Christian students watched in amazement, I wrote such benign words as "prayer" and "charity" on the board. "What do you think?" I asked. "It's like us," they said. "Exactly!" I said.

There was the year when a woman came to class and happily proclaimed that she had learned from her minister that gays are an abomination and a sign of the last days. Because I didn't necessarily know the sexuality of my students, I felt that I needed to protect them from discrimination. I stopped the class and asked if everyone agreed with her. They all did. I said that I did not, that I have a gay family member, and I did not agree. One by one, the stories poured out. This one had a cousin, another had a friend. Finally, a young man from Haiti told us in tears that he himself had had such feelings. His confession was followed by awesome silence, and then one by one every-

## SUSAN MARTELL HUEBNER

### *BATTLE AT THE LOT LINE: EITHER/OR VS. BOTH/AND*

#### ***Summer 2016***

My neighbor, who once brought me a prayer shawl for healing my cancer, now walks toward me across the bumpy lawn between our houses. Her new knee requires careful stepping over the lumps and dips. We haven't spoken in many weeks.

There was that one day, when we shared a glass of wine on her patio, and she said, "that's the way all men talk" and followed it with "some women ask for it." That one day, when we finished our wine, I walked home wondering how to navigate the hard ground that lay between our two properties, the divots and exposed roots glaringly obvious. Minor obstacles, until now.

Today she says she trimmed her houseplants and she offers me some jade cuttings. I say I already have a jade plant, but politely note that mine is not as brightly green as the stems she holds in her outstretched hand. I accept the jade and place it in a glass of water where it sits on my kitchen counter, waiting for me to place it in nourishing soil.

XXX

#### ***Fall 2016***

I struggle. The cuttings sit in water.

I seriously consider throwing them away. My ideas about who my neighbor is have changed. I don't want to plant these things and have them growing in my home. I don't want anything personal from a person so ignorant. I read somewhere online that jade is considered a symbol of friendship. I watch the news. This friendship feels impossible.

I reconsider. I contemplate finding a pretty pot and planting the cuttings. I could place the plant in my sunny living room window, next to the

## DONNA BANTA

### *COLLISIONS*

On November 7, 1975, I broke my mother's heart. It wasn't picked up by the tabloids. I didn't need rehab, bail or an abortion. I was on the honor roll and active in church. Hell, I even registered Republican. (To please her.) Then on that day in 1975, I came home from school, kissed her hello, washed my hands at the sink, and while pouring a glass of milk, let slip that I would not be applying to Brigham Young University. The moment of impact was still a blur. White noise, milk sloshing over the lip of my glass. A string of reassuring lies. (I'll still go to church every Sunday, I promise.) Didn't matter. I was no longer Deanna Sutton, model Mormon girl. The girl who chose to leave California for humble BYU.

The clock read 6:15 a.m. Too late to go back to sleep. I felt across the bed for Paul. Not a stir.

According to my mother, it was all because of that Simon Post, my high school lab partner. Would that she could turn back time, and forbid me from seeing him socially. But how was she to know? He seemed like such a nice boy, for a non-member.

Simon's lesser church affiliation acted on me like an aphrodisiac. On date number three, at my urging, we pulled off en route to mini-golf, removed our glasses, and engaged in a delicious make-out session. It began in the front seat, progressed to the back and culminated in my first non-penetrating orgasm.

Our romance was short-lived. A dip in our midterm grades combined with a class seating rearrangement compelled us to put our glasses back on. (I've often wondered if Simon's mom was behind the lab partner shuffle, perhaps after treating the stain inside of his corduroys.)

But as I sat four tables away from Simon, who now refused to look at me, I was strangely at peace. Normal even. Nothing like what I was taught.



## MONICA MISCHE

### ON THE PATH TO TOTALITY

*When I was six, I saw an astronomy show at the Hayden Planetarium. I watched in amazement as the sun dipped below the horizon, the room darkened, and across the domed ceiling appeared a multitude of stars, first faint, then glimmering, then bright. Finally, sweeping and luminous against this wondrous all, emerged a magnificent cloud of light—the Milky Way. My heart froze, and with wavering breath, I whispered to my sister, "Is this really true?" As if to answer, a voice reverberated: "These stars surround us, even during the day. We cannot see them because our sun blocks them out. At night, our city lights do the same. But the stars are there—always—whether we see them or not."*

Forty-four years later, I'm sitting cross-legged on a bench in the grand hall of Washington DC's Union Station. It's late August. I'm wearing faded jeans and a sleeveless blouse, searching through my backpack crammed with almonds, apples, power bars, an extra pair of shoes, looking for a folded slip of paper, my ticket to Charleston. High above me, in windowed recesses of the gold-leaf vaulted ceiling, stand statues of Roman Legionnaires. Adorned with capes and crested helmets, bare legs apart, muscular arms balancing emblazoned shields, these concrete figures stare unfaltering ahead, safeguarding travelers for over a century. Legend says the shields were not part of the sculptor's original design. Included for modesty's sake, they conceal any semblance of the soldiers' manhood, protecting the eyes of passengers below.

A man approaches, offering me a brochure. He invites me in his soft West African accent to attend Bible study at his church. He asks if I know Jesus, if I believe. The man's intense gaze impels me to reply. Jumbling my words, I attempt to relay some undefined spiritual sensibility—respect for Christianity, reverence for the mysteries of the universe. The man nods, but my own speech falters. I stare at my shoes. Thanking him for his time, I zip up my pack and head for the trains.

## CHARLES D. BROCKETT

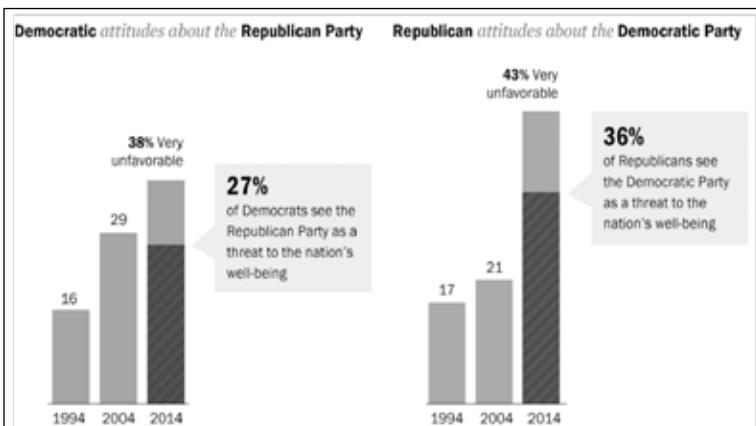
### *CENTRIFUGAL FORCES: SHARING RESPONSIBILITY*

Many of us worry about the increasing polarization that is fraying our social fabric, that is overwhelming our common chord. Few examples make the basis of this concern more vivid than the following three:

Back in 1960 about five percent of Democrats and Republicans when surveyed objected to the idea of their children marrying across partisan lines. By 2010 the percentage soared to 33 for Democrats and 46 for Republicans (Illing 2017).

Chart 1 shows the increasing percentage of people across the decades viewing the other party "very unfavorably." And remember that the starting point of 1994 was no year of warm fuzzy feelings about the opposition—that was the year when Newt Gingrich's Contract with America swept Republicans into control of the House of Representatives. Note too that in 2014 respondents were also queried about seeing the other party "as a threat to the nation's well-being."

Chart 1. Viewing the Other Party Very Unfavorably & as a Threat (%)



Source: Dimock et al., 2014: 7 (Pew Research Center).

Finally, and most astonishing to me, a recent survey found around 42 percent of both Democrats and Republicans viewing the adherents of the other party as "downright evil" (Edsall 2019).

Presented with such alarming findings it is easy to lose sight of the many important areas where broad consensus remains. A good set of questions relevant to recreating our common chord from one of the most respected research organizations asks, "What is important in being American?" and then presents respondents with eight possible characteristics. We still are united on the following dimensions (Sides 2017):

- respect American political institutions & laws (94% agree);
- have American citizenship (92% agree);
- be of European heritage or descent (only 20% agree).

For two other characteristics broad agreement remains among the general public but differences between the parties are more notable (15% and 20% partisan differences):

- accept diverse racial & religious backgrounds (88% agree);
- be able to speak English (85% agree).

For the final three characteristics there is significant disagreement between us (although the partisan differences are no greater than with the set above except for the last of the three for which the gap between the parties is 26%):

- live in America for most on one's life (58%);
- born in America (56% agree);
- be Christian (42% agree).

A similar mix of consensus and disagreement was found in another recent study comparing voters in the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections on twelve different issues and attitudes (Drutman 2017). On some there were virtually no differences between people who voted Democrat in both elections and those who voted Republican in both:

- |  |                        |
|--|------------------------|
| politics is a rigged game              | 3% partisan difference |
| importance of Social Security/Medicare | 4%                     |
| foreign trade                          | 7%                     |

But on other important issues and attitudes there were major disagreements between the two sets of voters:

- |                         |                |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| government intervention | 46% difference |
| economic inequality     | 39%            |
| moral issues            | 35%            |
| immigration             | 32%            |
| Muslims                 | 31%            |
| black people            | 30%            |



