

Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt
By Arthur C. Brooks
Conclusion: Five Rules to Subvert the Culture of Contempt
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Every parent knows by heart his or her kid's favorite book. You have to read it to them every single night, sometimes multiple times, for months and years on end. It's like something they'd make you do at Guantanamo, and it gets seared permanently into your brain. My poor dad could recite Dr. Seuss's *Yertle the Turtle*, word for word, until the day he died.

For whatever reason, my own kids loved *The Important Book* by Margaret Wise Brown, written in 1949. It goes through everyday things a child would see and lists what is "important" about them.

Here's one little snippet to give you an idea:

*The important thing about rain is
that it is wet.
It falls out of the sky,
and it sounds like rain,
and makes things shiny,
and it does not taste like anything,
and is the color of air.
But the important thing about rain
is that it is wet.*¹

I always suspected that Margaret Wise Brown was secretly moonlighting as a beat poet. She would play the bongos for a minute, and then, while taking a deep drag on her cigarette, say, "The important thing about rain is that it is wet. *Can you dig it?*"

Anyway, I remember that book every time I'm finishing a new hook of my own and am writing the conclusions chapter, which is supposed to sum up the important point of my book in a memorable way. So here goes, in the style of Margaret Wise Brown:

*The important thing about contempt is
that it is bad for us.
Sometimes we don't like people who disagree with us,
and we want to tell them they are idiots,
and social media makes it easy to do,
and pundits get rich by doing it,
and maybe it seems that some of them deserve our contempt.
But the important thing about contempt
is that it is bad for us.*

(Cue the bongos.)

What is the cure for our culture of contempt? As I have argued throughout, it's not civility or tolerance, which are garbage standards. It is *love* for one another and our country. Love is the "why" of the leaders that can bring America back together, and of all of us in our families and communities.

You might note that the title of this book is actually a bit misleading. The problem I address is that we are constantly hearing that those who disagree with us are our enemies, and many Americans have begun to believe this. But in reality, these aren't my enemies at all; rather, they are simply people with whom I disagree.

I am asking you to join me in a countercultural movement. I don't know yet if it will be successful or popular. If this were a book called *Liberals Are Evil* or *Conservatives Are Stupid*, it would be a guaranteed mega-bestseller and the call to action in the last chapter would be simply to go along with what everybody else is doing. Watch a ton of cable TV and read your favorite partisan columnists; silo your news feeds on social media; curate your friends and stop talking to people on the other side; compare people you disagree with to Hitler or Stalin; make huge assumptions about others' motives; hate; hate; hate.

The call to action here is harder, because I'm asking you to join me and work to subvert the prevailing culture of contempt as a radical for love and decency. But I need to lay out the plan as specifically as possible, because it runs so counter to the currents of our prevailing culture.

So, culled from the lessons throughout this book, here are five simple rules to remember if you believe we can renew our nation and you want to be part of that movement.

Rule 1. Stand up to the Man. Refuse to be used by the powerful.

Most people don't believe they are being used by others. Why not? Think for a second about a manipulative leader—someone you know of who really uses people's hatred for his or her own goals of money, power, or fame. Got the image in your head?

Well, guess what? You have the wrong image, because that's someone you dislike. You are thinking of someone who might use others, but who can't use you, because you already see through him or her. The right image of a powerful manipulator is someone on *your side of the debate*. Maybe it's a media figure who always affirms your views, or a politician who always says what you think, or a professor who never challenges your biases. They say the other side is terrible, irredeemable, unintelligent, deviant, or anything else that expresses contempt—and say you should think these things as well.

As satisfying as it can feel to hear these things, remember: these people do not serve your interests. If you have gotten this far in this book, you (like me) have strong views on various subjects but hate the way we are being torn apart, which is what these powerful people are doing. Why do they do that? Because when they get you fired up, they make money, win elections, or get more famous and powerful.

To begin with, then, make an inventory of these kinds of figures in your life. Take your time; be honest. This is just for yourself; you don't have to post it on social media. Then set your strategy for rebellion.

Rebellion comes in one of two forms. The first is passive: tuning these manipulators out. This is most appropriate for those with whom you don't have any direct contact—a columnist or TV host, for example. Stop watching the show or reading the column. Ask yourself: Will I miss something I don't already think or know, or am I just scratching an itch? Remember: Unless the person is actually teaching you something or expanding your worldview and moral outlook, you are being used.

The second form is active—and harder: Stand up to people on your own side who trash people on the other side. It's never easy to stand up to our own friends, but contempt is destructive no matter who expresses it. You don't have to be a jerk about it. Simply be the person who gently defends those who aren't represented, even if you disagree with them. Will you get invited to fewer parties, have fewer followers on social media, and hear less gossip? Probably. But you know it's the right thing to do. And you will feel *great*.

Rule 2. Escape the bubble. Go where you're not invited, and say things people don't expect.

Just as a fire requires oxygen, the culture of contempt is sustained by polarization and separation. It is easy to express contempt for those with whom we disagree when we view them as "them" or never see them at all. Contempt is frankly much harder to express when we see one another as fellow human beings, as "us."

A simple way to start is by going to unfamiliar ideological territory. If you're a conservative, listen to National Public Radio in the morning a couple of days a week instead of watching *FOX & Friends*, or include a few pieces from *The Atlantic* in your list of articles to read. If you're liberal, from time to time put down *The Washington Post* (unless you're reading my columns) and read *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page, or add a few conservative podcasts to your rotation of offerings from more progressive hosts.

A more serious approach involves your portfolio of relationships. Ask yourself: Do I go places where my ideas are in the minority? Do I hear diverse viewpoints? Do I have personal friendships with people who do not share my politics? Answer honestly, and make an ideologically wider social circle this year's project.

Seeking out what those on the other side have to say will help you understand others better. You will be a stronger person, less likely to be aggrieved or feel unsafe when you hear alternative points of view. Plus, such understanding will also improve your ability to articulate and defend your own beliefs in a way that others find compelling, or least defensible. You might change a mind or two. And if your argument is weak, you'll be the first to know.

Escaping the bubble also means (to mix metaphors a little) breaking out of the shackles of identity. In America today, people primarily identify themselves in strong demographic terms, including political categories. To be sure, this identification can create a sense of belonging and power in numbers. But mostly it emphasizes our differences. That is ultimately a self-defeating

proposition if what we want is a unified country that can cope with our shared challenges in the years ahead. It is a reduction to demographic identities that makes us distant and unrelatable to others and makes others seem foreign and contemptible to us.

By now readers know that one of my great moral heroes is the Dalai Lama, and I believe he understands the balance between common story and individual identity better than anyone I have ever met. Here are his words: “I’m Tibetan, I’m Buddhist, and I’m the Dalai Lama, but if I emphasize these differences, it sets me apart and raises barriers with other people. What we need to do is to pay more attention to the ways in which we are the same as other people.”²

We are called to find common ground where it genuinely exists, improve our own arguments, and win over persuadable Americans by answering hostility with magnanimity, understanding, good humor, and love. We cannot do that while hiding in our narrow ideological foxholes. This is especially true for leaders, which every person reading this book is, or can be if you so choose.

Rule 3. Say no to contempt. Treat others with love and respect, even when it’s difficult.

Contempt is the problem in our culture today, and it is never the solution. We are polarized and unable to make progress because contempt has created a bitter tribalism in America. Do not be part of this problem. No insults, no mockery. And as psychologist John Gottman taught us way back in Chapter 1, no eye-rolling!

I must come back to a point I have made repeatedly: never treat others with contempt, *even if you believe they deserve it*. First, your contempt makes any persuasion of others impossible, because no one has ever been insulted into agreement. Second, you may be wrong to assume that certain people are beyond reason. I have given plenty of examples in this book of people forming unlikely bonds precisely because they didn’t treat each other with contempt. Finally, contempt is always harmful for the contemptor. While it might feel good in the moment, it is the fast road to unhappiness and even poor health.

“How can I avoid contempt for someone who is immoral?” I hear that question every day. In virtually every case, those whom you consider to be immoral are not so in ways you care about, like compassion and fairness. They have different moral taste buds on issues like loyalty, purity, and authority, but that’s all right. Focus on the things that are most important to both of you.

What about when you are the one treated with contempt? It won’t be long before *you* are, if you are on social media or a campus or live in our society. What should be your reaction? The answer is to see it not as a threat but an opportunity. Why? Because another’s expression of contempt toward you is your opportunity to change at least one heart—your own. Respond with warm-heartedness and good humor. Your life will change a little. You are *guaranteed* to be happier. Others might see it, and if it affects them at all, it will be to the good.

It sounds like I am telling you to be a nice person. That is correct. Being contemptuous and being nice are totally incompatible. Lest you worry that being nice is deleterious to your success in work and life—that you might look like a patsy—this book gave you a trainload of empirical

evidence to the contrary. Jerks can do alright for a while, but in the end, nice guys (and girls) usually finish first.

For leaders who truly desire the common good—as opposed to manipulate the public for personal gain—repudiating contempt and embracing love for others means adopting an authoritative leadership model. Coercion, division, and polarization are ultimately counterproductive and never to be used. Rather, the goal should be to work to inspire others with a vision of hope and a model of inclusiveness toward others’ ideas.

One last word on this topic. You might be feeling a little guilty right now. If you have been connected at all to political discussion over the last few years, you may have become a combatant in the war, and guilty of saying contemptuous things about, or to, others. I have, too. What do we do about that?

Remember a few chapters ago, when I compared our contempt addiction to alcoholism? For contempt addicts who are committed to change, there’s a lesson for us from Alcoholics Anonymous. AA takes its members through twelve steps to recovery; step nine is: “Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

Have you hurt someone with your harsh words, mockery, or dismissiveness? Are you among the millions of Americans who have abandoned a close relationship because of politics? It’s time to apologize. Perhaps say, “I know we don’t agree, but you are more important to me than our disagreement. Sorry I let our disagreement mess up our relationship.” If the person won’t accept your apology, that’s a pity, but it still will help *your* heart.

Does this idea make you nervous? Maybe you’ll need a couple of drinks first. (Just kidding.)

Rule 4. Disagree better. Be part of a healthy competition of ideas.

If you did nothing more than glance at the cover of this book, you might be tempted to conclude that my argument is to avoid being disagreeable by disagreeing less with others. By now you know that nothing could be further from my point.

Disagreement is good because competition is good. Competition lies behind democracy in politics, and markets in the economy. Markets and democracy are the two things that have made the United States into the most successful country in history, attracting the world’s strivers, giving most readers of this book a good life, and creating a model for people all over the world. In politics and economics, competition—bounded by rule of law and morality—brings excellence.

As it is in politics and economics, so it is in the world of ideas. What is a competition of ideas called? “Disagreement.” Disagreement helps us innovate, improve, correct, and find the truth.

Of course, the competition of ideas—like free markets and free elections—requires proper behavior to function. No one thinks that hacking a voting machine is part of a healthy democracy, nor that cronyism and corruption are part of the way free enterprise is supposed to work. In fact, those things are the opposite of competition; they are ways to *avoid* competition.

Likewise, anything that makes open, respectful disagreement difficult or impossible is incompatible with a true competition of ideas.

The most obvious way we shut down the competition of ideas today is by shutting out certain voices and viewpoints. Institutions can do this—think of the movement at some universities to “de-platform” objectionable people and views—but so can individuals when they curate their news and information in a way that excludes ideas with which they disagree.

Less obvious but even more important for the competition of ideas is our attitude toward others when we disagree with them. We are in our current mess of tribalism and identity politics not because of de-platforming or social media siloing—those are symptoms of the real problem, which is our attitude of contempt toward others. Contempt shuts down the competition of ideas.

The single biggest way a subversive can change America is not by disagreeing *less*, but by disagreeing *better*—engaging in earnest debate while still treating everyone with love and respect.

Rule 5. Tune out: Disconnect more from the unproductive debates.

The last four rules summed up the lessons in this book. However, I realize I have one more I need to give you before we finish. My guess is that you, like me, are superconnected to the world of ideas. That’s great, but it can also be problematic.

For most of my life, I believed that to have a positive impact on the world, I needed to be as informed about it as possible. In my twenties, when I was making my living as a French-horn player in Barcelona, and with no plans to change career and no interest in public policy, I nevertheless decided to subscribe to *The Economist* magazine. I simply felt that I needed more information about the world to be a better citizen.

Many people subscribe to this theory. The media industry certainly wants you to. But is it right? These days, is more information better than less for your ability to be a constructive and happy citizen? Making you a constructive and happy citizen certainly isn’t the objective of much of the media today. Click on the app for your favorite newspaper and you will be immediately enmeshed in a complicated algorithm feeding you stories curated by your tastes and tendencies and specifically designed to keep you reading as long as possible. Social-media sites are engineered to feed your addiction to dopamine, the neurotransmitter implicated in all addictive activities and substances.

The free flow of information is obviously important for a free society. Public ignorance is a threat to freedom, as it aids powerful individuals with the wrong motives. And I recommend full participation in the competition of ideas. But the importance of being an informed participant does not lead in any way to the conclusion that more media in your life is always and everywhere better for you, or for America. I hope I have convinced you in this book that social media is creating tremendous problems, as is the constant outrage on ideologically siloed cable television.

The solution is selectivity and rationing. Obliterate your silos by listening, reading, and watching media on the “other side.” Get rid of your curated social media feeds. Unfollow public figures who foment contempt, even if you agree with them. Even better, cut way back on your social media use, perhaps limiting it to a few minutes a day. In addition to helping the country, you will be happier. A friend of mine—a well-known journalist with a large social-media following—once confided in me that there is little that brings him more anxiety than checking his Twitter feed. As he clicks on his notifications, he can feel his chest tighten. Maybe you can relate to this. If so, take control.

Want to get really radical? Stop talking and thinking about politics entirely for a little while. Do a politics cleanse. For two weeks—maybe over your next vacation—resolve not to read, watch, or listen to anything about politics. Don’t discuss politics with anyone. When you find yourself thinking about politics, distract yourself with something else. This is hard to do, of course, but not impossible. You just have to plan ahead and stand firm.

In discussing this proposal with friends and colleagues, I detect an inchoate fear. It goes something like this: “If I tune out politics, I may be happier, but it’s irresponsible. The fascists”—my conservative friends here say “communists”—“will run across the country with abandon.” This is a version of John Stuart Mill’s maxim, “Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends than that good men should look on and do nothing.”

Is that how you feel? Here’s the truth: If you stop talking about politics for a couple of weeks, *nothing will change*, except you might get invited to more parties because you don’t always talk about politics.

Besides, whether you know it or not, you probably need a break. Afterward, with a bit more perspective, you can come back to current events. Three predictions: First, you’ll find that politics is a little like a daytime soap opera, of which you can skip a couple of weeks without losing track of the plot. Second, you’ll see the outrage industrial complex in media and politics more clearly for what it is: a bunch of powerful people who want to keep you wound up for their own profit. Third, like any reformed addict, you’ll see how much time you were wasting and how much you were neglecting people and things you truly love.

After you come back from your politics cleanse, how can you keep from falling back into your old patterns? Resolve to pay attention to *ideas*, not just politics. As I said at the very outset of this book, they aren’t the same thing; ideas are like the climate, whereas politics is like the weather. The world is full of amateur political weather forecasters. The world needs more people who are thoughtful about the climate of ideas. Perhaps most important, while politics creates animus and contempt, people can generally disagree about ideas without bitterness. I know of no one who has stopped talking to a family member over disagreements about the merits of the idea of a universal basic income, for example.

I just reduced this whole book to a few lessons. Want it even simpler? Go find someone with whom you disagree; listen thoughtfully; and treat him or her with respect and love. The rest will flow naturally from there.

Think of it like missionary work. Missionaries are generally ordinary people with a vision for a better world that they want to share. They face a lot of opposition. In places like China, they are in physical danger, and even here in the United States, most people hear the knock on the door from missionaries and whisper, “Pretend we’re not home!” But some open the door, and then some of those people listen and say, “I do want that.” That’s how proselytizing is supposed to work. Missionaries supply others with a new, clear, and purpose-filled vision, delivered with love and kindness (never contempt, if they want to succeed), and then give them the tools to make that vision a reality. And no matter how others receive their witness, they themselves wind up brimming with joy.

Near my home there is a Catholic retreat house where my wife and I teach marriage-preparation classes for engaged couples. (When we were engaged, we barely spoke a word of the same language. We don’t recommend this for communication.) In the chapel, there is a sign posted over the door—not the door coming in, but rather the one going out into the parking lot. It is written for people to look at as they’re leaving. It says, YOU ARE NOW ENTERING MISSION TERRITORY. The message is simple yet profound: you are here because you have found what is good and true, but you’re going to go out where people haven’t yet found what you’ve discovered. You have the privilege of sharing it, with joy, confidence, and love.

That shouldn’t be just a religious message. It should be a message to all of us who want to make America and the world better. You know what our world needs: more love, less contempt. I hope that after reading this book, you have clear ideas on how you can be part of the movement to make it so and are fired up about the prospect. So as you put down this book, I have just one thing I want you to remember:

You are now entering mission territory.