

“Empathy as a Political Virtue”

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Introduction

Empathy according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary is the ability to share someone else’s feelings, the capacity to understand and share another person’s experiences and emotions. It comes from two Greek words, “em” which means in, or part of, and “pathos” which means feelings or pain.

We do not live as isolated beings. We need others. Biologically we do not survive as a species without cooperation and respect for other humans. We live in communities and thereby are able not only to survive but to flourish as individuals. Without some community in our lives we die, physically and spiritually.

No community, however –family, neighborhood, village, city, state, or nation -- can flourish without the capacity to sense and appreciate the feelings, thoughts, and needs of others.

Aristotle taught that we are social beings by nature, and that politics, in fact, is the conversation of citizens in community discussing and seeking the “good life together.”

For these reasons, our *polis* political community, like every other community of which we are a part, needs empathy among its citizens to thrive. This does not mean we always agree, nor always are able to reach a consensus on important public issues. It does mean that we try to understand our fellow citizens, especially those who hold different views from us, regarding what the “good life together” is all about.

If our political community is to flourish, we need empathy -- both an understanding and a respect for the experiences and feeling of fellow citizens, along with capacity to discuss these civilly. Out of this “empathetic” process of civil dialogue and debate comes a sense that, despite differences of approach over policies, there is a deeper bond, some fundamental values, that hold citizens together in political community. This is what empathy in the political community produces and what holds us together.

Our heritage as Americans always has been confident that we can meet this minimum standard. Our Pledge Allegiance to the Flag reminds us that “we are one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Even our money reminds us that “E Pluribus Unum” – out of our diversity comes unity. Empathy in civil society makes this pledge, this hope, possible, because when we practice it together with fellow citizens we sense, feel,

believe that what unites us in our differences is stronger than what divides us.

Empathy is Declining in this Election Campaign

The current election campaign has frayed the deeper bonds of unity among us as citizens since we are losing the capacity to feel and understand the experiences of those with whom we disagree politically.

We hear Donald Trump verbally attacking minorities and immigrants and boasting of his disrespect for women. We have heard Hillary Clinton call his supporters losers and claim he does not have the character to be president.

The political commercials on television not only for president but down the ballot as well – senators and state legislators – are filled with disrespect and selective marshalling of facts bordering on out and out distortions. They appeal to the emotions of fear and disgust; they do not promote a rational understanding of issues.

Facts do not seem to matter in candidate speeches, even when independent organization point out the numerous errors in their claims. The distortions and lies by some candidates and their propaganda machines continue blithely along bombarding live audiences and media messages with distortions of the truth without shame or hesitation even when proven to be wrong.

Joseph Goebbels the Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany in 1941 said:

“If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.”

The phrase “big lie” was also used in a report prepared during the war by the United States Office of Strategic Services (OSS) - predecessor of the CIA - in describing Hitler's own psychological profile:

“His primary rules were: never allow the public to cool off; never admit a fault or wrong; never concede that there may be some good in your enemy; never leave room for alternatives; never accept blame; concentrate on one enemy at a time and blame him for everything that goes wrong; people will believe a big lie sooner than a little one; and if you repeat it frequently enough people will sooner or later believe it.”

It is not only that Goebbels and Hitler said these words. They put them into operation by large public rallies and the use of the

media to whip crowds and the public into high pitch anger and even hatred.

These words and tactics have an eerie tone for us listening to them over 50 years later. In a different context and in a different time, these same words and tactics have a whiff of truth to them as we listen to the political discourse and watch public reactions in our own electoral campaign going on now. “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it Never allow the public to cool off; never admit a fault or wrong; never concede that there may be some good in your enemy; never leave room for alternatives’ never accept blame. ...”

It would be sad if these kinds of attacks were just the in the domain of the political candidates and their media spin doctors. What is most disturbing is that many Americans are buying into these distortions and allowing emotions such as anger, fear, and even hatred, boils up in their hearts and actions.

When crowds yell, “Lock her up!” or more recently, “Execute her! When staff members of a presidential candidate plot to disrupt the crowds of opponents with violence. When a political commenter in the media announces that if the other candidate wins, “I am getting a musket” When white racists fire bomb a black church in Mississippi and scrawl, “Vote for Trump,” on the wall. When Muslim Americans face an uptick of physical and verbal abuse in public not seen since the immediate 9/11 days. When all of this happens in public, we are in danger of

serious disarray as a nation and a loss of empathy for one another.

Even in private life the ability to understand and respect political differences is coming apart. Friendships are being lost, families are seriously divided. In some families in order to maintain peace relatives cannot discuss the election with one another. Wives and husbands who support different candidates are living in tense fear and silence with one another.

Over 50% of parents who are Republicans say they do not want their child or children to marry a Democrat and nearly 50 % of Democratic parents say the same about their children. The political divide is getting wider, not narrower.

As reported by the American Psychological Association (APA), psychiatrists watching these bitter divisions are saying that about half of adult Americans are experiencing what they term “electoral stress” and worry that such stress will not automatically subside the day after the election. There will be many Americans so worked up emotionally in this election who will continue to experience stress and bitter disappointment over the outcome no matter who wins. Their emotional health will be scarred for some time to come.

What does this forebode for us as a nation as we try to move forward after the election, to come together to support our new government leaders, to work for the common good? Will there

be any sense of a common good left, or will we be living in different realities feeling we have been cheated by the results and unwilling to believe there are any fundamental values left which unite us? Are we becoming two Americas?

I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that we have not been so divided as a nation since the eve of the Civil War a century and a half ago.

How Can We As a Nation Restore Empathy?

What is causing such decline in empathy among us?

Perhaps it could be due to the growing confusion and pain many Americans are experiencing with loss of jobs in middle age as corporations move abroad and new jobs require education and training which they do not have? Could it be the rapid cultural changes going on in our society with women needing to become breadwinners in families, grandparents needing to raise children in face of growing parental opioid addiction, the recognition of LGBT rights in so many institutions, the growing coloring of the American populace and the loss of white male power?

It could be a combination of all of these factors. What is clear is that the result is that so many of us due to our own pain and confusion and inability to cope in our personal lives are losing the ability to understand and sympathize with the experiences and feelings of others. We are losing empathy.

Where is religion in this crisis?

All religions teach that there is a presence in every human being of something divine or spiritual that provides a deep bond of unity among us.

The religions of the Book –Judaism, Christianity and Islam – all believe in the same scriptural passage in Genesis 1:26 – “he created them in his image, male and female he created them.” For these traditions what they believe to be God is actually in every human being, and that is why the commandments of Moses were given – to promote respect the sacredness for the life of every person who reveals the divine to us.

Sometimes this is one of the most underemphasized doctrines in Christianity. In my World Religions class recently when discussing Judaism I explained this passage and explained why Jews are so keen on keeping the commandments since an act of disrespect against another person is also blasphemy against God. The looks on the faces of several indicated that it was as if they had never heard this before, although most grew up Lutheran, Catholic, or Evangelical.

Eastern religions teach something very similar. For Hindus who believe in a divine force, *Brahman*, teach that the human soul is actually a piece of *Brahman*, and also emphasize the importance of practicing respect towards others as an encounter with the divine.

Buddhists do not believe in a transcendent divine person or force beyond this world but teach that all living beings – humans, animals, vegetation – share in a spiritual power that unites us all in one sacred reality. When we disrespect or hate others we are actually destroying ourselves.

Native Americans believe the Great Spirit is present everywhere -- in every human, animal, and plant. All creation deserves our reverence, and before we judge another we need to walk a mile in their moccasins. That is practicing empathy.

Confucius taught that the order of heaven was to be realized on earth through ethical behavior, and that if one could not respect humans there was no way one could understand the gods nor have a relationship with them. He actually would be horrified were he to visit our country at this time, and would probably conclude that many of us are practical atheists by our actions, even if professing a belief in God in words.

The vast majority of Americans identify with one of these religions, with 80 % professing to be Christian and about 5% other traditions. Even the 15% today who do not, or no longer, identify with any organized religion mostly characterize themselves as spiritual and try to live moral lives, espousing the same ethical ideals and values taught by the great religions of the world.

Why are these great traditions, religious and humanist, not nurturing empathy in our political discourse today? They have been powerful influences in our past. Why not today?

Is it because many interpret the separation of church and state to mean we can behave one way in houses of worship and a completely different way in politics? Is it that some believe it is faith alone that saves and behavior has nothing to do with it, so why bother being moral in politics? Is it that greed and hunger for power has overwhelmed any sense of decency among many of us so that religious or humanist values are only skin deep?

Is it partly due to the relative silence of religious and moral leaders in face of public disrespect and hatred, something that did not occur fifty years ago during the civil rights and anti-war movements when clergy were out front in word and deed prophetically reminding us our responsibilities to act justly to one another and stop violence?

I am puzzled by all of this. I know many of those who experience tension in their own families and friendships over politics, and a good number who attend and yell at political rallies, also must be attending houses of worship regularly or occasionally. Statistically this must be a fact. What is going on in churches in face of the stress people are facing in their civic lives? Why are not religious leaders addressing these issues of fear and hatred in their messages, or doing so only in very general ways by saying we always need to love one another with no specific applications to our own context today?

Are the clergy afraid of violating IRS rules about not preaching partisan politics? They are not reluctant to condemn abortion and gay marriage in sermons, why are they reluctant to condemn

serious disrespect and sometimes hatred for one another? This is not partisan politics; this is their duty as moral and religious leaders.

Are some pastors perhaps afraid of losing members of their congregations, something Jesus was willing to do to speak the truth even at the risk of his own life?

Some pastors to their credit are beginning to address the moral dangers of severe disrespect bordering on hatred in the current political context. One can only hope that more do so after the election. Rekindling political empathy needs their support as we move beyond Nov. 8th to rebuild reconciliation across party lines.

It is easy to point the finger, however, at religious leaders. Whether or not they meet their responsibility to warn us of the consequences of public disrespect and hatred in this world and the next, we as citizens have an obligation to help one another.

Glenn Beck -- not normally known for being politically objective -- in an interview on *Meet the Press* a month ago said something wise: he professed he was really worried about how the new president will be able to govern effectively given the severe polarization in the country. The only hope for coming together after the election, he said, was for reconciliation to begin at the local level.

What is each of us doing? Do we periodically throw “gasoline on the fire” in the way we talk about candidates for office? Do we cluster in political conversations only among like-minded folks who think like we do?

What are we personally and as a fellowship going to do once this election is over to promote reconciliation across political lines? Whether or not my or your candidate wins or loses, are we going to practice empathy – truly find ways to understand and sense the experiences and feelings of those on the other side, and work to restore bonds of mutual respect among one another?

Will we try to understand why some feel so emotional about the elections and where their anger or hatred is coming from? What is the disappointment and pain they are experiencing to smother their rational faculties of reflection? Where is the common ground we can re-establish with them so that we can agree to disagree respectfully and work together to reconstruct civility in our political discourse?

We are doomed to another four years of political stalemate if we do not try to do this, and we all will suffer as a country. Many critical issues facing the nation need to be addressed in the next few years – economic growth with equity, terrorism at home and abroad, immigration reform, community-police relations, protecting the environment. These challenges cannot be engaged effectively unless we as a people come together and let our elected officials know that we want them to work together as we are doing as American citizens.