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Essay by Phoebe Farag Mikhail

Why We Need Bridge People More than Ever

Next week, TW's new "Truth-telling" issue launches with a focus on first-person nonfiction. Phoebe Farag Mikhail gets the conversation started here by speaking up about her dislike of political labels.



This spring, I excitedly ripped open the small package. *Nevertheless, She Persisted*, the buttons boasted, and I smiled, inspired by the words of Mitch McConnell, but not in the way he intended. Senator Elizabeth Warren had been warned, he explained, but she persisted, reading a letter by Coretta Scott King as part of her vocal opposition to Jeff Sessions's nomination for attorney general. Warren was then publicly silenced by the Senate. I purchased the buttons from MomsRising a few days later.

Nevertheless, She Persisted. I loved what the slogan represented to me—a woman breaking barriers to speak up for

what she believed in. Until I realized I couldn't wear those buttons in public.

It's not because I fear for my own safety. Instead, I fear I'll be labeled. Before I even open my mouth, wearing a button like this triggers a set of assumptions about who I am and what I believe in—a set of assumptions that's almost entirely wrong.

I'm a Coptic Christian and US citizen who grew up in New York City. Unlike some of my Egyptian-born friends, I'm pale-skinned enough to pass as white, and this affords me the privilege of hiding a button. I don't face the profiling that other minorities do because of their appearance. But I do face instant labeling, and I don't want to shut down a fruitful conversation before it starts. Too often, overcoming all those wrong assumptions to get the other person to listen exhausts me. Then I stop listening, too.

Once at a dinner I was hosting on Easter, the discussion turned to the recent bombings of two Coptic churches in Egypt during Holy Week. A guest openly wondered why many Copts, who are Christians, were angry with Egyptian President El-Sisi. I explained why I thought a leader who takes away so many personal rights should at least uphold the implicit contract of keeping us secure. His response? "Oh, I see. You are one of those revolutionaries."

But I'm not one of "those revolutionaries." No political group fully represents my views. I'm a bridge person, and we need far more bridge people in public life.

Just as a bridge is firmly planted on either side of the same river, a bridge person is someone who can inhabit seemingly opposite spaces. Living at the intersection of several different identities and worldviews allows me to empathize with different people and consider multiple sides of the same issue. As a bridge person, I'm even willing to change my stand if I gain knowledge or experience that challenges my previous views. The trouble is, very few groups allow me to do this or accept that political ideals can change over time.

Our current political climate leaves little space for bridge people. Consider a recent *New York Times* op-ed by economists Christopher Blattman and Stefan Dercon that generated a storm of negative comments. In "Everything We Knew About Sweatshops Was Wrong," these researchers admitted to changing their minds. Like many economists, they had initially assumed sweatshops in developing countries were a means for lifting people out of extreme poverty. But after conducting a study of industrial development in Ethiopia, they discovered that many people who worked in these factories were worse off than if they had never worked in the first place.

Did sweatshop critics on the left rejoice at having conventional economic wisdom overturned by academic research? No. As *Times* columnists Max Fisher and Amanda Taub note, this op-ed "provoked bitter derision among many on the left. To these critics, the important thing wasn't that [two economists had] changed their minds, but that they had ever disagreed in the first place."

Like Blattman and Dercon, I risk being rejected by the very groups I identify with on certain issues. I fight for women's rights while participating in a religious community that doesn't ordain women as priests. I mourn the deaths of millions of children to abortions while also acknowledging that women who need the procedure require safe access to it. I defend the rights of Muslim friends and neighbors in the US while also publicly decrying what Islamist extremists are doing to minorities in the Middle East.

I majored in English literature in college and now teach writing at the university level, but I speak Arabic to my children. I want them to grow up bilingual, so when my kids ask me when our plane will arrive at our destination, I say, "Soon, inshallah"—then worry I might be escorted off the plane due to the fears of an ignorant traveler.

I'm far from the only one who faces retribution for expressing ideas that don't match the party line. When pro-life feminists decided to participate in the Women's March on Washington this January, some (though not all) faced backlash from fellow marchers they had much else in common with. "We had marchers screaming at us, ripping up our signs, one spit on us," said Kristina Hernandez of Students for Life of America as quoted in a Vox report.

Many more of us recede into the background, too tired to speak up. The silent majority may well be made up of bridge people—of those whose views cannot be categorized and subsequently vilified by the other side. I know this because

when I speak up, I get thanked privately.

For instance, in a Facebook post last fall, I expressed concern when a few Christian friends excitedly shared video clips of President-elect Trump quoting the Bible in a speech. Here's an excerpt from my post:

Mr. Trump has never claimed to be a practicing Christian and only recently began quoting the Bible to pander to the Christian vote. Please, my friends, I accept that he is the president-elect, and I am praying for him, but please, please do not be deceived by political expedience.... We don't need our public figures quoting us Bible verses. We need to read our Bibles ourselves. We need to hear the Bible at church and during Bible study so we can live it with our families and our neighbors.

The number of "likes" and shares I received was telling enough. But the private Facebook messages from friends thanking me for publicly speaking up about something so obvious astounded me. "Thank you for being a voice of reason," one said. "You have a way of saying what I want to say but I can't find the words for," another wrote.

We need to have these conversations in the open, not just in private messages. From the conservative who welcomes refugees to the liberal who supports government programs for the poor while disagreeing with the Supreme Court on gay marriage, there are more bridge people than you think—and the world needs to find us and welcome us. We are the ones who know firsthand that labels mean little, that people are more complicated than their politics, that issues are more nuanced than what politicians would like us to believe. We're the ones who are more inclined to listen because we know what it's like to be silent and to be silenced.

We're the ones who can bridge both sides of the river. Without bridge people—without those of us willing to cross to the other side, even when we're afraid to wear buttons that express what we think and feel—everyone drowns.

Publishing Information

- "['Nevertheless, She Persisted' and the Age of the Weaponized Meme](#) [5]" by Megan Garber, *Atlantic*, February 8, 2017.
- "['Everything We Knew About Sweatshops Was Wrong](#) [6]" by Christopher Blattman and Stefan Dercon, *New York Times*, April 27, 2017.
- "[How DARE You Agree with Me, Sir!](#) [7]" by Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, *New York Times* ("The Interpreter" newsletter), May 5, 2017.
- "[Can You Be a 'Pro-Life Feminist'? The Women's March on Washington Offered Some Insights](#) [8]" by Emily Crockett, *Vox*, January 22, 2017.

Art Information

- "[The USS George H.W. Bush at the Friendship Bridge](#)" [9] © U.S. Navy, photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Michael B. Zingaro; Creative Commons license.

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She is married with three young children whom she hopes will grow up to be bridge people.

You'll find her on Twitter [@pkfarag](#) [12]. For more information on [MomsRising](#) [13], an advocacy organization for women and families, click the link for its website.

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- [6] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/27/opinion/do-sweatshops-lift-workers-out-of-poverty.html>
- [7] <http://www.nytimes.com/newsletters/2017/05/05/the-interpreter?nlid=62263331>
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