

Transcript of “Conversion Via Twitter” featuring Megan Phelps-Roper and Brittan Heller -- October 22, 2019

OK, I think we're going to get started. My name's Chris Bavitz. I know a lot of you-- I'm one of the faculty co-directors at Berkman Klein. We are so excited about today's event, which I'll talk about in one second. A couple of quick housekeeping things. We livestream and record these events. And I mention that just because if you ask a question later on, you should be aware of that.

The second thing is you should ask a question later on. Megan and Brittan are going to talk for a bit, and then we're going to turn it over to you. And my colleague Rubin and/or I or others will run these microphones around the room so we can hear what you all are saying. Feel free to ask questions.

A couple of other just housekeeping items. We have a bunch of events coming up at Berkman, including, tomorrow, Israeli Justice Hanan Melcer is going to be talking with Yochai Benkler and Niva Elkin-Koren about protecting elections from online manipulation and cyber threats, the experience of Israel's 2019 elections. That will be here in Wasserstein, in Room 2012. And check out the Berkman Center website for other events coming up.

And I'm going to quickly just turn it over. I'll just say by way of introduction, sometimes at Berkman Klein we work for months and months to finally craft and hone events and pick amazing speakers and come up with ways of presenting the information that are new and interesting. And this was a case where our good friend, Brittan Heller, who's counsel at Foley Hoag, reached out and said, I'm going to come with Megan, and Megan is going to talk about her new book, and I'm going to ask her questions.

And I said, OK, great, done. So this is going to be great. Megan is going to read a little bit from her book, and then we'll turn it over to Brittan to have the conversation and then to all of you to ask some questions. So with that, Megan Phelps-Roper and Brittan Heller. Thanks.

Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you so much for that, Chris, and thanks everyone for being here. I grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church, which was started by my grandfather, and consists primarily of my extended family. When I was five, the church started an intense and prolonged ministry of protesting gay people and everyone outside of our church every single day. And though that ministry continues today, I am no longer part of it. I grew up an ardent believer in everything that my family taught, but 10 years ago, things began to change.

Right now, I'm just going to read for about 10 minutes from chapter five. In this part of the book, I'm introducing the beginnings of my doubts about the church, which came from conversations

that I was having with people on Twitter. Over time, these people started to become like friends to me, and in one case, maybe more than friends.

The only thing he ever lied to me about was his age.

Is this working? Can I also pull this up? Is this better?

Oh, that's a lot better.

OK, sorry about that.

The only thing he ever lied to me about was his age. Since we were living in the golden era of catfishing, it occurred to me that this was nothing short of a true miracle. I wasn't even sure it counted as a lie, either, since the number he gave me without context, age 38, was his age when we first met. It was February 2011, and my church's website, godhatesfags.com, had just been taken over by the hacker collective known as Anonymous, which replaced our gospel preaching with a mocking message.

The takeover happened live on a popular web show during a joint interview with a hacker and my mother, defiant even in the face of ostensible defeat, and the video spread rapidly, garnering half a million views in 12 hours, and featured on YouTube's home page. We responded predictably, my aunt Margie penning a provocative press release that I immediately posted to Twitter, along with our challenge to Anonymous-- bring it, cowards.

Westboro and Anonymous are each notorious in their own right, and with the added spectacle of a mid-interview hack, the story was irresistible. The drama was reported by major news outlets across the country, which is how my name and photo ended up in the RSS feed of a man living in a tiny town in eastern South Dakota.

The first tweet he sent me must have been crude, because my response included a warning to get your head out of the gutter. His message was lost to me almost instantly, though, one among a deluge. With the advice and consent of my mother, I had become Westboro's voice on Twitter 18 months earlier, and had found great success at getting attention for our message. For years, my proximity to my mother had thrust me into the logistical work that powered Westboro's picketing engine.

Combined with my boundless energy and enthusiasm for our beliefs, that proximity had also given me a high-profile public voice that others of my peers lacked. Reporters would come to interview my mother as our de facto spokesperson, and then turn to me with questions about the perspective of the Phelps grandchildren, the first Westboro generation to have grown up on the picket line.

I believed our doctrines to be the very definition of goodness and righteousness, not tedious or burdensome, and I loved them with all the fervor my mother had been modeling since I was a child. Though I was always afraid I wasn't sufficiently articulate to speak for the church, I never let that stop me from stepping up to the plate. And the more I spoke, the more I learned how to

speak. I was ever eager to fulfill my duty, both to exhort and to convince the [INAUDIBLE] with sound doctrine. And that trend had continued into the social media age.

Thanks to our rising profile after the Supreme Court oral arguments, I was now receiving sometimes hundreds of tweets a day, and posting dozens more of my own. Although we protested at Twitter's San Francisco headquarters, I'd come to love the platform dearly, a place for me to spread our message in a way that didn't require the distorting lens of a journalist, who just couldn't seem to get it, no matter how much effort I spent trying to explain.

I discovered I was far more effective at pleading our cause directly to the people on Twitter, absent the influence of Bible-ignorant hacks who wielded professional cameras and microphones. After two decades on the picket line, I was 25 years old, and a skilled defender of Westboro and its many controversial doctrines. This random guy was just an anonymous face in the crowd, asking the same questions I'd answered hundreds of thousands of times before. God hates fags, not I hate fags, I clarified for him. We love them more than anyone.

Less than two weeks after the Anonymous attack, the Supreme Court published its opinion in *Snyder v. Phelps*, and the media circus surrounding the church ramped up 100-fold. God had worked in the hearts of the justices, and we had prevailed against our adversaries. Had the Snyder lawsuit succeeded, we knew that the much-vaunted American right to freedom of speech would have become little more than window dressing.

If one person can label another's opinions on public issues offensive, and then sue the speaker for millions of dollars in damages, what protection does the First Amendment offer? By that logic, a member of the KKK could sue a black protester for protesting a Klan meeting while promoting the offensive belief that racism is a societal evil.

The Snyder lawsuit had to fail because, as Chief Justice John Roberts wrote for the majority, Westboro believes that America is morally flawed. Many Americans might feel the same about Westboro. Westboro's funeral picketing is certainly hurtful, and its contribution to public discourse may be negligible, but Westboro addressed matters of public import on public property in a peaceful manner, in full compliance with the guidance of local officials. The speech was indeed planned to coincide with Matthew Snyder's funeral, but did not itself disrupt that funeral, and Westboro's choice to conduct its picketing at that time and place did not alter the nature of its speech.

Speech is powerful. It can stir people to action, move them to tears of both joy and sorrow, and, as it did here, inflict great pain. On the facts before us, we cannot react to that pain by punishing the speaker. As a nation, we have chosen a different course-- to protect even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate. That choice requires that we shield Westboro from tort liability for its picketing in this case.

Emboldened by our success, we announced that we would quadruple our protests of soldiers' funerals. In the days and weeks that followed, I was more active on social media than ever before or since, so thankful to be one of God's representatives on Earth, and utterly exultant that he had put a megaphone to the mouth of our tiny church.

I used Twitter to bait celebrities with anti-gay messages, to publicly celebrate Japan's Fukushima nuclear disaster, and to debate the merits of the Snyder case with anyone who would listen. Whether I was cooking dinner, sitting on an airplane, or standing at a protest holding two signs in one hand and my iPhone in the other, I spent every spare moment I could find answering thousands of users, whether they were curious, angry, confused, or mocking. And in the midst of it all, him.

Over the weeks, I started to notice his name and photo each time they appeared among the flood of messages I was receiving, though neither gave me any hint to who he could be. His name was Formerly Known As, his profile picture that iconic image of Robert Redford as Jay Gatsby, leaning against the yellow convertible. I studiously ignored the spike in my heart rate and the dopamine rush I experienced whenever I saw them.

So many of those who messaged me were enraged, understandably so, given that we were disposed to celebrating the deaths of children and blaming their parents for the tragedies that took them. And while he was certainly perplexed by our doctrines, anger had no part in his response after that first tweet.

Instead, he lurked, his infrequent questions belying the fact that he was reading each and every word I posted. His careful attention was intimidating and intoxicating, and all the more so as a figure of him started to form in my mind-- exceptionally witty, quietly dignified, deeply curious, and above all, respectful and kind.

The thoughts he shared were never what I anticipated-- reverent praise of my grammar, critiques of the font used on our picket signs, and literary and film recommendations as diverse as Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Gilead* and the comedy blockbuster *The Hangover*. Apart from his typical questions about the church, he was all over the board, and never where I expected.

I relished confounding his expectations, too. Like many others, he'd arrived at my Twitter under the impression that my church was filled with hillbillies and rednecks, an assumption I was only too happy to dispel. Upon my trumpeting of our Supreme Court victory, he learned that my family is full of lawyers, and I learned that it was a profession he shared, another piece of the puzzle that I meticulously filed away.

He was shocked to find that my grandfather had been honored by the NAACP for his civil rights work in Kansas. Still anonymous, he wrote this message to a researcher who was looking into the ways Westboro used Twitter. "I became aware of Westboro via Anonymous. I immediately sent Megan a nasty tweet. She responded in a charming way. I was charmed. I Wiki'ed Westboro, which led me to Wiki Fred Phelps. I learned that he, like me, was a lawyer. I learned that he was a civil rights pioneer in Kansas, which was contrary to what I expected. I studied more.

During that study, Westboro won a Supreme Court decision I didn't realize was pending. Whether you love them or hate them, or think they're good or evil, you can't deny that it's a fascinating, complex American story. If Megan hadn't sent a witty, charming response to a nasty

tweet from me, I wouldn't know the first thing about Westboro, and I wouldn't have written this to you. That's the power of Twitter. That's influence. That's the power of an [INAUDIBLE]."

Witty, he said. Charming. I found myself blushing at his compliments, but failed to recognize the deeper import of what he was saying. It was only much later that I noticed the pattern, that the dynamic he described had played itself out repeatedly during my time on Twitter. Among many others, it happened with a friendly college student in Canada, a sassy startup employee in Chicago, a hilarious Australian guy who tweeted political jokes, even an American soldier to whom I'd sent a care package in Afghanistan.

At the time, I had been vaguely aware of the changes that communication on Twitter was working in me, but it was only in hindsight that its effects became clear. The 140-character limit caused me to drastically cut back on my use of insults, which Westboro members made a habit of stringing together in long alliterative lists. Bombastic, blowhard, big mouth, bimbo, bastard. Bush was usually at the end of that.

Not only was there no space for insults in tweets, there was also an almost immediate feedback loop. Unlike with email, I could watch a Twitter conversation derail in real time whenever I included personally disparaging language. The exchange would swiftly devolve from a theological debate to a playground quarrel. It became clear to me that causing offense with needless ad hominem attacks did nothing to communicate our core message, and I learned to avoid it.

Hostile tweeters became almost like a game to me, and I delighted in learning to use humor, pop culture, and self-deprecation to diffuse and disarm antagonism, to change the nature of the conversation and convey our message in a way that outsiders could better hear it. The tongue might be a fire, I was learning, but it didn't always have to be. Somewhere along the line, my anonymous lawyer bragged about his Words with Friends prowess, and I impulsively responded with my username in a hashtag. Two days later, he started a match with me, and the game began in earnest.

[APPLAUSE]

So thank you for sharing that. I want to make sure people can hear me here. Great. So what happens next? You should get the book outside there to learn about Megan's whole journey, but how did you end up from somebody playing Words with Friends 10 years ago, being the de facto spokesperson for Westboro Baptist Church, to someone--

Sitting here.

--sitting here with me?

So those conversations I was having with the man that I eventually married, he was, again, part of this group of people, these individuals who found ways of kindly and effectively challenging my beliefs at Westboro. There were two aspects of it. So there was the kind of logical-- you know, I mentioned my family is full of lawyers. And they are extremely analytical and very

intelligent. And you know, given the premises, like if you go along with the two foundational beliefs of Westboro, which is that the Bible is the literal and infallible word of God, and that they have the only true interpretation of it, everything else follows. Or so it seemed to me, until I got on Twitter.

There were these few internal inconsistencies in our beliefs. Like if you had made arguments that didn't go along with those two premises, I couldn't have heard them. I just dismissed them out of hand. I had Bible verses ready to explain why any argument outside of that was wrong. But those internal inconsistencies, that was the initial wedge that allowed me to see that we could be wrong, that there might be other appropriate ways of seeing things.

So there was the rational side of it, and then there was the emotional side, which Chad was part of the-- like, his arguments, because he wasn't particularly well versed in theology, like he didn't know a lot about the Bible, I'm constantly giving him Bible verses. And he would say, like-- he would go look at those verses, like I see this is in the Bible, but he would kind of force me to look at the emotional impact of what we were doing at Westboro.

Specifically, for him, the thing that he always kept coming back to was the funeral protests. And we would have these signs that said things like pray for more dead soldiers and pray for more dead kids. You know, this was, for us-- you know, we had found these passages in the Old Testament, and we were going-- you know, we thought we had to go along with that. And Chad kept forcing me-- Chad, among others, kept forcing me to think about the actual impact. I had learned to dismiss that impact. I had learned to dismiss people's feelings as, you know, if you had a feeling that went against the Bible, then literally God hates your feelings. That became one of our picket signs.

Also, another part of the emotional aspect of it was community. So I was talking to an anthropologist last year, and she defined shame as the feeling that we get when we know that we have violated the norms of our community. Westboro had been my only community my whole life. I always distrusted outsiders. Even though we went to public school, you know, I always knew to keep people at arm's length.

And there was something about Twitter, like the fact that it was like-- I felt safe there, right, because the communication was very limited, you know, to these 140-character tweets. I was kind of unaware. I didn't sense any danger in interacting with people there. And over time, though, I started to feel like I was becoming part of this community of people on Twitter.

So I would see when something bad happened at Westboro, like some-- when Amy Winehouse died, for instance, you know, they're calling her a whore and a drug addict, and they're celebrating, and they're announcing that they're going to protest her funeral, things like that. Meanwhile, on Twitter, you know, and with these conversations with Chad, I'm seeing how other people are responding. And these are people that I have now come to know, right? Come to build rapport with over time. And I started to feel ashamed.

So before Twitter, I never felt ashamed. I always felt very proud of what I was doing. So I would say, like, all of those things were major contributors to my eventual realization that, you know,

this-- I came to this question of, oh my god, what if we're just people? What if this isn't this divine institution, you know, ordained and led by God himself? What if we're just human beings trying to figure things out? We think the answer is in the Bible. What if they're not? And that was this really destabilizing moment. And from then until the day that I left was about four months.

And then when I left-- I mean, I don't know if you want me to keep going here.

You want her to keep going?

So when I left, I was still-- I was extremely lost. Like, when you leave Westboro, you are immediately cut off from everyone. And the church is almost entirely my extended family. So it's started by my grandfather. He had 13 children. Nine of his children had stayed. And so it was them there, and then their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. So when you leave, yeah, it's just-- and again, they were-- that was my whole life. Like, it's not just going to church on Sundays or protesting every day. You know, you're doing everything together.

It was my-- you know, I did a lot of work for the church, you know, organizing the picketing operation. So when I left, obviously there's this enormous vacuum in my life. And I had come to realize that I had done all these extremely hurtful things to so many people for so long. And I thought I had to run away forever, basically, like that there was no way to publicly acknowledge any of this and that nobody would be willing to give me a second chance.

And almost immediately, I encountered people who helped me see things differently. And one of them was the guy who actually made that very first point on Twitter, the one who found that very first contradiction. It's this guy named David [INAUDIBLE], who ran a blog called Jewlicious. And he invited my sister-- I have a younger sister who left with me-- he invited my sister and me to come to the Jewlicious festival that I had protested three years earlier, and had been these like super acrimonious pickets. Like, we were standing out on these public sidewalks and, you know, these counter protesters were coming and surrounding us, and hitting us. And the Long Beach police were, like, watching it all and laughing and encouraging it. It had been-- again, it was just really awful.

And my first instinct, like I wanted to go and, you know, to learn about Jewish people, right? We had all these ideas, all these things that we'd been told about outsiders, and I felt like it was important to now go and actually talk to these people. Like, who are they really? What do they actually believe? And not just this like caricature in my head.

And so I said we could come. And then he said, OK, but you have to talk about this. And I was like, not a chance. And my sister was like, we're going. And if this is what it takes-- she said later that she knew that I would do most of the talking, and so-- like, and it was a really amazing experience, for so many reasons. Yes, the experience of talking about it, and to be looking out into this crowd of people, many of whom had been at those counter protests, you know, three years earlier-- and you know, I'm like-- for a while during that talk, like, I couldn't look at people. I felt like-- it just-- I don't know, it was absolutely terrifying.

And then, you know, when we get to the part where we're talking about leaving, and my sister and I are both just weeping, and to look up and see these people weeping along with us, and realizing, you know, that-- their ability to empathize with us in spite of all of the extremely hurtful things we had done, that gave me hope. You know, the idea that people would allow us to move on from this, to become-- and to allow us to change our ways, and to evolve and to become different people. I don't know, it gave me hope.

And there was so much more about that trip. Like, David is one of the people who-- I mean, he was obviously instrumental in my leaving the church, but he was also instrumental in helping me realize that there was something I could do, right? So he's also the one who taught my sister and me about this concept in Judaism called tikkun olam, which means to repair the world, right? He said, you and your family have added to the brokenness in the world, and you have a duty to do what you can to try to repair some of it. And then to encourage us to talk about it.

And yeah, anyway, so there was-- so that was kind of the beginning of this period of where constantly reaching out to these communities that I had targeted at Westboro and, you know, issuing this public apology, and basically saying, like, we're so sorry for the harm that we caused. Like, that wasn't the intent. Like, we had been raised to believe this was what it meant to love your neighbor. And anyway, so it was just this whole, like, trying to rebuild a worldview from scratch, essentially. And it was incredibly overwhelming and liberating. And anyway, it's definitely been a trip.

I like to think about anger as being an emotional response to a perceived injustice. So if you think about when you feel anger rising in your chest, what is the intellectual response to that? That is an imbalance or an unjust thing that you are perceiving, and then the emotional response to that is anger.

Right.

Do you think that that's why people were able to empathize?

You mean because they could recognize the origin? Like that it wasn't intentional? Or what do you mean?

Maybe because you and your sister going there and issuing the explanation and the apology resolved that injustice for people who had felt it initially.

Yeah, and I think also the realization that it had come from-- you know, I was very tempted at the very beginning of this, you know, unraveling process, like I definitely felt anger. It definitely felt like how are these my two options? It is either to lose my family and everything in my life, right? So it was my lifelong home, my job, my community, everything that I had built in my life. And now looking back and realizing that I have dedicated 20 some years of my life to this thing, and that I now believe was completely destructive and awful. Or, to stay and get to keep all of those things, and have to do things-- you know, to continue doing these terrible things.

And there was, again, a moment where I felt like blaming the people who had taught me these things. And then I realized almost immediately that they also were indoctrinated the same way that I was. Protesting didn't start until I was five, but all of the doctrine-- protesting was just the natural next step for these doctrines that they had been all taught from the time that they were children. And then so who were they taught that by? My grandfather, who started the church.

And what was he doing? He was-- like, the doctrines that Westboro believes-- I mean, obviously the funeral protesting is kind of their own unique take on some of these doctrines, but the actual beliefs themselves used to be mainstream in many parts of the English-speaking world or, you know, Europe. And so anyway, I think for the people who we were talking to, like for them to realize that this was not something that was like some inherent hatred that we felt that we were trying to inflict pain on other people. And I think understanding that was a big part of why they were willing to, again, let us move on from it.

So it seems like a lot of people, if you read the book, comment on something that I'd like to call authenticity, on your authenticity in particular, where basically it seemed like you noticed that there was a difference between your public persona and your private persona, and the way that you operated worked to bridge the two. You hear a lot of talk about authenticity in online spaces that's being really privileged by platforms and built into the DNA of their business model. How would you define having an authentic persona, given the fact that people do have these two aspects to their offline and online personalities?

I'm not exactly-- can you [INAUDIBLE]?

[INAUDIBLE]

So you talked about having different communication styles in public and in private.

Right.

In the church and on Twitter.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, OK, I see what you mean now.

What insights do you think come from blending the two?

Right. So one of the things for me about getting on Twitter was realizing that the communication style that we used was primarily to get attention, right? So the protesting started-- you know, originally it was protesting a local park, just this park that was half a mile from the church. We were trying to get local attention to clean up this park that was known as like a meeting place for gay men.

And so it was, you know, these-- you have these small signs, and you're trying to get people who are driving by to read them. And so we end up having like three to five words on the picket sign. And again, we would use the most provocative form, version of our message possible to get attention.

And when I got on Twitter, you know, obviously 140 characters isn't that much more than the three to five words on the picket sign, but it was enough for me to realize that that communication style-- like obviously if we were just talking to somebody, we would use more words and kind of elucidate more. And we could still be provocative, but that wasn't like the main goal was not provocation. The provocation was just for attention. And realizing that that was something that was not communicating our message, it was something that was just putting people off.

And actually, we would say, well, this is-- like the simplest form, like America is doomed or something, right? Or you know, again, those extremely awful-- we don't need any more examples of the awfulness of the signs, but it was the most extreme version of them. And we would say that this is the simplest version, but you can oversimplify something to the point of, again, especially if it's provocative, a provocative idea, such that it is actually obfuscating the message. And that's what was happening in our case. And it took me getting on Twitter for me to realize this is not something that-- this is not communicating what-- there's so much noise in this communication.

And so I think this is also partly what, you know, once I started to kind of soften that language, obviously the ideas were still there, and a lot of the ideas were still really offensive even when you communicate them less provocatively, but that kind of-- you know, it made the communication such that I think that was what allowed people to recognize that I was sincere, that I was well-intentioned, that I thought it was the right thing. And so that was why they were able to kind of step back enough and to like not be provoked by the provocative ideas, because they could see the sincerity, if that makes sense.

Yeah.

So I think that's a huge part of-- I mean, authenticity, I guess, is another way of saying that. You know, I gave this Ted Talk a couple of years ago about how to communicate with people that you deeply disagree with, especially on these like, you know, something-- ideas and values that you hold very dearly. And the first one of those four points is to not assume bad intent.

Like for me, that was the first thing that-- because like if you're looking at somebody saying something terrible or doing something destructive, you know, we assume that they're doing this on purpose. They must know that this is wrong, and they're doing it anyway. And that kind of immediately puts up this really strong barrier between you and them, and it kind of makes it very difficult to understand what they actually believe is behind their actions. And it stops us from seeing that. So anyways, authenticity, definitely.

I know you're good friends with Sarah Silverman, right?

Yes.

She has some really good examples of how she engages with people on Twitter that I think mirror yours pretty well.

Yeah.

Could you share the example about what she does, and kind of how you and she have interacted?

Yeah, I think one of her-- I mean, the first thing that comes to mind is this-- I can't remember what the guy said to her. It was just some really mean comment.

I think he called her a cunt.

Oh yeah, is that what it is? That might be it. But she went and looked at his page. Like, so she sees that, right? So again, that first step, don't assume bad intent. So she went and looked at his page, and found out that he was suffering from some health problems and was in a lot of physical pain. And she-- I mean, again, you can look at that.

You know how we, like, snap at people when we're hungry or something, we're tired? Like, it's that ability to look at the something bad that someone is doing, and to see that there are a lot of things that probably are contributing to this, and it's not just because this is a stupid or hurtful person. And she raised money for him to get his medical expenses or whatever.

Like, that's amazing. And that is such a-- like, again, the thrust of, again, those four points that I talked about in my Ted Talk, the essence of that, I realized at the very end of the process, was love your enemies. It is such a powerful idea that the things-- again, when you feel upset and frustrated and offended, it's really difficult to step back enough to see the other person as they are.

All you're seeing is the offense. And recognizing them as a three-dimensional human being and being able to empathize with that, it's really difficult to do in the moment unless it's like-- I feel like it's a skill that you have to cultivate. But it is so much more effective at changing things, right? At changing the dynamic, at teaching the other person not to be that way, rather than punishing them for being that way. You know what I mean? And ultimately, I think the latter-- like if you can connect with that person, if you can, again, find a way of seeing them as a whole human, then you stop them from doing this to other people, right?

It's way more effective than trying to shame or punish them. Like, people tried to do that to me, completely understandably, for 20 years before I got on Twitter. And it wasn't until people were able to see me as I was, as an indoctrinated person, and to help me find my way out of it. And so now I'm not out there protesting funerals and singing and dancing as people are mourning, you know? We're not creating more victims. I don't know. Anyway.

You do.

Thanks. Yeah, I guess I do.

So I really like the way you talk about Twitter. And you promote the aspects of technology that build bridges between people.

Right.

A lot of the work that you and I have talked about previously have been we've talked about a restorative justice type framework for social media and other types of online communication as a cure to polarization. Are there specific things that you think might work when people are talking to people they disagree with online?

You mean like what we can do individually?

Yeah.

I hate to keep talking about my Ted Talk, but I really think those are the four-- and I would actually say there are five aspects of that. The fifth point, there was a fifth point that I would have included that there wasn't time for. Generally, those five points. So the not assuming bad intent, asking questions, because it's a signaling to the other person that they're being heard. And that kind of almost seems to, for most people, almost immediately starts to make them curious, too, about your view of things, right?

The third was to stay calm, which is very difficult to do when they're very charged conversations. But it can be really powerful, right? Because to not feed into the provocation of the other person, and to be able to step back long enough not to do that instinctively, again, just changes the dynamic of the conversation.

Four was to make the argument, right, because it's one of those things, it's kind of counterintuitive that the things we believe most strongly, they seem so obvious to us that we sometimes don't even bother to make the arguments for them because we feel like any decent person would have already come to the same conclusion that we have, and how could they possibly not believe differently? So being able to actually defend your position, and to articulate it in a way that the other person can actually hear it, considering where they're coming from. This is also partly why you're asking those questions.

And then the fifth point that I would have included is to be patient because, especially when these are deeply held values and beliefs, you know, people don't change their mind in an instant. So even when, you know, David, Jewlicious, made that first point, my initial response wasn't, oh my god, you're right, I've got to leave.

Like, it took about a year and a half, actually, for me to really come to the conclusion that, oh my god, it's not just this one contradiction that he pointed out, the problem is so much bigger than that. But there's no question in my mind that the unraveling process began in that moment. But if he had just kind of-- well, anyways, we don't have to keep talking about that, but that's huge.

I think also, you know, being deliberate about following people, consuming content from people who believe differently than we do, but who we can respect as intelligent, well-intentioned. Like, even if you have come to different conclusions, being able-- in other words, like regularly being exposed to ideas that you think-- you know, like that kind of thing is, I think, important, because we talk all the time about echo chambers and bubbles and things like that. And I'm sure there are

things that tech companies can do, but we can also do something by deliberately exposing ourselves to those things, and to having those conversations with people.

So I understand you recently became a mother.

Yes.

Congratulations. I wanted to see how becoming a parent has influenced your views.

So my daughter just turned one. Sylvie, she's the best.

She is the best.

She has a little curly ginger faux hawk. She took her first steps a few days ago. It was very cool. I've thought so much about-- like, as soon as I got pregnant, I started thinking about my mom all the time and the kind of mother she was, and what parts of my upbringing-- because like, as many bad things, you know, I think really destructional relational habits that I learned at Westboro, there was so much good, too.

And so trying to figure out how to disentangle when everything was so consumed by this ideology. So even the good things came from that ideology. So it's definitely been like a confusing process. But you know, it's been really healing to me, too, to realize-- so one of the things David said early on when we left was he said, you are your parents' children.

And I was like, how can you say that? We completely betrayed-- this was right after we left, so like I just felt like we had completely betrayed everything and everyone we had ever loved. And he said, in a way, leaving Westboro Baptist Church was the most Westboro Baptist Church thing you could've done. Like, they're the ones who taught you to stand up for what you believe in no matter what it cost you. They just never imagined you'd be standing up to them.

And so that was like the first realization I had that there was a lot of this that we could keep. You know, that in a way, we could honor our parents by living these values that they had taught us. Obviously not in the way that they had intended, but yeah. That was really wonderful. Just as for me becoming a mother has been-- like, I have to think all the time that I'm not raising her to be my daughter. I'm not raising her to grow up and live in the house next door and live the life that I think she should live.

I have to raise her to stand on her own two feet and make her own decisions and decide what kind of life she wants to live. And that is such a different method of raising a child than I experienced at Westboro. And so it's I feel like something that I'm going to have to keep being very deliberate about, you know, making the right moves to let her become that, you know?

My final question for you before we open it up to everyone else is what's the one piece of advice you would give yourself at 25.

Think about how you know what you think you know. I don't know if 25-year-old me would, in that moment, probably would just kind of brush that off, but I think it would be something that would have made me think.

All right, I'm sure people have tons of questions for Megan. So I think Rubin has the microphone, and he's going to help us facilitate this.

Sounds like you spent several months sort of gradually drifting away from Westboro's ideas system, but there must have been a sudden breakpoint at the end of that, rather than just sort of continuing to drift away, because basically, you know, there's life before and life after. What was that breakpoint? Was it a tweet? Was it something else?

It was-- so you're right, there was this period. It was about a little over a year where I was considering all these ideas, right? And so the doubts are kind of growing and growing and growing. And it was just this thinking. I was painting in the basement, in a friend's basement with my sister, and I'm just thinking about it as I'm, you know, paintbrush moving up and down the wall.

And that question, it's like it all of a sudden hit me, like, the only way to make sense, it was like just extreme cognitive dissonance, right, because the things that are piling up where this clearly isn't scriptural, this isn't biblical, so those things are piling up, and then the main belief that I have is that Westboro is the place where God meets with his people. And so, again, it finally hits me that, you know, the only way to make sense of this is for this belief to give, for the idea that we are this divine institution. That is the thing that's wrong.

And you know, it was-- I write about this in the book, like it's amazing to me looking back, that-- so when that finally breaks, and it's like everything seems to be unraveling at once, I mean, I have these, again, realizations, these specific things that were wrong. And then all of sudden it hits me like, oh my god, what else were we wrong about? And then it was like this series of memories flashed through my mind.

And it was clearly things-- I mean, again, looking back, it's so fascinating to me that it took that question for-- it was like this-- as if they had been buried deliberately in my mind, these thoughts and these questions and these doubts that had arisen at various points in my life. And I just had never-- I just instinctively quashed them or something. So I write about this in the book, like exactly what all of those things were. And--

[INAUDIBLE] same time?

So she was painting the wall behind me. So as this is going through my mind and I am just a total wreck, I feel like the world is ending, right, because again, it was my whole life. And as soon as it occurred to me that, oh my god, this isn't the place, I literally mid-stroke turned to put the paintbrush down and walk out and just go pack and leave that instant. And when I turned, I saw my sister painting the opposite wall and realized, you know-- we talked about so many of these doubts, and I couldn't leave without talking to her.

And then I had this thought, because she was kind of-- like, she's very artistic and creative. And that was kind of seen as a little bit rebellious, you know? Whereas I had always been this very zealous church member, very obedient, you know? And then I thought, like, oh my god, what if she's thought about leaving and was afraid to talk to me because I was that way?

And so yeah, so that's what made me go to her. And that wasn't true. She hadn't thought about leaving. And it was a really terrifying prospect, because with all good intentions, she would have turned me in, right, to turn me over to the elders for what I came to see as re-education.

And so the fact that she didn't immediately tell on me-- I was still terrified. There was, again, those four months between when I had this painting experience and until the day I left. Anytime, she could have gone and turned me in, which was, again, absolutely terrifying, because you-- anyways, there's this whole section of the book, like I read the audiobook last month, and I cried so many times because that period, like the prospect of leaving and thinking about it, it just felt like everyone was dying, and like the world actually was ending. And so yeah, it's absolutely terrifying experience, but it's all extremely detailed in the book.

Hi. I'm Susan, and I'm a Baptist minister. And it's been tough, I think, in my career to constantly have people wonder which kind of Baptist I am, and growing up knowing about your church and always feeling like the division between my progressive Baptist experience and the fundamentalist experience. And you all were at an event that I was at. I don't know if you were there. But I had my child in a stroller. And I pulled up to you, and I was coming to a gathering about queer and gay and trans folks in the Baptist church. And never did I know that you all were coming, but also how much rhetoric around abortion there would be. And I had had an abortion. I had never talked about it at that point.

Here I was pulling up to this thing, seeing all these, you know, you know-- you know. And I guess I'm just curious, like I haven't read your book yet, but I just am so curious about, like, how are you like actually like living out the restorative justice of the reparations? Or like how are you doing this? Because like, that has hurt me for my entire life, and it's hurt my son for his entire life. And it's just-- I know it's not your fault. I don't blame you. It's just sort of like I don't know what to do with it, and I don't know how to, like, hold you accountable, you know, around how you're living your life.

So I mean, I don't talk a lot about-- like, I do financially contribute to a lot of organizations related to people specifically that we targeted. You know, the military, the LGBTQ community, and others. I spent a lot of time volunteering with organizations. So my 12 month away from home was spent in Montreal volunteering at the Jewish Federation and places like that, which, you know, other big targets of the church.

I try to use these experiences-- you know, obviously we created so many victims. And I am one person, and I do what I can. I'm drawing a-- you know, one of the things, you know, the law enforcement, I work with law enforcement. And you know, dealing with hate crimes and extremism and de-radicalisation and counterterrorism. You know, I have tried to do everything that I can every opportunity that I've had since I left to put myself in communication with people that we used to target.

I've tried not to thrust myself on people. So people will ask, like, have I reached out, for instance, to the specific families that we targeted at the church, especially whose funerals we protested. And my answer to that is no because I'm not-- I feel like we took that day and we made that about ourselves, and I'm not about to go now and put myself and make those days and those people and those experiences about my need for forgiveness.

But again, anytime someone reaches out to me, I do everything that I can. I got a message recently from a gay man who, you know, when Westboro was at the peak of its notoriety, was a teenager struggling with his sexuality. And you know, he said that he would consume, compulsively consume Westboro content as a form of self-harm, and that, you know, hearing me speak and reading my book and seeing me dismantle these arguments, you know, now, for these ideas that I used to defend so vigorously, has been a closure for him. And I've talked to-- I've had so many of these kind of full-circle moments with people, individuals and groups that I used to, you know, obviously, say and do all kinds of terrible things to.

But I know there are so many more. I mean, I'm constantly coming into contact with those people. And again, I had thought that the only way of dealing with this was to hide from it because there was just too many people. And I still feel, you know, that obviously there's still so much more that I can and should do. And I will.

But my husband pointed out the other day that I've now spent almost as many years outside of the church, of my adult years, as I did inside the church. And I don't see it that-- I mean, it was an interesting fact, but I don't see it as being like, oh, once I've spent eight years doing what I'm doing now versus what I did at the church, it's not like it just balances out that way. Because again, there are just so many people that we affected.

And so yeah, I mean, I'm just going to keep doing what I can. I'm really sorry. I'm really sorry that we did that to you. I used to-- I mentioned we just dismissed everyone's feelings. And it definitely took time for me to come to realize the practical effect and the lasting effect that we had on so many people. It's something that we still-- sorry, I'll shut up in just a second, but I was just talking to-- so Westboro tries to pretend like we don't exist for the most part, but anytime an ex member does something that gets a lot of attention, it's almost like they feel like they have to respond in order to co-opt it to be redirected to be about their message.

And so yesterday, there was a woman we had protested her brother's funeral. He was a veteran. And she asked me about an apology. Like, I wonder if-- I haven't read the book yet, but I wonder if there is an apology in here for people like us that you really hurt. And I talked to her. You know, we had a conversation. And then my uncle saw this and starts doing what Westboro does.

And I started, you know, very carefully parsing his argument and showing him, even from his own position, even from a biblical position-- I'm not a believer anymore, but even from a biblical position, what they've done is very wrong. And they have come to acknowledge some of those things as being wrong, specifically the celebrations of death, this kind of spiteful joy that they showed. And he speaks in these generalities about how, yes, these things are wrong, but not a this is a woman asking you for an apology for the thing that you know, you have come to acknowledge is wrong. What exactly is the thing that's stopping you from doing this?

And so, you know, again, this is one other way, I should say, of the making amends thing. Like obviously, all of the people, you know, the young people in the church who are still leaving, you know, trying to help them find their way, and to-- but part of it is also trying to reach Westboro. And at the end of the book, I do talk about certain things that have changed, at least partly as a result of the arguments that I've been making to them since I left. It's all back to this idea of wanting to stop making more victims. That's absolutely a part of it, too.

So I was really interested in the indoctrination process because I, like you, I'm a Christian, I'm a person of faith, but the theology that I've been taught has been one of love and liberation, and one in which we see the humanity in others. And my absolute disgust at watching your church, your former church, over the years, and how they have taken what should be so beautiful, something that we can offer to the world, and made it something that's made people so sad. I'm just interested to what was the psychological process that made you feel so right in your position?

So with my family, we read the Bible every day. We had Bible study every night. We spent a lot of time memorizing Bible verses. There was always a Bible passage. Everything. If you could show me that something was in the Bible, I would absolutely go along with it. And so for us, that was all it was. Like, they would talk about world events in light of Westboro's understanding of the Bible.

And again, because of the fact that a lot of their views were mainstream-- so I remember, and I read about this in the book, 9/11, my instinctive reaction, having grown up on the picket line with the modeling of the older people, my grandfather and my mother and others, it was always to celebrate those things. And so my instinctive reaction was to say awesome when I heard what had happened. I was 15 at the time.

And then a couple days after 9/11, my grandfather gave a sermon. And in the sermon, he references how the Puritans of old England responded to the great plague and the great fire. So it had totally ravaged the city and killed some-- I can't remember how many thousands of people. And I am listening to that sermon, and all of a sudden it hits me, like, oh my god. I always felt like Westboro was kind of an island, you know, existing out of time, and I'd never-- like, Westboro calls-- Gramps used to say that we were the lone bastion of truth in this insane orgy of fag lies. That's how he put it. So it was just this-- they really see themselves as the only righteous people.

And so for him to be referencing like the Puritans, so like I went and looked up these-- you know, found this really popular Puritan minister. And his rhetoric, obviously slightly old English at that point or whatever, but everything about it was what we believed. And so, you know, it was this-- the realization that it just gave me that much more confidence in my grandfather and in the church, the fact that we had this claim to, you know, this righteous past. Right?

It was not that it was unthinking, it was that it was uncritical, I would say. I was constantly asking questions. And as long as there was a biblical root to all of those things, that was fine with me. They totally revere the Bible. Sorry, what now?

[INAUDIBLE]

Right. So I should say--

[INAUDIBLE]

We didn't, right? It was that when love thy neighbor first appears in the Bible, it's in Leviticus 19, verses 17 and 18. And it says, thou shalt not hate thy neighbor in thine heart, but thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor and not suffer his sin upon him. Thou shalt not avenge nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

So my grandfather would quote that passage, and he would say clearly what it means to love your neighbor is to rebuke them when you see them sinning. Because it says, right, thou shalt not hate thy neighbor in thine heart, but thou shalt in any wise rebuke him. Right? So it's this idea that you see people sinning against God and doing the things that he hates, and that in doing so, they are bringing the curses of God on themselves, and that ultimately, if they don't repent, they will also spend eternity in hell, you know, where Jesus says where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched.

And so you understand the stakes are so high that if the only chance that people have to repent is if you go and warn them, you tell them they have to obey, God says I set before you this day a blessing and a curse, a blessing if you obey me, and a curse if you won't. So Westboro sees it as this, you know, they have to be out there warning people. It's like they always compare it to you see somebody, you know, like a blind person wandering into the street, like you know that something bad is going to happen to him if you don't warn him, and that it's a hateful thing not to warn them.

So it's just that they have reframed-- I mean, you know, that's their framing of what it means to love. And so that's one of those things that, for me, it's a hopeful thing that they are motivated by good intentions, because it's something that, if we can find a way to reframe those things, like what does it mean to be loving-- and I think there is an answer to that.

So this was something that-- I did not know this. I didn't recognize this until after I left. But the parable of the Good Samaritan, the story of the Good Samaritan, that was in response to Jesus saying-- the question posed to Jesus about, and who is my neighbor? You say we're supposed to love our neighbor. Who is my neighbor?

And he tells the story where the priest and the Levite see the man who had fallen among thieves and was beaten half to death and left to die. The priest and Levite see him, and people who ostensibly are tending to the things of God, they see the man in need and walk across the street and, you know, pass by on the other side. And then the Samaritan sees him and helps him practically.

They did not do what my family does, which is to go and say, this happened to you because you're a sinner, repent. That's the example of my family. That's the priest and the Levite seeing him in need and not helping. And so this is another one of the arguments I've been making to

them since I left, that the answer is, instead of going to places like-- you know, talking about Hurricane Katrina and saying this is a curse from God, it's go and help those people practically. You know?

Anyway, there are scriptural arguments to be made against the things that they do, but it was absolutely motivated by what they understand to be biblical principles. It's not something that they made up.

[INAUDIBLE]

Oh, no, no, it's just constantly talking about and reading the Bible and memorizing it. And it's not like a-- I was going to say it's not like some kind of sorcery or something. It is just this extreme, like, this is the only way of viewing this, right? It's ideology that you marinate in all the time. Does that make sense?

Hi. I'm Jesse. I'm from Kansas, lived in Topeka, and grew up in a military family. So I've driven by your former church quite a bit on 12th and Gage, right around there.

Right.

It looks like an absolute fortress set aside a little neighborhood.

Right.

And so I was just wondering, what do you think is the future of Westboro itself? And on a broader level, what do you see as sort of the future potential of Twitter to de-radicalize and to radicalize, and how that balance will go, and how we can perhaps shift it?

Yeah. So I think Westboro-- it's hard to say. I mean, I don't think it's going to like cease to exist, but I do think two things will happen that will continue to kind of diminish their voice in the world. It has been, I think, diminished for a few reasons. One, the young people are-- you know, every year, basically every year, one or two young people leave the church. Two-- which obviously gives them fewer vehicles to spread this message.

Two is the moderating. So I mentioned the church has been moderated the past several years. And I think there's absolutely still room for that to continue to happen. And this is, again, partly the arguments that I make to them. The third is that society has become so much more polarized and tribalistic and there's so much more hatefulness that Westboro, they're not like-- they just don't have as much voice in the middle of all that because people are already distracted by all the other hateful things that they're saying, which is not a positive thing at all, obviously.

And then your other question about Twitter, so I guess-- I don't know the answer. I think it will continue to moderate, and I think that they'll never have the same kind of voice they had when I was there, like towards the end of the time there. Twitter, it's one of those things, like-- I think extremist groups use online spaces to recruit people. It's like, we need to be recruiting people back, you know what I mean?

Like, we look at people in these groups, I mean, it seems so often as being, like, hopeless. And the instinct is to isolate them. And I think that's, in my own experience, that's not the answer. It is to try to reach these people, too, to articulate and defend the principles. Like, why have we as a society rejected these ideas? Why do we reject racism and sexism? And to just be willing to reach out to those people. And yeah, I mean, because your question was actually just how can we use those things, those platforms?

[INAUDIBLE] what do you see as the future of it? Whether it has [INAUDIBLE]?

Yeah, well I think it goes both ways. It is, you know, who-- it seems like, you know, people in these groups, they are very motivated to reach people. And it seems like there's a kind of, again, from the mainstream, there is more of a sense of hopelessness and apathy toward those people. And that's one of the things about extremist groups that we could learn something from. Like, we should be as passionate about our ideas and about spreading them and about reaching people so they do not fall victim to those ways of thinking.

You know, the epigraph of the book is this line from *The Great Gatsby* that I read it again-- I don't know, shortly-- in the year or so before I left the church. I get to this line towards the beginning, and it immediately resonated with me. Says reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. And it's funny, I can't quite remember what I was thinking at the time. I think it was because that was how Chad, who I was communicating with at the time, how he seemed to see people, as like there being hope for people. Like, that the person that-- somebody who's doing something destructive, like that there is hope for change, that I don't need to judge them now as, like, this is hopelessly who you will be forever.

And I think the more we can see people that way, the more likely we are to-- one, to even be willing to reach out to them, and two, to actually find ways of changing their hearts and minds. I think there's a lot of potential. Anywhere humans gather, any way that we can communicate, there is a push/pull, right? It can go either direction. And so using our experiences and our words to influence other people in a better way. I think, you know, we are our brother's keeper. That's kind of how I see it now.

And I think if you look at the way that product policy is developing, especially on Twitter, but on some of the other more popular platforms for young people, like Instagram, they're actually building in some of the lessons that you've said, along with some insights that social psychologists have. So some of the new features on Instagram, for example, if you write something that the AI sees matches with potentially abusive language, it will actually stop and ask you to think about it, and then ask, do you wish to proceed. And about 80% of the time, people will choose to not proceed with that type of language.

Twitter's been really good, as well. But I think one of the fundamental challenges, which you and I talk about a lot, is how to scale compassion. How do you operationalize tolerance and listening to people? And so that may be what the next technological challenge, is when we're looking at the way the Twitter worked for you, how can we make that work for more people in more contexts?

We have our last question, down at this end of the room.

My name's [INAUDIBLE]. I'm from Germany, and I study regulation of online platforms. And I'm glad to hear about the experience that you had with Twitter, but from my experience, while I would perhaps engage hateful views of a person in a one-on-one conversation, I wouldn't necessarily do so on Twitter. And I think the difference would be that there's an audience.

If you will, the difference between a discussion and a debate. And my impression is that a lot of people who use platforms like Twitter as a recruiting tool are not actually there to learn or to deepen their own understanding of their own position, but to speak to an audience, and that engaging with that can actually give a platform to hateful views. So I just wanted to hear your thoughts about that.

So David, he initially said, because he didn't see initially that I was sincere, he first was really hostile to me. But he thought it was important to engage because of the audience, because it is by you are giving the audience and arguing back. So you're right, I wasn't there to learn. In fact, Westboro would say, we have nothing to learn from these people. That's how we viewed outsiders. I was there, I thought we had the truth of God, and I was there to spread that message.

David thought it was important because of the audience to be articulating and defending better ideas. And so I guess this is just the marketplace of ideas, right? The fact is I did have a platform, right? I already was there talking. Him being there to counter those ideas and to show anybody who was watching this is why we reject these beliefs, this is why these are better ideas, better principles, you know, it's just one of those things that, again, you don't want to amplify, like needlessly amplify people's messages, but there is something to learn from people who are-- there is a reason, there is value in showing people why we as a society have rejected those ideas, because people come to bad ideas in all sorts of ways. Some people, like me, are taught them from a very young age. Some people find them in books. Some people argue themselves into bad ideas.

And so we want to-- it needs to be part of our language, our public language, why not-- why this, why not that. Right? And so, again, this is why I think it is valuable. Like, you obviously want to do it in a way that doesn't amplify those messages as much as possible, or-- so for instance, I've written a book, right? There's a lot of stuff in there explaining exactly what Westboro believes.

So in some sense, that is giving them a platform. However, I never talk about their ideas without also talking about why I rejected them, why I think they're wrong. And as that gentleman that I was mentioning earlier, the gay man who was a teenager, like dismantling those ideas from the outside is extremely valuable, I think, for public discussion as a whole, and for people who might be tempted to fall into those ideas.

When you look at the mechanics of online radicalization, most of the time you'll see there's a personal component to it. Nobody becomes radicalized by just seeing content on Twitter writ large. When you look at people who join groups that tend to promote violence or have violence as part of their tenets, they will all talk about the same thing, how it will start in a public forum

and then move on to a private type of a chat. Sometimes this takes place on video game platforms, sometimes it goes into DMs, sometimes it goes into Words with Friends, right?

Yep.

And like I was saying to you before, that's part of the challenge, where you can't change people's minds by telling them that they're wrong. You have to change people's minds, even in online forums, by showing them that there's another way.

I think we'll have to leave it there. Please join me in thanking Megan and Brittan. And as Megan alluded to, there are books at the table right outside. So if you're interested in the book, you can get one out there. Thanks so much.