PART I

The Polluted Public Square

The public square is that literal and symbolic place where we meet to discuss and debate problems of the commons. It may be a church basement, a television studio or around a water cooler, but most importantly the public square is a place where citizens gather to discuss important community matters, governance and participate in democracy.

Our public squares should be forums for open and honest, higher-quality debate, but sadly, these meeting places have become polluted by a toxic mix of polarized rhetoric, propaganda and miscommunication. A dark haze of unyielding one-sidedness has poisoned public discourse and created an atmosphere of mistrust and disinterest. In this first part of *I'm Right*, we will examine how we all pollute the public square, and how we can make space for healthier dialogue.

SECTION A

Smashing Heads Doesn't Open Minds

1

Like Ships in the Night

with Daniel Yankelovich *and* Steve Rosell

We have an almost extreme situation
where the very intelligent elites are sort of
mumbling, and bumbling, and proceeding
as if they were communicating—when they're not.

Daniel Yankelovich

When I first began thinking about writing this book, I invited Steve Rosell to lunch at a little Italian restaurant across the bay from San Francisco in Sausalito, California. I wanted his reaction to my early thoughts. I also wanted to convince him that my ideas were worthy of an interview with his famous colleague, social scientist Daniel Yankelovich, whom I had first met more than a decade earlier. I had read his brilliant books and valued his thinking tremendously. Born in 1924, Yankelovich is the author of twelve books and has held professorships or other academic affiliations with New York University, the graduate faculty of the New School for Social Research, the University of California and Harvard University.[1] Together, Rosell and Yankelovich are pioneers in an evolving field that uses dialogue to deal with highly polarized public conflict.

During my lunch with Rosell, I mentioned I was considering calling my next book *Duped and How*, and he immediately expressed concern that such an inflammatory title would set the

book up, right at the outset, as a polarizing piece of work. Starting with a title that seems to say "I'm right and you're an idiot" is not the best way to influence people or help them move toward considered judgment, said Rosell, who has a doctoral degree from Cornell, has been an advisor to numerous international agencies and major corporations and worked with four Canadian prime ministers.[2]

Rosell emphasized his point by recalling the 2011 debt ceiling crisis in Washington DC, when everyone argued up until the last minute. This kind of debate, or "debacle" as he called it, is totally ineffective and seemed to him like a stalled airplane was hurtling toward Earth, while everyone in the cockpit argued about what to do. Rosell said conspiracy theorists assume there is a clever plan behind such combative exchanges, but the scarier truth is that when it comes to today's political posturing, there is no great and clever plan: "Nobody is pulling the strings. It's just out of control," he said.

I was conflicted by this conversation. On one hand, I was reluctant to change the title I proposed because I was angry about the pervasive propaganda and underhanded public relations trickery I was witnessing, deceit that conceals the gravity of so many environmental issues. Few speak out about this dark art, and I was keen to expose its perils, the spell it casts over unsuspecting victims. At the same time, how could I dismiss his wisdom? Rosell argued that assuming this stance would slam the door on many thoughtful, open-minded readers.

Later, I realized that by starting out with a polarizing position and aggressive posture emblazoned across the cover of my book, I could ironically and precisely illustrate the conflict-heavy tone I disapprove of. So, thank you, Steve, for the title.

I wanted to hear the reactions of these two social scientists to David Suzuki's question, and also learn more about the power of dialogue, how to mend broken conversations and achieve clear, collaborative communication so we can triangulate issues in inno-

vative ways and find creative solutions. I was interested in their thoughts about the state of public discourse, propaganda, polarization, activism and the work I had described in my book *Climate Cover-Up*.[3]

Rosell set up the interview,[4] we three sat down together in San Diego, and Yankelovich got right to the point when he said polarization is dangerous because it interrupts lines of communication and leads to gridlock. It stops us from tackling urgent problems because without consensus we cannot take effective action. Rather than highlighting our differences, he said we should be working toward finding common ground, and moving into a place where we can reserve judgment until we have considered other ways to approach controversial issues.

Yankelovich once wrote: "Democracy requires space for compromise, and compromise is best won through acknowledging the legitimate concerns of the other. We need to bridge opposing positions, not accentuate differences."[5] He added that any unyielding one-sidedness creates a mood of corrosive bitterness. Worst of all, it is a formula for losing the battle, whether it's a war on terror or combating global warming. Taking a polarized attitude toward critical issues will inevitably yield answers that are dogmatic—and wrong—and keep us from arriving at truth.

"It's sad to say, but our culture favors debate, advocacy and conflict over dialogue and deliberation," Yankelovich said. These adversarial forms of discourse have their uses when attacking special interests in a courtroom or on television when we want our talking heads to be entertaining, but they're the wrong way to cope with the gridlock that threatens to paralyze our society. He said today's typical model of mass communication—"where people are not listening, being mistrustful, being polarized, not sharing the same basic understandings or mental frameworks"—distorts any possible discussion. We desperately need to find common ground.

Yankelovich believes the quality of public discourse today is "very poor" partly because people are generally inattentive to

public affairs and because the media plays by its own rules. In addition, our public discourse is undermined by a lack of understanding about the rules of communication.

In particular, the scientific community is largely innocent of the rules of public discourse. So we have very gifted experts offering abstract, technical, difficult, highly qualified statements, and a media that presents what these people say in the form of controversy. "And since it involves an awful lot of inconvenience, people prefer to ignore it saying: 'If you people can't agree, what do you expect of us?'"

The scientific community assumes the same rules of communication are always applicable and rational, that people are attentive, open-minded, persuaded by facts and believe that those who are presenting information are people of goodwill, and not deliberately trying to manipulate them. But none of those things are true.

Communicating under conditions of mistrust requires a different approach, said Yankelovich, who spent the first 30 years of his career in market research. Under these circumstances, the first step is to acknowledge the skepticism or concern people feel, and then encourage them to reason why in this particular instance it isn't applicable. The approach should be: the burden of proof is on us; performance should exceed expectations; promises should be few and faithfully kept; core values must be made explicit and framed in ethical terms; anything but plain talk is suspect; bear in mind that noble goals with flawed execution will be seen as hypocrisy, not idealism.

When dealing with conditions of inattention, the objective is obvious: get people to listen. If they are mistrustful at the start, they won't listen, even to fair and balanced points of view by distinguished and credible scientists. So a key place to begin thinking about this is for policy makers and scientists to recognize that communication is not going on when they think it is. "We have an almost extreme situation where the very intelligent elites are

sort of mumbling, and bumbling, and proceeding as if they were communicating—when they're not."

Yankelovich explained that university professors are used to communicating under conditions of trust and assume the public knows they act in good faith and will therefore accept their version of things. Well that's not true either, said the expert. Communicating under conditions of mistrust and political polarization is very different than communicating under conditions of trust. When we understand these elements—inattention, mistrust and polarization—it's clear why the truth about global warming has become so distorted.

Yankelovich added that the advertising profession has developed ways to communicate under conditions of mistrust and inattention, and others should too.

This is also where authentic conversation comes in. Yankelovich believes dialogue is not an arcane and esoteric intellectual exercise. It is a practical, everyday tool that is accessible to all, and when we use dialogue rather than debate, we gain completely different insights into the ways people see the world. Those who say they are "dialogued out" are actually tired of the lack of real dialogue, because most dialogue is just disguised monologue.

During our interviews, Yankelovich and Rosell explained the clear differences between dialogue and debate: in debate we assume we have the right answer, whereas dialogue assumes we all have pieces of the answer and can craft a solution together. Debate is combative and about winning, while dialogue is collaborative and focuses on exploring the common good. Debaters defend their assumptions and criticize the views of others, whereas in dialogue we reveal assumptions and reexamine all positions, including our own.

I especially appreciated their comment that debate is about seeing weaknesses in other people's positions, while dialogue is about searching for strength and value in our opponents' concerns.

This means approaching environmental issues with an attitude that we could be wrong and others could be right.

Yankelovich stressed the special form of communication called *dialogue* is only needed when people don't share the same framework, when ordinary conversation fails and people are passing each other "like ships in the night." Authentic dialogue takes some effort to achieve and would not be worth the trouble if we could accomplish it with something simpler. In other words, when everybody is singing off the same sheet, shares the same values, goals and framework, we can all communicate just fine. But when we have highly educated scientists communicating with poorly educated citizens, as well as policy makers and people from the oil industry, it's obvious that everybody brings a different frame to the issue.

Climate change is a perfect storm when it comes to communication, because it involves a broad array of stakeholders, people with differing values, frameworks and levels of education—all being whipped up by winds of passion and emotion. Rosell added that a growing gap between elites and the general public breeds mistrust between those different universes of discourse. "Government folks talk in jargon, and scientists talk about data. The public talks a different language, and you have to earn their trust. You can't assume trust anymore."

In our lawyer-ridden society, the dominant mode of communication is advocacy, Yankelovich observed. Advocates are trying to sell something, whereas dialogue needs people who will listen, pay attention and suspend judgment so there is enough shared framework that even if people disagree, they can find some common ground.

When I asked Yankelovich how he became absorbed in the world of dialogue, he described an interesting journey. After having trained in philosophy and psychology, he moved into market research and public opinion polling, but was disappointed in the

level of public discourse and the fact people rarely gave thoughtful, considered responses. He noticed this kind of "raw" opinion has certain structural characteristics. For one thing, it is full of contradictions. Ask people the same question at different times and you get different answers. Change the wording slightly and answers change again. People's views are inconsistent, and most importantly, people don't tend to think through the consequences of their views.

Having isolated these characteristics, Yankelovich determined to find out under what conditions people could move from raw opinion to more thoughtful judgment, where their views would be consistent and where they would be aware of the consequences. In the course of trying to answer these questions, he came upon dialogue, and that led to his ongoing work on how to improve the quality of public discourse and public trust.

Yankelovich and Rosell have identified a process they call the *public learning curve* that describes maturing public opinions, where people's views evolve from poorly informed reactions to more thoughtful conclusions. The three-stage process begins with building awareness and consciousness (where advocates and the media typically do a good job). The second stage involves working through wishful thinking and denial, resistance to change and mistrust, grasping at straws, deliberate obfuscation and lack of urgency (which is where dialogue comes in). The third part of the learning curve is when people come to resolution (which is handled by decision makers and governance institutions). "Much of our work focuses on improving the 'working through' stage, which our society does not handle well and where critical issues like climate change can get stuck for years or decades," said Rosell.

The dialogue specialists have developed tools and techniques to accelerate this process, but it still takes time and Rosell explained that's to be expected. Experts in all fields have taken many years to master a sphere of knowledge and understand an issue. "There

is an assumption that somehow the public will do that instantly, but they don't. They need time to work through the learning curve, and it can take decades in some cases."

In conclusion, Rosell emphasized: "Public discourse matters, public confidence matters, and trust matters if you want to achieve anything collectively. But what's going on now is not competent, not effective, not legitimate, and it's undermining public trust."

The ability to have an honest conversation is a tremendous national and public resource, but what Rosell sees happening now is a deliberate attempt to fracture society. We've all been exposed to this during election campaigns, when we hear outlandish attacks, out-of-control PR and distorted information, but Rosell said this conduct has a cost when it enters everyday life. "You keep doing that, and doing that, and you basically pollute the commons."

Protecting the public square and the public good is an objective worthy of support, he said, and by working to create a climate of trust, a community of discourse, we build up capital that we can use to deal with tricky issues in the future. On the other hand, when public conversations are corrupted, when we can't think things through because of a tangle of polarization, attack rhetoric and failure of experts to communicate, it is difficult if not impossible for people to move from raw to considered opinion. It is hard enough to go through these stages when we are exposed to clear arguments and healthy discourse, he said, and added that people can surprise themselves when they find common ground and manage to talk and disagree in a different way.

2

The Advocacy Trap

with Roger Conner

There are a few profoundly evil people in the world,
but if you think you're surrounded by them,
you probably need to change your own psyche.

Roger Conner

When we look at the miserable state of public discourse today and how we are polluting the public square, it's plain to see that many people believe the problem derives from evil on "the other side." But this kind of pollution comes from all around the square—including our side—and as long as we think somebody else is the source of it, we're unlikely to ever see our way through it. The problem is structural and derives from human psychology, the way we look at the world and ill-intentioned and well-intentioned sources alike. It also arises from the nature of advocacy.

My ideas about this book were still developing when I came across the work of lobbyist, litigator and consensus builder Roger Conner. Conner has spent close to half a century studying public discourse and now teaches a course on non-litigation strategies for social and political change at Vanderbilt Law School in Nashville, Tennessee. Conner told me that my pollution analogy is particularly apt when applied to climate change because smog was long believed to come from factories. Eventually we acknowledged the

possibility that it was individual car drivers who were causing the greatest harm—a controversial view when first advanced.[1]

Conner says that most of us aren't evil, and good people sometimes do bad things for good reasons. If we don't understand that, we fall into something he calls the *advocacy trap*, which happens when we come to believe that people who disagree with us are wrongdoers. This judgment causes us to become locked into such a foe stance that we lose sight of our purpose. People can't collaborate to solve global or systemic problems when we treat one another as enemies.

Roger Conner acknowledged he spent the first part of his career as a "name 'em, blame 'em, shame 'em advocate" and thought he had learned everything he needed to know about advocacy in Sunday school: "There was David and Goliath, and I was always David. There was Moses and Pharaoh, and I was always Moses." What these Biblical heroes did exceedingly well was identify the source of evil, name it and crush it.

Conner was caught up by that brilliant simplicity, and his first gig as an advocate was in the environmental movement, running the West Michigan Environmental Action Council. His motto there was We fight evil and do good. But then Conner went to Washington DC to work on immigration issues and was in for a shock. He discovered a whole other cadre of people who thought that they were David and he was Goliath; "they wanted to destroy me" Conner realized. Still, he decided the way to be a successful advocate was to redouble his efforts to overcome his enemies. The media loved him, and soon Conner was appearing on every major talk show in the US and was a regular on CNN's *Crossfire*.

One day he was invited to the US National Institute of Justice to work on crime and disorder issues "at a time when big cities in the US were falling apart"; while working at the local level, Conner had a eureka moment. For the first time in his life, he found his tried-and-true approach—identifying the correct solution, identifying the enemy and overcoming the enemy—didn't work.

"If you're trying to get rid of a group of drug dealers, maybe that works. But you can't deal with police that way, or neighborhood organizations or the public defender." He went back to the drawing board and began earnestly researching local communities all around the US that were successfully tackling crime. In every instance, Conner found people who were historically on the Left working effectively with people on the Right.

Solutions were evolving wherever members of the community and police worked collaboratively, where people were suspending areas of disagreement and seeking common goals. Perhaps most importantly, Conner realized it was impossible to understand the problems, let alone create solutions, without deeply hearing what people were saying. The result? At the end of his research, he found himself "essentially unemployable," as he no longer believed in the effectiveness of any of his former advocacy tools.

The solution must lie in more peacemakers, Conner surmised, and for a decade, he toiled as a professional peacemaker on public policy issues. But he realized the greater challenge was to create new, more sophisticated advocates. At Vanderbilt Law School, while consulting to a couple of foundations, Conner witnessed how many public policy issues devolved into shoving matches in which neither side fully understood the problem. He saw people blinded by their own resentments and hatred.

Conner set out to understand why this was happening and began reading works by people like Harvard public policy lecturer and author Marshall Ganz and Martin Luther King, "people who are less theoretical and more practical." He had previously thought that professional Washington lobbyists were bad people engaging in polarizing conduct, but then asked himself, "Could it be that we have good people doing bad things for good reasons?" On the whole, yes, he said, and he added this is at the root of polarized public discourse.

Concerning environmental campaigns against oil and gas pipelines in Canada, Conner admonished, "If you think that the

whole movement of people advocating for the pipeline in Canada is made up of people who are either evil or idiots, I can almost assure you with great certainty that's not accurate."

I found his answer surprising and slightly irritating, but Connor sees effective advocacy as a way to change the flow of events in the public life of a community by altering the way key individuals and groups think, feel and act. "The flow of events is complex, like a river with many tributaries," and the effective advocate seeks to alter that stream by guiding individuals and institutions to change their behavior.

Conner said there are two obvious ways to change behavior—by pushing and pulling—and one less obvious way involving collaboration. The push approach makes a person do something whether they want to or not, and the pull strategy involves cajoling someone through education, incentives or warnings. The third option operates like a well-functioning community team and entails solving specific problems through deep forms of collaboration in which participants may agree to disagree on other matters. The collaboration strategy requires all participants to step off their narrow paths, surrender individual egos and agendas. No one ever does it perfectly, and at first Conner thought these three fundamentals were the whole answer.

But it soon occurred to him there is another dimension. Conner calls it *stance*. Stance is about attitudes we hold toward another person or group, and allows us to describe others as friend or foe, from bosom buddies down the spectrum to bitter enemies. (Conner uses the term *friend* not in the sense of liking a person but to signify that we respect them and accept they are decent, even though they hold other opinions.)

Conner explained that the most common strategy when trying to overpower someone believed to have evil interests is push-foe, whereas push-friend would be utilized when working with a government official or legislator who agrees with you. Pushing in this

instance is done from a place of respect and care. You wouldn't want to cause this person to lose her or his job. You wouldn't call them names. A pull-friend or collaboration-friend strategy is usually stable and sustained over time, as is a foe-push strategy. Why in the latter case? Because unfortunately, most of us have attitudes toward other people or groups that are determined by their behavior toward us. "If you behave like my enemy, I understand you are my enemy." If you behave like a self-interested, profit-seeking, care-nothing-for-the-environment person and call me a liar, I see you as my enemy, Conner said. So we commonly allow our stance to be determined by other people's behavior.

This leads to what Conner calls the advocacy trap. People don't start out as enemies—it happens in stages. When people disagree with us, we first question their views, but eventually we question their motives and intentions. When they persist in their disagreement with us, we start to perceive them as aggressors. When they criticize our cause or condemn our reasoning, our defense mechanisms kick in. We are offended and start to get angry. When both sides in an argument draw their stance from the perceived behavior of the other, people eventually start treating each other as not just wrong but as wrongdoer, and then as enemies. Once that happens, it is almost impossible to do anything over a sustained period of time other than futilely push one another.

Conner observed that the advocacy trap is very much like other seductive but ultimately self-destructive pleasures. In the short run, it provides attention, "from the all-important media and applause, not to mention money, from their base, but in the long run this behavior prevents them [advocates] from fulfilling the calling that drew them into public advocacy in the first place."

Effective advocates need to shift from push, to collaborate, to pull as circumstances change. It's very difficult to engage in genuine collaboration or even compromise with someone you consider untrustworthy, evil or despicable. In a sustained dispute, if both

parties draw their impressions from the perceived behavior of the other, each of them mirrors what they think the other is doing. It doesn't take long for them to look at each other with profound distrust. Once the advocacy trap is set, breaking the circle of blame is extraordinarily difficult. To escape this rancorous circle, an advocate needs to stand up and walk away. In three decades of experience, Conner has seen no other solution to such inflamed situations. To explicitly and consciously choose a stance of respect, or better yet empathy and compassion—and to do so without expectation of reciprocity, is exceedingly hard. But letting go of the foe stance can break a stalemate.

Conner does not suggest people stop fighting for what they believe in, but he counsels us all to police our attitudes so we can learn to push sometimes, pull sometimes, collaborate sometimes and remain limber enough to sway back and forth, like a light-footed boxer, as the situation demands. Too much aggression will automatically and absolutely increase the energy the other side is devoting to an issue, he explained. "Nothing's so common as powerful groups creating resistance by overplaying their hands and dealing in ungenerous or resentful ways."

Roger Conner, who is also a consultant on advocacy strategies, conflict resolution and polarization, said it takes conscious thought and discipline to generate our attitudes toward others from the inside, rather than having them develop from the outside. But people who monitor their attitudes toward others, and don't allow resentment to boil up, can actually hear what others are saying. A good police officer employs that skill so an angry drunk can't provoke them. A wise doctor does not become emotionally upset when a child with multiple gunshot wounds comes into the ER. Parents do this too, when raising children. Of course, some kids are smart enough to get under their parents' skins, but a smart parent can overcome that, just as a good CEO does. Few of us practice this skill of not letting our perceptions control our

attitudes, and as a result, we hand over control of a vital part of our cognitive machinery to someone else.

In a 2005 paper titled "Strategy and Stance,"[2] Conner said a leader such as Martin Luther King refused to fall into the advocacy trap because he refused to allow his stance to be a reflection of the behavior of others. He did not give others the right or the power to determine his attitude. The same was true of Mahatma Gandhi, who refused to hate those who imprisoned him. To use the entire range of strategic options, a public advocate must avoid thinking of others as foes.

Conner observed that it is no surprise that good people do bad things for good reasons. And the advocacy trap is to be expected in a political arena where people disagree, just as it's normal for a swamp to stink at night. "But what has changed in the current environment, compared to when I first started 40 or 50 years ago, is the increasing number of people involved in advocacy." Sheer volume is creating more polarization as more people are treating one another as enemies.

The antidote is to develop a greater capacity for self-awareness and self-control because "resentment is like a drug. It feels good to go home and say: 'Those assholes! Those jerks! Those liberals. Those conservatives…I'm right, they're wrong.'" Self-righteousness becomes a fuel that can justify "damn near anything." Conner has seen how resentment escalates in groups that start out only mildly resentful of each other. Discussion grows about how the other side is misusing information or ways in which they're making unjust attacks. "The truth is we all have some degree of uncertainty, and we go to this self-righteous place to protect ourselves from that uncertainty." Righteous indignation is necessary to act in the face of injustice, but self-righteousness develops when you cannot admit there may be an error in your point of view—or the possibility the other side is motivated by something other than evil. "I believe it's possible to think somebody is completely wrong,

but also to believe they are a decent person who has somehow got it wrong." If you can hold that thought, you will avoid falling into the advocacy trap.

In conclusion, Conner urges advocates to abandon the foe stance and hold every person in your vision with respect. If you need to do it for religious reasons by saying every person is a child of God, try that. If you need to do it for psychological reasons and say, "I don't know what childhood experiences this person had that led them to behave this way," try that. Start by assuming others' intentions are good, and believing the leader of an organization deserves respect.

In Conner's experience, it's better to be clearheaded and respectful when pushing a strategy. It leads to greater understanding. Push strategies are often essential to wake someone up, but you need to switch to pull and then move toward collaboration as soon as possible. Success comes from understanding another's needs so fully that you can reshape the future together.