

techniques and learn more. Say you pick fake experts. You have a few practice rounds of identifying the fake expert out of three choices. And then you're at bat. Choose the argument that involves a fake expert:

"Scientists weren't afraid to look into the strange physics behind lasers and semiconductors, so I don't think we should be afraid to look into telepathic remote-viewing."

"Celebrity Jenny McCarthy says vaccination causes autism."

"Boris Johnson has funny hair so he's a terrible Prime Minister."

If you said Jenny McCarthy, you won! Cook's idea was that students could challenge other students, compete on score, classes could compete with other classes, and you'd end up with what he called "basically a critical-thinking matchup."

With this gamification, Cook was trying to level the unfair playing field that disinformation tends to exploit. Human beings are understood to have two principal modes of thinking, fast and slow, as the psychologist Daniel Kahneman famously called them. Fast thinking is reflexes. Slow thinking is reflection. Disinformation often appeals to the fast-thinking system. It plays to the gut, and the gut does as directed. The challenge for fact-based people is, as Cook puts it, that "trying to get people to be critical thinkers and think logically through misinformation is really pushing upstream." What the game does is give people enough practice at spotting disinformation and its underlying fallacies that their skills of bullshit detection move into the realm of the reflexive.

What had begun as Cook's pursuit of in-the-moment climate talking points for tense family dinners had evolved. What if these methods could train a new generation to recognize the moves and signs of disinformation and be guarded against them? What if illustrating those moves on a single issue, climate, offered that "umbrella of protection" against disinformation on topics far afield, as some early research suggested it did? What if, as Cook seemed to believe, it was futile to hope that Fox News or Facebook or anti-vaxxers or anti-maskers or microchip truthers would go away? What if you grudgingly accepted their lies as here to stay and sought to forge citizens resistant to them?

## MEANING MAKING AT THE DOOR

The drive from Phoenix to Flagstaff cut through stunning Arizona desert, greening as you went north. Cacti gestured toward the plain azure sky like fingers making Hindu mudras. Bushes and shrubs pixelated the land without filling it. Forests of ponderosa trees blurred past. Mesas appeared tinily on the horizon and then swelled as you approached, their flat tops almost unnatural, diamond cut. The exits along I-17 North told their own story of Arizona's land and its people. Indian School Road. Cactus Road. Sonoran Desert Drive. Carefree Highway. Pioneer Road. Bumble Bee/Crown King. Cottonwood. Mormon Lake. A sign warned that there would be no civilization, no gas, no food, no water, for dozens of miles, and it wasn't kidding. Everything disappeared for a long stretch. And then, all at once, a settlement appeared, a camp town carved into the unforgiving landscape.

I switched on a podcast as I drove—*The Daily*, from *The New York Times*. To my surprise, the day's episode was of particular local relevance:

As congressional Democrats dramatically scale back the most ambitious social spending bill since the 1960s, they're placing much of the blame on moderate Democrats, who have demanded the cutbacks.

The holdup on this massive plan is Democrats Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, who say we don't need to spend this kind of money—this is way too much money.



Today, the story of one of them, Senator Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona.

The podcast recounted the saga of Arizona's most mysterious politician. Sinema had once been a member of the Green Party and a leftist leader protesting the Iraq War. She ran for the state legislature as an independent and lost. Then, in 2004, she ran as a Democrat and won. She established herself as a movement leader who went inside: one day she was defending the cause of immigrants in the legislature; the next, she was marching on the state capital alongside undocumented people in the Arizona summer heat.

Then, several years into her tenure, something turned. Chasing dreams of political elevation, to the U.S. House of Representatives and then the Senate, Sinema reinvented herself as a political moderate who took pleasure in thwarting her own party and would vote with President Trump's position most of the time in his first year in office. "I'll work with anybody" became her new brand mantra.

When President Biden took office, with a fifty-fifty Senate standing between him and most elements of his agenda, Sinema, along with her colleague Joe Manchin of West Virginia, became a pivotal figure in Washington. It was she who famously thumbs-downed, with a performative curtsy, a chance to raise the federal minimum wage. Will-they-won't-they became a national guessing game as two senators who often seemed closer to corporate donors than to their own constituents held up most of Biden's agenda during a historic crisis.

Toward the end of the podcast, the host played audio of the Bathroom Incident. With the fate of Biden's Build Back Better proposal still in the air—a package of rare ambition that, if put into law, would transform the social safety net from cradle to grave, fight climate change, and, potentially, create a pathway to citizenship for millions of undocumented people—the fates of many rested on two senators. Sinema was engaging in her usual obstinacy and dangling and withdrawing of hope at that time, which infuriated many on the activist left. And so a group of protesters had followed her into the bathroom after a class she taught at Arizona State and filmed themselves confronting her.

"We need citizenship for seven million. We need the Build Back Better plan right now," one activist said. "We knocked on doors for you

to get you elected, and just how we got you elected, we can get you out of office if you don't support what you promised us," called out another.

"Wow," the podcast's host said, reacting to the idea of a protest following a senator into the bathroom. After a long recounting of what had made Sinema so rage inducing to so many, this tactic seemed to strike the host as a bridge too far.

The local group that confronted Sinema was known for its uncompromising defense of undocumented immigrants. It was called LUCHA, or Living United for Change in Arizona. Its priority at that moment was pushing Sinema to support a pathway to citizenship for the undocumented as part of Biden's big legislation.

As it happened, I had arrived in Arizona that morning for the purpose of witnessing LUCHA's work, not out of any interest in bathrooms, but because LUCHA's organizers pursued multiple and contradictory modes of persuasion. On one front, they were attracting attention to a form of protest that very visibly and confrontationally called Sinema out, while on another front they engaged in the work I had come to see: a promising experiment in persuasion by door knocking, grounded in increasingly hard-to-muster behaviors of empathy, curiosity, and nonjudgment, fueled by an almost mystifying faith that people can change.

My guide to the process known as deep canvassing was Cesar Torres, whom I found at LUCHA's offices in Flagstaff. Out in the corridors were posters of inspiration ("Leaders: Leadership is action, not position," accompanied by a bald eagle). Inside was the managed chaos of activists working against the clock—an array of folding chairs, a bottle of Febreze, hand sanitizer, packets of sugar, water bottles, alcohol wipes, Ziploc bags, Gatorade, bug repellent, bags of Doritos, printer toner, Stayfree pads, and a microwave above a mini-fridge.

Cesar was wrapping up a video meeting with leaders of other deep canvassing projects around the country, each with its own goal: in one state, they might be working to raise the minimum wage; in another, to strengthen gig-worker protections; in another still, to redirect funding from the police to social services. Cesar was wearing an



Under Armour baseball cap, which throughout the day he swiveled 180 degrees around, backward to forward, forward to backward; a blue Adidas hoodie; and rectangular glasses that underscored his image of earnestness, sincerity, and calm.

Cesar, now a leader of LUCHA's deep canvassing operations in Arizona, had come to the work rather by accident.

He was born in Mexico, the son of a carpenter. His family was neither rich nor poor. "We had it good in Mexico, but my parents always wanted the best for their kids," he told me. His father ventured north alone to get a job in the United States. A year and a half later, when Cesar was seven, his mother led him and his two sisters, then two years old and six months old, north as well. The children crossed illegally, with the help of a coyote.

The family reunited and settled in Richmond, California, a largely Latino community just north of Berkeley in the Bay Area. "It was super Latino, so to me it was normal," Cesar told me. It was only when he left the area for higher studies that he realized that he lived in a country full of people wanting to be rid of people like his family.

Cesar didn't know he was undocumented until he was fifteen or so. He wanted to get a job, which forced his parents to tell him the truth: "That was a little shocker to me." His mother worked as a nanny, and his father as a handyman and a welder. Both parents applied for residency and citizenship long ago, but Cesar said their applications have been frozen since September 11, 2001, and the clampdown on immigration. "We've been waiting for something for decades now," he said.

His parents had come to America with dreams of their children going to college. But being undocumented made that dream elusive. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program had yet to come into effect, and so financial help with college was out of the question. Instead, Cesar enrolled in a local community college. He joined student government. At a conference one day, he heard someone say they were hiring political canvassers in Riverside. He signed up for the gig, and the organization looked the other way about his status.

He went to work as a canvasser for Mi Familia Vota, a national civic organization that registers and educates Latino voters. The director took a shine to Cesar and showed him the ropes. "Being undocumented,

you feel like a second-class citizen sometimes," Cesar said, "where you don't really think you have a say. He showed me the power of organizing and how I can have a voice without necessarily having one."

After a few years of doing that work, Cesar was advised by his mentor to go and study some more. He went to get a bachelor's in political science. Then it was back to canvassing. He became an accomplished campaigner, working for campaigns directly as well as firms that offered organizers for hire. He traveled the country and managed teams.

If what he would later do was called deep canvassing, it was in reaction to the traditional kind of canvassing being comparatively shallow. For Mi Familia Vota and other campaigns, he generally knocked on the doors of friendly voters, confirming that they were voting for the desired candidate, ensuring they had a plan to vote, or registering them if need be. Changing minds wasn't the mission, and it turns out there was a reason for that.

The Democratic Party, and much of the left in general, was migrating from a fixation on persuading moderates and Republicans to a fixation on turning out and energizing their own diehards. The journalist and television anchor Chris Hayes has described the shift well. For years, he said, "there was this kind of dominant ethos among Democratic Party operatives, which was the obsession with the swing voter." The party's sages were "prophets of the swing voter," who "almost always coded as white, suburban voters, who went this way and that, and you could appeal to them if you were a Democrat and you were fiscally responsible and tough on crime and you checked all these boxes that made them not worry that you were too much of a lib." This thinking still very much exists in the party firmament, and when losses happen, the prophets will rise from the dead.

But in recent years, Hayes continued, "newer-school thinking about the Democratic coalition" was ascendant. It was a "product of a number of things—post-Obama, the demographic changes in America, and the vanishing swing voter, where the idea is the country is polarizing, the number of people that bounce back and forth between the parties is shrinking, people have these tribal affections and loyalties, the parties stand for incredibly distinct visions of existential truths about people, like who is an American—basically, who counts." The emerg-



ing view was “mobilizing your coalition, getting people enthusiastic,” Hayes said, echoing Anat Shenker-Osorio.

Hayes set up this schema before launching into an interview with an organizer named George Goehl, a major figure in the deep canvassing movement. And Hayes made plain his own feeling about these approaches and the change of strategy in recent years. “I am generally sympathetic to this latter model, which I think is in the ascendancy, which I think is about mobilizing your coalition,” he said. But there was one thing about the emerging model that gave him pause: “There’s a kind of thing that happens when this ‘mobilize your people’ idea gets taken to its most extreme logical conclusion, which is a kind of writing off that happens.”

It was one thing to make the best use of an organizer’s time by focusing on shoring up those in your in-group whom you could most effectively mobilize instead of those who seemed less likely to move. But the “writing off” Hayes feared went beyond that simple calculus. Somewhere down the line, it risked becoming a habit of mind to assume people can’t change, won’t change, that you don’t need them anyway, that they’ll never get that vaccine, that they’ll always vote for the racist, that they’re beyond the reach of persuasion.

In his first years of traditional canvassing, Cesar’s work was more or less entirely in this ascendant mobilizing mold. He didn’t think much about the writing-off issue, about what was *not* being attempted, until he heard about, and then landed, a job managing campaigns at LUCHA. At first, it seemed pretty similar to other canvassing jobs he’d done. But he knew he was in strange new waters when he was told at a training session that the goal was to spend thirty minutes per door. It sounded like a spoken typo. Coming up in political canvassing, he had absorbed the mantra “If you’re spending more than five minutes at a door, you’re wasting your time. You are not going to convince somebody.”

This new deep canvassing method, by contrast, was about staying long enough to surface something different. Cesar was trained by his new employer to knock on doors, get people to start talking and keep talking, and begin a protocol designed with scientific rigor to change minds. It was live-action persuasion built on an approach that felt quaint and somewhat contrary to the culture’s drift toward confronta-

tion and fatalism about others. Cesar learned that the deep canvasser had to listen, truly listen, and keep listening, then listen some more, as the person on the other side of the door explained why they felt some kind of way about transgender people or undocumented people or minimum-wage workers. He had to listen without judgment and with visible curiosity even when they were criticizing or degrading people like him. He had to refrain from calling the other person out. Instead, Cesar was trained to probe for the person’s experiences around the group of people or topic under discussion. In the hope of changing their political preferences, he learned to help people process those stories and reflect on their own dissonances—the way they deplored immigrants because they were lazy but did love Manuel, who worked in their yard, because he worked so hard, and come to think of it, everyone in Manuel’s family worked hard, too.

As Cesar trained in deep canvassing, he found it super intriguing. When he went out in the field for the first time, he said, “I saw the effect it had on folks. And it was like, ‘Whoa, this is dope.’” Though it flew in the face of his prior training, it rhymed with his deepest orientation. “I’ve done it my whole life,” he told me. He was always the guy in the bar who realized some of the other guys were right-wingers and who sought out a conversation with them about immigration and, at the perfectly chosen moment, revealed that he was among the undocumented people they feared. He was the guy who tried to tell himself what John Cook had argued: that the crazies weren’t perpetrators so much as victims of a society awash in mis- and disinformation.

The method Cesar was learning was built on assumptions that pushed back against widespread cultural beliefs: that persuasion in politics doesn’t work; that people can’t and won’t change; that calling out every chauvinism everywhere is a moral duty, and failing to is complicity; that the views of the other side are deep rather than superficial.

“One of my most memorable canvass stories,” Cesar said, “is that I went to talk to a person, and they were like, ‘No, I don’t know any immigrants.’ And I still kept digging in there, and she was like, ‘Oh, well, yeah, my sister’s husband is undocumented, and he got hurt at work. He had an accident. He’s in the ICU, and they have no health care, they can’t get worker’s comp, and they’re struggling.’ And I was



like, 'Yeah, he would definitely benefit from making sure that we pass a pathway to citizenship.'" What struck Cesar was how her hostility to immigrants lay on the surface but, right below it, was the seedling of another view. Yet it wouldn't sprout on its own. It needed watering. The woman needed help making meaning of her experiences. Though she had, in her own brother-in-law, a source of dissonance with her view of immigration, "she doesn't see him as an immigrant guy," Cesar said. "She's like, 'Oh, this is my sister's husband. This is my brother-in-law. He's just a regular person.' And the message that I was able to get across to her was, 'When you think of immigrants, sure, you're thinking of the border crisis or gangs or whatever the media wants to bring up that week. But it's not that. It's people like me.'"

Cesar's parents worried about him doing this work. "You don't want to be a mechanic or something?" they sometimes asked, partly because it was a job they didn't understand, partly because what they did understand concerned them. "I would be on Telemundo or Univision doing Spanish interviews," Cesar said, "and they're like, 'Why are you on there? Why are you putting our family at risk of deportation?' They were just scared, because all you see on the media is, ICE is deporting this many people, ICE raids. My parents are like, 'If you're supporting immigrants, they're going to target you.'" How reckless it might have felt to his parents for their boy, whom they had lovingly smuggled across a border, to go to people's houses and tell them he was undocumented. But for Cesar his work was not a betrayal of their struggle but a fulfillment of it. What better way to resist living in the shadows, fearing a knock on the door, than to be the one who does the knocking?

At 3:00 p.m., Abby and Dakota, the two other canvassers working that day, reported to LUCHA's offices. Cesar had been taking stock of where the campaign was. LUCHA was on week twenty-nine of a thirty-week marathon of deep canvassing. By the latest numbers, the canvassers had hit 49,250 homes, attempted to speak to 70,945 distinct people, sometimes speaking to couples or adult children living with parents. Of those, 8,067 people had answered their initial question of how strongly they support a pathway to citizenship on a scale from one

to ten, and 97 percent of those who answered the first question kept the door open long enough to answer the same question at the end of the conversation. The difference, if any, between the opening answer and the closing one was how the canvassers measured a changed mind.

Cesar handed his colleagues "turfs," maps of the neighborhoods and homes they would be hitting. Those, paired with the voter database they had on their phones, would guide them. Then he gave Abby and Dakota a pep talk.

"The pressure is working," Cesar told them. "Sinema feels it. And we need her to know that we are not stopping until the Build Back Better Act gets passed."

Respectfully but skeptically, Dakota, a newcomer to LUCHA, asked, "Just to confirm, the pressure is, in fact, working?"

It was a reasonable question. Every day came another story of Sinema hosting fundraisers, jetting off to Europe to court donors, and dutifully shutting down some corporation-hindering provision of the legislation under debate. Meanwhile, there were phony "audits" of the 2020 election vote ongoing in Arizona, funded by mega-donors across the country hoping to reinstate Trump a year after he lost the election. There was something touching about LUCHA's theory of change—that going to people's doors and urging them to make calls to pressure Sinema to support a pathway to citizenship could counteract the shadowy dance of special interests and dark money.

Cesar was at pains to tell them that, yes, it was working. He seized on any bit of evidence he could to make the point. Take, for example, all the donor events Sinema was doing. To Cesar, this was proof that she was scared. Would a senator confident in her reelection prospects a full three years in the future be fundraising as if there were no tomorrow? Then there was the fact that her voice-mail box was full days earlier but had been cleared again. Someone had to be listening. When you invest so much time and energy in working the levers of bottom-up democracy, you need to believe it works. Whether or not it does is another matter.

Then the three canvassers went their separate ways. I followed Abby to the east side of Flagstaff, where she would be canvassing. Though it was still in the three o'clock hour, the late October air was crisp and chilling fast. Abby constantly found herself calculating how



much time she had before it got dark, around six. She would keep going for another hour or hour and a half after that, but it got a little hairy walking dark streets, turning into shrouded properties, knocking unexpectedly.

This was one of the harder-up neighborhoods they worked. The cars tended to be missing parts—hubcaps, grilles. Houses often sat beside empty lots with metal fencing, inside of which ferocious dogs barked—the local alarm system. Mostly the neighborhood was quiet, but there were some signs of communal life. In the front yard of one home, a man sat shirtless in the cold air having his hair cut by another man with clippers. Halloween decorations were popping up. Sandbags encircled many of the lots, sometimes stacked two or three high, to absorb the flooding that came with the summer monsoon season. Many of the bags had burst after a recent flood, the sand erupting into the street. It was one of those once-in-centuries floods that seemed to happen all the time now, caused by forces that other canvassers in other states were knocking on doors about.

Abby first approached a ranch house and found a mother whose two small children hovered at her knee, one of them sucking on a lollipop. Her partner was the one in the voter database, and he wasn't home. Abby asked if a conversation about a potential pathway to citizenship might be something he'd be interested in. The woman was pretty certain it was not. Move on. Then Abby came upon a short-haired, incredibly pleasant progressive woman who wanted her to know she was a progressive and was totally on board with it all, the immigration, the everything. She wasn't sure why Abby stuck around, barreling through her script. But one of the many things that distinguishes deep canvassing from other approaches is that you don't rest on the laurels of a self-professed ten, as the progressive woman was on the pathway to citizenship. What you don't want is an unreflective and tribal ten, someone saying what they think they are meant to say because they're on Team Blue. Such a person might be with you now, only to blow in the wind the next time a charismatic leader with a different view comes along. So whereas another kind of canvasser might speed along, Abby tried to stay as long as she could, even as the progressive woman made clear she needed to get back to things, working from home and all. Abby got her to verbalize some of why immigration was important

to her, got her to talk about some of the immigrants she knew, her personal stakes in the matter. Then, having secured a promise by the woman to make a call to Sinema's office, Abby left.

Soon Abby was standing outside a small house, knocking on the door of an older white woman with flowing white hair. She asked if the woman would be willing to have a conversation "about immigration reform and stuff."

"Will it take long?" the woman asked.

"Usually like ten-fifteen minutes," Abby said.

"I really can't stand that long," the woman said. "I have a medical condition." And where many traditional canvassers might have respectfully yielded, Abby tried to find a solution. Could the woman come outside and sit on one of her plastic Adirondack chairs? Could she maybe wear an extra layer to brave the chill? The woman went back inside, grabbed a woolen poncho, and sank into the plastic chair, the fading sun warming her face.

Abby went through the early motions. How is your afternoon going so far? Then she introduced the matter at hand, semi-reading from a script that seemed to perpetuate some of the problems with communication on the left that Shenker-Osorio railed against, above all selling the recipe instead of the brownie.

"We're just going around specifically talking, as an organization, about the process of reconciliation through the federal budget as well as the Build Back Better Act. Are you familiar with either of those things?" Each time I witnessed the opening of these exchanges, the canvasser seemed on the verge of losing someone who had agreed to talk to them, only to regain their footing momentarily. A flood of earnest, alienating words washed over them—"reconciliation," "budget," "allocated," "reform," "parliamentarian." For the canvasser, these words were the stuff of life, the object of their aspirations, but for many people on the other side of the thresholds, they were words that created distance, reminding them of pin-striped people far away who didn't see them, didn't help them, and kept thriving as the country wilted.

Now, having gotten through the preliminaries and the declaration of her purpose, Abby moved in to gauge the white-haired woman's support for a pathway to citizenship. She was a ten. "For people who



want to become citizens, yeah, they need an easier time doing it," she said.

Again, Abby stayed, having been trained not only to gauge and strengthen support for a policy but also to assist the subtler process by which people organize their ideas and experiences into opinions. The white-haired woman gave reason to pursue this path. She seemed at once supportive of immigration but not especially versed in it, not as sure of herself on the subject as the progressive woman before her had been. This was the kind of faint allegiance that could evaporate, that the canvassers wanted to deepen through talk.

At this point in the conversation, whether facing a skeptic or a die-hard supporter or someone in between, the canvasser is trained to ask the subject if they know any immigrants in their own life. If the answer is no, there is another, more complex conversational path to follow. But, fortunately for Abby, the white-haired woman said yes.

"I know some that became citizens," the woman said. "Some of them don't want to. They just want to make enough money to go back to Mexico, and they tend to do that. There's all different kinds. Some of them were illegal here. And that was really sad, because a lot of them, where they were, they were going to die if they didn't leave. Their kids just didn't have a chance. So if they want to stay and be citizens and vote and everything, and be part of this country, I say, 'Yeah.'"

Cesar had met up with Abby by this point, and the white-haired woman's words inspired him to share his own story. "Myself personally, I came to the United States when I was seven years old," he said. "My parents brought me. Obviously, I had no choice at the age of seven. And it's been a struggle trying to figure out—"

"The DACA," the woman offered.

And so Cesar told the woman his DACA story—the expiration of his status, the delays wrought by Trump's gutting of the program. He talked about the \$495 fee he has to pay every two years, the background checks and fingerprints he must do, just to continue living in the only country he has really known. This was another important aspect of the deep canvassing process. After getting the subject to reflect on people they know affected by the issue, you share your own experiences, whether personal or those of people you love. And I saw now how the concrete details of a life can make things even clearer for

a voter than the moral appeals that may stir the kinds of people who become canvassers (or journalists). The white-haired woman's ears perked up when she heard Cesar say he had to pay his fee every two years, and additionally pay for getting his fingerprints.

"On top of the \$400?" she asked.

"Every two years, yeah."

"You have to pay for fingerprints?" she asked. That particular point really stuck with her.

Cesar now moved into the ask phase. Would she make a call to Senator Sinema? Inserting a pathway to citizenship into the Build Back Better bill would make these troubles go away for Cesar. The woman said she would call. Then, with the questions still washing around in her mind, she came back to the one about whether she knew any immigrants personally.

"I used to work at a Walmart after the recession," the woman said as Cesar stood in front of her, helpfully shadowing her face to keep the sun out of her eyes. "And most of the kids there—they were brought over. They were in college; they were going to school while they were working. And the other kids, they weren't. They were just messing around and stuff. And it really impressed me that a lot of people that come here really do want a better life, and they're willing to work for it. They ought to get it."

This memory hadn't seemed to occur to her in the first moments of the conversation. It took having the conversation. At first, she had had a position: they deserve a life here if they want it. But with a little help from her canvassing friends, the opinion had struck deeper roots. She had seen immigrants up close at Walmart. And they weren't just decent people, same as everyone else. They put her own fellow Americans to shame, as she remembered it. Yes, that was it. That was why she felt the way she did. And now, hearing what she hadn't known, just how hard it is for many people in that boat, even having to pay for their own fingerprints—can you believe that?—her conviction grew sturdier.

And so the LUCHA team moved through the area, asking how afternoons were going, soliciting these personal stories, sharing their own, helping people process their experiences and opinions, and the rhymes and sometimes the dissonances between them. What had occurred with the white-haired woman was the relatively easy case—



a supporter of the cause from the outset who did have personal relationships with immigrants. Other encounters that evening illustrated the more forbidding path when such relationships are lacking.

Abby knocked on the door of a white house, outside of which human-sized ghosts had been hung as decorations for the Halloween festivities looming that weekend. A grizzled woman named Lily opened her front door but remained behind a wrought-iron outer door, scowling.

What's it all about? Lily wanted to know.

"What we're talking about right now is the Build Back Better Act that's trying to be passed right now," Abby began, "and the reconciliation budget, which is going to allocate money toward immigration reform. So that's just, like, the main thing."

"What do you mean, immigration?"

Abby said she was advocating for "the undocumented community, specifically within Flagstaff." This did not have the effect she hoped.

"Oh, we're citizens," Lily said. Abby hadn't suggested otherwise, but it was revealing that what Lily took from her spiel was that Abby was going around trying to help immigrants and that was of no use to Lily, since she wasn't an immigrant.

"Yeah, no, for sure," Abby said. "We're talking to folks whether they're an immigrant or not."

At this point, despite her evident hostility toward Abby and the topic, Lily, like a surprising number of people at the door, signaled she would stick around for a conversation. She turned halfway around and yelled at somebody inside to pause whatever they had been watching.

Now Abby asked Lily how supportive she was of a pathway to citizenship.

"I don't know nothing about immigration. Nothing," Lily said. It seemed important to Lily to separate herself from immigrants. So even as Abby made clear that she wasn't assuming Lily was an immigrant, Lily kept making clear that she wasn't.

Abby asked Lily to quantify her position on a scale from one to ten. "Knowing me, I would say no," Lily said. Okay. Put her down for a one.

It was time for the personal-relationships gambit. "Do you know anyone that has immigrated into the United States?"

"Nope." It was somewhat hard to believe for someone living in the

middle of Flagstaff. But this not knowing, this total lack of association, seemed important to Lily. Abby wasn't sure of Lily's background, but she knew the neighborhood was heavily Native American, and she had gotten this kind of reaction many times in the community: people who quite understandably resented the idea of helping newcomers to the United States when their own community, here before the rest, had never gotten a lick of help.

In the choose-your-own-adventure that is deep canvassing, the personal connection road had proved a dead end. So it was time to attempt the detour, a route the experts called analogic perspective taking, which, luckily for them, is a phrase the canvassers don't use at the door. The idea is that even if you don't have a personal stake in the issue, in this case the lives of immigrants and undocumented people in particular, the issue reflects some more universal dimension of the human condition to which you may be able to relate. So to the person who knows no immigrants, you might ask, "Have you ever struggled in your life? Have you ever wanted to do right by your kids but been hindered from doing so?" To the person who doesn't really know what transgender means, you might say, "Have you ever been counted out or disrespected just because of who you are?"

The appeal of the personal-connections route is that it is easier to go from people you know, certainly people you care for, to embracing a politics that would ease their lives. But the power of the perspective-taking detour is that it universalizes. It takes the particular struggle of one group and de-exoticizes it. It makes it a timeless human struggle, almost the Hollywood version of a political fight. And it asks you to see yourself in Others.

"Was there a time in your life when you have had to help someone through a particular struggle, maybe taking care of a family member or something?" Abby asked Lily.

"Oh, I donate a lot, but I'm against the immigrants," Lily said. "I'm not just talking about from Mexico. I'm talking about all over."

"Gotcha," Abby said, abiding by her training to bite her leftist-college-student tongue.

"We got our own families," Lily said. She noted that she did take care of her boys, so that counted as helping people.

Abby came back for another swipe at the perspective taking, this



time the other way around: "Was there a time in your life where someone has helped you through some sort of challenges, struggles, and then what was that like for you?"

"Nope."

"Cool. Awesome," Abby said unsinkably. The conversation ended.

Minutes later, in an apartment building just around the corner, a conversation with many of the same rudiments went in a different way.

Kyle surfaced from inside wearing a 2014 Winter Chill NBA sweat-shirt, Nike slippers, and a blue metallic chain. Abby began her ritual, and from the outset Kyle seemed curious and interested, even if his eyes kept falling to his phone.

At first, during the spooning out of the reconciliation-allocated-facilitates-reform jargon soup, Kyle was polite but monosyllabic—yeah, uh-huh, yeah.

When asked to register his support for a pathway to citizenship, though, he immediately pronounced himself a ten.

Abby proceeded into the personal-connections question. But here, as had been the case with Lily, Kyle claimed no connections with immigrants.

"Me? No. No, I don't know anybody," he said. But then something unexpected happened. Before Abby could get to the perspective taking, Kyle went there himself and argued for the logic of that method with plainspoken eloquence.

"Well, I'm a Native American," he said. "So, either way, it still applies to me the same way as the immigrants, you know?"

Now, without prompting, so as to explain the commonality he saw, he went into the particulars of his situation. He worked construction, and these days his big problem was that he made too much money to qualify for government-subsidized health care but too little money to afford health care on the open market. "I can't even pay for my son's health care," he said. "I can't pay for my wife's health care. They say I make too much money, so it puts me at a loss at the same time. So I'm in the same boat."

There it was in that last sentence—that analogic perspective taking, though this time achieved without Abby's prompting. His first three sentences had simply been about his hardship, his difficulties making a life in working-class America. But then, in his concluding thought,

where Lily saw such hardships as a reason to forswear help for others, he had said, "I'm in the same boat."

Abby went into the analogic questions meant to stir the kind of reflection that had already begun. Had Kyle ever had to support anyone through hardship? He had. "Even when I was in high school," he told Abby, "I still had to try to find a way to provide for my fiancée and her little sister and everything like that. So it's been pretty hard for us, but I mean we're getting through it right now."

Inversely, had he ever been helped?

"No. I do it all on my own since I was seventeen. I'm thirty now," he said. "My family didn't have my back or anything like that. So I had to do everything on my own, and I had to provide for my own. So that's all I got to say on that."

And, again, what Kyle took from this was that he was duty-bound to stand up for people who also hadn't gotten help. He spoke of how much he admired immigrants working in construction who do the jobs others wouldn't be willing to do. "There's nobody else that's going to do it," he said. "It's just immigrants and us Native Americans. That's it, pretty much."

Now Abby asked Kyle for his score of support once more. "I'd make it an eleven," he said.

Would he make a call to Sinema?

"Can I cuss on the line if I have to?"

He placed the call right there, reading from LUCHA's sample script. He kept it polite.

After hanging up, he asked if he could take a photo of the script with his phone, "just in case I call back again tomorrow."

"Those immigrants are my skin color," Kyle said. "So they're also my brothers. And, back in the day, we learned a lot from each other."

"Absolutely," Abby said.

"I respect them."

He spoke now of the reservation where he had grown up. "We really don't have a lot out there where I come from. No running water, barely electricity. And so when they come in, they have an opportunity to at least try to get a job." I wasn't entirely sure what he meant. I took him to mean that given how resource starved his people had been, he was happy to see that many immigrants have one thing going



for them that his people hadn't: access to a market hungry for their labor.

One way to understand the deep canvassing process is as an attempt to turn Lilys into Kyles, to help people extrapolate from their own experiences and own pain a politics of wider solidarity. That wasn't what I had witnessed that day, because Lily was immovable, and Kyle was, without prodding, already there. But in the space between them I glimpsed the hope of the project.

Before Abby left the apartment, Kyle thanked her and, unbidden, armed with the script he had saved, said, "I'll give a call every day if I have to."

**O**n Election Day 2008, Steve Deline was full of optimism—and then suddenly of despair.

Most people who remember that night will remember it as the moment when Barack Obama won the American presidency, breaking a forbidding barrier. Deline celebrated that victory as avidly as anyone. But that night a second thing happened as well, and had it occurred on any other night, the event might be better remembered: a slender majority of Californians approved Proposition 8, a ballot measure to abolish same-sex marriages, which had become legal in the state just that year.

In the next days, as millions celebrated Obama's victory, Deline was crushed. "I would walk around the grocery store and look at the people around me and just have this overwhelming feeling of 'Did you vote against me? Do you believe my love is less worthy than your love?'" he told me. "I suddenly had this profound sense of alienation from people around me, in my community and in everyday life, that I had never experienced before."

What especially devastated him was that it wasn't some distant others who had voted against his freedom. The proposition had won Los Angeles County, for crying out loud. It had won parts of the Bay Area, of all places. And the loss was, by his count, the twenty-eighth straight loss on marriage equality at the ballot box across the country. It was one thing to be able to tell yourself that some right-wing Christian fanatic on the Supreme Court had taken your rights away,

or senators representing the state of Alabama had voted against you. It was another thing to know that the people walking around with you at the store, the people filling your gas tank, the people you waved to in the neighborhood—many of them were against you. "It's people around me," Deline said, "people who know a lot of people like me."

A few months later, Deline, still in his funk, heard about a canvassing experiment being developed by a local organization called the Los Angeles LGBT Center. The goal, as he understood it, was, "Let's go try and talk to the people who are voting against us. Let's go into the neighborhoods where we lost heavily and knock on people's doors and find out (a) if we can have a conversation with the people who voted against us; (b) if we can talk to each other honestly; and (c) if that's possible, if there's anything we can do to change those minds." It struck him as unusual, because so much of the canvassing he had experienced was focused on turning voters out, not confronting disagreements. "It just ran against all the conventional wisdom," he said, "to the extent of being considered folly, I would say, in a lot of circles." But if it was folly, it wasn't a folly rooted in airy hope, but rather, Deline told me, in terror. "It came from a place of desperation and feeling like I had no other choice but to try to talk to the people who I didn't think I could talk to," he said.

As a gay man himself, Deline felt that the movement was winning in the courts and legislatures. "But," he said, "if we cannot switch something in the hearts and minds of a significant number of people around us, we are blocked." As David Fleischer, who ran the Leadership LAB at the L.A. LGBT Center, has said, "People were open to saying, 'Yeah, we do not know enough about our neighbors who voted against us, and the tools that we have to gain insight into them are woefully inadequate, so we better go to talk to them.'"

After attending some protests, Deline signed up for training with the center's canvassing project. On the drive over, he pulled over and called his then boyfriend. "Remind me why I should go ahead with this," he said. "Remind me why I shouldn't just turn around and come home right now." Still, he took the training. And, before long, he was hitting the streets, testing out early prototypes of what would become deep canvassing.

On his first day of actual canvassing, the first door he knocked on



was opened by a guy clutching an In-N-Out burger who gave him an “I don’t want to talk to you, move on.” On his second door he addressed a highly religious family eating dinner outside. The wife politely declined to talk, and then the husband began screaming at Deline. But then came the third door, and from that knock Deline was hooked.

“I talked to this average dude, mid- to late-forties Latino guy, and just asked him how he voted and why,” Deline said. “And he told me that he voted for the proposition, and I explained a little bit. The experience of just getting to talk about it with him and focus on it being not an argument but a conversation about what’s going on for you, what’s going on for me, just allowed me to shed my sense that he was the enemy, and that he was this bogeyman that I needed to be afraid of, and it was fundamentally different for me. And I think he got to shed his sense that I was this enemy and this bogeyman—whatever framework he had in his mind for what a radical gay activist was.”

Something in Deline flipped as he began to have more such conversations. “It just completely changed my sense of agency and ability to rightsize the world, and rightsize my understanding of people around me,” he said. It made him think, “I’m not surrounded by bogeymen. I’m surrounded by people who are working hard, and they made a bad choice, and they had a huge impact on me, and I have to hold that pain and be honest with them about it. But I also can feel that they are not fundamentally out to get me, and we can talk about it, and we can work through it. And, actually, if I take the time to do that, that’s what makes it possible for them to reach a different conclusion.”

As deep canvassing developed into a more rigorous and formal method, it became a bigger and bigger part of Deline’s professional life. Eventually, he became one of its major champions and practitioners. He began to see in its emphasis on listening and story sharing, non-judgment and vulnerability, an alternative to what he saw as the predominant approach to persuasion in his progressive circles—a combination of giving people the best arguments and information and shaming them for failing to come around.

“When I look at the progressive movement and people on the left, there’s this sense that we just know better,” he told me. “Like, ‘Oh, if they just had the information or the education or the facts or the knowledge that we had, they would think the same way we do or be-

lieve the same things we do. It’s just this question of education, knowledge, information.’”

But in the early experiments that became deep canvassing, that approach did little. “One of the things we tried was going out with talking points and facts. Like, ‘Hey, guess what? Your church is never going to be required to marry anyone it doesn’t believe in marrying. This big, giant fear you have is just not true.’ And over and over again, that just fell flat, and people didn’t react.

“Over time,” Deline continued, “it became clear that, ‘Oh, all of these answers we’re trying to give aren’t helping.’ We can try to answer people’s concerns with facts and information. And their fears about gay people, and about their church being forced to do something, and their righteous indignation about lefties pushing things on them—there’s no answer we can give that dispels these fears. They’re actually in a place where they’re wrestling with some deeply seated emotions. The thing that actually made a difference was inviting them to talk about their lives, and then things they’ve experienced and their stories, and sharing our stories.”

What many of his ideological allies ignored, Deline came to believe, was how emotional the process of opinion formation could be. “We are all beings who are in the hands of warring emotions, really powerful emotions. Those emotions are what lead us in a direction around politics. And what do we do when we feel like something emotionally feels right? We go out and seek out facts and information that validate that feeling we’re having, that make us feel like reasonable, rational people.” The scholars call it motivated reasoning.

“When we are disagreeing with someone,” he continued, “and we say, ‘Your facts are wrong. Here are the correct facts,’ without intending to, what we are doing is telling people that what they are feeling is wrong, which is threatening on a much more deeply emotional level than telling someone that their facts are wrong.” That is when people lapse into defensiveness and shut down.

The L.A. LGBT Center’s deep canvassing approach began to invert this process, by providing a script and a protocol by which people could face those they disagreed with in ways that opened them up. “What we learned,” Deline told me, “is changing your mind on something is about navigating a sea of conflicting emotions. Not only is



what we have going on driven on an emotional level for most people, most of the time, but they also don't actually feel completely one way or the other. They feel a lot of *conflicting* emotions. They feel cognitive dissonance. So changing your mind is not actually about flipping a light switch: one second you think one thing, and the next second you think another. Changing your mind is about navigating through this morass of conflicting emotions and trying to pick your way through it and come out somewhere that makes you feel a little bit more resolved."

Deline and his fellow canvassers didn't think of themselves as being divided against their targets on the other side of the doors so much as they thought of their targets as being divided against themselves. They saw them as being lost, grasping. It was another way of saying what Shenker-Osorio had described about the swing voter being confused, not centrist. (She would eventually advise deep canvassing efforts around the 2020 elections.) The canvasser's opportunity wasn't to implant something of their own, something foreign to the target, into them. Rather, it was to pit some things going on inside them against other things going on inside them, to get them to re-rank these things.

Yes, you don't like immigrants, but you like *that* immigrant you know. Or you don't favor a pathway to citizenship, but you know what it means to be overlooked and shut out, and you think of yourself as standing up for the little guy. For canvassers, these dissonances were something to work with. They were grist for the persuasive mill.

"My discovery in doing this work was that most people are sixty-four around most things," said Deline, who continues to do deep canvassing work through an effort called the New Conversation Initiative. "If we ask them to plant their flag on one side or the other, if we approach them that way, they're going to do so, because that's what makes us feel like rational, thinking humans—having an answer to a tough question. But if we approach people with the idea that it's normal to have complicated feelings, even if they have a Trump sign on their front yard, even if their public face expresses one thing—if we approach them with the assumption of 'There's something more going on underneath,' oftentimes we find out that there is."

In one of the early canvasses the L.A. LGBT Center did while shaping the method, captured on video, an older man stands at his door, wearing a baseball cap and greeting a canvasser who has come knocking. The man is welcoming but guarded. The canvasser, Jackson, asks how the man voted on Prop 8. The man says he didn't.

"What would you say is on the side for you that's holding you back from supporting it?" Jackson asks. "You know, I'm just trying to understand better."

"Basically, I kind of didn't want to get involved. I didn't want to make the wrong choice."

"Sure, you want to do the right thing," Jackson says.

But the question has an effect on the man. "Well, now you're making me think about this," he says, stroking his face reflectively.

And then the man begins to tell the story of his cousin, Jill, a lesbian who has been in a relationship for twenty years. She is having financial troubles that the legal institution of marriage would ease. She can't fully tend to her partner of forever when it comes to health issues. And now the man at the door begins to cry. A moment earlier, he could not be bothered to vote on this issue—who knows what's true, both sides, and so on. Now the faintest intervention has rejiggered his whole view of the matter, and he assures Jackson that next time he will be voting yes.

What the canvassers learned at doors like that one was soon codified into a methodology that I had seen practiced by LUCHA.

First, the canvasser was to make contact.

Second, the canvasser was to create a "nonjudgmental context." This didn't mean concealing the purpose of the outreach. In fact, canvassers were supposed to declare the issue they had come to talk about up front, and only then ask the resident their opinion on the topic. As the answers poured out, the canvassers were meant to keep poker-faced, "not indicating they were pleased or displeased with any particular answer, but rather to appear genuinely interested in hearing the subject ruminate on the question," as one report on the method put it. In this phase, and beyond, curiosity was among the canvasser's sharpest tools. In some versions of the protocol, after getting the subject's initial thoughts, the canvasser was to "come out" with their own rating on the issue, before saying they were interested in having conversations with



people regardless of whether they agree, and moving on. (The “coming out” language hearkened back to the origins of the work, when canvassers might literally come out at that moment if they chose.)

In this early phase of listening to subjects on the door justify their opinions, grace was essential. As a report on deep canvassing on the news site *Vox* put it, “The new research shows that if you want to change someone’s mind, you need to have patience with them, ask them to reflect on their life, and listen. It’s not about calling people out or labeling them fill-in-the-blank-phobic. Which makes it feel like a big departure from a lot of the current political dialogue.” The article quoted David Broockman, a Berkeley political scientist, even more bluntly: “In today’s world, many communities have a call-out culture. Twitter is obviously full of the notion that what we should do is condemn those who disagree with us. What we can now say experimentally, the key to the success of these conversations is doing the exact opposite of that.”

Third, the canvasser was to exchange personal narratives, as Abby had done in Flagstaff when she asked people if they knew any immigrants. Whether or not the subject does, the canvasser would then share their own story or that of someone who gave them cause for doing this work.

Fourth, the canvasser was to invite analogic perspective taking. Was there a time *you* needed support? Was there a time *you* needed health care but struggled to access it? Was there a time *you* were counted out because of factors beyond your control? The goal of this stage, according to the report, was “to end with individuals self-generating and explicitly stating aloud implications of the narratives that ran contrary to their previously stated exclusionary attitudes.” In other words, to sow cognitive dissonance of the highly generative kind.

Fifth, the canvasser was to make an explicit case. Here, after doing much listening and eliciting, the canvasser spoke more openly of their own feelings about the subject at hand. Depending on the topic, this was the place where canvassers were encouraged to make use of the Race Class Narrative framework that Shenker-Orsorio had developed and that the deep canvassing methodology made use of.

Sixth, the canvasser, having sown some cognitive dissonance, was to seek to help the subject wrestle with it out loud. Having first listened

nonjudgmentally, the canvasser now could point out contradictions in what they had heard. The report gives an example of what a canvasser might say: “It sounds like, on the one hand, you think that immigrants do a lot to benefit this country, and, on the other hand, you think it is more important to take care of our own citizens first. What is on your mind now that we have been talking?”

Seventh, and only seventh, the canvasser was to respond to the subject’s concerns with talking points and facts. As Deline had observed, this seventh step was step one for many amateurs. *No, Dad, the earth really has warmed!* But in deep canvassing this kind of refutation and fact-checking and responding was back-loaded, and what preceded it was a significant amount of listening and trust building. “Canvassers were trained not to address concerns until this point in the conversation so that voters would not feel threatened by this section,” the report says. “Only after rapport had been established and stories shared would canvassers address concerns.” To be fact-checked, in other words, had prerequisites. It helped first to feel heard, cared for, respected, seen in the fullness of one’s complexity and even, yes, confusion.

Eighth and finally, the canvasser was to ask the subject to rate their support for the policy in question again. Has our conversation changed your opinion? the canvasser asks. The scholars who helped build up the method call this the “rehearsal of opinion change,” with the subject often lured into “active processing” of their own ideas and stories and background and the cognitive dissonance that might have surfaced. The theory is that political opinions are often hastily formed from scanty information. Following a substantive chat at the door, the subject is encouraged to think more slowly about whether their view comports with their deepest values, with what they know to be true, with their sense of themselves, with their experiences.

Soon a method developed in one corner of the country was spreading far and wide. In 2012, it aided a victory that brought it full circle from its origins. A group called Minnesotans United for All Families, advocating against a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, undertook 222,693 phone-based deep canvasses with voters in that state and claimed 20,353 people had moved their opinion somewhat. A corresponding ad campaign reinforced the message of the



canvasses: that the proposed constitutional amendment would hurt real people who lived in your community, and that you, the voter, had the power to make their lives harder—or easier. When Election Day came, the fight for marriage equality won its first victory after thirty-three straight losses in ballot initiatives. In a retrospective on the campaign titled “Eighteen Months to History: How the Minnesota Marriage Amendment Was Defeated—Money, Passion, Allies,” Minnesota Public Radio called the “massive, one-on-one conversation drive” the “secret weapon” of the effort. “In the past, our side of the fight has focused on rights and equality and that this is discrimination,” a deep canvassing trainer named Alison Froehle told the radio station. “But that frame of mind does not move voters. So what we’re doing on this campaign is, we’re having conversations from the heart. We’re taking it from an abstract frame of mind and into the personal, reminding people that this is going to hurt real people.” A 2008 funk in California had, just four years later, fueled a triumph in Minnesota.

A conversation conducted by the L.A. LGBT Center in 2015, also captured on video, illustrated the method in its maturity and its vast potential. A woman stands at her door in Los Angeles wearing a do-rag and two necklaces with heart-shaped pendants. The question at hand is whether to include transgender people in nondiscrimination laws. The canvasser, Steven (not to be confused with Steve), asks where the voter is on a scale from one to ten. She stares at the scale on his sheet and vigorously wipes her nose as she thinks.

Six, she says.

“Six! Okay!” the canvasser says, as excited for her as if she had said the cookies she was baking were chocolate chip.

He asks for a reason she would vote to include trans people in these laws and a reason she wouldn’t.

Why she would: easy. She isn’t judgmental. Why she wouldn’t: “I wouldn’t want that around children.” She adds, “People could pretend to be . . . and go after our kids. That’s something big to think about.”

All this while, Steven is cool, levelheaded, betraying no hint of judgment. He moves into the next phase: Does she know anyone trans?

Yes, she does. “It’s my nephew. Niece. Nephew. Whatever! He was born a boy, but he wants to be a girl.”

Okay! Steven won’t take the bait. But while the woman continues to

call the relative in question “he,” Steven now uses “she.” He is patient and openhearted about the woman getting to a place of greater tolerance at her own pace, but he is clear on the destination.

Steven asks how much the niece has talked to the woman about her situation. Well, that’s funny, the woman says, because they don’t talk at all anymore. Her niece sensed the woman was uncomfortable with her, and she pulled away.

The woman says her niece’s transition was hard for her. The lipstick, the hair. She had helped raise her niece as a baby, and back then the child was being raised as a boy. She didn’t get it. But she keeps interlacing these statements of outright prejudice with a contrary point that is important to her: she is not a judgmental person.

Steven tells her a story of a friend of his, a trans guy, great guy, who felt out of place in his own body. So he got his chest flattened and was beyond excited and sent selfies of the new him to a high school friend, who responded with shock.

The woman at the door listens to this story carefully. You can see her recoil at the high school friend’s reaction. What kind of person . . . And then you could see her realize that she *was* the high school friend for her niece. “Maybe that’s the way I kind of reacted toward him—without saying it, but the way I guess I was acting. As if, don’t come around me, that’s really weird,” she says.

Soon she is saying that Steven is making her feel bad, because she is realizing what she has done. And here Steven’s answer is revealing and counterintuitive: “No, no, no, I’m definitely not trying to—I think it’s really complicated.” She is coming his way and growing apologetic for how she has been, and his concern in that moment is to give her the feeling that it’s okay to struggle over these things as she now is. He is giving her Ernesto Nieto’s golden gate of retreat. He stubbornly resists making it a matter of right and wrong, even though for him, doing this work, it must be.

Having had success with the “do you know anyone?” phase, Steven moves into the analogic perspective taking. Has she ever been on the receiving end of that kind of mistreatment or discrimination? Has she ever felt different?

She scrunches her nose and thinks. Not really, no. She is a Black woman living in America, but she doesn’t profess to relate to the idea



of discrimination—which could have something to do with the white canvasser in front of her and could have something to do with the fact that regular voters often don't see their lives in the politicized terms that activists and pundits and professionals use. Or perhaps she didn't connect "that kind" of discrimination encountered by trans people to whatever she had experienced in her life.

The woman thinks more on the question. Well, when she moved to L.A. a couple years earlier, she got some bad vibes from people. It made her feel alone. At the place she works, some of the women picked on her, nick-nacked on her, for being from somewhere else. She should, it was said, go back to where she was at.

Steven empathizes with her and tells his own story of being different. He is gay, he now reveals. In high school, he was the only one who was out. He started a gay-straight alliance in defense pretty much of himself. He won an award for it senior year. As he left the gym after receiving the honor, a bunch of guys came up to him, telling him he didn't deserve the award, he was just a fag, he only got the award because he was gay and the administration felt it had to give it to him. "It's all kind of that same feeling of 'They see you and you're different,'" he says, trying to weave his story, her story of moving to L.A., and her niece's story together. The woman nods along.

And now he tries to bring it all together. That feeling of isolation that he had felt that day at the gym—it sounds to him as if that were the feeling the woman at the door felt at work, being picked on like that, and it sounds as if that were the feeling her niece is feeling, too. "So that's why it's really important to me that something like this law is on the books," Steven says, "so that people don't have to go to work and feel like they're going to be fired because everyone's looking at them differently." He has wrapped the three experiences into one, but also subtly universalized them into the woman's anecdote about her workplace.

The woman's eyebrows perform a high jump. "That's true," she says. She hadn't made the connection before, but now she recalls that her niece had gone to work in her wig and everything, and she had been fired.

"And that's exactly what this law is doing," Steven says, meaning preventing.

"Okay," the woman says, seeming genuinely interested in new information, in the opening up that was happening. "That makes a lot more sense."

Again, Steven does something surprising here. Instead of consolidating his success, he elects to bring up the earlier hesitation that the woman expressed—about people pretending to be trans and preying on children. It might be more intuitive in that moment to let the sleeping dog of bigotry lie and go deeper into what the woman seems to be feeling now, but the canvassers believe that those kinds of objections risk flaring up again if not properly addressed and dismantled.

Steven now explains, kindly but more forcefully than before, that trans people and sex offenders are two distinct groups of people that she is conflating. "I don't have no problem with that," the woman now says. And she reflects out loud that that was probably what her niece, whom she still calls her nephew, was going through.

"I never really thought about all that like that," she tells Steven. Shortly she gives her new score of support for including trans people in discrimination laws.

Ten. "It's only right," she says. "Let a person be who they are. Hiding it is worser. So let 'em out. I believe that. Everybody should have the right to be who they want to be."

That fall, the governor of California, Jerry Brown, signed SB 703, a piece of legislation tightening restrictions on the state doing business with any company that discriminated against employees based on gender identity in providing benefits.

These various victories continued to raise deep canvassing's national profile. But it took a stinging loss in 2016 to give it its broadest reach yet.

After the surprise victory of Donald Trump, a veteran progressive organizer in Chicago named George Goehl found himself in something of the same boat as Steve Deline back in 2008: wondering how so many around him—including so many of the people he had grown up with in small-town Indiana—could vote for this madness. But also not wondering, because he knew the places where the factories had closed and the Walmarts had come in and the xenophobia and racism were never far below the surface, waiting for enterprising cynics. The organization Goehl led, People's Action, launched a rural organizing



program to listen and talk to voters. “I don’t think it’s a high bar in the U.S. to build the biggest progressive organizing event in rural communities, to be honest. But I think we might’ve done it,” Goehl told me. And then, in 2019, People’s Action decided to apply the deep canvassing method to its organizing work, launching a three-state experiment to test its power.

The experiment was a huge success. For every hundred voters the campaign spoke to about establishing universal health care, including for undocumented immigrants, it moved around eight of them, according to the resulting research published by the scholars Joshua Kalla of Yale and David Broockman of Berkeley. The findings added to a growing body of research that was finally putting to bed concerns that surfaced after a since-retracted study in 2014. Back then, a graduate student in political science named Michael LaCour had elected to study the L.A. LGBT Center’s deep canvasses and had published, in the prestigious journal *Science*, an eye-popping finding: that twenty-minute conversations at the door could change minds on gay rights, and, even more strikingly, that only gay canvassers could create these lasting shifts in view. But LaCour’s study collapsed when Broockman and Kalla tried to replicate his results, and LaCour was accused of faking evidence and lying about his funding, and *Science* eventually retracted his research. Broockman and Kalla then did their own research on deep canvassing in 2015, studying a follow-up project by the L.A. LGBT Center and a grassroots organization called SAVE in Miami aimed at reducing prejudice toward transgender people. They found that the power of canvassing was real, whereas the identity-of-canvasser thesis was not. And then came the 2019 study by the same duo, which lent further credence to the hard-to-fathom notion that spending just minutes on a door with people could move the mean attitude of the targeted group as much as years of diffuse social change.

Armed with these results, People’s Action began to train more and more of its member organizations, which work on the ground in local communities, in the method of deep canvassing. One of them was the group in Arizona called LUCHA.

On my first day with LUCHA, I had watched Cesar gamely reassure his two canvassers that, yes, the pressure to get a path to citizenship in Build Back Better was working! But the next morning, unbeknownst to pretty much anyone, there was a development. It was announced that, after months of negotiations, President Biden had a framework for getting his double-barreled agenda passed. The program he soon went on TV to tout was pared down, eliminating vast areas of ambition—from dental and vision coverage for senior citizens to free community college. But guess what seemed to make the cut? That pathway to citizenship. It appeared Sinema had gotten on board, along with every other Democratic senator, for Biden to be able to announce a “deal.”

At the 3:00 p.m. staff meeting, Cesar was pumped. “There is some good news that came out this morning,” he told a slightly bigger group of canvassers and visitors from a partner organization. “There was a really bad joke this morning in our meeting about how this process is like *Squid Game*. It’s unfortunate: a lot of people died, like paid family leave and free college and a lot of other really useful things that we need as a nation, as a community. But immigration reform, which is what this campaign is about, is still there.”

There were some murmurs about his comparison of slimmed-down legislation to avoiding murder by robotic snipers in a Korean Netflix drama.

“It’s a little too accurate,” Cesar said. “But hey.”

The cause wasn’t out of the woods yet. What appeared to be in this newly announced compromise was a “registry” through which undocumented people could come out of the shadows and live more normal lives and get on a pathway to citizenship. But there remained the risk that moderates would object once again and that the plan would regress to the idea of immigrant “parole,” which had fewer protections and no path to citizenship and sustained the paying of fees and the permanent insecurity that Cesar knew well.

The news affected the day’s canvassing plan. On the doors today, it would be less about pressuring Sinema to support a pathway and more about getting her to do what she had supposedly committed to. “A lot of this has come from the work that we’ve been doing the last twenty-nine weeks here, and from decades of work before that,” Cesar said, speaking to himself as much as to the team. “Right now, it’s the



time to continue and not let up." Cesar had no way of knowing that the "deal" announced that day would collapse in acrimony, killing the Build Back Better Act's chances that year.

The team fanned out across the city. Cesar was soon walking through a private development covered in "Neighborhood Watch" signs. He mused that he had been kicked out of neighborhoods like this before. Clutching his turf sheet in one hand and the app in the other, he moved from house to house, going through his routine, finding rabid agreement in some cases but also a right-wing guy who refused to talk and a higher-than-usual proportion of unanswered doors. The Arizona Cardinals were playing at that moment. At one point, he marveled at the size of the garages around him. He said they were bigger than his childhood home.

That was in the tonier part of the neighborhood. Soon we began to see trailers in the driveways and more outdoor storage of possessions. And we found ourselves at the door of a man named Matthew.

He came to the door glowering and skeptical, wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt adorned with a dog howling at the moon and an orange knit cap. Cesar stood across from him, a "Welcome Friends" doormat between them.

Cesar, sensing wariness, sprinted through his opening, before asking Matthew about his level of support for the pathway to citizenship, one to ten.

"As of lately, down to, like, one," Matthew said, seemingly both pissed off by Cesar's arrival and wanting to make use of the platform it afforded.

"And why is that?"

"Just all the BS that's going on," Matthew said.

Did he care to elaborate?

He did.

Matthew launched into a diatribe whose sub-diatribes had sub-sub-diatribes. As it happened, "all the BS that's going on" was a fitting summary.

Why did he oppose a pathway now? Because he knew people who had come here as immigrants, busted their butts for years, were still fighting for status, and all of a sudden other immigrants got approved before them. That wasn't right.

"Yeah, no, for sure," Cesar tried. "Definitely, the system is broken. Me personally—"

But Matthew wasn't done.

The mass migrations happening under Biden. What was that about?

Cesar tried to talk about the root causes of migration. But Matthew pressed on. "I don't mind a neighboring country like Mexico, but now we're absorbing further south countries. Yeah, they're having a bad whatever. That's their country. That's three or four countries away."

Though his last name was Hispanic, Matthew wanted to make something clear: "I was born and raised here. Again, born and raised here."

Cesar tried to explain the nuances of what the pathway to citizenship would actually do. He was struggling to meet Matthew where Matthew was.

"The problem is everybody in the government just needs to get their butts kicked out and they have some new blood in there," Matthew said.

Matthew continued his monologue, teetering between somewhat accurate criticisms of the American political establishment and batshit-crazy theories and lies. The politicians keep telling us X is going to happen, and then they slip in Y, and they don't tell their constituents. Obama bowed down to Mexico's president one time. ("You never do that if you're supposed to be a superpower.") There were opinions of presidents: Trump "did some decent stuff and then did some dishonest stuff"; Nixon was a "decent president, dirty"; Biden was "the joke of the Hill." Matthew's view of the Biden administration's agenda of physical infrastructure and social spending was that "nothing is going to get done except for them wanting to pass whatever money that they want to get."

Standing beside Cesar, I saw Matthew through the deep canvasser's eyes. He was a fount less of political opinions than of political emotions. He felt betrayed, lied to, ignored, condescended to. Many of those feelings were grounded in the realities of American political life. But he then felt a need to assign ideas to those emotions. It was Cesar who was coming to his door inviting him to do that. And here Matthew faltered. Sometimes he knew what he was saying; sometimes he didn't. Fox News or its equivalents seem to have done some



of the work of helping him array his feelings into a rudimentary politics. Cesar's hope was that those feelings might be organized in other ways.

"I don't even care—Democratic, independent, or otherwise, they need to clean out the White House. They need to clean out the Senate. All that old blood just needs to be flushed out," Matthew said. "I'm not saying to riot the Capitol or anything, but that'd show them how pissed off people actually are." With that, he seemed to worry even himself: "I'm not cheering those people on. That was wrong to do that. There's a legal way to do it.

"Everybody has just failed at their job in the government, period—from the city level lately, with the floods that happened around here, all the way up to the federal level," Matthew said.

There was another thing, too. Biden wasn't doing anything on the border, so the policy, Matthew said, was effectively, "Hey, come here, come in." Then, he added, Biden had finally responded to the border crisis Matthew had, seconds earlier, condemned him for ignoring and abetting. "Now Biden is finally trying to fight that, but he switched positions, reversing on that a little bit. Do you want a person in office that's switching his opinion so much to popular opinion?" So it was wrong not to attend to Matthew's concern and wrong to change your mind to attend to it.

Cesar tried again to speak to these roiling emotions. "No, I understand your sense—I mean, I think, you know—"

But Matthew just barreled on. He didn't like immigration. Didn't favor that at all. That said, he did favor people who come and work hard and accomplish things. Matthew knew people who had to move because the immigration cops came to their door. He now made an aside about how he could personally show you where to cross the border, if you wanted to know.

Soon Matthew talked himself into another sentiment. Think of the Border Patrol agents. "What about those guys?" he said. "They get hurt, they get killed, they get injured. Do people care about them? No. They're like the Man."

And in short order, Matthew had a new worry he wanted to raise while he had Cesar. So you have this open border, people just flooding across, not from a neighboring country, but three or four coun-

tries away. What was to stop some terrorists from more of the Middle Eastern part of the world from sneaking in along with the legions of migrants? Matthew claimed he had been in the military, so this was coming from a place of knowledge. Surely the Taliban or whoever has some guys among their ranks "that look like a Mexican or Hispanic—Latin origin." Were those guys pouring across the border, too? "We've already dealt with one 9/11," Matthew said. "Do we want to invite something else like that in this country now?"

He was talking himself into further stress. How did those hijackers even get in the country on 9/11? You're telling me no one thought it was a *little strange* that some Middle Eastern guys were taking flight lessons here in the United States of America? Were they even pilots? How come no one asked these questions that Matthew was asking?

Now Matthew said something honest and moving: "I had a buddy die over in Afghanistan. That's where the aggression is coming from. They screw up everything. They can't get nothing right." This show of vulnerability was an opening, perhaps, but by this point Cesar had given up.

As he walked away from the house, Cesar said of Matthew, "He's in a dangerous place of misinformation mixed with truth."

A short while later, just after 6:00 p.m., with the sun gone and the cold night air of the desert blowing and Matthew still on his mind, Cesar knocked on a door in a sprawling apartment complex.

For the longest time, no answer. Just as he was about to leave, the door opened. A hefty, well-built man stood there, missing his left leg, hopping on crutches, wearing an Outlaw Threadz T-shirt that said "Never Forget" on the front, referring to 9/11, and "American Patriot" on the back. Cesar, though trained to talk without judgment, though proud of having the temperament to do so, was spirit tired after Matthew's filibustering and now braced himself for another round.

He launched into his script.

"You're talking about illegal immigrants?" Raymond interrupted.

Oh, no.

"Well, in a way, yes, undocumented immigrants," Cesar said, concerned. Cesar asked if Raymond was familiar with the current proposals in Congress to address the issue.

Raymond said that he was familiar with those proposals, and in fact



he was familiar with the broader issue in another way, too: "My dad used to be a coyote."

"Oh, wow," Cesar said, taken aback. "That is insane."

And now Raymond gave his reasons for supporting the undocumented community. There was of course his father's work, the same work that had carried Cesar to America. There was the fact that those immigrants do jobs no one else seems willing to do. But for Raymond there was another thing, too. Like Matthew, Raymond said he was a veteran. And the way he saw it, "undocumented citizens are more than welcome to come to my country because I served for seven years. And they can come here, and I'll still protect them."

Now he pointed Cesar to the front of his T-shirt: "Never Forget." And he turned and pointed him to the back: "American Patriot." And then he said, with great self-satisfaction, "There you go." As if his position on undocumented people were self-evident given his service, given the slogans on his chest and back. It was, to him, obvious: he was a patriot. Some awful terrorists had come here and done some real harm on 9/11. He wouldn't forget. Didn't forget. Went into battle for his country. Served as a patriot would. And he served for a purpose: to make and keep the country safe. And what good was keeping it safe and wonderful if people couldn't avail themselves of its bounties? He said he wanted people to come from away and make use of what he had fought so hard to keep.

Cesar, moved by this speech, thanked Raymond for his service and for receiving him so warmly.

"Hey, I got your guys' back, man. You ever have problems, let me know."

Cesar thanked him again and went into the particulars of how to place a phone call to Senator Sinema's office.

As he left, Raymond repeated his promise, gesturing to the shadowy stairwells and alleys of the complex. "You run into any problems around here," he said, "just come back." He took a few hops and, with a smile, closed the door.

George Goehl, the organizer who ran People's Action, helped me better understand what I had observed in Arizona. I had flown in

perhaps expecting dramatic, instant mind changing, a Bourne movie of door-to-door persuasion. After all, I had seen the process work in any number of videos. I had read of the results in studies. But as it happened, in the two days I was on the ground, in the fewer than a dozen meaningful interactions I witnessed, there were no dramatic one-to-ten conversions, or even more modest ones. That was partly random and partly because so many of the people we encountered were already supportive of the undocumented—one of many signs that Arizona's politics were changing, as its recent embrace of the candidacy of Joe Biden had shown.

What I had seen was subtler, a slow discourse movement that sought to insert itself in the never-ending process by which voters figure out what they think. The term Goehl used for this process was "meaning making." The way he saw things, the country was in the grips of great forces of change—demographic, economic, political, climatic. Even before voters were angry, and so many of them were, they were lost, discombobulated, unsure of how to see themselves and the world—voters of all backgrounds, all persuasions. What they were seeking wasn't to be found in thirty-second campaign ads or proposals for better health care, Goehl believed, as important as those things were. What they were hungry for was a way of making sense of it all. They were in the market for something like what Alicia Garza had spoken of as a "home." Goehl's fear was that the cruel and hateful and greedy in public life were more ready to give them that than his own allies were. "Absent positive, generative meaning makers in people's lives, the only thing that's left is the far-right preacher and Fox News and Rush Limbaugh, and, increasingly, proud white nationalists," Goehl said. "So every day we forfeit being involved in helping people make meaning of what's happening, we forfeit a chance to help move some people toward us, and that's a lot of people."

Goehl harbored an abiding faith in this meaning-making project, and it grew out of his experience knocking on doors. "Over and over, you would see somebody have something wash across their face. They'd be like, 'I never thought about that.' Or, 'I've never connected my struggles to this other person's struggles.' Or, 'I've never thought about the fact that I am focused on the wrong culprit in this story.' It keeps you wanting to come back, and wanting to figure out how you're



going to reach more people. We're starting very late. This is a project that needed to start decades ago."

When Goehl spoke of meaning making and the various ways that process could go, he was explaining what I had seen at the doors. In Lily and then in Kyle, I saw two people, a few houses apart, make opposite meaning of similar underlying experiences. That Lily had been neglected meant that others should now be neglected like her. That Kyle had been neglected meant that he and others should come together in solidarity to demand an end to neglect. The next day, in Matthew and then in Raymond, I saw it again. That Matthew had served his country meant that it should close itself off to the lazy and dangerous and undeserving. That Raymond had served his country meant that it should open itself up to dreamers everywhere, because what good was a cornucopia uneaten? The churning that led to these positions was not automatic or inevitable. Asking people for their vote every few years wasn't enough. Goehl believed it was vital to be just as present in the off-season.

And for him this insight was highly personal. Before he used terms like "meaning making" or knew much about politics, Goehl had a street education in the difficulty of changing others.

He grew up in Indiana, in parts that were rural even by the standards of the rural. "We had to drive forty miles to get to a place with twenty thousand people," he told me. The family was simultaneously educated and working class, in terms of income, culture, and geography. Goehl's father sold metal crafts, and his mother worked as a social worker; both had university educations. Goehl's was a childhood full of mud-ball fights and minibikes, of catching fish in the pond and crawdads in the creek. This was the Indiana that was closer to Kentucky, physically and otherwise, than to Indianapolis.

When Goehl was ten, his parents split. He moved with his mother to Bloomington, a college town and a veritable megalopolis relative to what they had known. Suddenly he was an exotic being to many of his new acquaintances who made fun of how he said "warsh" for "wash" and "crick" for "creek." At the same time, he encountered a range of humanity that had been unfathomable before the move. Across the street from his school was the Tulip Tree Apartments, Indiana University housing that was full of international students and their

families. "So suddenly I've gone from running through the woods on three-wheelers to my friends being from Zimbabwe and Malaysia and Nigeria and going over to their house to eat and smelling all this food—like my senses were alive," he once told an interviewer.

A transition that was interesting and eye-opening at first became harder in time. Goehl began to struggle with drugs. "Fast-forward to when I was probably nineteen or twenty, was deep in a serious drug culture and using like crazy and really very much a hot mess," he said. Someone told him about a soup kitchen up on Pigeon Hill in Bloomington that would feed him. After a few visits, he noticed that some who came to eat there also volunteered there—taking out garbage, mopping, wiping tables. He thought he should do that, too, and began to. A new kind of drama entered his life.

An Armenian man from Beirut who cooked at the soup kitchen did theater on the side and asked Goehl if he would act in his production of *Equus*. Ordinarily, Goehl might have passed. But a short time earlier, as he wrestled with his own demons, he had lost a close friend to suicide. She left a parting note for him that stuck: "I remember it saying something like, 'You're really talented. I'm watching you just waste away here. And if anything comes out of what I'm about to do, I hope you do something with your life.'" Perhaps because of that, Goehl said yes to the play. The cook paid Goehl part of his own \$3.85 wage to come into the soup kitchen and rehearse while the cook cooked. "It was a long path to getting it together," he told me, "but that was him investing in me and seeing something in me." It was the spark of Goehl waking up, getting clean, turning his life around.

Eventually, Goehl got a paying job at the soup kitchen that had once fed him. A place that had, at first, just stabilized him now began to radicalize him. Coming in every day, seeing the same people show up again and again in line, was an education. "I didn't really have some serious political analysis or grow up with heated conversations about politics and structures at the kitchen table or anything like that," Goehl said. "So that was the beginning of me being like, 'Oh, yeah, nobody starved on my watch, but the reason people are poor is things haven't changed at all.'"

That was the seed of becoming an organizer. Early on, Goehl and some friends worked on issues of housing and homelessness. He sought



out organizer mentors. He moved into immigrant rights work for a time. Ultimately, he worked his way up to running People's Action. It was there, as part of its rural organizing, that he set on deep canvassing as a new way of working.

"It is amazing what opens up when you recognize the person across from you, wherever they are at, that there's a reason they're there, and that there's probably some unmet human needs on the other end of that," Goehl told me. He wanted to make clear that the goal was not dialogue or healing or listening for its own sake. "The core of organizing is we want to create change in the world and change in structures and policies and rules," he said. "But it is a craft that first and foremost is designed to help change people, and help people shake off any limiting beliefs, whether those are about ourselves or about society, and replace them with something else."

When Goehl had been in line at that soup kitchen, it didn't look good. "I've been able to do all this neat stuff because some people decided to invest in me," he told me. "The same people could have been like, 'The guy's a drug addict and looks crazy and isn't providing any value to society and is here in line mooching off the soup kitchen,' or something like that. And people decided to do something different." Goehl changed. That inspired a mantra. He used it often: "People change."

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