

# Braver Angels—Helping to Build a Bridge Over Troubled and Divided Waters

It takes a brave person to go out of his or her comfort zone and cross the great divide and try to talk to those on the other side of the political spectrum.

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## *Commentary*

Is there a place where Republicans and Democrats can come together to talk and find common ground?

I wasn't sure until I was invited to attend an interesting meeting on the evening of July 11, 2024, at the Heartwood Church in Rohnert Park, California. It was a meeting of the Sonoma County Chapter of a national group called "Braver Angels."

The national organization was started in South Lebanon, Ohio, on Dec. 9, 2016, shortly after the presidential election that caused such a great divide and polarization in our nation when Donald J. Trump unexpectedly won over Hilary Clinton.

Braver Angels' purpose was to provide a safe place where both Republicans and Democrats, Conservatives and Liberals, of various shades of Red and Blue, could all come together, meet and get to know each other, discuss their differences in an even-tempered, polite, respectful way, and, hopefully, discover that there are many more things that they share in common than things that divide them.

As most of us agreed at the meeting, that divide seems to have only gotten worse over the years. Just as I was finishing writing this article, news flashed across my screen of the attempted assassination of former President Trump that happened at a rally in Pennsylvania on July 13. We can see that the divide is even getting more violent and dangerous. Our nation needs a time for healing and coming together more than ever.

Braver Angels' three founders are social workers, who had known each other from conferences in the past: David Blankenhorn of New York City, who is serving as president; David Lapp of Ohio, who hosted their first meeting; and professor Bill Doherty of the University of Wisconsin, also a marriage counselor, who is the designer and facilitator of their "Red and Blue" workshops. He sought to apply the

same skills to the Braver Angels' meetings as he would in marriage counseling: "Focus on what you have in common: your shared history, goals, aspirations, and values." Eight years later, in 2024, we can see that they have had great success. There are now chapters of Braver Angels in every state and 12,000 members nationwide.

At our meeting on July 11, we first watched a documentary video that shows clips from a Braver Angels' workshop with an equal number of Democrats and Republicans present. After watching the film, our group was separated into smaller discussion groups of five or six people. They asked us to join a group of people whom we did not already know. Each of us was given two minutes to speak about the ideas we liked the most from the film.

Here in Sonoma County, the Democrats far outnumber the Republicans by about three to one. That was also the ratio at the Braver Angels meeting. There were about 30 people present, and only 10 of us were of a conservative bent. But it was a good feeling to be welcomed and to have our voices and opinions listened to and appreciated, no matter what political persuasion we were coming from.

## **Six Consensus Points**

Here are six things we all agreed upon by the end of the meeting:

- We are all in this state and nation together. The future is going to affect all of us. Wouldn't it be better to be working together to try to make it a better future than one that is so divisive?
- We all want the best for our children and grandchildren who will be taking over this future from us. If we can learn to work together, how much easier will it be for our children to do the same? They will be following our examples.
- We all agreed that the media seems to be intent on dividing us, putting labels on us and stereotypes, making us have prejudices

against each other, creating fear of someone who is different to us. We need to be open to looking at other opinions from different media sources and not just to believe only one side.

- We can disagree and still be friends. It is okay to have differing opinions. When we were divided into small groups, I told my group that I used to teach speech and debate in high school and middle school. One day, half the debate class would be assigned the affirmative on a certain issue, and the other half would be on the negative. In a few days, after they had all had a chance to debate, they would have to switch sides and take the opposite view. It was good for them to see that each issue has a pro and con and a different way of looking at it. Debate makes a person more accepting and understanding of differing viewpoints and how they can change. And, in spite of being on the opposite side of a viewpoint, everyone can still remain friends.
- Maybe from our Braver Angels' experiences, we can come together on major issues and unitedly go to speak to our elected officials about them. Our officials are not used to seeing people of different parties being united on issues. Surely, that will have an impact on them.
- This meeting should not be our only experience. This should not stop. We should continue to attend and invite others to join us, to promote the same feeling of "crossing the bridge of the great divide" that we experienced.

## **Where Does the Name 'Braver Angels' Come From?**

The original name was "Better Angels" and comes from Abraham Lincoln's first Inaugural Address, where he used the phrase:

"We must not be enemies, but friends. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will yet swell when again touched, as surely they will be,

stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, by the better angels of our nature.”

However, in 2020, the leaders had to change the name because it was already trademarked. They chose “Braver Angels.” To them, it still has the same underlying meaning as Lincoln intended. Lincoln gave this address when the country was in a state of great division over the approaching civil war regarding slavery.

Lincoln is essentially telling us that if we listen to the “better angels of our nature,” we, as citizens of this nation, will want to be united and be friends—not enemies. There are many passions that can divide us, but we should remember what has united us before—the feeling that swelled our hearts as we remembered the brave patriots who were willing to give their lives so we could be a free and united nation.

I like the name “Braver Angels.” It takes a brave person to go out of his or her comfort zone and cross the great divide and try to talk to those on the other side of the political spectrum. As we experienced at the Sonoma Braver Angels’ meeting on July 11, once we had made that brave move, we felt welcomed and had a good feeling about being there—each trying to do our part to reunite our greatly divided nation.

*Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.*

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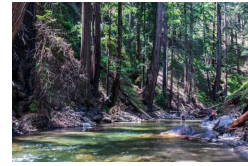
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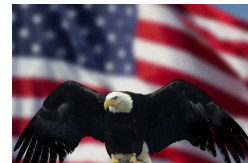
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