

# *The Space Between Us*

*By Sarah Bauer Anderson*

## **Introduction**

There's a line from the Jewish Talmud that says, "*If the house has fallen, woe to the windows.*" It's the idea that we are part of a connected collective. That we do not operate independently from one another. That "the fate of each is bound up in the whole."

It's a simple enough idea, but I suspect you and I might agree we aren't doing a very good job *living* as if this is true. We live deeply fragmented and divided lives in times where our politics, party, religion, denomination, and theology are revered and almost idolized above everything else. We hold to them so tightly that we are willing to justify all kinds of bad behavior to elevate our way of thinking, believing, and voting for the sake of self-preservation and self-elevation.

And in the meantime, this collective "house" we live in—our shared experience, shared space, shared culture—is growing weaker. Its foundation is deteriorating, and its roof is caving. We have become so single minded in promoting our own that we've compromised the integrity, goodness, and strength of the whole: the whole of our country, the whole of our faith, and the whole of the humanity we live alongside.

It's become difficult to watch the news.

Social media is often a dumpster fire.

Conversations, debates, and free exchanges of ideas have become tense, if they happen at all. On a lot of days, it doesn't look good.

But I haven't given up hope.

Don't get me wrong. There are days where, for me, the news channels stay off and social media stays closed. But it's not every day. And in fact, I refuse to believe we have gotten to the point of no return. Since you're reading this book, I suspect you might feel the same way.

And that's why what follows is for us. *All* of us who aren't quite ready to throw in the towel.

It's for the people who haven't lost faith in the house. Who have their feelings, and opinions, and ideas about the windows, but are trying not to lose sight of the bigger picture. It's for people who believe there is a better way. It's for the people who know the windows matter, but so does the house. And because the house is in poor shape, it's for the people who are asking the question, "How are we going to make it right? To fix what feels like a rapidly worsening situation? As followers of Jesus, what is our responsibility?"

I can't promise to have all of the answers in the pages that follow. I can't really promise to have most of the answers. But I can promise to share what I learned growing up outside the Nation's Capital as the daughter of a former Republican Presidential candidate and what I've experienced as an adult living inside the Bible Belt working in the church world. What you'll find is what I've come to believe is the best way forward—an alternative to the visceral times we live in.

## **Saving the house starts, I believe, with asking a different question.**

We've been asking, "How do I get others to change their minds, see as I do, come to my side and be like me?" But what if instead, we started asking, "**How can we begin to close the space between us?**"

What if instead of trying to make us the same, we got better at understanding and appreciating where we are different? What if we learned to practice compassion in our differences instead of judgment? I know, it seems

simplistic. And I know it's certainly more complicated than that. But I'm not convinced it doesn't *start* there. So, *why not* start there?

I've never been mistaken for an optimist. (I don't know many natives of Washington DC who are.) But these days, I'm as close as I've ever been. Because we've never been more poised for great change than right now. Because we've never felt the need for a different way more than we have right now. Because the time is ripe for something new. For a way to cross the widening space between us. And I think one of the most divisive people in all of history—Jesus—may offer us the best insight into how we go about doing just this.

## ***Chapter 1*** ***Connection vs. Distance***

*“Come, gentlemen, I hope we shall drink down all unkindness.”* Shakespeare

*“On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.”* Isaiah 25:6 NIV

It's a tradition, my dad says. In the early years of my parents' marriage, every weekend that my mom and dad would leave Washington DC to visit my mom's parents in Lancaster, Pennsylvania—after navigating the rush hour traffic outside the city, after the lengthening gaps between houses—they would pull into the driveway and find my grandfather waiting. He'd be standing just inside the door with a tray in his hands, two gold-rimmed tumbler glasses with mallard ducks on the side filled with freshly made Old Fashioneds on it, ready to be passed off.

It became a sort of thing between my dad and his father-in-law. The exhausting escape my parents made from the nation's hub and the welcoming invitation of a cold drink and a warmly lit house just a few hours later in eastern Pennsylvania.

That was more than 40 years ago, but the tradition remains. (For my Southern Baptist friends, I'll give you a minute to let this idea of a family cocktail hour settle in.) These days, my dad's the one who serves up the drinks when my husband, Rodney, and I turn down the street for a visit with our two kids. We've moved from Old Fashioneds to Manhattans. And the trip for us is from Atlanta to DC. Since our trip also involves two small children, the Manhattans are desired starting at about hour three of the ten-hour drive—preferably in IV form. It's one of my favorite things about coming home. Still. And I don't even like Manhattans all that much. (I'm more of a gin and tonic girl myself.)

We don't have a drinking problem.

You should know that up front. I'd be worried too if the first thing I learned about a family was their cocktail preference. It's just that, in our family, when these drinks are passed around, they symbolize something.

That no matter the literal or metaphorical distance between us, closeness is possible.

That connection with one another is achievable and valued over anything else.

That whatever baggage we brought with us—literally or metaphorically—can be left at the door.

That shared stories bind us together more than shared beliefs, on both the big things and the small things.

**That no matter how much we may disagree when it comes to just about anything else, when the drink tray is passed around, we know our company with one another matters more.**

I know, *it's just a drink*. But sometimes, this drink is what facilitates our defenses coming down, our ties to one another being strengthened, and our differences being put in perspective.

And we have some (okay, a *lot* of) differences.

**We are a family of politicians and pastors.** That's the main problem. Because every one of us has made a livelihood out of the two most emotionally charged topics out there. The two areas most responsible for fractured friendships and strained relationships.

This wouldn't be a big deal if we all landed on the same page on every issue politically and religiously, *but we don't*. It would be nice if we were quiet about our opinions when around one another, *but we aren't*. We *know* we don't always land on the same page with our beliefs and our voting records, *but we still like each other in spite of it*.

And not because we ignore our differences. Politics and religion make up our livelihood. We *have* to talk about it. And honestly? We like it that way. We relish the conversations both politics and religion bring about. We thrive off of them and linger longer at the table dissecting and philosophizing over them. We debate, and contradict, and argue varying positions. Sometimes it gets uncomfortable. But we don't stop doing it; it's as much a part of our family culture as the Manhattans.

It's who we are. It's the way we've always been. Disputing, discussing, deliberating. We can't escape them because they are in our DNA.

## **An American Fairytale...Or Something Like It**

My parents were a match made in GOP heaven. Both had harbored dreams of living in DC and participating in local politics since their teenage years and ended up moving to Washington in the late '60s—my dad to attend Georgetown Law School, my mom to intern for her local congressman the summer following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Two months later, when Bobby Kennedy was shot and killed in his run for the White House, my mom and her sister joined the thousands who lined the streets of Washington as his body was brought to be laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery.

Washington was where my parents' political fairytale began. They met working for the Republican National Committee in 1970 and went out on their first date after my mom lost a bet to my dad. Her losing meant she had to clean his apartment (which looked exactly how you might imagine a bachelor pad to look). As she tells it, she arrived at his place, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, a mop and a bucket full of cleaning supplies in hand, her jaw set, determined to uphold her end of the deal, only to have my dad open the door to let her in...and see himself out. Apparently, he had had somewhere else to be.

When he arrived back at the apartment several hours later than it should reasonably take to clean an apartment, she was still there, stubbornly finishing up the job she said she would do. He felt so bad for her he treated her to dinner afterwards. The rest is history.

Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, eight years after my parents got married. And the eight years of Reagan's two-term presidency that followed were commonly known as the start of the conservative glory years (at least in our house). Every Republican of a certain age (which my parents were) looks back on those days fondly. My dad had been a fan of Reagan's long before he was even elected into office. He remembers being a senior in high school, watching Reagan give a speech and looking at his dad, a blue collar worker who never graduated high school himself, and saying, "One day, he's going to be president, and I'm going to work for him." And my dad did. He

started working for Reagan's campaign for \$1 an hour, and eventually he worked his way up to serving as Under Secretary of Education at the Department of Education and then Chief Domestic Policy Advisor to the President.

It became clear the political blood had been passed down from my parents' generation to my own when my younger brother, as a colicky and fussy baby, would only stop crying if we sang to him, "You're A Grand Old Flag." I have memories of my baby brother strapped into the "jolly jumper" in the doorway to our kitchen as my mom made dinner while I tried to calm him with patriotic songs and a Big Bird hand puppet.

On long car trips, while other families played Mad Libs or the license plate game, we listened to the *Wee Sing America* tape, learning every verse to "Yankee Doodle Dandy" and "America the Beautiful" in the 12 hours it took to drive from Northern Virginia to Newport, Kentucky to visit my dad's parents.

And then there were my birthday parties. As luck would have it, I shared a birthday month with the United States herself. It would only be right to capitalize on this serendipitous connection. My most memorable American themed birthday party (that's right, there was more than one) was the, "Come dressed as your favorite character in American history!" party. I was Martha Washington and somehow convinced my best friend to come as George—which included her wearing high-waisted pants and baby powdering her hair. That anyone showed up dressed to match the theme is no small feat, given Amazon Prime didn't exist yet. I can't speak for anyone else at the party, but to me, it was perfection.

Even better, I was able to get a second wear out of my Martha Washington costume from that year's party. Every girl's dream, right? On September 17, 1987, I voluntarily came to school dressed up as Martha to celebrate the bicentennial of the signing of the United States Constitution. The school had not made it a dress up day. *I just took the liberty to do it myself.* Everyone else was dressed in normal '80s fashion, Umbro shorts and acid wash denim, while I was channeling the 18<sup>th</sup> century, making sure this historic, but often overlooked date, was properly celebrated.

In the summers, my family would attend barbecues at the lake houses of the Washington elite. Here the usually buttoned-up and professional political analysts were seen walking around in chinos, gingham, and carrying plates full of baked beans and coleslaw. It was a bit like seeing your teacher out in public. You assumed the talking heads on TV were real human beings, but seeing them out in real life was jarring—like the time we got caught in a conversation with Democratic commentator James Carville, who was animatedly talking with a piece of corn on the cob stuck in between his front teeth. It showed more humanity than I was prepared to handle.

My family's ties to the Washington political culture didn't seem weird at the time; they just *were*. It wasn't unusual to take messages for my dad from TV political personalities who called the house to see if he could give a sound bite on whatever the pressing issue of the day was. In an old Bible somewhere in my childhood bedroom at my parent's house, I have a phone number for Britt Hume—former White House correspondent for ABC and current political commentator—because I couldn't find a pad of paper fast enough, so the Holy Scripture would have to work.

Due to my dad's job in the Reagan administration and his next job heading up the Family Research Council in Washington as the political branch to the Christian conservative think tank, Focus on the Family, our political world would sometimes bleed into the religious world as well.

James Dobson, the president of Focus on the Family, and his wife Shirley would sometimes come to eat at our house (after my parents had hidden their alcohol stash from view, of course). We would all sit at the dining room table, my parents and the Dobson's telling stories and delving deep into theological discourse, interrupted only when Jim taught my brother, sister, and I how to put our hand through the flame of a candle without burning ourselves. (A surprising move for a guy who was a family psychologist, and yet unable to read the nervousness coming from my mom as she watched her three young kids playing with fire.)

And in middle school when I participated in a True Love Waits ceremony—an event students attended with their parents to sign a pledge committing to sexual purity before marriage—the whole ordeal was filmed by a television crew. The ceremony happened to take place on the same weekend my dad was being interviewed for a *60 Minutes* segment. I was a shy and self-conscious preteen, the not-so-kind adolescent years made worse when I was inspired to get my hair cut to resemble Amelia Earhart—a style choice that suggested "true love" for me might be

waiting close to forever. My not-quite-comfortable-in-my-own-skin self saw the whole experience as a bit of a nightmare, being wired for a mic and followed around by video cameras and a couple of slightly uneasy and out of place cameramen who feared they had found themselves smack dab in the middle of a purity cult.

In my time as part of a high school youth group at a Bible church in northern Virginia, I hosted a weekly prayer breakfast at our house before school where other high schoolers would show up before dawn to eat the fruits of my mom's labor of love—warm cinnamon rolls straight from the oven that she had woken up earlier than me to make for all us. I sat on our youth group's leadership team, participated in my high school's Fellowship of Christian Athletes, even though I was, in no way, an athlete, and over all felt the comfort and safety that came from being raised in a house with strong Christian values.

While my dad worked on the political front from an office in DC, my mom did her part from home, hosting Bible studies and a book group for other moms, serving as a mentor mom for a Mothers of Preschoolers group, and writing a "Washington Prayer Alert" that went out to my dad's donors keeping those outside of the beltway attuned to the inner happenings of Washington, and ways they could pray for our country's leaders. My dad would travel a fair bit in those years, giving speeches around the country, and though my mom loved the excitement and rush of the political world where she worked until the 1980's, she then chose to be a stay at home mom holding down the fort, never losing her zest for the issues of the day, but channeling her energy into us kids under her roof. In 1994, at a dinner one night in Washington, my mom was awarded by Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, the honor of Homemaker of the Year. It was a chance for her to receive the spotlight she deserved, the applause for *her* this time, a chance for her to be celebrated for her less prominent but no less important work.

Like I suppose is the case for many adult children, I only now appreciate all she worked to do, all she gave up and sacrificed for us as kids to have the kind of childhood we did, tabling her own desires for our sake. While my dad may have more of a traceable presence in the public eye, her work in our private life was, and is, unmatched.

By the time I graduated high school, I had become the poster child for what a teenager living in the evangelical Christian subculture looked like and wouldn't have it any other way. I decided to kiss dating goodbye with Josh Harris, found evidence that demanded a verdict with Josh McDowell, and was challenged in passion and purity with Elisabeth Elliot. The nights not spent lying awake wondering over my eternal fate after reading *Left Behind*, I worried about spiritual warfare, thanks to Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*.

*That* was my normal—my family's normal in life just outside the Beltway, as tried and true Republicans and Evangelicals. These were the political and religious experiences that shaped who I would ultimately become. Due to my childhood, escaping politics and religion was never in the cards. It's always been a part of who I am.

## **An Unexpected Detour**

But then, things changed for me. A lot. Or, I should say, my mind began to change. I met and befriended people with different faith backgrounds. I started listening more to peers who didn't vote a straight Republican ticket—and they didn't *seem* misled or crazy. I started to see expressions of Christianity that were decidedly *not* Evangelical, and though different and unfamiliar, they were refreshing. I engaged with a world different from the only one I had ever known and found it more interesting and less scary, more nuanced and less definitive, than I ever expected. As my world got bigger, as my experiences with people different from me accumulated, the way I had seen certain issues and ideas began to shift. What had once seen obvious to me in terms of policies and theologies no longer did.

I left the political bubble of DC for good after graduating college and relocated to the Bible Belt, and in the years that followed, the shift continued, in a veering away from the familial beliefs I inherited. And that complicated things.

Every one of us in my family has kept the passion and conviction we were known for, but it has started manifesting itself in differing ideas and positions. It can no longer be assumed that when a topic like immigration, marriage equality or gun control comes up, we will end up landing on the same page. Actually, these days, I can be sure we won't. And let's just say my current voting record is more checkered than my straight Republican upbringing would

suggest is possible. In other words, my family has ended up more dissimilar in some ways than we ever thought we would in the big areas of both politics and faith.

And that can be complex.

Maybe disappointing if you are the parent. Maybe frustrating if you are the kid.

And as a result, I've learned that one of the trickiest things about becoming an adult is learning how to bring my adult self into childhood relationships, or of having to "reintroduce myself to everyone I know" as Lauryn Hill said—my family of origin in particular.

These days the need for nuance and care when discussing our dissenting positions is necessary. None of us fit into neat categories or boxes in our politics or religion, causing us to tread more carefully than ever before.

*That's* why we drink Manhattans. We don't do it to ignore what we no longer have in common or to brush over where there is discord, but rather to remember the people behind the positions and the history shared between us, even when our viewpoints differ. **We do it to keep in mind that there is something larger that keeps us together.** Not the alcohol, but the gesture of raising glasses, the telling of stories, the giving of toasts, the putting aside of disagreements for the sake of connection over the commonalities we share. That's what we've learned. Connection is worth fighting for, at all costs. And when we share the drinks and choose to sit face to face, leaning in toward one another, even when it feels easier to pull apart and back away, we're fighting for it. The divisions matter less. The not seeing eye to eye, less critical. The places of conflict, or tension, or strain, less obvious. What we have in common rises to the surface. We see it, we acknowledge it, we nourish it. In our corner of the world, in our family unit, we're figuring it out.

I don't see myself as more evolved—and my family doesn't see me as brainwashed—because some of my viewpoints have changed.

I don't see them as out of touch—and they don't see themselves as smarter—because they continue to believe the way they do.

**We aren't existing in relationship for the purpose of making each other into our own image.**

We see each other as people. Not people to change or convince. But people to understand. And honor. And respect. We aren't batting a hundred in our gatherings together. But we are doing our best. And so far, our best has been good enough.

Which is why I'm certain it's possible for you, too. Because if we've managed to find a way forward in spite of what could drive us apart, there's hope for everyone.

## **Dissent in a Family and a Nation**

I'm not naïve. I am not sure any of us have that luxury anymore. A few minutes watching the news, searching the Internet, or posting on social media will tell us we are a mess. These are complicated times we live in, and they don't seem to be getting any better. If anything, they are continuing to get worse in the animosity and rage that season our cultural discourse. Religion and politics take center stage yet are often failing to do the thing they exist to do: work for the common good, help us achieve our best selves, and construct a better world. These days they bring out the worst in us. Our current culture politically and religiously leaves many of us staring at one another in confusion and bewilderment at who we have become. People we thought we knew well are now strangers, maybe even adversaries in their relentless and sometimes vicious fighting for different positions and ideals. Even more shocking, we sometimes find ourselves behaving just as passionately—over generalizing certain types of people and stereotyping others. Relationships are at risk of falling apart completely when we realize how diametrically opposed we are. As hard as we may try to have the same kinds of conversations we once felt comfortable having, in the end we are all tired, frustrated, and maybe even more confused than ever because differing views in our politics and religion have left gaping wounds among us and created un-crossable distances between us.

And maybe worst of all, *we are starting to get used to it.*

We live on edge and in constant tension of what to say and what not to say, what to believe and what not to believe. Not just with our families, but also with our friends, and neighbors and, of course, our social media followers. Nothing is neutral. Nothing is nuanced. Fear tinges our conversations—fear of saying the wrong thing, being misunderstood, and increasing the divide. We are as polarized as ever and as extreme as ever. As my friend John says, the center has vacated. We plant our feet in what we think and believe and have an unwillingness or inability to communicate in a civil way about any of it. We are wound up tight and ready to snap over the things that

matter *and* over the things that don't. And instead of risking engagement that might go wrong, we widen the space between us by choosing silence, sticking with friends who think as we think, or totally detaching on issues that do matter and are worth talking about.

In our healthier moments we know we are part of the problem and that improvement and growth are necessary, not just in the “other” side but in us, too. Maybe in us, especially. We understand that to redeem the image of both religion and politics in the public square and our private homes, there's much work to be done by all of us—both externally and internally. And in our more optimistic moments, we believe we just might be at the place in our time and culture where we are ripe to begin the work required to make change happen.

But how do we even *begin*?

Even if it's true that now is the time for reconciliation, and civility, and respect in our fractured thinking and

opposing ideas, what do the first steps of progress even look like?

I think it's simpler than we think, but certainly not easy. In fact, I think we are where we are in this fractious era because at some point, we started believing that talking about politics and religion is uncomfortable, and uncomfortable things ought to be avoided. As a result, the muscle used to debate kindly, speak openly, and converse respectfully has atrophied. We've forgotten how. Couple that with a low tolerance for innocent misspeaking, naïve ignorance, and divergent thinking, and it's no wonder we've arrived where we have. We're the product of our own unwillingness to talk about tough topics well and our choice to “deal” with it all by avoiding it. But now what? How do we get *out* of here? How do we begin to have a civil conversation? What needs to change in our behavior and our countenance, in our posture and our positioning, to make discourse in both politics and religion possible? Not

just *possible*, but *healthy*?

I know. It seems harder than ever. I know we live in as divided a time as any when it comes to our political expressions and religious conviction. *I get it.* My family is living it. But when a family made up of politicians and pastors

...who is divided on whether to get news from FOX or CNN,

...whose expressions of faith range from high church to mega church to reformed church and whose theological leanings are just as varied,

...who are split on whether they are more likely to attend a pro-life march or a racial solidarity march, ...who spans the spectrum of faith and political leanings,

When a family like this manages to get together and still like each other at the end of the night, I think they may be on to something.

Based on our experience, **I am absolutely convinced, against all odds, that it's possible to move toward one another when distance seems inevitable and connection feels impractical.** I believe we are capable of adopting an attitude of learning and curiosity toward the people we feel more likely to butt heads with than share meals with. I think we can figure out a way to not necessarily agree with one another but understand each other, and if not that,

at least value the humanity in one another. I think we can truly see each other and be pleasantly surprised that in our seeing and understanding, we become more capable of *knowing* and *liking*.

It seems a risky move these days to show who we really are to anyone in fear of what might be said or done to us in return. Our political positions discount us. Or our religious convictions isolate us. But I think there is much to be learned from peeling back the layers and letting people see our differences—the things we are becoming and the things we are letting go of—even at the risk of being misunderstood and underappreciated and all the while learning to show the same grace for others.

Maybe it sounds outlandish. Maybe it sounds naïve. But experiencing what I have, where I have, I wonder what a world full of people that extended this same courtesy to one another might actually look like. If we could mirror to one another the best parts of ourselves. If we could begin to voice and then practice the things we so desperately want for ourselves and those we love the most. To fit. To belong. To connect. In spite of our differences and in spite of ourselves.

To find the glimpses of grace in the gravity of our current culture.

Like when black protestors and white police officers share an embrace in times of heightened tensions between the two.

Like when churches host blood drives in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis in support of local hospitals.  
Like when neighbors sporting opposing political bumper stickers on their cars discover, against all odds, that they

actually *like* each other.

I don't think we'll solve all of the world's problems, but I'm not sure that's the point. I think a better goal is to learn to navigate the space between us civilly, and healthily, and lovingly. The space exists. That's okay. You could even argue it's good—that we *need* it. But we can do better with how we treat it.

What if instead of running from the ideas and the people who hold those ideas that aren't like our own, we moved in their direction, extending grace into the space between us?

I really believe we could change the world, or at the very least, *our* personal world. It may not fix everything, but it will start something. And I'm not even convinced we need the gold rimmed tumbler glasses with mallard ducks on the side filled with the best Manhattan you've ever had to do it. I think reconciliation is possible and change is probable even in the areas where our most deeply held ideals are different. I believe there is a way forward, and I believe we can get there together. And that's as good a reason as any to give it a try.

## WHAT NOW?

Chances are, you have specific relationships in mind where, when it comes to talking about the more divisive and controversial issues of politics and religion, you squirm a bit. We've all got them. It's important as we move toward crossing the space between us, we keep in mind all of things that make these relationships tense—*besides* the topics being addressed.

- If the tension is between you and other family members, keeping in mind patterns of conflict, shared history, and the unique pain that is family pain will be helpful.
- Determine what your goal is with the person you are experiencing conflict over politics and religion. Maybe ultimately, we would like people to change their minds and see things as we do. But since we can't really control whether someone changes their mind, we need to change our metric for success. Maybe

instead of “believe as I believe,” the goal can be to keep the emotional temperature of the conversation down. Maybe instead of “vote as I vote,” the objective can be to feel like both people were heard at the end. In other words, figure out what is in your power and take ownership and devote energy to that.

- Bring to mind the most recent conversation on a particular hot topic with this person. Take an inventory:
  - What about the conversation went well? What didn’t?
  - What did YOU do well? What could you have improved on?
  - What did the other person do well? What could they have improved on?

Above all, crossing the space between us is going to be about doing what we personally can do as we navigate tense and conflicted times. The more ownership we take in contributing to the distance, the more internal work we do in acknowledging our part, the less deflecting we do and excuses we make, the more success we will have in healing relationships that opposing ideas in politics and religion have hurt.

And if all else fails, share a Manhattan. We’ll even let you borrow our recipe. (And if alcohol makes you nervous, make yourself a Shirley Temple. Before coming of age, we indulged in more than a few of these in our family times together.)

### **Bauer Manhattan Recipe**

2 ounces Rittenhouse Rye

1/2 ounce Red Dolin Vermouth

1/2 ounce Cocchi Vermouth

Pour in a cocktail shaker with ice.

Shake, then strain into a rocks or martini glass. Garnish with a Maraschino cherry.

Find something to make a toast about, and enjoy!