

“Do the Right Thing”

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26 August 2012

Reading

“Open Eyes” by Victoria Safford

To see, simply to look and see,
is an ethical act and intentional choice;
to see, with open eyes, is a spiritual practice and thus a risk,
for it can open you to ways of knowing the world
and loving it that will lead to inevitable consequences.

The awakened eye is a conscious eye, a willful eye, and brave,
because to see things as they are, each in its own truth,
will make you very vulnerable.

Think of yourself as a prism made of glass,
reflecting everything exactly as it is,
unable to exist dishonestly—
reflecting beauty where there's beauty,
violence where there's violence,
loveliness and unexpected joy where there is joy,
violation where there's violation.

*Here's the front page of the paper;
here's that seedy, gossipy conflict at your job;
here's a memory, unblurred by wishful thinking;
here's a perfect afternoon in spring,
and buds now on the trees and blackbirds in the marsh.
Here's the world, just as it is – now look!*

That kind of seeing is a choice, and it is a sacred practice.

And then there is refraction—
taking into yourself, as a prism takes in light,
the truth of what you see and hear
and transforming it somehow,
changing its direction, acting on it, rendering it somehow, anew.

That again is holy work.

The spring day, received, comes out again as gratitude
(dispersed into a spectrum);
a sorrow, yours or someone else's, fully realized and received,
not denied, not covered up, not justified or explained away, ignored—
some sorrow clearly, bravely seen is taken in, absorbed and felt,
and re-emerges, bent now into compassion.

To see clearly is an act of will and conscience.
It will make you vulnerable.

It is persistent, holy, world-transforming work.

Sermon: “Do the Right Thing”

I recently heard a story from a friend¹ about a woman
who was driving while all stressed out, as some of us can be...
in this case, late for work, talking illegally on her cell phone,
and trying to organise her many to-do lists all at the same time.

The driver in front of her stopped suddenly for a yellow light,
causing her to miss a chance to squeeze through the intersection.

She immediately began screaming in frustration, honking her horn,
and making angry gestures of an unseemly nature.
You know the kind.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap, tap, tap on her window
and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer.

He ordered her to exit the vehicle with her hands in the air.
She was stunned.

In short order, the officer arrested her,
taking her down to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted,
photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

¹ This telling of the story comes from the Rev. Julie Stoneberg, minister in Peterborough, Ontario.

After a couple of hours of waiting,
she was escorted back to the booking desk
where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

“I’m very sorry, but there’s been mistake,” he said.

“You see, I pulled up behind your car
while you were blowing your horn
and flipping off the guy in front of you.

I noticed the ‘Practice Random Acts of Kindness’ bumper sticker
and the ‘Hate is not a family value’ bumper sticker ...
and, well..., and, well, I assumed you had stolen the car!”

...I’m not quite sure there’s anything worse
than being busted for being our worst self.

Has it ever happened to you?

Have you ever been caught in one of those compromising moments
when we fall short of our own high standards—
when there’s an undeniable distance
between what we deeply value and what we actually do or say?

One of those profoundly uncomfortable moments
when the gap between our actions and our aspirations
is on full display, in all of its glory, for others to see?

It’s not always so easy in this life to “do the right thing.”
Even with a strong moral compass installed,
it’s often harder than it might seem
to actually know what the right thing is, let alone to go and do it.

Jonathan Haidt, in his book, *The Righteous Mind*,
the book that I’ve been plugging all month in this sermon series on ethics,
spends a great deal of time looking at how we make moral decisions,
how we strive to do the right thing.

As a researcher in the area of moral psychology, it’s something of a relief
to have him report that we humans are generally moral creatures.

He's found that each of us is guided by a moral code established largely through the emotional experiences of our lives, particularly early on.

He has also found that we can be keen judges of the moral codes of others. We are readily righteous—making quick and withering critiques of the morality, or the rightness and wrongness of other people.

As it turns out, it appears we humans have an astonishing capacity for self-righteousness.

And, what's more, we have an equally astonishing inability to recognise this charming trait in ourselves.

This is why we find self-righteous people so amazingly irritating.

And, truth be told, it's why others find each of us, in our own spectacular moments of self-righteousness, so downright annoying, too.

There's a delightfully instructive story told by the late great actress Bea Arthur that shows how this works.

Not so long ago, John invited his mother for dinner. And when she arrived, she couldn't help but notice how handsome John's new roommate, Michael, was.

She had long questioned John's sexuality, and over the course of the evening, as she watched the two men interact, she began to wonder if there wasn't a little something more between John and Michael than met the eye.

And John, reading his mother's thoughts, volunteered, "Look Mom, I know what you're thinking, but I assure you, Michael and I are just roommates."

Well about a week later, Michael went to John and said, "You know, ever since your mother was here for dinner, I have been unable to find that beautiful silver gravy ladle. You don't suppose she took it, do you?"

John said, "Well I doubt it, but um,

I'll write and ask her. Just to be sure.”

So he sat down and he wrote:

Dear Mom,

I'm not saying you DID take a gravy ladle from my house...
and I'm not saying you did NOT take a gravy ladle.
But the fact remains, that one has been missing
ever since you were here for dinner.

Love,
John.

A few days later John received a return letter from his mother, which read:

Dear Son,

I'm not saying you DO sleep with Michael...
and I'm not saying you do NOT sleep with Michael.
But the fact remains, that if he'd been sleeping in his own bed
he would have found the gravy ladle by now.

Love,
Mom

How easy our assumptions come.
How prone we are to certainty.

The research that Haidt and his team have done
show that human decision-making is largely driven by our emotions.

Even those of us who proudly consider ourselves to be highly rational beings
are, in Haidt's book, found to be just as emotionally based
in our decision making as everyone else.

There's no easy separation of cognition from emotion.
Our cognition—our thinking or information processing—
is steeped with emotional content,
and our emotions, even at their most visceral,
are filled with bits of cognition.

The question, as it has seemingly always been,
is which one is in charge, which outranks the other, which one drives.

For much of Western history, it's been an "either/or" question.

But, Haidt says that is not so.

It's more of a "both/and."

Haidt says there really are two types of cognition—intuition and reasoning.

Intuition is rooted in our emotions, but tends to be subtler than emotion.

Intuitions are like instant moral flashes that tell us
what the right course of action is in any given moment.

One of the classic ethical quandaries that's often posed to research subjects
to test this is called the "Trolley Problem."

It goes like this: there is a train hurtling down the rails
at a high speed toward a precipice where the track is out.
All five people aboard the train are sure to die if nothing is done.

With the flip of a single switch, though,
the train can be diverted to another track,
though on this other track, there is a man
who will, unfortunately, be hit and killed instantly by the train.

What to do? What would you do?
Do you let things just play out,
or do you exercise your agency to lower the death toll?

Haidt says that it's intuition that tells us that we should save the five.

It's not full-on emotion, and it's not reasoned thinking.
We just know, in an instant, what should be done.

Intuition, then, is what he says is "the best word to describe
the dozens or hundreds of rapid, effortless moral judgments and decisions

that we all make every day.”²

Now, Haidt has created a useful metaphor to help us better understand the two types of cognition.

Our intuition—and all the emotions that come along with it—he calls “the elephant.

Our elephant is the automatic processes that keep running in the background, kind of like software.

From an evolutionary perspective, the elephant represents the older parts of our brain—the part that helped us to suss out danger and respond accordingly. You know, to run.

When we humans developed the ability to reason and communicate, this elephant got a rider—a little thinker that sits atop the great animal and tries to generally keep it out of trouble.

The rider, with its ability to reason, can do several useful things:

- + it can peer into the future by thinking through alternative scenarios and thereby help the elephant make better decisions.

- + it can learn new skills and master new technologies, which help the elephant reach its goals and avoid disaster.

- + and, most importantly, it can speak for the elephant, though it doesn’t always know what the elephant is actually thinking.

It seems that one of the rider’s most significant gifts is for creating plausible explanations for whatever the elephant has just done—and for fabricating convincing justifications for whatever it is the elephant wants to do next.

The rider, then, is both our arch-defender and, in some ways, our most seductive enabler.

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It is superb at explaining away our actions, after the fact, and it does an amazing job of convincing us of why it's really okay to do what we truly already want to do anyway.

In the realm of moral decision-making, our rational riders are pretty busy finding workable reasons to support whatever our emotions are telling us.

Our riders are pretty good at letting us do what we want.

Though the rider sits in the driver's seat, it's hard to get our elephants to go anywhere they don't already want to go.

This means that for the past couple of centuries we've probably given our powers for rational thinking far more credit than they actually deserve.

And, we've given our intuition and emotion not nearly enough.

Haidt says that all of this means that we make rapid-fire first judgments and "are dreadful at seeking out evidence that might disconfirm" our initial judgments.³

Now, I realize this can be awfully hard for Unitarian ears to hear.

Which is why I think it's so vital that we dig down into the implications of what his research is showing us.

Because it turns out that we are just as susceptible as anyone else to believing pretty much whatever we wish to believe.

The good news is that Haidt does show that we can be influenced by trusted friends who challenge us, who give us reason and arguments that can, sometimes, just maybe(!), trigger in us new intuitions that make it possible for us to change our minds.

It is this kind of challenging and loving dialogue, in which we open ourselves to the possibility of insight and even change, that the great 20th century theologian Henry Nelson Wieman

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called “creative interchange.”

For Wieman, creative interchange is that
which has the power and character
to transform us as we cannot transform ourselves.

It is what has the power to save us from destruction
and point us to the best that human life can attain.

To Wieman, creative interchange, was short-hand for god,
for it was in that communal wrestling for deeper understanding, he felt,
that the divine could be glimpsed.

Creating Interchange isn't, then, something we can do by ourselves.
Our tradition has long affirmed that we need one another.
And, the latest brain science is showing this to be true.
Moral inquiry is a team sport.
Doing the right thing is something that we must endeavour to do together.

And, yet, there is a danger inherent in this, too.

Haidt's work is also showing how “groupish” we humans can be.
How easily we seek out not the perspectives that challenge us,
but the ones that confirm the biases we already hold.

This is seen in the ever-increasing polarisation of our politics,
where it seems that only echo-chamber conversations are now possible.

It's readily reinforced by niche media outlets
that so seductively cater to and confirm our own particular viewpoints.

I don't know about you,
but I have to force myself to read *The National Post* or *The Sun*.
It's that's true for you, as it is for me, it's worth asking why.

It's worth asking why we are increasingly
only capable of talking past those with whom we disagree.

And, its worth asking how dangerous life might become
if dialogue were to completely break down.

It reminds me of the cartoon of a young boy standing in the living room, with his parents sitting on opposite couches, both with their arms crossed in a clear sign of hostility.

The father says to the son: “Your mother and I are separating because I want what’s best for the country and your mother doesn’t.”

Friends, in our quest to do the right thing, may we see in others what they hold to be precious and true.

May we offer challenge where it is needed, but do so with a generous helping of humility for ourselves.

May we question our own sense of certainty, as much if not more than we do that of others.

And, may we have not only open hearts, but open minds, too. Minds open to the power of transformation that can come through creative interchange.

So may it be. Amen.