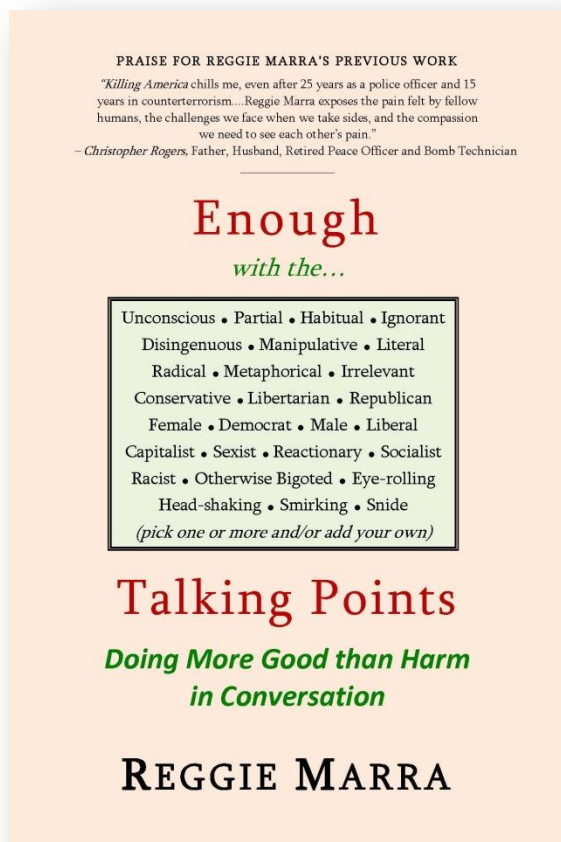


## An Example of a ‘Conversation’ that Does More Harm than Good

by Reggie Marra



What follows here is an example of the type of exchange that led me, some six years ago, to begin a process that manifested in the writing, and publication in June 2020, of [Enough with the...Talking Points: Doing More Good than Harm in Conversation](#).

The intention of this ‘conversational review’ is to point out the type of thinking, reacting and writing that doesn’t do any good, and not to take one or another side in the content of the exchanges. If I miss the mark toward that end, I welcome clear, substantive feedback that points to it.

The *primary* exchange is between ‘commenters’ Rick, Gus and Gary, with other commenters contributing as well. The first comment for each commenter is **bolded**.

My exploration of each comment, through some of the lenses in the book, is in **red font**.

These lenses include, and are not limited to: recognizing “cultural givens,” personal experience, preconceptions, judgments, assumptions, labels, insults, and sweeping

generalizations; differentiating facts and opinions; staying curious on and committed to the path of learning; knowing your intention in conversation; seeking and recognizing similarities as well as differences; staying focused on the topic of the conversation; understanding emotion; embodying another’s story; exploring the impact of getting or not getting one’s way (who wins and who loses); understanding the difference between truth and *truthfulness*, and committing to both. There’s more, but these will suffice for now. Not all of these lenses are explored below.

My intention in what follows is to provide a more-or-less-brief example of what the book addresses. I don’t do this with any definitive sense of being “right,” but I do approach it with 40+ years of engaging with human development and various forms of conversation that do more good than harm, and having spent major parts of the last two years developing the book.

The names of the “commenters” are pseudonyms (except mine). Not every comment in the thread is reproduced here – a few other folks chimed in, but did not stay in the thread; each comment that appears is reproduced unedited.

Thanks to Sal who has read the book and decided not to get involved in the thread, except to mention that it could appear as an example in a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

As you read through this, note which comments, **including those in red**, bring up an emotional charge for you. Get curious as to why. Explore a bit. Reflect. Think and feel critically. Commit to the truth.

My **comments in red** refer to the statement immediately above them. I used a bulleted form to provide more white space and make the piece easier to read.

\*Note also that because of the format of social media exchanges, unless the commenter directly addresses the person he or she is responding to, it is not always clear to whom each subsequent comment is directed. This thread is a clear example of why social media generally are not effective for any kind of authentic, rational exchange of ideas or opinions. But you knew that.

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**(Original Post) Reggie:** "When asked if he found (John) Lewis' life impressive, Trump responded, 'He didn't come to my inauguration. He didn't come to my State of the Union speeches. And that's OK. That's his right. And, again, nobody has done more for Black Americans than I have.'"

Atta boy, Don, way to stay with the question, hold that big picture, and conclude with a whopper with a straight face.

Full interview here: <https://www.axios.com/full-axios-hbo-interview-donald-trump...>

- Donald Trump deflected the question about John Lewis's life and spoke about Lewis's decision not to attend specific events that were important to him (Trump) – this is an example of not focusing on the topic being discussed/question asked.
- Trump has a history of reflecting events and questions back to himself.
- The final sentence in the quote is provably untrue (whether we call it a lie, hyperbole or ignorance) and is consistent with Trump's language patterns regarding himself and his plans as the best, greatest, and more than anyone else. The list of names of people living and dead, who have done more for Black Americans than Donald Trump (and most of us of any skin pigmentation) is exhaustive.
- "Atta boy," which is my commentary, is mildly sarcastic. A more direct approach would be something like "The President's response dodges the question asked, makes it about himself rather than the deceased, and concludes with an outright lie."

**Gus:** At this point, is anyone surprised by this?

- A straightforward comment, in the form of a rhetorical question that indicates the writer expects this type of response from Donald Trump.

**Al:** Disgusting. Exactly what a racist would say.

- "Disgusting" is a label/characterization, which could be clarified with something like "I find the President's comment disgusting." "Exactly what a racist would say" is inflammatory and indirectly calls the President a racist. Something like "I find that last sentence to be racist" would comment on the sentence and not the person.

**Rick:** Lewis was a racist and only looked out for blacks.  
Trump is right

- The initial sentence here is provably untrue, insulting, and a sweeping generalization of the life of a man who has been honored for over 50 years by whites, blacks, liberals, conservatives, etc. for his courage, humility and service.
- The final three words, stated as a fact, which it is not, could be clarified with "I believe Trump is right."

Reggie: Good book. Worth reading. <https://www.amazon.com/Enough-Talking-Points-Doing-Conversation/dp/0962782890>

- My response to Rick here is based on first, my completely subjective but informed belief about the value of the book, and second, on my awareness that using false statements, insult and generalizations are specific behaviors the book explores.
- My response also intentionally avoids getting involved in attempts to refute or debate anything or anyone in the thread.

**Gerry:** you have lived too long to have learned so little

- Caveat: I know the general relationship between these two people, which goes back to the late 1970s/early 1980s.
- The message is that Rick has not learned certain things over the course of his 50+ years of living. One way to take the edge off this might be something like, "I'm disappointed that you would write what you've written, remembering you as I do."

Rick: Quite the contrary. It's not how long you live but the experiences you've been through that teach us. My experience and the current culture we are in is my basis for my comment. Take away from that what you may. Live, experience and then learn. Don't just live.

- This response could be a simple statement of the writer's belief (as he says); the last two sentences together seem to imply/can be inferred as a course correction to Gerry, implying that Gerry has lived, but not learned. This could have been clarified with the word "I" at the beginning of each of those final sentences.

**Gus:** What is your major malfunction that you write something as heinous as that?

- This is insulting, assumptive (that someone has a major malfunction if they disagree with Gus) and inflammatory. "Heinous" is a characterization/judgment that does not consider that the other has a worldview that differs. The whole sentence invites what follows.

Rick: what's your problem with what I said . Do you have a problem with what I feel and experienced. ?

- This response is measured, and asks Gus a question that is somewhat deceptive. The question asks if Gus has a problem with what Rick has felt and experienced. Gus's remark was about

what Rick *wrote*, not about his feelings or experiences. This is nuanced for sure, and its clarity is necessary.

**Gary:** It seems your life experiences having led you to this post ignoring all of the struggles of Mr. Lewis. Putting his life on the line for people. Which is something trump does for no one. All of this convinces me that you and your life are first hand experts at what racism is.

- Gary begins with a measured view (It seems...) bringing John Lewis's life and work back into the exchange.
- The second sentence, in light of putting one's life on the line, supports the first and is factual.
- The final sentence, albeit in an indirect way, calls Rick a racist (expert at what racism is). This is insulting, inflammatory, a judgment and a label.

Rick: typical liberal answer , when someone disagrees it is automatically considered racist.

Wrong way to define racism.

That's the real issue.

Just for being a member of the black caucus makes him a racist

- The first line here includes a sweeping generalization (typical liberal answer) and an assumption (when someone disagrees it is automatically...).
- The second line is meaningless as written – it implies that Rick knows the wrong and right ways to define racism, but he doesn't offer either, so the five words accomplish nothing.
- The third line asserts that defining racism the right way is the "real issue" but again, offers no definition – again adding nothing substantive to the thread. It is also asserted as a fact (i.e. "I believe" or "I think" would be less declarative), and there's no evidence that it is factual.
- The final line is a provably untrue generalization and seems to be based on unstated assumptions and/or preconceptions.

Gary: Not typical. You can cast me as an easy strawman but most critical thinkers will look at your post and see the bigotry. But go ahead cast me as a "typical" while you cast yourself as an independent thinker. Because obviously you cannot hold the concept that us liberal progressives might have come to our conclusions based on our life experiences, specifically our dealings with bigots.

- This response by Gary stays with the content of what it responds to – Rick's immediately preceding comment.
- First it refutes the accusation that his own previous comment is "typical," and then, *without labeling or insulting Rick* notes the "strawman" move that Rick has made (i.e. moving the conversation from a discussion of Lewis's and Trump's respective lives to an attack on "typical liberal answer[s]."
- Then, "most critical thinkers...bigotry" is an assumption that's not proven here.

- In the next two sentences, Gary challenges Rick's claiming to be an independent thinker while characterizing Gary's response as a "typical liberal response" – a challenge that holds up rationally.
- The next sentence holds up as well, and might be more effective if begun with "It seems that you cannot..." rather than "Because obviously you cannot..." This revision identifies the statement as the writer's view as opposed to an obvious given (which would not be obvious or given to someone who agrees ideologically with Rick).

Rick: You are the bigot and antiAmerican socialist who has decided that our capitalist system is flawed.

I believe in God , family and country .

Marra can give you a pretty good background on who I am.

You don't know me and call me a bigot , that's ignorance at its best. But expected from someone like you.

- The first sentence is an assumption, sweeping generalization, insult, and label that accuses Gary of something of which there is no evidence in the exchange (i.e. "who has decided that our capitalist system is flawed").
- The second sentence is fine, as a stand-alone – Rick is stating his beliefs. In context however, it follows the previous sentence and seems to imply that Gary does not believe in these same things (admittedly, I'm inferring that, and, I believe, reasonably so in the context of the thread; I would defer to Rick if he offered another reason for stating his beliefs in this comment).
- The third sentence directly involves me (Marra), is an assumption and not true. I knew Rick as a high school student in the late 1970's/early 1980's.
  - My memory is that he was a good kid. I also know via social media that he is a professional singer, but I have not had direct, in-person contact with him in some 40 years (give or take). In terms of who he is now, my only response is that he has written what he has written in this thread, and while that may not capture who he is, it indicates aspects of how he views the world.
  - In other words, I am not qualified to give anyone "a pretty good background on who [Rick is]." I disagree with his calling John Lewis a racist, can refute that easily, and don't endorse his, or anyone else's, labels, insults and generalizations in this thread.
- The fourth sentence begins with what a misread or a projection on Rick's part. Nowhere in the thread has Gary called him a bigot. The closest thing to that is Gary's "Because obviously you cannot hold the concept that us liberal progressives might have come to our conclusions based on our life experiences, specifically our dealings with bigots," does not call anyone a bigot, but I can see how, in context, Rick might interpret it this way.

- The final sentence labels and insults Gary as ignorant based on the inferred “bigotry” in the first sentence, and the final words (But expected...) constitute a sweeping generalization that has no meaning other than to insult Gary.

Gus: I am NOT the one with the problem. You are a foul racist.

The very fact that your kind still exist in 2020 is the reason we need Black Lives Matter.

I look forward to the day when such hatred as your is exterminated by goodness, compassion, and empathy.

- Because of the timing and nature of the thread, it is not clear here if Gus is responding to comments that Rick directed at him, or to comments that Rick directed at Gary.
- That said, the first sentence is a judgment that states that it is Rick only, and not Gus, who has a problem, but provides no evidence for this.
- The second sentence, calling Rick a “foul racist” (insult/label) and the third sentence, in which Gus refers to Rick as “your kind,” which is a sweeping generalization, suggests that both Gus and Rick engage in similar strategies and have similar “containers” for their views, albeit from opposite sides of the content of the thread, which has deteriorated to insults and generalizations. They seem to hold opposite views and each, in this thread, is intolerant of the other.
- The final sentence makes a subtle and meaningful move from talking about Rick to talking about the hatred that Gus attributes to Rick, and while “exterminated” is almost always a charged word (outside the realm of cockroaches, etc.), Gus’s stating the means of extermination as “goodness, compassion, and empathy” softens the charge and any historical violence that may be connected to the word. What I infer from this last sentence, and this is nothing more than my inference, is that Gus is becoming aware of how he “sounds” and is making an attempt to move from name-calling to a remembering of goodness

Rick: you are living in fantasy land. You are the liberal socialist antiAmerican pig .

Misinformed ,people like you should be re-educated to become normal again.

Remember liberalism is a mental disorder.

- The first sentence is a characterization of Gus (or Gary – it’s not completely clear, but context seems to point to Gus) as being out of touch with what’s real.
- The second sentence hits Gus with labels, insults, sweeping generalization and assumptions – together a name-calling that seems to name what Rick doesn’t like (liberals, socialists, anti-Americans, and pigs).
- The third sentence begins with a judgment and assumption (“misinformed” which for many of us typically means *a different perspective than my own, and therefore incorrect*), and continues to provide a solution (re-education), and a goal (to become “normal again,” which

does two things: 1. Suggest that Gus was once normal like Rick, and 2. Identifies Rick's perspective that his view is "normal."

- The final sentence goes a step further, characterizing liberalism as a mental disorder, which is false, as would be characterizing conservatism in the same or a similar way.

Gary: since you believe in god and country then it would be important to remind you that Jesus and the founders of this country were all people who had that disorder called liberalism. They railed against the powers that be at their times. Plus your liberalism is a disorder post is kinda bigoted. You may be a very good person for all I know. I am responding to the bigotry I see in your posts while you are carving out a summary of who I am. And very incorrectly, I might add.

- Gary takes Rick's earlier statement, "I believe in God , family and country ." and challenges it with a reference first to the story of Jesus, who, whether one reads the Bible as literally true history or powerful allegory (or a little of both), attempted to liberate the people of his time from the limitations of their ways of being in the world – meaning not that everything about their ways of being was wrong or bad, but that there were certain opportunities for growth available, a "New Testament," and then to the Founding Fathers, who, in fact did work together to liberate the colonies from British rule, and in so doing created what is still commonly known as a "liberal democracy" that in its liberalness has room for liberals, conservatives, libertarians, etc.
- Gary's "They railed against the powers that be at their times" is a concise, accurate summary statement, evidence of which can be found in the Bible and in any generally accepted (by conservatives or liberals) history of the 1770s concerning what was going on in the British colonies in North America, and subsequently in the United States which emerged from the colonies.
- Gary's next four sentences begin to shift the tone of the exchange.
  - "Plus your liberal is a disorder post is kinda bigoted" comments on the post and not the poster. This is a simple, yet important move away from the personal insults and labels that appear earlier in the thread.
  - Gary then further differentiates the post from the "poster" with "You may be a very good person for all I know," which establishes Gary's ability to separate Rick's language from who Rick is.
  - Then "I am responding to the bigotry I see in your posts while you are carving out a summary of who I am," is a statement by Gary of what he is doing and what he sees Rick doing.
  - In the final sentence, Gary asserts that Rick's belief that Gary is a "liberal socialist antiAmerican pig" is incorrect: "And very incorrectly, I might add." Gary has created an opportunity for Rick to move away from the generalizations and name calling, inviting a more civilized exchange.

Rick: I stand to correct you, the founders of this country I guarantee you were not liberals. They believed in principles of law , created a constitution and offered the freedom to achieve any dreams and practice our religion ( not to kill babies after they are born a liberal concept).

Jesus said and remember it my friend ( it is a sin to fall in love with money) bigotry is carried out when someone is AntiAmerican and loves socialism and does not accept opinions of other people. You liberals call racist and bigots anyone that disagrees with your Ideas.

My posts states that I agree with Trump and that he is a great President. I also believe that liberals are trying to destroy America.

I also know that it is impossible to debate a liberal because they suffer from a mental disorder.

- Rick's initial sentence, guaranteeing that the founders were not liberals is a statement of opinion that history refutes (addressed above re Jesus and the Founders).
- His second sentence attributes to the founders a belief (re principles of law), and two behaviors (creating a constitution and offering freedom) that are provably true as written. The parenthetical comment at the end, which seems to limit religion to not killing babies after they are born, an act he refers to as a "liberal concept" is hard to understand. He may have meant "before" they are born, but even that renders the parenthetical statement a generalization based on an assumption.
- Rick's next sentence, "Jesus said and remember it my friend ( it is a sin to fall in love with money) bigotry is carried out when someone is AntiAmerican and loves socialism and does not accept opinions of other people" seems to contradict itself, in paraphrasing Jesus about it's being a sin to fall in love with money (typically a trait tied to unhealthy versions of capitalism, not socialism), describing bigotry as being AntiAmerician, loving socialism, and not accepting the opinions of others. This sentence needs to be clarified in order to be understood (at least by me) in the context of the thread.
- "You liberals call racist and bigots anyone that disagrees with your Ideas" is another example of a sweeping generalization, and one which Rick is actually practicing throughout the thread – calling those who disagree with his views "racist," "liberal socialist antiAmerican pig," having mental disorders and not being "normal." This is an example of projection; for more on projection and Shadow, visit [here](#) among many other sources.
- Rick's next two sentences stand up well, whether or not one agrees with them. He states that his posts state that he agrees with Trump and that he is a great President, which are two opinions that he states as opinions.
- "I also believe that liberals are trying to destroy America" is his belief, stated as a belief, albeit with the generalization of "liberal," which like "conservative," outside of a specific context, and the worldview of the writer/speaker doesn't carry a lot of clear meaning. See Chapter 4 of [Enough with the...Talking Points](#) and this [post](#) for more on this.
- While that last statement could be made more powerful with a clear articulation of what he means by "liberals" and substantive, specific, factual examples of how they are destroying America, the belief, albeit with the generalization, is his, and stated as such.

- Rick's final sentence reverts back to a generalized assumption that is false, as would be its opposite (i.e. it's impossible to debate a conservative...) and the earlier insult that liberals suffer from a mental disorder.

Gary: You are calling me all sorts of names while your posts constantly portray bigotry. You are constantly labeling me without knowing me and I am pointing out bigotry in your posts. I have no idea who you are but your posts are bigoted. And very uninformed. This liberal believes in law and order. I find it quite humorous that you say liberals do not accept the views of others and then post that liberals are trying to destroy America. Not exactly accepting our point of view hmmm?

Anyway. I have made my points and you have shown us all who you are.

I wish you peace and happiness in your life and as a fellow citizen I wish you well.

Can you do the same?

- Here Gary seems to double down on his earlier move to avoid insult and point out what is happening in the exchange.
- The first sentence is true, and the evidence is in the earlier comments by Rick. While quoting the bigotry would be more powerful than "constantly portray bigotry," the examples are nearby in the thread. (No one in the thread has offered a definition or an opinion regarding his understanding of bigotry).
- The second sentence essentially does the same as the first – simply pointing to, and not characterizing, what Rick has been doing.
- The third, fourth and fifth sentences acknowledge that Gary and Rick do not know each other, repeat Gary's statement that Rick's comments are bigoted, and characterizes the bigotry as uninformed, which is a characterization.
- Sentence five points to a specific example of this characterization: "This liberal believes in law and order," in which Gary self-refers as a liberal, and asserts his belief in law and order.
- Gary then turns again to another example of Rick's doing the very thing(s) he accuses liberals of doing – not accepting others' points of view. The "Not exactly...hmmm?" is a bit antagonistic, albeit at a lower level than personal name-calling and insults. Something like, "You seem to be doing in this exchange the very things you accuse liberals of doing" would be more direct and gentler at the same time.
- Gary's final 3 statements make it clear he is about done with the exchange. That Rick has shown us who he is assumes that his (Gary's) writing is an indication of identity, as opposed to belief. That's a larger discussion for another time.
- Gary ends with a peace offering and a bit of a challenge.

Rick: I totally disagree with you but I accept and wish you all the same you wished me.

Peace

- Rick restates his disagreement respectfully and extends Gary's good wishes back to him.

**Sal:** Reg, you should include this exchange in the 2nd edition of your book.

- Someone who has read [\*Enough with the Talking Points...\*](#) chimes in. I agree with his suggestion, but not sure it will happen.]

**Frank (to Rick):** I totally agree with your assessment of his response to you - it's their knee jerk reaction to anything that doesn't coincide with their thought process - scary!

- Frank, making his first appearance in the thread, supports Rick. Frank's comment, first is unclear (attributable to the nature of and timing of comments on social media) regarding 1) which assessment of which response Frank is referring to, and 2) who the "his" refers to, Gary or Gus.
- The post-hyphen clause, "it's their knee jerk reaction to anything that doesn't coincide with their thought process - scary!" is a sweeping generalization ("their" and "anything"), assumption and characterization for which no evidence or support is provided, effectively doing the very thing that Gary earlier pointed out that Rick had been doing throughout the thread.

Gary (to Frank): "Their" implies we are all the same and you are the independent thinkers. While that might make it easier for you to feel superior to some folks. It is a fallacy. We all come to our conclusions and beliefs by our experiences.

- Gary points out the generalization of "their," infers a meaning and points to it as a fallacy. He concludes with a sentence that I would guess many of the folks in the thread would agree with, but that's just a guess.

Frank (to Gary): I won't debate you for there is no true debate with liberal minds such as yours - that has been my overwhelming experience - liberals have no tolerance for free thinkers who oppose their views - I am no more superior than the next person but people who believe as you are a cancer on our republic.

- Frank states his position of refusing to debate, and uses a generalized characterization ("liberal minds"), statement of opinion as fact ("there is no true debate with...like you"), and a closing insult/generalization ("liberals have no tolerance...people who believe as you are a cancer on our republic") as his reason not to debate Gary.
- While Frank does qualify the characterization, statement of opinion as fact, and insult as "[his] overwhelming experience," he chooses to characterize, generalize and insult.
- He points to his own self-awareness with "I am no more superior than the next person" and then betrays that expression with his aforementioned conclusion, "but people who believe as you are a cancer on our republic."

Gary: Though your post attempts to describe me, it ends up saying a lot more about you and your close minded approach to opposing views.

- Gary responds here essentially as he had previously to Rick:
  - that what we “say” (i.e. write) and how we say it disclose a lot more about who we are than about the person or thing we’re speaking about, and again points out that Frank is doing the very thing he is characterizing liberals as doing.
- “Close minded approach” is still a characterization however, and while the evidence for it is in the thread, something like this would make the point and avoid the characterization: “You wrote that ‘liberals have no tolerance for free thinkers who oppose their views,’ and yet you express no tolerance for my views in this thread and refer to me as a ‘cancer.’ You are practicing the very thing you are arguing against.”

**Gail:** He’s a disgusting smear in our nations history. A total disgrace. Vote him out.

- Gail makes a debut here, late in the thread, and uses an insult, “disgusting smear,” and then a characterization, “a total disgrace,” both of which, as throughout the rest of the thread, don’t do any real good. The final sentence is a direct expression of her desire/view, expressed as a directive, which is clear, and not in any way a label, insult, generalization or characterization.

Gus: Apparently, the evil Rick took a pot shot at me and then blocked me.

Apparently, he’s a coward as well as a racist.

- Here, Gus reappears, characterizes Rick as evil and calls him a coward and a racist – again, characterizations, labels and insults that do no good in conversation.

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### Some general, closing observations and comments:

- Almost none of the above comments address the literal content of the initial post, which pointed to Donald Trump’s (lack of) response to a very specific question about the death of John Lewis. The rest of the thread deteriorated into name-calling, labels, insults, generalizations, and in most cases, little or no evidence of self-reflection/self-awareness *in the context of the thread* (i.e. every one of the participants might or might not be self-reflective or self-aware with their kids, spouse, profession or throughout his or her life; except for two brief moments, this reflection/awareness was not evident in this exchange).
- Social media are not designed for thoughtful, robust, informed, rational, etc. disagreement or agreement. While they are not the only place in which attempts to communicate regularly deteriorate, they tend to foster such deterioration.
- Of the primary participants, Gus, Rick and Gary, and the latecomer, Frank, only Gary participated in a way that did, or attempted to do, more good than harm in the context of the exchange, according to the lenses for conversation that can be found in *Enough with the...Talking Points*.

- Finally, and again, my intention here is to assess the language, tone, etc. of the comments and in no way to judge the people making the comments. I obviously have views on Donald Trump and John Lewis and made a conscious effort to keep them out of my assessment of the comments. I have been concerned for some years now about the increasing inability (or refusal) of Americans to speak with each other, especially, but not only, when they disagree, in respectful, reflective, compassionate, informed and wise ways. [\*Enough with the... Talking Points: Doing More Good than Harm in Conversation\*](#) is my current contribution toward such respect, reflection, compassion, information and wisdom.

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