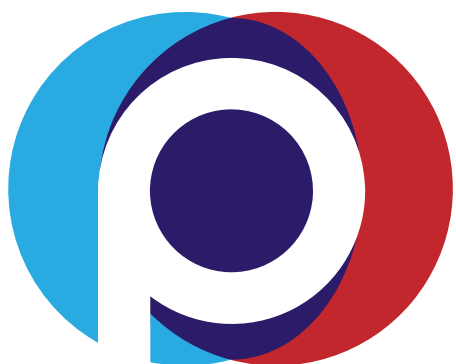


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An Impossible Unity: New York Encounter 2018

[Juan Leon](#) 06 Feb 2018

The New York Encounter was launched in 2011 as a festival celebrating great art and big ideas. Every year, luminaries from different industries -artists, academics, CEOs- would give unique lectures on themes both poetic and practical (“Reality has Never Betrayed Me,” “In Search of the Human Face,” “Looking for the Sea and yet Not Afraid.”)

This year, the Encounter decided to acknowledge and lament the country’s political fragmentation.

The man behind it. Maurizio Maniscalco is NYE's co-founder and president. He's a song writer and percussionist. He's also an immigrant.

Born in Italy, Maniscalco recalls the first presidential election he followed in the United States, nearly 25 years ago. “Candidates and parties were fighting, people were debating and arguing ...and yet, once we had a president that was *the* president. That was *my* president. For the good of the country. Look at where we stand today. I don’t care if you are pro or against Trump. I’m only saying that to the best of my knowledge, the last time a president had half the country on his side and the other half not even acknowledging him was with Lincoln. And it didn't end well.”



Maniscalco says the divisional strife facing American society goes beyond mere political disagreement. “The fragmentation is inside us, especially in the youngsters,” he says, “Nothing sticks. Nothing seems to touch and set in motion our heart. And without ‘affection’ there is no real knowledge. The person is intrinsically weak. We may find the road to economic success but the ‘I’ falters, and oftentimes crumbles. Dramatically and tragically.”

“We naturally yearn for unity and long to be part of a real community: life blossoms when it is shared.

And yet, we live in an age of fragmentation...”

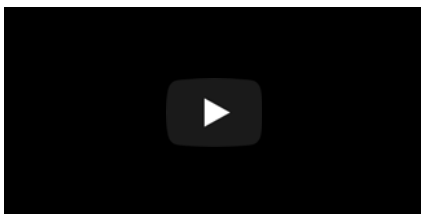
This is the central premise and challenge addressed at this year’s [New York Encounter](#), which took place over Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend at the Metropolitan Pavilion in Manhattan.

The Encounter was a reflection -- and investigation -- of human experience, and the itinerary seemed downright radical in 2018: civil public discussion of music, film, politics, faith, ideas. Most importantly, The Encounter didn't leave anything at surface level - it went straight to the profound.

It felt almost like a throwback to a lost era.

But that's what we need right now. One need only look at the current media landscape to see evidence that The Encounter's deep-diving, multi-dimensional approach is *exactly* what we need right now:

Empty rage is the fuel of current media (check out Axios founder Jim Van de Hei's analysis to see [how](#) we got here). An October 2017 Pew Research Center survey revealed the [record high levels of partisan division](#) during Barack Obama’s presidency were only continuing to grow under President Trump. In an even more recent [Pew survey](#) of 38 countries, measuring satisfaction with news media, the US was the most sharply divided along political lines.



Asked whether he thinks the media plays a role in polarizing America, Maniscalco is candid:

“Of course. Look, I am not even sure your magazine would be interested in publishing this interview. I am aware this is not a trendy approach. But it’s the only approach. When I watch TV, whether it’s CNN or FOX, and I hear ‘the wise man’ speak, I hear ‘the just’ scolding the unjust...I would like to ask them: What is it that you are really interested in? Is it a matter of self-righteousness, mere power or what?”

But there's something underneath the media-fed rage. Something unifying that NYE understands and captures: It's a fatigue from the sheen of polished media cynicism that blared at us from screens. Underneath this fatigue burns a human desire to truly engage with perspectives, to hear them out, to be challenged.



Maniscalco encourages the media to go deeper. “You are not really interested in the other. You just want to dominate him,” he says of the media talking heads that dominate cable news and politics with ratings-chasing bombast. “I would like to invite them to the Encounter where a Rabbi, and Apostolic Nuncio and a big shot from the Muslim world can spend the whole day together debating during a conference, and then dining together like brothers. As it happened yesterday.”

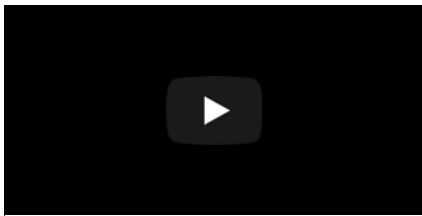
The 11,000 attendees that broke bread at this year’s Encounter prove there’s an appetite for this brand of shared civil discourse. Jews, Catholics. Liberals, Conservatives. Young, Old.

“At the root of the Encounter there is a Catholic movement called Communion and Liberation. Its founder, Msgr. Luigi Giussani, was a young Italian priest who in the mid ‘50s realized that a formally Catholic world can exist as an empty shell hosting a mentality which has not much to do with hope, faith and charity,” says Maniscalco, “Through Msgr. Giussani we’ve been educated to follow in St. Paul’s steps when he invites us to ‘test everything and retain what is good.’ That task is no small undertaking. A group consisting of nearly 400 volunteers from across the country works year-round to put on the event for people “who want to go beyond preconceptions and ideological barriers.”

Among this year's exhibits: A discussion on the films of Terence Malick; a dialogue between George Washington professor Amitai Etzioni and Columbia University Professor Mark Lilla about America's cultural and political divide; and a presentation on how to fall in love with poetry with American poet Edward Hirsch.

Past speakers include Archbishop Timothy Dolan, New York Times commentator David Brooks, and former astronaut Tom Jones.

The conversations had in Encounter -eclectic, experimental and open- offer a daunting but practical model of community: The first steps in a renewed commitment to understanding and bridging ideological divides.



Historian David Moss argued recently on NPR's [Hidden Brain](#) podcast that the American political system is much more resilient to crumbling in the face of ideological division than we think. This year's edition of the New York Encounter shows this sentiment of resiliency is just as true of Americans themselves.

Trending



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