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## *Bridges & Walls*

When I was a child, I remember watching the 1939 cartoon, “Gulliver's Travels.” It was based on the first section of the classic satire by Jonathan Swift, published in 1726. Most of the cartoon's plot had to do with encounters between Gulliver and the Lilliputians, a variety of miniature humans about six inches tall. The kingdom of Lilliput was in a deadly power struggle against another nation of tiny people, Blefuscu. Like the divided village in the story of “God's Hat,” their differences were petty and superficial—on the surface.

Lately, I have really been appreciating all kinds political satire. My spouse & I have been listening to an audio version of the original *Gulliver's Travels*, which includes multiple voyages and many more adventures than have been featured in cartoon versions of the story. For example, the nation of Laputa prides itself on scientific research and inventions. Gulliver visits a laboratory testing *medical* treatments on politicians for the afflictions of greed, bribery, and corruption. In another experiment, the brains of senators are removed, divided in half, and redistributed, so that each brain ends up half liberal and half conservative. Such remedies seem utterly relevant in our own time.

A PBS News Hour feature last spring explored how American political opponents increasingly regard one another as enemies: “not just wrong, but ... malevolent.” This has gotten much worse in the past 50 years. Would you be upset if a child of yours wanted to marry someone of the other political party? In 1960, the percentage of Americans who said they felt this way was just around 5%, on both sides. Now, a third of Democrats and almost half of Republicans say they would object to such a match. The events of the past few days have laid bare the stark and deepening gap.

Given this cultural trend, how can we live in peace with coworkers, neighbors, and loved ones who vote the other way? In our communities, how can we restore the warp and weft of our tattered and torn social fabric? How can we learn to appreciate the morally sound foundations of opinions we oppose? How can we reach beyond disruptive conflict to promote peace and well being in our hearts, in our homes, in our congregations?

I spend most of my time among people whose values I embrace, but we always share our Thanksgiving table with several of our more conservative loved ones. This can be especially difficult right after an election.

I've heard a number of people question the value of maintaining any relationships across the divide. I understand the impulse to turn away in anger and hurt. Let me offer a couple of things to consider. First, that more psychic energy is spent in maintaining distance than it takes to stay in relationship—especially with family. The burden of bitterness can be exhausting to carry.

Second, if we claim the “goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,” it behooves us to do what we can to stay connected with those closest to us as well as with those in wider circles.

There are ways to avoid unpleasant confrontation and promote warm fellow feeling by focusing on common ground—however trivial it may seem. Love for our pets, anecdotes about travel, sports, complaints about traffic, and appreciation the a meal can help keep interactions positive. Perhaps you have found additional topics conducive to bridge-building conversation.

Here is another helpful practice: in conversation, we can learn to say “yes, and” rather than “yes, but.” “Yes, but...” implies a dismissal of the other person's assertion. “Yes, but” sets up two opposing sides and blocks further communication. “Yes, and” allows us to lean in and hear and acknowledge the other person, even as we hold fast to what is true for us. It moves conversation forward, makes a positive spin possible. We dance in spirals together instead of building walls between us. The full complexity of our shared experience can come to light.

Another resource for cultivating positive connections across ideological difference is “moral foundation” theory. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has identified six categories of moral judgment. These categories enable more complex understanding of people's political opinions and identities. You can go to his team's web site ([yourmorals.org](http://yourmorals.org)) and fill out a questionnaire to find out what combination of these values guides your opinions, and how your foundations compare with others who identify as liberal or conservative.

The categories are: liberty, fairness, loyalty, authority, purity, and compassion. For some people, moral value may be found distributed among all or several of these foundations; for others, one or two of them may rise above all the rest.

1. Liberty, autonomy; opposite **domination, oppression, restriction** (A new category, since I first stumbled upon this theory a few years ago)
2. Sanctity, purity, nobility, high quality; opposite **desecration, degradation, contamination**
3. Authority, hierarchy, leadership, tradition; opposite **insubordination, subversion**
4. Loyalty: belonging, patriotism, tribalism, self-sacrifice for the group; opposite **betrayal**
5. fairness, justice, proportionality; opposite **cheating**
6. Care, compassion, gentleness, nurturance; opposite **harm**

It's possible to go deep into the weeds of this theory. Each category deserves a sermon—perhaps a book—all to itself. It's interesting to compare this list with other moral guides, such as the 7 Deadly Sins or the 10 Commandments. I find these moral foundation categories helpful for engaging imagination and cultivating curiosity about the views of others. They provide a range of values to consider, beyond right and wrong. The title of Haidt's book is

*The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion.* In other words, a person who doesn't prioritize the same foundations I do is not a person *without* morals, but may prioritize different categories.

Most people I've talked to about this theory guess correctly which of the categories Jonathan Haidt found liberals most identify with... what do you think? ....

(liberty, purity, authority, loyalty, fairness, compassion)

When you think about the *other* foundations, do you find any value in them? Can this help you listen more openly to others, people you disagree with on specific issues?

Those of us who don't prioritize compassion, then, are not *without* morals: they prioritize instead fairness or authority, perhaps. I know that for some, a cheater (defying fairness) or a rule-breaker (defying authority) may be just as bad as one who causes harm.

The six categories can also help us avoid the trap of either-or thinking in our understanding of social and economic issues. In mainstream American media, every issue must be represented by voices from "both sides" in order to produce "fair and balanced" views of issues and events. Public discourse often takes the form of debate. It seems impossible to avoid heated arguing. This has the effect of creating personal enmity between the speakers and warring camps among the audience. Moreover, reducing "balance" and "fairness" to two sides—and only two sides—oversimplifies many issues to the point of distorting evidence. Reducing every issue to two sides can easily *misrepresent* a consensus of specialists. The debate on global warming has been a striking example of how common journalistic practice gets in the way of more complex problem-solving dialogue. Although there is scientific consensus, the small percentage of scientists who have reached opposing conclusions often gets equally strong representation in the media. Verbal combat makes a more *entertaining* story than complex, nuanced investigative reporting.

There will be times when the implications of one moral foundation contradict those of another. Sometimes we avoid doing harm at the expense of fairness. "Authority" is often in tension with other foundations, particularly "liberty." Sometimes, deference to one authority contradicts another—as when the king and the pope disagree, or when branches of government come into conflict. When circumstances pit our own moral foundations against each other, we find ourselves in a moral—often emotionally charged—dilemma.

President Obama models tolerance of moral complexity and emotional dissonance. I remember a 2008 speech on race relations in which he describes his grandmother:

... a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

Obama was talking not only about his grandmother, who loved her grandson deeply despite her racism, but about *his own* conflicted feelings toward her. He reminds us how commonplace—and how difficult—it is to experience profound emotional contradictions within ourselves. In order to stay in relationship with someone, we must work hard to acknowledge our contradictory feelings. Otherwise, we risk estrangement, even from someone dear to us.

The many weighty issues on our minds and hearts these days challenge us to be guided by our vision and grounded more firmly than ever in our covenant and our principles. May we, in our homes and social circles as well as our community, aspire to boundary-crossing and bridge-building for the good of all. In closing, I offer these lines from Jelalladin Rumi, an invitation to a journey toward interconnectedness, wholeness, peace, and joy:

Out beyond ideas

of wrong-doing and right-doing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,  
the world is too full to talk about.

*May it be so.*

