

The two of us have been digging in to reconcile the differences between us for 15 years. What are we digging into? The thick, rich, confusing soil of the different ways we think, experience, and understand the world.

FINDING **JOY** WITH THOSE
Who Don't Think
Like You

It was clear within the first 10 minutes of meeting that we were radically different. Put it this way: If the human brain is 95 percent water, Angie's is like a still mountain lake and Dawna's is like a bubbling geyser. Dawna makes direct eye contact and tells provocative stories. Angie, on the other hand, looks off into the distance and asks evocative questions.

As mother and daughter-in-law, love (or even liking each other) was not a given. In fact, just the opposite. We both loved the same man, but in two very different ways—as son and as husband. No law in the world could force us to turn toward each other. Mothers and daughters-in-law more often run from each other or, at best, tolerate each other rather than dig in.

BY **ANGIE MCARTHUR** AND **DAWNA MARKOVA**

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Our clear differences have not, however, kept us apart or hindered our ability to work well together. A year after we met in 1996, our family started a consulting partnership. And in 2015, after two decades of teaching and learning what we came to call intellectual diversity with global leadership teams, we distilled the results of our digging and discovering into the ink of our first book together, *Collaborative Intelligence: Thinking with People Who Think Differently*.

Since we've had a tremendous amount at stake professionally, we have not been able to take the way we relate to each other for granted. Each of us had to sort through our cognitive differences as they arose, and decide which were "givens," nonnegotiable: Angie's love of early-morning runs and Dawna's nocturnal biorhythm, for instance. We then assumed all the other differences were "workables": preferences, styles, dispositions, and proclivities that we needed to dig into and work out. This required us to respect and maximize our differences. Angie's need to question an idea from many angles, for example, helped us expand our thinking when we got stuck. Dawna's ability to think in stories helped us find meaning in challenges we faced.

With every new dimension we added to our business, friendship, and family dynamics, we have had to learn new ways to connect, understand, and harmonize our very different styles and ways of thinking.

"DIGGING IN" MEANS SEARCHING

Digging in means wondering, exploring. What is important to her? What really matters to me? What does she need now? What do I? What pisses her off? Like two fervent golden retriever puppies after a bone, we have been tracking a scent. Thoreau said, "Gnaw at it, bury it, unearth it, and gnaw it still." Dig in. We sniffed and scratched. Our understanding of each other grew. The questions and discoveries took us deeper into the humus of what could be possible. They carried us to the decision to write books together.

Clients and friends have openly asked us how we do it—how two women who are so very different can be so in sync. We have come to respect and recognize that each person possesses many kinds of intelligence, including rational and relational. The former divides information into discrete facts, processes, and logic. Try to use your rational thinking when relating to someone who thinks differently than you do. You'll find yourself overthinking, trying to figure out whether you should say this or that, be this way or that way,

do this thing or that thing. No matter how smart you are, your mind can become like a frustrated kitten tangled in a ball of yarn. The more you try to unravel the mess, the worse it gets. You become lost in your limited capacity to know or grow or relate to the mystery of your uniquely different ways of thinking.

Relational intelligence, on the other hand, connects things, creates meaning, and offers understanding about how to relate one thing or person to another. Most of us have been schooled in rational intelligence, but have never had specific formal training to foster relational intelligence. This is the bone the two of us have been digging to discover for 20 years, the answer to our clients' and friends' questions about how we do it: We have grown and never stop growing our relational intelligence.

The more that wonder and discovery are present between you and another, the higher the chances of that special kind of intelligence growing. Think for a moment about what it's like to sing in harmony with another person. Each of you allows your voice to come forward, fall back, and then merge to create beautiful music. It can be the same when we relate. If you know how to discover it, there is a palpable energy, an intelligence between you that can facilitate achieving far more together than you could alone.

When people want to cultivate skills and talents such as playing the piano, solving complex mathematical equations, or hitting home runs, they can draw inspiration from and model themselves after great artists, athletes, and respected thought leaders. But we don't have ways to do this relationally. Just think for a moment: Who were *your* relational role models? If you're like most of us, you modeled your relational habits after those who raised you, for better or worse.

But even if you had the most loving and compassionate Nobel Prize-level people as your parents, you still have been bombarded daily in politics, on reality shows, and on the nightly news with examples of how not to relate to someone who thinks differently and how to run from them as fast as you can. Who has modeled for you how to dig in? Who are the relational geniuses you've learned from, and how did they practice?

MAYA ANGELOU'S PRACTICE

Thirty years ago, I (Dawna) was backstage about to speak to a crowd of several thousand about my first book, *The Art of the Possible*. I noticed another woman sitting in a red

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Starlings
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leather swivel chair reading the *Boston Globe* and sipping tea from a thick, white, steaming mug. She looked up and grinned at me in such a way that I was speechless. I felt totally recognized, and at the same time recognized her as Maya Angelou. Evidently, we were both going to give keynote speeches within the hour. A copy of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* lay unopened next to her tea. She went back to the *Boston Globe* and, since I had no idea what to say to the great lady, I tried to ignore her, pacing back and forth as I flipped through the stack of note cards to review the key points for my talk.

Maya Angelou, by contrast, flipped through the newspaper and did something that I thought very odd. She paused at several pages with photographs of a person on them, rested her left hand on her heart, and stayed like that for a few moments. Each time, her face lit up in a grin as if she held the moon in her mouth. When she had gone through the entire section, she thumbed back to the beginning, and started the process again—only this time, as she paused at different photographs and placed her hand on her heart, she shook her head sadly.

I couldn't resist asking her what she was doing. "I am practicing," she said. "Yes, this is my practice. At first, all of these people seem very different from me. The first time I go through the photographs in the paper, I pause at the pictures of people who have done remarkable things—built skyscrapers or discovered a cure for a disease or negotiated a peace settlement—and I say to myself, Well, if I can recognize that in them, it must be in me somewhere too, or else why would I even be intrigued? So I just wonder for a moment, What does that remind me of in myself that I'd like to grow?"

It took a minute for her words to really sink in, but when they began to sprout in my mind, I replied, "That's lovely. I get that. But then why, if you don't mind my asking, do you go through the paper a second time?"

She looked up at me from under her eyelashes and said, "That's the hardest part of the practice. The second time I scan for people who have murdered or raped or destroyed something precious. This time when I pause again in recognition, I say to myself, Oh, yes, that's in me, too—there is a dormant dark part inside. How can I delve in to discover the need under that destructive behavior, so I can find a positive

way of meeting it before it erupts?”

Then she placed both of her palms gently on the newspaper and tilted her head as she explained, “You see, I am learning something from each of these people parading across the pages of the *Boston Globe*, Dr. Markova. Each of them is teaching me to meet some aspect of myself that I might have ignored otherwise. This is what makes the bird in my heart sing.”

Maya Angelou’s “practice” was to constantly dig in as she learned to reconcile the needs of all the different aspects of herself—the best and worst. It also prepared her to relate to the multitude of those she encountered outside of her heart’s cage.

RECONCILING WHEN YOU’RE “AT ODDS”

Reconciling the differences between you and someone you care about requires a leap into the unknown. It’s like the adventure of exploring a foreign country where you don’t understand the culture or the language. The roads you travel may seem to be full of wrong turns and dead ends.

In order to get there, you’ll need to replace a few limiting beliefs with ones that will liberate your thinking. Here are some basic rules of relational thinking:

1 You can’t change the other person—even for his or her own good. You can, however, grow your capacity to relate to them, to dig in with them. You do this by shifting from the noun *relationship* to the verb *relate*.

When you think of the relationship between you and another person as a noun—“She’s my boss and our relationship is on the rocks,” or “My colleague and I just don’t click anymore”—it insinuates a doomed and static thing, a noun. You make the relationship into an object, a photograph instead of a movie you are directing. Without realizing it, you relinquish your capacity to influence and navigate how you are creating the film. Consider the difference between saying to yourself “This relationship sucks,” and “The way I’m relating to this person sucks.” The former produces a shrug. Your choices are to fight, flee, or freeze. In the

3 QUESTIONS to help reconnect authentically with someone who doesn’t think like you

1. “Here’s how you are specifically important to me...”
“How am I important to you?”
2. “What’s the most important thing to you right now in the issues that have come up between us?”
3. “Are you open to hearing what’s most important to me?”

latter, you are free to discover what adjustments you might make and learn what is the best route toward the other person, given the present circumstances

2 You can’t make them love, respect, or even like you. You can, however, find a way to respect yourself and how you are relating to the other, no matter what.

The word *respect* means “to see again as if for the first time.” The greatest gift we can give each other and ourselves is a willingness to question our biases, see past our blind spots, and discover each other again. This involves recognizing that relating to another

person is an ongoing learning process, rather than following a memorized formula. If things were as simple as a formula, we would all have flawless interactions. Instead, we need to reclaim wonder, which is no small thing. As Sherry Turkle points out in *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, wonder is a rapidly disappearing commodity in our time and “not knowing” is no longer valued.

As soon as you’ve formed a fixed opinion of someone else or yourself, you’ve essentially shut them (or yourself) out. If you want your relational capacity to grow, you have to shift from a mindset of certainty to one of discovery. “She’s a terrible communicator” becomes “I need to discover how to tell her what I need for communication.” “He is bossy” becomes “I need to discover how to relate to his style and not let it diminish my confidence.”

The following certainties will keep you from relating effectively:

- What you consider to be the other person’s deficits and faults
- The ways you believe the other person needs to change or improve
- The stories you are telling yourself about why you are right and the other person is wrong

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Jumping Deer 
Jessica Roux

3 You can't prove to the other person that your perspective, needs, and way of doing things are right, or better than his or hers. You can, however, grow your ability to recognize, understand, and value each of your differences.

When we work with people who believe their differences are irreconcilable, there is no learning or forward movement possible. It is as if their belief has become a wall between them that makes understanding impossible. Sometimes the wall is blank. They just don't know why they don't feel understood, or don't understand the other person. Sometimes it's too tall to see or climb over.

In our collective eight decades of clinical and personal training about communication and psychology, we have heard professors use the word *understanding* many times, but none has defined it or described how this essential element of human connection is created within and between people. To get there we have to go through confusion.

Most people are not comfortable with confusion: They will try to convince others of their perspective, or move quickly to converge. But confusion is as natural to the human mind as a tide is to the ocean. It's a sign that the brain is opening to learn how to digest new information or a

new perspective with what you already know. Since we've all been trained to "fix" confusion whenever possible by closing down possibilities, confusion is the place where learning stops and possibilities are killed off.

Think of two jazz musicians tuning their own instruments and then reaching in the quest to connect with the other in a new harmony. Think of members of a choir singing within their different ranges while questing to create a coherent sound with the others. The mind doesn't "find" the one right way and close on it. It opens further and further, searching, learning, finding, losing, finding in a new way.

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The two are coauthors of books including *Reconcilable Differences: Connecting in a Disconnected World* (Random House, 2017), from which this article was adapted.