

## Opinion

## Well, that might be awkward

Just in time for that holiday dinner, Alabama women share lessons in how to have the tough conversations that happen at the family table

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Alyxaundria A. Sanford *Spaceship Media*

This year women from across the country, from all political leanings, joined a closed, moderated Facebook group called The Many to discuss politics and current events — and anything else they wanted.

In this project, hosted and managed by Spaceship Media in partnership with AL.com, members took the opportunity to learn from and about people with different ideological backgrounds.

Democrats, Republicans, and those who identify as independent and “other” spent almost 10 months engaging in a variety of topics that some may avoid when talking with someone who holds different views. And it all started with women in Alabama this past spring.

The women of The Many discussed everything from the current White House administration to abortion to police brutality and the #MeToo move-

ment.

As a moderator of The Many, I was extremely fortunate to have the chance to watch these conversations happen. I was keen to see how members learned how to engage with each other, how to approach one another with compassion, and how to ask questions of genuine curiosity.

While this has been a positive experience for many members, conversations can get heated. To host productive and civil discussions, we encourage members to take a moment and reflect on a statement or question to which they may take offense.

In these commentaries, members of The Many share advice on how to have difficult conversations with people you may not agree with, just in time for the holidays.



### We can disagree and still love one another

**Meg Glenn:** Born and raised in Alabama, I’ve lived all over because of my husband’s work for a major oil company. We never lived near family and struggled with the normal challenges of being a busy working couple raising two busy daughters.

We returned to Alabama in August 2016 because we love the beauty of this state (flawed though it is) and to be near my aging parents and our adult daughter and son-in-law. It was a politically charged climate to approach via moving truck, but we forged ahead, unpacking boxes and balancing family life.

My dad was a civil engineer, and growing up I don’t really remember tons of political dinner-table talk, but I did acquire an admiration for a beautifully designed bridge or an interstate ramp that worked flawlessly.

I think political talk was considered an adult domain. I was, however, required to watch the Watergate testimony ad nauseum. I understood little of it. I do vividly remember my mom (prior to Nixon’s downfall) loading us onto public transportation to see him speak somewhere in downtown Birmingham.

I couldn’t really get a good view as I was all of 4-feet tall, but I do remember seeing protestors, and their presence was what really got my attention. They were loud and wore cooler clothes than we did; bell-bottom jeans, crazy folk-inspired blouses, headbands and had posters held high.

People who didn’t agree were mesmerizing. And so, it began. I started to listen when people disagreed. I started to read The Birmingham Post Herald that magically was in our driveway daily. I listened surreptitiously to the grownups talk from the top stair. I watched my mom go back to UAB for her degree.

I joined Spaceship Media’s The Many (and subsequently The Many Alabama) after our current president took his oath of office.

My father and I couldn’t have any civil conversations politically speaking. I’m a moderate and consider myself independent politically. My dad is a staunch conservative. He sees stark black-and-white, and I see a gray haze like morning fog surrounding just about every issue.

To him I’m a raging liberal, a snowflake. And he loves to argue, and I still love to disagree.

The Many gave me a perfect opportunity to engage in conversations with women across the political spectrum with civility, respect and an open mind.

The agreements upon joining the online conversation include a solemn oath to participate with an open mind, to avoid memes, to check inflammatory language, to contact a moderator if conversation starts to step over the line, and to take a step back if emotions are too charged.

We aren’t always successful because this political climate is steamy and oppositional. But we try. And try. And try again.

I honestly can’t say that my mind has been changed by The Many, or that my dad and I are really any closer politically. We still struggle to talk about current events. But I can say that we still love this country and each other. I now have a 1-year-old grandson, and I want him to love and defend this country and state. He and I may someday disagree, and I’ll share with him what I learned in The Many. We can disagree and still love people on the ‘other side’.

*Meg Glenn is a retired educator and proud new grandmother. She describes herself as an independent who has “gradually leaned more left” over the years. An Alabama native, Meg lived around the world and in three different states, before settling back in Alabama.*



### Disagreement doesn’t equal disrespect

**Sahar Ezez:** Having a different perspective on political, social or economic matters is nothing new to me.

I’m a first generation Pakistani-American, a Muslim and a Socialist, and I grew up in Marengo County.

I wore a Hijab, a headscarf, during college. I’ve often butted heads not only with my “stereotypical” Southern Christian friends, but even my friends within my own ethnic or religious background.

I remember attending a conference where a fellow attendee sympathetically asked me if I had a hard childhood as a minority in the Deep South, to which my response was laughter. I’ve never shied away from conflict or disagreement. In fact, I welcome it. It’s in the conversations we have with one another regarding our disagreements where we explore the foundations of our beliefs.

How can I explain the five pillars of Islam to my Catholic friend who’s explaining the Holy Trinity to me, if I haven’t taken the time to learn about them myself?

How can I explain the history behind Pakistani wedding traditions, such as doing the henna on the bride, when my American friends explain why they throw the brides bouquet, if I don’t know the history myself?

How can I defend my Socialist beliefs to my Capitalist friends, if I don’t know the sacrifices of the Haymarket Rioters in 1886 that lead to the introduction of the eight-hour work day?

When I joined The Many on Facebook, a dialogue group focused on gathering women across the socio-political spectrum, I did not go in expecting to have my political beliefs changed by someone opposite of me. In fact, my beliefs are perhaps even stronger now than they were before.

I did, however, note myself using a gentler tone, ensuring that I pointed out things I agreed with whenever I did disagree with an opinion, and providing more sources when I stated facts, rather than having a “just Google it” attitude that I perhaps have too often otherwise. Perhaps this was because The Many was an established safe space for women, or perhaps I was taking these precautions because I knew more about the people I was speaking to.

Joining The Many put into perspective two seemingly obvious things that I too often overlook: that those who disagree with my beliefs may not understand them or have not been exposed to them, and that just because they disagree with my beliefs doesn’t mean they aren’t respecting me.

It’s easy to surround yourself with people who agree with you so that you never have to confront the negative aspects or complicated technicalities of your personal beliefs. But, in the wake of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, it is imperative, now more than ever, that we deeply examine our beliefs and the morals that shape them.

I am not asking anyone to go home during Thanksgiving and argue with their conservative grandmother at the dinner table. I am asking everyone to bear in mind the seriousness of the political climate we live in and ensure that not only should your beliefs be rooted confidently in knowledge-based morals, but that the manner in which you convey them be humane and dignified.

*Ezez is working towards her masters of accountancy at the University of Alabama and works in the finance industry. Born in New Jersey, but raised in Demopolis, she is a registered Independent and self-describes as Socialist.*



### Put the phone down and look each other in the eye

**Amber Tolbert:** If you’re looking to survive a family dinner, they say avoid talking about religion and politics. It’s probably good advice, considering the fact that my brother is a Democrat, my dad is a Republican and I fall somewhere in between.

But my family has never followed that rule. In fact, at just about every meal, we go straight to politics. Halftime of the game? Politics. Thanksgiving dinner? Politics. Random Tuesday night? You guessed it.

But we could not have more opposing viewpoints. From the economy to national security to the refugee crisis to taxes to welfare to marriage to the next election — we will ardently disagree. What could possibly happen when a bunch of stubborn, Irish-blooded kin with opposing beliefs get together and discuss important things happening in our world? With all of the polarizing political chaos that we see from the media, I’m sure you could not fathom what happens at our dinner table ...

Nothing.

We disagree. That’s it.

No raised voices. No getting upset. No arguing. Just a plain old discussion among people who respect each other and who happen to disagree. But is this type of civil discourse on the verge of extinction?

In today’s world, we choose only news sources that are swayed with our established beliefs. Social media algorithms feed us content we like. We de-friend those who don’t make posts we agree with. Politicians fuel the polarization so we will side with their political party.

But what if we chose to meet in the middle of the aisle?

Most people these days are afraid to say what they are actually thinking for fear of offending. By default, we avoid talking about the things that really matter to us. Or worse, we have no respect for others and we hurtfully tear other people down to send the message that our point of view is superior.

But can’t we learn more about our own convictions by listening intently to people who have an opposing view? Is it possible for us to peacefully disagree without vilifying the other side?

Some say it is impossible. I am here to tell you: It is possible. And not just with family. In The Many, we have civil discussions on social media about issues that matter. Women discuss political matters across party lines and adamantly disagree on all issues. While people have their typical party affiliation, everyone still has nuanced beliefs about different issues. But what I’ve learned from this group is that when we refrain from name-calling and instead ask good questions, a respectful dialogue can exist.

At your family table or on your social platform, you can help set the tone. It’s not always what we say, but sometimes it’s how we say it. Are you speaking in a respectful and reasonable way? The other person will likely reciprocate. Are you asking good questions or only dishing out your viewpoints? Lean in, and learn to listen well.

As the holiday season approaches, let’s try something new. Put down your cell phone, look the other person in the face and talk about what matters to you. And then listen to the human being sitting across from you about how they may see things differently. We might be surprised to learn we aren’t enemies after all, but simply human beings who disagree.

*Tolbert is a Birmingham native who now owns and operates two cafes in the area. She is the mother of a 2-year-old and is pursuing an MBA at Samford University.*

# Opinion



## Alabama women share lessons in how to have the tough conversations that happen at the family table



### Sometimes a little grace goes a long way

**Tiffany Rouse:** Have you ever seen America so contentious? How did we all end up against each other?

Everything we read and see is telling us that we are divided more than ever, and we will never recover. We blame it on national leaders, irresponsible rhetoric, the media and all sorts of outside influences.

While all those forces play a role in the health of national dialogue, our daily conversations and attempts at important dialogue are controlled by us and us alone. We seem to have regressed in the art of civil discourse, but I am here to say that all is not lost.

For the better part of 2018, I have engaged in political conversation with women from all over the country and all over the political spectrum as part of a Facebook group called The Many hosted by Spaceship Media. While this might seem like a nightmare to some, I have found my experiences in the group to be refreshing and encouraging.

I've learned a few techniques that could help those heading into tough conversations with friends and family members of differing viewpoints.

- ▶ Don't go into a conversation with guns blazing. It is not your job to change anyone's mind. When you shift your objective from getting someone to join your side to working to understand their point of view, you can stop seeing every difference of opinion as a personal affront. And even if it is a personal affront, which is sometimes the case, a little grace can go a long way.
- ▶ In every two-sided conversation there is always common ground. We must look to find it and start there. We must take a step in the other person's direction, even if he or she doesn't seem interested in meeting halfway.
- ▶ A good way to start this process is to ask questions. Questions lead to answers that show nuance. Even if we can't see it, assume the nuance is there. Every person brings a unique perspective to an opinion. It is our responsibility to value that perspective.
- ▶ One of the most important aspects of a conversation is tone. An in-person conversation can lead to an argument at the slight raise of voice volume. An online discussion can go south quickly with one typo or errant use of caps lock. Be more cautious of the tone of your voice in difficult conversations. If you're sensing an angry or accusatory tone in someone else's words, ask for clarification. This is hard work. This is about more than easing tension over a Thanksgiving dinner table. It's about modeling grace and humility even when it isn't earned or reciprocated. Let's lean in to the awkwardness and discomfort. Let's invite people to disarm instead of pointing our own weapons at them.

*Rouse lives in the Birmingham area and is a conservative member of The Many who has previously aligned with the Republican party. She is a stay-at-home mom of two toddlers, and previously worked for nonprofits.*



### Our words can calm or create emotional meltdown

**Jerrilynn Finkley:** As a member of The Many Alabama, I have enjoyed the engagement with other members of the group. In places where we can reach agreement on various topics, we have.

Sometimes I have been asked by the moderators to be mindful of how I respond to some of the topics submitted by other members. At first, I immediately took offense at being admonished, it seemed, for merely stating an opinion, and I responded accordingly. I felt that as adults in this group, we should be able to voice our opinion without fear of offending anyone.

After personal reflection, I did reconsider my position and took into consideration that not every member of this group is able to engage with me so passionately. I agreed to try and be more civil towards any members who respond to my comments.

We live in a society that at times can be so politically correct and toxic at the same time.

Sometimes I feel that we have descended into an abyss of perpetual discord with one another due to the constant back-and-forth rhetoric we engage in. Being a member of this group has shown me that there are strong positions on all sides of the political, religious and societal spectrum, but that through thoughtful conversation, we can reach agreement where we can, and where we cannot, we still can respect one another.

Because the holidays can be so overwhelming and oftentimes depressing for people, I would consider these factors when opining on topics that are considered hot button issues.

Our words can be calming to one another or they can create a hostile or emotional meltdown. I have experienced being on the receiving end of demeaning vitriol on social media forums and if I were not a mentally strong individual, the comments could have certainly affected me differently.

As we approach the upcoming holidays, I would hope that I can be a part of bridging the divide among my fellow Alabamians who are members of this group. Our life experiences and how we respond may be vastly different, but in the grand scale of it all, we have more in common with each other than we actually realize.

*Finkley is a lifelong resident of Alabama who lives in Summerville. She is a Democrat and a strong advocate for affordable healthcare and housing.*



### See if you can use some of the lessons I learned

**Cherry Brown:** As we approach the holidays with family and friends, with all the excitement and happiness, it does not take long to remember all the differences involved. Politics, religion, child rearing, you name it!

Everyone has their opinions, and it does not always make for a happy, relaxing visit. As my husband has sometimes suggested, don't go! But that's not feasible either. One of the things God teaches us in the Bible is to prefer one another — that is, put the other person before yourself, whether spouse, child, family, stranger or political opposites.

Being a member of Spaceship Media's The Many — a culturally diverse, multi-faceted and opinionated group of women has been like one long "holiday" since I joined in January. From liberal to conservative, each woman has an opinion and is not afraid to share it, just like your Uncle John at Thanksgiving.

The difference being that in this gathering, you need to back it up with facts, not just feelings. That's the hard part for me!

I read a lot, but I can't always cite where I have read what I quote in the group. Being conservative is suspect enough, so moving into a discussion with just my feelings and convictions can be tough.

In the spirit of togetherness and harmony, and practicing preference for others during the holidays, here are some of the lessons I have learned as part of The Many:

- ▶ Be aware going into your gathering that as you are dedicated to your beliefs and convictions, so is your family member. You will not change minds in a heated discussion. If a discussion ensues, attempt to back your opinion with solid facts and be able to cite them.
- ▶ Screaming is not productive.
- ▶ For goodness' sake, don't call the other person names!
- ▶ Understand that having a discussion with differences can be a good thing. It will either open possibilities you had not thought of, or it will cement the convictions you have.

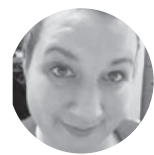
These are a few of the things I have learned having a heated discussion with liberals.

Is there a deep divide in our country, as well as families? Yes, but that should not deter us from being able to work together.

Just as we try and treat each lady with respect in The Many, we should treat our families with respect even more. So be sure to "prefer" that family member you don't agree with, and have a happier holiday.

And remember at least your vote will cancel out Uncle John's. Good times.

*Brown, originally from Mobile but now living in the Birmingham area, is a conservative member of The Many. She is a mother, wife, and self-described Bible believer and lover of people.*



### Darkest, brightest parts of me brought out

**Kristeena Bernard:** When I was contacted to join The Many, I was intrigued by the idea of focused discussions that were intended to showcase the bias of women from different walks of life. I was flattered and relieved.

My friends and family were weary of political discourse after 2016, they either agreed with me wholeheartedly or we didn't discuss such matters in order to preserve our relationship.

I lost both friends and family along the way, and I embraced the idea of a safe haven for political discourse where disagreements could be had and we could move onto other topics after we found common ground.

But I was wrong. These strangers brought out the darkest and the brightest parts of me. I was longing for calm discussions but found that I, myself, was not always capable of remaining calm.

I learned my limits, then acknowledge that limits are often waylaid by the reckless need to be recognized as the "right" side in a discussion.

I also learned that common ground may never be found among some personalities.

It is certainly humbling to see and accept that one's own positions may be harder to defend than realized and when pushed, logic can often give way to emotional pitfalls like despair, anger and fear, and sometimes, that's OK.

Humans are emotional creatures, passion is so much better than apathy.

Overall, this was a wonderful experience and I learned a lot from this social experiment. I learned as much about myself as others in the group, and my discussions here were certainly a growth experience.

I would do it again if I had half a chance.

*Bernard is an unabashed progressive liberal in The Many, and feels that her atheism lends unique perspectives to the group. Newly married, Kristeena is also an animal lover and devoted volunteer.*

## Kavanaugh debacle cost Dems the Senate

**Marc A. Thiessen** *Special to the Washington Post*

Brett Kavanaugh must have been smiling as the returns came in on Election Day, because it is now clear that the Democrats' campaign to destroy him will go down as a massive blunder.

It failed to keep Kavanaugh off the court. It cost Democrats their chance to regain control of the Senate. And it gave Republicans an expanded Senate majority that will allow them to confirm an even more conservative justice next time around.

Today, Kavanaugh sits on the Supreme Court hearing cases. Meanwhile, Democratic Sens. Heidi Heitkamp, North Dakota, Joe Donnelly, Indiana, and Claire McCaskill, Montana, are packing up their Senate offices — thrown out by voters furious over their party's brutal campaign of character assassination against Kavanaugh.

Sen. Joe Manchin, West Virginia, was the only Democrat who voted for Kavanaugh, and he survived — but just barely.

Two weeks before Election Day, Manchin was leading by double digits, but on Tuesday night he won by just over three points. Had he voted against Kavanaugh's confirmation, he would likely have been toast as well.

The Democrats' smear campaign also cost them the chance to pick up GOP seats.

In Tennessee, Rep. Marsha Blackburn was trailing former Democratic governor Phil Bredesen by five points in a CNN poll before the Kavanaugh hearings.

She ended up winning by just under 11 points, as the Democrats' mistreatment of Kavanaugh united Tennessee Republicans behind her.

The Kavanaugh smear no doubt also played a role in energizing GOP voters in Texas, where Sen. Ted Cruz defeated Rep. Beto O'Rourke by just 2.6 points in one of the reddest states in the union.

None of that might have been possible had it not been for the Democrats' horrific treatment of Kavanaugh.

As Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell put it, the failed effort to stop Kavanaugh was "like an adrenaline shot" for the GOP base.

Republican voters were outraged to see a good man accused, without a shred of corroboration, of sexually assaulting a teenage girl, exposing himself to a college classmate and participating in gang rapes in high school.

They were disgusted by Senate Democrats' insistence that the burden was on Kavanaugh to prove he didn't do it and by Democrats' blatant disregard for the presumption of innocence.

They were energized by Kavanaugh's willingness to fight back and declare his treatment by Democrats a "national disgrace." And they punished the perpetrators of that disgrace at the polls.

Now Republicans have not only an expanded Senate majority but also a pro-life majority. Reports indicated that Trump was close to nominating Judge Amy Coney Barrett, a devout Catholic and mother of seven, to replace retiring Justice Anthony Kennedy.

Barrett became a folk hero among religious conservatives after Diane Feinstein, California, ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, grilled her over her Catholic faith during her confirmation hearings as a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit last year. "The dogma lives loudly within you," Feinstein told Barrett, suggesting that her faith disqualified her.

That outraged conservatives, who rightly castigated Feinstein for applying an unconstitutional religious test on Trump's nominee.

As Harvard Law School professor Noah Feldman explained, Feinstein "insinuated an anti-Catholic stereotype that goes back at least 150 years in the U.S. — that Catholics are unable to separate church and state because they place their religious allegiances before their oath to the Constitution."

Barrett was confirmed for the Circuit Court. But when it came to the Supreme Court, Trump calculated that with a razor thin-GOP majority he needed what was supposed to be a safer pick and went with Kavanaugh instead. Now, with an expanded, pro-life Senate majority, Trump no longer has to worry about losing a few GOP votes next time around.

At every stage of recent Supreme Court fights, Democrats have miscalculated.

Their mindless decision to filibuster Neil Gorsuch paved the way for Senate Republicans to get rid of the filibuster for Supreme Court nominees — which made it possible to confirm Kavanaugh by simple majority.

And if Barrett ever makes it onto the Supreme Court, Democrats can thank their horrific, defamatory treatment of Kavanaugh.

The lesson for Democrats should be clear: Character assassination does not pay. Quite the opposite, it backfired — big-time.



**President Donald Trump gathers with Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh in the Justices' Conference Room before an investiture ceremony at the Supreme Court in Washington. From left are, Associate Justices Neil Gorsuch, Sonia Sotomayor, Stephen Breyer, Clarence Thomas, Chief Justice John Roberts Jr., President Donald Trump, first lady Melania Trump, Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh, Ashley Kavanaugh, and Associate Justices Samuel Alito, Jr. and Elena Kagan. Fred Schilling, Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States**