

Seeming Opposites Reveal the Unity in Community

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“She's SO liberal!!”

“He's WAY too conservative!!”

This is a familiar refrain in today's polarized world. You would think that liberals and conservatives were natural enemies. What if the deeper truth was nothing of the sort? One brilliant researcher and author is finding that, in actuality, both sides carry important truths for all of us who care about healthy communities and being fully contributing members of them.

Jonathan Haidt, PhD, (pronounced “height”) is the author of the book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, and a professor at New York University. He proposes that “liberal” and “conservative” are more like personality types than simple political labels, and our moral judgments are based on instinct and intuition much more than cool rationality. He even suggests that we all have “moral receptors,” similar to the receptors in our brains and bodies for various chemicals and substances.

Dr. Haidt says that liberals and conservatives agree on 2 out of 5 major moral values, compassion and fairness. He goes on to write that conservatives work with 3 additional values: Loyalty, authority, and sanctity.

Complicating matters for everyone is Dr. Haidt's premise that our moral wiring “both binds and blinds.” He argues that our moral frameworks are closed loops that reinforce the thinking of the person in them and make it very hard for someone of one moral type to understand the other. For example, liberals see “authority” as “oppression,” while conservatives experience it as providing order and predictability. He says that conservatives and moderates have an easier time understanding liberals than liberals have understanding conservatives.

Describing himself originally as a “religion-hating, conservative-hating, secular liberal,” Dr. Haidt says his research into the duality of moral orientation has drastically changed his opinion of conservative moral thinking.

He says that conservative values of loyalty, authority, and sanctity actually lead to better group cohesion and success.

What this implies is that beneath the liberal/conservative duality lies a unity at the heart of healthy community. Both orientations are good and necessary for human thriving. We all agree that compassion and fairness are essential, and conservatively-oriented personalities bring a message of the importance of loyalty, authority, and sanctity in binding together a group in a common purpose and ordering interactions.

How, then, do we bridge the divide? Dr. Haidt recommends that practices rooted in relationships and shared communal experiences, particularly sharing meals, seem to be the best ways to overcome the tendency to segregate and divide. He also suggests approaching conversations with people of the other orientation from a position of humility, perhaps even acknowledging or praising the other person's underlying drives as being worthwhile and important. Everyone seeks validation and acknowledgement, and this sets in motion the social power of reciprocity, paving the way for safe communication and the possibility of greater understanding and respect.

For more about the work of Jonathan Haidt, listen to his interview on the NPR show, On Being with Krista

Tippett: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/jonathan-haidt-the-psychology-behind-morality/transcript/6347>.

(Remember: If you're interested in purchasing his book, *The Righteous Mind*, go to www.smile.Amazon.com and select Sts. Clare & Francis so we receive small donation. Thanks!)

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