

Why We Divide Up on Religion (and so much else)

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June 23, 2013

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I think it's pretty fair to say that no matter how we may have voted in the recent Provincial elections a lot of people in BC woke up the following morning, heard the results, and experienced quite a shock. Here are some questions: What do we do when our team loses? Or wins, for that matter? How do we feel about the other side, and ourselves, and what do we think about the motives that lead people to vote the way they do and support a particular party and its views about the way things are and should be for this Province and our nation?

We may comfort ourselves and try to explain the outcome of why X number of our fellow citizens voted the way they did by thinking they were just stupid or lazy: too easily swayed by negative ads, blinded by religion or greed, or fear of change—isn't that how political progressive types may look at conservative voters? And conservatives, looking across the divide?—what they may see is a bunch of losers—hopelessly naïve about the hard realities of economics, blind to the perils of big government, and corrosively permissible about social entitlements and behaviours, public and private, that flaunt prudence and restraint.

And to complicate matters, what about religious identities and loyalties? We may think and feel, all things considered, this is the best possible place for *us* to experience spiritual and ethical growth and meaning. We value the openness and diversity of our faith, among others goods. And then, looking at others, do we wonder: *what are they thinking?*: submitting to irrational creeds, patriarchy, mindless ritual, and scriptures chock-a-block with archaic myths and confusing appeals to love *and* violence, compassion *and* intolerance? And those on the other

side of the religious divide— if they give us any thought at all—they may weigh us up and wonder: how can *you* have a credible religion without an authoritative creed, without scripture, compelling ritual, and the disciplined sacrifice of appetites and resources for the sake of ordered worship, and for the transmission of tradition and communal harmony?

And on and on it goes: and so we fight our culture wars; we talk about clashes of civilizations; our politics are turning into a hyperpartisan circus; media shock jocks declaim, traduce and sneer; and income inequality stalks the land—and great yawns the abyss, with god knows what consequences.

How do we account for the roots of our divisions; from whence do our moral judgments and behaviours arise—those that aid and abet the taking up of one side or the other? And is it possible to conceive and achieve effective means of reframing our common dilemma and bridging the deep fissures in the body politic and religious?

So many questions. So little time. But first, a story:

In 1984, our young family house-sat for a professor who was out-of-town on a research sabbatical. It was a mixed race, upper middle class neighbourhood adorned with leafy, tree-lined streets and well-built single family houses. A mayoral election was underway, and it was clear from the uniformity of lawn signs and the climate of opinion all around us that “everyone” was going to be voting for the politically liberal, Afro-American candidate. The radio stations we listened to, the newspapers and magazines we read confirmed our deeply held partisan outlook. I remember this clearly: it seemed self-evident who would come out the winner in the election—it was our guy. But boy, were we wrong. And I still recall the uncomprehending shock when the way-conservative other fellow won the election.

What happened is that we lived in a moral matrix, a self-reinforcing feedback loop, a bubble—a matrix just like the one in the movie where our consensual reality, the one we took for granted as how things were and must be, turned out to be something altogether different. How to escape from what binds and blinds?—let’s take the red pill like the movie character Neo and go down the rabbit hole for a few minutes and get out of our matrix, shall we?

The person offering the red pill and the way out of our own moral matrix is the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt whose recent book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* gave me a lot to think about and the subject for these remarks. Haidt and his colleagues have surveyed a vast array of studies about human behavior from disciplines that include the likes of cultural anthropology, social variations and morality, neuroscience and evolutionary psychology in order to account for the whence from and where to of the moral inclinations and behaviours of peoples and cultures around the world.

He summed up the results of their findings by using three metaphors: the *first central metaphor* is that our mind is divided, like a *rider on an elephant*, and the rider’s job is to serve the elephant. That is, our intuitions come first and foremost—they’re the elephant, and our strategic reasoning, the rational mind comes second—that’s the rider. Here’s an example:

Let’s say you go to Florence, Italy, with a friend, and while in Florence, you drag your friend to see Michelangelo’s monumental statue of *David*. You know the one I’m talking about? It’s huge, gorgeous, and totally nude. You’re floored by its epic grandeur and beauty. You enthuse over the statue to your friend who, much to your surprise, averts your gaze and mumbles that he’s embarrassed looking at it and really feels uncomfortable. You exit the gallery and ask Why? What’s going on? And not getting a reply, you start talking about the unparalleled skill of

the artist, the extraordinary moment of the Italian Renaissance, the quality of the Carrara marble, and so on. Not a dent. And then your friend confesses that it's the statue's full frontal nudity; he feels offended, violated somehow, and *then* he tells you he thinks it's inappropriate for something like that to be in full public view and refers to children standing there with their parents and so on.

What this story shows is something the philosopher David Hume observed almost three hundred years ago: "Reason is ... the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." People "have gut feelings—particularly about disgust and disrespect—that can drive their reasoning"—that's the elephant of our immediate, intuitive judgments; and what follows are post hoc rationalizations, the reasons we laboriously come up with afterwards to justify our feelings, our intuitive judgments—that's the puny rider atop the elephant. In answer to our friend's embarrassment, we groped for reasons to explain why we liked the statue; and when pressed, he too, after his immediate rush of feeling, laid out his own for not liking it.

You went to Italy wide open for new experiences; you went there for a change of scenery and for the whole trip to "rock our world." That's the typical stance of the liberal mind. And your friend? As the journey unfolds, you notice that *he* actually wants to eat at McDonalds, and find out that he accompanied you—if truth be told—out of loyalty and friendship; he went even to keep an eye out for you, to watch your back in a foreign country.

(The BC NDP may have thought that invoking "It's Time for Change"—was sufficient reason enough for people to vote them into office; whereas, in fact, there are a lot of people out there who are uneasy about change, and prefer the known—even if arrogant and scandal prone—to a whole new order of things. And appeals to reason in political campaigns, religion and elsewhere? Think for a second about Stephane Dion's campaign—he may have seemed eminently rational, thoughtful and compassionate to some—sufficient reason to vote for him and

his party; but the Conservatives laid down their intuitive trump card: an Anglophone-challenged, not-quite Canadian, tree hugging, ninety-eight pound weakling egghead. How do you compete for hearts and minds when that's lined up against the Conservative ace of spades: the Charles Atlas party—martial, monarchical, resource extractive, the no-nonsense adult in a world of crazies?)

I think we intuitively know why we are Unitarians and gather here; but consider the difficulties we have sometimes rationally explaining to our friends, family and colleagues this religion's compelling appeal to us. Rev. Lovejoy of *The Simpsons* television show, however, has us clearly weighed up in the balance and finds us very wanting indeed. When he offers Lisa Simpson a "Unitarian Sundae" at the Ice Cream Festival put on by his West Branch American Reform Presbylutheran church, Lisa looks at the empty bowl and complains: but "there's nothing here." To which Rev. Lovejoy replies, "*Exactly.*" (for a couple of other takes on first response intuitive judgments and second order post hoc rationalizations, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* and Thom Hartman, *Cracking the Code...*)

Intuitions are powerful things; it's that affective/mental "elephant" of ours, governed by deep and immediate feelings of disgust, joy, fear, pleasure, and the like. Everyone has them, though how we explain and give reasons for them *after the fact* varies from person to person, and culture to culture. Increasingly, neuroscientists explain it this way—we're absolutely *not* born blank slates. Imagine the brain by analogy to a book, they say; nature provides us with rough outlines waiting to be filled in during childhood and beyond. "But not a single chapter—be it on sexuality, language, food preferences or morality—consists of blank pages on which society can inscribe any conceivable set of words." Instead, writes the neuroscientist Gary Marcus, "Nature provides a first draft, which experience then revises.... 'Built-in' does not mean unmalleable; it means "*organized in advance of experience.*" (Haidt, 152-3)

Given this insight, and after working through the vast array of studies, Jonathan Haidt proposes that certain *moral* foundations are innate, and that if you link evolutionary theory with

anthropological observations, you can explain what a moral mind “organized in advance of experience” looks like, and how that first draft gets revised to produce the diversities of moralities we find across cultures and from person to person. If his first metaphor is the elephant and the rider, Haidt’s second metaphor goes like this: “*The righteous mind is like a tongue with six taste receptors.*” And the taste receptors, or foundational pillars of morality, organized in advance of experience and training go like this: (*flip chart 1*)

Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity and Liberty. Each of them has evolved along with us in response to adaptive challenges our species has encountered in nature and society down through the generations. For example: the *Care* receptor has evolved, Haidt proposes, in response to the need to care for vulnerable children and adults. It makes us sensitive to signs of suffering and need. As well, it makes us despise cruelty and compels us to want to care for those who are suffering. Note that there’s a positive and negative side to this moral receptor of ours: the flip side of care is harm—we despise cruelty and are drawn to the needs of those who are vulnerable. And so it goes for each of these moral “taste buds.” (*flip chart 2*)

Fairness is the response to the challenge of reaping the rewards of cooperation without getting exploited. It makes us want to embrace good partners who cooperate and reciprocate our good deeds, and to shun or punish cheaters (just think of those who don’t pay their fair share or shun their load of work in a congregation). *Loyalty* is all about the need to form and maintain coalitions. We trust and reward team players, and it leads us to want to hurt or ostracize those who betray the group (if you’re in a union dispute, think about how you feel when a colleague crossed a picket line). In a world full of various social hierarchies, the *Authority* receptor leads us to forge and respect relationships that will benefit us in those settings, and makes us aware of

those who disrespect the social order of things (ever been in a restaurant with a grandparent and have a chirpy young server come up and say: “hey guys; whaddya want to order?”). In a world full of pathogens, feelings for *Sanctity* arose not only in response to the omnivore’s dilemma—what to eat, what to shun—but it also leads us to invest value in symbolic objects that help bind groups together—and to be repelled by those who trash those things (you think a devout Catholic would be indifferent to an artist submerging a crucifix in a jar of urine and call it art?). And finally, there is a *Liberty* receptor, one that had evolved in groups where individuals or collectives that attempt to dominate and constrain can trigger a motivation to unite with other oppressed individuals as equals in order to resist the oppressor (ever had an authority figure tell you can’t do or read something or love someone?).

Jonathan Haidt and other moral psychologists are proposing that there are sets of innate universal, moral values shared across all cultures. He goes on to assert, given a myriad of data and studies that those human groupings—be they religious political, and cultural—that cultivate, maintain and embody most or all of these values have a competitive advantage in the public domain. And he provocatively proposes that here, liberal types are at a disadvantage. They over-rely not only on their appeals to that puny rational rider atop the passionate intuitive elephant—naively thinking, contrary to the evidence, that reason, not intuitive feelings, is in charge of the human subject.

Going further, he claims that the liberal repertoire can be prohibitively limited in its moral foundations. And he shows this in one survey and study after another, as well as recent religious and political trends and outcomes. Liberals may be great at appealing to Care and Fairness and Liberty, but Haidt points out they can be and have been tone deaf and blind to the

foundational moral receptors of Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity—and thus they lose elections, members, and influence. He's not saying that progressives have to betray themselves, their tradition and values. Rather, while remaining true to who we are and must be, surely it is within our creative capacity, as well as our traditions, to resuscitate, revalue, and reassert a moral vision and practice that uses the full range, all the receptors of that extraordinary organ, the human tongue, and thus speak and name the full range of our innate moral endowment.

I've seen progressive environmentalists find language and practices that enabled them to forge common cause with deeply conservative rural folk in order to preserve open spaces for generations to come; and each side embrace the outcome as more insightful and sustainable because of their combined contributions. We need the yin and the yang of life, even as we need the day and the night, winter and summer, female and male—seeming opposites that are in fact complementary and interdependent. Humanists and mystics, children and elders, fiscally prudent and the daring, those who revere and remind us of our five hundred year old roots and the restless who speed the shoots of the tree of our faith into skies arching over landscapes, a future we can barely imagine.

But *morality can both bind and blind*, and don't we know it,--that's Jonathan Haidt's third and final metaphor for the righteous mind. It helps forge effective solidarities—it helps truly to bring us together—but if we hive off into self-reinforcing, bubble-like moral matrices, if we hang out only with like-minded people, if we consume partisan media to the exclusion of all others, if we step up to a piano and strike only one familiar key or chord over and over—we relinquish all hope for hearing, seeing and experiencing the full blooming, aggravating, inspiring parade and possibility of our humanity.

And here, I think Unitarians actually have something to work with and offer *here* and beyond these walls, if we would but be true to ourselves, our principles and the grand array of sources that inform, provoke and inspire our living tradition.

In spite of what Rev. Lovejoy of *The Simpsons* may think, Lisa's Unitarian ice cream sundae bowl is *full, not empty*; and the ice cream in that bowl?—it will delight, astonish and refresh every taste bud—from care to sanctity to liberty—on Lisa Simpson's tongue, and ours, and countless others who will one day walk in those doors and take up the journey of their life alongside us. May we be worthy of ourselves and them, today and for generations to come.