



## Thinking Out Loud

# Diversity and the Landscape of our Democracy

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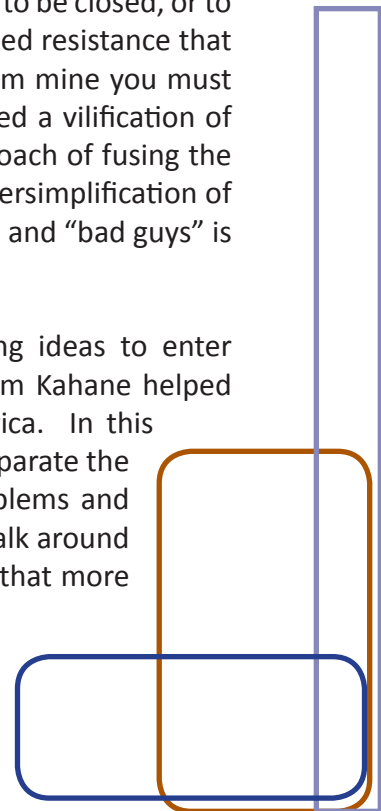
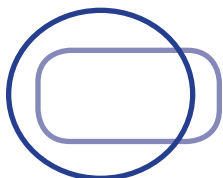
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**In biological systems an absence of diversity dooms a species to extinction.** This can be said for ideas and perspectives as well. If we cannot consider other ideas, those different from our own, how can we grow and mature and respond to the ever changing landscape of our neighborhoods, and our community and our country?

When we encounter an idea or opinion that is opposite to our own, there is a choice to make regarding how to respond – to be closed, or to be open. The choice to be closed is one of entrenched resistance that declares that since you hold a position different from mine you must be wrong. Even worse, this has increasingly included a vilification of the individual whose opinion is different. This approach of fusing the problem and opinion with the person leads to an oversimplification of the complex world we live in. Declaring “good guys” and “bad guys” is not a powerful model.

The choice to unlock our minds to allow opposing ideas to enter creates the opportunity for active citizenship. Adam Kahane helped facilitate the planning of post-Apartheid South Africa. In this very contentious environment, Kahane worked to separate the people from the problem. He suspended the problems and positions from the ceiling so that all “sides” could walk around them together; he de-personalized the situation so that more people could be involved in the solutions.

Choosing to be open means that we could instead welcome the conversation and perspective that is different than our own, even



when we experience it as disturbing. Margaret Wheatley, who writes and speaks about making progress in our complex world, says that she has started to listen FOR what surprises her. "...but when I notice what surprises me, I'm able to see my own views more clearly, including beliefs and assumptions." Imagine engaging in a conversation with the possibility that we might change our minds. Unfortunately, we just don't do that very often. Wheatley continues, "sometimes we hesitate to listen for differences because we don't want to change...we have to be willing to move into the very uncomfortable place of uncertainty."

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Until recently, I believed that the cynical and deeply divisive approach to public debate was largely at the national level; however, I have come to see that it also exists at the local level and even here in our community where the public debate is at times peppered with accusation, personal attack, and inadequate depth. We can do better.

Creativity and great ideas happen not in the comfort of uniformity of thought, but in the gray space of not knowing, yet being open to possibilities. The challenges we face in our community depend on us finding comfort in being uncomfortable – **and taking comfort in the knowledge that this is, in essence, the vital sign of a living democracy.**

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