READINGS

From “The Righteous Mind” by Jonathan Haidt

The answer to why people are divided by politics and religion is not, as some would have it, because some people are good and others evil. Instead, the explanation is that our minds were designed for groupish righteousness. We are deeply intuitive creatures whose gut feelings drive our strategic reasoning. This makes it difficult to connect with those who live in other matrices, which are often built on different configurations of the available moral foundations.
Still it’s worth giving it a try. We’re all stuck here for a while, so let’s try to work it out.

From Abraham Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address

I am loath to close. 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 battle-field 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.

SERMON

It had always seemed to me that our UU Third Principle was one of the easy ones: “We covenant to affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations,” or, in children’s terms, “We accept one another and keep on learning together.”

Easy, right? Now I’m not so sure.

Maybe it’s just because we as a nation are coming off one of the most bitter and contested weeks in some time. Circumstances surrounding the impeachment and then acquittal of the president of the United States have been difficult enough. But layer onto it a take-no-prisoners, intensely personal, partisan miasma that has turned political parties into virtual armed camps, and I begin to wonder if the idea of promoting acceptance of one another is something we can even talk about, no less aspire to.

Now, let me be clear that I’m no less caught up in all this than anyone else: I side with House Democrats in their assessment of the president’s actions, and I’m appalled by the president’s ad hominem attacks on his accusers.

still, occupying the position I do, I also wonder what this stressful time has to teach us as hopeful, compassionate people seeking to be among the builders of beloved community.
So, perhaps it is precisely the right time for us to explore what we mean and what we seek when we affirm acceptance and encouragement to spiritual growth.

If beloved community is what we seek, then acceptance is our gateway. Years ago the theologian Paul Tillich observed that most of us at one time or another have the experience of feeling estranged or separate from others. That experience can also make us feel separated from ourselves, and with this any sense of real belonging in our lives.

It's a frightening thing, and it can cause us to pull away even more. We break the cycle when we take the chance of opening ourselves to another and are received. It is, Tillich said, a moment of grace, when we come in touch with what he describes as "the origin and aim of our life," a common ground with all things in which, as he puts it, we come to know we are accepted.

Finding that ground for meeting, though, can be a challenge. How and why that is so is the subject of the work of the psychologist Jonathan Haidt. And here let me say that I am bringing Haidt's work before you at the request of UUCA member Wes Miller, who was the top bidder for the "name your sermon" offering at our community auction last fall. As it happens, Haidt's work connects nicely with our exploration of the UU Third Principle. So, here we are.

Haidt wants to be sure that we understand that the way that most people believe that we make moral decisions is mistaken. We imagine, he says, that we reach our conclusions through a process of careful reasoning. Not at all, Haidt says.

In fact, our decisions on moral questions arise from intuitions, essentially what we call gut feelings. Our reasoning steps in afterward to offer rationale for what our intuition feels to be right. We may not feel great about it.We might like to believe that our moral judgments have well-reasoned foundations. But, no.

Those impressive arguments, he says, are really "post facto" explanations intended to justify our intuitive leaps. "We do moral reasoning," Haidt says, "not to reconstruct the actual reasons why we ourselves came to a judgment; we reason to find the best possible reasons why somebody else ought to join us in our judgment."

He uses the metaphor of a rider and an elephant: The elephant is the powerful, internal source of our feelings, while the much-smaller rider is our mind's conscious, language-based processes.

"You can see the rider serving the elephant," he says, "when people are morally dumbfounded." The rider then jumps into action to demonstrate why the elephant's leaning is correct. It can be impressive to watch, but it doesn't necessarily change minds. "No matter how good our logic," he says, "it's not going to change the minds of our opponents if they're in combat mode, too."

If you want to change a person's mind on a moral or political issue, Haidt says, "talk to the elephant first." And elephants, he says, are persuadable. But to do that you need to know them. If there is affection, admiration or a desire to please, the elephant will lean toward that

person and prompt the rider to find the truth of that person's arguments. "Intuitions can be shaped by reasoning," he says, "especially when reasons are embedded in friendly conversation or an emotionally compelling novel, movie, or news story."

Haidt identifies what he calls six foundations that underlie morality for most people, essentially six taste receptors on the tongues of our righteous minds: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity and liberty.

Not all of these are priorities for all of us. Liberal minded folks, he says, tend to emphasize care and fairness over all the others, while conservatives tend to value all roughly equally. It helps explain why there is so often an awful lot of heat and little light in political debates. Two raging elephants can tear up a lot of the forest without either one making up much ground.

But Haidt suggests there can be another way. "Empathy is an antidote to righteousness,"
He says, but it's a hard path and can be slow going.

And there's another dimension that plays into all of this. In the end, morality is a function more of groups than of individuals, and groups can evolve and grow. Humans, Haidt says, have what he calls, "a hive switch." While we certainly have a drive to assert ourselves, we are also naturally drawn together, and in community we are able to find a unique joy and satisfaction: a buzzing hive where we find a home.

True happiness, he suggests, "comes from between": from what occurs in relationship. And religions like ours can be one place we find this, where we create a sense of sacredness that unites and inspires within a moral matrix that brings out the best in all.

All this is a way of saying that the acceptance we seek is rooted in our own machinery: what Haidt calls our "righteous mind." Yet, in a time of such division, how do we begin to bridge the gaps between us?

Haidt's thinking has inspired a movement calling itself Better Angels, which seeks to organize community gatherings whose goal is to bring together people across the political spectrum, for the purpose, not of changing minds but of helping participants better understand each other. Its aim, they say, is to "depolarize America."

It's an encouraging goal, but also one with many potential pitfalls. The group takes its title from the closing words of Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural, words you heard earlier that offer the notion that our divisions can be overcome by returning to what Lincoln called the "chorus of the union," once they are touched by "the better angels of our nature."

It is a felicitous phrase that is still quoted and admired. But it is easy to forget that in the end Lincoln's address failed in its aim. Most of the Southerners he sought to address were absent from the chamber, already ramping up for the Civil War. Southern newspapers denounced it as

a fraud, and five weeks after the speech Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and we were off.

That history serves as a sobering reminder of just how daunting the work is of taming our elephants. If we envision depolarizing America as simply urging people to calm down and make nice, we will fail.

Nor does this mean that accepting one another is a matter of compromising on our principles. There's a reason why our elephants are raging, and it matters.

Yet, it is also true that all this raging also has the effect of separating us from each other and even from ourselves, from the gentle, loving soul within that seeks harmony, union. Amid all that raging is also a lot of grief, and with that grief, sadness.

We remember Haidt's observation that empathy can be an antidote to righteousness. It gives us a way to talk to the elephant in language it understands. We don't give up our intellectual integrity when we acknowledge the fears and hopes that inform our opponent's arguments as well as our own.

This is the kind of spiritual growth that our third principle points us toward, how we keep on learning together. Without question it is a rocky road, and it needs time and patience.

That's why we need communities like this one to support us as we do this deep digging, as we gain clarity on those things that we can't compromise, what uncertainties we need to be humble about, and how we can open our hearts and widen the circle of love.

If we succeed we just might become part of a process that will bridge what divides us and find our own wholeness, while embracing all the living.