



Episode 693: The Art of Political Persuasion: Winning Supporters, Not Arguments

Guest: Robin Koerner

WOODS: You are covering a lot of different topics in this book, *If You Can Keep It*, so before we dive into the specific ones, what's the overall, what's the big picture of the book? What are you trying to paint here, and what do you want people to walk away from this book with?

KOERNER: Okay, you're right; so the book has a huge arc. It really does. Your listeners will not need telling, no doubt, Tom, that we have seen our rights be whittled away quite extremely now, and it's there in the Declaration and the Constitution that it's up to we, the people, to prevent that from happening. But we, the people, seem to have not prevented that from happening, so this book asks why in a quite deep way.

What is it about our makeup, the makeup of our brains, the way we receive information from the media, process that information, the way we perceive the world and interpret the world? What is it about all of those things that stop us being able to see what is happening around us, especially with respect to our rights and the founding principles of this country? And why is it that a lot of us actually know things that are wrong?

And the reason that I'm writing a whole book on that is if I can get the liberty movement to read this book and understand this stuff, they're going to understand better how to show what is so — the ways in which we are losing our rights and the solutions that we need to implement society-wide — they're going to be better able to show those solutions and engage other folks in those solutions. In other words, we, the people, will start to be more effective in maintaining or regaining, depending on how you look at it, our rights.

WOODS: All right, well, fair enough. Now let's get into some specifics here. You talked about the way we think and this affects how easy or difficult it is to get people to think differently from how they currently think.

KOERNER: Right.

WOODS: And you mention in here, you have reference to the Thomas Kuhn book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; you talk about paradigm shifts. You have that, I was telling you before we went on, that interesting playing card experiment that I

hadn't heard about before. Explain — I hate the word "paradigm," you know? It's just an annoying word. But it is a helpful concept for this, so explain what that's all about, and throw that playing card example in there, because I like that.

KOERNER: Okay, so this was an experiment called the perception of incongruity experiment that was done at Harvard; I think done at Harvard I think at the end of the '40s. And what they did was they flashed at speed playing cards to subjects, to participants, and the participants simply had to read out what they were seeing. Right, so six of hearts, seven of clubs, three of spades, whatever. Now, what the participants didn't know is that after they had been doing this for a while, the red and black colors in the cards were switched. So there'd be a seven of hearts, but it was black, or a three of spades, but it was red. And what the experimenters wanted to see was what cards were called out. So if you see a black seven of hearts, what actually do you see?

Well, it turns out that you don't say, oh, hold on; that's a black seven of hearts. You say simply, seven of hearts or seven of spades or seven of clubs. In other words, what you see is a function of what you know you're already looking at, which is a pack of playing cards. Now, in this case, the knowledge is wrong, but they're in a playing card paradigm. They've seen a lot of playing cards; this is obviously a pack of playing cards, so they're in a playing card paradigm, and that determines not only how they interpret the world, but their very perceptions of the world. And of course this is critical in politics.

And the other interesting thing about this experiment is that the participants were hooked up to equipment that was registering their physiological stress responses, so looking at sweat and current on the skin, heart rate, and things like that. And as these folks were shown playing cards with the colors switched, they were consciously seeing something that wasn't there, and their bodies were registering stress, and the stress rose and rose and rose. And this shows that we are very firmly kind of wired, made, to kind of stick in our paradigms. And we don't want to change what we know. And I go into this in more detail, like, neurologically as well.

Now, what happens of course eventually is that the rate at which these cards are shown is slowed down and slowed down, and the people get more and more uncomfortable, but they don't know why, until eventually looking at a card long enough, they go, oh, hold on, that's not a real card; that's a black seven of hearts. At that point, they are now released from the standard playing card paradigm, and they are able to see accurately everything that is shown to them. The lesson for politics I hope is obvious.

WOODS: But in case it isn't, let's actually give — let's give a real, flesh-and-blood example. Let's take, for example — let's take Ron Paul, because he goes beyond a black seven of hearts. He's like a Trivial Pursuit card in your playing card deck. He's not any kind of those cards, and then when that card comes up, people can't compute — they can't — so we've got this guy who's constitutionalist and he wants to cut

spending, but he's also extremely antiwar. I don't even have the right categories to think about this correctly, so therefore he's crazy.

KOERNER: Right.

WOODS: That became the refrain: he's crazy, because he doesn't fit into my view. He's not a regular playing card; he's not a correct playing card.

KOERNER: That's exactly right. You know, so we can't accommodate that data. We can't even — I mean, some folks can't even kind of perceive the data, can't accept it. So yeah, in the case of Ron Paul, he was kind of just marginalized. He was kind of outside the standard American political paradigm. And interestingly, I would say interestingly, in this kind of conception, one of the most powerful things that we can attribute to Ron Paul is that now bits of what he was doing and what he was saying have become mainstream, have started to get into mainstream American politics. So for example, if he was talking about audit the Fed on a debate stage 12 years ago, for example, no one — what is this guy talking about? But now we can at least, a lot of folks who might not even identify libertarian, they can at least get that that's a meaningful thing. They're not going to completely glaze over. So he's kind of enlarged the paradigm towards liberty.

But no, you're quite right, and there was a — you know, this excluding of data that doesn't fit the paradigm is, again, something our brains are soft wired to do. And indeed, it is exactly because that is the case that I needed to write this book for libertarians. Given that people are wired not to see what's so, it ain't any good just hitting them with more facts and logic, because the problem that's keeping us in tyranny is that people can't see what's so, because they're stuck in their own paradigm. So yeah, absolutely.

WOODS: I want you to talk just for a minute about what you did with Blue Republican, what that was all about, and how you can connect everything you've been saying up to now to that project. Is this something you learned through that project, or you already knew about it and this project was an offshoot of these ideas? What was the order?

KOERNER: Well, I was taught — I trained in direct sales, and really, one way of looking at this book is that it's sales and marketing for those who are trying to sell and market the ideas of and philosophy of liberty. So I already kind of had a skill in that area. And also, at university I studied epistemology, which is the philosophy of knowledge and belief, how do we know the things that we know. And I've kind of self-taught in behavioral economics, like in empirical psychology and all of that stuff, so I had kind of a bit of a grounding, you might say.

In 2011 I was given the opportunity to write on *The Huffington Post*, and *The Huffington Post* obviously is a mainstream outlet for folks on the Left. And you know, I was a liberal by default before I started reading Hayek and Hazlitt and all the good stuff. And what I mean by that is I'd never really given politics much thought. I'm a nice guy; there's this thing called government, this thing called law; obviously good

policy manifests all my good intentions for a more just society — you know, etc., etc. Liberal by default. I didn't really have a commitment to a philosophy, but policy that more directly manifests my good intention must be better than policy that doesn't. And I think a lot of kind of liberals who don't care that much about politics actually feel that way.

So I felt that way right up until I discovered the liberty canon, and I thought, okay, most of my friends are liberal by default, and I still remember how to speak that language, so I'm going to use this platform on *The Huffington Post* to the Left to tell all these Obama voters that they did — you know, good on them for sticking to their true liberal principles by voting for Obama the first time, but now you've seen what Obama's actually done in his first term, go vote, say, true to your liberal principles by voting for the one guy in the presidential race in that time who has a track record on civil rights, on not getting into unnecessary wars, on standing up against crony corporatism. And that guy happens to be an old, white conservative called Ron Paul.

And it turned out that very quickly the movement whose name I coined in this article, which was "blue Republican," as you mentioned, that this became the largest, numerically largest, coalition for Ron Paul within about a week of that article. And it stayed the largest coalition for Ron Paul right up to the convention. So it had a huge effect. So the biggest coalition for Ron Paul was actually a bunch of *Huffington Post*-reading moderates and leftists. And I was able to do that by using some of the understandings that I try and give my reader in this book, not only understanding how the mind processes information and holds tight to what it already believes, but how actually to, as it were, subvert that process by which judgments are formed.

Or maybe I should say "hack that process," because if you're trying to sell liberty, selling liberty isn't the hard bit. Liberty kind of sells itself. What you have to do is get somebody to unlearn whatever paradigm they have that stops them seeing what they need to see to be able to want their liberty or to realize that they haven't got their liberty. So that project was kind of a crystallization of a lot of what I'm helping folks do in my book, and it was a very successful project, and really it kind of put me on the map in liberty circles.

WOODS: Without a doubt. That's how I found out about you. I had known about you for years before we ever met in person, and I think we just met in person, you know, it was just a matter of a couple of months ago last —

KOERNER: It was.

WOODS: I saw you twice within a month. I hadn't seen you at all before then.

KOERNER: I'm just like the buses, you know? None for years, and then they come at once.

WOODS: (laughing) That's right; that's right. So all right, I think, related to this — I've got a whole list of things I want to talk to Robin about here, and I could go in two

directions here, but let's say something about the culture-precedes-politics theme that you have in here, because this is a point that I know even I myself, even though intellectually I recognize it, sometimes I still need to internalize it better than I do. So why don't you tell us what this means and how it affects the way we should approach people? Or the whole movement should approach what it's doing?

KOERNER: Yeah, absolutely. Well, look, basically politics can only kind of do what the culture allows. Now, what is culture? Culture is the way people behave, their expectations, the way they react to things, the concepts in their paradigm through which they understand the world and see the world. And because we in the liberty movement, we care about political ideas, and so we focus on politics and political philosophy. I mean, it's obvious that we would do so. And because we're not very good at sales and marketing, we think if we just explain our politics well, then people will get it and that will have a political effect. But —

WOODS: Yeah, that is kind of how I feel.

KOERNER: (laughing) Yeah.

WOODS: Yeah, that's why I do everything.

KOERNER: Tom, you know, I can't say this to you about many things — and you're wrong on that (laughing). But you and most of the libertarian army, as it were. "Culture precedes politics" is to say that we have to move the mainstream dial of culture, if you like. And the culture is the dog and politics is the tail, and the dog wags the tail. Now, if you try and apply pressure to politics without moving the culture, nothing that you do is going to stick. Jefferson talked about the ultimate defense of liberty is informing the discretion of the people. I mean, there it is: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, it's about "we, the people." Even the Founders said it's about we, the people. It's the "demos" of "democracy."

Now, this is important, because libertarian and constitutionalists — I love them; I'm one of them — rightly say we're a constitutional republic, not a democracy. And then they're kind of done with democracy. Well, yes, but also kind of no, because with a small "d," our constitutional republic sits on democracy in the sense that it is up to the *kratos* of the *demos*; the power of the people must be exerted to make sure that these rights that are enumerated in the Constitution just aren't words on a piece of paper. It's actually what people do, what people demand. It's that we have to move to ensure that the politicians have to comply, that politics — I mean, America is an interesting situation, because it's basically a two-party system.

And in the two-party system, if libertarians can get kind of a different relationship with democracy, they might do a lot better, because if you control the middle man — if you have a spectrum of Left and Right and you control the middle guy or that small chunk in the middle, then you have the power to take away wins from the Left and from the Right. And if we as a movement can make the enlarging independent middle — skeptical, disaffected middle of American politics that doesn't identify Republican or

Democrat anymore— if we can make them basically constitutionalists or classical liberals or libertarians or whatever you want to call it, then we can start moving the dial of culture, and politics will follow. Politics always follows.

And in a way, maybe we are kind of victims of our success, being Americans with our glorious Constitution, because I think a lot of folks say, well, it's all in the Constitution, so kind of the work's done. Well, the work isn't done, because the first words, "we, the people," are what it all sits on. And moving with people means moving culture.

WOODS: Okay, so how would you recommend that people do things differently from how they're doing them now? Give me a specific example.

KOERNER: Okay, so all salesmen know this, that a sale is not made through facts and logic. Facts and logic only really work in changing somebody's mind when you are asked for them. And this comes down to a misunderstanding, because we think that judgment, the forming of judgments and the justifications we use for our judgments are the same thing, and they're absolutely not. They're completely different processes in the brain. And we all sincerely believe that the reason we have our judgments is whatever reasons we give when we're justifying them to folks. But it turns out that 90% of how we get to our truth is nothing to do with the actual logical reasons that we fit post hoc to justify the truths that we end up at. There's a great quote — I can't remember who said it, but goes, "You can only find truth with logic when you've found truth without it."

So you've got to understand the process by which people do change their minds, and so I'm explaining about paradigms because how do you hack a paradigm. Well, a lot of it is of course finding common ground. So instead of explaining, "Here's why you're wrong; this is the way it is," what you're much better off doing is finding the thing in your opponent's worldview that you can authentically consent to or assent to and actually form some kind of relationship on that common ground, because what you're trying to do is move the bar that somebody's going to have when listening to you espousing libertarian views, move it from "Must I believe this?" — in other words, I'm disposed not to believe what this guy is telling me — to "Can I believe this?", which is, I'm disposed to believe what this guy is telling me.

And I'm going to do that for emotional reasons. Emotional reasons along the line of, do I identify with this guy — and this is where we get into the culture, because identifying with this guy means, can I imagine what it's like to experience the world the way he experiences it? Do I trust this person's moral motivations? And you start to establish those things by having human connections. And a prerequisite for having human connections is not to try and win an argument, but trying to win support, trying to win a friend. I say it's more like going on a date than winning a debate. So these are the kind of things that I'm talking about.

And if we can reflect back on our culture elements of the culture that people are already comfortable with participating in, then we do not seem alien, which means

that bar is moved from "Must I believe these guys?" to "Can I believe these guys?" And when that bar is moved down, when there is that kind of emotional connection, then actually the accuracy of the argument becomes much less important. It is about human connection. It's about not alienating ourselves from all those crazy socialists, for examples, or the liberals-by-default or the neocons, because we all have the same kind of psychodynamics. We all love our children. We all get scared and angry by the same thing; for example, injustice.

What's Trump doing on the Right here? What did Nigel Farage do in England so successfully? We just had Brexit, a huge win for liberty in Europe, maybe the biggest in 43 years since the British have been in Europe. What these folks have done is they have reflected back a sense of injustice that was there in the culture. Not telling people what they should think about it, but just reflecting it back. They already had it. So if we can start to do that and show people, look, we get you, because we care about the things you care about. At that point, they will want to hear our solutions. But you see, we do the emotional, the cultural connection first.

WOODS: I want to give some kind of testimony from my own experience in this regard, and we'll do that after thanking our sponsor.

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All right, I'll tell you where I've had the most success and where I've had the least success. The least success is in my Twitter debates with people, but, you know, you're arguing in 140 characters; there's no room for nuance there. There I think it's just entertainment for your troops, and it's a scorched earth policy, and that's just the way it is. But thankfully the rest of life is not like Twitter.

So I've had a lot of success bringing people over who used to be like me, and I think that's because of the reasons you've been describing, that I can credibly put myself in their shoes because I was in those shoes, and I can say I used to listen to the same radio people you listen to; I used to draw the same conclusion that you do about a lot of things. And even today I have some things in common with you, and I also know a lot about conservatism and I know what the basic principles are. Now, here's the problem I would say: I don't think you're being fully consistent in living by those principles if you're going to accept A, B, and C, and this is why I had to stop being in that kind of circle and move into something else. And when I do it that way, it doesn't mean that people immediately say, oh, of course you're right, I'll abandon what I've believed in for 20 years, but it's that first, that seed that's been planted, and before you know it can in fact bear some fruit. There are some good consequences that come from it.

I will say, though, that there are times when in my case I was benefitted when somebody was simply very, very blunt with me and said, look, this is just wrong and evil and backward and you shouldn't be doing it and you should be ashamed of yourself. I mean, that has worked with me. It isn't just the, well, they've got to

massage me a little and buy me a glass of wine or whatever. Sometimes the sledgehammer has also worked for me.

KOERNER: Well, sure, and humans are complex. You know, in 25 minutes we're discussing generalities here. So yeah. I would say, though, probably the guy who said that to you, that that was able to work because you hadn't already decided he was evil. And seriously, a lot of people have already made decisions about libertarians — maybe they're not evil, but certainly that they're callous, that they're freaky. So that bar is set right up at "Must I believe?"; in other words, I don't want to believe this guy, because, yeah, there's the huge identity gap. One of the things I say is all politics are politics of identity.

But you actually in your example, you said something else that I do make quite a lot of play out of when I give political communication seminars, which is that you succeed not by making the other guy wrong, but by actually making him right and getting him to test his own paradigm against his own paradigm and find his own inconsistencies, because then he's going to own the whole experience, and then he'll be committed to whatever he discovers in that process. He's not going to resist it, because it's his journey or her journey. Whereas obviously all of our psychological defenses go up when somebody's coming at us, saying you're wrong. And again, I'm generalizing. This isn't denying your last point.

And you know, actually, this thing about moving culture too: we only need to really be successful with 10%. I mean, if you get a critical mass of a culture — 10% of a culture, that's critical mass typically — if you get them all focused on the same thing — like, the American Revolution happened with 10% of the folks on the continent actually active and maybe 20 to 30% passive support. That is all we need. We don't need to get the hard Marxists, the hard socialists. We don't need that. But no, obviously — what you're talking about there, Tom, is salesmen say, "Seek first to understand before seeking to be understood." And I'm kind of advocating for that, because people will tell you how to sell them politically if you shut up and listen for long enough. So we need to do that. We need to do that with large numbers of people.

WOODS: All right, that's fair enough. There are a couple things I still want to make sure we cover, but I want to stay kind of on this topic but just steer it a little bit. You have a discussion in here of the Left-Right paradigm and how unhelpful it can be. And I was telling you that sometimes I agree with you and sometimes I don't; I go back and forth in this. Sometimes I say people are so stuck in this — they're more stuck in a Democrat-Republican paradigm than strictly a Left-Right paradigm, and that is very frustrating, because it means that their candidate they let off the hook and the other candidate is terrible, and if they switched what each candidate had done they would have no problem then currently defending the other person.

KOERNER: Right.

WOODS: And that is very frustrating and annoying, and it also limits the way they can think. They feel like there are two ways to think in the world: this way and that way.

And there are a lot of ways to think, so that is frustrating. But I don't like when people say it's because there's no such thing as Left and Right. Clearly there are. I mean, I'm telling you that the Hapsburgs compared to Lady Gaga, they were on the Right and she's on the Left. Those terms do mean something.

KOERNER: (laughing) Yes, absolutely. So I use the Left-Right — I consider the Left-Right paradigm as kind of the hugely important political example of this problem of paradigms, that we see the world — and by the way, the media sees the world — not as the world is, but in a way that conveys, that reflects the prevailing paradigm. And the thing about paradigms is they always cause you to see data in a way that reinforces the paradigm.

Now, with respect to Left and Right, here's an interesting thing. Most people have had this experience. If they have friends on the Left and friends on the Right, they know that their friends on the Left think that their friends on the Right are basically bad, callous, not really caring. But the friends on the Right think that their friends on the Left are, what? Those things or something else? Actually usually something else. People on the Right often think that folks on the Left are stupid. Not bad, but stupid. So what is it? What's going on here, because there's an asymmetry here? And if you can understand the asymmetry, you can understand a huge amount about how you need to sell your product of liberty differently to the Left from selling it to the Right.

Now, what's going on — again, to first approximations, because we don't have a lot of time — is that the politics of the Left are the politics of good intention, kind of as I described earlier in this interview, right? Liberal by default. There's this thing called government; there's this thing called law; obviously good policies will more directly manifest good intentions. Now, if I'm on the Left and I experience my support for a policy as coming from my good intention and I see you disagreeing with the policy, then from my paradigm, my understanding of you is that you obviously don't have the good intention I have. So I'm now making some inference, but I'm making an inference about you from my paradigm.

But my paradigm isn't the one you're working in, because if I'm on the Right, I may not believe, I probably don't believe that government and law work in the way that my friends on the Left think. In other words, I might believe that the method of imposing the policy through government force, law is going to determine the outcome more than the intention of the policy. So I'm judging policies by actually looking — perhaps by looking at history, but looking at policies and saying, okay, this kind of policy gets this kind of outcome. And the outcome may not be obvious from the intention that went into the policy, so I'm looking at my friends on the Left and I'm going, why can't they see that? Why can't they see that if you do this, you're going to get this outcome? My God, they must be stupid. Can't they look at facts?

So the guy on the Left is working on a moral, kind of intentional axis; that's their politics. But the folks on the Right might be working on a more kind of functional axis with their politics. Now, if I know that, I know that I'm going to be using different vocabulary and different arguments when I speak to the folks on the Left and folks on

the Right. I'm going to make those people feel comfortable with me in very different ways. And indeed, I make the point that we shouldn't actually be seeking to win arguments; we should be seeking to win supporters, and they are very different processes, largely because the judgment-forming process and the post hoc justification process, as I discussed earlier, are very different.

WOODS: Just because of the time limitation, I want to jump to something completely different. I just want to give you a chance to mention, because I think it's a nice discussion you have in the book, your discussion of liberty as a political manifestation of love. I was struck by the way you accomplished that.

KOERNER: Thank you. Look, it works like this, and I think this is super — the reason I put it in this book is we all have an experience of love. To be human is to know what love is. And when you love someone, you want for them what they want for themselves. The three little words that capture love are not "I love you," but they are "As you wish." And guess what. Politically that's liberty. Liberty is the politics of "As you wish." I want for you what you want for yourself.

And so I think this is really important in this book about kind of selling liberty and paradigms and understanding how people form judgments, because nobody has an ideological, certainly not a political, objection to love. Love completely subverts political biases. We don't talk about love enough in political speeches, and we should. I mean, in fact, if you heard someone talk about love in a political speech, some audiences will shift uncomfortably, but it's incredibly powerful, because it invites people to meet you on a human level. It basically forms that common ground right there in the deepest, deepest way.

And so selling liberty as the politics of love is to sell a certain kind of politics, if you like, in a completely apolitical fashion. And so it kind of gets through the cracks of all of these political paradigms, because we can all relate to it. As I said, we all have — pretty much all of us have a personal experience of love. And if we're having a political discussion with that common ground, we can do much better than hitting somebody over the head with *The Creature from Jekyll Island* often.

WOODS: Although, you know, again, you say that the human experience is complex. You would be surprised at how many people sat down, read that entire thing, and their lives were changed.

KOERNER: Oh no —

WOODS: And I know that you're not saying that it's not important. We do need those things.

KOERNER: But if you came to that book willingly, of your own accord, then you're at a point to be open to that book. That is not the same as having an argument with someone who hasn't decided they want to —

WOODS: Yeah, I see what you're saying. Yeah.

KOERNER: It's about getting someone doxastically open, is the term. And I'm saying more of winning converts to liberty is about opening people's minds to actually maybe the possibility that what they already believe is inconsistent. That's 80% of selling liberty, rather than just explaining the finer points of the monetary system, even though I do some of that in my book as well.

WOODS: All right, let's leave it here. Tell people how they can get this book.

KOERNER: Thanks so much, Tom. Yeah, so the best way to get it is to go to IfYouCanKeepIt.us. It's also available on Amazon, but if you go to IfYouCanKeepIt.us, I will personally sign the copy to you. So that's where I invite people to go. And by the way, just by complete coincidence, there's another book that came out with exactly the same title in the same month. It's not that one. I am Robin Koerner, so if you're Googling it, it's "If You Can Keep It Koerner."

WOODS: And Koerner is spelled "K-O-E-R-N-E-R" when you're Googling —

KOERNER: It is.

WOODS: — or you can just simply go to TomWoods.com/693, where I'll have a bio of Robin, and you'll definitely be sure that you're getting the correct book. Well, Robin, best of luck with the book. Great to finally have a chance to talk to you.

KOERNER: Yes, you too Tom. It's a real pleasure.