



A Historical Wound He's Trying To Understand

As Jewish immigrants from the former U.S.S.R., Michael's extended family endured a history of prosecution and genocide. But he finds that his parents lack empathy toward those seeking safety and freedom in the U.S. He's having a hard time understanding where they're coming from. And an even harder time talking to them about it. An expert in negotiation and mediation has some advice for us all.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back to How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything. Hola, new listeners! I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. Today I'm talking to Michael, who struggles to understand his parents' political views. They're Jewish immigrants from the former U.S.S.R. who had family members killed during the Holocaust, so Michael cannot understand how the history of persecution and genocide his own family endured doesn't make them more sympathetic and empathetic toward people seeking freedom, safety, and prosperity in the U.S. The situation has worsened as the presidential election draws near. Let's get into it.

Michael: My name is Michael. I currently reside in San Francisco, California, with my wife and my four-year-old. In my family, we call my mom and dad ma and pa. These days, we just go by mom and dad. My family and I immigrated to the United States in 1989 from the former Soviet Union, and when I was a kid growing up in that era, in that cultural political climate, a lot of the oppression from the government and anti-Semitic behavior, I was kind of blinded to it as a child and spent most of my time just kind of living in that childhood experience. And when we moved to the States, I realized that a lot of that stuff was here, as well.

We were sitting in front of our house. At the time, we were living in a set of condos where the garages face the street, and it wasn't uncommon for people to park directly in front of the garages to open them and get inside. And perhaps my father was a little too far into the middle of the street, and I remember specifically sitting in the passenger seat, and a gentleman in a rather large truck going around us and getting angry at the fact that we were a little too far into the street and yelling something to the effect of, "Get out of the street, you Jew!" And a couple of expletives would follow.

As I remind my father of that story, he seems to not have any recollection of it, and seems very surprised that that's something that I would actually remember. There's this kind of false idealism of the American dream that my parents have been experiencing for years, and from the moment they moved here, and that's almost sort of blinded them to the realities of the injustice and the oppression that happens in this country, as well.

So, in the past, when I've tried to talk to them about these issues, the responses were sort of typical responses that you get from a lot of Trump supporters, the community that is watching the same news events of Fox News, and that was really hard for me and my sister to understand. Coming from an environment and a background where both of my grandparents experiencing prejudice and anti-Semitism, not only in the Soviet Union, but my grandparents living through World War II and having my father's entire family except for my grandfather himself pretty my perish in concentration camps, to my sister and I that was really confusing. We couldn't understand how they could separate one from the other.

What happened where they were able to make that switch, where the oppression that they were living in the old country and some of the anti-Semitism that they're still experiencing now in this country, that they couldn't connect to other people? To other minorities? People that were living through a similar experience now as immigrants. When we first moved to the United States, we moved to Orange County, California, out of all places. My mom had a distant relative, I believe it was her second cousin, who was able to get us into the country, and we stayed with him for about a year until we were able to get out on our feet and we moved into our own place at that point. And I believe because they stayed in a community that didn't have a big Russian community to begin with, didn't have a very big Jewish community, I remember my high school, there was maybe six Jewish kids.

So, I think because of that, because of that demographic, conservative Republican community, they took on a slightly different identity. And so, I think because of their struggle to start all over again, to retest, to recertify, to go to school again to become the microbiologist and the mechanical engineers that they used to be in the old country, I think for them that represented that immigrant hustle. I think that's what the American dream represented to them. Financial security, independence, the freedom to have the ability to build a life for themselves. So, I think from their perspective and to play devil's advocate, because they went through the effort in doing things the right way, they don't have the empathy for the situations where perhaps in some of these cases it's impossible to go through that route.

So, I worry a lot about the influence that their ideals now have on my child, because for one, I have married a third-generation Chinese American, so my kid is growing up mixed race. I think that's made me see the world in a completely different light. It's not just my anti-Semitic or stereotypical sort of experiences of my own culture that I can put out in the world and discuss, but now I'm living through my wife's experiences in her shoes, and now my kid is gonna experience

both. And so, I think that changes you tremendously, and I think that has a lot to do with how they see the world.

In light of everything that's happening now in the news, and the Black Lives Matter protests, and coming up on this election in November, our conversations specifically between my parents and I have gotten less and less direct about these topics. We don't really have those conversations anymore, because we just... I don't know how to approach them anymore.

Lantigua-Williams:

Michael, man. I feel you. Talking about politics, especially in our political climate, can be so, so draining. But these conversations are even more challenging and even more important right now. How can we be heard while genuinely trying to understand our loved ones' perspectives? I'm ready for some help, so I called in an expert.

Sara del Nido Budish:

My name is Sara del Nido Budish. I am Assistant Director and Clinical Instructor at the Harvard Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program at Harvard Law School, and I live right outside of Boston.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, you heard Michael's story. What did you hear?

Sara del Nido Budish:

Yeah. The level of perspective taking that Michael is really trying to engage in with his parents. You just get the sense that he feels so deeply his family's story, and the history of his family, and what his parents have been through, and I hear him really grappling with trying to make sense of their conclusions, their views on the sets of issues that he mentioned. So, that really jumped out at me.

Lantigua-Williams:

From your experience, from your practice, what are some of the key elements when one is trying to exercise this perspective taking type of engagement with someone who does not see things the way that you see them?

Sara del Nido Budish:

I think that a term that's often thrown around in my field and that I think is the right term sometimes is conflict resolution. I am not such a gigantic fan of that term, because I think that the notion of a resolution to these really challenging, complex issues, and sort of that challenge of taking someone else's perspective, I don't necessarily think that that's always the right frame. It's sort of more helpful to think about conflict engagement, like how can I engage with this person? How can I sort

of work through this conversation and grapple along with the person around these issues?

So, thinking about in advance, like what is a good outcome? What would I want to hear from the other person? That can help to sort of set your expectations about the conversation. What would success look like? I think the second thing on preparation is thinking for yourself in advance, what could throw me off in the conversation? Then it's like, "Well, how could I react differently? What is one thing that I could try or one thing that I could do to handle that moment differently?"

Lantigua-Williams:

So, being related to someone absolutely impacts how I enter into arguments, what I hope to get out of them, and even when I try to be the most present and my best self, there is this almost cellular tugging that makes you just want to shake them sometimes. So, how do you keep people like me from shaking their relatives?

Sara del Nido Budish:

I love it. The first thing I would say is that the shaking, that instinct to kind of shake the person, that shows that you care. And that, I think that's not insignificant. That's sort of a starting point, and it shows that that instinct is really coming from a place of love. It's sort of a question that we all sort of think about in these conversations. How does a loving relationship also hold conflict? Also hold disagreement?

Lantigua-Williams:

I love the way you frame that.

Sara del Nido Budish:

And I would say that those are not incompatible. In fact, we all have different instincts around conflict. Some of us are more avoidant and really shy away from conflict. Other people, other families in fact might see conflict as normal, as a sign of sort of how you engage with one another around the dinner table or whatever it is. And sometimes the other thing I would say is that it's sometimes a matter of thinking about what it would take to be more transparent about that connection.

You know, bringing that struggle, that sort of challenge into the conversation in what you actually say, so what might that sound like? I mean, if someone were to say, "You know, I love talking about these issues with you and I also find it really hard, because I love you and I really care about these issues, and I want to feel like we understand each other. And I'm just wondering what your experience with these conversations are, mom or dad. What do you think of? How do you feel about talking to me about these issues?"

Lantigua-Williams:

Tell me a little bit about how we can lower the stakes by adjusting our expectations and graduating, sort of like in a gradual way, and graduating to the point of maybe persuasion? Like ultimately, that perspective taking is about persuasion, so what are some of the in between things that I can graduate to in the process of evolving this conversation with this person?

Sara del Nido Budish:

I think that conflict evolution is a really perfect frame on what those sorts of modest goals might be and what those victories are, like what is there to celebrate at the end of a difficult conversation? You know, difficult conversations will always be difficult. It's not that we're thinking of ways to make them easy. They're just not gonna be easy. So, I think that one way to adjust your frame on the conversations is thinking about well, first, what are those places where we trip up? What are the pitfalls these conversations... You know, I've had one, or two, or five, or a hundred conversations with this family member before about this issue, or maybe other issues, and here's what generally happens.

Being aware of that pattern and taking stock of that, as a first step of sort of an awareness thing, and then for that, really thinking about ways to almost disrupt that pattern. What is a way that I can behave that will get us to different territory? And it could be really, really simple, right? So, like when my dad raises this one particular statistic that he always raises in these conversations, what I usually do is throw out my statistic. What if instead of pulling out that statistic, we ask a question? And what might that question be?

And not the kind of question... I love questions that are like, "Don't you think," questions, which really are not questions. Just because there's a question mark at the end does not actually make it a question. So, what's a question that I can ask this person that actually really does come from a place of curiosity? Even if the conversation five minutes later ends up in a really frustrating place, maybe there's a moment that was different. So, I think that that is sort of a first clue into things we can work on, so maybe it is like one small change in one conversation, and then next Thanksgiving, it's a different thing. So, I think it's sort of being understanding of yourself and forgiving of yourself and the other person on that, as well.

Lantigua-Williams:

In Michael's case, there is a historical wound. He knows that members of his family were lost, were murdered in the Holocaust, right? And I don't know after talking to him if he or anyone in that situation or a similar situation could set that aside to be in an argument like this. So, how does a person like Michael, who has this, who is very much in tune with this historical hurt, how does he use that or not to inform the way that he approaches these difficult conversations with his parents?

Sara del Nido Budish:

One thing that occurred to me when I was listening to Michael's story is that there must have been a time when his parents told him these stories of their life, and I wonder if that's sort of a point of connection for them that he can now draw back to. So, there's sort of hope. There's a lot of hope for recementing those bonds and coming back to a shared history. I think at the same time, though, one of the things that struck me was what happened in front of his garage, and the different ways in which Michael and his father remember, or not remember, that story. It was just so powerful, because Michael has carried that all these years, and it sounds like for his father, it barely registered. That, I think, is also a place to explore the difference in perspectives.

So, what if Michael were to say something like, "You know, this incident was so powerful for me, and it sounds like it was something that you've remembered or at least vividly for many years. I'm just really struck by that difference. What are your thoughts on that? How are we coming to different, sort of how are we working those into our narratives about ourselves maybe differently?" I think the one other thing that comes to mind is that Michael's a father now and that is something that he and his father at least have in common. They both are fathers. And I wonder just as there were so many ways in which Michael's parents' lives changed, and perhaps their views changed with it, Michael's views are changing, too, because of his role as a father to a mixed-race child.

So, I think that those are some potential openings for a different kind of conversation.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, last question. What are some of your go-to dos and don'ts when you are dealing with family conflict management, where there seem to be polarities?

Sara del Nido Budish:

So, I think one of them is to sort of pay attention to the pace of the conversation, so there's sort of a dynamic that can develop in these conversations that make them a little bit more like debates. There's like a point, response, point, response. And it can speed up and kind of escalate, and that can be fine, or it can be sort of harder to really kind of take stock of what's happening. So, I think silence is also a go-to strategy for me, even if it's just a pause. Like if I have something in my head that I want to say or I want to come out with, can I wait three seconds before saying that thing?

And maybe the person will share more, and maybe it'll help me to either share the thing that I want to share, or just be more thoughtful about it. Another thing is again coming back to the goals. A lot of times my goal in these conversations is to understand the other person's view, and then also feel like I am heard, as well. So, one strategy for that is to try and as much as possible repeat back what I hear the other person saying, like it sounds like the way you feel when you read about this

is XYZ. Is that right? It gives the other person an opportunity to correct you. Often they'll elaborate. Maybe they'll say, "Yes, that's right."

And then I think the other piece of that, which is important, is the sharing your own views piece. It can sometimes feel hard if all you're doing is listening in a conversation, although that's... I would never say that that's not important. That's usually important. But for everyone, and I would put potentially Michael in this category too, are you really sharing with the person the core of what you feel, as well? If you're trying to get to the bottom of where their views come from and how they've reached those conclusions, can you behave reciprocally? Can you give them the gift of sharing with them really your own thoughts and feelings that give rise to your conclusions? And that, I think, offers some hope at a deeper connection.

Lantigua-Williams:

Beautiful. That was great. Thank you so much, Sara. Thank you, thank you.

Sara del Nido Budish:

Oh, you're welcome!

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let's recap what we learned from Sara. Focus on engaging, not persuading. The first goal is to be understood and to understand others. Set modest goals. Taking the conversation in a different direction than last time, not becoming frustrated or angry, learning something new about the person, those are all worthwhile achievements on the road to persuasion. Be transparent. If a conversation is challenging for you, say so. The other person might be having a hard time too. Talking about struggle can actually lead to mutual understanding. Use silence strategically. Try not responding for a few seconds when the person says something provocative. Doing so gives you time to think through a response and leaves room for them to say a little more. Repeat back what you heard. This gives the other person a chance to correct you, to elaborate, and to hear how their words are landing.

Be generous. Open up and share vulnerably. Help others understand where you are coming from and model for them how they can show up in the conversation to help you. And remember, you can hold conflict lovingly. Disagreement and love are not mutually exclusive.

Lantigua-Williams:

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