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James David Herd: Listening to understand, not to respond

By James David Herd | Managing Editor
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Karl Schmalz, the Red Co-Chair of Braver Angels' Executive Board, speaks to the audience on Thursday, Sept. 17, at the Constitution Day Fishbowl exercise.

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Last week, on Thursday, Sept. 17, to kick off Constitution Week, I took a hard pivot and went back to college.

To clarify, I attended an event on the Schreiner University campus called a "Constitution Day Fishbowl," hosted by the organization Braver Angels, which aims to bridge the political divide and "equip Americans to practice courageous citizenship across political differences through skill-building, convening and collaborative action."

Before entering Schreiner's CCAC Ballroom, I had virtually no idea what a fishbowl was, but I left with more belief in listening to understand instead of listening to respond.

I think — as a nation — we could all benefit from truly listening to each other, instead of half-listening to be heard.

In the fishbowl exercise, six Schreiner students were on stage, three on either side of a podium and a life-sized cutout of Abraham Lincoln. The students were given a topic to discuss; in this case, the discussion covered whether the decision concerning birthright citizenship in Trump v. Barbara was just or not, and they had to answer three questions concerning the topic:

1. Do you agree/disagree with the decision made in the case, and why do you agree/disagree?
2. What concerns or reservations do you have about your position?
3. Irrespective of your position, would you favor an amendment to the 14th Amendment to clarify the scope of birthright citizenship?

Four students agreed with the decision made in Trump v. Barbara, while two students disagreed. While the students took turns answering the questions at the podium, the audience was encouraged to truly listen to understand and to try to suppress that urge to respond as soon as we heard something we may or may not disagree with. I found this to be an agreeable ask, and it was easier than I thought it would be because I make an effort to listen to political debates on the regular. I never claimed to not be weird.

In the immediate aftermath of the discussion phase of the fishbowl, the host, Karl Schmalz, the Red Co-Chair of Braver Angels' Executive Board, asked the audience to group up and discuss what they learned from listening to both of the groups. I found this to be one of the most fascinating parts of the exercise because it really defined the state of political discussions and disagreements in America. Too often, we experience cutthroat debates that ultimately do nothing to bring us together; we often feel like if the opposition is unable to see things from our perspective, they must be lost causes, not worthy of our love or respect. I admit, in some cases — specifically people whose sole goal is to increase the division — this can be true. But in acknowledging that not everyone is a bad actor trying to widen the chasm intentionally, it becomes important for us to make sure we're listening to each other, especially if we disagree.

Listening to an oppositional viewpoint does not mean you have to agree with it. If you listen to an oppositional viewpoint and your first instinct is to hurl insults and doubt your opponent's intelligence, you didn't truly listen to it. If participating in the fishbowl exercise did anything for me, it allowed me to acknowledge both of these points. It reinforced my belief that the arguments we engage in online

and the ones we engage in in real life are radically different, and that extends to the personas we adopt in both environments. As we tiptoe ever closer to the midterms, the national debate stage will likely become more inflamed, but that doesn't mean we have to be. If you find yourself in a situation where you would normally disagree with something, ask yourself if you're listening to understand or if you're listening to respond; if your answer is the latter, maybe give the former a try. It may be a great decision for your own sanity and mental health.

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