



A
HUMAN FLOURISHING
SEVEN PILLARS
ESSAY

The Questions That Matter

Honest Disagreement in a Divided Age

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A Note Before We Begin

The Human Flourishing Pledge ends with this commitment: *I embrace the questions that matter, pursued honestly and across difference, as essential to human progress.*

On first hearing, it can sound like the most reasonable thing in the world. In practice, it is the commitment we have lost the most ground on. The conditions for keeping it have eroded faster than we noticed, and the costs of letting it slip have compounded in ways most of us still cannot quite see.

This essay sets out to do two things: name what we are losing, and make the case that engaging the questions that matter is both worth the work and within reach.

What You Already Know

There is someone in your life you used to be able to talk to. Maybe a sibling. Maybe a neighbor you used to wave to from the driveway. Maybe a friend from college, or a colleague you used to take to lunch, or the person across the holiday table who once made you laugh and now feels like a stranger. You know the shape of the question that came between you. You may not be able to say when it happened. But you can feel that the conversation you used to be able to have has gone somewhere else, and that something true used to live in that exchange that does not live anywhere now.

This is not the scene the public conversation focuses on. There are no raised voices. No one is screaming on television. You are simply standing in a kitchen, or sitting in a parking lot before a family gathering, choosing what not to bring up. Calculating which topics are safe.

You have learned to do this without noticing. It has become the texture of ordinary life.

Look around and you will see this avoidance everywhere. The Thanksgiving table where everyone agrees out loud about the safe things and knows, without saying, there are subjects no one will raise. The friendships that have contracted, year by year, around a smaller and smaller portion of the actual lives the friends are living. The workplace meetings where the real disagreement never surfaces.

These choices come from love. The people doing it have learned that some conversations end relationships, and they would rather keep what they have in smaller form than risk losing it entirely.

The calculation makes sense. The cost is real.

The Conditions Have Changed

The story most of us tell ourselves is that the country has become more polarized — that people disagree more sharply than they used to, and that this is what makes hard conversations harder.

That story is incomplete. Americans have always disagreed deeply — in 1968, in 1925, in 1860. What has changed is the conditions under which those disagreements meet today.

A generation ago, the people you disagreed with were also the people you went to church with, sent your kids to school with, ran into at the hardware store. The disagreement was held inside a thicker fabric of shared life.

You could be wrong about each other on one thing and still be right about each other on twenty others.

Robert Putnam has documented what has happened to that fabric: the bowling leagues, the PTAs, the union halls that once put us in regular, low-stakes contact with people unlike ourselves have thinned to the point where most of us no longer have those rooms in our lives at all.

What replaced them is an environment optimized for the opposite of what those rooms did. The platforms most of us spend our hours on were built to capture and hold attention, and the engineers who built them learned quickly that nothing engages a human nervous system more than the feeling that someone on the other side is the enemy. The platforms learned to feed us outrage because outrage holds attention better than understanding does. We did not choose this. It was chosen for us, and we now spend large portions of our days inside an environment that is, by design, making us worse at the work this essay is about.

There is more. Geographic sorting has separated us by worldview at a rate without modern precedent. Local newspapers, which once gave a community a shared set of facts to argue about, have collapsed. The institutions that mediated public life — schools, churches, civic associations — have lost the standing that once let them hold a community's disagreements without breaking. We have arrived at a moment where almost everything in our environment makes engaging the questions that matter harder, and almost nothing makes it easier.

Looking at this environment squarely lets us be honest about what we are actually being asked to do. The work of engaging the questions that matter is harder now because the conditions have changed, and the kind of conversation that used to happen by default — in the texture of ordinary American life — now has to happen intentionally.

What This Has Already Cost

Look at what this avoidance has already cost. We have lost the capacity to be wrong in public. The price of being seen to change your mind has risen so high that almost no one does it anymore, and a society whose members cannot change their minds cannot learn.

We have lost the institutions of common life. The places where Americans of different views once worked things out face to face have not been replaced; their absence is a hole in the civic body that nothing else has filled.

And we have lost something else — harder to put words to, but most of us feel it. The neighbor whose lawn sign you find offensive shoveled your driveway last winter without being asked. You said thank you. You did not bring up the sign. The shovel and the silence are both real, and most of us no longer know what to do with the fact that they coexist.

Multiply that small confusion across a country, across millions of relationships, and you have the slow loss of something that used to hold us together — a confidence that we are still, somehow, in this together. That across the difference there is still a fellow citizen, a fellow human being, capable of the same work and worthy of the same effort.

These losses will not be fixed by better arguments or better information. They are the result of conversations we have stopped having.

The only thing that has ever rebuilt them, in any society at any time, is people deciding, deliberately, to take those conversations back up.

What the Seventh Pillar Asks

The seventh pillar describes what that taking-back-up requires. It names a category of questions, and a way of engaging them.

The questions are the ones that matter. They are the questions about how we should live together, what we owe each other, what is true and what should be done. They show up at every scale — from how to raise children well, to how to be a good neighbor, to what a country owes the people inside it and the people who arrive at its borders. They touch identity, values, and the shape of the future we are building or failing to build. They are the questions our public conversation handles worst, and the ones our private lives most often steer around.

Read that and your first instinct may be to recoil. Many readers hear “questions that matter” and picture conflict — the long arguments, the bruised feelings, the holidays gone sideways. The instinct is reasonable; the conversation as most of us have encountered it is exhausting and rarely productive. But what the pillar is asking for is different from what the resistance imagines.

The conversation itself does not have to feel like conflict. What is genuinely hard is the question underneath.

Where do we draw a line? What do we owe each other? What is true when people we respect reach different conclusions from the same facts? Those questions are hard. They will not answer themselves.

The engagement has a shape. Two or more people sit with one of these questions and disagree about it. Each brings their actual thinking — what they truly believe and why, rather than a performance of certainty. Each listens long enough to hear what the other actually thinks, not what they assumed the other thinks. Each is willing to be changed by what they hear. The goal is not for one of them to win. The goal is for both of them to see more clearly together than either could alone.

The pillar asks you to embrace the questions that matter rather than bury them. It asks you to pursue them honestly. And it asks you to do this across difference — especially in the harder rooms where the agreement is not there and may never be.

This is what the pillar calls essential to human progress. The rest of this essay is about why.

What Centuries Have Learned

You have had a disagreement recently that mattered to you. With someone whose opinion you also took seriously. Somewhere in it, there was probably a moment, even a brief one, when you almost stepped outside yourself. You almost saw what you were doing from a third position — the position of someone watching both of you and weighing what each was contributing to the room. The moment may have lasted a second. Most often, defensiveness rushes back in and the moment closes. But it happened. And in that second, you saw the situation more honestly than you had a moment before.

That capacity is older than any of us. Thinkers in different traditions have studied it across centuries, and they have reached the same conclusion every time: it is the muscle on which the work of engaging hard questions actually rests.

What Adam Smith Saw

The clearest account of it in modern philosophy belongs to Adam Smith. Smith is remembered today, when he is remembered at all, as the economist who described the workings of free markets. He was that. He was also, first and more importantly, a moral philosopher, and his earlier book — *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* — is among the most penetrating accounts ever written of how human beings actually navigate disagreement with each other.

The image at the center of Smith's book is the impartial spectator. The idea begins from an honest observation about human nature. When something touches your own interests or your own sense of who you are, your immediate perception of it is unreliable. You see it from inside your own position. You feel what protects you and justifies you. The part of you that could see what the matter looks like from outside has been overtaken by the part of you that needs to defend itself.

Smith's proposal was that the work of being a moral creature is to develop, inside yourself, the capacity to see what you are doing as a thoughtful and disinterested observer would see it. A third party who can take your position seriously, and the position of the person you are disagreeing with seriously, and render an honest verdict on which has more truth in it.

This is what was happening, for that one second, in the disagreement you remembered. The impartial spectator inside you woke up. Most of the time, in the heat of an argument, it does not stay awake long. The spectator is overwhelmed by the participant. You are too inside what you are defending to step outside it. Smith knew this. He never claimed it was easy to step outside yourself this way. His point was that the attempt is what matters — and that becoming someone who can step outside themselves more often, more reliably, is the work of a serious adult life.

The impartial spectator develops only through doing — inside actual disagreements with actual people who see things differently — attempting, over and over and across years, the shift from defending yourself to seeing the situation honestly.

The Same Move, Between People

Smith described this capacity in its internal dimension — the shift inside yourself from defending your position to honestly seeing the situation. The older philosophical traditions described its external dimension — the same capacity carried out between people.

The Stoics called this work *dialectic*. The translation has weakened it in modern English, where the term has come to mean either an academic discipline or a polite synonym for argument. The original meant something more particular: two or more people pursuing a

question through structured disagreement, each bringing what they actually think, each willing to be changed by what they hear.

You have probably experienced this too. A conversation in which someone said something you had not considered, and you genuinely heard it, and you walked away thinking about the question differently than you had walked in thinking about it. The conversation did not need to end in agreement. Often it didn't. What it produced was clearer seeing — for both of you — than either of you had brought in.

A. A. Long, the most careful modern scholar of Hellenistic philosophy, has documented how seriously the Stoics took this work. They believed the capacity to engage well across difference was the substance of moral life itself. A person who could not engage the questions that matter, with others who saw them differently, was not yet a person in the fullest sense the tradition meant.

That conviction did not stay in Athens. The Talmudic schools developed it into the *machloket* — disagreement preserved for centuries in the same text, two voices side by side, both still teaching. The medieval universities formalized it. The Enlightenment placed it at the center of what a free society would require. The work is older than any of us, and every culture that has built something durable has done it in some form.

What This Has Built

The list of what this work has built across history is most of what we mean when we speak of progress. The abolition of slavery is one of its monuments — won not by speeches alone but at quieter scale, in Quaker meeting houses where John Woolman traveled from one slaveholding Friend to the next through the 1750s and 1760s, asking, in the language of his tradition, the question that could not be asked from a pulpit: brother, do you see what you are doing? The Society of Friends became the first religious body in the Atlantic world to disown slaveholders. It took three decades. It happened conversation by conversation.

The expansion of the franchise, the recognition of full personhood for people who had been denied it, the slow softening of prejudice toward neighbors who lived or loved differently than the majority — each of these followed the same pattern. Each looked, in retrospect, like inevitable progress. None of them was, at the time. Each was the cumulative result of millions of conversations like Woolman's — most of them carried on by people who had no idea they were doing historical work.

What we remember as progress was built on a willingness we have largely forgotten — the willingness to sit with a hard question in the presence of someone who saw it differently, and to stay long enough for the engagement to do its work.

A society that loses this work does not lose its progress all at once. It loses, first, the capacity to make any more. Then, more slowly, it loses the capacity to hold what it has already made.

The records show that civilizations fall, more often than not, when they stop being able to talk to themselves.

Disagreement Is a Form of Respect

There is a kind of avoidance most of us have practiced so long we no longer notice we are doing it. We learned it from people who loved us. We pass it on to people we love. The thing being avoided is whatever question would change the room if it were asked. The avoidance looks like kindness from the outside, feels like care from the inside, and has the texture of harmony to everyone in the room.

Look more closely and you find it is also a form of withholding.

The friend who never tells you when you are wrong is protecting themselves from your reaction, not you from harm. The colleague who agrees with everything in the meeting and then says what they actually think to one other person afterward is choosing safety over honesty. The relative who steers around the subject every Thanksgiving has decided that the relative across the table is too fragile to receive honest engagement on it, or that they themselves are too fragile to offer it.

Politeness and respect are not the same thing. Respect treats the other person as someone capable of hearing what you actually think and capable of being changed by it. Politeness treats the other person as someone who must be managed. Most of us have confused the two for a long time.

Here is what the difference looks like in a single life.

A friend tells you she has serious concerns about someone you are dating. She is not enjoying the conversation. She has been turning the words over in her head for weeks before saying them, weighing what telling you might cost her against what not telling you would cost both of you. She says them anyway, carefully, with no insistence that you agree. You feel defensive for two days. You also think it through.

A year later, when that relationship has ended for the reasons your friend named, you remember her face. The carefulness of it. The willingness to risk you being angry with her. The trust she placed in you to be able to receive what she had seen. That is what respect

looks like — someone who took you seriously enough to tell you the truth, and stayed with you while you absorbed it.

A marriage that survives across decades survives because the two people inside it learn to disagree without rupture. A friendship that lasts has been tested by moments when one of you said something hard and the other one stayed. A parent who has earned their adult child's trust has earned it partly through the willingness to be wrong out loud — to admit, when the moment came, that they did not understand and wanted to.

This is true at the larger scale too. Two people on opposite sides of a contested question are often working from genuinely different maps of the world — different formative experiences, different things they have had to navigate, different lessons the world has taught them. A person raised in scarcity and a person raised in abundance will not approach the same economic question the same way, and neither of them is simply wrong. Before you can have a useful conversation, you have to understand the map the other person is holding.

We can disagree and still love. This is the actual structure of every durable relationship.

Its absence is what most fractured relationships are missing.

The capacity to do this is the work of a lifetime — something you build by doing, like a craft. The people who can hold a hard conversation without losing themselves or losing the other person did not arrive that way. They learned, most of them through failure first — conversations that ended badly, friendships they wished they had handled differently. The doing slowly built the capacity.

What this kind of engagement produces is rarely agreement. Agreement, when it comes, is one possibility among several — and not always the most valuable one.

Sometimes what it produces is understanding: a genuine grasp of why someone believes what they believe, where their thinking comes from, what it would cost them to change. That alone is worth something. It is the necessary first step toward anything else.

Sometimes it opens someone's mind to thinking about a question in a new way — not changing their position, but expanding the frame. That opening is more modest than persuasion, and often more durable.

And sometimes it produces something neither party would have arrived at alone — a compromise, or a third position that breaks the binary entirely, a way of seeing the problem that neither of you brought into the room. These are the rare outcomes, and they only come from the kind of engagement that gives them room to emerge.

Persuasion — actually changing someone's deeply held position — is the rarest outcome of all, and almost never achieved by trying. It tends to happen, when it happens, as a by-product of all the other things: real listening, genuine curiosity, and trust built over time.

That is what respect across difference produces. The clearer seeing matters more than the agreement ever could.

From the First Circle Outward

We first learn — or fail to learn — to engage hard questions at the kitchen table. A child watches the adults around him disagree about something. He watches whether they raise their voices or stay steady. He watches whether they say what they actually think or perform for each other. He watches whether they listen or rehearse. He watches whether the disagreement ends with the two of them still in the room, or with one of them walking out, or with the subject permanently set aside as too dangerous to revisit. None of this is consciously taken in. All of it shapes what he will do later, in his own marriage and friendships and workplaces and votes.

What he absorbs at five and ten and fifteen years old becomes the floor of what he is capable of as an adult. A child raised by adults who can disagree without rupture learns that disagreement is survivable. The child raised by adults who can't learns something different about what conversation is for.

The first circle is where this work begins. The wider circles are where it gets tested and refined.

A word here: recovering this work in families does not mean ambushing a holiday dinner with a hard question. The kitchen-table scenes above are diagnostic, not a recommendation. Families can do this work, and well, but it happens through intention — a chosen time, a clear purpose, both parties willing to engage. Under those conditions, family is one of the best settings for honest disagreement. Without them, even small questions become impossible.

A friendship that has survived twenty years has been tested by at least one conversation where one of you said something the other did not want to hear, and the friendship stayed. The friendships that did not survive that test are the ones that contracted around safer ground until the friends were no longer really friends, just people with shared history.

In a neighborhood, the engagement has to extend to people you did not choose. You moved in next to whoever was already there, and they did not move out. You are going to share weather and lawn lines and the sound of each other's lives for years. The disagreement, when it comes, will not be with someone you can avoid.

In a workplace, honest engagement runs into power. The colleague who disagrees with the boss is taking a different kind of risk than the friend who disagrees with the friend. Workplaces that develop a real culture of honest disagreement do so by deliberately

protecting the people who raise hard questions. Workplaces without that protection lose, over time, the best of what their people could have contributed.

In civic life, this work has to extend to strangers — and now, increasingly, to strangers who have been algorithmically presented to us as enemies. This is the hardest version. It is also the one our condition most urgently requires.

What makes the wider circles harder is the thinning of trust. The questions in a marriage can be as important as any in civic life. But you do not know the strangers on the other side of the political divide the way you know your spouse. You have no twenty years of shared history with the colleague across the conference room. You cannot assume goodwill from the neighbor whose lawn sign offends you the way you can assume it from your sister.

The Stoics had a word for this expansion of genuine concern outward through the widening circles. They called it *oikeiōsis* — the gradual, deliberate expansion of moral attention from the self, to the family, to the community, to the wider human family, to the whole of human civilization. They held this expansion as the work of a life: never automatic, always deliberate.

Every essay in this series sits inside that frame. The first circle is where this engagement begins. The wider circles are where it has to keep being done.

The widening circles ask more than the first circle does, and the engagement itself has to grow to meet them. In a family, you can often rely on shared history and unconditional love to hold a hard conversation steady. In a civic context, you cannot. You have to build the trust deliberately. You have to sustain the conversation when the impulse is to walk away.

Most of us were not taught how to do this. The schools we went to did not teach it. The platforms we live inside actively unteach it. The relationships in our lives that taught us the most about it taught it accidentally, through people who happened to be good at it, or terribly, through people who weren't.

What we did not inherit, we now have to build.

What This Asks, and What We Are Building

If you have read this far, something in this essay has reached you. The diagnosis has the shape of your life. The losses are losses you can feel. The questions that matter — the ones in your own life, in your family, in the country you are watching change — are not going away. You also know how rare honest engagement with them has become.

What comes next has to be built. The places where Americans of different views used to work things out face to face are largely gone. The platforms that replaced those places actively unteach what those places made possible. The schools that might have taught honest engagement have largely stopped trying. The families that used to model it for their children are doing so less consistently than they once did.

This is the work Human Flourishing is committed to. We have given it a name — the Practice of Dialogue — releasing later this year as the framework that makes this kind of engagement teachable, repeatable, and shared.

The first public invitation into the Practice is the One Conversation Challenge: take up one conversation, in your own life, on a question that matters, with someone you have been steering around. The Challenge is where the work begins for most readers. The Practice is the deeper architecture behind it.

The Human Flourishing Pledge is where the commitment begins. What follows from it — the Practice, the gatherings, and the community of people committing themselves to each other and to this work — is what this movement is for.

We know what this asks. The conditions of our moment are real. The costs of taking the questions back up — of engaging them honestly with people who see them differently — are real too. The deeper cost — the country, the community, the family we are becoming if we do not — is the one we cannot afford to accept.

The questions that matter will keep arriving. Whether we engage them honestly, across difference, will determine what kind of country, what kind of community, what kind of family we leave to the children growing up inside the conditions we are shaping.

This is the work we cannot afford to abandon.

Read the Human Flourishing Pledge at humanflourishing.us, and sign it if what it names is what you are trying to practice.

Then take up the [One Conversation Challenge](#): one question that matters, one person you have been steering around, one conversation you choose to have instead of avoid. It is the smallest version of everything this essay describes — and where the work begins for most of us.

Share this essay with someone who sees the world differently than you do. When they have read it, have the conversation about it.

The work is ongoing. The community is forming. The conversation is ours to take back up.

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Scott McIntosh is an engineer-turned-entrepreneur who built McIntosh Engineering to \$50 million in revenue before co-founding MAC⁶, a thriving entrepreneurial community in Tempe, Arizona. He co-founded Conscious Capitalism Arizona as the third chapter globally and has been among the earliest investors and advocates for Heroic Public Benefit Corporation. A certified Positive Intelligence coach, longtime student of Stoic philosophy and ancient wisdom, and grandfather of four, Scott writes and speaks at the intersection of human flourishing, free enterprise, and the urgent questions that define our moment.

Angela McIllece**Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | Founder, Soul Force Strategies**

Angela McIllece is a creative strategist, coach, and designer, and the founder of Soul Force Strategies. Drawing on her background in creative design, personal development philosophy, and community building, Angela works at the intersection of vision and execution — helping individuals and organizations clarify their identity and build with intention. As a military spouse for thirty years, Angela has lived and worked across cultures — including living in New Delhi, India and Bogotá, Colombia — raising young children abroad and traveling widely throughout Asia and Latin America, and across the United States. These experiences have shaped her deeply held belief that human flourishing is both universal and beautifully particular — expressed differently across cultures, but rooted in the same enduring human needs.

Selected Sources and Further Reading

The following works inform the arguments in this essay and offer paths for readers who want to continue thinking through them.

Directly cited

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). The originating philosophical account of the impartial spectator — Smith's name for the capacity, internal to each of us, to see ourselves and our disagreements as a thoughtful, disinterested observer would.

A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (1986). The standard modern account of Stoic dialectic and the conviction, central to the tradition, that the capacity to engage well across difference is the substance of moral life.

Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). The foundational diagnosis of what has happened to the civic infrastructure of American life — the bowling leagues, the PTAs, the union halls — and what its loss has cost us.

John Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman* (1774). The first-person record of one Quaker's slow, conversation-by-conversation work to persuade the Society of Friends to disown slaveholders. A model for the kind of historical change the essay describes as built one conversation at a time.

Selected further readings

Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (2020). Putnam's argument that the conditions for civic flourishing have been built before and can be built again.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840). The classic account of what made American civic life work — the associations, the local institutions, the habits of self-government — and the warnings about what would happen if they were lost.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958). On the public realm, the conditions for genuine speech and action among equals, and what is lost when civic life thins.

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