This summer—just as saying something controversial (or not saying something mandatory) got numerous charitable leaders excoriated, several academic leaders dumped, a host of editors and writers ousted, and articles and books cancelled by angry mobs—something interesting happened. Symmetrical open letters were published by separate groups of center-left thinkers and center-right thinkers, both of them warning that free speech, personal expression, and democratic functioning are being seriously threatened right now. The center-right declaration, called the Philadelphia Statement, was published in Newsweek on August 11, and signed by people like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Charles Chaput, Robbie George, Niall Ferguson, and Christina Hoff Sommers. The center-left letter is set for October publication in Harper’s, and was released on line in July, with endorsements ranging from Noam Chomsky, Anne Applebaum, and Jonathan Haidt to Wynton Marsalis and J. K. Rowling. Following are condensations from each statement:
Philadelphia Statement on Civil Discourse

Newsweek

Freedom of expression is in crisis.... We need to be a nation in which we and our fellow citizens of many different faiths, philosophies, and persuasions can speak our minds and honor our deepest convictions without fear of punishment and retaliation....

We desire a flourishing, open marketplace of ideas, knowing that it is the fairest and most effective way to separate falsehood from truth. Accordingly, dissenting and unpopular voices—be they of the Left or the Right—must be afforded the opportunity to be heard.... Mere exposure to ideas we find offensive is not an act of "violence"....

Tragically, we are losing these defining features of our democracy. Common decency and free speech are being dismantled through the stigmatizing practice of blacklisting ideological opponents, which has taken on the conspicuous form of "hate" labeling.... Universities are imposing speech regulations to make students "safe"—not from physical harm, but from challenges to campus orthodoxy.

These policies and regulations assume that we, as citizens, are unable to think for ourselves and to make independent judgments. Instead of teaching us to engage, they foster conformism and train us to respond to intellectual challenges with one or another form of censorship....

We must be willing to trust that bad ideas will be corrected not through censorship, but through better arguments.... We must renounce ideological blacklisting and recommit ourselves to steadfastly defending freedom of speech.

A Letter on Justice and Open Debate

Harper's

Our cultural institutions are facing a moment of trial. Protests for racial and social justice are leading to overdue demands for police reform, along with wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society.... But this needed reckoning has also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity....

We speak out against the intolerant climate that has set in on all sides.

The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted.... It is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought.

More troubling still, institutional leaders, in a spirit of panicked damage control, are delivering hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms....

The result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal. We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement....

The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away.... We need to preserve the possibility of good-faith disagreement without dire professional consequences.
These simultaneous cries, arising from quite different sectors of our society, make clear the dangers we face. Rising intellectual intolerance is producing personal suffering, civil strife, and a crumbling of crucial democratic liberties. Impingements on open expression of ideas are making it harder for us to find workable responses to practical challenges.

Some philanthropists are responding. Robert Rosenkranz created the Intelligence Squared debates to reinforce our American tradition of sharp but civil arguing in search of the best solutions to problems. Funders of the anti-polarization charity Braver Angels are trying to build what they call “patriotic empathy” across our political divides. Other donors ranging from the Kettering Foundation to the Liberty Fund, from Charles Koch to Pierre Omidyar have poured resources into education, publishing, and discussion supporting democratic tolerance and collaboration. But these efforts now sail into fierce cultural headwinds.

Alas, rising orthodoxy and resistance to hearing opposing points of view has become a serious problem within the philanthropic world itself. One leader who has recognized this is Larry Kramer of the Hewlett Foundation. He has created both new grantmaking initiatives and new staff procedures within his organization to encourage intellectual humility, more ideological balance, and habits of listening with empathy. The following condensation is adapted by the editors from Kramer’s October 2019 address to The Philanthropy Roundtable.

**Practical Steps Toward Healthier Listening**

*Larry Kramer  
President of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation*

Before moving into philanthropy, I was a Constitutional historian, and my main interest was in the conditions necessary for popular government to exist. Prior to the American Revolution, 2,000 years of political wisdom said popular democracy was not possible, and the Revolution and Constitution disproved that. It was a singularly remarkable achievement. But if you look around today, you can see fundamental conditions necessary to sustain our government breaking down. Chief among these is our capacity to compromise across differences—the emergence of tribalism within the American community.

This is a problem we believe philanthropy can address, and one that we work on at Hewlett. In 2014 we launched the Madison Initiative, with the idea of helping to create conditions for people to talk to each other and find ways to solve problems despite their differences, instead of trying to batter the other side into submission. [In 2020 Hewlett converted this special project into an ongoing program that will make grants of $20–25 million annually to strengthen processes of democratic give and take.]

Our Constitution was a product of compromises across violent disagreements—differences of principle far greater than anything we’re dealing with today. James Madison, the Constitution’s chief theorist, understood that the new United States was too big and complex a society to be homogeneous, and he embraced that as a way to make republican government work. Because differences will always exist, he argued, we must accept that citizens will have a wide variety of interests and beliefs and passions. So he and the other founders created a process that forces people to compromise with each other. That willingness to find ways to move forward together despite disagreement is what makes our popular government work.

When I was a law-school dean, I used to tell students that the most important lesson we had to teach was how to see the argument on the other side in its most favorable light. That helps you appreciate your argument’s weaknesses and their argument’s strengths, and it lowers the temperature in the disagreement, which makes compromise and settlement possible. If you can pull that off, you have the chance to be a really good lawyer. Also a good citizen. I call it “listening with empathy.”

That ability to understand and appreciate opposing viewpoints is no less important in philanthropy, and I’ve tried to build it into the culture of the Hewlett Foundation. [See Hewlett.org/listening-with-empathy for a fuller description.] We ask every team not only to seek out opposing views, but to spend time in actual conversation with people who hold those views, trying to understand what makes them seem reasonable to others. That’s what I mean by listening with empathy. It’s how you find common ground with someone who has very different beliefs. And even if you don’t succeed in that, the process makes the disagreements feel less apocalyptic and dire.

Some people think that listening with empathy involves betrayal of principle. But there’s no inconsistency between caring passionately about an idea and taking the time to understand how somebody else can be equally passionate about the opposite idea.

If we want a functional democracy, we must recover the ability to engage each other without outrage. If we insist on approaching each other thinking, “I’m right, and you know I’m right and only take your position for some bad reason—because you’re racist or self-interested or something like that,” this democracy will not survive.

Another way we avoid engaging, one we see more and more frequently these days, is what I call the identity excuse: I don’t have to listen to you because you’re a blank. Then fill in the blank: because you’re a white male, a Black Lives Matter supporter, a union member, in the oil industry, whatever. We’re never going to find common ground if we won’t entertain
the possibility that the other side may have legitimate reasons for its positions and that some of our own arguments might be wrong. We need to engage each other on the substance of arguments.

This is particularly true for philanthropy, because we have no excuse not to engage. We have the resources, time, and independence to be able to listen respectfully. Yet I increasingly see intellectual door-slamming in our field as well, even in my own organization.

A couple of months ago I did a presentation to staff about challenging existing thinking about economics and political economy. When I finished, someone on the staff raised a hand and dismissed the existing orthodoxy in economics by simply saying, “Of course economists take that position—just look at them.” By which this person meant they are all white men. I said that may have been true in the 1930s and ’40s, and there are certainly disparities that remain, but that today there are economists of all races, genders, and ethnicities on all sides. But the comment took me aback, because I saw lots of heads nodding in agreement, as if that was all you needed to know. It was a textbook illustration of what I’ve called the identity excuse.

So I asked all of Hewlett’s programs and departments to do something different. I asked them to find people who fundamentally disagree with what we are doing. And I asked them to invite the people in to hold a seminar in which they would listen and exchange ideas, followed by a second seminar without the guest to talk about what they learned.

I challenged the staff to look for real vulnerabilities in our positions and to bring in the best people on the other side to challenge us. That may be people to our left, it may be people to our right; the disagreements may not be left-right divides at all. But I asked them to think hard about where the vulnerabilities in our positions lie and to find people who would force us to grapple with them. If the experiment works, I hope to make this part of our regular practice going forward.

The initial response from many was “we know the arguments on the other side, we’ve read their stuff.” But there is a big difference between reading somebody’s argument and having that person come in to answer your challenges and to learn that they have answers. Plus, arguments evolve over time, and they may have new arguments. Plus, engagement itself is stimulating and important.

This kind of engagement is really at the heart of what we do. No one has to surrender their position. No one has to change their mind. I’m not asking for that. Some people might, and it will be interesting to see what people learn. But the main thing is to be open to engaging. If we cannot do that, we are missing what I think of as a core value of our foundation.

As expected, the hardest part of the process has been finding the right participants, people who can argue that there are intellectual vulnerabilities in our positions in ways that do not trigger a screaming match or shut everyone down. I’m asking the Women’s Reproductive Health Program, for instance, to bring in people who think abortion is fundamentally wrong, to get them to see there are people who hold that position for reasons other than religious or cultural fundamentalism or belief that women should be kept in traditional roles. These are arguments I want us to grapple with and understand and be able to answer, both in our own minds and publicly.

Some useful things are already happening. One program brought in somebody who voiced fundamental disagreements about donor-advised funds. After that conversation the program director came to me and said it was so interesting, the speaker was much more nuanced than we ever thought. To me, that was gold.

How do we encourage other philanthropies, other sectors, the rest of the country to see how important this is? Because it’s something we all need to do.

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**J**ust as Larry Kramer is experimenting with constructive ways of keeping open inquiry and free expression alive within foundations, Ian Rowe and Irshad Manji have become models for social entrepreneurs who want to register tough objections to reigning orthodoxies without being immediately dismissed. Rowe is the CEO of Public Prep, a network of high-performing charter schools in the Bronx. Manji is an advocate for reforms in Islam, and author of Don’t Label Me: How to Do Diversity Without Inflaming the Culture Wars. The text below was adapted by the editors from an online discussion organized by The Philanthropy Roundtable in June.

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**How To Disagree Without Being Disagreeable**

*An* *conversation between Ian Rowe and Irshad Manji*

**Rowe:** For the last decade I’ve run a network of charter schools in the South Bronx—2,000 students, mostly black and Hispanic kids from low-income communities. Now I’m embarking on an effort to create character-based International Baccalaureate high schools for the same population. For my student body, one of the most important things to learn is that they have individual agency—that their personal decisions and actions will influence their life outcomes. We’re all familiar with the powerful influence of “grit”—perseverance in pursuit of a goal. Children don’t develop that determination if they feel their efforts don’t matter. Agency is the precursor to grit and hard work, and you can’t have agency if you think success comes from someone else’s actions.

In the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd a dominant narrative has emerged that structural racism is the key...
factor holding black people down, and that white people need to first give up their privilege before black people can succeed. What’s missing from that discussion is the topic of black excellence. While there are certainly structural barriers to black success, individual agency matters a lot. That’s why millions of black people succeed even out of difficult backgrounds.

Every person faces a range of challenges in life. Life is unfair. The question is—are these challenges so huge that you are immobilized? You’re going to face barriers based on race, class, gender. You might be short, you might be tall, you may be attractive, you may not be attractive. I’m not equating racism to these other things, but we have to help young people understand the need to work through inevitable barriers in life. What can you learn from other people who have triumphed over challenges?

If we keep pushing the idea that structural racism is this heavy weight that has to dominate your life, that you’re going to get killed while jogging, people will be immobilized. The very last thing we want for our young is them believing they are powerless. There are millions of real people who have disproved that.

Manji: One of the things I like to point out is that even if you are less powerful, that is not the same as being powerless. That’s why agency really matters. There is systemic racism, of course. I’ve experienced it. But is it something overwhelming? No. Systems, structures, institutions are nothing more than the people who inhabit them. People strive, engage, model, and change lives.

Rowe: While discussing these ideas with colleagues, I noticed they were self-censoring. They said, “Ian, you can’t say these things in public. A message of black independence might be construed as blaming the victim.”

Manji: The key to teaching young people how to communicate across lines of disagreement is moral courage. One of the scariest things you can do in this polarized time is to approach people with whom you disagree. Kids are mortified of being cancelled.

But we are living in a time of many challenges, and if we are going to advance enduring solutions, people who disagree with each other have to engage. If all you do is impose answers on people who don’t buy in, that is a mortal threat to our republic. So we’ve got to remind young people in particular that if you want to be heard, you must first be willing to hear others.

If you are open to having a conversation with someone who disagrees with you, start with some ground rules: One, I am not going to shame you—you agree not to shame me for being honest? Two, I am going to listen, and give you the opportunity to speak first. Will you then reciprocate and listen to my truths?

Starting off with ground rules like these doesn’t mean you’re going to convince the other party of your point of view. But you immediately lower emotional resistance. That frees up bandwidth to actually hear. Our minds are always looking to win rather than to understand, but if you make the point you are here to understand, the other person may reciprocate.

Moral courage demands that I tame my ego. I have to acknowledge that you may have experience and perspectives I don’t. It behoves me to hear your circumstances and ask questions. Only after you know I’m hearing you do I take an opportunity to express where I’m coming from.

This isn’t just about being civil. Civility is nice, but if you’re coming into a knife fight, civility may get you killed. With the right techniques—the skills of moral courage—you can outwit aggression and get a fair hearing from someone who would otherwise not be willing to give it.

Manji: Prior to this latest wave of anti-racism protests I would have said that we can “get away” with more blunt honesty because we are not white. But I think we are living in a different time now. The fact that I am brown and not black leads many of today’s anti-racism activists to believe my voice should not count for much.

The early colonists put white men on top and everybody else underneath them, but it seems to me the hierarchy is now flipped—that black people get more credit than everybody else, with white, straight men being at the very bottom. Does payback really equal progress?

I have listened to many people make the case for why black voices must be prioritized. I understand that African Americans have a long and difficult history. That said, I often ask people who are dismissing other voices today, “Is it possible that you are doing to other people what was done to blacks in the past?”

Rowe: I frequently find that people are talking past each other. They’re operating on false assumptions of what others believe.

I’m a big fan of writing down thoughts. I can’t make sense of things until I’ve organized and even challenged myself on paper. I like to enter a conversation in the mode of inquiry. Is there a grain of truth in what someone is saying? Can I accept the possibility that I could be wrong? Because none of us have all the answers.

I also like to lean on hard data. For example, I often talk about the “Success
...—the series of decisions, like staying in school, and not having a child before marriage, that build together to produce a very high likelihood of economic success. Americans who follow a fairly simple set of rules will end up in at least the middle class in 97 percent of all cases. That’s phenomenally useful information, but it’s typically not part of the dialogue. Conversations are typically more emotion-driven than fact-driven. How do we inject actual evidence into our public discussions?

**Manji:** Timing is everything. If you start off with stats, you’re never going to get much further. Because, like it or not, most human beings think emotionally. And from a biological standpoint the most easily generated emotion is fear. That’s why taking the time to build trust is so important to the strategy of being heard.

Once you have reciprocal trust, that’s when hard elements can be introduced, not by making strident statements but by asking sincere questions. You can ask, “Do you think that research should matter?” “What role should statistics and data have in this?” Asking that as a question puts the ball of accountability back in the court of the person you’re engaging. You’ll get more information about what they value and can reframe your argument in a way that has a shot of being heard.

**Rowe:** I think you also have to reveal some vulnerability yourself. I often share my own experiences of being a black male in this country and the challenges I have faced. It shows I’m not dismissing the problems.

But what we eventually need to talk about is proportions. So, for example, the George Floyd killing was a terrible occurrence this summer. The year before, police shot and killed, for one reason or another, 13 black people who turned out to be unarmed. Any killing is a terrible incident, and needs to be accounted for.

But in that same year of 2019 there were also more than 3 million black students in colleges and universities. If we want a full picture of black status, we need some broader data.

A different obstacle arises when you agree with someone’s diagnosis of the issues, but disagree with their prescription. For example, abolishing the police or defunding their departments. What if I believe that will hurt the very people we claim we’re advocating for? For some people that makes me untouchable.

**Manji:** You can’t win them all. But before you know who is worth your time, you have to engage. If you just assume they’re kooks, militants, whatever, your assumption may be wrong.

That’s why I’ve adopted the BLM hashtag in my social-media posting. Many of the policies that Black Lives Matter promotes are nonstarters. In fact, I believe they’re dead ends for the very people whose lives they claim to value.

But I want to reach the people who use the BLM hashtag. I’m not going to let that crowd get away with hypocrisy. The things I tend to post are counterintuitive to what most of them see in their media feeds. I post about the icons they say they uphold, and use their own symbols and arguments to get them thinking.

**Rowe:** I do not use the BLM hashtag. I run charter schools, which I believe are a very important tool in the arsenal of how we create opportunities for young people of all races across the country. The Black Lives Matter organization has as part of its platform a moratorium on charter schools. They claim charter schools are in opposition of the interests of low-income black kids. I totally disagree with that.

I would love to talk with leaders of Black Lives Matter about the many families on our wait list. Our wait list in the Bronx alone has close to 5,000 families desperate for a charter-school education, the vast majority of them low-income black and Hispanic households.

The slogan “black lives matter” is very easy to sign onto, but when you get into the substance of what BLM is actually calling for in the lives of kids it’s a very different discussion. Many people adopt the slogan as virtue signaling. They feel they’ve got cover.

That’s the problem with colleges, corporations, philanthropies creating an office of diversity, equity, and inclusion. They find a nonwhite person to lead it, and that office becomes their cover.

We need to focus on less superficial changes. We need ideas—like charter schools—that are effective, that have proven to succeed. But that requires rigorous competition among ideas. That’s why, for me, viewpoint diversity is even more important than racial diversity.

**Manji:** There is so much dishonest diversity. Dishonest diversity slices and dices individuals and stuffs them into categories, and says, “welcome to your assigned place.” Honest diversity treats people as individuals, not as mascots of this or that tribe.

The next time anybody demands more diversity in some slot, here’s a question to ask them: What kind of diversity are you talking about? Do you mean honest diversity, which is about understanding and engaging different ideas? Because I’m very much in favor of that kind of diversity. Or do you mean dishonest diversity, which is about labeling? Frankly, no one should be interested in that.

We have real problems. But I don’t think we need to discard our individual liberties, force people to censor themselves, treat people as avatars of some group, tear apart our social contract, or rip down the country to solve them.

**Rowe:** I came across a quote from Tocqueville written many years ago. “The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.” I’ve found that statement compelling because it resonates with the notion that America is always in pursuit of becoming a more perfect union. Our founders laid out these inspiring ideals, and we are in a constant effort as a country to live up to them.

But our progress depends on a civil discourse and constructive ways of disagreeing and moving on. At this moment in our nation’s history it seems like silencing of unfashionable ideas is the status quo. We need people to stand up and speak. That’s how our country will survive and thrive.