

**Reaching Across
First Unitarian Church, Louisville, KY**

**By the Rev. Dawn Cooley
September 20, 2009**

The guest on the Daily Show was former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee. He and host Jon Stewart were having a fun, witty repartee – a viewer could tell they felt amicably toward one another. After a commercial break, Stewart started in on a new area of conversation: “Respectfully speaking,” he said, “the one thing I guess I don't understand about social conservatives... The gay marriage issue and why conservatives are against it.”

Huckabee then proceeded to talk about why he's against gay marriage: because the institution has been around for 5000 years, because of religious reasons, he even mentioned anatomical issues and the wisdom of the voters passed Proposition 8 in California (though they apparently did not have enough wisdom to vote for him!). Stewart had a response to every concern Huckabee brought forth. Huckabee seemed to disregard Stewart's comment, and then would change tactics and share a new reason why he was against it.

It was fascinating to watch this respectful conversation between a devout conservative and a staunch liberal: fascinating, in part, because it seemed as though they were speaking completely different languages. That they didn't really understand each other at all.

This sort of cross talk is seen throughout our country these days: in town hall meetings about health care, in debates about repealing the inappropriately named “Defense of Marriage” act, in conversations about immigration, the economy, marriage rights – the list goes on and on.

According to Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham, both from the psychology department at the University of Virginia, this *was* speaking in different languages is indeed what is often going on when we see this type of cross-talk: both Stewart and Huckabee were responding to the issue in very different ways, from very different perspectives.

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Haidt and Graham are the pioneers of a new way of understanding how different systems of our intuition have evolved over time and have given rise to psychological foundations for morality. Called Moral Foundations Theory, Haidt and Graham liken these systems, these foundations, to a taste bud in that they produce an “affective reaction of liking or disliking when certain patterns are perceived in the social world.” Just as some people have a preference for spicy foods, and others for sweet or for sour, each person has a personal preference for certain social patterns. Haidt and Graham explain that these five systems lie *underneath* our rational minds, which we then use to explain what is, at its core, usually an intuitive response. Just as one does not consciously choose to prefer spicy, sweet or sour foods, one does not choose consciously how to respond to these various foundations. And as our tastes can change over time, the importance we place on these systems can also be finely tuned. Let’s walk briefly through each of the five systems.

Consider this first scenario: You have a young child and flu season is coming. You can choose to give your child a flu shot, and have your child hate you for a month because it hurt. Or you can choose not to give your child a flu shot, and perhaps risk your child getting the flu with all its physical and emotional issues.

This scenario addresses the first foundation in Moral Foundations theory, that of “harm/care.” This first foundation is related to our evolution as mammals with attachment systems and an ability to feel and dislike the pain of others. It underlies virtues of kindness, gentleness and nurturance. How relevant is it for you, in determining whether something is right or wrong, whether or not someone was harmed, and at what level? This is the first foundation of

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Moral Foundations Theory: the harm/care foundation.

Another scenario: You find out that a punishment has been applied inconsistently to different groups of people by one particular judge in your city. How do you feel or react?

This addresses the second foundation in Moral Foundations Theory, called Fairness/Reciprocity. This foundation is related to the evolutionary process of reciprocal altruism. That is, when one person provides a benefit to another without expecting any *immediate* payment or compensation but in which there is an understanding that the act of altruism would be reciprocated if the situation is later reversed. This is where ideas of justice, rights, and autonomy originate. How important is it, to you, whether or not someone acted unfairly in determining right from wrong? This is the second moral foundation, that of Fairness/Reciprocity.

Now consider this: You are traveling in a foreign nation, riding one of their lovely public transportation systems. You hear the person in front of you say something derogatory about your country, something that you don't believe to be true. How do you feel or respond? Does your answer change if, instead of your country, they were insulting people of your faith? Your ethnicity? Your sexual orientation?

This third foundation is related to our history as tribal creatures able to form shifting coalitions. It's called the Ingroup/Loyalty foundation and it underlies virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group – groups that may include your country, your community, you're your family. How relevant is it, for you, in determining right from wrong, whether or not someone betrayed his or her group? This is the third foundation, the ingroup/loyalty foundation, which

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our intuitions use to determine whether something is right or wrong.

A scenario for the fourth foundation comes from a work situation: Your boss has decided not to pay the licensing fees for a piece of software the company uses. You know that there are legal actions pending against people who have done exactly this. How do you respond?

The fourth foundation is called Authority/Respect, and is shaped by our primate history of hierarchical social interactions. It underlies virtues of leadership and followership, including deference to legitimate authority and respect for traditions. When you are determining right from wrong, how relevant is it whether or not the people involved were of the same rank or rung on the societal ladder? This is the authority/respect foundation of moral foundations theory.

And finally, you attend a performance art piece in which the actors act like animals for 30 minutes, including crawling around naked and urinating on stage. Did the actors cross any boundaries? Were they immoral to act in such a way?

The fifth foundation is shaped by the psychology of disgust and contamination. This foundation, called Purity/Sanctity, is found underneath religious and cultural notions of striving to live in an elevated, less carnal, more noble way. This foundation speaks to the idea that the body is a temple that can be desecrated by immoral activities and contaminants; an idea, which the organic food movement is proving, is not unique to religious traditions. This Purity/Sanctity foundation assesses how important it is, in determining right from wrong, whether or not someone did something you found to be disgusting.

So these are the five areas of Moral Foundations theory: Harm/Care;

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Fairness/Reciprocity; Ingroup/Loyalty; Authority/Respect; and Purity/Sanctity. Haidt and Graham, who developed this theory based on existing morality theory, combined with data from thousands of people across the world, liken these foundations to a stereo graphic equalizer. Similar to the person sitting next to you in traffic whose bass is pounding so loud you feel it in your car with all the windows rolled up, some people have some channels, some foundations, tuned to high, whereas other people prefer various other channel settings. Getting back to the Daily Show, we can see that Mike Huckabee has a different setting for his morality equalizer than Jon Stewart does. There's Huckabee, sitting in his car, happily listening to a complex musical ensemble. He has it turned all the way up. Sitting in the car next to him is Jon Stewart – who can hear only the bass vibrating its way through his vehicle. When it seems like they are talking across each other, it turns out, they are!

Now here is where it gets really interesting, and yields practical applications. It turns out, generally speaking, that political liberals *primarily* use 2 channels on their morality equalizer: the harm/care foundation, and the fairness/reciprocity foundation. The other three channels may register, but at very low levels in comparison with these two primary means of determining right from wrong.

Political conservatives, on the other hand, have all 5 of these channels active, and all 5 turned up high. The politically conservative system for determining right from wrong, with its five different foundations, is complex and nuanced. Political Conservatives have moral concerns that liberals typically either don't recognize, or tend to minimize.

Political liberals may wonder: What makes Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and

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Purity/Sanctity *moral foundations* and not xenophobic characteristics? The answer Haidt gives is simply: social entropy. Without these other three foundations, cooperation in society tends to decay. To solve cooperative problems, its not enough to appeal to a good conscious (which is where political liberals tend to focus their efforts), it's necessary for there to be some repercussion for not cooperating (which is where political conservatives tend to focus THEIR efforts). The devolution of society into chaos is something that political conservatives fear very deeply. They're often willing to achieve and maintain order even though it may cost those who are at the bottom of society. Political liberals, however, are willing to risk chaos and disorder in society in order to achieve justice for the weak and oppressed.

With all this talk about political liberals and conservatives, let me get in a quick caveat. Kurt Vonnegut wisely said, "Thanks to TV and for the convenience of TV, you can only be one of two kinds of human beings, either a liberal or a conservative." Of course, the reality is that we're all over the spectrum. But hyperbole can be useful: looking that the extremes can be helpful, particularly when we look at how our liberal religious tradition (which is blessed to have both political liberals and conservatives) tends to approach social justice issues. Let's look at civil marriage as an example.

Institutionally, in regards to civil marriage, we're like Jon Stewart of the Daily Show. We keep banging the drums of fairness/reciprocity and harm/care. We say that civil marriage is a civil right. We liken the situation to that of interracial marriage, illegal in some states until the 1970s. The UUA produced a video showing that we have *opposed* discrimination against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people for almost 40 years. And these are all true, and well, and good!

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And they are not enough. These arguments almost *exclusively* from the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity foundations. They do not speak to social entropy that many political conservatives fear.

But if we want to effect change, the changing of hearts and minds, as an institution, we need to address the other moral foundations as well: Ingroup/Loyalty; Authority/Respect; and Purity/Sanctity. UU Minister Davidson Loehr points out that “the most successful liberal advances tend to wrap their expanded definitions in what sounds like conservative categories.” For instance, when JFK proclaimed, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country,” he was proclaiming a conservative idea, yet he used it to “effect significant liberal transformations in our society.” When the liberal agenda is advanced, it is because liberals have addressed these other intuitive systems at work in the lives of conservatives.

Again, this is an exaggeration of the extremes, but as we are blessed with both political liberals and conservatives in our congregations, I can’t help but wonder how our message might broaden if more voices were brought to the table. We can’t just charge in and expect to change people’s minds. However, if our message was able to be heard and understood, no matter what channels a person’s moral equalizer was set to, we may begin to address those social entropy fears. Remember, Haidt and Graham identified these moral foundations as intuitive – something that happens at an instinctive level, before reason and rationality come into play. Indeed, the future may show that people are biologically predisposed towards either liberalism or conservatism. Though most of us tend to think that we’re right, that our way is what’s best for society, neither liberal nor conservative, nor any other political affiliation, is always right. Nor is any one always wrong.

And so it becomes essential that our messages be accessible at each level of these five moral foundations, whether that message is about one specific social justice issue, such as Universal Healthcare, or Civil Marriage, *or even* when we are talking about our faith more generally – for

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instance, if we are talking to a religiously conservative co-worker or family member. Rather than repeating the same thing, over and over, in increasing volume, we want to be clear enough so that no matter what pitch a person is listening to, they will hear and be unafraid. We need to be using each of these channels, each in as many ways as we can in order to make our important messages heard, and understood.

For instance, when we are talking about what Unitarian Universalists believe, we might choose to address the Purity/Sanctity foundation by using the language of our Universalist forbears: that we are all God's children, we are all loved and in the eyes of love, no one is an abomination- we are all sacred. We might address the Authority/Respect foundation by talking about Love as the ultimate authority to which we are all answerable. Love as the beginning, and the end; Love between us, around us, and within us; Love as the guiding force in how we treat one another. Which leads to how we might address the Loyalty/Ingroup foundation: that we are loyal to the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, and as such, we work for the betterment of others in the web – particularly those less fortunate than ourselves – that yes, we are, indeed our brothers' keeper because we have a responsibility to our brothers and sisters locally and around the world. These are many the same words we would usually use to describe our faith, but they are set at a slightly different pitch than what some of us may be used to using.

When we learn to listen to, and to communicate with different moral settings than what we usually prefer, we may just find that we can appreciate how a different tuning sounds. We may understand better the fear and rage that is present at the townhall rallies about healthcare. We may better understand why so many are against civil marriage as a civil right. And in our understanding, others may feel heard. For it is only when we reach out to one another that we can truly begin to communicate. May we, in our reaching out, better understand ourselves and our world. And may our understanding bring compassion. Blessed Be.

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Sources from which I drew

This sermon was meant to be heard, rather than read. As such, I did not do a very good job of directly indicating when I was quoting from my sources. So if you are perusing the sources below and find a phrase that sounds familiar – it almost certainly is. That said, here are the primary sources I used in writing this sermon:

- The Daily Show, with Jon Stewart. December 9, 2008. Available online at <http://www.thedailyshow.com/full-episodes/index.jhtml?episodeId=213344>
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