

FREE FORUM with TERRENCE McNALLY: A World That Just Might Work

DIANA McLAIN SMITH, REMAKING THE SPACE BETWEEN US - Recorded February 18, 2025

Terrence McNally:

Hello, I'm Terrence McNally welcome to FREE FORUM: A WORLD THAT JUST MIGHT WORK. I'm going to be speaking today with DIANA McLAIN SMITH about the ideas and resources in her book, *REMAKING THE SPACE BETWEEN US: How Citizens Can Work Together to Build a Better Future for All*. You can learn more at Remaking-the-Space, all one word, remakingthespace.org. It's also on Substack.

On Free Forum we explore the lives, the work and ideas of individuals I suspect hold pieces of the puzzle of a world that just might work. We look at politics, economics, environment, science, health, culture - all based on the fact that I believe we can do better and I want to find out how.

The show streams weekly on the Progressive Voices Network on [Tuneln.com](https://tuneln.com) Podcasts are available anytime anywhere on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, most major podcast sites and at my site, terrencemcnally.net.

Since the election, I have been recording conversations with an eye toward moving individuals and society toward a restoration of the common good - as both a primary value or goal and as tangible outcomes in the real world.

Marshall Ganz on organizing - translating the resources you have into the power you need to make the changes you want. Sam Daley-Harris on what he calls transformational advocacy - as practiced in organizations committed to training, empowering, and supporting their volunteers. Drew Gilpin Faust, Harvard's first female president, on her memoir of a white girl growing up in the South in the 1960s, resonant at a moment when many of the retro attitudes of that day are once again ascendant. My next after this will be with Vanessa Woods, author with Bran Hare, of *Survival of the Friendliest: Understanding Our Origins and Rediscovering Our Common Humanity*. You get the idea.

When I booked today's conversation with Diana Smith, I was eager to explore and flesh out her contentions - one, that we the people are ultimately responsible for the failures and ruptures of our society, our media, our politics, our government.

The relationships that we have with each other drive all those bigger spheres, for good or ill. We - in a deadly dance with media and politics - shrink and distort our worlds, retreating into and fueling tribal divisions. and second, that there are hundreds of organizations and hundreds of thousands of people engaged as we speak in - as she titles her book - *REMAKING THE SPACE BETWEEN US*. Not making cases or building arguments, but developing relationships. This is news to most of us because the media doesn't report on it.

But there's another side to this moment. Donald Trump is arguing to the Supreme Court that their immunity ruling has already given him unrestricted power to fire people, asking the court to overturn a lower court order, blocking his decision to fire the head of the office of

special counsel, an independent agency, whose mission is to safeguard whistleblowers in the government and to enforce ethics laws.

And I see three possible outcomes and two of them - if the court rules for Trump or if they rule against him and he defies their decision - as making clear the constitutional crisis we confront.

And this past week Defense Secretary Hegseth declared that NATO membership for Ukraine was unrealistic and suggested Kyiv should abandon hopes of winning all its territory back from Russia, Trump announced peace talks with Russia over the war, seeming to sideline Ukraine and Europe from the process. Vice-President Vance attacked current European values and warned that the crisis for the region was not external actors like Russia or China, but rather “the threat from within”, And then he chose to meet with a far-right politician but not with Germany’s current mainstream leaders.

According to Heather Cox Richardson, whose daily substack posts I highly recommend, British journalist Nick Cohen wrote of all this: “[t]he radical right in the US is not engaged in a grand geopolitical strategy. It is pursuing an ideological campaign against its true enemy, which is not China or Russia but liberalism. The US culture war has gone global. The Trump administration hates liberals at home and liberal democracies abroad.”

Proving his point, on Saturday after Vance’s speech, Trump’s social media account posted: “He who saves his Country does not violate any Law.” This message, attributed to Napoleon, not only claims that the president is above all laws, but also signals to supporters that they should support Trump with violence. And that is how they took it. Right-wing activist Jack Posobiec responding, “America will be saved[.] What must be done will be done,” to which Elon Musk added: “Yes”

Political scientist Stathis Kalyvas posted: “There is now total clarity, no matter how unimaginable things might seem. And they amount to this: The U.S. government has been taken over by a clique of extremists who have embarked on a process of regime change in the world’s oldest democracy...They think their actions will increase U.S. power, but they are in fact wrecking their own country and, in the process everyone else. The only hope lies in the sheer enormity of the threat: it might awake us out of our slumber before it is too late.”

So taking that in, I questioned the value of talking about developing individual relationships and building communities for the future when a coup is taking place and we are not sure how to stop it or even if it can be stopped. The checks and balances have failed us - with the Supreme Court’s immunity ruling, the media’s fear of retribution, and the failure so far Republicans in Congress to defend or assert their constitutional legislative rights. Other than the Cuban missile crisis, this might be the most frightening moment of my lifetime.

I’ll bet Diana Smith has had to confront some of the same questions. Her thoughts about human nature and what works to reduce polarization and toxic tribalism may still be true. But I want to acknowledge up front that this conversation has to recognize the emergency we face and be willing to twist the lens a bit on how to use these hopeful insights and practices to confront to the level of the crisis.

We face a number of critical challenges that can only be solved across groups and nations - and Diana makes this point very clearly - climate change, an unhealthy relationship with rest of nature, pandemics and public health, inequality, social and racial division and tribalism. We cannot afford to break the United States at this moment given the crises we face.

DIANA McLAIN SMITH has worked with families, businesses, entrepreneurial nonprofits, and communities, and has developed an approach - Leading through Relationships - that converts conflict into constructive outcomes. She's a former partner at the Monitor Group and former chief executive partner at New Profit. Her books include *Divide or Conquer*; *The Elephant in the Room*; and her latest, *REMAKING THE SPACE BETWEEN US: How Citizens Can Work Together to Build a Better Future for All*

We're recording this conversation Tuesday February 18th. Welcome, Diana McLain Smith to Free Forum: A World That Just Might Work.

Smith:

Well, Terrence, that was a hell of a welcome. It was long. It was full of despair. It identified no leverage points for us to find a way out. And it is exactly the kind of thing that is going to undermine any resistance, the very resistance we need now more than ever. So I'm going to say a little bit about why I think that we need an alternative way of moving forward.

McNally:

Go ahead.

Smith:

First, I do want to clarify something. When you characterized what I was saying, you said individual relationships. While it is true that individual relationships are part of how we're going to work our way forward, that's irrelevant to the argument in the book. The argument in the book is that, since we were founded, groups have been divided along ideological and demographic lines in our country. Demographic meaning along things like race, gender, age, and so on, and ideological being things like conservative, liberal, and those groups, because we are built on an adversarial notion of democracy, have competed with each other, since our nation was born. And those win-lose adversarial relationships among groups have from time to time caused fissures that have put our democracy at risk. That happened early on and it happened in the Civil War and it is happening now.

Another thing you said that I wouldn't agree with is that we the people are to blame. We the people are part of a joint venture, and you alluded to this later in your welcome when you talked about the media and government and politicians. We are jointly responsible with these other groups.

My belief is that, if we're going to get out of this, we the people are going to have to get us out of this. And if you look at your construction, there is absolutely nothing in it that suggests what we the people can do differently to get us out of this.

What I've been working on for the past number of years, actually my entire life, is how can groups reconfigure how they interact with each other along these demographic and ideological divides that are artificially created to keep the people in power in power. If we don't start to work together with each other to solve the problems that are driving everybody

crazy, we create the conditions for people like Trump and Musk, not only to take power, but to be voted into power, and to be welcomed into power.

And so I think right now our best bet is to play two games. One is a short-term game, and that's an electoral politics game. We've got to do everything we can to elect people to Congress in 2026 and to the presidency in 2028 that will bring an end to this catastrophe, which by the way, we hopefully will have some fodder by which to make our case because hopefully these guys will self-destruct. Okay. So that's the short-term game.

We're not going to win that short-term game as long as people on the Left are hating and lumping together everybody who voted for Trump. We have got to hive off those people who voted for Trump because they voted against the Democratic party or because they voted against people who are preserving the status quo. We've got to persuade those people as well as the disaffected and the disengaged not to vote for Trump and his cronies. Okay? That's the short-term game.

But the long-term game is we have to build a mass movement that consists of 3.5% of the population, which is somewhere over 11 million people. According to Erica Chenoweth, who has studied political movements, nonviolent movements that can mobilize 3.5% of the population almost always succeed.

Right now we have 77 million people who voted for Harris and millions of people across the country who are already working together to solve problems. So we need to build on that infrastructure that has already been built by the people I talk about in the book, a movement that can demonstrate that we are able to govern ourselves and do not need daddy to come in and punish us as bad little girls. That's the long game. And you can't play that game with the logic you laid out.

McNally:

How so?

Smith:

All you'll do is get a bunch of people pissed off and screaming and yelling.

McNally:

How is that developing from the logic?

Smith:

The logic is, tell me how building relationships across groups can help us fight. And then you went on to list all the things that were being done, which are infuriating. They are. They're infuriating. They got me angry as I was listening to it, but that's all it does. It builds anger in the public square.

What were you suggesting we do about it? That's what I want to know, Terrence, what are you suggesting we do about it? We the people, because it ain't going to be them.

McNally:

What I'm suggesting we do about it, and I thought that was clear, was that we listen to people like Marshall Ganz, Sam Daley-Harris, you, Vanessa Woods, and we take wisdom and practice from their insights.

Smith:

That did not come across. You started out with that and then you took a left turn. Maybe I completely misread you, in which case I apologize and I will listen to it. But it seemed to me you were going on the kind of rant that is absolutely driving people to despair and give up.

There's a quote from John Adams: "Oh my soul, I'm weary of these dismal contemplations. When will mankind listen to reason? Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes and exhausts and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide." That's where what you said brought me.

McNally:

Oh, well, there you go. What I was saying was let's do what I've been doing, as I said since the election, which is trying to fortify people with paths forward that see a very different vision and a very different set of possibilities. But let's not ignore that the crisis... Let me put it this way. When I picked up your book, decided to invite you and so on, I didn't realize how fast and how aggressively the Constitution, for instance, would be thrown into crisis.

Smith:

Well, I did. I'm not the least bit surprised, just for the record. I wasn't surprised when he got elected in 2016. And I wasn't surprised now, for the reasons I said before. We have had these divides since we were founded, and we have fought with ourselves since we were founded, and we were setting ourselves up for this moment. And the only ones who can bring us back are us.

And of the people you mentioned, the one to me that has the most legs going forward is not Marshall Ganz, who by the way I think is a terrific person and a great thinker, but was made for a different era when people listened to narrative.

I think of the people you mentioned, the one I have the most faith in as bringing us forward is Brian Hare and Vanessa Wood, because I think our democracy based on an adversarial democracy has reached an end and we have to reconfigure ourselves as friends working on common problems. And if we don't do that, we are not going to survive. So it is survival of the friendliest, not the fittest that we are dealing with right now.

McNally:

No, I quite agree...

Smith:

Well then maybe we're violently agreeing...

McNally:

(laughs)

Smith:

...but when you began, I was saying, "Yeah, that sounds good. That sounds good..." And then all of a sudden it was like, "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, we're going down the tubes."

And how is anything going to take us back from that? And certainly, how is building relationships going to do it? Well, my point of view, there's no other way to get there than working across divides.

McNally:

Believe it or not, that is what I was saying. What I was highlighting was that just in the past few days, the threats to our constitutional democracy...

Smith:

-- I'm aware of that. It's awful. It has me very upset and that's what you're hearing. But I'm trying to figure out how do we move forward?

McNally:

Right, right. Same here.

Smith:

Okay.

McNally:

One thing I will ask though is when you say the short term is the midterm elections and electoral politics...

Smith:

... and the presidential election, yes.

McNally:

Yeah. That to me is the middle term.

Smith:

Well, there's a short term of what do you do to resist? But the question is: How do you enlist people to resist without an alternative they can get behind? And I think we are failing people as leaders by not proposing an alternative. And I actually read in one Substack post, we don't need an alternative. We just need people to get out there and resist. That will not work. We need an alternative. If you look at Martin Luther King...

McNally:

...that's just what I was going to say.

Smith:

I believe the alternative is a world in which groups can cooperate across divides because it is in their self-interest.

McNally:

And they have to realize that, and they have to feel that in their bones.

Smith:

Understood. And that's very hard. And we need a very profound campaign. And I feel like a lone voice in the wilderness because all I hear is, "Oh my God, oh my God, we're going down the tubes..." And by the way, false hope is also not going to work. "We can do it, guys. It's always been the people. Americans are made to fight for democracy..." Well, that's not true. That's just not true. Americans have thrown democracy down the tubes more times than I can count if they are unaware of the extent to which they're being manipulated by people in power.

McNally:

Yeah, I'm sorry that you heard it the way you heard it.

Smith:

Well, so am I. I am too. I really am. I truly am.

McNally:

But it really speaks to what you say is going on in the country - that that's the way people react. By the way, I wanted to remind people that I have done an interview with Erica Chenoweth about her work on when resistance succeeds, and her point, that Diana made, which is that she has found - and this is not speculation or wouldn't it be nice, this is research - that when 3.5% of the population resists, that usually tips the entire thing. So you can look at her work or you can go and find the podcast that we did with her.

And the nuance there about why nonviolent protests work better than violent ones, is that the violent ones tend to remain with those people who are willing to be okay with violence. And if you want to grow into that mass movement and hit that 3.5%, you're going to be much better served if it's a nonviolent resistance. And this is Gandhi, this is Mandela, et cetera. This is Martin Luther King, this is James Holman. This is the way it works.

What I was going to refer you to, because I think it really speaks to some of what we're talking about here, is... George Packer had a cover story in *The Atlantic*, which I interviewed him on - *What's to Become of American Civilization*. He spent months in Phoenix, Arizona, the fastest growing city in America, politically actually quite purple, and a city that has always dealt with water problems and is dealing with them again.

And the biggest takeaway I had from his article, and he agreed pretty much, is that Phoenix could solve its water problems in the 1980s. They came together and they actually put together policies that have pretty much worked within the geographical area they were looking at. What's happened since then is the droughts have been worse, the population has spread and so on, and they need to revisit this. The difference is that in the eighties, you reached agreement between competing interests, you had agriculture interests,

environmental interests, developer interests, citizen groups, et cetera. And he said, “Now you have enemies.” And the difference makes it impossible to solve problems. I think this is very much what you’re talking about. Right, Diana?

Smith:

Nelson Mandela said, “If you want to work with your enemy, then you’ve got to make your enemy your friend.”

The point is, you’re absolutely right. We have turned each other into enemies. It’s the logical consequence of two things. One, the fact that we have always lived in these segregated groups and still segregated along racial, gender, age, I mean, among every single line you can imagine. We’ve lived in primarily separate groups along demographic and ideological lines. And then you add onto that the kind of dislocations and threats that we’ve experienced the past 50 years, where the problems in the world no longer respect boundaries - pandemics, climate change, migration, it’s all crossing boundaries. There is no safe place in the world.

So people are under tremendous threat. And so they’re clinging more and more to these closed, insular, small groups of the same ilk, and they distance themselves from people who are different from them. And they imagine that those interests, which you referred to as competing interests, are only competing interests, as if there are no overlapping interests or as if there are no different interests that might be creatively met through collaboration.

McNally:

Yeah. Let me ask you a question that just occurred to me as you were speaking. What if you had responded to my introduction by saying, “I’m surprised you said that. What are you worried about?”

Smith:

I would’ve been a much better person than I’m capable of being right now.

McNally:

As Diana knows, I am quoting her.

Smith:

Yeah. No, no, no. I couldn’t agree with you more. And I took three weeks off. I was so devastated by the result of the election.

McNally:

Yeah, I’ve heard, actually, I’ve listened to podcasts that you did prior to the election, and it was clear that you had a bit of optimism...

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Smith:

I wouldn't say I'm feeling that great these days, like many of us. But I'll tell you the thing that triggered me. And I don't like that I was triggered, and I'm not sure I should be doing podcasts right now, but however...

McNally:

I appreciate that.

Smith:

Yes. Yeah. However, I will say that what triggers me is when the people we need add to the despair.

McNally:

Yeah...yeah...I hear you. And what I was doing was trying to ride that line you mentioned before - we can't be Pollyanna and we can't be all pessimism. I'm trying to ride. This is the reality.

Smith:

I get it. I understand.

McNally:

We're dealing with it. How do we deal with it? Yep.

Smith:

I get, and I can connect what you just said to what you did. I mean, it's a perfectly reasonable interpretation. It's not the one I had...

McNally:

Right, right. I hear you.

Smith:

Well, obviously what bothers me the most is what Trump and his cohort are doing. That bothers me the most.

But then if I'm thinking about how are we going to address that and win, the two things that trouble me the most. One is people who are saying, "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, we're all going to hell in a hand basket." And the other one is, "It's all going to be fine. Hang in there. Don't lose hope."- without concrete things that we can do.

I want concrete things that we can do. And by the way, it's got to be more - which I am doing, calling our congressmen - It's got to be more than that - our senators and so on. That's important. No question about it. Do not misinterpret this. And it's got to be more than taking to the streets.

We need a strategy for how we are going to get through this and defeat this threat to our democracy. We need a good strategy. We need an alternative. We need a vision. And we need

a strategy. That's what we need. And I'm looking for people who have that, and I don't see it, and it troubles me.

McNally:

Well, I agree with you, which is why I'm doing the searching.

Smith:

I know you do. I know you do. And I'm saying it pugnaciously, but I don't mean it in relation to you, Terrence.

McNally:

No, no, I know. I know. I'm just saying it is the search I'm onto to too. Which is again, why I sort of frame this conversation as - I know what we both want over time. How do you tap those impulses in the immediacy of the moment ... so that we're not trimming the brush while the house is on fire?

Smith:

Can I give a try at it now that I've calmed down somewhat retrieved my better self? Somewhat.

McNally:

Go ahead.

Smith:

But I may need your help, Terrence, if I go off the deep end again, and I'd say my apologies to your listeners, but for all I know they found it entertaining.

McNally:

No, I mean, it's the reality we're in.

Smith:

Yeah, I know. I know. You're very forgiving. I appreciate it. So let me give a try at it. Okay.

McNally:

Yeah.

Smith:

So there was an article that came out within days of the January 6th coup, insurrection, whatever you want to call it, in

McNally:

2021. Yep.

Smith:

2021. Within days of that, a guy by the name of Dan Simon published an article and he said, you know what? We're sort of taking a deep breath now because we just won this election and it looks like we've limited Trump's administration to one term. And he goes on to say, nothing could be clearer than that we're not out of the woods yet.

And he then reflects on why he came to that conclusion. And it was because he had just come across a book that had been recommended to him by a guy named Richard Hamilton. And the book was called, *Who Voted for Hitler?* and that was the name of Simon's article too. And the book traces in gory detail, the municipal elections in 1928, 1930, 1932, and 1933. And it's how Hitler first gained and then consolidated power. And it is so similar to how Trump gained and consolidated power in the US. It's unnerving. And so Hamilton ends the book - this is now in 1980, that Hamilton wrote this. It's not like we haven't had warning signals.

McNally:

Right.

Smith:

Okay. And he said, regrettably, one again sees the emergence of political gangsterism and the surfacing of totalitarian aspirations in many places throughout the world. And then he goes on to say different words, different symbols, and he goes, it is as if human beings were condemned to experience such things as a phase in an ever-recurring cycle. There is a task for the genuinely critical intellectual to break that cycle to assure a more human course for human affairs.

Now, that to me was a very important sentence because that task has never been more urgent. And it's not just for the critical intellectual, but for all of us. It's for all of us to take on that task. And the thing I wanted people to know is that millions of Americans are already undertaking that task.

McNally:

Yes.

Smith:

And they are resting our democracy back from extremists, and they've been doing it for over 20 years.

McNally:

Right

Smith:

And they've been rebuilding it on firmer ground. But the question we have to ask ourselves, okay, if we're going to succeed, is what leads this cycle to repeat?

McNally:

Mm..hmm...

Smith:

Because that's where the lever lies.

McNally:

Okay.

Smith:

And I have a hypothesis. Do you want me to give it to you?

McNally:

Tell you what, let me throw one sentence out there.

Smith:

Sure. Absolutely.

McNally:

And that may include your hypothesis or it may be tangential to it.

Smith:

Okay. Alright.

McNally:

And it's the other thing, when I mentioned that article that Packer had written and how people who were interests in the eighties now see each other as enemies. And what that does, and what I wrote at that point was that the lesson that runs through his article and has resonance far beyond Phoenix is that the cultivation, the cultivation of partisan polarization by the political parties and political players and the media to their benefits in terms of power, influence, and dollars, is the roadblock that chokes our ability to talk to each other and even begin to solve the critical problems we face.

Smith:

Okay. Read that sentence again, and if you don't mind, I'd like to just interrupt you for a second to point out something.

McNally:

Sure. Okay.

Smith:

So read it again if you could a little slowly.

McNally:

Sure.

Smith:

Allright.

McNally:

The lesson that runs through his article and his visit to Phoenix is, and has resonance, I think far beyond Phoenix, is that the cultivation of partisan polarization by the political parties, political players, and the media to their --

Smith:

Okay, I'm going to stop you there.

McNally:

Okay, go ahead.

Smith:

So there we have a causal statement. Cause-effect, and that is: the political parties and media... They are the actors in control and they're cultivating something. Okay, keep going, but I just want to underscore that.

McNally:

And it benefits them.

Smith:

Right. Okay. Understood. They're positive agents. Keep going. Keep going,

McNally:

And they gain power, influence, and money.

Smith:

Yup.

McNally:

They're doing so, however, creates a roadblock that chokes our ability to talk to each other and begin to solve the problems.

Smith:

Okay. Now let me stop there. Okay. So it creates a roadblock, and that roadblock is so powerful. It prevents us from talking to each other and solving our problems.

So the cause and effect goes from people in power creating a roadblock that leads us powerless. That's the logic I'm trying to fight cause I think the opposite is true. I think our inability to solve problems... We are vulnerable as a people because we live in these separate groups. Because we live in these separate groups and we never talk to each other.

That has been true since our founding that has made us vulnerable to being exploited by these people. That's on us. Only we can solve that problem. Only we can break out of these silos and talk to others.

I understand that that is hard. I understand that it's being exploited. I understand that the

people exploiting us are incredibly powerful. I get all of that, but I'm looking for how are we going to get out of this? And they're never going to stop doing that.

McNally:

That's right.

Smith:

They're never going to stop it.

McNally:

That's right.

Smith:

So w'e have got to empower ourselves and each other to break out of these silos and say, "Enough, already. Enough already. We are going to work together."

Now...Okay. So can I just say my hypothesis now, or you can respond to what I said if you'd like...

McNally:

No, go ahead...your hypothesis.

Smith:

Okay. So do you understand though?

McNally:

Oh yeah. Yeah.

Smith:

I'm saying I want to turn on its head the dominant narrative, which is we are being done to. And I'm saying we are vulnerable to being done to, and that's because we have a structure to our social society that is in our hands and of our making, and we can remake it.

The question is why does this cycle keep repeating? Why is democracy so often put at risk? Why does it so often die? Whether it's the Roman Empire or during the Civil War...Okay, what is that about? And Hannah Arendt said something like, the totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia were not the problem. They were the most horrific solution to a problem confronting all of humanity, how to live in a pluralist world. And humanity has yet to solve that problem. Okay...

But the question is, what exactly is the problem that plurality presents and how can we solve it without seeding power to authoritarians? So why is pluralism such a problem and how can we solve it without calling on Trump as daddy?

And to oversimplify what I say in *Remaking the Space Between Us*, the difficulty we face in a democracy like ours, a multi-group democracy, is that people across different groups must arrive at solutions that work for most of us, if not all of us. And they have to do it in the face of forces that drive groups apart.

McNally:
Yes.

Smith:

And we do not pay attention to those forces. And I'd like to say what they are, because if we paid attention to them, we could counter them. The first is a history in which people were sorted into groups and ranked along a hierarchy.

That's number one. And as James Baldwin said, "History is not in the past. It lives on in all of us." We have a history in which people were sorted into groups and ranked along a hierarchy.

The second is we share cultural beliefs - win-lose, zero sum. Cultural beliefs. We've all been raised with them. Those pit these groups that have been ranked along a hierarchy against one another so that, as one group tries to go up the hierarchy, it gets slapped down by another group. That then causes those win-lose zero sum cultural beliefs among groups... That causes widespread institutional breakdown, that then generates widespread mistrust.

And then the last is universal cognitive biases and emotional defenses prevent us from seeing our own role in perpetuating these forces rather than changing them.

And so we make ourselves vulnerable to people who are trying to divide us by not being able to solve problems that are affecting us in our communities. We can't solve them cause we're fighting each other. We're seeing each other as enemies.

Because we can't solve them ourselves, we look to Trump to solve them for us. If we could solve them ourselves, if we could make pluralism work, if we could work together across groups, we wouldn't need Trump, who is seen as a strong straight talking, independent enough guy who can cut through all the constant bickering and solve our problems for us. But if we could solve them ourselves, which by the way, millions of people are already doing across the country, but we never hear about it because the media doesn't cover it. The media doesn't tell us about it, so we don't know about it.

McNally:

Right. I mean, that's another contributing factor when you were listing those.

Smith:

Yeah. That's another contributing factor that doesn't explain it, because I'm a citizen and I managed to discover them.

McNally:

Right.

Smith:

I went and looked for them.

McNally:

Right. Yeah... Basically what I was seeing was, there's an external force trying to separate us because it's in their interest, and there's internal, psychological, emotional, intellectual biases that we have that insidiously may...

Smith:

Then there's a history, and there's institutions and there's cultural beliefs.

McNally:

So you've got to coming from all sorts of directions. What you're saying is, if the problems are big enough to cause this alarm, they're big enough for us to figure out how to overcome all those things that are trying to keep us apart.

Smith:

I think what I was saying...

McNally:

I think trust is one of the biggest issues we have. And so it seems to me at the very root, in the early stages of all of what you are talking about, and what I want you to do now is not theory, but practice. I want you to tell people stories and groups that are doing the right thing, the path forward. We've ended up saying, God, that as I said, the house is on fire. What do we do? But now let's talk about the long-term work that you...

Smith:

Okay, I'll tell you all about it. I'll tell you all about it. But first I want to say, just like we segregate groups into different groups, we segregate disciplines into different disciplines. And of the five forces - there's history, there's cultural beliefs, there's economic issues, there are institutional interests, and there's psychological issues. They all conspire, but at the bottom of it all is people's lack of responsibility for any of it. Because we are a country that was founded on rights, not responsibilities. And being responsible for our democracy does not come naturally to us, and we best start to take responsibility, or it's going to slip out of our fingers. But let me give you some example of people who are taking responsibility. Okay with that?

McNally:

Yes.

Smith:

Is that where you wanted me to go?

McNally:

Exactly.

Smith:

Alright. Well, first of all, I want to say that there are... When I did the book, I thought there were thousands. It ends up there like thousands and thousands of locally rooted, nationally connected groups with millions of people working together on problems that are affecting

their communities. And in doing that, they are breaking out of these silos and working across groups and getting to know each other. So they didn't go into it trusting one another. They came out of it trusting one another because they were working on common problems and they discovered that they had more in common than they thought.

So I'm just going to give you one example. My next Substack, which is coming out in a few days, has links to all of this. So you can find...

McNally:
Excellent,

Smith:
...find the links. One that I found really interesting recently... This is after I published the book... I kept doing the research - was Eleven Tennesseans. These are people from Tennessee, funnily enough being Tennessean and highly divided by their different political beliefs about guns. So you guns' right activists and gun control activists - diametrically opposed. And after a school shooting, they decided to come together and see if they couldn't agree on a way forward. And I think there were eleven of them, and the first thing they did was they talked about their experience of...They didn't immediately start debating the second amendment. What they did is they talked about how they'd experienced guns in their lives.

McNally:
Mm...hmm..

Smith:
So the gun rights activists talked about how guns had been something they did with their fathers or their sons, and connecting with nature and a lot of them were ethical hunters. And how you would go about making sure that if you were to shoot a deer or another animal, you did it in a way that was...

So the gun rights activists have this whole relationship with guns that they associate with all sorts of good things in life. And the gun control activists spoke about how they had lost people through gun violence, how it affected their lives, the lives of their families, the lives of their communities. And on the video of their conversations, which again, I will link to, you can see both groups scratching their heads and saying, "How come I didn't understand this before?"

McNally:
Right...Why is this new to me?

Smith:
I would never have thought this... completely different than what I would've imagined. And they started working together and after some number of weeks, I think it was, I could be wrong on the timing, they came up with a proposal that they jointly agreed to on reasonable legislation for curbing gun violence. And then they brought it to the Tennessee legislature. And, of course, the Tennessee legislature didn't do anything when they brought it. They blew it off.

And so my biggest worry is that a number of people would just say, "Well, you see what happens, you get to the legislature and it gets blown off. What can you do?" And I go, "Well,

they obviously never saw the movie Rocky.” I mean, it doesn't matter how many times you're knocked down, you get up and you get in there and you do it again and you keep coming back. And that's what these folks are doing.

Another example that's very powerful, and there's a video too, is after October 7th in the Middle East, when Hamas attacked Israel and Israel retaliated by attacking Gaza, a Palestinian and an Israeli, both of whom had lost people in that moment, got together to talk with each other about how they could break the cycle of violence together. It doesn't get worse than that, harder than that.

McNally:
Right...

Smith:
Do you want me to give some more examples? I'm happy to.

McNally:
Sure. You've got Billings, Montana and Lewiston, Maine were just examples...

Smith:
Lewiston Maine is a really good one because it's counterintuitive to what people assume.

McNally:
That's right.

Smith:
So Maine is the whitest state in the nation. It's so white even their snow's white. And they have a city called Lewiston, which is the whitest city, and so it's completely white. And Lewiston is going down the tubes. It was an old mill town, and economically it was going down the tubes. And they had a town manager, this is probably 10 years ago, maybe a little bit more. And he said, the only way we're going to revive this town is if we get more people. You need people to invite industry and business, but the people are leaving because there's no industry and business. So it's Catch 22. He said, immigrants, that's our solution.

But what do we do when most of the immigrants coming in are people of color? He said, well, we'll make it work. He went about recruiting Somalis who had settled in the southern part of the United States, but they were finding it very hard to gain traction there. And they had heard through informal immigrant networks that Lewiston actually had pretty good schools and inexpensive housing. And so they went to Lewiston. And things were going well, and they were starting to revive the industry, and they were opening up stores and they were actually putting money in the coffers - doing the opposite of what people are afraid of, which is that they're going to take money away.

And this is a great example of what we're up against. All of a sudden, the town mayor wrote a letter to the immigrant community, saying to the Somalis, could you please slow down the rate of immigration because we can't afford to provide the social services that your

community needs, and the liberal left among whom I count myself as a paying member, but whom I think makes some big mistakes from time to time.

McNally:

Oh yeah.

Smith:

...got into a huge uproar and started demonstrating against him, which then got covered by the *New York Times* because they love covering intergroup conflict. Love it. Oh my God. It's what sells their papers. And that then brought the Ku Klux Klan to town.

McNally:

Oh my God.

Smith:

And that is what is wrong with what's happening? Okay. That sequence right there. And that could have been nipped in the bud if after that letter, which by the way got interpreted very differently by different groups. Some people said it was a racist attack. Some people said he was well intended, but oblivious. And it went on and on and on. But the one that won out was, he's a racist and we have to fight back.

And by the way, he very well could have been racist, but that doesn't mean that the best way to fight back is to do something so polarizing that you bring the *New York Times* to town. And then the Ku Klux Klan. Anyway, after that happened, a guy, I'm going to block his name... He was the worst. He made Trump look like a moderate back in the day. He ran for governor and he won with only 33% of the vote because it was a split vote.

McNally:

LePage,

Smith:

Thank you. ... talk about setbacks. These were setbacks, right? And instead, what happened is White Mainers and Black Mainers, old Mainers and new Mainers, meaning immigrants, came together and built the Maine Political Alliance. And it was a multiracial, multi-class alliance that was able to fight back on many of the things that LePage tried to pass. And also got ranked choice voting, which in Maine ended up making it so that people like LePage... It's a controversial election mechanism for complicated reasons. But in this case...

McNally:

We've dealt with it on the show. But yeah, we won't go it into it, but there are alternatives to winner take all.

Smith:

There are alternatives to winner take all, and it's a necessary but insufficient solution, and it won't get passed as long as we the people are so divided. But, that said, it did help get LePage out because he couldn't win under that construct. But more importantly, as Heather McGhee in the book, *The Sum of Us* - a wonderful book - says that alliance allowed people to

completely reframe how they saw one another, and that is the kind of informal movement we need across the country for groups that have been isolated from one another - isolation being what tyranny lives off of.

McNally:
Sure.

Smith:

...to get people to stop being so isolated from one another and working together.

And then the other one is Not in Our Town, which was Billings, Montana, back in 1998, I think it was. A Native American home was vandalized. It was some white nationalists wrote, "Die", and a swastika on the side of the house. And then a kid's menorah, which he had put in the window, was broken when a brick went through his window. He was six years old. And then African-Americans at their church were terrorized by a group of skinheads. And this all happened in a relatively short period of time.

And the town responded first with the painter's union going and painting the Native American home. And, when asked why they did it, they said, "What do you mean? I mean, they're are neighbors. Don't they do that elsewhere?" And then White neighbors started to accompany African-American congregants to their church. And then the local newspaper published a picture of a menorah, and hundreds and hundreds of homes hung the menorah in their windows.

A woman by the name of Patrice O'Neill, who was an independent filmmaker, did a documentary which you can find on PBS, called *Not In Our Town*. She showed that film to folks out in California where she's from, and then she said, "Well, what do you think of these people in Billings, Montana?" And they go, "We don't want to talk about Billings. We want to talk about our town."

McNally:
Sure.

Smith:

We want to talk about how we can build a town of belonging such that hate can't take root. And based on that, a national movement took off. And now there are thousands of Not in Our Town groups across the country. And they have alliances. This is what's so critical. Alliances are absolutely critical - alliances of law enforcement, faith leaders, educators, teenagers, elderly people, people across race, working together to figure out how can they create communities of belonging that will not allow hate to take root. And that is what is going to get us out of this mess.

McNally:

Absolutely. As I think I said once before, if our problems are big enough to divide us, they must be big enough to bring us together because we have to solve them. And the last thing I want you to do, Diana, is give a couple of links because I want people to be able to find good news instead of just if it bleeds, it leads. And I want people to be able to find those

organizations that are all around the country that are working together to build communities across what are usually lines of division.

Smith:

Well, first of all, on the news front, a group of journalists came together a while back and wanted to change the nature of journalism so that it didn't lead with what bleeds. And so they formed an organization called Solutions Journalism Network. And if you go to solutionsjournalism.org, you'll go to their website and at the top along the menu, you'll see Who We Are, Impact, Programs, Directory... and then towards the right, you'll see Solutions Story Tracker. Okay. These are all stories about people around the world, but especially in what we're talking about now in our country who are not just talking about the problems people cause, but the solutions people are creating to those problems. And one of the things that they said early on is, "We have a distribution problem, which is that somebody in one community might solve a problem, but nobody hears about it in another." So, for example, I just told you about Maine. Think about what happened in Ohio during the campaign...

McNally:

Right...

Smith:

People in Ohio hadn't heard of Maine. I think they probably still haven't heard of Maine. That's really a problem because it's the identical problem.

McNally:

Oh my God. As you were saying it, that's what I was thinking. Of course.

Smith:

Absolutely the identical problem. And there were a lot of people in Ohio who were fighting the divisiveness. The father of the little boy who got killed on the school bus in an accident with an immigrant who didn't have a valid license... That event got blown up, and the father said, "Don't you dare use my son to divide us." Okay. Anyway, so that's Solutions Journalism Network. Can't recommend it highly enough. That's one. Obviously the book is another place you can find a gazillion stories...

McNally:

... and the website.

Smith:

Well, the website's important because I've now worked very hard to create two sections. One's called Listen and Read, and the others Learn and Act and under Learn and Act, you will see a lot of organizations listed there.

McNally:

Let me just say to people, I always on the show say, "...and the website to learn more." Very often, that website might just have their bio and a few articles. Diana and her team have put together a website that is made to help you put into practice what we've been talking about. It's a resource.

Smith:

Learn and Act is a great section. And now I'm feeling very badly about my bad behavior at the beginning of the podcast. I know you'll forgive me, Terence, but I hope your listeners do as well.

McNally:

And will you forgive yourself? Yeah, no, no. Look, what that did was that demonstrated the sort of the intensity of the moment, and if not the fragility, the vulnerability of our psyches.

Smith:

Right. And hopefully the ability to recoup...

McNally:

Exactly ... as we did.

Smith:

Yeah.

McNally:

In essence, the episode includes the problem and the solution.

Smith:

Well, that's a good way to put it...and I hope it doesn't overshadow the substantive part of the conversation.

McNally:

Yeah, yeah. Well, I'll edit it so that I will have that in mind.

Smith:

People are people. I'm a people. I can live with the fact that I fail from time to time. I don't need to be protected, honestly. But I appreciate the thought greatly. I do. It's kind of you. And so I look forward to not listening to it, but I will have my friend Emily, listen to it. She can tell me how awful I was. Alright, Terence, a pleasure.

McNally:

Let me me tell people, the new book is REMAKING THE SPACE BETWEEN US: *How Citizens Can Work Together to Build a Better Future for All* and the website is remakingthespace.org or you can look for Diana Smith at Substack

For this conversation and many other interviews and articles, and to join me in pursuit of a world that just might work go to terrencemcnally.net or a worldthatjustmightwork.com - the same website.

If you want to get my weekly announcement telling you who's going to be on, what we're going to talk about, and links to 10 or 15 articles to flesh out the conversation, email me at temcnally@mac.com. You can sign up at my site or at most of those podcast sites to get the podcast. You'll find years of podcasts there - Michael Lewis, Naomi Klein, Bill McKibben, Van

Jones, Greg Boyle, George Packer. You can follow me on Twitter @mcnallyterrence. Thanks to Kiyana Williams in production, George Vasilopoulos at Progressive Voices, and most of all, you, my listeners. Please share this podcast widely.

And finally, thank you, Diana McLain Smith. Keep up your good work.

Smith:

Hey, Terrence, you too. And I can't wait to hear what Brian and Vanessa have to say. I'm big fans of theirs.

McNally:

Very good.

Smith:

Alright. Okay. You take care...see you...

McNally:

Have a great day out there in the snow.

Smith:

I will. And you in California. Take care.