

Politics: Meet me in the Middle Episode 36 – Empathy Vs Values: with Activists and Authors Gregg Hurwitz and Billy Ray

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Voice over 1: From CurtCo Media.

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Bill Curtis: This is a show about what drives conservatives, what motivates liberals, and how we might be able to talk to each other, reach each other with mutual respect and understanding that can lead to a better, more productive society. This is Politics: Meet Me in the Middle. I'm Bill Curtis.

(singing)

Did you know that studies have shown that the vast majority of people don't feel heard? Voters don't feel heard, women don't feel heard, men don't feel heard, and people of color don't feel heard, and cops don't feel heard either. That's because, frankly, we're not very good at listening to each other. Listening takes skill and a lot of mental processing. Talking? Not so much.

Now, why would we invite two very famous and talented writers onto Meet Me in the Middle? Billy Ray and Gregg Hurwitz will be addressing the heart and the mission of this podcast: how we can talk to each other and really hear people with differing political views. Now, in full disclosure, Billy and Gregg will show us how they're doing it to help Democrats get elected, but I'll be here to ensure that we listen to both sides, and so will Ed. Let's introduce our panel. Firstly, as usual, our co-host Pulitzer prize-winning historian, bestselling author, worldwide lecturer, and the widely quoted socially distant and Zoomed in authority of everything historical and constitutional, Ed Larson. Nice to see you, Ed.

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Ed Larson: Thank you so much, and I'm excited to have these two guests today. Wow.

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Bill Curtis: Also, Zooming in, Jane Albrecht. She's an international trade attorney who represented US interest to high-level government officials all over the world. She's been involved with several US presidential campaigns and, in full disclosure, she's president of the Malibu Democratic Club. Nice to see you again, even remotely, Jane.

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Jane Albrecht: Always good to be here, and I'm thrilled to have Billy and Gregg here today too.

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Bill Curtis: Now for our special guests. Billy Ray is probably best known for writing the Oscar-nominated screenplay for Captain Phillips, and he won the Writers Guild Award, as well. He's written and sometimes directed films, including The Hunger Games, Richard Jewell, he was directed by Clint Eastwood, Flight Plan with Jodie Foster, and many more. He's also the writer and director of The Comey Rule, based on James Comey's book: A Higher Loyalty. It'll be on Showtime in September. We also like him because he's a Dodger fan.

Gregg Hurwitz is the New York Times internationally bestselling author of 22 thrillers, including the Orphan X series. His novels have won numerous literary awards, and he's been published in 32 languages. He publishes academic articles on Shakespeare, and he's taught or lectured at USC, UCLA, and Harvard. In the course of researching his thrillers, he swims with sharks, he sneaks onto demolition ranges with Navy seals, and he's gone even undercover into mind-control cults. Gregg's editorial pieces have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, The Huffington Post, and now finally he's on Politics: Meet Me in the Middle.

Gregg and Billy have worked together pro bono on political races since 2016. They've helped candidates with messaging, speeches, debate prep. Focusing on Democrats? Yes, but it's about how to make arguments that our Republican friends may actually respect. They've also written and produced many political ads. As a matter of fact, there's one I really want you to see, so we're going to place it on our website that features the Shining City on a Hill speech by Ronald Reagan. You simply must see it and you'll understand what really moves us. Today you'll see that these guys are truly impassioned. Billy Ray and Gregg Hurwitz, welcome to both of you, and thanks for joining us.

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Billy Ray: Thank you.

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Greg: Thank you.

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Bill Curtis: You guys have also talked about how we're not so good at listening anymore, and for your political messaging, you two have made communicating an art. Can you tell us about that?

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Greg: Well, one of the things that I think is really important that we've boiled a lot of this down to is

understanding the different value structures and ways that conservatives versus liberals take in and hear information, in terms of Big Five personality theory. A lot of people are more familiar with Myers Briggs, which is the cliff notes to Big Five personality theory. There's different traits structures. Liberals tend to... higher in certain traits like openness and empathy, and we tend to communicate through those. Whereas conservatives tend to communicate or tend to have a value structure that prefers high conscientiousness as a value set. Both of these are absolutely essential value sets. One of the things where we find polarization, is when people only communicate in the language and through the value set of their own listeners or people who are likeminded. We have a breakdown of discourse that happens in the middle of good faith, enlightenment discourse, people only communicate among themselves in their own language, and their values, which drives the left further left, and the right for the right until what we have is black and white thinking and the denigration of anyone who doesn't think like us.

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Bill Curtis: What should they do instead?

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Billy Ray: I'll give you an example, thinking of high empathy, high openness arguments. Democrats tend to be higher in those things. They communicate in that language, as Gregg said. A classic Democrat argument is, "Don't you care about Jimmy Kimmel's kid?" To which Republicans say, "I care about Jimmy Kimmel's kid, but I can't take care of everybody's kid." It's not that they lack empathy. It's that in a hierarchy of values, it falls below conscientiousness. What you have to do as a Democrat, we believe, is make arguments that are not high empathy arguments, but are arguments that are actually designed to reach who cares about the robustness of the community as a whole.

These personality traits are fixed. You can't go up to an introvert and turn him into an extrovert. By the same token, it does not help a Democrat to go up to a Republican and say, "Why can't you be more empathetic like me? I'm a better person than you are because I have higher empathy." It's important to note that high conscientiousness, which conservatives score so well in codes for better health, a longer lifespan, more stable marriages, and better careers. While Democrats are condescending to Republicans saying, "Why can't you be more like us?" Publicans are saying, we're fine. Over here with our longer lifespan and our better careers and our better marriages.

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Bill Curtis: You've done an analysis to understand the driving psychology behind conservatives and Democrats, right?

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Billy Ray: I think under everything in a conservative voter, the thing that unites them politically is a fear of chaos. If you go back and look at every argument that Republican candidates make, classically, the subtext of it is always, "Democrats will bring chaos." It's why Ted Cruz is out there right now tweeting that all Democrats are anarchists and [inaudible 00:07:07]. It's why Mike Pence is out there saying, "Joe Biden wants to defund the police," when he knows that not to be true because he's trying to paint a picture that Democrats will create less safety. It's why the Willie Horton ad worked. It's always the attack that Republicans make. What we try to talk to democratic candidates about, they have to attack the fear of chaos that makes a Republican, a Republican, and they have to paint themselves accurately, I believe, as the antidote to chaos.

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Bill Curtis: You defined it as conscientiousness, which you said paired to orderliness and industriousness. Doesn't our society need those attributes, at least for some people to be their driving psychology?

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Greg: Absolutely. It's the job of conservatives to make sure that we're moving slowly and not throwing out the baby with the bathwater as we start to innovate and change. That's why they like to have boundaries around gender, around countries. It's the job of liberals to say, "Okay, granted we need to have boundaries around a country. We need to have an immigration system that obeys the law, but if we make a wall that is too impenetrable, then new ideas and people won't get in and will stagnate and die." The good-faith discussion about the ways that those two value sets need to work in operation for the betterment of society are when society functions the best.

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Bill Curtis: Gregg, the other day, you were talking about how conscientiousness results in better marriages, better finances, better health, longer lifespan. What's wrong with that?

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Greg: Nothing's wrong with that at all. It's wonderful, but we also need risk-takers, right?

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Bill Curtis: That leads to chaos, right? Risk-takers.

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Greg: No, not if it's in balance. Look, the left and the right get off course in predictable ways. We see what happens. It's (inaudible) tasks, it's infighting, and it's a constant cannibalization of their own side. It's a very predictable manner. There's a reason why a lot of the "cancel culture" has emerged from the left. Whereas when the right gets off course, it tends to feel more like authoritarianism and a different set of values. Either side on their own can get off course. It can get out of whack. What we need to do is to try to have the conversation in the middle where we actually are complementing each other in the values that we are proposing and having good sense management between the two poles. We've completely lost that over the last four years.

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Billy Ray: Just to circle back to what your original question was, which was, "Do risk takers create chaos?" No, they don't. I'll give you an example. I-

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Ed Larson: Maybe not create, but they risk chaos.

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Greg: Yeah.

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Billy Ray: Okay. The question is, "How do you define chaos?" In other words, the Republican argument against something like-

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Ed Larson: Anything I can't control.

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Greg: Okay. Wait a minute. The Republican argument against gay marriage for 10 years was, "It will destroy the institution of marriage." The idea was if you allow gay people to marry that somehow heterosexual marriage won't count anymore. That was a very serious argument that conservatives made over and over and over again, completely wrong, and has now been proven to be wrong. There is no version of Republicans going back and saying, "You know what? We overreacted on that one." Instead, they're going to double down and they're going to say, "Oh, Democrats want to take all your guns away. Democrats believe in eight and half month abortions." It's all the same argument. It's selling this idea that Democrats

equal chaos. What we have found is that in the era of Donald Trump, the opposite is true.

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Jane Albrecht: The other thing it's important to remember is that while these can be dominant characteristics, it's not like one side has only high conscientiousness and the other side only has empathy. There's a mix of both traits in both sides. It's just which is dominant.

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Greg: That's right. In fact, Jane, that's an excellent point. There is a staggering amount of agreement in America right now. We believe hard work and innovation should be rewarded. We think everyone should play by the same rules. We believe in opportunity. We believe in a baseline of medical care. We just have different views of how to do it. We believe in preserving fields and streams and oceans. We're in massive agreement, conservatives, and liberals alike. If you remove social media, which basically thrives on descent, discord, and dopamine hits of outrage and virtue signaling. We have the mainstream media, which outrage and adrenaline equals eyeballs. You have lobbyists who, if we ever figured out that the percent of Americans who favor a bill has literally 0% impact on whether the bill will pass.

They are all about having us be separated all the time. Politicians, when they go to raise money, have to paint all of these differences. To Jane's point, of course, conservatives have empathy. Of course, liberals have high conscientiousness or Billy Ray wouldn't have written 5,000 screenplays by his 21st birthday. These are all traits, and these differences are very small if we can figure out how to not let them be toxically magnified, and then just start to believe this matrix-like web of polarization, that we have unwittingly plugged ourselves into all the time.

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Ed Larson: There are certain issues that have been magnified by one side or the other because they are wedge issues. Issues like abortion and abortion rights. Issues like guns and gun control. Those issues have come so much to dominate the discourse and to drive this wedge between us. Those are big issues this time. I mean, Trump ran on some of those and equally at the gut level, the Democrats have run on those same issues from the other side. They shouldn't be so fundamental, but they have become voting issues for so many people.

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Bill Curtis: Ed, I think the reality is that a lot of the

issues you just mentioned really are exploding because of the extremes that Gregg was talking about before. Let's take guns, for example. Most conservatives think that it's okay to have some regulation for guns. It's the extremes that don't want any regulation at all so that we should be able to go purchase a small nuclear weapon if we so choose.

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Ed Larson: I don't know. I talked to a lot of people on these issues. You talk about abortion, that's just so important to them, and they care deeply on that issue.

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Jane Albrecht: Let me make an observation. What you're talking about Ed, is the culture war issues. The reason they've been picked particularly by the Republicans is that they completely feed into the fear versus the openness. They play very well for that purpose.

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Greg: Well, I want to agree with something that Ed said. I think the two issues where we have fundamental core differences are on abortion and are on the rights of the LGBTQ versus the rights of religious leader. I think those are two fundamental and core issues. If there can be a conversation that is not depicting the other side as being either hatefully misogynistic or murderous, but an understanding that we come down on very different sides of an issue of freedom versus religious value sets, and we can talk about them in ways that are humanizing. I do think there's a lot of ground to be picked up. Often some of the most conservative folks about the issue of abortion and pro-life, aren't comfortable necessarily with government-mandated pregnancies, for instance. There's nuts and bolts issues that I think there can be good-faith discussion about how freedom and libertarian values interfere and where they begin and end, as long as we are vilifying of one another.

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Billy Ray: I would add quickly to that, Ed. Gregg and I have worked with... I think it's 31 first time candidates running for house or Senate, and then another 30 or 40 that are actually current members in the house or Senate, all on the Democrat side, about messaging. Not one of those Democrat candidates has ever said to me, "The most important thing to me is to take people's guns away." Not one. Yet you look at Donald Trump who is sitting on the tarmac in Ohio saying, "Biden's going to hurt God and Biden's going to hurt guns. He's going to take your guns away." It is a panic button issue for Republican candidates. It is not an

aggressive agenda for Democrats, and it never has been. That's one where the messaging is getting in the way of where we actually agree.

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Bill Curtis: Interesting. Well, we'll be right back with Billy Ray and Gregg Hurwitz in just a minute.  
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Bill Curtis: We're back with Billy Ray and Gregg Hurwitz. Gregg, before the break, you were talking about polarizing issues. Now you've discussed an analogy where political positioning can be compared to cults. Can you explain that?

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Greg: Yeah. I wrote a thriller early in my career about mind-control cults. There's certain key ventures that you see or key actions in cults. You can see this in large cults like North Korea or in specific or smaller cults. One of the first things is that they aim to inoculate people to outside information. You do that from displacing them from family and friends. The cult leaders are a step ahead, so they say to their members, "Look, your friends and family aren't going to understand you. In fact, they're going to be so jealous and so envious about the progress that you made here, that they're going to even call us a cult," right?

There's a strong inoculating effect against any information. As we're talking to people, one of the things that we have to realize, and this is something I've been thinking a lot about, is we can't go right at Trump, and we can't go right at them in terms of insulting him. If you just say he's a cult leader, he's a hypocrite, he's an idiot, he coned you. Then people start to feel terrible about themselves, and what they find is that they will claim to their ideology and their beliefs more. What you do is you try and open up a sliver of cognitive dissonance within them. That Reagan ad that you saw and liked very much is what I was doing. Is to paint the difference to good faith conservatives to say, "Here's how your party has moved, in my estimation."

The conversations we're having now. We're having conversations



about class injustice, about race, about police forces we would never be having in year three and a half of a Hillary Clinton presidency. We just wouldn't. It would be a very similar trajectory. That's the same trajectory that saw no real wage growth for working-class people for 40 years. I don't know if I'm quite ready to commit to this, but in a lot of ways, I wonder maybe America did in fact choose the right poison in 2016 of those people who felt not seen or heard or represented in the ballot. He gave voice to a lot of things that Americans knew for years. The game is rigged. The elites are condescending and sanctimonious. Politicians don't care about you as much as they care about corporations.

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Bill Curtis: You said the Democrats had lost the communication with their base.

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Greg: Right. Maybe he's the imperfect messenger who was dropped in the middle of this with his, what I think are base instincts and divisiveness and lack of care and competence and lack of care of anyone but himself, to give us an opportunity to really look in the face a lot of the divisions that we've taken our eye off. As much as Billy and I did all those years that we didn't do very much in politics.

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Bill Curtis: You say that, but is he the guy, then, to take it forward from here and fix it?

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Billy Ray: One of the ways that I think about it, Bill, is the person that you would pay to do demolition on a building is not the architect who's going to build up from that emptiness. They're not the same skillset. We've just had the demolition for four years, but that's not the person that you would want to rebuild things. We talked to candidates all the time about saying to Trump voters, "I get what was fun and what was funny about Donald Trump in 2016. I get that it was funny to watch him on the Libs." The fact is the democratic party had lost touch a little bit. I understand why it was appealing to look at somebody who was saying, "I'm going to blow the whole damn thing up." I get that.

Here's the issue. Now it's four years later, he did blow the whole damn thing up, and we are facing a problem in COVID that only a federal government can solve. We don't have one. Don't get sucked into the argument about big

government versus small government. This is about effective, competent, robust government. We don't have one. He got it out of there. That's why you're worried to death about your mom in the nursing home. That's why your 15-year-old kid just did spring quarter on your couch. That's why you and your husband both lost your jobs because there are certain things that only a federal government is big enough to stop. We don't have a federal government that's competent to do it.

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Bill Curtis: Ed, come on in.

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Ed Larson: I agree with the points that Gregg and Billy had been making just now. He ran on those issues, but he also ran on some positive issues. He ran that he would change the Supreme Court. I know a lot of people who voted for him because they thought he'd get new Supreme Court nominees, which he's delivered on. He ran on, "Build a wall," and he sort of built it. He certainly has grown a lot of muscle and weight into stopping immigration.

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Billy Ray: I'm sorry. He ran on four promises. "I will bring back manufacturing. Your healthcare will get better and cheaper. Mexico will pay for the wall, and I will drain the swamp." He had a Republican House and a Republican Senate and went oh for four on those promises, which means either they were not good ideas or he is not an effective leader.

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Ed Larson: Sorry, but I think he also ran on build a wall, on closing off immigration. He ran on less regulation to unleash business. The Supreme court was a huge issue, appointing new judges to the Supreme court. Of course, he had the recent death of Scalia to play on, and he ran against China. I think he ran on those issues, and people think he delivered on them.

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Greg: I'd like to just jump in with Ed, to talk about something that actually just happened now on the podcast in real time because this is always interesting. Ed raised a couple of points about things that Trump delivered on, and he was pretty quickly shut down. It doesn't cost us anything to concede ground when it is correct. China and the trade arrangements with China, we're not bueno. If you talk to CEOs in Silicon Valley, that was not a good arrangement. Trump called it out, and he tackled it. He did promise the Supreme court, and he delivered the Supreme court. There are

a few things that he did, and it accrues to our validity and grasp of reality if we can agree and concede in certain areas where he did do things.

For me, I think what's very important is, is we can't fall in love with our politicians any more than we can hate them. Hating Trump, to me, is an exercise in futility. Pretending that Joe Biden also is Nelson Mandela and Robert Kennedy rolled into one is additionally something I don't think is important. I think the most important way that we can talk to people is to join on the aspects that are correct and not turn it into that every speck of Trump is vile. We can all have different opinions about where that falls and that every aspect of what we're advocating is positive. The point of a democracy is that nobody gets everything that they want. That we all agree, imperfectly, that through our different skillsets and through our different structures and values that we all wrangle, and fight and we move very slowly and imperfectly towards the light.

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Bill Curtis: Billy getting back to the premise of the show, how is it that we communicate with the never Democrat, the friends that we have that we want to have a conversation with, and get them to feel that Biden will not be the chaos president?

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Billy Ray: The very first thing that I would say to Republican friends, and I do have them, is I don't like chaos. I like order. I like stability. I like security. I like safety. I like things that are dependable. I can't live my life if I don't have those things. As I look around me right now, I see an economy in freefall. I see a virus not being checked. I see patients lining up in parking lots because they don't have enough ICU beds to get in. I see people questioning whether or not an election is going to take place. I see a post office under attack. I see chaos. In every respect of American life, I see chaos.

That is not what people were signing up for when they signed up four years ago to support Donald Trump. There were 62 million Americans who did. You have to honor that. You have to acknowledge that. When I look at what Joe Biden is talking about, it is about restoring stability. The build's been knocked down to the ground. Who's going to build it back up again, better than it was before? I believe Joe Biden gives us the basis of that.

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Bill Curtis: You have advised dozens of candidates, but you guys don't accept any money for what you do, which in our

society is somewhat rare. Can you explain that to me?

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Billy Ray: I would never ever take money for this. I consider that this a service to my country. I'm terrified by what's happening to our democracy. I find that to be a much bigger issue than guns or anything else. I'm talking about the fundamental ideals of what makes America, America. They've never been more under threat. I see a country in which 30 or 40% of Americans don't seem to care that foreign governments want to influence American elections. That's a real problem for me. I would not accept money to try to turn that aircraft carrier around.

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Greg: One of the things that we remarked at times is that we ask for no money, no credit, and no permission. If you don't need those three things, you can pretty much move the world. Billy and I have been spending 10, 12 hours a day, some days pro bono, 1518. The minute that I start to take money and make money, the minute that somebody is going to employ me, I have a different responsibility set. I have to listen to it. I don't just mean that they're going to tell me something that's crassly corrupt. I mean, "Do I shave 5% off my opinion to make it work with somebody because I'm reliant on them?" There's all these ways that corruption comes into play. If we are fortunate enough to win, the number one thing that I want is that we can get corporatism out of politics and out of the American economy to whatever extent makes sense.

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Bill Curtis: The other day you said that to persuade people you need humility, and the liberals haven't been very good at that. What do you mean?

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Billy Ray: Gregg and I are both storytellers. When Hillary ran in 2016, I thought there was a great lack of humility in that she never told her story. Say what you want about Donald Trump, he told the story. His story was, "This country should be run like a business. I'm a businessman. I alone can fix it." That's a story, right? People were ready to buy into that story. Hillary, I think, kept approaching it from a point of view of, "This guy is such an asshole, there's no way you're going to vote for him. I just don't believe for a second you're going to vote for this guy, and therefore, I'm just going to show up and tell you, I'm Hillary Clinton, and you got to check the box." There was a lack of humility there too. You have to engage people on an

emotional level in both screenwriting and in politics. These are intellectual exercises that are designed to elicit an emotional response. I think she lost sight of that, and I think we, as a party, lost sight of that.

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Greg: We're in a marriage right now. Let's take the metaphor into the personal. The country went 51%, 49% in the popular vote for Hillary. We're split. We're married. We're not going to get rid of anybody. We don't get to get rid of Kansas or Virginia or Florida or Alabama, so what do we want to do about it? When you have an argument within a marriage or with a best friend or with your kid, one of the traits that's absolutely essential is humility and is owning your piece no matter how small it is. Even if you can come back and go, "You know what? I'm absolutely furious about this blowup that we had." This 5%, I'm going to own. Or this 90%. Here's the piece for me.

That's always the way that we can start to loosen things up. We better wake up and figure out that we don't have all the answers. I'd love nothing more than a competent, good-faith Republican and conservative movement backed by moral upstanding people who actually adhere to free-market capitalist and conservative values to have respectable discourse with, to figure out our respective blind spots to move the country forward. I would love that.

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Bill Curtis: As we close, I'm going to steal the last word because I think we'll all disagree on some issues, we agree on a remarkable number of them. One thing that we can all here agree with is that we all want to return to fundamental decency as Americans. Billy Ray and Gregg Hurwitz, thank you so much for joining us today. This has been a spectacular conversation as we expected coming in. Jane Albrecht and Ed Larson, thank you too. Billy and Gregg, how can people find you? How do they follow you?

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Greg: They can find Billy on CBS. What's the night that's got the Comey Rule?

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Billy Ray: There's a mini-series that I made called the Comey Rules, an adaptation of James Comey's book. It airs on Showtime September 27th and 28th. I look forward to the robust conversations that I think will follow.

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Bill Curtis: Well, that should be interesting.

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Greg: I'm on social media. Most of more of my social media is about the thrillers that I write. I do talk a bit about politics. I'm also over at Thinkspot. It's a website designed for thinking that's unplugged and out of the box. I'm over there a bit on occasion with stuff that's more political, and I'm publishing op-eds primarily to talk across the aisle at The Bulwark quite a bit.

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Bill Curtis: Excellent. Ed, if someone wants to follow you, you've had quite a few articles published lately, how do they find you?

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Ed Larson: Use Google and look them up. I've quite a few in the Hill, some in the Atlantic, recently. Of course, for my books, both the new edition of Summer For The Gods, with the new afterward and Franklin & Washington, which was out earlier this year. Those can be got at your neighborhood bookstore or your library.

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Bill Curtis: Okay. Jane, if someone wants to get ahold of you at the Malibu Democratic Club, how do they do it?

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Jane Albrecht: It's going to be a busy fall. It's at [www.malibudemocraticclub.org](http://www.malibudemocraticclub.org).

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Bill Curtis: Billy Ray and Gregg Hurwitz, thank you so much for joining us, and thanks for joining us on Politics: Meet Me in the Middle. We'll see you next week.

If you like what you hear, please tell your friends, and please leave a comment. Yes, we'd appreciate it if you gave us a five-star rating. You can also subscribe to the show on Apple podcast, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcast.

This episode was produced and edited by AJ Mosley and Mike Thomas, and it was audio mastered by Michael Kennedy. The theme music for Politics: Meet Me in the Middle was composed and performed by Celleste and Eric Dick. Thanks for listening.  
(singing).

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Voice over 3: From CurtCo Media, media for your mind.