

## **The Politics of Human Nature**

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How we see human nature just very well may be the most important political question of all. Have you ever really thought about that? As offspring of the Protestant Reformation, UUs split away from Christian religious orthodoxy by declaring that humanity is always in a state of becoming of evolving and not stagnant and born in sin. We have a higher vision of what human beings can possibly become.

Many religious and political conservatives (though certainly not all) hold the belief that human kind is inherently bad and born in sin. That we cannot evolve beyond a certain point because of something within us that is in arrested development. Just as we too can become dogmatic in our progressiveness or liberalism, the attitude of many religious and political conservatives divides humanity into us and them because of this belief, consciously or not. Do you really believe in and trust the basic inherent goodness of humanity? Not what we pay lip service to it, but do we really believe this deep down inside of us. The question may be the most important question our world faces today. Human beings are at a crossroad on this planet. We human beings have the power to either create an apocalyptic scenario on this planet and destroy ourselves or we can create a future of promise for us and our children.

There is intense uncertainty as to the outcome of our future. In these challenging times, we may want to search ourselves as to what we believe is the basic nature of humanity for our conclusions, collectively and individually will affect our global future.

At this time in our collective history, there is tremendous doubt regarding the inherent goodness and worthiness of our species. The world appears full of evil, but if we draw the conclusion that humanity is not basically good -- that we do not possess inherent wisdom—what good can the future hold?

If we believe that humanity is basically flawed and defective and not to be trusted, we will continue have Brexit votes, and reality TV stars as the leader of our country. We will vote for the “law and order candidate” and other unsavory characters because fear will drive our decisions. We will need a wall to keep others out, we will need more police and military protection from the other so-called barbarians at the gate. There is an old saying that one should choose their enemies wisely for they will spend their entire lives fixating on them. An illustration is in order here. I have permission to tell this story.

When I was writing this sermon in the office one Tuesday morning in December, Tricia, our church administrator, had come into the office upset about the fact that someone had hit her car and left the scene. Tricia was not hurt, her car had a few scratches and that was all that had happened, but she was feeling very violated by this selfish act. I was thinking to myself, this is what my sermon is about as I had started writing this moments before she told her story. I was writing about the inherent good in most people, whether they always act on it or not is another story. We wound up laughing about it and then she told me that she had also lost her American Express card a few days ago and was really annoyed about it. Then she told me that someone had found the credit card and had been trying to contact her at least twice by phone (he had an old

number) and so he left his business card in her front door. I guess he called American Express to get her address (so much for privacy in this day and age) but what a gift!

On one hand there was the person who had hit her car and left the scene, and on the other hand someone found her card and returned it to her. Two radically different human behaviors; and a pessimist would focus on the hit and run, and would see the returning of the credit card as an anomaly. We can complain because roses bushes have thorns or rejoice because thorn bushes have roses, Abraham Lincoln tell us “If we believe and act as if human beings are basically no good, low down, or evil, inevitably the forces of fear, doubt, and aggression will escalate.”

How and if we move forward will not and cannot depend on one spiritual, economic, or political system. It will depend on who we are and how we feel as human beings, personally, and collectively speaking. The principle of basic human goodness is not particularly religious or secular. It is not a moral view of good or bad and we must move beyond the temptation of simplistic polarized, this or that, kind of thinking. It is about how at our very core, no matter what others believe and despite the opinions of others – we have a belief that we are complete and worthy. Remember, the world is changed not by your beliefs or opinions but by your behavior. To create a brighter future, we need to meet each other on equal footing in terms of understanding. If we can feel confident in humanity’s goodness, it just may illuminate our lives, our society, and our politics. It just may bring about what our Jewish Brothers and Sisters call, *Tikum Olam*, the healing of the world.

Given the speed and aggression of our world and the tenuous state of our ecosystem, it may appear that we as human beings have forgotten all about our innate goodness. When this happens, fear and paranoia run rampant through the streets as we are witnessing now. Without a feeling of innate goodness and worthiness (we are not speaking here of naïveté and foolishness and kumbaya, for in the words of the late musical artist and activist, Nina Simone, “we must not be afraid to leave the table when love is no longer being served.”) but without a feeling of worthiness and goodness society and communication become mere vehicles of manipulation and deception, much as it is today, in which every activity is used to wall ourselves away from others and to outdo someone else.

Dr. King said that many of our social and political problems are due to the fact that we have separated love and power, or heart and mind. We have forgotten that kindness is inherent to the human heart, and so we consider love a sentimental and anemic force. In terms of mind, we are capable of intelligence, technological prowess, and strength, but without love, that power becomes abusive. We then become alienated from each other and our environment.

It is always important to stop and ask ourselves, what does it really mean to be a human being? Not a human doing, but a human being. Can we make the time to sit still and meditate on this? This simple act of reflection may save us from a future too horrific to even contemplate.

Some will undoubtedly ask, what good can one self-reflective thought do? When we get up in the morning, we routinely put our minds on thoughts of hope or fear, which influence our days and our very lives. We get up with the morning news and fill our heads with the problems, challenges, and alternative facts of our world, all in the name of being informed citizens, and then we pour caffeine on top of it and wonder why our days are so hectic, depressing, and confused. We do this unconsciously for the most part, but make no mistake, we do it. In addition, we may have been taught at home or at church that we are not worthy of the good that is in our lives and that simply by having been born we are inherently damaged goods. Madison Avenue tells us that we are not complete unless we are consuming something every day. We are not human beings, we are consumers. By taking a moment to self-reflect, to just be still and breathe for a moment, we come to realize the preciousness of life and our connections with others, and we can feel the goodness that has sustained humanity throughout all time, and a vast new horizon of human possibility looms large before us.

Daily life is challenging and there are plenty of reasons to think that human nature is bad. But feeling what is in your heart is a powerful tool for individual transformation and social change. Feeling is what makes us human and we must also remember not to believe everything we feel. Yet through the experience of feeling we discover a basic goodness. This basic goodness does not change no matter what obstacles or challenges arise in our lives and acknowledging this goodness will keep our society from breaking down. In fact society will become stronger because the basis of any society is what the individuals feel about themselves.

Our merely wanting to communicate with each other on deeper levels is a sure sign of that goodness. This communication between family and friends, progressive and conservative, parents and children, theist and non-theist, gay and straight, folk of color and folks of European descent, humans and the animal kingdom and nature, happens billions of times a day; each and every day; conversations between two people and other living beings begins the connection.

Where there is a lack of patience the connection breaks down. Where that lack of patience becomes evident, we become more selfish, more and more angry. We react more painfully, more indecisively, and with more uncertainty.

If we are to survive as a species, and not only survive, but to thrive and to flourish, we must be courageous enough to believe in the goodness of humanity, despite what we see in the newspapers, social media, and on television. We must begin to really examine our assumptions. This is the time, today, to begin to contemplate human nature. Is it really our nature to be fearful and aggressive, or are we by nature more gentle and fearless in our hearts? Underneath the noise, the stress, the anxiety, can we find an inner peace? Our very destiny is at stake as to how we answer those questions. Goodness happens around us in so many ways, when we smile at another person or when we converse with someone.

Our ability to move forward comes from the strength which at times will appear as vulnerability. People will always say and do stupid things, society will always do stupid things. When something appears to go wrong we blame ourselves. The first step is to try not to be afraid of our vulnerability. Something has touched us and we can embrace those feelings, for there is a strength to the embrace and a strength that will come from the embrace.

The second step is called courage; the courage to feel and to join with others in responding from the heart and the mind of goodness. Yes, we must respond even when others may think we are being foolish. We must respond with love. We must believe in our own humanity and thereby we will believe in the humanity in others. You see it's really less about saving the world and more about serving it.

King puts it this way: "The person who hates you has some good in him or her; even the nation that hurts you most has some good in it; even the race that hates you the most has some good in it. Discover the element of good in your enemy, and as you seek to hate him or her, find the center of goodness and place your attention there and you will take a new attitude."

All great spiritual teachers and paths teach this technique. You may not be able to change the situation, but if you change your mind about the situation, you change it. In short, if you change the way you look at things, the things you look at begin to change.

An illuminated society, an enlightened society, an evolved society is not a utopia. The beloved community in Dr. King's parlance, is not a Shangri-La. We would be naive and immature to even think so. The beloved community, the evolved society is simply a place where we have the courage to be and to live as we truly are. It sounds like a truism, nothing new, but it is true. As the late, great radical historian Howard Zinn wrote almost 30 years ago, "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness... If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction...The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

Slowing down to self-reflect creates a space where our collective, individual, and political lives can meet. It is our nature as human beings. In this way we will have the confidence in who we are as inherently good and loving human beings, and we will go forth to collect our good and to collect the love in all areas of our individual and collective lives; and this includes our political lives as well, for if the truth be told, there is simply no separation.

May it always be so.