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Braver Angels: A Grassroots Effort to Depolarize American Politics

Late on the evening of February 20, 2020, David Blankenhorn, Cofounder and President of the grassroots non-profit organization Braver Angels, turned off his television. He had just finished watching the ninth debate of the Democratic presidential nomination contest, during which the remaining candidates not only attacked each other's policy positions, but also sought to impugn one another's characters. Blankenhorn lamented the hostility he observed. His disappointment was exacerbated by the knowledge that these individuals were ostensibly on the same team, and that the division between Democrats and Republicans, not just candidates but also citizens, was often even more substantial.

According to researchers, "Since at least 2012, Americans have been more likely to say there are strong conflicts between Democrats and Republicans than exist between other groups in U.S. society, such as rich and poor people, young and older people, and black and white people."¹ (See Exhibit 1 for more on this trend.) Left versus right conflicts were manifested by more than differing opinions on candidates and policies. Increasingly, it seemed to Blankenhorn and others, liberals and conservatives thought of each other as inherently immoral, unintelligent, ill-willed, and maleficent. Furthermore, because Democrats and Republicans often considered members of the other party effectively beyond redemption, fewer and fewer Americans seemed interested in constructively engaging the other side.

Blankenhorn established Braver Angels (initially named Better Angels) with Bill Doherty and David Lapp in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election with the goal to help reduce the division and animosity between Democrats and Republicans. They thought that some of the same techniques and theories used in family therapy might be applied to the American "family." They devised uniquely adapted workshops and debates to cultivate goodwill between liberals and conservatives, as well as other events and services. By early 2020, Braver Angels counted over 9,000 paid members (at a rate of \$12 annually) and more than 50 chapters nationwide. It maintained a paid staff of five individuals, but relied mostly on its more than 1,250 volunteers to plan and execute events and grow the organization. Membership dues and small donations accounted for just over 22% of the organization's budget. The rest came from foundations and wealthy individual donors. To date, more than 900 events had been held across the country, mostly in urban areas. An additional ten to twenty events were happening each week.

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As he prepared for bed after the debate, Blankenhorn thought deeply about the direction in which he hoped civil discourse and political institutions would move, and wondered what role Braver Angels could play. Supporters applauded the Braver Angels approach and survey results showed that attendees greatly benefitted from participating in events. Yet the scale at which the organization was operating could hardly be considered a movement. How, Blankenhorn asked himself, could Braver Angels impact the citizenry on a level that would lead to greater institutional strength? Scaling the number of participants and volunteers was part of the equation. So too was rethinking the organization's revenue model, which he believed was overly dependent on large grants and major gifts.

A Lifetime of Advocacy and Activism

Blankenhorn was born in 1955 in Jackson, Mississippi. "Two factors shaped and defined my childhood," he said. "The first was experiencing many of the most intense moments of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South, and the second was living through family disagreements about these and other issues. The two were inextricably linked. My mother is kind, gentle, deferential, and Christian. She was generally supportive of the Civil Rights Movement. My father is aggressive and had much more traditional white Southern views about these issues." Said Blankenhorn, "Later in life I became a student of divorce and family conflict, and learned that often times children take on responsibilities aimed at maintaining elements of unity and peace. Perhaps that was me, and it's not inaccurate to say that my whole life has been about trying to solve problems related to ruptures and animosity."

After attending Harvard University and the University of Warwick, earning degrees in social science and history, Blankenhorn began a career in social action and public service. In 1987 he established the Institute for American Values, a think-tank with the mission "to study and strengthen civil society." In 1995 he helped found the National Fatherhood Initiative, which sought to improve children's lives by empowering men to be more responsible fathers. He also held official and unofficial advisory roles during the presidencies of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton on issues relating to families and society.

Although he identified as a classical-liberal Democrat, his support of traditional values and institutions often led to the assumption that he was a conservative. Prior to the robust media coverage of Braver Angels, Blankenhorn was perhaps best known for his opposition to same-sex marriage on the grounds that despite its many clear benefits to the institution, it also posed threats. He outlined these views in his 2010 book, *The Future of Marriage*. However, in 2012, Blankenhorn announced in *The New York Times* that he had changed his stance on the issue. Eventually, he decided, "the equal dignity of homosexual love" (and other factors) outweighed the priority to provide all children the "right to know and be cared for by the two parents who brought them into the world, biologically speaking." He later said, "I've got scars from the so-called 'Culture Wars,' but everything I have done has been about trying to bring perspectives together." (See Exhibit 1 for more on Blankenhorn.)

Better Angels

In the fall of 2016, Blankenhorn, like many Americans, wondered what the results of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election would mean for the American social fabric. "I called my friend David Lapp, who lived in an area in southwest Ohio that went for Donald Trump at a rate close to 70%," Blankenhorn recalled. "I asked him what the mood was there, and he said, 'People think it's great.' I told him that wasn't the case in Manhattan. People were despondent, angry, going around as if they had been gut-

shot." Blankenhorn and Lapp agreed to two weeks later gather twenty people, ten who had voted on either side in the election, and spend 13 hours over the course of three days talking about their views. The objective of the event was to enable attendees to begin to change their minds not about the policies and candidates they supported, but about the nature of the people on the other side of the issues, and to recognize that some common ground could be found.

To moderate the event, Blankenhorn and Lapp recruited Bill Doherty, a longtime friend and the Professor and Director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program in the Department of Family Social Science, College of Education and Human Development, at the University of Minnesota. Doherty, along with a number of colleagues in his field, had determined that many tools used in family therapy were relevant to social and political conflict. In addition to family therapy, Doherty had applied aspects of his approach to, for example, mending relationships between African-American males and police officers. A 2019 profile in *The Atlantic* referred to Doherty as a "therapy entrepreneur" creating different counseling programs and marketing them to willing customers." His namesake institute, the Doherty Relationship Institute, claimed to specialize in "educating couples in all stages of stuckness." (See Exhibit 2 for more on Bill Doherty.)

The first event, held in Ohio, drew positive reviews from attendees. Said Blankenhorn, "Bill, David, and I saw the potential, but there were kinks to iron out and opportunities for improvement. We spent the next year learning, prototyping and practicing. Over the course of 40 or so workshops we came up with something that was effective, and we believed could be replicated by others. We also gave the events a name: Red/Blue Workshops."

By this point the three founders had also launched a new organization and given it a name: Better Angels. "The name is a reference to Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address," said Blankenhorn. "He was warning us of the dangers of disunity, and in doing so redefined the political usage of the word 'angel.' Previously, angels were thought of as guardians who looked over or out for people. Lincoln used the phrase "better angels of our nature," to suggest that there were angels within us, and that by listening to them we could heal the divisions in the country." In early 2020, the founders announced they would rename the organization to Braver Angels.

Expansion

In the fall of 2017, Blankenhorn, Lapp, and Doherty announced to their networks via social media and direct correspondence that Braver Angels would be leading a one-day moderator training session. Attendees would be volunteers, pay their own way, and commit to leading at least three Red/Blue workshops using the format and procedures they learned in training. Ninety prospective moderators attended across four locations nationwide.

"There's a pretty specific profile," said Blankenhorn said of those who volunteered to be moderators. "Most are highly educated, and high income. Many have moderated groups before, although that is certainly not a requirement. For some, the biggest challenge is to unlearn techniques used in other settings. Our goal was to make it somewhat fool-proof. We did not want to have to rely on highly trained individuals. We'd never scale like that. The first training seminars were prototypes, too. Eventually we converted the training to a 45-minute application (to be reviewed by Doherty) and a 7-hour online tutorial. After a few checks to see if they get it, they're mainly out in the wild leading workshops. Supervision may seem minimal, but we've found it works. They work in pairs, and every attendee fills out a brief survey, so issues do get reported back. Every month there is an online video meeting where moderators have the chance to ask questions, and we post anything important or that's recurring on a sort of FAQ repository."

A membership model was also introduced. For \$12 annually members were given access to resources to help them hold events in their area. They could become organizers, moderators, or debate chairs. Precise numbers were not maintained, but according to Blankenhorn liberal grassroots membership significantly outpaced conservative membership. Membership growth was fueled almost entirely by word of mouth and positive media coverage.

Anatomy of a Red/Blue Workshop

Workshops were attended by anywhere from 10 to 20 individuals, though Blankenhorn believed 16 was the optimal number. It was important that the group be split evenly between Democrat-leaners ('Blues') and Republican-leaners ('Reds'). Two trained moderators were responsible for leading the sessions. Everything from scheduling to recruiting attendees to securing a venue and providing refreshments was handled by volunteers. "Costs are usually low. Sometimes groups passed the hat to cover costs, but often they are either absorbed by volunteers or taken care of by a local donor. For the organization, the budget for a given workshop is nearly \$0."

Workshops were held in a variety of venues. Ideologically neutral venues were preferred, though Blankenhorn acknowledged that finding a truly neutral location was nearly impossible. "Public libraries are about the best," he said. "Often workshops are held in places of worship. Sometimes a private individual will volunteer a home or office. There have been workshops in Veterans of Foreign Wars (V.F.W.) Halls and Rotary Clubs, too." Weeknight workshops were typically 3 hours long, while weekend workshops lasted 7 hours.

The first steps included making introductions, breaking into groups (one liberal, one conservative), and going over ground rules. Said Blankenhorn:

The most important rules are: Say what you believe; listen carefully; don't try to change anyone else's mind; and speak for yourself, not for the group. There are a few other 'Be Nice' rules, such as 'No personal attacks' and 'No hate speech,' but we purposefully kept the guardrails pretty wide, in large part because conservatives in particular will often not agree to participate if they feel their speech is being regulated. As a result, you will sometimes hear a bit of rough and insensitive language.

One of first and most important things I look for when I observe a workshop is whether the moderator signals his or her political background or position, which is almost always liberal. Signals include: using therapeutic language, too much discussion of feelings (as distinguished from opinions), policing language, intervening when someone may feel offended, and heavily guiding the group. It's understandable that moderators do this. Many of them come from 'helping' professions, which attract predominantly the left-of-center. They're used to doing things the way they learned. But our model is different, in large part because we are trying to appeal to a wider swath."

Next, members of each group were asked to list what stereotypes they believed the other group had about them. "For example," said Blankenhorn, "liberals might note that conservatives saw them as baby-killers because they supported abortion rights. Alternatively, a conservative group might suggest that liberals viewed them as racists." After a brainstorming session, each group shared with the other group their "Top 5" list. The moderators then led a discussion about what it was like to hear the other side's perceived stereotypes.

Attendees were also instructed to discuss (in their groups) whether or not there was any validity to the stereotypes they had enumerated. Said Blankenhorn, "It's possible they say no, but what almost

always happens is the admission that there are kernels of truth. For example, you might hear conservatives say, 'Liberals wrongly paint us as racist. The vast majority of conservatives are not racist, but it does seem most racists are conservative.' Alternatively, liberals might arrive at something like, 'Conservatives think liberals hate America. Most liberals don't hate America, but they do criticize the country when they feel it can do better, and can get carried away and go too far!' After each side reached its conclusions, the groups again presented to one another and discussed what they learned from hearing the other side talk about perceived stereotypes. Said Blankenhorn, "The benefit of this exercise is that it allows people to get a lot of ugly stuff out on their own terms. That is, they're not sitting around waiting for that kind of thing to come out during an accusation or outburst from the opposing group. It's like a cleansing process. It also demonstrates to the other side that you are capable of self-reflection." Blankenhorn added that this 'kernel-of-truth' portion of the workshop was something the founders did not introduce initially. Rather, it was something suggested by an attendee of one of their prototyping workshops. "It turned out to be a brilliant idea," he said.

Subsequent activities utilized what Blankenhorn referred to as a "fishbowl" format, where one group sat on the inside and the other group assembled on the outside. The outside group was tasked with sitting silently and listening to members of the inside group answer a question. These questions (which were scripted) included: "Why do you think your side's policies or candidates are good for the country?" and "What is an experience from your life that had a big impact on your political views?" After each side had the opportunity to answer and to listen, the moderators brought the entire group back together for conversations about what they learned. "These questions personalize the conversation," said Blankenhorn, "and make philosophical ideas more real." Participants across groups and at different workshops also often reached similar conclusions. Said Blankenhorn, "People tend to say, 'Before the workshop, I thought my side was fractured and disorganized, and that the other side was monolithic and effectively mobilized.' They come to see that both sides can be incredibly diverse and disorganized."

Another way Blankenhorn and Doherty adapted the workshops was to make President Donald Trump less of a focus. "At first we used his name a lot because he seemed to embody so much of the polarization. You either loved him or you hated him. What we found was that if you ask about him, people will talk about him, but that if you don't, they won't. Conversations were much more productive when the questions hewed more towards, "Why do you think your side's ideas are good for the country?"

The next activity gave attendees the chance to ask members of the opposing group questions about their ideas and experiences. This was yet another portion of the workshop where the founders had iterated. "Initially," said Blankenhorn, "people asked the questions directly. It was a disaster, because they tended to ask mostly 'gotcha' questions. 'Gotcha' questions are ones in which an accusation is smuggled inside. For example, 'If you say you're not racist, how can you support the most racist president in decades?' It's clear why people do this—it's all they hear on television. We moved to a curated model, where moderators select and help attendees craft 'clarification' questions. A good rephrasing of the race question in a 'clarification' tone would be: 'How do you reconcile your views on race with your support of the current administration?'"

After the Q&A session, most of the remainder of the workshop focused on 'checkouts.' Attendees discussed what they learned throughout the day by engaging with and listening to the other side. Then they formulated lists of things they could do personally, with their own group, and with the other group after the workshop. Said Blankenhorn, "The most common checkout response is something along the lines of 'We're less divided than we have been told.' Often in response to questions about going forward participants will say, 'Let's form a local chapter and keep the conversation moving.'"

Other Workshop Conclusions

"I dislike stereotypes," said Blankenhorn. "Getting people to deal with individuals as they are rather than as types is one of the primary goals of the workshops. However, in thinking about how Braver Angels can better serve citizens, it's necessary to sometimes think in terms of groups, and it's interesting how accurate some generalizations can be." He elaborated:

Generally, if I'm a conservative, I might want to go to a Braver Angels event to finally get the chance to be listened to by liberal elites. The feeling is often: *they have crazy views of me, I want to tell them they're wrong to their face*. Liberals are often different. He or she may say: *who are these people who voted for Trump? Do I know any of them? Maybe the guy who cleans my pool? If only I can engage with them, they may become enlightened to my point of view*. Put another way, it's a core liberal value to appreciate difference and be willing to reach out. Conservatives are more likely to see difference as an obstacle or necessity, while liberals are more likely to see it as an advantage or an intrinsic good. Traditionally, approaches to bridge the divides tend to advantage liberals because the methodologies used are almost always based off of liberal assumptions and liberal explanatory frameworks. In this context, the conservative sensibility is seen as less than, something in need of correction.

We recognized that there are two roots of the Socratic Method--discussion and debate. It so happens that liberals tend to be more comfortable with discussion, which favors cooperation, and conservatives tend to prefer debate, which favors competition. We had our workshops, which represented attempts to make the discussion more palatable to conservatives. They enjoy it once they're in it, but it's harder to get them to attend. We also felt we needed the opposite--a debate format that while inherently preferable to conservatives could be adapted to appeal to liberals as well.

Braver Angels Debates

Traditionally, in formal debates, participants (as individuals or as teams) are instructed to take maximalist positions on one side of an issue and argue that position with the sole intention of winning the argument. "In our debates," said Blankenhorn, "there is an issue, but there are no sides. The rules encourage speaking honestly, and admitting when you don't know something. You can speak to either (unofficial) side, though that does not mean the goal is to arrive at any sort of centrist position or compromise. Enthusiasm is encouraged, as are nuance and the recognition of ambiguity. There are no winners or losers. We describe it as a collective search for personal truth."

Braver Angels Debates typically last around two hours. Debate chairs were charged with keeping the conversation moving and making sure basic rules were observed (e.g. preventing interruptions, adhering to time limits, ensuring everyone had a chance to speak, and that one side did not dominate the event), but had minimal responsibilities to frame the arguments, provide facts, or serve as referees. The ideal size, according to Blankenhorn, was 20 to 30, but skilled chairs could handle groups as large as 50 or more. Although there were no official teams, it was viewed as imperative that there be approximately the same number of individuals on either side of the issue. Braver Angels Debates were especially popular on college campuses and at high schools, where students and educators found them useful tools for fostering better understanding of issues and working towards defensible opinions. Topics ranged from gun rights, to abortion, to immigration. "In many ways," said Blankenhorn, "debates are the flip side of the coin from the workshops. If you feel more comfortable with clarification of differences, try a debate first. If your default skews towards cooperation and common ground, try a workshop first."

Other Activities

While workshops and debates represented the bulk of the organization's efforts, Braver Angels continues to offer other events and ideate on potential new offerings. Skills Training Workshops were designed for individuals to learn how to navigate difficult personal situations and communicate in a polarized world. Ideological parity was not required, and up to 150 people across either party could attend. Red/Blue Pairs was a program that matched individuals who disagreed on politics and enabled them to build new friendships across the partisan divide. To date, approximately 6,500 individuals attended Skills Training Workshops, and pilot-level numbers only had participated in the Red/Blue Pairs program.

In late 2019, Braver Angels launched an initiative to offer a new series of candidate debates. "We ran our first trial during a local election in North Carolina in fall 2019," said Blankenhorn. "The idea is to train moderators to run candidate debates in a way that will better benefit both citizens and those running for public office. We'll have to see what works, and train moderators, much like we did with the workshops, but the goal is to have at least one revamped 'Braver Angels' candidates' debate in every congressional district within the next 2 to 3 years. Similarly, we want to give town hall events a makeover and help them be more useful to stakeholders."

Blankenhorn also envisioned specific workshops on topics such as race, another highly polarized issue. "Recently, in my view at least, a common attitude is that African-Americans need to educate white people about racism, and that it's primarily a one way street. But might it be better, more productive, to think about this differently? If groups can go in on an equal footing then it's not just one side saying 'I have to teach you.' We're eager to test a new dialog series based on these principles."

Looking Ahead

Unable to fall asleep after the Democratic debate, Blankenhorn stayed up thinking about the future of Braver Angels. His grand vision for five years down the road was for the country, at the level of both citizens and institutions, to be characterized by less rancor and more goodwill. To do that, he figured the organization would have to reach at least one million voters--approximately 1% of the eligible voting population. Measuring impact would continue to be difficult. Right now, with Braver Angels' limited scope, success meant people walking out of events with the pleasure centers in their brains lit up, good media coverage, and a slow trickle of people coming to believe there was value not mainly in changing other peoples' minds about issues, but in changing their own feelings about the people with whom they disagreed.

Eventually, thought Blankenhorn, you would have to look at election surveys and so-called 'thermometers' that gauged the feelings people harbor about their political opponents. At an institutional level, he hoped there would be more rules encouraging compromise and deliberation. You would not see, for example, the Speaker of the House of Representatives rip in half a copy of the President's State of the Union Address. Nor would you see the President refuse to shake the hand of a leader of the rival party. Changes at the various levels—civic and institutional—could become, and would need to be, reinforcing cycles.

At the organization level, Blankenhorn saw two main constraints. The first was funding. Bill Doherty and most other leaders, including the heads of operations and marketing, were volunteers. More than three years in, Braver Angels still did not employ a development director or someone to lead digital initiatives. "We need to keep membership dues low, to avoid becoming an elite organization, which is something we are already facing," he mused. "Yet it would be great to have

membership dues account for more than 22% of the budget both for the message it would send and to ease the pressure to secure major gifts and large grants. Just last year we asked members to add a donation on top of their dues if they were able. We raised \$271,000 in two months, which was fantastic so generous of them, but that's a rabbit you can't always pull out of your hat."

The second was how the organization would spend additional funds if they were available. Building a bigger network of trained moderators would be a start. Forty weekly events nationwide would be a good target for 2022, he figured, but would still likely leave Braver Angels well shy of his 1%-of-voters goal. Online programming was an intriguing option, but no one on the leadership team, including Blankenhorn, had significant experience in that area.

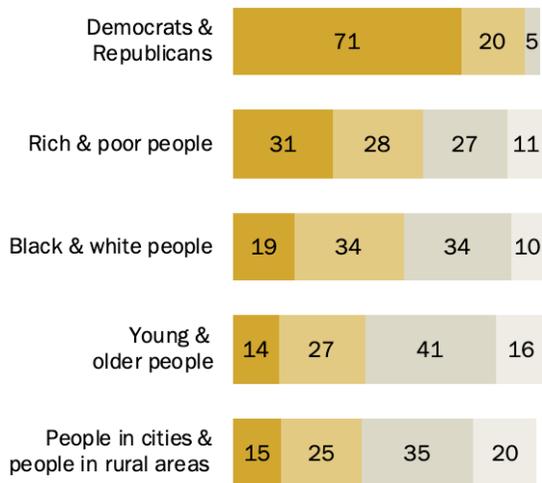
One of the things that was most clear, however, was that the goal was not simply to have more and more events. The workshops and debates were the means, not the end—instruments for affecting hopefully broad changes in the way Americans viewed and interacted with one another. Yet more instruments and better instruments were necessary. Blankenhorn thought again about a metaphor he sometimes used to explain the Braver Angels idea. "Suppose everyone used to love apples. Now, some people don't love apples anymore, but the people who still do love apples want them to love apples once more. So, the apple-lovers gather up a bunch of their own people to reach out to the former apple-lovers and re-secure their love of apples. This is how things have always gone; and it never works. People won't join an arrangement in which the other side has decided for them. New solutions are required." Though the task felt daunting, Blankenhorn was caught by a flash of optimism. "Anyone who thinks we're currently living in a conflict-oriented society," he mused, "should have seen the Deep South during the racial and political unrest of the 1950s and 1960s. Compared to that, this feels like Sunday School."

Exhibit 1 The Partisan Divide in America, c. 2020

U.S. public sees stronger conflict between partisans than other groups

% who say that conflicts between ___ are ...

■ Very strong ■ Strong ■ Not very strong ■ No conflicts

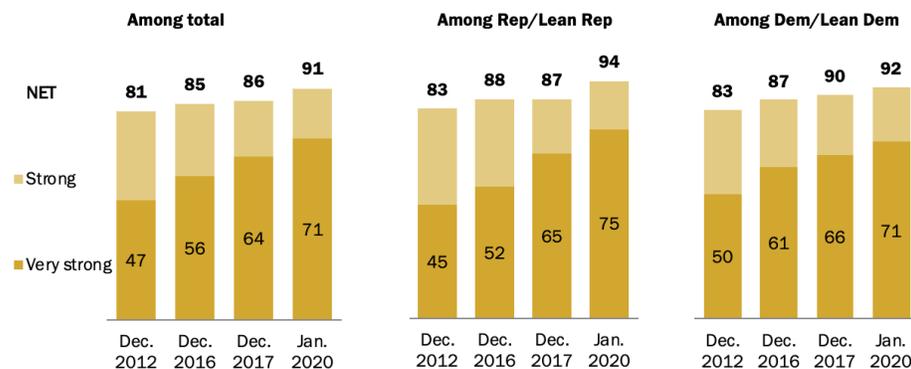


Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-13, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Growing shares in U.S. see strong conflicts between Democrats and Republicans

% who say that conflicts between Democrats and Republicans are ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-13, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Pew Research, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/04/far-more-americans-see-very-strong-partisan-conflicts-now-than-in-the-last-two-presidential-election-years/>

Exhibit 2 David Blankenhorn Biography

David Blankenhorn is founder and president of the Institute for American Values, a nonpartisan organization whose mission is to study and strengthen civil society. He is the author of *Fatherless America* (1995), *The Future of Marriage* (2007), *Thrift: A Cyclopedia* (2008), and *New York's Promise* (2013). He is also the co-editor of nine books, the most recent of which is *American Thrift: A Reader* (2013).

A 2007 profile in *USA Today* describes him as making "a career of thinking about big issues" and describes the Institute for American Values as "a catalyst for analysis and debate among those with differing views." A 2012 profile in the *Deseret News* says: "A soft-hearted liberal raised in Mississippi and educated at Harvard, he started his career as a civil rights organizer and has since carved out a unique career cutting across ideological lines. He is one of America's most important liberal thinkers concerned about family issues."

Blankenhorn was born in 1955. He lives in New York City.

Source: Institute for American Values <http://www.americanvalues.org/about/bio.php?pid=1>.

Exhibit 3 Bill Doherty bio

William Doherty, Ph.D., is Professor in the Department of Family Social Science where he directs the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project and the Citizen Professional Center. He is Past-President of the National Council on Family Relations, the oldest interdisciplinary family studies organization in North America. He has authored 11 professional books on family studies and family therapy, many scholarly publications in variety of journals and books, and five books for the lay public on the topics of family rituals, confident parenting, marriage, overscheduled kids, and the family dynamics of wedding planning. Of particular relevance to Thanksgiving is his book *The Intentional Family: Simple Rituals to Strengthen Family Bonds*. In addition to studying family rituals, his current research interests focus on community engagement to strengthen families and couple relationships, and the prevention of unnecessary divorce. Bill is also a practicing marriage and family therapist and co-founder, with his daughter, of The Doherty Relationship Institute.

Source: <https://theconversation.com/profiles/bill-doherty-204885>.

Endnotes

¹ Schaeffer, Katherine. "Far more Americans see 'very strong' partisan conflicts now than in the last two presidential election years." *Pew Research Center*. March 4, 2020. Web. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/04/far-more-americans-see-very-strong-partisan-conflicts-now-than-in-the-last-two-presidential-election-years/>