

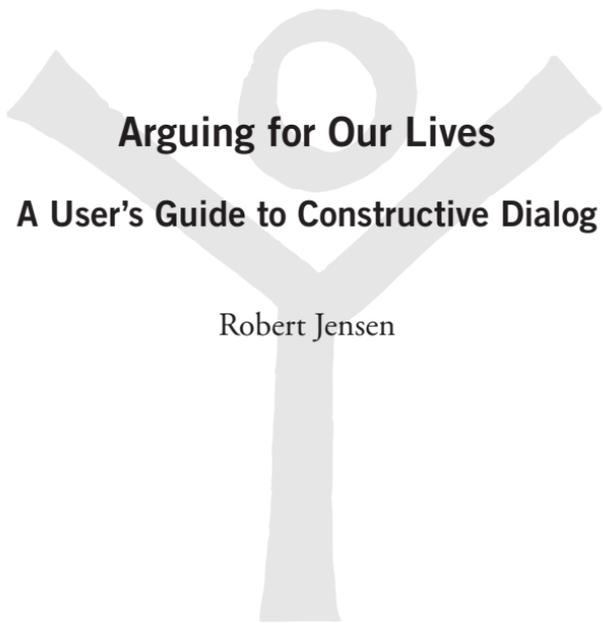
**A USER'S GUIDE  
TO CONSTRUCTIVE  
DIALOG**

# **ARGUING FOR OUR LIVES**

**ROBERT  
JENSEN**



# City Lights



# Arguing for Our Lives

## A User's Guide to Constructive Dialog

Robert Jensen



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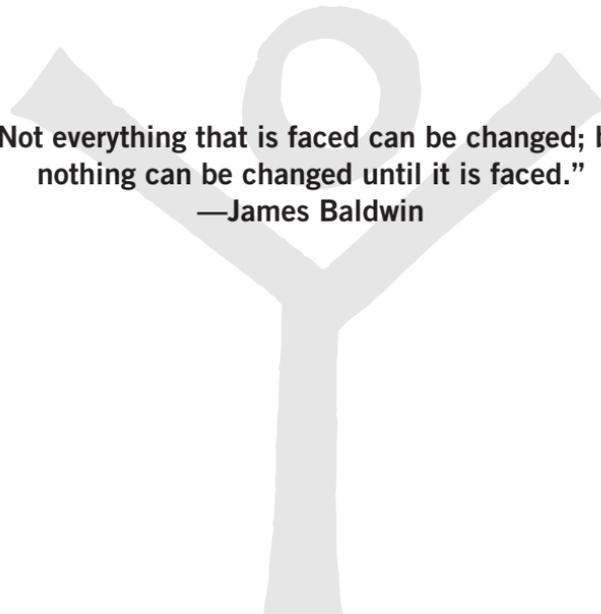
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**“Not everything that is faced can be changed; but  
nothing can be changed until it is faced.”**

**—James Baldwin**

# **City Lights**

# Contents

## **INTRODUCTION**

The age of anxiety *1*

## **CHAPTER 1**

In defense of intellectual life *11*

## **CHAPTER 2**

Intellectual basics: Simple but not simplistic *19*

## **CHAPTER 3**

Power basics: Political but more than politics *29*

## **CHAPTER 4**

Thinking critically about politics *45*

## **CHAPTER 5**

Thinking critically about religion *57*

## **CHAPTER 6**

Thinking critically about news media *67*

## **CHAPTER 7**

Thinking creatively: Paradoxes, metaphors,  
aphorisms *79*

## **CHAPTER 8**

Thinking courageously: Reframing ourselves and our  
world *93*

## **CONCLUSION**

The age of anguish *113*

Endnotes *123*

## INTRODUCTION

# The Age of Anxiety

It would be tempting to say that we live today in *the* Age of Anxiety, if such an age hadn't already been proclaimed in the last century, first in Europe after World War I and then across the whole world in the nuclear age. Poet W.H. Auden won the 1948 Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, which struggled—mostly unsuccessfully—with the search for hope in a modern industrial world drained of meaning:

Both professor and prophet depress,  
For vision and longer view  
Agree in predicting a day  
Of convulsion and vast evil . . .

Auden didn't express a lot of confidence in his fellow citizens' abilities to change course:

We would rather be ruined than changed,  
We would rather die in our dread  
Than climb the cross of the moment  
And let our illusions die.<sup>1</sup>

While the number of prescriptions that doctors in the United States today write for anxiety disorders might suggest our own moment in history is particularly anxious,<sup>2</sup> we should step back and think of all of recorded human history as an anxious age. Ever since we humans created what we call “civilization” and started the project of living beyond the planet’s means and beyond our own capabilities, it has been inevitable that human societies would struggle with anxiety. The further we overreach—creating complex societies too big to manage, drawing down the ecological capital of Earth—the more intense the collective anxiety. Our problem is not just the many anxious individuals who have particular trouble coping, but ways of living that aren’t designed for the type of animals that we are, as we try to micro-manage a world that is too vast and complex for us to control. Our collective anxiety is not an aberration but a predictable outcome of a simple truth:

For ten millennia, we have been a species out of context.<sup>3</sup>

Let’s put the anxiety of our age in this larger historical framework. The genus *Homo* goes back a couple of million years, and our species, *Homo sapiens*, has been around for about 200,000 years. What we call civilization, which arose with the invention of agriculture, starts only about 10,000 years ago. What today we take to be normal ways of organizing human societies are, in fact, recent developments, radically different from the way we lived for 95 percent of our evolutionary history. We evolved in small gatherer-hunter groups, band-level societies that were probably well under

one hundred members and organized internally in much more egalitarian fashion than the way we live today.<sup>4</sup> Research on human social networks suggest that there is a limit on the “natural” size of a human social group of about 150 members, which is determined by our cognitive capacity. This has been called “Dunbar’s number,” after anthropologist Robin Dunbar: the number of individuals with whom any one of us can maintain stable relationships.<sup>5</sup>

When we create social, political, and economic systems that require us to deal with more people and more complex relationships in hierarchies, we are living outside of our evolutionary context. When individual humans are taken out of familiar settings and plopped down in brand-new places, we get a bit anxious. What is true for us as individuals is true at this larger level. Life out of context is bound to be an anxious life.

This out-of-context existence produces a baseline anxiety, from which we see spikes at particular moments in history when we humans seemed incapable of managing ourselves in any sort of rational and humane manner. In the twentieth century, we saw that happen after the mass slaughter of World War I, when the best and the brightest of Europe had just finished fighting a war that reached new levels of barbarism. After World War II, during which the barbarism returned in full force, humans were left to ponder the possibility of complete annihilation in the nuclear age.

There is plenty of horror in the world today—both in the intense, sporadic violence of war and in the ongoing, everyday suffering that results from global inequality—but humans also have taken some steps forward in our dealings with each other. In relations within and between societies, there has been progress, albeit fitful and uneven. Slavery is illegal

and has been abolished in practice in most places. In many societies there is recognition of the value of cultural diversity. Gender and racial equality have advanced in significant ways. There is much work to be done to produce a more just world, but one can see the path for moving forward.

But there is a good reason we may be in a distinctive age of anxiety, if we take seriously the more intractable problems on the ecological front, where the news is bad beyond the telling. Consider this warning from 1,700 of the world's leading scientists:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.<sup>6</sup>

That statement was issued in 1992, and in the subsequent two decades humans made no significant course corrections. For anyone looking at the data on our multiple, cascading ecological crises; for anyone thinking about the trajectory of human life on the planet; for anyone who feels a connection to what is dying all around us—the severity of the human attack on the living world can produce intense anxiety. Our age of anxiety today is rooted in these unfolding

ecological disasters and a growing realization that we have disrupted natural forces in ways we do not understand and cannot control. As Bill McKibben puts it, “The world hasn’t ended, but the world as we know it has—even if we don’t quite know it yet.”<sup>7</sup>

McKibben, the first popular writer to alert the world to the threat of climate change, argues that humans have so dramatically changed the planet’s ecosystems that we should rename the Earth, call it Eearth:

The planet on which our civilization evolved no longer exists. The stability that produced that civilization has vanished; epic changes have begun. We may, with commitment and luck, yet be able to maintain a planet that will sustain some kind of civilization, but it won’t be the same planet, and hence it won’t be the same civilization. The earth that we knew—the only earth that we ever knew—is gone.<sup>8</sup>

If McKibben is accurate—and I think the evidence supports his assessment—then some level of anxiety would be an appropriate reaction to our situation. We can’t pretend that all we need to do is tinker with existing systems to fix a few environmental problems. Massive changes in how we live are required, what McKibben characterizes as a new kind of civilization. No matter where any one of us fits in the social and economic hierarchies, there is no escape from the dislocations of such changes. Money and power might insulate some people from the most wrenching consequences of these shifts, but there is no escape. That long-standing anxiety produced by living out of our evolutionary context is intensified

to unprecedented levels by ecological crises that force us to recognize that we do not live in stable societies and no longer live on a stable planet. We may feel safe and secure in specific places at specific times, but it's hard to believe in any safety and security in a collective sense.

This is not the preface to a naïve argument that we return to gathering and hunting; with 7 billion people on the planet, obviously we couldn't go back even if we wanted to. Just as naïve would be to believe we can count on human ingenuity and “advanced” technology to save the day. There is no magic to be conjured that can re-create an idyllic past or create a utopian future.

Instead, we need to start facing the sources of our anxiety so that we can honestly face reality and develop better coping strategies. Right now, the most affluent and technologically sophisticated society in the history of the world—the United States—seems more committed to deep denial than to enlightened engagement with this anxiety. A good first step in that engagement would be recognizing that our anxiety is a product of our arrogance; that the cure for that arrogance is recognition of our ignorance; and that understanding our ignorance—the limits of human intelligence—will help us, paradoxically, develop the critical intellectual skills we need to face the challenges ahead.

### **Arrogance**

Just as we typically think of anxiety as a characteristic of individuals, so do we speak of arrogance in individual terms. We all know people who are haughty and unjustifiably overconfident, and we recognize that we all have within ourselves that weakness. But the focus here is the collective arrogance

of the modern human. Since the invention of agriculture, we humans have used our well-developed cognitive capacities to control our environments and manipulate other species to our advantage, and that success has led to arrogance. The development of modern science put that arrogance on steroids, as humans began to believe we could—almost literally—run the world as if we were gods.

That arrogance is what has transformed Earth into Eearth. We can intervene to bend natural systems to our will, but we lack the capacity to control the consequences of our intervention. We are really, really smart, but we have not been quite smart enough to see the limits of our intelligence.

Facing that fact, we have two choices. One is to believe that we will find solutions to all our problems through more sophisticated technology. This is what some of us have begun to call “technological fundamentalism,” which today takes the form of a quasi-religious belief that the use of advanced technology is always a good thing and that any problems caused by the unintended consequences of such technology can be remedied by more technology. Finding themselves in a hole that they have dug, technological fundamentalists argue for digging deeper and more furiously. In 1968, Stewart Brand began the *Whole Earth Catalog* with that famous line, “We are as gods and might as well get used to it.”<sup>9</sup> Four decades later, Brand wrote that this suggestion had become an imperative: “We are as gods and HAVE to get good at it.”<sup>10</sup> For some, the solution lies in intensifying our commitment to the delusion that got us into the mess in the first place.

The other choice is to recognize that we are fundamentally ignorant in the face of a world whose complexity we not only can't control but can't begin to adequately describe.

Given the success of science in revealing physical processes heretofore unknown to us, the appropriate response should be not arrogance but the recognition of human limits. The more we know, the more we should be aware of what we don't know, and likely will never know.

This is not a suggestion that we celebrate stupidity, nor is it an atavistic call for abandoning science. Rather, we would be wise to adopt what plant geneticist Wes Jackson calls “an ignorance-based worldview”: whatever our technical and scientific prowess, we are—and always will be—far more ignorant than knowledgeable.<sup>11</sup> Acknowledging our basic ignorance does not mean we should revel in the ways humans can be dumb, but rather that we should recognize our obligation to act as intelligently as possible, keeping in mind not only what we know but how much we don't know.<sup>12</sup>

Again, to be clear: Nothing in this view argues for abandoning all hope of knowing anything, for giving up on the search for truth, or for concluding in despair that we can discover nothing upon which we can act with confidence. It is not a plea to renounce science or to seek answers purely on non-rational grounds, but is simply a call for intellectual humility.

An obvious example: Technological fundamentalists are comfortable with pursuing nuclear energy, despite the potentially catastrophic consequences of a reactor accident and even though there remains no workable system of safely disposing of the waste. Folks endorsing an ignorance-based worldview would counsel against the development of an energy-production process that presents those risks and depends on the promise of some future solution to the waste problem.

If, as Jackson suggests, we were to understand that “knowledge is not adequate to run the world,” then before

embarking on a scientific or technological venture we would ask, “How many people will be involved? At what level of culture? Will we be able to back out? Scientists, technologists, and policy-makers would be assiduous students of exits.” If we had taken those questions seriously, we would not have embarked on the disastrous nuclear project.

Adopting an ignorance-based world view doesn't mean we should ignore our intellectual capacities; in fact, it demands more of each one of us. When we recognize that experts can't answer all our questions, and that sometimes experts' hubris can get us in trouble, then sharpening our critical thinking skills becomes more important than ever. An ignorance-based worldview is a call to that critical thinking.

# City Lights

## CHAPTER 1

# In Defense of Intellectual Life

There are two clichés about our intellectual lives that illustrate contemporary U.S. culture’s confusion and cowardice. One is the response to one’s attempt to analyze a difficult problem: “You think too much.” The second is the common advice for getting along in groups: “Don’t talk about religion or politics.”

On the first cliché: Yes, it’s possible to overthink, if we engage in endless analyzing as a way to avoid taking action we should take, or if we get stuck in our heads and cut ourselves off from our experience and emotions. We don’t want to fall into passivity or disembodied abstraction. But too often in this culture, when we want to tackle a tough problem and think it through carefully, we will be accused of thinking too much, as if somehow the problems we face can, and should, be handled without using our intellect.

On the second cliché: If we don’t talk about religion or politics, what else is there of interest to discuss? In this context, I’m defining “religion” broadly, as wrestling with ultimate questions of existence that are wrapped up in the query “What does it mean to be a human being?” I’m using “politics” broadly as well, to mean the quest to answer the

unavoidable question in any society, “How should power and resources be distributed?”

We all should think a lot, especially about religion and politics. We should all be striving to be the best critically thinking intellectuals we can be.

Both those terms—critical thinking and intellectual—come with some baggage. Some people fear that encouraging “critical thinking” is really a euphemism for an attack on traditional values, especially those rooted in religious faith. And many assume that “intellectuals” are elitist snobs who tout their academic credentials as proof of superiority. Both terms can be misused that way, of course, but that is not the only fate for critically thinking intellectuals.

Critical thinking should lead us to evaluate all claims, including “traditional values,” and that means that individuals and societies will on occasion have to abandon some of those traditions. The world came to abandon the traditional values that justified slavery and defined women as the property of men, and most of us agree that was a good thing. But critical thinking can not only lead to challenges to tradition but can also help us understand the strength of some of those values. A critique of hierarchical male-dominated models of family, for example, can lead to greater appreciation for the way in which more egalitarian models of family can help connect people in healthy communities.

Critical thinking also should be applied to new ideas, to help us separate important insights from faddish claims. Such critical thinking applied, for example, to each new diet plan that promises to make losing unwanted weight easy would save people a lot of money and heartache. In the classroom, critical thinking applied to postmodern literary theory could

save countless students from slogging through attempts to explain literature in arcane academic language and would likely increase their appreciation of literature.

Some kinds of intellectual work require specialized training, which means some people will play special roles in some endeavors. In a technologically advanced society, obviously no one person can acquire the knowledge of every technology; we will have to rely on specialists' expertise in some arenas. But especially on matters of social, political, and economic policy, everyone is capable of developing the intellectual abilities needed to contribute to the cultural conversation about our goals. We don't need to be specialists to develop viewpoints we can defend in dialog with others. In a healthy democratic system, experts serve the greater good rather than dictate it.

To create a culture in which people aspire to be critically thinking intellectuals, we must overcome the negative connotations of the terms. That effort would be aided immensely if those people who are paid to do intellectual work—professors, teachers, clergy, journalists, and writers—were to demystify their work. I have been a university professor for more than two decades, and the longer I teach, the more I talk with students about the process by which I come to understand a concept or answer a question. My goal is not to showcase my allegedly superior intellect but to demonstrate how we all can work our way through a problem. That's not false modesty; I believe I have something important to offer the students as a result of my intellectual work, but I don't believe that I have some special gift that gives me an advantage. Whatever I know is the result of effort and struggle, not genius. My job is to make that process attractive and attainable, not shroud my professional status in a mystical aura.

Even with these attempts at the demystification of intellectual life, in my experience many students are nervous about applying critical thinking and most are reluctant to identify as intellectuals. For some time, I've been tempted to ask my students, in jest, "Are you now, or have you ever been, an intellectual?" One semester, I finally did that.

In my introductory journalism class at the University of Texas at Austin, I told students at I was going to take a risk and ask some of them to come out in front of their classmates. I feigned nervousness and warned them that I wasn't sure if this was a wise thing to do, but that I needed to know more about them for the next section of the course. Instead of asking if any of the students were gay or lesbian—the identities typically associated with coming out—I posed a different question: How many of you, I asked, are intellectuals? How many, I asked, are willing to stand up in front of others and publicly declare, "I am an intellectual!"

The students chuckled, then looked nervously at each other when they realized I was serious. No one stood at first. I repeated the question: "There are two hundred of you in this room, all college students attending a prestigious institution of higher learning, and not one of you is an intellectual?" Finally one student stood and then a few others, but no more than a dozen were willing to claim the label.

After the exercise, we talked about why university students, no matter what their academic major or particular interests, might reject the label "intellectual." As I expected, some associated the term with elitism, a claim that one is smarter than everyone else. Others assumed it is a term that describes certain professional positions, such as university professors, and it would be dishonest to embrace the identity

themselves. Some likely refused because by that point, late in the semester, they were skeptical of identifying with anything I suggested.

I told them that as journalists, or prospective journalists, their hesitation wasn't surprising to me. Most working journalists would reject the term, mostly to avoid being seen as snobby. But I pressed them to consider how we could use the term in a positive fashion, not just as a label for certain professions and not as an assertion of arrogance.

What would it mean to be serious about being a critically thinking intellectual? First, the term "intellectual work" is not just a synonym for "thinking." Every day, everyone thinks about things. Intellectual work suggests a systematic effort to (1) collect relevant information, (2) analyze that information to discern patterns that help deepen our understanding of how the world works, and (3) use that understanding to make judgments about how to try to shape our world. The key is "systematic effort," which requires intention and discipline. We all think, but intellectual work means organized thinking to reach conclusions for a purpose. When it's defined that way, it becomes clear that lots of different kinds of people do intellectual work—not just writers and professors, but students, organizers, political activists, researchers of various kinds. They engage in that systematic effort in search of the answers to questions about the natural world, technology, human behavior, societies. Some focus on fairly small questions while others look more broadly.

We should add three important qualifications to this defense of intellectual work.

First, this definition of intellectual work doesn't assume

a simplistic dichotomy between work done with our minds and work done with our bodies. All the work we do in the world involves some combination of our minds and bodies. Anyone with experience in the skilled trades, such as plumbing or carpentry, knows that work requires not just physical exertion but a sharp mind that can assess a problem and plan the appropriate steps to complete a task. Successful gardening requires a lot of digging, weeding, and hauling, but also involves an extraordinary amount of knowledge about the way that air, water, soil, plants, and animals interact. Even basic manual labor requires thought about how to perform a task efficiently. I once had a warehouse job that involved unloading trucks and stacking boxes of building supplies, and what I remember about it is not just the physical labor but the craft of coordinating the unloading with other workers and constructing the stacks of boxes in a stable fashion—the more careful the construction of the stack, the higher we could stack the boxes without them falling. In that case, the intellectual work was relatively simple and solved a problem of limited interest to others, but it demonstrates the capacity we all have to be systematic in our thinking.

Second, not all intellectual work involves critical thinking. Many jobs in the so-called “information economy” involve exercising the intellect but require no critical thinking in the way I am using the term. Some of that work is clerical in nature, shifting data from one place to another or one form to another, with little serious reflection needed by a worker. One can open an academic journal and read articles in which the author demonstrates an understanding of various theories and methods, presenting information but employing little rigorous self-reflection and limited critical thinking.

Third, what the culture labels intellectual work is not more important than, or superior to, other categories of work. It's obvious that those people who are paid to do work that is primarily intellectual wouldn't last long if others weren't engaged in work that creates food, shelter, clothing, and other necessities. When a society is affluent enough to subsidize intellectuals, often those given the privilege of doing intellectual work create the illusion of their greater value, which we should reject.

We shouldn't assume that only those being employed in primarily intellectual vocations have the capacity or the duty to be thinking critically. In a healthy society, everyone would understand themselves as intellectuals. In a healthy democracy, all citizens would see intellectual work as part of their political obligation.

# City Lights