

Many people have become blind to the goodness in their fellow Americans. One sociologist wants to change that.

# LEARNING TO Trust AGAIN

BY JOSH C. MORGAN

**MY WIFE AND I WERE** at a crowded grocery store not long ago. It was a weekday evening, cold and wet—and tense. People were carelessly blocking aisles, grumbling and snarling and cutting one another off with their carts. At one point, two women traded insults for several minutes after colliding in the freezer section.

Things got worse at the checkout line. The cashier scanned a man's discount card, but he misread the

**WHOM DO WE TRUST MOST?** We asked 5,500 Americans: If you lost \$100 and it was found by someone from your life on this list, do you trust they would return it to you? Here are the percentages of "yes" votes for each



**Mail Carrier**  
**45%**



**Dog Walker**  
**33%**



**Bartender**  
**26%**



**Coworker**  
**60%**



**Teacher**  
**64%**



**Handyman**  
**30%**



**Clergy**  
**69%**



**Hairdresser**  
**49%**



**Family Doctor**  
**73%**



**Garbage Collector**  
**22%**



**Lawyer**  
**37%**



**Next-Door Neighbor**  
**55%**



**In-Laws**  
**71%**



**Mechanic**  
**32%**



**Babysitter**  
**41%**



**Police**  
**64%**



**Grocery Cashier**  
**36%**



**Dry Cleaner**  
**27%**

category.

savings on her screen as an additional charge. He decided she was acting maliciously and began to argue.

"She's being spiteful!" he yelled. "This is un-[beeping]-believable."

Other customers looked away as the cashier tried to reason with him. She called a manager, who escorted him to customer service. Shaken, she moved to the next customer in line.

We've all witnessed uncomfortable scenes like this in public places. My reaction when I see them is both personal and professional. I am a data analyst and sociologist who studies how and why people interact with one another—or why they choose not to. To me, the grocery scene was another example of how our trust in others has eroded. But it was also a teachable moment on how we can

rebuild our faith—starting with just one person.

**A** **AMERICANS'** diminishing trust has been making news for years now. At our peak in the late 1960s, more than half (56 percent) of Americans surveyed said they thought "most people can be trusted." By 2016, fewer than one in three (33 percent) agreed. Trust in our institutions—including politics, the media, and our employers—has fallen too. The United States now trails most developed countries by global measures of trust.

How can you tell whether you are a trusting person? Try this test: If you lost \$100 while running errands, would you expect someone to turn it in or would you assume the first person

to find it would take it?

These expectations represent two types of trust that social scientists study, and both are at the heart of the trust crisis. The first, more optimistic kind reflects what's called generalized trust. It's based on the idea that people generally share your values and would

react as you would. You know that *you* would return a lost wallet, so you have faith that you'd get yours back. (It's worth noting that people who trust others by default—people who experience more generalized trust—report being happier, healthier, and more resilient to life's ups and downs.)

The second, more pessimistic view

“  
A TENSE  
ENCOUNTER  
IN THE  
GROCERY  
STORE LEADS  
TO A LESSON  
IN REBUILDING  
FAITH.

is called particularized trust, meaning you tend to trust only particular people—people who believe or act like you do. So while you know *you* would return the wallet, you also know that most people aren't like you, and therefore you wouldn't expect to get it back.

Here is the problem: In our increasingly polarized world, roughly a quarter of Americans have particularized their trust over the past 50 years. Because of this, millions of Americans have become less willing to rely on or to help most people, and they have lost confidence in the value of public services.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: SHUTTERSTOCK (19)



## 40 COMPANIES FOR LIFE

What are the most trusted brands in America? *Reader's Digest* teamed up with research firm Ipsos Connect to find out. We asked more than 5,500 Americans which brands they trust the most in 40 categories. Here are the winners. For more on them, go to [rd.com/trustedbrands](http://rd.com/trustedbrands).

**Always**  
Feminine products

**Aveeno**  
Body lotion/moisturizer

**Behr**  
Interior paint

**Blue Cross Blue Shield**  
Health insurance

**Carnival**  
Cruise line

**Centrum**  
Vitamin

**Claritin**  
Allergy relief

**Clif Bar**  
Nutrition bar

**CVS Pharmacy**  
Pharmacy/drugstore

**Depend**  
Incontinence products

**Dove**  
Soap/body wash

**Fidelity**  
Retirement investment services

**Folgers**  
Coffee

**Ford**  
Truck/van

**General Electric**  
Large kitchen appliance

**Hilton**  
Resort

**Home Depot**  
Home improvement store

**Kellogg's**  
Cold cereal

**Kraft**  
Salad dressing

**Listerine**  
Mouthwash

**Lysol**  
Bathroom cleaner

**Maytag**  
Washer/dryer

**MetLife**  
Life insurance

**Milk-Bone**  
Pet treats

**NyQuil**  
Cold and flu remedies

**Olay**  
Antiaging skin care

**Purina**  
Cat food

**Purina**  
Dog food

**Quaker**  
Hot cereal

**Silk**  
Nondairy milk

**Tide**  
Laundry detergent

**Toyota**  
Hybrid/electric car

**Toyota**  
Car

**Toyota**  
SUV/crossover

**Tylenol**  
Headache/pain reliever

**Verizon**  
Wireless provider

**Visa**  
Credit card

**Visine**  
Eye-care product

**Walmart**  
Mass merchandiser retail store

**Weight Watchers**  
Weight-loss system

Because fostering trust and elevating the national conversation have long been central to *Reader's Digest's* values, the magazine has been creating surveys over the past few years to measure the country's mood. This year's survey, conducted in November 2017 with the survey company Ipsos, asked Americans the hypothetical question about the lost \$100. It found that our trust in people across most professions in our lives, from mail carrier to lawyer to grocery clerk, sits well below 50 percent. (The most trustworthy: the family doctor.)



"WE FELT BAD ABOUT HOW THAT MAN TREATED YOU AND WANTED TO BUY THIS FOR YOU."

for everyone else. There is no quick fix. Still, I'm convinced that Americans can choose to trust one another again. I wanted to listen to people on the front lines of the issue—people out there trying to make a difference—so I began a podcast in 2014 called *The Plural of*

Nearly half of us didn't trust next-door neighbors or coworkers. Also telling was the fact that trust levels varied by income, by race and ethnicity, and even by location in the country. That has fed the crisis, too: What may restore trust among one group might not make sense

## WHICH GROUPS HAVE FAITH IN OTHERS?

Exploring the demographic patterns in the *RD* poll

**W**hom do you trust more: a coworker or your next-door neighbor? It might depend on where you live, how old you are, or your gender. This year's *Reader's Digest/Ipsos* survey reveals a host of fascinating demographic patterns.

American adults generally trust their family doctor, but people 55 and older trust him or her far more than those under 35

(80 percent vs. 68 percent). For women overall, the most trusted person isn't the doctor but the in-laws. In general, Northeasterners trust more than Southerners do (though the differences aren't large). Wealthy people are more trusting than people earning less than \$25,000, and whites are more trusting than Hispanics or African Americans.

No matter their earn-

ings or ethnicity, one group stood out for their confidence: readers of this magazine. The survey found that folks who read us regularly have far more faith in others overall than nonreaders of the magazine. Can the *RD* trust factor become contagious? We hope so. That would make us proud.

For more data from our survey, go to [URLTKT](http://URLTKT).

*You* ([pluralofyou.org](http://pluralofyou.org)), for which I've interviewed dozens of trusting individuals about what motivates them.

One of the most impressive people I've met is Pardeep Kaleka of Milwaukee. Kaleka's father founded the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in nearby Oak Creek. On August 5, 2012, a white supremacist shot and killed six members at the temple, wounded four others, and then turned his gun on himself. Kaleka's father was among the dead.

Kaleka and the congregation could have easily shut out the world after the incident. Instead, they founded Serve 2 Unite ([serve2unite.org](http://serve2unite.org)), a non-profit that conducts talks and workshops on trust and unity in schools and communities across the country.

"We know the shooter wanted us to be isolated and miserable," Kaleka told me. "To battle that, we needed to get out into the broader community."

In other words, we need to learn to talk to one another,

even in uncomfortable circumstances—or, perhaps, especially then.

**B**ACK AT the grocery store, my wife and I reached our flustered cashier. I grabbed a bottle of water from a nearby cooler and handed it to her. We learned her name was Beth.

"We felt bad about how that man treated you and wanted to buy this for you," I said.

Beth's face lit up, and we talked as she scanned our items. She told us she had been working that evening

through severe foot pain and would be having surgery later that week. We wished her well in her recovery, and she thanked us as we left.

Those are the balancing acts, the moments of countering social and emotional pain with healing, that will add up to restore trust across the United States. You can start that pattern in someone else's life, even in a place as ordinary as the neighborhood grocery store. **R**



JOSH C. MORGAN is a data analyst and sociologist living in Baltimore. He also hosts the podcast *The Plural of You*.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MCKENDRY

## LINDA: WHAT A PRETTY NAME!

In 1947, after Jack Lawrence's song "Linda" hit No. 1, 5.5 percent of the girls born in the United States were named Linda. Since then, no baby name has become so popular so quickly. Oddly enough, the Linda who inspired the song (the daughter of Lawrence's lawyer) became even more famous in 1969 when she married a guy named Paul McCartney.