FUSIT Spiritual Journey Archive Project: Summer Sermons, 2022

2. Faces in the Crowd: Thoughts on Interpersonal Connections in the Face of Global Division

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Reading:

Taken from an interview with Allen Buchanan on his book *Our Moral Fate: Evolution and the Escape from Tribalism.* Found at https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/our-moral-fate-allen-buchanan-on-escaping-tribalism/ https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/28/opinion/coping-climate-war-happiness.html

Tribalism is much worse than disagreement, even deep disagreement. If I disagree with you, I may still treat you with respect, listen to what you have to say, and try to bargain and compromise — to meet in the middle. With tribalism, you regard those you disagree with as not just wrong but as either incorrigibly stupid and misinformed or irredeemably corrupt, insincere, and even evil. You disregard the content of the person's views because you dismiss the person as not worthy of being listened to or engaged with. At the extreme, this amounts to dehumanizing the Other; because we think that humans are reasonable and can be reasoned with. When you exclude someone from the community of reasonable beings, you dehumanize them.

He goes on to describe how we are capable of both tribalism and inclusion and that the direction we take is a function of social environment. We have to think hard about the features of social environments that either trigger tribalism or encourage more inclusive attitudes toward those we disagree with. To a large extent this means tweaking institutions so that they give us incentives to listen, to bargain, to compromise. One thing individuals can do is resist the temptation to occupy belief silos — to interact only with people who share their cultural and political views. The events of recent weeks have been really tough. One after another, things I really care about – my bodily autonomy as a woman, reducing the number of guns on our streets, the imperative to fight climate change – all of these are being opposed by people in positions of power with support from many within our country. And I think, "What is WRONG with these people?!" Buchanan describes tribalism as "regarding those you disagree

with as not just wrong but as incorrigibly stupid and misinformed or irredeemably corrupt, insincere, and even evil." Part of me says, yes – that is exactly what I think!
My earliest associations with tribal thinking go back to the Cold War. I was raised in an environment where Communists - Russians in particular - felt like an evil force motivated by our destruction. I can feel echoes of that now with threats to my world order that feel every bit as existential as a Russian invasion. In such a scenario tribal thinking feels justified - so what's the problem? For me, anger and even rage are justified, but what I'm less comfortable with are my feelings of contempt. Contempt is defined as "the feeling that a person or a thing is beneath consideration, worthless, or deserving scorn." For me, contempt isn't a good feeling and it doesn't motivate me toward constructive behavior. Additionally it is completely counter to the values I strive to hold, be it our first principle to honor the worth and dignity of others or to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Historically, our first principle grew out of a resistance to the Calvinist idea of predestination – the belief that some people are irretrievably condemned to Hell. I may not believe in hell, but there are times that our cultural and political divide feels pretty close to the Calvinist world view of good vs evil.

Audette Fulbright, minister at the UU church in Roanake, VA, speaks of the first principle as the ability to look on others with "eyes of compassion". Not approval nor necessarily tolerance of specific actions but rather the challenge to look upon others as human beings with unique stories and as deserving of empathy as ourselves. It's hard, but I believe this is where the stories come in.

I don't know how many of you heard Elton Hall's sermon two weeks ago but I really liked his analogy of the rose. You can call a flower a rose but there is so much you do not know of its particulars. And extending the metaphor of the rose, there is so much depth and complexity that a name alone can never convey. My own experience of gaining empathy through stories is rooted in years spent in academic research labs.

In a molecular biology lab you spend a lot of time sitting around. Waiting for the DNA to digest. Waiting for proteins to separate. Waiting for the centrifuge to stop spinning. Much of this time is spent with lab mates who are also waiting and there is opportunity for a lot of casual conversation. When I started my PhD at Cornell, my lab mates were from China, Taiwan, Ethiopia, and Spain. During my post-doctoral research at Purdue, my lab mates were Chinese, Pilipino, South African, German, Pakistani, and Russian. Of the Russians there was Mischa Ponamarev who was young, gay, newly graduated from Moscow State University, and rapidly shedding the trappings of his Soviet childhood. There was Lev Krishtalik, an elderly Jewish theoretician who was barely surviving in post-Soviet Russia and who visited whenever the head of our lab could procure money to bring him over. And there was Stas Zhakarov, with whom I worked most closely. It's been many years since I've done bench science and I've forgotten most of the techniques, but stories shared by my lab mates are something I continue to carry with me. Some of these stories I shared in a 2014 sermon reflecting on the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Fifteen to twenty years older than I, Stas had been an adult in the Soviet Union at the time I was fearing imminent invasion by the communists. And yet during long hours of mundane storytelling, waiting for data, in the car driving to Biophysical Society meetings, and co-authoring papers, I learned some of the multi-hued threads of his life experience: deep affection for his cultural heritage; the joys and satisfaction to be found within the constraints of Soviet rule; the talents of his grandmother from whom he would return with cured sausages and strange distilled liquor in complete violation of customs regulations. Once you have a mental picture of someone's grandma, it's hard to consign them to the faceless enemy horde.

In 1989 and 1990 I had felt real euphoria while listening to news coverage of the peaceful marches in Leipzig, East Germany and the fall of the Berlin wall that signaled the crumbling of the Iron Curtain. But it took these mundane chats with Stas to transform labels – Russian, Communist - into a real sense of individuality and personhood.

While at Purdue I also worked for half a year with a young woman from Karachi Pakistan and came to recognize some of the inaccurate stereotypes I had held about Muslims and Muslim women. Sufiya had never lived outside her parents' home until coming to Lafayette but she adapted to a new world quickly and resourcefully such as, finding camaraderie with students from India, and finding a kosher butcher that could provide meat that met Islamic dietary restrictions. I learned to schedule our joint experiments around her prayer times, and the head of the lab eventually stopped worrying that her head scarf would get caught in the lab equipment. Years later when I hear news from Pakistan, hers is the face I imagine.

In reading some of the academic literature about dehumanization, a recurring theme is the importance of empathy as a counteracting force. What I don't find in the academic literature is acknowledgement of how challenging the practice of empathy can be. Our casual repetition of the first principle bothers me for similar reasons. Sometime it feels like we toss it out there like any other platitude without pausing to think about what damn hard work it is. When gripped by fear and anger such as during these recent weeks, tribal thinking, contempt, and dehumanization feel so natural.

Getting to know Sufiya and Stas was really transformative for me, but as far as putting the first principle into practice, they were a piece of cake. Events threw us together, I liked them, and the negative religious and cultural assumptions I brought to the relationship evaporated like fog in the bright sun.

Much more difficult is recognition of the worth and dignity of people we don't like. And I've worked in research labs with plenty of them too. People who were inconsiderate, treated others badly, had serious anger issues…. Many of these people I <u>never</u> came to like but, sitting in the lab, I heard their stories too and I experienced moments of empathy that have stuck with me for many years. Common denominators for many "difficult" lab mates were the lack of financial security and lack of emotional support in their lives. If nothing else I came to see how much I took for granted in my own life.

Empathy can also be difficult because of the distress it brings. I frequently read about strategies for teaching children to be empathetic, but both children *and* adults need strategies for how to live with what Milan Kundera refers to as "the weight of compassion".

The author and activist Andrew Boyd writes:

> *Compassion hurts. When you feel connected to everything, you also feel responsible for everything. And you cannot turn away. Your destiny is bound with the destinies of others. You must either learn to carry the Universe or be crushed by it. You must grow strong enough to love the world, yet empty enough to sit down at the same table with its worst horrors.*

With so much injustice happening right now, the weight of compassion can feel crushing. So much easier to armor oneself with anger and contempt. It can also be satisfying and easy to retreat into simple mythologizing, thinking that my people are the good guys, that Ithaca is enlightened. If only those were true.

I'll add a final and personal challenge to affirming the worth and dignity of others. I'm not a process person. I want a certificate. Give me a degree in The First Principle so I can move on. But sadly, that doesn't seem to be how it works. Every day I find myself mentally dismissing someone based on unfounded assumptions or labels that don't accurately represent their individual experience. I am struggling to extend empathy to people who are driving me nuts. It isn't an easy path. But on the upside – that's the version of myself that I really want to be.

Closing Words:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness... What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction...And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

-- Howard Zinn