

Call to Worship

The events of this past week have reminded me of a story from the New Testament. In Matthew 21, just after Jesus arrives in Jerusalem on a donkey, in the last week of his life, he goes to the temple.

There he finds the traders and the money lenders, and he overturns their tables and drives them out. He said to them, ““My house will be called a house of prayer,’^[e] but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’^[f]”

¹⁴Soon after the blind and the lame came to him, and he healed them. And a crowd of children who had seen **all this** cheered and praised him. But the chief priests confronted Jesus -- “Do you hear what these children are saying?”

“Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read --

and here Jesus quotes one of the psalms of the Hebrew Bible, an ancient proverb that can be translated three ways. So I’ll just give you all the meanings . . .

“have you never read --

““From the mouths of children and infants
you, Lord, have called forth your praise’^[g]
you have established your strength
you have called forth great wisdom.”

From the mouths of our children, O God,
you have called forth great wisdom.

In the name of the youth of Parkland, Florida, I call us to Worship.

Reading:

The daughter of a white poet and a black social worker, Natasha Trethewey was born in Gulfport, Louisiana. She grew up in both Atlanta and New Orleans, and she holds an MFA from U-Mass, Amherst. Her poetry won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007, and in 2012, Natasha Trethewey was named 19th Poet Laureate of the United States.

This is a slightly abridged version of her poem, Enlightenment.

Enlightenment

BY NATASHA TRETHEWEY

In the portrait of Jefferson that hangs
at Monticello, he is rendered two-toned:
his forehead white with illumination —

a lit bulb — the rest of his face in shadow,
darkened as if the artist meant to contrast
his bright knowledge, its dark subtext.

By 1805, when Jefferson sat for the portrait,
he was already linked to an affair
with his slave.

...

The first time I saw the painting, I listened
as my father explained the contradictions:

how Jefferson hated slavery, though — *out
of necessity*, my father said — had to own
slaves; that his moral philosophy meant

he could not have fathered those children:
would have been impossible, my father said.

...

I did not know then the subtext
of our story, that my father could imagine
Jefferson's words made flesh in my flesh —

*the improvement of the blacks in body
and mind, in the first instance of their mixture
with the whites* — or that my father could believe

he'd made me *better*.

....

That was years ago.

Now, we take in how much has changed:
talk of Sally Hemings, someone asking,

How white was she? — parsing the fractions
as if to name what made her worthy
of Jefferson's attentions: a near-white,

quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave.
Imagine stepping back into the past,
our guide tells us then — and I can't resist

whispering to my father: *This is where*
we split up. I'll head around to the back.
When he laughs, I know he's grateful

I've made a joke of it, this history
that links us — white father, black daughter —
even as it renders us

other to each other.

Sermon:

What a poem, huh?

Such strong images packed with such strong feeling. Strong differences held together in tension. Differences -- Stated, given voice, made known, without judgement. A relationship so deep and so mired, so weighted with a history of suffering and its justification. And yet, despite it all a relationship intact, still whole, across difference. A relationship strong enough for humor, even yet.

What a model. I love it.

20 months ago, two Octobers ago, on the eve of the presidential election, I preached to you about the great divide in our country. I started off with a story about my sister, the police officer who feels personally attacked by my support for Black Lives Matter. Afterward, many of you came forward to tell me about rifts in your own families, about painful arguments and estrangements, about how you lie awake at night worried about our politically polarized nation.

By all measures, in the many months since then, things have just got worse. According to a nationwide Pew study, the divergence between the two parties has never been wider. For example, in June, 8% of Democrats gave President Trump a positive approval rating, whereas 88% of Republicans did. An 80% gap, that holds true even to this month.

More shocking still is Americans' view of each other.

Since 1994, the number of folks in both parties who hold **highly negative** views about the opposition has **doubled**. What's more, 36% of Republicans say that Democratic policies threaten the nation, while 27% of Democrats and view GOP policies as dangerous.

This is a huge social problem. In fact, polls show that Americans think of political polarization as our number one social problem. 86% of Americans say political conflicts are either strong or very strong. Only 65% say the same about conflicts between blacks and whites, and only 60% about conflicts between the rich and the poor.

Political polarization is our number one social problem. What are we doing about it?

Lauren Arledge and Caitlin Quattromani have been best friends for several years, two white moms in their 40s, raising their families together in Colorado, and yet they found themselves on opposing sides of the 2016 election. In a TED talk from last July, both speak about how this last year has tested their friendship.

Arledge, the liberal, tells this story:” My sons were inundated with news around this election. I was concerned they were picking up so much polarizing misinformation and growing really fearful about a Trump presidency. Then one day, shortly after the election, I was taking my sons to school, and out of the blue my younger son says, “Mom, we don’t **know** anybody who voted for Trump, right?” And I paused and I took a deep breath, and I said. “Yes, we do. The Quattromanis.” And he got this confused look on his face, and he said. “But we love them?” “Yes, we do.” And he said, “Why would they vote for him?” And Lauren Arledge says: “I remember thinking that it was really important how I answered this question, that I model the right behavior. Somehow I had to honor our own family values and yet show respect for our friends. “They think that’s the right direction for our country, I said.”

“But I don’t understand **them**,” I’ve heard people say so many times in this last year. I’ve said it myself. “Why would people vote against their self-interest? Why would they vote for candidates and policies that hurt our people and our country? Are they evil or just stupid?”

Many of our stereotypes about people who disagree with us are based on a simple misunderstanding. We believe, we **assume**, that human behavior is based in rational decision-making, that people make moral decisions based on rational thought. So when other people make what seem to us totally irrational decisions, we can’t get our minds around it. “Are they evil or just stupid?”

But here’s the thing – science is telling us that humans **don’t** make moral decisions based on rational thought. NYU social psychologist Jonathon Haidt – H-A-I-D-T-- invented the metaphor of the elephant and rider, later popularized in the book *Switch*, by the Heath brothers.

Imagine an enormous elephant, with a tiny person on top. In this metaphor, our rational thinking, our minds, are the riders, whom we **like to think** are in charge. But the elephant is so much bigger and stronger. The elephant represents our emotions – 99% of our moral decision-making, is emotional and **below the conscious level**. Most of the time, we go where the elephant takes us.

When you see it that way, you begin to understand that the opposition is not (on the whole) evil or stupid. They -- and all of us -- are motivated first and foremost by emotions, by unconscious tribalism, by moral frameworks that correspond with our deepest beliefs about human nature.

Last fall, on the TV show 60 Minutes, Oprah Winfrey travelled to Grand Rapids Michigan to interview a roundtable of voters. Pollsters had chosen 7 people who voted for Trump and 7 people who didn't. There was the usual rancorous disagreement, along party lines.

Then, six months later, 60 Minutes producers were about to gather another similar group when they found out something startling. The original group has stuck together, After the taping, those 14 strangers formed their own private Facebook group and continued interacting, talking every day, both about politics and their lives. Then they started socializing. One of them, a hockey coach, invited them all to a game. Another invited them to the shooting range.

The 14 still disagree, about everything. They openly and continuously disagree about taxes, about Trump's fitness for office, about sexual harassment. But they keep talking.

Lauren, a liberal in the group, characterized her experience: I don't have access to Trump voters outside of this group. So this group has helped me to understand perspectives that I would not have had access to. And so I've been able to take that out to my friends, and they say, "Hey, I really learned a lot." That's huge. Because everybody wants to feel understood, but it's **quite a different thing to want to understand.**

Social psychologist Jonathon Haidt, who I mentioned earlier, has proved one of the pioneers of the growing field of Moral Foundations Theory. It holds humans around the world base their moral decision-making on the same five foundational concepts – care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. Liberals the world over tend to focus on just the first two foundations – Liberals base roughly 70% of their moral arguments on an ethic of caring for people and/or avoiding harm. The other 30% of liberal morality focuses on an ethic of fairness and/or not cheating. The other three moral foundational concepts play almost no part at all in liberal decision-making. They just don't exist.

As you might have guessed, those other foundations make a big difference in the life of conservatives. Yes, conservatives also attend to care and fairness, but they balance that with concerns about loyalty to their group or community, obedience to systems of authority and hierarchy, and the concept of sanctity and/or purity.

So there are literally three different kinds of morality that liberals can't see, they can't access them for purposes of persuasion or debate. It's a huge blindspot.

For most of the last 50 years, liberals and democrats have been trying to convince voters either by appealing entirely to reason, the tiny rider on top the elephant, which we know doesn't

work, or, when they do address emotion, they appeal only to the two moral concepts available to them – care and fairness. Which have a limited appeal.

A psychologist named Robb Willer tried this experiment. He created an essay promoting progressive environmental policies by invoking **not** the classic liberal values but using the conservative value of sanctity/purity. “Keeping our forests, drinking water, and skies pure is of vital importance,” it said. And “We should regard pollution of places we live to be disgusting.”

It worked. Conservatives who read this essay became significantly more supportive of progressive environmental policies. They were even significantly more likely to say they believed in global warming, even though that essay never mentioned that at all. But it re-framed environmental issues as a whole as moral issues, corresponding to a conservative moral value that they hold dear.

That’s the secret weapon of my title today. Learning how to access the opposition’s moral frames. If you’re a liberal, you might want to practice that.

Jonathon Haidt, however, has a different project. He has stepped outside the labels entirely, to serve as interpreter.

“It’s like we’re all living in the matrix, as in the movie, the Matrix,” explains Haidt. “Each moral community is a separate matrix, a huge consensual hallucination. If you’re within the blue matrix, it’s a complete reality. The other side are troglodytes, racists, the worst people in the world. And You have all the facts to back that up. But Somebody in the next house over is living in a different matrix, and they see a completely different set of facts.”

This rings true for me. For every political conversation I’ve attempted with my family members, for every point I could make about whatever candidate or policy, they hold equally factual-seeming counterpoints. Based in deeply held values like loyalty and authority that I don’t share or understand. We are living in separate matrices. And it’s painful.

What to do?

First, hard as it is, no fun as it is, we need to dial down the demonization, on all sides, so we can find common ground and build a government that works. Lots of candidates, companies and special interests profit off the distress we are causing each other, but it hurts us all, especially the kids. Like that mom in Colorado we need to model better behavior.

Research shows us – most of us **on all sides** are not just evil or stupid. We’re all just people trying to make sense of our worlds. We’re a bunch of dumb elephants.

“The truth is,” says Haidt, “liberals and conservatives are right. There are a lot of threats to this country and each side is constitutionally incapable of seeing them all. We need each other. Humans have evolved the ability for complex moral reasoning because we need it, in order to

build and maintain our complex societies. All of these perspectives are necessary.” But we need to be able to hear each other.

Because, in the words of Lauren from Grand Rapids, everybody wants to feel understood, but it's **quite a different thing to want to understand.**

Rebuilding the common ground doesn't mean we change our positions, sell out and move to the middle. Again, that's a knee-jerk oversimplification.

No, the goal is to **live into complexity**, to stand in constructive disagreement.

The goal is self-differentiation, which is part of spiritual maturity. This is understand yourself, your identity, your mission with such clarity that it isn't threatened by others, that you can stand in conflict without rising anxiety, and therefore listen with humility. This is maturity.

It is to stand, like Natasha Trethewey, before that two-toned portrait of Jefferson at Monticello, to balance the darkness and light, the high ideals and the deep tragedy. Because we have no choice. **We ARE all “both and.”**

Which is why I wrong to refer to weapons in my sermon title today – using war metaphors is part of the culture of demonization.

As Dr King and Gandhi demonstrated, nonviolent resistance is not ultimately about winning battles or defeating our enemies. The nonviolent resister, the spiritually mature person, seeks to defeat evil ideas -- not people.

The true goal is out beyond “winning.” It is **reconciliation**. It is turning our enemies into friends.

There was a time when Americans were even more divided than they are today. Long before the advent of polling. And we can all draw from it as a shared moral framework.

On March 4, 1861, when Abraham Lincoln rose to take his first oath of office, seven states had already seceded from the union. In his speech, on the eve of war, Lincoln outlined a clear moral stand – the Union was undissolvable, he said, and any attack against it would be met with force.

Even then, however, at the 11th hour, Lincoln didn't demonize or vilify. He both took a strong stand **and** he invited all sides, once again, to common ground, to moral engagement.

Over the next weeks, as we march and rally, let these words from Lincoln ring in our ears. Let us remember that is possible, advisable, mature, to stand for own beliefs without vilifying others, to differentiate and speak our moral own values while working to open up the common ground.

Looking out on the crowd that day, Lincoln said:

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not **be** enemies.
Though passion may have strained
it must not break
our bonds of affection.
The mystic chords of memory,
stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave
to every living heart and hearth-stone
all over this broad land,
will **yet** swell the chorus of the Union,
when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Endquote

Godspeed, better angels, godspeed.

Amen.