TRUST ACROSS A TABLE

Sermon delivered by Elder Dardis McNamee
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Today, trust often seems in short supply: We live in a divided country, caught up in wrenching controversies over the prevalence of guns and new limits to women's autonomy, about fairness and free speech and what these terms even mean. And about who, if anyone, has the right to tell others how an American life should be lived.

Trust is a tricky thing; hard won and easily lost, it can be hard to measure, and almost impossible to prove. So it tends to make people nervous:

Trust in God, but lock your car.

As to what to believe, I side with Mark Twain: "It's not what they don't know that gets to me. It's what they know for sure that just ain't so."

There's been a lot of this going around these days, in this era of The Big Lie that is still playing out around us, as the hearings in Washington continue to make what seems to be a good-faith effort to pin down the events, actions and motivations behind the assault on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

This is no easy feat, as Mark Twain would have understood: "A lie can travel half way around the world, while the truth is putting on its shoes."

So when an American general sees a question about his belief in the peaceful transfer of power as potentially self-incriminating, it's high time we get the truth on record.

And talk about it. Over a cup of coffee, a beer, a glass of wine—and if we're lucky, a table piled high with the fruits of the field—we need to get to know each other again.

We need to find trust across a table; and on the basis of this trust, to explore the ideas that will the basis for changing our communities for the better, for rebuilding the society we want to live in.

So these are the two things I'd like to talk with you about today: rebuilding trust, and exploring ideas for change.

And it all depends on TRUST ACROSS A TABLE.

In Vienna, in my other life, this trust is often established over a glass of wine at a Kaffeehaus, a Beisl neighborhood bar, or one of the Heurigen country wine taverns that surround the city. For Austrians, wine is the national drink the way beer is for the Germans or Czechs or Slivovitz for the Poles. Hence sharing an achterl, an eighth of a liter, is often considered the best way to say, let's relax and get to know each other better. As a result, it is served at every possible occasion, including PTA meetings and the university cafeteria.

So, explained Viennese cabaret legend Gerhard Bronner, turning it down could be socially fatal: Take the case of a certain middle-level civil servant from the working class district of Ottakring, loyal to the governing coalition and his party newspaper, head of his household (at least, when his wife allows it), who takes the family to the cinema around the corner on Saturday night. He's the essence of a true Viennese…

Except for one thing: He doesn't drink wine!

In Vienna, this is unthinkable! Bronner sang, gleefully. Word gets around! I mean, a man like that could be capable of anything! It's effectively high treason!

The result, he confided, was that no one would invite the poor man over. He was closed out of the Stammtisch and the building society savings fund, the ministry has revoked his promotion and his wife was even considering divorce. Even the political parties: How can a guy like this be reliable? He must be an anarchist!

In Vienna, sharing that achterl across a table is an expression of trust, a code for a whole set of values, and at the end of the day, that what we value most is our shared humanity.

We are fortunate here in Rensselaerville to have a tradition of civic engagement, where neighbors join together in the projects and institutions that solve problems and enrich the life of the community. It's a long list, beginning with the fire department, the library, Conkling Hall, the historical society, the institute, the preserve, and of course this church.

And central to them all is THE SHARED TABLE, and often that glass of wine. We take our loaves and fishes—the real ones and the metaphorical ones—and share them with our neighbors, in gatherings where everyone is welcome and we all sense that somehow, in the transformation made possible by our openness to each other, there will always be enough.

Back in Vienna, business life, too, often takes place across a table—in a Kaffeehaus: This is an unhurried, congenial place that is neither your office nor mine, where we meet as equals across a table, and lay the foundations for trust. Here, with formal table service entirely different in tone from coffee shops in the United States, that achterl of white or red often enhances a conversation over lunch, backed up of course by a full bar, should the need arise.

Traditionally, the Viennese never wanted to make too much of the wholesomeness of the shared table: a typical Kaffeehaus menu might include a couple of sausages with mustard and horseradish, a little goulash, beef broth with a dumpling, or a slice of pound cake. Not long on veggies or tofu.

The famed chronicler of the interwar Kaffeehaus, Friedrich Torberg, was very clear on this: "*Was die Natur betrifft, genügt mir der Schnittlauch auf der Suppe.*" "When it comes to nature, I'm happy with the chives on the soup."

Which hadn't changed much by 2016 when the Vienna Social Democrats entered a governing coalition with the Green Party, and long-time Mayor Michael Häupl confessed that, actually the only green that he really liked was Austria's famed white wine, the Grüner Veltliner.

In Vienna, unlike, say Paris, Rome or Istanbul, it's actually not really about the food; it's about the conversation, the conviviality, the wit, the time spent with friends.

It is often out of this kind of fellowship that intractable problems can be approached and important new ideas are born:

This was the intention behind the first Living Room Conversations in Rensselaerville in the summer of 2019, as part of a bipartisan national initiative called American Creed, in the hope of bridging our cultural and political divisions. A valuable project cut short by the pandemic, it is still an important example of what might be possible.

In this thinking, I have found an unexpected ally in former President Ronald Reagan, who at his farewell address, Jan. 11, 1989, offered what he called "lesson #1" about America:

"All great change in America begins at the dinner table," he said. "So, tomorrow night in the kitchen, I hope the talking begins."

One of the most remarkable dinner tables I know of took place in 18th-century Paris, where a dazzling circle of intellectuals gathered every Thursday and Sunday at the home of the Baron Thiry d'Holbach for sumptuous dinners and lively discussion of the ideas we have come to know as the French Enlightenment.

These are also the ideas that became foundational to the western ethos, and most certainly to the thinking of our American Founding Fathers, such that we can hardly separate them from who we are.

But at the time, their goals were radical: to free men—and women—from what they saw as the fear and ignorance fostered by organized religion, to free people from a church that condemned desire as lust and reason as pride, and perverted empathy into meaningful suffering in the promise of an afterlife. To establish governments whose authority was derived from the consent of the governed. So there they were, in what you might describe as a haven of free speech in the ultimate safe space, debating their way through challenges to the beliefs and attitudes that had defined their societies for centuries.

Over the more than two decades of Baron d'Holbach's famed salon on rue Royale Saint-Roch, this sparkling company included a close circle of Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and David Hume, and later, among many others, Adam Smith and Benjamin Franklin. And François-Marie Arouet, whom we know as Voltaire.

What transpired between the plates of paté, pigeon and poulet rôti, was what historian Philipp Blom describes as "a moment of astonishing radicalism in European thought," that was seen as so threatening to both church and government, that it had been all but erased from history.

The Baron's salon was a haven for these philosophes, free from the watchful eyes of the royal and clerical censors. Many of the Enlightenment's leading voices faced continual threats of arrest or exile, and were often forced to extreme measures: Denis Diderot, after being imprisoned for heresy and forbidden to write philosophical works, concentrated on his great *Encyclopedie,* where the

dangerous ideas could be discussed with scholarly detachment. Baron d'Holbach wrote his *Christianity Unveiled* under a pseudonym, and escaped retribution only through connections at court.

Voltaire, after repeated brushes with the censors, fled Paris and sent his contributions from exile in Switzerland—and took care to distance himself from the most extreme positions. And Jean-Jacques Rousseau, turning against his friends, took a final revenge in his posthumous *Confessions*, which along with Voltaire's increasingly vicious attacks, severely damaged their reputations to later generations. Their writing was then ultimately suppressed by Robespierre, for whom their true society of equals, of observed knowledge, pleasure and kindness, was simply not the kind revolution he had in mind.

Part of the problem may have been that they simply had too much fun. A typical soiree chez d'Holbach unusually consisted of a reading of a new work by one of the attendees followed by discussion that would quickly fan out into politics, philosophy or history –and of course the essential glue of all social systems, gossip. Between the venison and volaille, talk flowed more freely; it helped too that the host was himself a philosopher, often more radical than many of his guests. And that he had a wine cellar renowned throughout Paris.

This was a group that David Hume christened that "wicked company," friends who treated philosophy as an active pursuit of answers to the puzzles of the human condition, not so much in a quest for unifying principles, but in the active description of the questions of living.

In the end, Diderot and d'Holbach, the most revolutionary thinkers in the group, have been largely forgotten, David Hume is honored in Britain and Rousseau and Voltaire became the first of the Lumières entombed in the Pantheon in Paris.

It seems to me that now, with the fleeting shallowness of social media—with the brief flashes of attention, petty aggressions and anonymity—TRUST ACROSS A TABLE is something we need more than ever.

The other day, someone asked after a mutual friend, if he was back in the village this summer. We didn't know, because so many of the places where we used to meet—the tavern at the Palmer House, the Hilltown Café, the Helderberg Brewery taproom—aren't there anymore.

Such places are central to the life of a community: We need a *Stammtisch*, a common table, where people can come together without an invitation. One of those low-threshold meeting places, where our shared life can unfold.

But what we do have are the annual benefits for the library, the fire department, the Huyck Preserve, the hospitality of our homes, and the community of our church luncheons—which we hope are a cut above the old Salvation Army model of obligatory prayer before the soup!

We are also blessed with a village of lovely gardens and culinary sleight of hand that makes every luncheon an event, of memorable menus that have us coming back for more.

And as with the loaves and fishes, there somehow always seems be enough to go around.