

# The Ideological Traffic Jam + the River That Can Break It

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## Discussion Guide

# Introduction

This guide is designed to support conversations between organizers, activists, colleagues, friends, and neighbors who care about defeating authoritarians and building democracy. As infrastructure, democracy's foundations and institutions support and protect the rights of anyone and everyone to organize, to protest, to file lawsuits, to run candidates, to hold conferences, and advocate in any other nonviolent way for change. The imperfect democratic infrastructure we have had in the United States and throughout much of the world is perilously close to being obliterated by authoritarians that want to replace it with rule by whim, and if they succeed it will have catastrophic impact on people and the planet.

That assessment is not cause for despair, it is cause for strategic clarity. The conditions for democratic renewal and reconstruction are ripe, but only if we effectively organize and mobilize quickly, and that requires us to break out of patterns that are holding us back. After reading "The Ideological Traffic Jam and the River that Can Break It," by Scot Nakagawa, this discussion guide is designed to be a further move toward breaking some of those patterns and building the effective, sustainable pro-democracy networks we need.

## How to Use this Guide

A discussion needs at least two people, so gather with at least one friend, colleague, family member or community member either in person or online to best engage this content. No matter your role or how long you've been involved, if you read, "The Ideological Traffic Jam and the River That Can Break It," and want to talk about it, this guide is for you and your people. Groups of 4-6 are great for deep conversation that can include every voice and bring a diversity of perspective; if your group is larger than 12, we recommend that you break into smaller groups.

The guide itself is facilitative, so this discussion will not require specifically skilled facilitators. Each section gives some tips for how to do that. Overall, it is designed to support your learning, to draw out your experience and understanding, and to make insights applicable. While we encourage you to follow the basic trajectory of the guide and draw from questions in each of the three sections, depending on the size of your group and how much time you have, you may decide to prioritize some questions over others.

# Part 1: Reflections

This section is designed for short reflections that can bring everyone's voice into the discussion. If you are in person, you can sit in a circle and go around the room to answer at least one of these questions. If you are online, you can take turns by having people pass to each other.

1. What feelings did you have reading this piece? How did you feel overall when you were done reading? How do you feel now?
2. Which parts of this piece resonated most for you? What do you feel most curious about?

# Part 2: Deepening Concepts

This section is about exploring the concepts in the essay more deeply, including grappling with big questions and looking for shared understanding. You might find the conversation going in new directions, generating other questions, or bringing in new experience or information. You will also likely want to only discuss some of these questions. All of that is okay – go where the energy of the group is, with an eye toward developing understanding of the concepts. The goal is to share understanding, listen to each other, and see what you're learning from the essay.

## *The Crises We're Facing*

1. The first part of the essay talks about the crisis we're in and four additional accelerants: the ecological meta-crisis, the collapse of patriarchal bargains, the state capacity collapse, and the great wealth extraction and collapse of economic legibility. Which of these interconnected crises are new to you and which are familiar? What frameworks have helped you to understand the causes of and solutions to these crises?
2. We're living in a time in which global autocracy is on the rise, and authoritarians are consolidating power in the US, gaining ground everyday. Why are authoritarians gaining ground, and how do they deal with "the ideological traffic jam"? How does it benefit them?
3. Defending democracy is so hard because it requires living with contested truth, multiple frameworks, and unresolved tensions, and that fragmentation happens along the very fault lines the traffic jam creates. How have you seen this show up in your own life or life? What is his alternative that builds power that doesn't depend on ideological consensus?

## Part 2: Deepening Concepts

### *Many Springs, One River*

1. Springs are spaces where people make sense of the world through shared frameworks, develop strategy with like-minded people, build culture and identity, find safety and belonging, get educated and organized, and experience ideological coherence. Where does space like this exist in your life? Who else is part of that space?
2. Consider your motivation for the fight to stop authoritarianism. Why does this fight matter to you? Where does that sense of meaning come from? What are you fighting for?
3. Many springs need to feed a river of mobilization big and diverse enough to defeat authoritarianism. What are some of the elements that describe that river? Which ones make sense to you, and which ones do you have questions about? Which of the mass movements he mentions do you most want to learn more about?
4. Rather than further fragmenting into disparate springs, the river the reading is calling for is held together by a few key principles, and a shared commitment to living in a free society. Where do you see the presence or possibility of the principles he lists in the current moment? How does this approach solve the traffic jam?

### *Spring Leaders and River Builders*

1. Spring Leaders and River Builders have different duties and jobs. Where do you see your strengths, and what practices sound most doable and meaningful? Why might other roles be important, too?
2. The reading lists examples of what it looks like to maintain your spring's strength *and* contribute to something larger. Beyond the examples in the essay, where else do you see this kind of pluralism in action? Where do you see potential?
3. If the role of the River Builder is distinctly focused on building infrastructure for coordination without domination, that also helps to paint a picture of what it looks like to be in the river together with people from many springs. What sticks out to you about what we do together in the river? Why is it important to keep spring and river activities distinct? What should you keep in a spring, and what should you bring to the river?
4. This framework may feel familiar or intuitive, and at the same time it's easy to fall into old patterns that have held organizations, coalitions, and movements back. Which 1-2 of the common mistakes – trying to merge springs, letting one spring dominate, confusing spring and river activity, making the river bureaucratic, tolerating authoritarian springs, failing to defend springs under attack, and neglecting your spring to build the river – seem most possible in your context? What examples of these tendencies have you seen? How can we prioritize the “do’s” in the essay over the “dont’s”?

## Part 3: Applying what you've learned

This section includes prompts that you can either discuss with a group or journal about on your own, as well as activities aimed at putting the concepts in this essay into practice. These prompts ask you to focus on your specific context, and are particularly helpful to groups of people that are already in some kind of motion together. At the same time, if you're just getting started, these prompts can be a helpful guide. As the reading says, "Start where you are. Build what you can. Connect to others. Coordinate action. Defend each other. Win."

1. Take a few minutes to identify the springs you are connected to. Where do you find ideological clarity, community, and belonging as you make sense of the threats we are facing and the possible futures you are building toward? Who are the people, groups, and networks you find yourself going over and over again? Now, compare notes with others in your group. Where is there commonality and/or overlap? In the spaces of most overlap, assess:
  - Where and how are leaders being developed?
  - What political education is happening?
  - Where and how is identity and belonging cultivated?
  - Where is there mutual aid and community care?
2. The reading states, "Without strong springs, there is no river to feed," and so the best approach to building the river starts with strengthening your springs. Consider the people you feel most aligned with, including people you're with now and others – even make a list if you want to. Where do you see opportunities to invest in more political education to ground each other in shared frameworks, leadership development to build spring and river awareness and skill, and participate in or establish mutual aid and community care systems together?
3. Consider some of the other springs in your area, including those that you may disagree with on everything except democracy. Where do you have genuine relationships already? Who could you reach out to to initiate contact or build together? Now, map out some curriculum you can study together to cultivate river awareness within your spring:
  - What other frameworks do you need to study to better understand – even if you disagree with – the other springs in your area?
  - How can you make river awareness part of your spring's leadership expectations? How can you create accountability mechanisms for river participation?
  - Where can you find stories of successful river coordination in places like the United States, Serbia, South Africa, Poland, South Korea, the former Czechoslovakia, Indonesia, and elsewhere?
  - How can you build your skill and capacity to tell stories of effective spring to river coordination?

## Part 3: Applying what you've learned

4. If you're part of an active group connected to a spring, make a 3-6 month plan for phase 3 and 4 of the Implementation Guide in the essay. Be sure to start small and scale up based on what's working, and to build in ways to learn from both success and failure.
  - What infrastructure for coordination already exists in your area?
  - Who from other springs can you convene to build relationships, and when and where could a small convening happen?
  - What are some opportunities on the horizon to demonstrate power by coordinating concrete action together? What would successful coordination look like? What agreements do you need for mutual defense and river accountability?
  - What are some ideas you have to build in learning, so that each time you coordinate action together, you are celebrating success, doing more of what's working, less of what's not, and adjusting your coordination strategy to strengthen trust and sustainability?
  - What stories can you tell from the beginning and throughout that help strengthen springs and feed into a river?
5. If you are a funder, start with an assessment of your portfolio. Are you already funding spring or river activities? Where do you see barriers, including traditional approaches to funding. Now, build a plan for increasing investment over the next 3 funding cycles:
  - How can you identify potential springs to fund? Of the buckets of work listed in the funder guide, where do you see the easiest possibility for your focus?
  - How can you identify river infrastructure to fund?
  - What do you need to do internally within your organization to better fund springs, river, and the bridge?
  - What projects that you're currently funding would you need to wind down? What would you need to do internally to set boundaries about what not to fund in this time?