

How Can Half the Country Be So Stupid: A Memoir and Guide to Friendship Between Political Opposites

Notes & Noteworthy Sections

Chapter 1: Shenanigans and LEGO Bricks

Footnotes

1 Haidt, J. (2008, September). Transcript of "The moral roots of liberals and conservatives". Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind/transcript?language=en

Noteworthy: Political associations contain traditions, moral underpinnings, and are instinctively tribal. Even when people try to form an individual partnership—i.e., a Christian and Jew marry, a Mexican and African American form a friendship, or a Republican and a Democrat start a business together—people from their own tribe will often ostracize them. And yet, tribes still manage to have good relations, build alliances and share resources. We must not forget that throughout history, tribes have depended on each other to thrive. They've engaged in trade, intermarriage and protection agreements. At the same time, we have a tendency to want to fight outsiders. In fact, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt stated that we find in-group loyalty so deeply pleasurable that we *create* tribes to fight against each other—also known as the NFL (National Football League).

Go Vikes! Go Packers! (Insert your local rivalry).

Chapter 2: Can We Agree?

Footnotes

2 Kolbert, E. (2017, February 20). Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>

Noteworthy: Sometimes it's easier to agree something needs to be done about a particular issue, than to agree on the solution. But it's a start. Here's a pro-tip: don't try to present facts and logic to your political opposite to win them over. Researchers have proven that facts don't change our minds, that we won't let go of our beliefs even when presented with contrary evidence. Instead, look for underlying values you might share in the situation. For example, Benjamin tapped into Julie's curiosity and empathy by pointing out that leaving Mexico was no 'picnic' for unauthorized immigrants.

Chapter 3: Va Va Va Vitriol

Footnotes

3 Haidt, J. (2008, September). Transcript of "The moral roots of liberals and conservatives". Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind/transcript?language=en

Noteworthy: Alleging immorality in others is a great way to feed our self-righteousness. And we're hardwired to believe that what we believe is the *right* belief. Social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, said our righteous minds "unite us into teams, divide us against other teams, and blind us from the truth. When you take a strong position, or you take a side, you risk a blind spot. In fact, cognitive psychologist and linguist George Lakoff said in a 2017 interview, on *The Tavis Smiley Show*, that "ideas and beliefs are not merely floating in the air, they are physical; a part of the neural circuitry in our brains developed over a lifetime, and pointing all the way back to the perspectives of those who raised us as children."

Chapter 4: Take a Walk on Your Blind Side

Footnotes

4 Story by Martin Luther King Jr. (2020, January 20). Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'Letter From Birmingham Jail'. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/04/martin-luther-kings-letter-from-birmingham-jail/274668/>

5 Packer, G. (2010). The Empty Chamber. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/08/09/the-empty-chamber>

Noteworthy: In a 2010 article called *The Empty Chamber*, The New Yorker writer George Packer reported that opportunities for the two sides to bond in Washington D.C. were rare. “On the first floor of the Capitol, there is a private dining room for senators, the ‘inner sanctum,’ where Republicans and Democrats used to have lunch (at separate tables, but in the same room). No longer is this the case. In fact, no longer do the majority of our congressional representatives move their families to D.C., where in the past, couples from both sides of the aisle found social time to mingle. These days, the Senators eat lunch in their respective caucus rooms or ‘downtown.’”

Chapter 5: Understanding Conservatives

Footnotes

6 Keillor, G. (2016, May 05). Bob McDonnell and the Rolex Christians. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/bob-mcdonnell-and-the-rolex-christians/2016/05/05/735ca968-1247-11e6-81b4-581a5c4c42df_story.html

7 Saad, L. (2019, June 25). Majority in U.S. still want abortion legal; with limits. Retrieved 16 June 2020 from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/259061/majority-abortion-legal-limits.aspx>

8 Bradner, E., & Walsh, D. (2016, September 07). Jolly uses jar of mosquitoes to urge House passage of Zika funding. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/07/politics/david-jolly-mosquitoes-house-zika-funding/index.html>

Noteworthy: Legislators will often make a good show by co-sponsoring bills, but later run to their partisan corner when the actual vote is taken. This is one of the pitfalls of ‘omnibus’ bills. They lump many bills together, forcing legislators to vote against the omnibus bills that contain the very bills they originally sponsored. We’re reminded of this when Republican Rep. David Jolly from Florida carried a jar of Zika virus-infected mosquitoes (that cause damage, including microcephaly, in the babies of pregnant women) to the House floor to ask his fellow colleagues to imagine the fear and anxiety if the mosquitoes were allowed outside the jar. The reason the Zika funding bill stalled was because Democrats were blocking the passage because Republican legislators wanted to attach other measures to the bill, such as placing restrictions on Planned Parenthood funding. This type of playing politics while people suffer is what makes the public so angry with the establishment.

Chapter 6: Education and Collaboration

Footnotes

9 The Lugar Center. Carden, D., Forrester, J., Board, W. S., Davies, D., Bunch, J., Daugherty, A., . . . Kemp, K. (n.d.). Our Work. Retrieved from <http://www.thelugarcenter.org/ourwork-Effective-Bipartisan-Governance.html>

Noteworthy: As stated on The Lugar Center website: *Bipartisanship is sometimes inaccurately defined as the pursuit of centrist outcomes. But there is no contradiction between holding strong ideological views and embracing bipartisan principles.* Bipartisanship prioritizes governance and recognizes that building consensus has inherent value to national security and prosperity. The Lugar Center and Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy have produced a system to track how many bills our lawmakers co-sponsor in a bipartisan manner. They rank how often each member of Congress works across party lines. This information can be found at www.thelugarcenter.org.

Chapter 7: Understanding Liberals

Footnotes

10 Frank, M. (2002, October 25). What Senators Can Learn from Paul Wellstone. Retrieved from <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,384714,00.html>

11 Kolbert, E. (2017, February 20). Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>

Noteworthy: In a 2017 article in The New Yorker, Elizabeth Kolbert quotes Sara and Jack Gorman’s book, ‘Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts That Will Save Us’ (Oxford University Press) who cite research on confirmation bias suggesting: “People experience genuine pleasure—a rush of dopamine—when processing information that supports their beliefs.” Conversely, when presented with facts that don’t agree with our feelings and beliefs, we tend to discard them.

Chapter 8: A Blueprint for Bridges

Noteworthy: Some of the most convincing political messages create a villain. If you’re a Red Team messenger, then the Villain is usually the government—the big, bad government that wants to seize your treasures and hide vital information from you. See if you can find the villain and the victims in this Red Team message:

Our public schools are overspending, underperforming and leaving our children behind and our wallets depleted.

If you happen to agree with this statement, then it’s hard to separate out the victims and the villain at first. Let me help you: the villain is the public school system embodying the teachers, leadership and curriculum in the assumption that all of these key elements are complicit in a deceitful crime. There are two victims; the children left behind and the taxpayers whose wallets are being depleted.

These narratives often hold a kernel of truth, but they also hold a heap of generalization. They serve to keep the news entertaining and keep the negative aspects of tribalism alive and well.

If you’re a Blue Team messenger, then your villain is usually the big, bad corporation. The corporations ravage the planet, abuse the workers and only care about profit as leaders fly around in corporate jets. Look for the victims and the villain in this Blue Team message:

When companies don’t provide healthcare to workers and the workers qualify for public assistance; that’s corporate welfare.

Again, if you believe this is true it can be difficult to analyze. In this scenario our villain is the company not offering healthcare to workers. The victims are the low wage employees, and the taxpayers who allegedly provide welfare to this company, by funding healthcare for its workers. Along with the kernel of truth in these narratives, there is a more complex story left untold. As a former small business owner, I have personally felt the frustration and the lowering of my own thin profit margins, when generalizations about business operations are embedded in policies, not to mention political messaging.

Once you learn to spot the villains and the victims in a message, you can find them everywhere. While designed to generate mistrust of the other side, this can backfire, and the audience may end up distrusting the entire system. Think of it as war fatigue. And this leads to political apathy and hopelessness, and a population ready for a savior. But what happens when the saviors fail to deliver the salvation they promised? The next step in this victim/villain system is to blame the other side for the failure, starting the cycle all over again, instead of displaying transparency, honest assessments, and servant leadership that doesn’t place winning over the common good.

Something we can do, proactively, is to drop the victim/villain narratives in our own discussions, and instead, ask genuine, open-ended questions of each other with a mindset of curiosity. Then listen, don’t debate; just ask more questions.

Chapter 9: Friendship

Footnotes

12 <http://www.sunnyhillsumc.org/history.htm#six>

13 Morris, S.G. (2018, March 03). Memories of Funtown Define Racial Divide of a Generation Past. Retrieved 2020 June 22 from:

<https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/entertainment/arts/2018/03/04/memories-funtown-define-racial-divide-past-generation/378272002/>

14 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allophilia>

15 Mindock, A. & Woodward, C. (2020, June 18). Taking a Knee. Independent. Retrieved on 05 July 2020: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/taking-a-knee-national-anthem-nfl-trump-why-meaning-origins-racism-us-colin-kaepernick-a8521741.html>

16 <http://www.sunnyhillsumc.org/history.htm#six>

17 Excerpt from "Solidarity", UAW Newsletter, January, 1958.
<https://uaw.org/members/uaw-through-the-decades/>

Noteworthy: Benjamin credits his resilience toward racism, whether being turned down to rent Airbnb's or being told by a condo owner that they'd run out of information sheets at an Open House, to the opportunity to grow up in Sunnyhills, where he was loved and adored as an equal to everyone else. The first planned interracial community, Sunnyhills, in Milpitas, California, "had 420 homes occupied by 1958 (growing to over 1000 three-bedroom homes), and could boast of Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian, Canadian, Irish, German, French, Indian and other nationalities and ethnic groups" in addition to the Black Ford Motor Company workers. It stood as a "real tribute to the union [UAW], the citizens of Santa Clara County and the several organizations and persons who have given unstintingly of their time toward making Sunnyhills one of the foremost democratic communities not only in California but in our country." Sadly, the community of Sunnyhills remained an island for many years as the surrounding communities continued to segregate African Americans.

A message from Benjamin: *Building trust is a very difficult task. Some can never let go of the past, to live in the present. You must never give up persisting, if you want to be a game changer. It's easy to give up on the 'other', it's easy to judge them harsher because they damn well deserve it. It's easy to just walk away. It's easy to fail. It takes no effort on your part to let discord remain the same.*

You build trust by making it personal. You make it personal by sharing and listening to their personal story, their family history, their hopes, dreams and tragedies.

I want to thank my Milpitas family and Sunnyhills community. You made me strong. My life always mattered to you, and that made it matter to me. It never had anything to do with me being black. I was just Benjamin. What we saw in each other, what we did together, seemed so simple then. Seems so impossible now.

With your help, I will persist. Thank You.

Chapter 10: Blame the Brain

Footnotes

18 Fields, R.D. (2015, October 30). The neuroscience of witches. *Brainfacts.org*. Retrieved 16 June 2020 from <https://www.brainfacts.org/diseases-and-disorders/mental-health/2015/the-neuroscience-of-witches>

Noteworthy: I'm going to give you some basic bullet points that might help as you regulate your own polarization:

- Watch for Blindspots: Morality unites us within tribes, but has the potential to both imprison us and blind us: Look for your blind spots and take a walk on your blindside. Think of someone you can share this book with as a way to discover and unpack your blind spots with each other.
- Have Coffee: The more we hang out with people like us, the more we strengthen our viewpoints. Have coffee with the 'devil' once in a while. You'll discover common values you didn't realize existed. Listen for the things they deem fair or not fair.
- Be Uncomfortable: We get uncomfortable thinking about things that disagree with our views: Stay uncomfortable—at least for a few minutes each day. Read, listen or watch a news source other than your preferred sources. Try to identify who is portrayed as the victim and who is portrayed as the villain.
- Enjoy Meals: Sharing a meal should feel inclusive without fear of being triggered by political commentary. It's okay to divert the political pundit at your table by asking them, for example, to tell a story about something they are really proud of that they've done in their life. This helps everyone focus on shared values rather than divisive opinions. There are many resources, books and organizations to help with civil conversations. Braverangels.org is one of them.
- Be Curious: Curiosity cannot exist in the same space as judgement: Stay curious.