

The Idolatry of Reason
Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
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Now let me say,
very clearly,
I love my mom.
She's my mom.
She's a good and decent human being,
and adores her grandchildren;
she raised me in this faith,
and taught me to love the earth and wild spaces.

But the way that she approaches politics distresses me.
Not because we have different opinions.
I'm pretty much just as much a flaming liberal as she is,
though there are a few issues where we disagree.
But mostly, we like the same politicians and policy ideas.
What distresses me - and I've told her this many times, so I'm
not talking behind her back here;
she'll probably listen to this sermon online and hear me say
these words -
what distresses me is when she says something like, "I can't
believe that so-and-so conservative would say such-and-such."
Sometimes I get text messages:
"Can you believe what Scott Walker said?"
or "How could Jeb be so stupid?"
or "It's unbelievable! Rand Paul's aide licked a reporter's phone
and didn't get fired!"
Stuff like that.
To which I often reply,
"Mom, stop watching cable news. Just stop."

For these messages almost always come about 10 minutes into the time slot of Rachel Maddow's cable news show. The outrage machine is up and running.

My mom is not unusual in this regard, of course. Indeed she's very typical - liberals often think to themselves, or say out loud, "I don't understand how conservatives can think such stupid, inane, foolish, illogical thoughts!"

How many of you have ever thought to yourself, or spoken aloud, such a notion? "How can conservatives think such an illogical thought?" Raise your hand.

Now, we might think that we liberals - and we are religious liberals all, and political liberals - most of us (but not all of us) it's an important distinction - we might think that we liberals are the only ones to think this way.

We think we are logical, and we find the position of the other side illogical.

We reason based on facts, while they, the conservatives, they decide based on emotion.

The book by George Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, presents more or less this perspective.

We, the liberals, he says, are right, but we can't seem to convince the other side of this.

Why not?

And he says it is because they have tapped into the real way we think -

through stories, metaphors, emotions.

And liberals need better stories to compete, need better metaphors and archetypes.

I think part of what he says is absolutely right, and I'll come back to that.

But I don't want to slip by without challenging the core assumption, at least a little:

the idea that it is us liberals who are logical and the conservatives who are not.

Because I'll tell you a secret.

Don't tell anyone. Shhhh.

Some of my friends are political conservatives.

Shhh. It's our secret.

I listen in on their conversations sometimes.

And guess what?

As crazy as some liberals think conservatives are -

that's just as crazy as some conservatives think liberals are.

Some conservatives think that liberals are illogical, decide based on emotion, and live according to their own set of facts.

Liberals, thank god, do not have the market cornered on self-righteousness,

despite our occasional best efforts to claim that territory for ourselves alone.

I think it is in our nature - all people -

to believe that we are right, we are logical, that our positions and ideas make sense.

I mean, if they didn't make sense, we wouldn't hold those ideas, would we?

So we say.

Lakoff, and others who look at this kind of thing, have learned a lot from behavioral economics.

Behavior economics fascinates me.

It used to be that economists believed in "rational self-interest."

That people would choose to buy things, sell things, act, in ways that fit their rational self-interest.

You would have to factor in stuff like social prestige, and other intangible things,

but pretty much, people would act in their own best interest.

And economists took this theory out into the world, where it promptly exploded in a plume of smoke and ridiculousness.

Because we don't!

We don't act in our rational self-interest.

We *think* we do, but we don't.

So behavior economics studied what actually motivates us, and found all sorts of subtle nudges -

the way the room was set up, the power of habit, the metaphorical associations,

what our friends do, and so on and so forth.

So apply this to politics:

liberals are often confused as to why lower-income people might vote for conservatives -

it's not in their economic self interest!

What's the matter with Kansas?, as one well-known book on the topic asks.

Conservatives, by the way, do wonder about us liberals too - how could someone who would really benefit from a tax cut not want one?

It boggles the mind.

Neuroscience provides the answer.

We don't decide things based on facts and figures and logical syllogisms.

Our emotions, our hearts, are a vital part of how we make decisions.

The stories we tell ourselves and believe about the world, the metaphors and mythical maps that we use to make sense of all the data that comes in -

these structures and pathways are how we decide.

And this is how it should be, frankly -

if we had to weigh every decision with the full set of facts,

if we subjected every vote and purchase and life choice

to the fullness of logic,

we would be paralyzed and overwhelmed -

decision fatigue, they call it -

there's too much to know,

and sometimes the answers aren't clear,

and we need our instincts, our shortcuts, to figure things out.

It turns out that only a few of us are Spock's, using logic to decide.

Some of us are Doctor McCoy's, using our best sense of right and wrong.

But most of us are Captain Kirk's, going with our gut, trying our best, and fighting for the people we care most about.

And it turns out that if we who believe in human dignity and liberty want to "convince" people to join us, logic is not very effective - but story, emotion, joy, love, and hope is.

This is what's happening in the story for all ages today - what a powerful story.

A true story.

Instead of trying to have a discourse about human genetics, instead of trying to convince them with arguments, instead of playing their game on their rules, send in the clowns.

Change the story.

Deliberately mis-hear the hate and replace it with love.

Don't take the hate seriously, just laugh at it, and show that life is better this way.

I love the creativity of those clowns, the courage and the deeper spirit.

Let me give another example.

One of the biggest social changes in the last generation is the rapid acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships.

It's really remarkable.

How did it happen?

The evidence about this is clear - what actually changed people's minds

was knowing the story of someone.

Seeing folks as real people.

Some 15 years ago, the movement stopped trying to convince people with legal arguments, and started encouraging folks to come out and tell their story, celebrities and every-day folks both. And once you know someone's story, you can't dismiss them or condemn them in the same way.

This, then, must be our approach if we hope to convince others, change folks' minds, in the work for justice and fairness.

Lots and lots of young black men and women have died at the hands of law enforcement or quasi-law enforcement. But what began with the killing of Travon Martin, and continues with the stories of Tamir Rice and Rekia Boyd and Freddie Gray and so many others, is a movement - BlackLivesMatter - that is more about telling the stories of these persons, because when you tell the story folks connect at an emotional level.

(It is why those who don't want to confront these truths contest these stories so strongly, too. Why they search high and low to prove they were "not an angel" — as if that was enough to warrant death.)

If we want to do something about income inequality, charts and facts won't sell it. It has to be a story, a narrative - about individual people trying to make ends meet, and a wider story, about how we are kin to each other, about community and responsibility and decency.

You need a metaphorical vision, something that calls people to a higher understanding.

Imagine all the people living as one.

You might say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.

We'll build a land where the captives go free,
where justice rolls down like waters.

Metaphors, images, stories. This is what compels, what makes the hard work possible.

If we want to do something about climate change, showing a picture of melting ice isn't going to change anyone's mind.

All the science presentations in the world won't convince anyone -

which is unbelievably frustrating to scientists, because it isn't how science works.

But it is how people work.

If we want to get folks to move on this issue, we need to tell the stories of people whose lives are destroyed,

whose lands are covered in water;

you have to make it real, tug at the heart, not just the head.

You have to make it a moral issue, not just a meteorological one.

And now we are in my territory:

now we're talking about religion.

Listen,

I did not really see them.

*I came later and saw their tracks
on empty sand.*

But I don't believe

*only to the edge
of what my eyes actually see
in the kindness of the morning,
do you?*

Can we imagine more than is known for sure?
Can we understand that, not only do we reason based on more than facts,
we feel more than we can see?
There is a level of intuition, of mystery and wonder -
a place where words and concepts fear to tread,
a place for poetry instead of prose.

What does this have to do with politics or social justice?
Everything.
Mystery, wonder, awe;
a sense of holiness
gives a sense of humility.
We are part of everything, but we are not everything.
The spiritual attitude ought to be one of curiosity and discovery,
and not self-assurance.

A lot of Americans have turned away from religion,
and they did so because they felt, correctly, that too much of religion
was too cocky, too political, too much about who was right
and not enough about a deeper spiritual yearning for connection.

I don't believe only to the edge of what my eyes actually see.

A long time ago, I preached a sermon in a different Unitarian Universalist congregation where I said, as part of the sermon, we're not God. We should be humble.

Someone later said, accusingly, "are you saying there is a god?!?"

I said, "I'm not saying that one way or the other. That's an open question.

I'm just saying, it ain't us."

Truth is larger than any one person's version.

It is larger than a set of facts or propositions.

The whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and curiosity is more beautiful than righteousness.

If we want to convince each other to support those policies and ideas

that we think will make the world more fair and good,

we need to get deeper than argument,

and deeper than a quest for power;

we need to get to the heart.

Our heart, and theirs.

Many years ago, when I was younger and more naive,

I was talking with a mentor about a difficult problem.

I didn't know what to do, and we talked it through for a while.

But then he said, "Matthew, you can't think your way through this.

You have to feel your way through."

I was terrified.

Back then, I thought the way I'd been taught:

there was a right answer, and with enough cognitive power,
you could figure it out.

But I learned then, and keep learning, again and again,
that that's not true.

There's a story, being lived and being told,
each moment of every day.

No answers. Just stories.

No clear and hard truth. Just metaphors.

No compulsion. Just invitation.

No formula. Just a vision of a better world. Imagine it.

No way to stop hate - but a way to laugh and live with joy.

This is then my invitation to us:

instead of being outraged by what so-and-so said,

turn off the cable news, and listen to one another.

Hear the story from someone else's point of view.

Begin with curiosity and humility.

The Sufi Poet Rumi said, "Out beyond ideas

of wrongdoing and right-doing

there is a field.

I'll meet you there."

Meet one another there.

Build a new way.

Tell the best stories.

Welcome the heart, don't act like it's not there.

Don't abandon facts or science or the search for truth,

but always be humble about what we think we know.

Imagine a better world, and share that vision with hope.

Believe more than you see.

Let justice roll down like water.
Start with love, that is the seed.
Start with love, that is the seed.
And let us sing.