

We're caught in a gridlock. Shakespeare shows us the importance of being open to changing our minds.

The title says it all. I recently had reason to flick through the United Nation's 2023/24 Human Development Report, which they called [*Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining cooperation in a polarized world*](#).

What is polarization? Experts offer various definitions. Broadly speaking, polarization describes what happens when differences (social or political or cultural) divide families, neighbourhoods and societies, and as these divisions become more and more entrenched.

According to the [2023 Edelman Trust Barometer](#) study, Australia is following the U.S. and other countries down 'a path to polarisation'. Among the survey respondents who felt strongly about a contentious social issue, only 24% said that they would help another person in need if that person disagreed strongly with their own position, only 21% were willing to live in the same neighbourhood as that person, and a mere 19% were willing to have that person as a coworker.

It's becoming the norm to believe that it's not possible for groups and individuals to, first, engage with and listen to one another across differences and second, change our minds – if not about an issue, then at least about the people whose opinions conflict with ours. That's polarisation in action. And it's harmful.

According to *Breaking the Gridlock*, polarisation is partly responsible for our growing inability to cooperate across differences to address the many global challenges impacting us all: 'runaway climate change', for instance, as well as the widening gap between rich and poor countries, and spiralling numbers of people experiencing high levels of 'sadness, stress and worry' (pp. 3-5). Polarisation is 'fuelling mutual distrust and suspicion' (p. 179). And [researchers](#) are now suggesting links between escalating levels of polarisation and the current 'loneliness epidemic'.

This is the gridlock we need to break.

Shakespeare and the possibility of change

My work involves spending lots of time reading and thinking about Shakespeare. (Some people can't imagine a worse nightmare!)

I'm bringing Shakespeare into this conversation as his plays turn on the belief that people can and will change their minds. Shakespeare helps us see the gridlock we're stuck in by taking us into worlds shaped by assumptions that are sometimes very different from our own.

[Daniel Spector](#), a New York college acting teacher, drew my attention to this contrast. Spector shows that the things Shakespeare has his characters say and do reflect a ‘belief in the possibility of change’ (p. 497). Most of the time, this belief drives characters in conflict towards, rather than away from, one another. They speak to each other – and listen. Characters try to resolve their own problems by persuading others to change their minds. Sometimes, a character realises that they’re the ones who should change their minds. The dying Laertes telling Hamlet that he no longer blames him for Polonius’ (Laertes’ father’s) death is one example.

What might a community or a neighbourhood that believes in the possibility of change look like? Spector describes the societies in Shakespeare’s plays as a ‘community of strong-willed individuals bound by a shared commitment to one another (whether they like it or not).’ (p. 497) Characters know that they need others for their own and society’s wellbeing. They need to ‘seek change from one another’, even those they hate (p. 498).

In recent years, Spector observes, his acting students have increasingly resisted the idea that Shakespeare’s characters can be at once in conflict and also seek to resolve their conflicts via ‘give-and-take’ exchanges (p. 498). This resistance shows in his students’ struggles to perform Shakespeare’s characters as able to change their minds. To Spector, his classroom is symptomatic of polarisation.

As I read Spector’s reflections, I wondered what his students would make of the climactic scene in [Coriolanus](#) (one of Shakespeare’s lesser-known plays). In this scene, the main character radically changes his mind.

‘O mother, mother! What have you done?’ Coriolanus changes his mind

Set in the early Roman Republic (5th century BC), *Coriolanus* centres on Caius Martius, a Roman patrician (noble) and war hero who receives the name ‘Coriolanus’ for conquering the city of Corioles, which belonged to Rome’s Volscian enemies.

But Coriolanus also has enemies at home – the starving plebians (common people).

Before the battle for Corioles, Caius Martius had shown much contempt for the plebians, calling them dogs – ‘you curs’ – and scorning their appeal for affordable corn – ‘Hang ’em!’ When the newly named, victorious Coriolanus returns home, the tribunes (representatives) of the people, Brutus and Sicinius, scheme to inflame the simmering class tensions and turn the plebians against Coriolanus.

The tribunes succeed, convincing the plebians that Coriolanus is their ‘fixed enemy’ who will crush them. On his part, Coriolanus also goes on the attack by insulting the tribunes. He then digs in his heels: ‘I would not buy their mercy at the price of one fair word’.

The two sides are polarised. They can no longer tolerate one another’s presence.

The tribunes exile Coriolanus from Rome. Filled with hate, Coriolanus makes a beeline for his arch enemy, Aufidius, head of the Volscian army, and offers to help Aufidius raze Rome. When news of Coriolanus' imminent attack reaches Rome, blame and fear echo through the city.

Enter Volumnia, Coriolanus' mother, along with his wife and son, on a mission to persuade Coriolanus to change his mind. At first, he is deaf to them. But Volumnia does not give up. Shakespeare gives her more than 50 lines to mount her final plea. That's a lot of speaking. But Coriolanus is listening. Eventually, he takes Volumnia's hand and exclaims, 'O mother, mother! What have you done?'

Coriolanus changes his mind. Volumnia's words have caused his 'eyes to sweat compassion' and he decides to spare Rome.

This powerful moment surprised me the first time I read it. Shakespeare's play depicts Coriolanus as proud and obstinate. It seemed impossible that he would enact such an about face, impossible that he could imagine himself beyond the gridlock of polarisation and distrust.

In this moment, Shakespeare enables us to also imagine – to imagine what it might look like to believe in the possibility of change and move towards others with whom we're in conflict, imagine what it might look like to listen.

Of course, none of this is at all straightforward nor without significant cost to groups and individuals who try to act against the grain of entrenched social and political norms. Without spoiling the play's ending, I'll note that Coriolanus' change of mind was very costly for him. This is why he cries out 'What have you done?'

Yet it seems to me that our generation needs to heed Shakespeare's call to be open to engaging across differences, to imagine ourselves changing our minds about others. The toll of the gridlock on individuals, communities and the planet makes this call too urgent to ignore.

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