

# Not Giving Up

THOM RUTLEDGE

*The strength of the Constitution lies entirely in the determination of each citizen to defend it. Only if every single citizen feels duty-bound to do his share in this defense are the constitutional rights secure. -Albert Einstein*

*This is my update as I reconnect to my political commentary work. Possibly more information about me than you ever wanted to know. -Thom Rutledge*

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The political landscape of our country these days is probably best described with images of huge earthquakes and avalanches. And fires and floods, both literally and figuratively.

First, I want to acknowledge the degree of naivete I have discovered in myself since election night 2016. Like so many others, I was genuinely shocked to see that Donald Trump was going to win the election and that the historic moment of Hillary Clinton becoming president was not going to be. I was not waiting through the night to watch this happen: I was going to bed. But first, I checked my email to find my laptop lit up like a pinball machine with messages from clients asking for session times as soon as possible. They were panicked – not an exaggeration. One thing that I said for the next four years was that Donald Trump was very good for my business and that I would happily surrender that advantage if he would just go away.

Fast-forward eight years and there it was again. If possible, even more unbelievable than the first time.

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I began writing political commentary after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the genuinely terrifying response of the George W. Bush administration's response to that crisis. I discovered that I needed to express myself as more and more disappointing, soon to be devastating news continued to be reported about Dubya, Shotgun Cheney, Rumsfeld and their hole in the wall gang were seemingly missing every point and responding to an entirely fictional story about what the 9/11 attacks were all about – not to mention who and what was actually responsible for what had happened.

I would wake up, have coffee and breakfast, read some news and watch the Today Show before work. Increasingly on those mornings, something we get stuck in my chest, throat or head after absorbing just a little news and I was compelled to write before I did anything else. It did not feel like I could do anything else. I am certain that during the early days of this response, I was late to my first sessions far more often than I had ever been. If you were one of those clients, I apologize.

Some of what I wrote were straight-ahead opinion pieces but my writing evolved more toward political satire because, by nature, I am a smart ass. During this time I connected with what for me was very valuable support in my political rantings. My book, *Embracing Fear*, had been very recently published and the author/spiritual teacher, Oriah Mountain Dreamer, had written a foreword for the book. She also became my friend and my Canadian pen pal through the Dubya Bush years. As others I have talked with also discovered, having a pen pal from Canada provided a very useful and validating perspective. Another of the endorsements for *Embracing Fear* was written by a hero of mine, The Episcopal Bishop and prolific author, John Shelby Spong. Jack (he let me call him Jack!) also became a supportive pen pal, especially in support of my political commentary. Oriah and I were email pen pals but the good Reverend Spong was an old-fashioned letter writer so he and I used the old-fashioned mail – we wrote to each other on paper.

As the national craziness and stupidity progressed, I did begin to enjoy my new writing venture. Some of my favorite pieces included *Super W & the Evil Doers*, *A Bigger Ego Is All It Takes* (Chicago Tribune, 2003), *Christians Want to Rumble*, *What Would Jesus Do with a Slab of Granite*, and *What I Have to Say about George W Bush*, *Blood-Thirsty Christians*, *Homophobes & People Who Don't Use Their Blinkers*. I did not meet with great success in publishing these pieces but during that time, my by-line did show up in The Chicago Tribune,

Nashville Tennessean, The Indianapolis Star and The Philadelphia Inquirer. And once I was quoted in someone else's article in the New York Times.

All in all, a decent run and here was the most valuable lesson that came from this: I realized that I was only preaching to my own choir and I was writing nothing that had any shot at actually influencing someone's thinking about anything that was going on. I returned to full focus on my day job and laid off the political commentary writer from my committee.

Sometime during the first four years of the Obama administration, my commentary writer showed back up with a new idea: to write about politics from the perspective of my job as a psychotherapist, with a particular emphasis (as in my work) on effective communication, both interpersonally and INTRApersonally. In other words: *Therapy for Politics*. This writing might have a chance at influencing readers' thinking, since I would not be writing with such a heavy-handed, opinionated voice. My opinions would be there but in the form of what I have learned in my life --- professionally and personally – about healthy communication, specifically communication with the intent to solve problems.

[Therapy for Politics](#) applies principles of therapy and communication training to how we think about and act upon our political positions. This project is intended for all of us, especially U.S. citizens and U.S. political/government representatives.

Our chosen representatives should be expert problem solvers, creative, out-of-the-box thinkers, willing and able to collaborate with other representatives of both political parties. Let us ask our candidates to provide resumes of successful problem-solving, not examples of how stubborn they can be and how effectively they avoid considering any perspectives other than their own. That was a case worth making.

I am less naïve than I once was and I do recognize that we are currently looking at a Republican party in which there appears to be no one who is willing to stand with a separate opinion, differing in any way from Donald Trump. This complete breakdown of any collaborative process inside one political party must be addressed before anything else in the Therapy for Politics project can be useful. It is, of course, impossible that every Republican member of Congress is in total agreement with what any one person says. So either there is a common incentive that is valued among these men and women above all other practical and ethical considerations or they feel in some way threatened to the point of abandoning their values and beliefs in independent thought and in adhering to their professional commitment to accurately and faithfully represent their constituents. This represents an impasse that must be resolved if we are going to be able to continue to work effectively within the system of government that we currently have. As long as members of the Republican party do not feel free to express independent thought and to stand for ideas that do not necessarily agree completely with their president, they are impotent – and we are, therefore, suck.

I write this now to introduce readers to [Therapy for Politics](#). It is available as a PDF document on my website. Specifically at <https://www.thomrutledge.com/therapy4politics>. What I have done so far is a work in progress. My primary goal right now is to remain realistic in understanding that drastic, miraculous change is not likely, but that it is possible to introduce readers from both political parties to idea that at the core of our political dysfunction is a failure to effectively and respectfully communicate. I have worked with couples and families over these past 40 years and as different as each relationship and circumstance are, solutions cannot be discovered and implemented until errant communication can be addressed successfully. The principles are the same in all relationships, including relationships between politicians and their constituents, between politicians across party-lines, and between politicians and their colleagues in their same political party.

The only thing I am asking of readers of this material at this point is to consider what I have to say open-mindedly, requesting that the political cynic who resides with most of us now, step to the side while you read and consider. I am not asking – or expecting – everyone to agree with me. Remember, I am working on being realistic and it seems clear to me that when there is an expectation for total agreement, there is not a chance in hell that any

decent communication can take place. If you do find some of my ideas potentially useful, please share them with others. Also, I know that many potential readers are both smarter and wiser than I am. To you, I welcome your better ideas to the conversation.

I think that is what it comes down to: conversation. Can we possibly contribute to a process of confronting the uselessness of all-or-none thinking, rethinking our politics with effective communication, rather than opposing ideologies, at the center? I know that this cannot work unless there are enough people from both political parties to consider it. Even my inner political cynic tells me that I am being unrealistic – no, that voice tells me that I am being ridiculous. But I am not my political-cynic voice, I am the person with hope for some success along the way if enough of us can at least begin to influence the conversation in this direction.

Before I finish, I will give a bit more of a specific example of how this might begin to happen.

To do this, we have to learn to hold onto ourselves and consciously keep our defenses down for longer than we are used to. If someone says something that implicitly or explicitly represents a fundamentalist, “this can’t be wrong” position, I might say, “I hear what you are saying and lately I have been thinking that there must be some ways that we can put our heads together and figure out better ways to communicate about politics. Not to better convince each other of our position but to do better at hearing each other out without becoming as defensive as most of us get in these conversations.” In this scenario, I will realistically imagine that the other person responds with something even more defensive than before. And this is how this approach might have a chance. Instead of responding to the content of what this person just said, I remain with the subject of process and simply say, “I don’t know. I’m not sure anybody really does. But I like the idea of thinking about how we might put our heads together and have some of these more productive conversations.” As I say that, I am definitely not focusing it directly to the other person. Instead, I am delivering the lines almost as if I am thinking out loud. If the other person responds combatively still, I simply repeat this technique, only briefer. “Yeah, maybe, like I said I don’t know. I just tend to think about things like this. I never said that I wasn’t weird.”

What I am accomplishing in the hypothetical conversation above is primarily changing the dynamic of the conversation, moving it away from defensive and combative, simply by never responding with resistance myself. Even if someone is hell-bent on playing tug-of-war, nobody can play that on their own. We are just not picking up the rope. This is communication by strategy, not intimacy. Good strategy can go a long way toward helping others to relax, once we learn how to do it. Always, easier said than done, of course.

That’s just a small example. My hope is that with [Therapy for Politics](#) we can share our ideas with each other of how we might diffuse the conversational explosives and gently dampen the fires.

Enough for these ramblings. If you are at all interested, please download and read what I have written on the web page. If you discover something worth sharing, I hope that you will. Thank you for sticking with me this far.

-Thom Rutledge  
Ashland City, Tennessee  
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Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist in Nashville, Tennessee. He is the author of several books, including *Embracing Fear*, *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook*, *The Greater Possibilities*, and *Simple Truth*. He has been featured on The Today Show, Anderson Cooper 360, the Fox Network, Australia’s Channel 10 and he has consulted with The Dr. Phil Show.

Thom and Allen Berger, Ph.D. co-host **The Emotional Sobriety Podcast** and facilitate Zoom and onsite workshops individually and together.