

Gaslit Nation Transcript

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“How to Stand Up to a Bully”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/how-to-stand-up-85397105>

[intro - theme music]

Andrea Chalupa (00:10):

Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your host, Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine; the film the Kremlin doesn't want you to see, so be sure to watch it. First, a couple announcements. We are running a very special summer series called “The Future of Dictatorship: What's Next? And Ways to Resist”. The series features leading voices on the front lines of understanding AI, corporate surveillance, Silicon Valley greed, and more, because the dictator's playbook remains the same, but the technology they have to oppress us keeps changing. You can learn more about the dictator's playbook in the *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*. You can join me for a special night out in New York City to talk all about the making of that book on Saturday, August 5th at 4:00 PM at the fun Lower East Side bar, Caveat, where I will be in discussion with the comedian Kevin Allison of the hugely popular *Risk* storytelling podcast.

Andrea Chalupa (01:10):

If you're not in New York, you can join us by livestream. This is a huge deal for me because I hardly go out, so this will be like a *Gaslit Nation* prom night. Join me at Caveat on August 5th in New York. Signed copies of the *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel will be available for order at the event. For details on how to join us in person or livestream, go to [gaslitnationpod.com](http://gaslitnationpod.com) and you'll see the link right on our homepage with more information about the event. Go to [gaslitnationpod.com](http://gaslitnationpod.com). That's [gaslitnationpod.com](http://gaslitnationpod.com). We'll be back with all new episodes of *Gaslit Nation* in September, including a live taping with Terrell Starr of the *Black Diplomats* podcast reporting from Ukraine. That's right, Terrell's gonna be in Ukraine and we're gonna hear all about his summer, his reporting trips, what he is learning, who he's talking to, and what's next. That live taping will take place on Tuesday, September 12th at 12:00 PM Eastern for our supporters at the Truth-teller level and higher on Patreon. Come join us for that and join questions in the chat. And I hope to see as many of our listeners as I can on August 5th in New York at Caveat for a fun night out. Before we get to this week's guest, here's a quick word from our sponsor, Judge Lackey, the wiley narrator of the new *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*.

[audio clip from *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think* trailer]

Judge Lackey (02:28):

Happy Birthday America, you're exceptional. As the great American thinker, Ivanka Trump, said, “Perception is more important than reality.” If someone perceives something to be true, it is more important than if it is in fact true. Learn more, including how to skip the line for Chinese patents, by reading the all new graphic novel by the shrieking ladies of *Gaslit Nation*, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*. Almost too easy.

[end audio clip]

Andrea Chalupa (02:56):

Happy Independence Day, everybody. And what better way to celebrate America's birthday than a conversation about how to stand up to a bully? Fascism, authoritarianism is a bully coming to power and using bullying to stay in power. So we're going to take it to the micro level. How do you stand up to a bully in your life? Today's guest is the science journalist David McRaney, the author of *How Minds Change* and host of the podcast, *You Are Not So Smart*, based on his 2009 internationally bestselling book of the same name and its follow-up, *You Are Now Less Dumb*. As a reporter, McRaney covered Hurricane Katrina, test rockets at NASA and homelessness in unhoused people living with HIV. He shares his insights today on how minds can change for ideas on how to stand up to the bullying disinformation cults threatening our democracy.

[guitar heavy music up and under]

Andrea Chalupa:

So where are you based?

David McRaney (03:58):

Well, it all depends on your old frame of reference. I find my corporeal instantiation is about an hour north of [inaudible] right now as it be, but I could be anywhere you want me to be. Just let me know.

Andrea Chalupa (04:10):

Oh, thank you very much, sir [in Southern accent] [laughs]. That was my contribution to that. Well, this is a very serious conversation, obviously for a very serious time. And I wanna say thank you for doing this.

David McRaney:

Yeah, of course.

Andrea Chalupa (04:23):

The big discussion, obviously, is your book is everything right now: *How Minds Change*. One of the questions we get often from our listeners at *Gaslit Nation* and also that we hear a lot among our friends and family today is how we're losing people. Families are getting broken apart, long friendships are getting broken apart because people are getting sucked into these different realities, and it's just us versus them political, toxic culture. What did you find in working on your book, *How Minds Change*? Is it possible to change a mind, especially when you've lost someone to such a toxic "reality"?

David McRaney (05:08):

Sure, and I understand all this frustration. I mean, I was in that same place when I started this whole project. You know, I had to change my own mind in the process. It's one of those things that ended up being a good marketing and interview moment to tell people I changed my mind in the process of writing a book about how people changed their minds, but I never intended for that. It was very much a surprise. My original viewpoint on all this going into it was you couldn't reason a person out of a position they didn't reason themselves into; that certain people were absolutely off limits, unreachable. And I

don't feel that way anymore. I feel like there's no one who is beyond the reach of persuasion. There's no one who can't be illuminated. There's no one who is actually unchangeable.

David McRaney (05:54):

I've started to see it more like we often use really poor tools—oftentimes those tools are the ones that come to us intuitively—but it's kind of like trying to reach the moon with a ladder over and over again. And when you fail, you eventually throw up your hands and say, “The moon's unreachable!” It just turns out you were using a really ineffective tool to get there. And I see that over and over again because I was the kind of person that would do that. I would get into arguments with family members, I would get into arguments with people on the internet, and I would enter into these debate frames where I was just trying to win, or I was trying to dump a lot of facts on the other party; facts that I felt like were on my side. And they would either double down, triple down or get very upset and angry, or they would wander into territory that didn't seem to make any sense to me: this in-group/out-group sort of thing.

David McRaney (06:46):

Initially, when I started the book, it came from this... I sort of don't outright say this in the book, but I've said it in recalling how it all came together: There was sort of a peanut butter and chocolate of comeuppance in this process. One is discovering the Interactions model and the other is discovering the Truth Wins model. Both of these are psychological premises that came to me in the process of reaching out to experts. See, I was invited to a lecture early on where a young woman came up to me afterward and said her father had fallen into a conspiratorial community, and she asked, “What can I do about it?” And I remember very plainly stating to her, “There's nothing you can do about it.” And I felt awful right away, partially because I didn't want to be so pessimistic and so doomsayer about things.

David McRaney (07:36):

But the other was, I just wasn't sure I even believed that. I knew I didn't have enough expertise to be giving out advice like that. I was talking about biases and fallacies and heuristics and motivated reasoning, but I wasn't talking about persuasion. At the same time that happened, the attitudes in the United States and the beliefs and the values towards same-sex marriage changed so dramatically over the course of about a decade. If you were involved in the activism, you were aware that that took a lot longer than a decade. But charted on a graph, I had a political scientist on my podcast tell me it was the fastest recorded shift in public opinion. And sure enough, it went from 60-plus percent of Americans were opposed to the legality of same-sex marriage to 60-plus percent of Americans were in favor.

David McRaney (08:22):

And that shift took place in roughly a decade. So, clearly people can change their minds, is what I thought when I looked at all that, I just didn't understand how it actually worked. And so the book builds up to persuasion. I never even intended for the book to address persuasion. I just wanted to understand what happens in a person's brain. Like, if I took somebody from now and put them in a time machine back to when the majority of the United States was opposed to same sex marriage, what would be the difference in their brains? And what happened between those two points? And building up from understanding how we change our minds about anything helped me understand why we would resist doing such a thing in certain scenarios. And I eventually was able to meet all these different organizations who actively work with those forms of resistance and have learned ways to bypass them.

David McRaney (09:11):

Street epistemology, motivational interviewing, deep canvassing and several others. And the thing that really blew my mind when I met those groups and I was embedded—this book is a very on-the-ground embedded book where I would spend time with all the people that I interviewed—and I would go door to door with them and conversation to conversation and train in their techniques. And I started to notice

that all of their techniques had pretty much the same steps in the same order. And they did all this independently. They weren't aware of the other groups. They often were not aware of the science that supported what they were doing. And it seems so marvelous once I realized that, "Oh, this is how brains work. And if you're devoted to trying to understand how to get past the frustrations that you asked about, you will eventually find all this if you're devoted to it."

David McRaney (09:59):

In these groups, the street epistemology and deep canvassing—deep canvassing in particular—when I spent time with them, they had engaged in 17,000 one-on-one conversations at people's front doors about wedge issues. And they had recorded them on video and they tossed out what didn't work. They kept what did work, and they slowly zeroed in on a technique that is very, very effective: so effective that social scientists are still studying them today. And I started to see all their techniques as something akin to, if you take the airplane that the Wright brothers created, the Kittyhawk aircraft, if you like, show that to any child right now, this year, if you make a TikTok that just shows it fly by, every kid will identify that as an airplane because airplanes have a certain form, a certain shape, a certain design to them.

David McRaney (10:54):

So no matter who would've created the first aircraft, and no matter who makes an aircraft today, they look like airplanes. And why do they look like airplanes? Because they're trying to overcome certain obstacles to flying around. They're having to deal with gravity and wind resistance and material science and weight and balance. All these things combine to when you overcome all of that, you end up with a certain form. And this is also true of the rhetorical techniques that actually work. They tend to take on a certain form because this is how one brain interacts with another brain when certain things are on the line. Identity in-group/out-group status, ideas like reactants, all of these things combine into, there is a way of going about doing this that we often do poorly, I guess is my overall answer to this question [laughs]. So I was very surprised to learn that all of this works. And so I see things differently now. I see that I've become a great proselytizer. There's no fanatic like a convert, I guess. And so I'm very converted to trying to spread the good news of yes, we can reach out to the people who, who seem lost to us.

Andrea Chalupa (11:59):

That's good to know. We're obviously gonna delve deeper into that and sort of concrete steps people can take. But this sort of cult-like thinking that we've seen people get sucked into—

David McRaney:

Mmhmm. <affirmative>

Andrea Chalupa:

—from being anti mask, anti-vaccine, comparing those pandemic safety measures to what Jewish people experienced in Nazi Germany and so on, to the flat earth society to a long list of things that we're all sort of dealing with today. QAnon, of course. With this sort of alternative reality that many people around the world are getting sucked into, there's a toxic culture of bullying. So the original idea for this conversation was to understand from somebody that's gone through the rabbit hole of trying to get a grip on persuasion; what works, what doesn't, and why. At the heart of that is really how do you stand up to a bullying culture? Because it's bullying what we're ultimately witnessing, where people are basically being convinced to act against their own interests.

Andrea Chalupa (13:05):

There was that famous line of a daughter saying how her father died from a preexisting condition and the preexisting condition was that she believed... That he believed Donald Trump and he therefore, you know, lost his life in the pandemic. He didn't take the precautions that he should have been taking. And so my question to you is, how do we stand up to a bullying culture? How do we stand up to the bullies in our lives? And that's such an important discussion to have because we're asking people to stay engaged, to stay active, to knock on doors to get out the vote, to make phone calls to get out the vote, to run for office themselves, to be election observers because we need good people to be election observers, poll monitors. We're losing some really good talent on the front lines of protecting our democracy because of such a toxic, deliberately engineered bullying culture. So please, if you could just go at it.

David McRaney:

[laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

It's like 30 minutes now. The floor is yours. How do we stand up to a bully?

David McRaney (14:03):

This is gonna require something of the people who are interested in this. At first blush, it's gonna feel like, "I can't believe you're asking me to do this." It's gonna require empathy, specifically something that my friends at NYU call cognitive empathy, which is to understand that human beings are motivated reasoners, that we believe things for reasons. And if you wanna take all the things that make up a mind when we're thinking about changing minds and reduce them to something that we can discuss easily, we could talk about it in terms of say, beliefs, attitudes, and values. And these are very different mental constructs. A belief is an estimation of whether or not something is or is not true. and you kinda measure that emotionally with confidence; how much confidence do you have that this is or is not a true statement?

David McRaney(14:54):

Then attitudes are sort of... These are valenced estimations of positive or negative qualities. So we often get these two mixed up because if I ask you, "Is chocolate ice cream delicious?" And you say, "Yes," it can feel like you believe chocolate ice cream is delicious, but it's not really a belief, that's an attitude. You have a positive association with this thing. So it's important to see that as separate from belief. You can believe that you have a positive attitude toward chocolate ice cream, so you can see that it starts getting nice and complex very quickly. And then a value is gonna be where do you think you ought to put your time, money, and effort? Where should you be putting all of your resources and what's most important to you in that way? And a person who isn't doing such a thing or is working against that could be seen as someone who is violating your value structure.

David McRaney (15:46):

So those are the three things that are always changing. Human minds are constantly changing in those three regards through a process called assimilation and accommodation. I'm gonna explain this because it's important to get to why certain things work and certain things don't. Assimilation and accommodation or how we change our minds. This goes all the way back to some of the first psychologists; Jean Piaget and others. My favorite way of explaining it is thinking of when a child sees a dog for the first time and you say, "Look: dog, dog, dog," and all the adults love to, you know, help children learn words. Something sort of categorical happens in the mind of that child. They think, "Okay,

non-human, walks on the four legs, not wearing clothes covered in fur, got a tail, got it, dog. Appreciate that.”

David McRaney (16:32):

Then later on, they may see a horse and they'll point to the horse and say something like, “Dog” or if they're a little more advanced, they might say, “big dog.” This is an attempt at assimilation because from the child's perspective, categorically, this is a non-human walking on four legs, not wearing clothes, covered in fur, got a tail, seems to fit. And then when you say, “No, no, that's not a dog, that's a horse,” a child must then accommodate. This means there must be more to the story. The category of dog and the category of horse, for you to have these two different categories, you must create a third category—a larger category that subsumes those two, that accommodates those two—which would be something like “animal” or “creature.” And this is continuously happening; we're constantly assimilating and accommodating. But the more complex your model of reality becomes, the easier it becomes to assimilate things, the easier it is to see something new as an example of what you already understand.

David McRaney (17:37):

And that takes a lot less cognitive effort, even physically. It takes fewer calories. And it's what we'll attempt to do in most situations, until enough anomalies build up, or there's enough... that we face too many problems when it comes to attempting to make something fit into an existing understanding that we are sort of forced to accommodate. Oftentimes that's what you'll be facing when you're talking to someone who sees the world differently than you and you're asking them to make sense of things. They've probably already undergone a pretty intense assimilation effort, and you're asking them to accommodate in some way. And it's hard. We resist it. It's a natural form of resistance. So the first kind of resistance you'll face is this sort of, “I would rather not expend the cognitive effort it will take to accommodate.” This all gets complexified—which is a word that I made up because I need a word to [laughs] to make sense of most of the stuff.

David McRaney (18:24):

It becomes more complex when you consider we are also motivated reasoners. This very simply means we often are trying to achieve a particular outcome, whether or not we're aware of it, when it comes to coming up with reasons for what we think, feel, and believe. My favorite example of this is if you ever had a friend and they've recently fallen in love with someone, and you ask them, “What is it that you like about that person?” and they say, “Oh, I like, I like the way they talk. I like the way, I mean, I could listen to 'em talk for hours, just the way their voice... It's the best. And I like the way they walk, just watching them cross the room. I can't get enough of it. I even like the music they're introducing me to. I can't get enough of that either. Even the way they, like, cut their food, I could watch them cut their food. Everything, everything.” So, you know, you're listening to this, you're nodding and if you're a good friend, you're like, “Okay, okay.” But if that same friend is breaking up with that exact same person a couple months later and you ask them, “What reasons do you have to want to break up with this person?” It wouldn't be surprising for them to say, “Oh, well, I mean, the way they talk, the way they walk, you know, the dumb music they make me listen to all the time. Even the way they cut their food. This is a person that takes a fork and a knife to a Snickers bar. I'm telling you, this person is the worst.”

David McRaney (19:46):

So reasons for can become reasons against when the motivation to search for reasons to justify your emotional state change. And that is a pretty clear indication that our reasoning is always motivated. And the strongest motivation for coming up with a reason for what we might think, feel, and believe isn't accuracy. It isn't being correct. I mean, we want to be correct as much as possible, but there is something that will supersede that, which is belonging. And that's because we're social primates. And this gets into

the meat of what I think a lot of people are experiencing and are wondering, “How could this be a thing that my friends and family are doing?” Brooke Harrington, the great sociologist, told me that if there was an E equals MC squared social science, it would be the fear of social death is greater than the fear of physical death.

David McRaney (20:38):

So SD greater than PD. Our reputation, our status, the way we imagine ourselves in the eyes of others... as social primates, this is the thing that we care about the most of all things. It isn't irrational because for most of our evolutionary history, that's what determined whether or not we got to eat and sleep and survive attacks from bears and wolves and things. So when it comes down to it, if we feel like the ship is sinking, we will put our reputation in the lifeboat and we'll let our body go to the bottom of the ocean. This is something we saw all the time during covid; people who were refusing to mask or refusing to get vaccinated, and even on their deathbeds they would feel like they had made the right decision because they died still feeling like they had signaled they were a good member of their group to the peers they felt mattered to them.

David McRaney (21:35):

And one of the big epiphanies for me learning about all this was through something called the Interactionist Model of Human Cognition, which comes from the work of Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber. They help me see that oftentimes I think we get into debates or to discussions, and we wanna appeal to logic and rationality and evidence, which are great things—I will never say we shouldn't be doing that—but a lot of that falls under the category of reason. Big R Reason, like propositional logic and those sorts of things. And in a good faith discussion, that's where you should go. If you're behind a lectern facing another person behind a lectern, that's what you should be doing. If you're a scientist who's producing papers that must be vetted in the marketplace of ideas of academia, great. Any place where you're playing by those rules, big R reason is the way to go.

David McRaney (22:23):

Big R reason is how we got to the moon. Big R reason is how we cured all sorts of diseases. It's how we have this software we're using to have this discussion with each other. But when you are facing off against someone in a disagreement of either perspective or facts or anything, we don't employ Big R reason, we use little r reason. Reasoning. We come up with reasons for what we think, feel and believe. And we're always doing this. We are always looking for a justification or rationalization and explanation for our thoughts, feelings, behaviors and intentions to behave. And those reasons, to be reasonable, need to be something that we would consider others would find that to be a plausible justification. And the others we care about are the people in the social groups that we feel the most allegiance to, or the ones that our reputations most hang in the balance with. All of that combines together to, here's sort of the pillars of what makes it so dangerous to be a member of the internet today, to be a citizen of the internet, to be a modern human being thrust into this epistemically chaotic information ecosystem where all the gatekeepers of your have sort of fallen by the wayside.

David McRaney (23:36):

And we're left out here in the desert of social media trying to figure out what is and isn't true. Number one, humans aren't just social creatures. We're ultra social animals. That would be the way you'd be categorized by an anthropologist or a biologist. We're the kind of primate that survives by forming and maintaining groups. So a whole lot of our innate psychology is about grouping up and then nurturing the group itself, curating cohesion between our peers. If the group survives, we survive. So all these emotions that everyone's familiar with—shame, embarrassment, ostracism—that's all about keeping the group healthy. It's more about keeping the group healthy than it is about keeping yourself healthy or any

one member healthy. So when it comes down to it, you would be willing to sacrifice yourself or others if the group will survive, if it comes to that.

David McRaney (24:26):

Another great pillar here is a lot of what we think of as our identity, for the most part, is just that which identifies us as being a member of the group. And when that comes under threat, we will react very poorly. There's a lot of research in this. The great Henri Tajfel did wonderful research showing that there's no such thing as a minimal group paradigm, which is, there's no single thing that is so small that people could not instinctively form a group around it very quickly. And one of the things that the internet has done is it's given us the opportunity to form groups around all sorts of ideas. And that's what happens. Once you can identify an "us" separate from "them", you will start favoring "us" over "them" and in that kind of environment, anything can become a signal of loyalty or a badge of honor or a mark of shame.

David McRaney (25:19):

And it can be randomly assigned oftentimes. Masking up became a symbol that you were part of one group and not another. And there are all sorts of examples through literature of things that were previously neutral and became politicized because at some point it became important to signal to other people how you felt about that thing. And I was told by Dan Kahan of the Yale Cultural Cognition Laboratory, there's nothing that could not become politicized in that way. Currently, fruit bats and volcanoes and tree frogs and the patina of the Martian atmosphere of Mars, these things are politically neutral, but they could easily become politicized and if so, people would feel like they really needed to come down hard one way or another. And all this accumulates to mean that as crazy as this sounds, we will often act as if we disagree on certain fact-based issues.

David McRaney (26:10):

But all of that is performative. It is a form of, as Liliana Mason called it, "uncivil agreement" where two groups disagree only because the issues become politicized. They don't actually... The facts of the matter are completely irrelevant to the discussion. And a final note on all this is we're unaware we're doing all these things. These drives and motivations are usually inaccessible to us. So when we are trying to come up with reasons during a discussion with another person, these things will rarely come up, which is why a lot of the rhetorical techniques that I cover in the book are all about helping people surface a lot of this stuff because once it is surfaced, it becomes really powerful. I talked to some scientists at NYU about this and I asked them about, how do people fall into these conspiratorial groups?

David McRaney (26:55):

How do people fall into these very politicized, very ultra-right-wing/left-wing? How do people fall into these polarized political communities? And underneath it all is pretty much the same psychology as it was described to me. The way they explained it to me was to imagine that somebody sits down to watch a movie on Netflix and one person's thinking, "I would like to watch something with Adam Driver in it. I don't care what it is, just Adam Driver. I think he's cool. I think he's kind of a weirdly ugly/sexy cro-Magnon kind of thing going on there. I don't know what it is I like about him, but he's fascinating to me. A good actor. I saw him in this one thing. What have I not seen?" Click, click, click, click and you find *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and you're like, "Oh, I don't really like *Star Wars* stuff, but I'll watch this."

David McRaney (27:44):

And then you watch it and you enjoy it and you think, "Oh, are there any more of these?" And then you eventually find a sub Reddit where people are talking about it. And eventually that subreddits asking you to look at this and the other thing. And you start having conversations there and your conversations start giving you a little bit of clout with the community. And you start feeling like you are somebody there. You



start forming an identity around the way you behave in that one group. And then at some point you switch over from, you may have gone there with the intention of discussing this issue, but now you go there for the feeling of belonging that is afforded. And that switches you over to a completely different set of psychological motivations than what got you there in the first place. Meanwhile, another person is getting on Netflix and they just wanna watch some sci-fi.

David McRaney (28:28):

They wanna watch something that's got a spaceship in it and an explosion. That's all they care about. And they find the same *Star Wars* movie and they think to themselves, "I don't normally watch these because this is kind of like a space opera. I wanted something that was more hardcore. But whatever." They watch it, they like it, they end up in that subreddit. They end up in that community for the same reason. At some point, these two people who enter the communities for completely different reasons are staying in the community for the same reasons. And if they go so far as to go to a convention and hang out in person and cosplay, they will have their identity fully invested and they will defend a lot of the ideas and the values and the predominant cultural signals that are within that group. And I had this described to me as many people will fall into one of these communities either because they are trying to establish a reputation that they don't already have, or they're trying to defend something they feel that out there in the public discourse is looked down upon.

David McRaney (29:25):

So they have completely different reasons for joining the conversation, but once they're in the conversation, the conversation kind of falls away and they just become a person who wants to go hang out with people who will hang with them. That's sort of the process that a lot of people find themselves, that's how your family members find themselves in these groups. And it's important to have empathy for this. Cognitive empathy, that no one's choosing this. It usually happens to them. It's the emergence of a lot of different drives and motivations through natural processes. And once they're locked into it, they are locked into it in a way that would require an outside voice to pull them from it. And the quickest way to get a person to reject your attempt to do so is to trigger something called reactance.

David McRaney (30:16):

And reactance is when you intuit that your agency is under threat. And we will very strongly push away from this. If you've ever been a teenager or you've ever interacted with a teenager, you've experienced reactance. That's when you know your room needs to be clean. Like, there's almost like a neon sign in your head that says, "Clean your room over" and over again. And then your mom comes along and says, "Hey, you need to clean your room." And you immediately rush in there and like, eat a Twix and throw the wrapper on the pile and then like Scrooge mc-dive into your hoarder mountain. [laughs] That's reactance. You know, that's the sense that, "Don't tell me what to do. Don't try to steal my agency." So anything that happens in a conversation, and if you'd like, we can get into some of the rhetorical techniques now because that's where we're headed.

Andrea Chalupa (31:05):

Yeah, no, absolutely. So towards that end, if you're stuck dealing with someone toxic, a family member, a coworker, what is some advice for dealing with that person?

David McRaney (31:17):

So let me discuss this on two fronts. How do you deal with bullying itself? And the other is how do you deal with persuasion in general? Know that one of the hardest things you're going to experience is you need to know right upfront, what are your goals? You need to set aside some time to consider by

yourself, what would be the optimal outcome for one of these conversations that tend to go poorly right now? What are your actual goals? What are your intentions? What do you want from this conversation? If we don't do that upfront, it can be very difficult to have the conversation that you keep failing in ways that don't really make sense to you. And so you need to also... It's a way to be authentic, transparent, and honest with the other person, because you can state that this is how you would really like the conversation to go.

David McRaney (32:01):

And know that if your goal is to shift that person's perspective, to have them see the world differently, if one of the beliefs they currently hold, you want them to have a different belief, or they have a certain attitude that you would wish they'd have a different attitude, or you want to rearrange their value set, if your intention is to change that person's mind in that way, you must offer them an opportunity to speak to you in a way where you are a non-judgmental listener and you must offer them an opportunity to explore how they got where they are, and you have to be empathetic toward them. You have to acknowledge that they may not be aware of how they arrived at where they're at, or why they're still there, why they fight for it. And it can be difficult to offer empathy to someone who is actively aggressing you.

David McRaney (32:50):

It can be very difficult to offer empathy to someone who has a hateful attitude towards you or towards your group. And I totally understand that. So no one is required to engage in this way if it makes you incredibly uncomfortable. There are all sorts of ways to engage in activism that would avoid this kind of back and forth. But if your goal is to change a person's mind, you do have to engage in this way. It's just the way it works. And that means the first thing you have to acknowledge is if you communicate anything to the other party that can be interpreted as "you should be ashamed of yourself, you should be ashamed that you think, feel, or intend to behave in a certain way", it's over, that will torpedo the whole thing that will activate reactants and they won't engage with you further.

David McRaney (33:37):

In fact, what they'll do is they'll double down, triple down, they'll aggress even harder, and you will not be able to have the conversation that you want to have. What you should be looking to do with the other party is move them out of the debate frame. You do not want to get into a, "I want to win, I need you to lose" scenario. "I want to prove that I'm right and that you're wrong." You have to think of that as sort of a face off and what you wanna do is get them into a shoulder to shoulder scenario. And how do you get them into a shoulder to shoulder? You alter the frame of the conversation to be such that you are trying to solve a mystery together. And the mystery is, "I wonder why we disagree." If it's your family member, it's like, "I love you."

David McRaney (34:18):

If it's someone who is coming to you from some sort of platform or intellectual source, and you can say that "I understand you've put a lot of work into this. You seem to be a reasonable and intelligent person. I find it odd that I look at this issue and you look at this issue and somehow we disagree. I'd like to understand that. I'd like to explore that with you." You're trying to get buy-in for a different kind of conversation, a conversation where the two of you go shoulder to shoulder and look at the mystery of how could two people disagree about something like this? In that frame, it's much less likely the person is going to aggress and push back against you in a certain way because they're not gonna feel threatened on a number of different levels. Now, when it comes to bullies in general, why do people bully?

David McRaney (35:01):

Well, there's a pretty robust psychological literature into bullying. Usually what's happening is in psychology, for any kind of aggression that qualifies as bullying, it must involve an imbalance of power. So this is something that the APA, the CDC, the National Board of School Psychologists, they all sort of converge on this idea that bullying is considered distinct from other forms of interpersonal aggression thanks to the power imbalance in which the aggressor has some kind of palpable advantage over the person that they're aggressing against. Also, about 85% of the time there are peers present. And that's an important thing because what's really happening is the bully is attempting to maintain some kind of social status. They're aware of their place in their group and they wish to maintain it. And in an attempt to feel better—because they're threatened in some way, they have some sort of fear—they try to pick out a target they feel they could win against if they could provoke that person into the kind of standoff that would be one person aggressing against another. So if it's physical, of course, you know, that's actual threats. That's a different thing than I think we're discussing. But if we're talking about intellectual bullying or conversational bullying, they often try to target people who they feel like can safely dominate. And sometimes in their mind that'll be people who are considered marginal or people who have violated some moral code they feel like they live by. Those feel like the safer targets from their perspective because they're thinking about their peers as the audience to all of this. So know that provocation is the point in these intellectual bullying situations. They want you to enter into a “I want to win, I want you to lose” frame. They want you to enter the debate frame. And if you do enter the debate frame, you've pretty much lost any opportunity to have the kind of discussion that would get that person to see things differently.

David McRaney (36:50):

In fact, as long as they provoke you into having that fight, they can walk away from it. They can feel like there's a draw. Whatever happens there, in the eyes of their peers they succeeded. And you're giving the bully what they want by entering the debate frame. So I would recommend as a major point of advice, never do that. And to avoid that, you need to know your triggers. You need to know what could possibly get you into a shouting match, an intellectual push-and-shove match. Assess your goals, try to imagine what it is you're hoping to gain in this conversation and try to move the frame to a collaboration of some kind. And once you've established that sort of collaborative frame, there are steps you can take that will not only nullify the opportunity of the bully to continue bullying, but could actually result in them seeing things differently. If you'd like, we could go through that.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, absolutely.

David McRaney:

Sure. One way we could do this is I can playact it with you if you'd like.

Andrea Chalupa:

Ha! Alright.

David McRaney:

Okay [laughs]. I'm gonna playact it with you and then I'll give you the steps. So here's a way you can practice not allowing yourself to be thrown into a debate frame and to avoid triggering bullies into aggression. And also standing up for yourself in a way that doesn't suggest to anybody that you've back

down. There's one other piece of advice—I can't believe I haven't said this yet—never talk to people on the internet in this way. If you're dealing with a bully of some kind, get them face to face. Oftentimes that's all it takes for them to back off of that sort of “let me punch down attempt to get you to fight me walking around the pool tables in the bar hope somebody bumps into me” thing that bullies do online. Actual eye contact in real physical space oftentimes will bring people much more likely into the frame of let's collaborate and figure out what's going on here. Okay, here's some play acting. Alright, Andrea—

Andrea Chalupa (38:48):

Andrea.

David McRaney (38:49):

Andrea, I'm so sorry. [laughs].

Andrea Chalupa (38:51):

Bully, getting my name wrong on purpose [laughs]

David McRaney (38:54):

Andrea.

Andrea Chalupa (38:55):

Yeah. Yeah. Perfect.

David McRaney (38:56):

Thank you. What was the last movie you remember watching?

Andrea Chalupa (39:01):

Oh, gosh. I'm gonna... I'm under pressure right now. I don't know, I don't watch movies. I've got two babies [laughs].

David McRaney (39:08):

Okay, anything; a TV show? A series?

Andrea Chalupa (39:11):

*Alien.*

David McRaney (39:12):

*Alien.* The original *Alien*?

Andrea Chalupa:

Mmmmm. <affirmative>

David McRaney:

Oh, wow. Okay, so I would love to talk to you about that just a little bit. Are you cool with that?

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah.

David McRaney:

I'm wondering, when I think about this movie, *Alien*, if you were the person that worked at Netflix and wrote the, like, four-sentence description for people who are browsing around, how would you describe it in that way?

Andrea Chalupa (39:34):

A woman saves the day from aliens. And then she has to keep doing it [laughs]. That's probably why I watched this film. It's, you know, validating.

David McRaney (39:45):

[laughs] I'm wondering, like, upon rewatch, did you like it?

Andrea Chalupa (39:48):

Yeah, absolutely.

David McRaney (39:49):

And let's say you were a movie reviewer and you had a very simple system. 1 to 10. 10 is reserved for the greatest films of all time, and 1 is reserved for films that make you consider that maybe these people should be brought up on charges and go to federal prison for making that movie. Where would you put *Alien*?

Andrea Chalupa (40:11):

I would put *Alien* as a solid 9.

David McRaney (40:17):

So this movie gets a solid 9. And that is an incredibly high rating, considering that 10 would be reserved for the greatest movies ever made. And it's very far from 1. I'm wondering though, why does it not get to the 10? Why does it not reach all the way 10 level for you?

Andrea Chalupa (40:36):

A 10 is for the weirdo movies that for whatever reason I have a chemistry with, I can't explain. Like the movie *Clue*. I'm always in the mood to watch the movie *Clue*. I cannot explain that. *Clue* gets a 10.

David McRaney (40:50):

[laughs] That's amazing. *Clue* gets a 10 and *Alien* gets a 9.

Andrea Chalupa (40:54):

And I cannot explain it.

David McRaney (40:55):

I wonder if you could though. I wonder what comes to mind right off the bat if we think what are some things *Clue* has that *Alien* doesn't?

Andrea Chalupa (41:05):

It's silly.

David McRaney:

Okay.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's got Madeline Kahn and Mrs. Peacock.

David McRaney (41:14):

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa (41:15):

And three different endings. I can go on.

David McRaney (41:18):

Okay. And then one other thing about all this given the time we have, is you could have given *Alien* an 8 and it still would've been unbelievably high. I'm wondering what got it higher than a 7 or an 8 for you? What gets it all the way up to 9?

Andrea Chalupa (41:35):

It's just beautifully done. It's just a perfect... I wanna call it a perfect film. And I think 9 is pretty damn perfect.

David McRaney (41:41):

Yeah. And when you say beautifully done, what comes to mind immediately, like as an example of that?

Andrea Chalupa (41:46):

The tension. The tension throughout. The character is just so extraordinary,

David McRaney (41:55):

Right.

Andrea Chalupa (41:56):

Sigourney Weaver.

David McRaney (41:57):

In just this little bit of conversation we've had, I'm starting to get an idea—and so are you because in this conversational technique, we're sharing the insights together—this strong woman protagonist seems to be a value that we could explore more deeply. You pointed out not just the character of Ripley, but also you talked about Madeline Kahn. You also discussed things that include, like the fact that it's silly, the fact that it's clever, the fact that there are multiple endings, the fact that it was unique and unusual in comparison to other films. *Alien*, you were starting to explore how it was visually stunning and the cinematography. And also I enjoyed that you said she saves the world from monsters and has to keep doing it over and over again. And every point that you were describing things that—

Andrea Chalupa (42:49):

I was talking about myself [laughs]

David McRaney:

Yes.

Andrea Chalupa:

Just kidding. Go on. Just kidding. I'm so kidding.

David McRaney (42:54):

That's exactly what I've said. I'm trying get—

Andrea Chalupa:

Really?

David McRaney:

Yes. At every point, you were revealing you. You were revealing your attitudes, your values, your beliefs, the things that... Whenever I asked, "Did you like it?" you said, "Yes, of course" and that was an immediate response. It was almost like bumping your knee against the table. And I asked, "Did that hurt?" All you have to do is check in with your emotional state, your feelings, your body, and say, "Yeah, it hurt." With *Alien* or *Clue*, if I ask, "Did you like it?" it was very easy for you to sample your attitude. It's right there. But if I ask you to start justifying and rationalizing and explaining it, it starts becoming more of a, "Mmm, well, hmm. I don't know if I can." And as we start to go deeper and deeper within that and elaborate more and more, a lot of times it's a fascinating revelation to *you*, even though this is an emotion that you're experiencing and all of it's inside you—and I'm not trying to copy and paste anything out of myself into your mind, I'm just elaborating, paraphrasing, and mirroring. So in a conversation with someone that you've had an issue with in the past, especially a relationship, you wanna maintain (a family member) and especially with someone who tends to employ bullying tactics against you, the first piece of advice, of course, is get them out of debate frame and do not allow yourself to get pulled into debate freedom. That's what they want. They want you to fight because if they get you to fight, there's a possibility they can win. And all they're looking for is a win-lose situation and that is not the kind of conversation that changes minds. And you need to make sure that you stay out of frame too. Don't try to defeat this person as some sort of intellectual opponent. That's not what it's about.

David McRaney (44:37):

The steps—and there are many different versions of this. I'll give you the way that I think they come together—is, number one, after you've committed to all the things I just described, just like we were doing with the movie, establish rapport, which means you assure the other person you aren't out to shame them. Ask for consent to explore their reasoning and be transparent about what you're up to. And then move on to, if you're discussing a fact-based issue, ask for a claim. If you're discussing an attitude-based issue, ask them how they feel about it. And then if you've got all that out in the open, you wanna confirm that you've understood what they have to say. Repeat it back in your own words and ask if you've done a good job. And you keep repeating that until they feel satisfied, almost like you're a lawyer for their side and you're trying to put it into a perfect argument.

David McRaney (45:24):

Clarify any definitions they put forth. Like when you said, “beautiful,” like, “I want to make sure I understand what *you* mean by that word and when you tell me what *you* mean by it, I'm gonna use *your* definitions going forward, not mine.” And then if we're discussing a fact-based issue, ask for a numerical measure of confidence, like, “How sure you have this like in a percentage wise?” And if we're talking about an attitude like we were with a movie, you know, gimme a sort of a numerical measure of where you put yourself positive and negative. And then ask for—and this is the most important part of it—what reasons do you have to hold that level of confidence or put yourself on that scale and where you put it? And then ask why you're not higher, why you're not lower? Start to really get all that elaboration outside of the feeling and get that out in front of each other.

David McRaney (46:11):

And then move on to asking, “What methods are you using to judge the quality of your reasons here?” And this is an interesting pivot. We've established what your feelings are. We've established why you feel like they are justified. And then now I'm gonna ask you, “What method do you use to determine that that is an actual good justification? What is the process you're using to get there?” And you focus on that for the rest of the conversation and simply listen, summarize, repeat, mirror, reflect and hold space for that person to actually generate their first fully formed opinion on the matter. And as impossible as this may seem, as hard as this will be to believe, that's all it usually takes. There's a very high success rate in rhetorical techniques that follow this format for people to not even recognize their opinion coming outta that conversation compared to what it was going into it, even to the point where oftentimes people will defend themselves as if they've always felt the way they felt when clearly it will have changed somewhat.

David McRaney (47:17):

And also when you wish them well at the end of this conversation, offer to do this as many times as you want in the future. And it will take time. Don't expect to change a person's mind and get a 180 in one conversation—though it does happen sometimes. But what you have established now is a pipeline. You've established a routine. You've established a dynamic you can return to over and over and hopefully, after many conversations, you will be able to get somewhere with this person. And you've made it very difficult for them to bully you in the future because now you're an ally in the formation of their actual opinion on that matter.

Andrea Chalupa (47:50):

Ally in the sense... You're not, like, reinforcing their reality?

David McRaney (47:55):



No, because one of the things that makes these work is that if their attitude truly is harmful, this will be discovered through the course of the conversation. If they truly are factually incorrect, this will be revealed through the course of the conversation. If their methods are faulty and they arrived here in a sort of a mistaken way through poor epistemology, that will be revealed through these conversations as well. So there's an opportunity for you to change your mind also. But if you really feel like the facts are on your side or that you are arguing for the reduction of harm that is legitimate, these techniques will arrive there eventually. And you are an ally in helping them metacognate and introspect, not an ally in their current position if you're looking at them.

Andrea Chalupa (48:42):

I can't thank you enough. And if people want to understand more in confronting this strange time that we're all in, check out Dave McRaney's book, *How Minds Change*.

[outro music - roll credits]