

THE RIGHTEOUS MIND
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS

~ *Lindsay Bates*

Come, let us worship together.

Let us open our minds to the challenge of reason,
open our hearts to the healing of love,
open our lives to the calling of conscience,
open our souls to the comfort of joy.

Astonished by the miracle of life,
grateful for the gift of fellowship,
confident in the power of living faith,
we are here gathered:

Come, let us worship together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Righty and Lefty: A Tale of Two Feet

~ *Rachel Vail*

READING

from *“Political Empathy”* (excerpts)

~ *Doug Muder*

This reading is excerpted from a recent article in the UUWorld magazine, an article called “Political Empathy” written by columnist Doug Muder.

In the summer of 2009 both my parents were in decline, so I spent much more time in my hometown than I had in many years. One Saturday afternoon I stole an hour to relax in my favorite local coffee shop, a converted bank across the street from the town square []. Some kind of commotion was happening over there, but I ignored it.

Then I spotted Jeff, my best friend from grade school. He was grabbing a coffee to take with him to the event. “What was going on?” I wondered. And then our conversation became unexpectedly difficult. It was a rally for the brand new tea party, he told me, knowing I would disapprove. I did not comment, and we parted clumsily, without the usual promises to get together when we had more time. I finished my latte while staring at the bank’s high ceiling, imagining all the things I could have said and feeling happy with none of them.

Jeff and I never did agree on politics, all the way back to that Wednesday morning in second grade when I gloated over Lyndon Johnson’s landslide victory. (He paid me back when Nixon squeaked past Humphrey four years later.) But somehow none of that stopped us from playing basketball together or building snow forts or riding our bikes across the bridge (without our parents’ permission) to buy fireworks in Missouri. Even now, it doesn’t stop us from having dinner together when I find myself back in town.

But it does stop us from talking about national issues or any topics that might lead us to national issues. We just don’t know how. []

All over the country, [] there are people like me and Jeff who would rather not: colleagues at the office, cousins who see each other at holiday dinners, college buddies who reconnect through social media. Not wanting to paint or be painted in demonic colors, we learn to tread

cautiously lest we stray onto one of those ice-covered hillsides that slope downward towards bitter conflict.

Democracy shouldn't be like this. Those moments when long-parted paths merge and old friends compare their experiences – those should be our society's most productive conversations, the moments when we map the elephant we have each been blindly examining.

Lately I have begun to fantasize about a different kind of discourse. What if, rather than learning to demonize people who hold different views, we learned how to picture them positively and empathize with them, even if we continued to believe they were wrong?

[] If I had more tools and more confidence in them, maybe Jeff and I could just talk freely and see what came up. "Why the tea party?" I might ask, hoping (rather than dreading) that the conversation might go somewhere that surprised me.

MESSAGE

The Righteous Mind

~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

Homework...yuk! That's how the character Lucy begins the "Book Report" song in the musical, *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Book reports, yuk!

The Peanuts gang is a 100 word book report on "Peter Rabbit". Of course each of them has a very different take. Lucy is above doing a book report, sees it as stupid, and uses a list of vegetables in the garden, along with the conclusion, 'the very, very, very, very, very, very end,' in order to reach her 100 words. Dare I admit that I pay an exorbitant amount of attention to the word count of my sermons...though I am usually cutting words, not adding them.

Shroeder, the artist/musician, struggles to find meaning in something so banal as Peter Rabbit, and essentially does a book report on Robin Hood, tying it to the assignment with pretty dubious associations between the Prince of Thieves, his men, his chasers, and the behaviours of a rabbit. I understand Shroeder. Forget the assignment...I'd rather talk about what interests me.

Linus, predictably, is overly academic, reporting on the psychological and sociological messages imbedded in the story, and is so ethereal as to render his report both inaccurate and meaningless. I hope there's not too much of Linus in today's message.

Charlie Brown...ah poor Charlie...is distracted and procrastinates...worrying about how it's affecting him...how his stomach feels...that he hasn't had enough sleep, enough time...oh, the pressure. Ultimately he makes a sandwich, and never writes the report. Yep, of all these characters, I most identify with Charlie Brown.

Except that I am ready this morning to 'turn in' my book report on "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion" by Jonathan Haidt. (pronunciation?) Of course, this isn't really a book report, because...that's not the point. The book is provocative, and it led to very interesting discussion in the non-fiction bookclub, but as one of my seminary professors used to say about any analysis or critique...SO WHAT? Why does it matter to us? What meaning does Haidt's book contain for us? For me? For you?

First, an important disclaimer. Since I am working so directly with Haidt's writing, many of the phrases, even some sentences, I use today, come directly from his book.

If this WERE a book report, perhaps I would do some analysis of how Haidt arrived at his conclusions. Since this is NOT a book report, I'm going to share some of his main points, and ask you to accept them as valid (at least for the next 20 minutes or so), so that we can spend the majority of

our time together exploring what the implications might be for us. You can always read the book if you want the background. (BTW, several people have made contributions to this sermon by sharing what most impressed them in Haidt's book.)

Here are his main points, or at least the ones that I want to lift up today...and believe me, there are many possible sermons in this book.

We needn't go very far from the title to find Haidt's first point. Human beings, he says, are hard-wired to be moral. As moral beings, we are necessarily led to judgment of others, and judgment of others leads directly to righteousness. Therefore, being self-righteous is the normal human condition...for all of us...and not just those of us not in this room.

Further, we're each born with a first draft of morality already written on our minds. We come into the world with a certain preparedness to learn morality. It is the impact and influence of family and friends, where we live, our life experience - that forms each particular 'righteous mind'.

Second, I offer Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory. It might help you here to know Haidt's definition of morality. He says: "Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate self-interest and make cooperative societies possible."(314) Morals are all about how we behave in the world and get along with one another.

His research shows that at least six moral foundations have developed, across cultures, to meet adaptive challenges as humans evolved. At least six; so there's more to morality than 'do no harm' and 'play fair'....the two foundations that are most often exhibited early in life.(216) He describes these moral foundations as components on a matrix...each with a polarity (which discloses the adaptive challenge from which this moral arose...along with current triggers, characteristic emotions and relevant virtues that accompany that moral foundation.

I won't go into all of that, but briefly, five of these moral foundations are:

1. Care, and its polarity, harm - which we understand as care for the weak or the imperative to have compassion - to heal and not to harm.
2. Fairness/cheating, or essentially the golden rule - a moral that has made it possible for us to work together and to partner
3. Loyalty/betrayal - which probably developed from our long history of tribal living. Those who hold this is a high moral value will go so far as to hurt those who betray their group
4. Authority/subversion - which is about social rules, agreement on rank, and respect. This can be about maintaining order just as much as it is about oppression of the weak by the powerful.
5. Sanctity/degradation - any ideology that says that we contain virtue by controlling what we do with or put into our bodies...cleanliness, bacteria, organic food, kosher, etc.

What's important is that we are all (with few exceptions) moral, but we have different tuners...we're tuned into different combinations of channels and we play them at different volumes...or to use another analogy, we each have different sets of taste buds, or taste receptors, which seem to respond to only certain things.

The third concept I want to share is that human cognition and decision-making involve two different systems. Haidt likens these two systems to a rider and an elephant (in case you were wondered about the picture on the order of service.) The rider is our controlled cognition processes, including reason, and the elephant is our automatic cognition processes, including initial responses, emotion and intuition (53).

The elephant almost always wins. In truth, our rational minds function in service to the elephant...in service of our intuitions/first responses. Reason's job, says Haidt, is to be the full-time press secretary for the elephant. (92) Therefore, it's a delusion to think that we can be dispassionate, rational beings. I think it's safe to say that we react first and most strongly out of where we are on the moral matrix.

Fourth, human beings are groupish. Haidt seems to bridge the selfish/altruistic debate in the theory of evolution by saying that human nature is mostly selfish, but that we have a groupish overlay. We're both, simultaneously. Among individuals, competition rewards selfishness; in groups, competition favors team players. In this duality, we are one-of-a-kind freaks of nature. (229)

Finally, Haidt concludes that morality binds and blinds. When people share morals, they become a team, and being a team shuts down open-minded thinking. When a group makes something sacred, they lose the ability to think clearly about it. So groups often get trapped in a moral matrix and become blind to the existence, or coherence, of other ways of thinking and being.

So there are some of the major hypothesis in Haidt's book...we are hard-wired to be righteous; we don't all rely on the same combinations of morals; our emotions and initial reactions drive our actions and decisions far more than does reason; we form groups that help us to cooperate and work together; and our moral positions both bind us with like-moral-ed people and this 'binding' in groups can blind us to the righteousness of others.

So what? I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with you about people you don't understand, or who don't understand you. Why can't we all just get along? It's the fundamentalist parents, or the homophobic brother-in-law, or the pipeline-supporting cousin, or the pro-life marchers, or, or...as Haidt's subtitle infers, we as people, good people, moral people, righteous people, are much divided by politics and religion. That's a hard reality, and yet we want to get along.

Here's a fascinating bit. Haidt found that there is a difference between conservatives and progressives (are those two words okay to use? Haidt is American, and often conflates conservative/progressive with Republican/Democrat), but in any case, whatever words we use, there exist polarities of religious and political views that simply see things differently.

Imagine here in front of you a large graph...with the horizontal scale running from left, extreme progressive, to right side, extreme conservative. On the vertical scale, a scale of 1-5, we have how relevant or important a moral value is. Remember that list of morals? Care and fairness follow a pretty similar path...they rate above a three in relevance on the left, and fall only slightly as we move to the right. Authority, loyalty and sanctity, also follow similar paths, and have their highest values (but still only mid-range) on the right, and fall slightly as they move to the left.

What this means is that on the most conservative side, all five moral foundations have an almost equal relevance, but on the extreme progressive end, care and fairness rank pretty high, and the other three are far below. Progressives respond and speak primarily to only two of these moral foundations; conservatives 'get' all five. Polarization occurs, in part, because progressives tend to have difficulty seeing how authority, loyalty and sanctity can even be articulated in ways that are moral. And, it seems obvious that conservatives must see those on the left as simply having fewer values.

The point is, it's hard to change an elephant's mind. My elephant will respond, and move toward, those things that it has 'taste receptors' for...be that sanctity, or loyalty; and your elephant will do likewise, be that care or fairness. How can we help an elephant develop a taste for something a bit

different, to be willing to try something new on their elephant menu? It seems that in order to accomplish many things in our world, in order to swing votes and get support for measures that we support, in order to respect and be respected, we have to change minds. Do we all need to get trained as elephant handlers? Maybe so.

You say, Haidt contends, and this is a big 'so what', that if we want to change people's minds, debate or reasoned argument is not going to work. If we want to influence people, we have to learn to talk to their elephant. (57) They have to respect us, which often is about communicating from a place of trying to understand each other's moral choices and preferences. In the end, people's minds are changed by being with people they respect, and then, through those people's choices and examples, experiencing difference, and seeing other possibilities. (79)

Key to this? Seeing how self-righteous we can be, and tempering it with some humility. If we are self-righteous in our standing, and judge the other as wrong, even bad, there's no hope of dialogue, no hope of growing respect, no hope of change. And, for those of us with a liberal/progressive bent, that means we must be open to a broader range of moral language.

Here's another big 'so what'. Groups play a huge role in our lives. Being able to form cooperative groups has been foundational in human social development. Groups provide both moral and social capital...capital that makes things happen. (338-341) We're happiest when we're in groups...especially with people who act, look, sound, think like us. And, being part of groups, like this one, is both satisfying and important in the development of our individual moral matrices.

But, groups also allow us to keep deluding ourselves about our self-righteousness. When everyone in a group shares a common understanding of how things were supposed to be done, we feel a flash of negativity when any individual violates those expectations. (239) We tend to cluster and isolate as a group, identify as us vs them, which breeds distrust of others. So, groups are always in danger of being blinded by our own insular self-righteousness.

This, for me, is really informative in our efforts in becoming more welcoming, and more diverse, as a community. The presence of diversity makes it hard for us to bond with one another, because we don't immediately recognize our likenesses. But the good news is that when we see or hear about things other people do, in a environment of respect, our elephant begins to lean. (83) So, if you put individuals together in the right way, a way that allows us to build respect and act civilly, then we can use our reasoning powers to challenge the claims of others, so that together, we build an open and evolving social system that values reason and difference.(105) Sounds like the ideal UU community to me!

But here's something to ponder. Generally speaking, cultures that value community place high relevance on the three morals that progressives pay little attention to. This might be our growing edge. We know that, as a rule, Unitarians are anti-authoritarian, value freedom and autonomy over loyalty, and here, we chafe at the kosher rules, which are all about sanctity. Might increasing our understanding of these values help us to strengthen community? Might it improve our ability to welcome others? I'm not suggesting that we have to agree or change our morals, but that we listen and be open to understand.

The ability to put ourselves in another's shoes is the most morally advanced exercise we can do. What I LOVE about the Right and Lefty story today is the acknowledgement that two different feet, with different sensitivities and desires, walk the same body. In some part, that simple recognition is enough...to know that we are all part of the human family. But, when we do want to move in one

direction, when we do want to wear the same shoes, we've got to talk it out, and find ways to understand one another.

It's sort like the Peanuts gang. Each of them takes a different approach to doing a book report. Lucy bows to authority by following the rules to the letter, but misses being able to say something real and personal. Schroeder shows his loyalty to a higher art, a better story, and in so doing disrespects Peter Rabbit. Linus gets so stuck in the role of rider, that he totally disregards the elephant in the room. And Charlie Brown? Well, don't we just love the underdog? Our care and fairness receptors get all lit up. He's the guy for us.

And yet, and yet, (it is a musical after all) they ultimately sing a really sweet and well-crafted quartet together, in which each different voice is heard. May it be so with all of us.

READING *For Religion to be Significant* ~ Mark L. Belletini

For religion to be significant, it has to provide more than the comforts of community. It also had to provide opportunities for deepening, for what I call spiritual growth, and for the casting down of false images of stereotypes, which hurts us all. A good religion has to open us to the real diversity of our modern world. For our work as liberal religious people is not to be competitive with others, and to find ways to supersede others, but rather to find ways to supersede ourselves, to grow beyond our limitations and our constrictive boundaries, each and every one of us. Diversity, you see, must not end up being some sort of feel good slogan, a word we keep in our back pocket to make us feel like we're broad minded. Diversity is a gift. But it cannot be a gift... unless it is received. It is only received when there are hands and hearts open enough to receive it. And the opening of fists into welcoming hands and welcoming hearts is our spiritual work.

CLOSING WORDS ~ Charles Howe (*adapted*)

We lit our chalice to affirm that new light is ever waiting to break through to enlighten our ways;

That new truth is ever waiting to break through to illumine our minds;

And that new love is ever waiting to break through to warm our hearts.

As we extinguish this flame, we transfer its light to our hearts, where we will carry it with this prayer....that we may we be always open to this light, and to the rich possibilities that it brings us.

Amen.