

Dignity Conversations: Cultural Addiction to Contempt

CONVERSATIONS THAT LEAD TO INSIGHT AND ACTION

Arthur Brooks writes in his book *Love Your Enemies* that we in America have “a cultural addiction to contempt.” Famous people sell us contempt, he says, “but ordinary citizens are the ones creating a market for it.”

- Are you addicted to contempt? If someone were trying to make the case that you *are* addicted to contempt, what would they point to as evidence?
- When you consider your own habits around contempt, what are the rewards? How does it make you feel? What does it do for you?
- What forms of contempt are especially addictive for you? News shows? Talk shows? What are your signs of addiction?
- Some people have compared contempt with cigarettes: the customers get addicted while the marketers get rich and deny the harm. Is this a fair comparison?

Arthur writes, “Hating others is associated with depression. Contempt will wreck your relationships and harm your health.”

- Among the people you know, do you see any link between watching partisan news channels and suffering from anxiety or depression?
- Do you see in yourself any connection between contempt and anxiety and depression? If so, have you tried to reduce your diet of contempt? Were you successful? If you haven’t tried, would you be willing to do so?
- Can you resist the lure of contempt when it’s used to draw you into the news? What stories are most likely to draw you in? How do you fight back? What do you say to yourself?

Contempt is an ugly emotion. That’s why we try to hide it with excuses and disguises.

- Can you recall a situation where you resorted to contempt? What was your excuse? What was your disguise? Was your disguise effective? Who bought it? Who didn’t?
- What are the most common excuses or disguises for contempt among political partisans? Do the two major parties use different excuses, different disguises?
- The Dignity Index team believes an important strategic move is to make contempt backfire, and we can do that by exposing contempt. Do you agree with this? What are some ways of exposing contempt? What effect do you think it would have?
- When we’re addicted to a substance, over time, we tend to need higher and higher doses to get the same effect. Do you think an addiction to contempt explains the escalating hostility in the country? Are the producers of contempt making darker accusations of the other side to sustain the addictive buzz in their audience?