

Groundbreaking TV Producer Norman Lear, Who Helped Us Talk About Tough Topics, Dead at 101

The Wired Word for the Week of December 17, 2023

In the News

Norman Lear, the TV writer-producer who provoked national conversations about previously taboo, hot-button subjects, died of natural causes Tuesday, December 5, at his home in Los Angeles. He was 101. He is survived by his third wife Lyn Davis, a filmmaker and psychologist, six children and four grandchildren.

"Norman Lear's profound influence on television will never be forgotten," CBS, his host network, said in a statement. "He redefined the sitcom by introducing topics that had previously been avoided, including race, poverty and sexism. And he did it all with wit and heart, making it relatable to millions of Americans."

Beginning with his hit series, *All in the Family*, Lear broached other serious issues in prime time, many of which had not seen the light of day before, including the Vietnam war, drug and alcohol abuse, economic inequality, domestic violence, abortion, rape, menopause, class, divorce and health problems. Until then, Lear remarked, "The message [television] was sending out was that we didn't have any problems."

Journalist Rebecca Sun wrote that "through the white working-class 'everyman' Archie Bunker (modeled in part after [Lear's] own father) and his relatives and neighbors, Lear provided avatars for American households to contend with issues involving race, gender, sexuality and religion."

Gloria Calderón Kellett, who was involved in the 2017-2020 revival of Lear's *One Day at a Time*, said Lear "awoke conversations that had to be had."

All in the Family featured Archie Bunker as a working-class, narrow-minded, loudmouth, angry bigot who was also somehow "endearing" and "a fearful man of progress," according to Lear; his long-suffering, kind wife Edith; their hardheaded daughter Gloria; and liberal son-in-law Michael "Meathead" Stivic. The show found critics and fans across the political spectrum, but was wildly successful: Watched by over 50 million viewers, it ran for nine seasons, won 22 Emmy Awards, and was No. 1 in the ratings for five consecutive years. Its sequel, *Archie Bunker's Place*, ran for four additional seasons.

Six shows spun off *All in the Family*, including *Maude*, about Edith Bunker's left-leaning feminist cousin, and *The Jeffersons*, an upwardly mobile affluent black family who had been the Bunkers' neighbors. Lear also created *Good Times*, about a poor black family dealing with discrimination; *Sanford and Son*, about a black owner of a junkyard and his son; and *Diff'rent Strokes*. These shows and other Lear creations such as *One Day At A Time* featured diverse casts and stories from underrepresented communities.

When Lear was asked whether *All in the Family* had made a difference in society, he answered, "We had a Judeo-Christian ethic hanging around a couple thousand years that didn't help erase racism at all. So the notion of the little half-hour comedy changing things is something I think is silly."

But that didn't stop him from trying. Executive vice president Marge Baker noted Lear's "real concern about the frightening divisiveness and intolerance in our society" saying that "he thought if he could make [people] laugh, they would listen." Lear once remarked that viewers who identified with Archie Bunker might not change their opinions, but his goal was to "get them to think."

And the very fact that diverse audiences could laugh together even when they strongly disagreed about a divisive subject seemed to inspire Lear.

"I don't think I've ever seen a more spiritual moment than an audience in a belly laugh!" Lear said. "The soundtrack of my life has been laughter."

On his 100th birthday in July 2022, Lear said "love and laughter" were the secret to his long life, adding: "The people I've loved, and loved me in return. I couldn't emphasize that more. I have been cared for, and I have cared, and I think it's mattered a lot."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Norman Lear, Whose Comedies Changed the Face of TV, Is Dead at 101. *The New York Times*](#)

[Norman Lear, TV Legend, Dies at 101. *Variety*](#)

[Norman Lear, Legendary TV Producer, Dies at Age 101. *CBS News*](#)

[Norman Lear, Pioneering TV Producer of 'All in the Family' and 'The Jeffersons,' Dead at 101. *RollingStone*](#)

[Norman Lear's Legacy of Inclusive Storytelling: 'He Was a Conscience for America.' *The Hollywood Reporter*](#)

Applying the News Story

We are indebted to Denise Kohlmeyer, freelance writer and former newspaper reporter, for her article, [3 Principles for Approaching Difficult Conversations](#), about the need to keep three T's in mind (timing, tact and tone) when preparing to have a conversation about a difficult subject. We've used her points in the scripture section below, adding a fourth "T" for truth-telling, seen in the Proverbs 27 and Exodus 18 texts.

The Big Questions

1. What topics, if any, were treated as "off-limits" in years past? Which of these, if any, are no longer taboo? What accounts for any changes in permissible topics for conversation?
2. What other topics have become taboo or toxic more recently, for you personally, or in the broader culture? What makes it hard to talk about those subjects?
3. What happens in a relationship when a conflict arises, that the people involved ignore or try to avoid?
4. Is there ever a time that it would be better to walk away from a conversation about a difficult topic? How do you decide whether or not to address a difficult subject with someone?
5. Should the church provide "safe spaces" for people to discuss difficult subjects? Why or why not? What risks and/or benefits might result from providing safe spaces for such discussions?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Exodus 18:22, 25-26

[Jethro said,] "Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you." ... Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves. (For context, read [Exodus 18:13-27](#).)

During a visit to his son-in-law, Moses, in the wilderness, Jethro observed the backlog of disputes Moses was trying to handle all by himself (vv. 13-16). It seemed to the elder man that he needed to have a difficult conversation with Moses about what must have been an aggravating and frustrating situation for Moses as well as for the people.

But Jethro didn't start by criticizing Moses or giving him his advice. He began by asking questions: "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" He asked for information, not assuming he understood what was happening or the context of the situation. The way he framed his question also made it clear that he assumed Moses had the best of intentions, that he was trying to do something good "for the people." This let Moses know that Jethro was on his side.

Jethro also gave Moses a chance to clarify what he was trying to achieve, and gave himself time to listen. Moses explained that the people had the desire to know God's will ("the people come to me to inquire of God") and that

he taught them "the statutes and instructions of God."

Once Moses explained his goal, Jethro could affirm it (vv. 19-20), while suggesting that Moses' approach was ineffective, inefficient and exhausting for him and for the people (vv. 17-18). Then Jethro offered what he thought was a better way to achieve Moses' goal: through recruitment of honest, trustworthy people to decide lesser cases (v. 21), leaving the harder cases for Moses to handle.

Church planter and professional coach Olu Brown wrote that "Jethro helped Moses understand that he could not avoid tough interactions with others. ... This advice is profoundly wise -- guiding Moses to how he should delegate power and authority. However, hidden in this wisdom is a sharp reality: 'They should bring every major dispute to you.' In plain print, there it is -- difficult conversations. Jethro helped Moses understand that although others could represent him in small cases, he still had the ultimate responsibility to handle the more complex ones. Leaders who avoid or try to delegate difficult conversations will never reach their fullest potential."

Questions: How do you decide whether you need to have a conversation with someone about a difficult topic? How can you be certain that *you* are the one who should engage in that conversation? How do you determine which topics are of vital importance to discuss, and which are likely to be unproductive, unhelpful or of minimal benefit to anyone?

Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: ... a time to keep silent and a time to speak; (For context, read [Ecclesiastes 3:1-8](#).)

James 1:19-20, 26

You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for human anger does not produce God's righteousness. ... If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. (For context, read [James 1:19-26](#).)

Most of us know how it feels when we've said the first thing that popped into our heads, only to regret our speedy speech a minute later. One consistent theme of biblical wisdom literature is the need to think before we speak. Proverbs 12:16 shows the foolishness of rash words: "Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult." James uses the metaphor of a bridle (which is used to control a powerful horse) to describe how we need to control our tongues; he writes at greater length about that in [James 3:1-12](#).

Writer Denise Kohlmeyer stresses the importance of choosing the right time for a conversation about a difficult topic. If either person in the discussion is under stress, pressure or duress, or physically, mentally or emotionally exhausted, it might be better to hit the "pause" button until you've had time to recover your equilibrium.

"Waiting ... gives you some emotional distance. Postponement gives you the opportunity to see the situation more clearly, objectively," Kohlmeyer says. "Waiting allows you to choose your words wisely, rather than speak rashly in the heat of the moment. Waiting also gives you time to pray for God's counsel for the conversation and to ask for the Holy Spirit's presence during the conversation. Waiting also gives the other person time to reflect and pray."

Postponing a conversation doesn't mean avoiding it, but exercising patience and thoughtfulness until both parties are in a better frame of mind to be able to engage productively.

Author Brad Larson agrees: "A hard conversation should never be a hasty conversation."

"The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered" wrote the Teacher (Proverbs 17:27 NIV).

Questions: How do you determine when to speak and when to be silent about a difficult topic? What helps you to "bridle your tongue" when you need to keep quiet? How does your faith help you speak up when you need to address a difficult subject?

Proverbs 12:18

Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (For context, read [Proverbs 12:15-](#)

19.)

The second "T" needed when preparing to discuss a difficult topic, Kohlmeyer writes, is tact, defined as "having a keen sense of what to do or say, in order to maintain good relations."

She quotes the poet Carl Sandburg, who said, "Be careful with your words. Once they are said, they can be only forgiven, not forgotten."

Many of Norman Lear's characters were not particularly good at being tactful. In the name of being honest, Archie Bunker (and others) could be incredibly cruel, speaking words that could wound, hurt the soul, and kill the spirit.

Our words have a lot of power: to draw blood, or to heal.

Of course, truth can hurt, the way a surgeon's scalpel hurts before the removal of a malignant tumor. But the goal of compassionate truth is always to bring healing to the sufferer.

Questions: What is the difference between speaking hard truths that need to be said and speaking words that kill? How can we do the first without harming the listener?

Ephesians 4:25, 29

So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. ... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. (For context, read [Ephesians 4:25-32](#).)

The third "T" in Kohlmeyer's "difficult conversations toolkit" is tone of voice, which she says "conveys the heart attitude of the speaker" and influences the listener, impacting how that person is likely to respond.

In a skit featuring Harpo Marx and Lucille Ball, both hide behind a curtain and peek out to face each other. Lucille is dressed like Harpo, and copies his gestures, as though she is his reflection in a mirror. When he makes a silly face or grimace, she does the same. When he looks angry, she looks angry; when he appears frightened, so does she. Finally, he pulls a fast one, making a gesture she doesn't anticipate, and they collapse into each other's arms, laughing hysterically.

The skit illustrates how our tone of voice can be reflected back to us by the other person in the discussion. If we sound angry, the other person is likely to respond in anger; if we sound kind and calm, the other party is more likely to be receptive to hear what we have to say.

Paul writes in our text that our words are to "give grace to those who hear." The Greek word for grace here could be rendered as "kindness, courtesy, consideration." Even when we have some hard truth to convey, it should be communicated with love ([Ephesians 4:15](#)), which, when translated, means "with tenderness, affection, fondness."

Pastor Brad Larson wrote: "Hard words can soften hearts. Spoken harshly, though, hard words wound hearts. When Jesus exposed the Samaritan woman's sin, he poured out the living water of his grace ([John 4:16-26](#)). This is his way. Condemnation without redemption is hatred, but condemnation with Christ's redemption is eternally kind."

Questions: How are words like building materials, and what are they intended to build up? What makes a word "good for building up"? How should the knowledge that "we are members of one another" impact the way we speak to one another?

For Further Discussion

1. Reflect on this, from Lori Stanley Roeleveld's book, *The Art of Hard Conversations: Biblical Tools for the Tough Talks That Matter*: "The awesome beauty and terrifying truth of hard conversations is that even if the outcome isn't what you had hoped, [the conversation] still has the power to set at least one of the participants free."

2. Baptist pastor Rob Hurtgen, wrote that "hard conversations can be great opportunities. ... [to] challenge the way you think about issues, ... enable you to define what matters most, [and] ... force you to develop well-defined action steps -- what you're going to do and not do. ... hard conversations ... clarify our thinking, confirm our convictions, and enable us with ... courage to act on those same principles."

Talk about a time when having a hard conversation led to one or more of those results.

3. Author Olu Brown wrote this about beginning a conversation about a difficult subject: "I start the conversation with my concerns, fears, and doubts. These confessions tend to release some of the tension in the atmosphere (at least for me) and allow the real words and phrases that I want to speak to flow. Here's how the beginning of such a difficult conversation may sound:

Thank you for meeting with me today. I want to start by saying that this is a challenging discussion for me to have with you. I appreciate and value you so much that I am willing to overcome my fears for this needed discussion. Thank you for listening to me, and I promise to listen to you."

What does Brown highlight in his opening statement, and how might the things he emphasizes open the door for a positive response from the other party?

4. Respond to this, from TWW team member Stan Purdum: "Several years ago, while searching for some resources for a church youth group, I came across a board game called 'Community.' In appearance, it was quite similar to 'Monopoly,' but where that game promotes winners and losers, 'Community' was designed so that in order to win, you had to help the other players win as well. And the key to everyone winning in this game was a square called 'community meeting.' It was similar to the 'go directly to jail' square on a Monopoly board. As you moved your object around the board, you'd periodically land on a 'go to meeting' square. When you got there, you'd have to remain there until at least one other player arrived so a meeting could be held. But before that could happen, someone at the meeting had to play a 'plain-speaking' card, which you got from time to time from a card deck that came with the game.

"The point, of course, was that before anything worthwhile could be accomplished when people came together for community purposes, there had to be straightforward statements of truth, even if those were sometimes painful. That is certainly true in the communities called family, church and friendships. And in life, there are times when the plain speaking needs to come in the form of rebuke. In Proverbs 27:6, the writer calls these 'the wounds a friend inflicts' and describes them as well meant. The wise, the Proverbs writer tells us, learn from them. They are the wounds that are meant to heal."

5. Discuss this: "Norman lived a life in awe of the world around him," his family wrote in a statement. "He marveled at his cup of coffee every morning, the shape of the tree outside his window and the sounds of beautiful music. But it was people -- those he just met and those he knew for decades -- who kept his mind and heart forever young."

Lear himself often said he was guided throughout his life by the mantra, "Each man is my superior in that I may learn from him."

Responding to the News

1. Try to follow the example of Renee Embree, a director of youth and family ministries in Canada, who writes: "I give myself the 'Holy Spirit test' during and after these difficult conversations, asking myself through that whole discussion, 'Did I display the fruit of the Spirit -- the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control of Jesus?'"

"One of my recurring prayers as churches (and conventions) navigate what can be difficult conversations is we'd display what it means to love one another, we'd display what it means to be family and truly be united under Christ, even while we debate passionately and disagree heartily.

"May we be able to say, 'I see it differently, but I love you and I know we both love Christ.' May they know we are Jesus' disciples by our love."

2. Check out these webpages for additional tips on having important conversations about difficult topics:

[How to Tackle Tough Topics With Your Kids. christianparenting.org](http://christianparenting.org)

[How to Have That Hard Conversation. The Gospel Coalition](#)

[Ten Commandments for Difficult Conversations. Christianity9to5](#)

Difficult Conversations. Churchleadership.com

8 Ways to Wade Into Water of Difficult Conversations in Church. goodfaithmedia

3 Principles for Approaching Difficult Conversations. crosswalk.com

Prayer

O God, help us to pause before we jump headlong into a conversation about a difficult topic, so that we can listen for your voice, guiding us away from anger, fear and defensiveness and leading us to peace and concern for the others involved. Help us to listen carefully to them so that we may understand their perspective and so that they will feel heard. Help us to come to a meeting of the hearts even if we can't always come to a meeting of the minds. In Jesus' name, Amen.