

You Can Do This at Home: Side by Side

We may talk intimately with close friends about our current thinking and feelings, and might even express strong opinions and values about current events. But how often do we talk, even with friends, about the early life experiences that influenced the way we see the world and what we believe today?

Taking the time and trouble to understand the context in which a person's values were formed, instead of basing our judgments and opinions on our assumptions about them, is a gift that keeps on giving.

Try sharing backgrounds with old, familiar friends, a group of colleagues, or when you want to have a serious dialogue with someone you expect to disagree with by taking turns, three or four minutes each, answering one or more of these questions.

1. Tell me about the place and time into which you were born. How did your family fit into the fabric of society?
2. When you were growing up, what were your family's social values? What were the political issues or who were the politicians your family talked about, either positively or negatively?
3. During your teenage years, was there a teacher or some other non-family member that influenced your world view? In what way? Did they have an effect on your political views of today or of your values or of your sense of yourself?
4. How would you describe your family's work ethic? And how would you describe the attitude of your family or your cohort of friends towards society's unfortunates, sometimes called the "underclass?"
5. When did you first take a personal interest in a particular politician? What did you believe their values to be? Did your close friends share your moral or political views? What propelled you into the political group you identify with today?
6. Have you ever had a firm belief, which then changed and caused you to turn in a different direction? Tell us the story.