

Do We Need a New American Dream?

Matthew 5: 38-48; Romans 12: 1-2; 14-21

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Ganges, Michigan
July 14, 2010

Prepared text of the sermon

A week ago we celebrated once again the independence of this nation, a nation that was founded on a magnificent vision of human rights, of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. Those who created and signed our founding documents were a rare gathering of visionaries whose labors established the foundation of a very great nation. As one of my friends said recently, those leaders were a miracle; they would never be able to establish the Constitution or the Bill of Rights today in the present feverish climate of political partisanship.

One of my most respected mentors whose funeral I conducted lived to the age of 92. He would often say how blessed one is to live long because one gains a perspective on the ebb and flow of human events. One has seen it all before, as it were, and is not quick to despair no matter how dark the day. And that is certainly true. Nevertheless, one has to be wholly out of touch with the current affairs of state not to wonder if we haven't reached a very dark period of our national life. The partisanship in our federal government obstructing the legislative process, the degree to which financial power trumps dealing with critical global issues, the serious economic situation of the present, dealing with the worst ecological disaster ever – one could go on but, of whatever political stripe, I think there is a general consensus that we are not in a good place. It is in recognition of the present state of this great nation and its failure to live by its founding vision that I raise the question, “Do We Need a New American Dream?”

The New York Times columnist, Paul Krugman, opened his column on July 2 writing:

When I was young and naïve, I believed that important people took positions based on careful considerations of the options. Now I know better. Much of what serious people believe rests on prejudices, not analysis. And these prejudices are subject to fads and fashions.

Krugman, a Nobel Prize economics scholar from Princeton, has been warning that the stimulus has been too little and now warns against cutting off stimulus

spending too soon. He finds the claims of deficit hawks similar to the claims of Herbert Hoover as we plunged into the Great Depression.

Well, I'm not here to argue for or against Krugman; this session is not economics 101. His statement about how we take positions based on prejudice rather than analysis struck me because I have been wrestling with that very same realization. When one wants to raise questions about the American Dream, one is not likely to have before one open minds eager for critical analysis. I'm not certain if religious views or nationalism and patriotism breed the greater emotional bonds that result in more prejudicial positions and less critical awareness; maybe they are equal. This I know, a preacher courts disaster addressing any one of them. That's why I'm glad I'm not a preacher any longer – just a senior on the edge of senility who will be forgiven for rushing in where angels fear to tread.

With all of that being recognized, nonetheless, I raise the question, “Do we need a new American Dream?” The question was raised by the best selling author Jeremy Rifkin, one of the leading social thinkers of our time, whose many titles cover a wide range of subjects, and whose counsel is sought by the European Union and heads of state around the world. His recent book, *The Empathic Civilization – The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*, is not focused on the United States particularly; rather, he is thinking in global terms about the human race. He did, however, write an essay entitled, “Empathic Civilization: Is it Time to Replace the American Dream?” It is in that essay that he deals specifically with the theme of my presentation. He defines the American Dream:

For two hundred years the American Dream has served as the bedrock foundation of the American way of life. The dream, reduced to its essence, is that in America, every person has the right and opportunity to pursue his or her own individual material self interest in the marketplace, and make something of their life, or at least sacrifice so the next generation might enjoy a better life. The role of the government, in turn, is to guarantee individual freedom, assure the proper functioning of the market, protect property rights, and look out for national security. In all other matters, the government is expected to step aside so that a nation of free men and women can pursue their individual ambitions.

He goes on to write of the present state of that dream which he thinks is in crisis and then suggests that to recognize that fact is one thing; to do an analysis of the Dream's underlying assumptions is another.

Rifkin writes,

Although American history is peppered with lamentations about the souring of the dream, the criticism never extends to the assumptions that underlie the dream, but only to political, economic and social forces that

thwart its realization. To suggest that the dream itself is misguided, outdated, and even damaging to the American psyche, would be considered almost treasonous. Yet, I would like to suggest just that.

I opened with Paul Krugman's statement that "much of what serious people believe rests on prejudice, not analysis," because the task Rifkin takes on – examining the underlying assumptions of the Dream – is where analysis will run into prejudice. Nevertheless, his examination is critical for an understanding of our present national situation. His particular attention to the American Dream arises from his large work, *The Empathic Civilization*, which gives an overview of the human story in its evolution and holds hope and possibility for a new stage of the human project.

Rifkin portrays the broad sweep of human history as far back as we can probe, but, for our purposes, Rifkin notes the cultural divide between faith versus reason, faith dominating the first millenium and a half of the Common Era, with reason becoming dominant with the Age of Enlightenment. It is his contention that we are moving beyond the faith-reason divide toward an empathic civilization. In a blog entitled "Empathic Civilization: Why Have We Become So Uncivil?" (posted 03/01/2010), Rifkin writes,

At the dawn of the modern market economy and nation-state era, the philosophers of the Enlightenment challenged the Age of Faith, that governed over the feudal economy, with the Age of Reason. Theologians and philosophers have continued to battle over faith vs. reason ever since, their debates often spilling over into the cultural and political arenas, with profound consequences for society.

The empathic advocates argue that, for the most part, both earlier narratives about human nature fail to plumb the depths of what makes us human and therefore leave us with cosmologies that are incomplete stories – that is, they fail to touch the deepest realities of existence. That's not to dismiss the critical elements that make the stories of faith and reason so compelling. It's only that something essential is missing – and that something is "embodied experience."

Both the Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – as well as the Eastern religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, either disparage bodily existence or deny its importance. So too does modern science and most of the rational philosophers of the Enlightenment. For the former, especially the Abrahamic faiths, the body is fallen and a source of evil. Its presence is a constant reminder of the depravity and mortality of human nature. For the latter, the body is mere scaffolding to maintain the mind, a necessary inconvenience to provide sensory perception, nutrients, and mobility. It is a machine the mind uses to impress its will on the world. It is even loathed because of its transient nature. The body is a

constant reminder of death, and therefore, feared, disparaged and dismissed in the world's great religions and among many of the Enlightenment philosophers.

But, Rifkin argues, the worldviews of both faith and reason, while still very much alive in the present, are giving way to what he calls the age of empathy. He points to recent developments:

New developments in evolutionary biology, cognitive science, and psychology are laying the groundwork for a wholesale reappraisal of human consciousness. The premodern notion that faith and God's grace are the windows to reality and the Enlightenment idea that reason is at the apex of modern consciousness are giving way to a more sophisticated approach to a theory of mind.

Researchers in a diverse range of fields and disciplines are beginning to reprioritize some of the critical features of faith and reason within the context of a broader empathic consciousness. They argue that all of human activity is embodied experience – that is, participation with the other – and that the ability to read and respond to another person “as if” he or she were oneself is the key to how human beings engage the world, create individual identity, develop language, learn to reason, become social, establish cultural narratives, and define reality and existence.

Rifkin is making a bold and daring claim that human nature at its core is empathic – in contrast to widely accepted views – from both the religious and the Enlightenment thinkers, that human nature is “fallen,” is depraved in religious parlance and competitive, even predatory, self-serving, acquisitive – every man for himself and winner take all in the view of a market economy stemming from Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Adam Smith and others. Just what does he mean when he claims the deepest core of human nature is to be empathetic? Let me expand a bit on the nature of empathy as he explains it and then illustrate it with stories that reveal it.

As I indicated above, the recognition of an empathic core to the human being is a relatively recent discovery with much work remaining to demonstrate and document it. Why has the realization of human empathy taken so long to understand? According to Rifkin,

There is still another reason why empathy has yet to be seriously examined in all of its anthropological and historical detail. The difficulty lies in the evolutionary process itself. Empathic consciousness has grown slowly over the 175,000 years of human history. It has sometimes flourished, only to recede for long periods of time. Its progress has been irregular, but its trajectory is clear. Empathic development and the development of selfhood go hand in hand and accompany the increasingly complex

energy-consuming social structures that make up the human journey. (We will examine this relationship throughout the book.)

Because the development of selfhood is so completely intertwined with the development of empathic consciousness, the very term “empathy” didn’t become part of the human vocabulary until 1909 – about the same time that modern psychology began to explore the internal dynamics of the unconscious and consciousness itself. In other words, it wasn’t until human beings were developed enough in human selfhood that they could begin thinking about the nature of their innermost feelings and thoughts in relation to other people’s innermost feelings and thoughts that they were able to recognize the existence of empathy, find the appropriate metaphors to discuss it, and probe the deep recesses of its multiple meanings.

We have to remember that as recently as six generations ago, our great-great-grandparents – living circa mid-to-late 1880’s – were not enculturated to think therapeutically. My own grandparents were unable to probe their feelings and thinking in order to analyze how their past emotional experiences and relationships affected their behavior toward others and their sense of self. They were untutored in the coming of the age of psychology. Young people are thoroughly immersed in therapeutic consciousness and comfortable with thinking about, getting in touch with and analyzing their own innermost feelings, emotions, and thoughts – as well as those of their fellows.

The precursor to empathy was the word “sympathy” – a term that came into vogue during the European Enlightenment. The Scottish economist Adam Smith wrote a book on moral sentiments in 1759. Although far better known for his theory of the marketplace, Smith devoted considerable attention to the question of human emotions. Sympathy, for Smith, Hume, other philosophers, and literary figures of the time, meant feeling sorry for another’s plight. Empathy shares emotional territory with sympathy but is markedly different. (*The Empathetic Civilization*, p. 11f)

Rifkin connects empathy to its origins in sympathy and makes the distinction.

The term “empathy” is derived from the German word *Einfühlung*, coined by Robert Vischer in 1872 and used in German aesthetics. *Einfühlung* relates to how observers project their own sensibilities onto an object of adoration or contemplation and is a way of explaining how one comes to appreciate and enjoy the beauty of, for example, a work of art. The German philosopher and historian Wilhelm Dilthey borrowed the term from aesthetics and began to use it to describe the mental process by which one person enters into another’s being and comes to know how they feel and think.

In 1909, the American psychologist E.B. Titchener translated *Einfühlung* into a new word, “empathy.” Titchener had studied with Wilhelm Wundt, the father of modern psychology, while in Europe. Like many young psychologists in the field, Titchener was primarily interested in the key concept of introspection, the process by which a person examines his or her own inner feelings and drives, emotions, and thoughts to gain a sense of personal understanding about the formation of his or her identity and selfhood. The “pathy” in empathy suggests that we enter into the emotional state of another’s suffering and feel his or her pain as if it were our own.

Variations of empathy soon emerged, including “empathic” and “to empathize,” as the term became part of the popular psychological culture emerging in cosmopolitan centers in Vienna, London, New York, and elsewhere. Unlike sympathy, which is more passive, empathy conjures up active engagement – the willingness of an observer to become –part of another’s experience, to share the feeling of that experience... (p. 12)

Is that the core of the human being in your experience? Why, if it is so, has human history seemed to describe quite another human being? Rifkin acknowledges that the official chroniclers of the human story – the historians – “have given short shrift to empathy as a driving force in the unfolding of human history. They write about social conflicts and wars, heroes and evil wrongdoers, technological progress and the exercise of power.” Only rarely is the other side of the human experience covered – the side that speaks of our deeply social nature and the evolution and extension of human affection. Rifkin contends,

History, on the other hand, is more often than not made by the disgruntled and discontented, the angry and rebellious – those interested in exercising authority and exploiting others and their victims, interested in righting wrongs and restoring justice. By this reckoning, much of the history that is written is about the pathology of power.

Perhaps that is why, when we come to think about human nature, we have such a bleak analysis. Our collective memory is measured in terms of crises and calamities, harrowing injustices, and terrifying episodes of brutality inflicted on each other and our fellow creatures. But if these were the defining elements of human experience, we would have perished as a species long ago.

All of which raises the question “Why have we come to think of life in such dire terms?” The answer is that tales of misdeeds and woe surprise us. They are unexpected and, therefore, trigger alarm and heighten our interest. That is because such events are novel and not the norm, but they are newsworthy and for that reason they are the stuff of history.

The everyday world is quite different. Although life as it's lived on the ground, close to home, is peppered with suffering, stresses, injustices, and foul play, it is, for the most part, lived out in hundreds of small acts of kindness and generosity. Comfort and compassion between people creates goodwill, establishes the bonds of sociality, and gives joy to people's lives. Much of our daily interaction with our fellow human beings is empathic because that is our core nature. Empathy is the very means by which we create social life and advance civilization. In short, it is the extraordinary evolution of empathic consciousness that is the quintessential underlying story of human history, even if it has not been given the serious attention it deserves by our historians. (*The Empathic Civilization*, p. 10)

I was given *The Empathic Civilization* for my birthday in February and I was reading it during the Winter Olympics. I was reading about empathy at the deepest core of our being when I actually experienced an instance of the human family being one. Did you watch the recent Winter Olympics in Vancouver? If you did is there one moment in particular that stands out for you? For me it was the moment when Joannie Brochere, the Canadian figure skater, finished her first program – a brilliant performance and, at its completion, burst into tears. Her parents had come to Vancouver to support her bid for an Olympic medal. A day after arriving her mother died of a heart attack. It was decided Joannie would skate nevertheless. She did. She did it beautifully – for her mother – and then burst into tears. I think there was not a dry eye in the Olympic stadium nor anywhere in the world where people were watching. The TV commentator Scott Hamilton's voice cracked with emotion. In those moments the world was one, united in empathetic embrace of that young woman. I was a beautiful moment. I knew immediately that Rifkin's claim for empathy at our core was right.

Rifkin knows that claim will not prove convincing through all sorts of scientific studies of the brain – not through any form of rational argument where various voices debate the issue. Thus before making his case for human nature being empathic he relates an historical incident that has the same effect on us as did the Joannie Brochere moment. He opens chapter one relating the story of December 24, 1914, in Flanders, Belgium:

The evening of December 24, 1914, Flanders. The first world war in history was entering into its fifth month. Millions of soldiers were bedded down in makeshift trenches latticed across the European countryside. In many places the opposing armies were dug in within thirty to fifty yards of each other and within shouting distance. The conditions were hellish. The bitter-cold winter air chilled to the bone. The trenches were waterlogged. Soldiers shared their quarters with rats and vermin. Lacking adequate latrines, the stench of human excrement was everywhere. The men slept upright to avoid the mud and sludge of their makeshift arrangements. Dead soldiers littered the no-man's-land between opposing forces, the

bodies left to rot and decompose within yards of their still-living comrades who were unable to collect them for burial.

As dusk fell over the battlefields, something extraordinary happened. The Germans began lighting candles on the thousands of small Christmas trees that had been sent to the front to lend some comfort to the men. The German soldiers then began to sing Christmas carols – first “Silent Night,” then a stream of other songs followed. The English soldiers were stunned. One soldier, gazing in disbelief at the enemy lines, said the blazed trenches looked “like the footlights of a theater.” The English soldiers responded with applause, at first tentatively, then with exuberance. They began to sing Christmas carols back to their German foes to equally robust applause.

A few men from both sides crawled out of their trenches and began to walk across the no-man’s-land toward each other. Soon hundreds followed. As word spread across the front, thousands of men poured out of their trenches. They shook hands, exchanged cigarettes and cakes and showed photos of their families. They talked about where they hailed from, reminisced about Christmases past, and joked about the absurdity of war.

The next morning, as the Christmas sun rose over the battlefield of Europe, tens of thousands of men – some estimates put the number as high as 100,000 soldiers – talked quietly with one another. Enemies just twenty-four hours earlier, they found themselves helping each other bury their dead comrades. More than a few pickup soccer matches were reported. Even officers at the front participated, although when the news filtered back to the high command in the rear, the generals took a less enthusiastic view of the affair. Worried that the truce might undermine military morale, the generals quickly took measures to rein in their troops.

The surreal “Christmas truce” ended as abruptly as it began – all in all, a small blip in a war that would end in November 1918 with 8.5 million military deaths in the greatest episode of human carnage in the annals of history until that time. For a few short hours, no more than a day, tens of thousands of human beings broke ranks, not only from their commands but from their allegiances to country, to show their common humanity. Thrown together to maim and kill, they courageously stepped outside of their institutional duties to commiserate with one another and to celebrate one another’s lives.

While the battlefield is supposed to be a place where heroism is measured in one’s willingness to kill and die for a noble cause that transcends one’s everyday life, these men chose a different type of courage. They reached out to each other’s very private suffering and sought solace in each other’s plight. Walking across no-man’s-land, they found themselves in one

another. The strength to comfort each other flowed from a deep unspoken sense of their individual vulnerability and their unrequited desire for the companionship of their fellows.

It was, without reserve, a very human moment. Still, it was reported as a strange lapse at the time. A century later, we commemorate the episode as a nostalgic interlude in a world we have come to define in very different terms. (p. 6f)

I get goose bumps reading that story even though I've read it many times. Something happens to me inside – some “Yes, yes, that is the way it should be – always, among all people.” I know in my “heart,” my inner being, what rationally I cannot prove. I'm reminded of a statement of Rudolph Otto in his classic, *The Holy*: “The feeling which remains when the concept fails.” Whether or not one can argue the biological, psychological, or spiritual bases of empathy at the core of our being, one knows that it is true in one's heart of hearts. As Rifkin comments on that Christmas Eve, he denies it was some sort of fluke:

But was it a lapse or was it an epiphany moment when what is deepest in our human nature came to expression in a most remarkable fashion?

Yet what transpired in the battlefields of Flanders on Christmas Eve 1914 between tens of thousands of young men had nothing to do with original sin or productive labor. And the pleasure those men sought in each other's company bore little resemblance to the superficial rendering of pleasure offered up by nineteenth-century utilitarians and even less to Freud's rather pathological account of a human race preoccupied by the erotic impulse.

The men at Flanders expressed a far deeper human sensibility – one that emanates from the very marrow of human existence and that transcends the portals of time and the exigencies of whatever contemporary orthodoxy happens to rule. We need only ask ourselves why we feel so heartened at what these men did. They chose to be human. And the central human quality they expressed was empathy for one another. (p. 8)

I tell the story of Joannie Brochere and relate the Christmas Eve “epiphany moment” because we can “feel” what occurred in both instances, whereas simply to cite the claim with supporting scientific analysis of child development, psychological and cognitive data invites arguments, and it is so easy to move into an intellectual discussion when we are dealing with the deepest level of feeling which defies rational statement because it is the language of the heart.

I began with Rifkin's question, “Do we need a new American Dream?” He raises the question out of his sense of our present national condition and his conviction that humans are empathetic at their core. As we've noted, he sees the American

Dream rooted in Enlightenment thought of the modern period that replaced the theological view that prevailed for the first 1600 years of the Common Era. The Enlightenment philosophers saw human reason as the apex of being human and that is what Rifkin challenges with his claim that empathy marks us rather than the ideology of faith from the feudal period or reason from the Enlightenment Age. In a word, the present is increasingly a world of growing global consciousness and we have a dream born of eighteenth-century thinking when the Age of Reason and the amazing vision of our founding fathers set us on the course to greatness.

Rifkin suggests the vitriolic rhetoric, the nasty partisanship, the “take the government back” and “get government out of the way” represent a sense of panic that we are losing the American Dream and the reaction is precisely a lack of empathy which, like it or not, will increasingly mark our global civilization. That is where we have arrived and are increasingly moving: the global civilization, the empathic civilization, are understood as threatening the American Dream – and they are. In a blog posted 02/08/2010 Rifkin asks “Empathic Civilization: Why Have We Become So Uncivil?” He suggests,

When we talk about civility, we are really talking about empathy: the willingness to listen to another’s point of view, to put one’s self in another’s shoes and to emotionally and cognitively experience what they are feeling and thinking. To civilize is to empathize.

Below all of the fiery rhetoric and finger pointing, the acid comments and degrading personal attacks, is a deep-seated fear and mistrust of “the other” – in other words, a lack of empathy.

My sense is that the fear that is spreading like a wild fire across America is due, in large part, to a seismic shift occurring in our thinking about the most cherished values of American life: our notions of freedom, equality, and democracy. In other words, what we are really discussing – underneath the surface of the political and ideological debates – are our beliefs about the basic drives and aspirations of human beings.

Freedom in the nation state era has been closely associated with the ability to control one’s labor and secure one’s property, because that is the way to optimize pleasure and be happy. The classical economists argued that every individual is free to the extent he or she can pursue their individual self-interest in the material world. Freedom, in the rational mode, is the freedom to be autonomous and independent and to be an island to one’s self. To be free is to be rational, detached, acquisitive, and utilitarian. The role of government, in turn, is to safeguard private property relations and allow market forces to operate, unfettered by political constraints. The conventional American dream is personal opportunity to succeed in the marketplace.

Against that “conventional American Dream,” Rifkin sets out our new global situation:

The empathic approach to freedom in the emerging Biosphere Age is based on a different premise. Freedom means being able to optimize the full potential of one's life, and the fulfilled life is one of companionship, affection, and belonging, made possible by ever deeper and more meaningful personal experiences and relationships with others – across neighborhoods, continents and the world. One is free, then, to the extent that one has been nurtured and raised in a global society that allows for empathetic opportunities at every level of human discourse. The new dream is the quality of life of humanity.

Rifkin makes a strong case for the incivility of the present being the result of “what we are really discussing underneath the surface of the political and ideological debates,” – that is our beliefs about the basic drives and aspirations of human beings.” What we fail to do is carry on civil discourse. As I cited earlier in this essay, Rifkin contends that our criticism “never extends to the assumptions that underlie the dream, but only to political, economic and social forces that thwart its realization”. He knows well that what is needed is to recognize that “the dream itself is misguided, outdated, and even damaging to the American psyche and, as he writes, that “would be considered almost treasonous.” However, before we call for his head, we need to hear him further; empathy need not threaten our human existence at its best and highest. Rifkin writes,

The ability to recognize oneself in the other and the other in oneself is a deeply democratizing experience. Empathy is the soul of democracy. It is an acknowledgment that each life is unique, unalienable, and deserving of equal consideration in the public square. The evolution of empathy and the evolution of democracy have gone hand in hand throughout history. The more empathic the culture, the more democratic its values and governing institutions. While apparent, it's strange how little attention has been paid to the inextricable relationship between empathic extension and democratic expansion in the study of history and evolution of governance.

Reimagining freedom, equality, and democracy from an empathic perspective has far-ranging consequences for the kind of society that we choose to live in. We would need to rethink our parenting styles, educational systems, business practices and even governance itself to reflect our empathic nature. This would constitute nothing less than a cultural revolution.

No one would deny that there is merit to our long-standing ideas about freedom, equality and democracy – especially the notions of personal responsibility, self-sufficiency, and the protection of basic economic and

political rights. Still, it's hard to deny the fact that a younger generation is beginning to broaden and deepen its sense of freedom, equality and democracy in an increasingly interconnected, interdependent and collaborative world.

Perhaps what is needed is a more transparent public debate around our core views of freedom, equality and democracy. Maybe it is time to suggest a moratorium on the hyperbolic political rhetoric and incivility and begin a civil conversation around our differing views on human nature. This would offer us a moment in time to listen to each other, share our feelings, thoughts, concerns and aspirations, with the goal of trying to better understand each other's perspectives, and hopefully find some emotional and cognitive common ground.

Had I another life, that is the conversation in which I would love to be engaged. I would love to set forth the claims made by Rifkin in the preceding paragraphs and engage in a transparent public debate around our core views on freedom, equality and democracy.

These are his claims:

- The evolution of empathy and the evolution of democracy have gone hand in hand throughout history;
- The more empathic the culture, the more democratic its values and governing institutions.

Thus, the inextricable relationship between empathic extension and democratic expansion.

Our problem today is not that there is a lack of conversation although perhaps conversation is too positive a term for the constant diet, 24/7, of political posturing and media anchor types' inflamed rhetoric and betrayal of the truth. Our problem today is the lack of civil discourse, where we genuinely listen to each other, genuinely seek to hear each other and understand each other. That requires empathy.

Antonio Damasio, a noted neuroscientist, has demonstrated through extensive studies of brain functioning that there is no such thing as a "cool headed reasoner." (*Descartes' Error*, 1994, cited by R. I. Benjamine in an essay on mediation). That means even as I recognize the critical necessity of civil discourse I must be aware that the human problem resides in me as well. I can become aware. I can "catch" myself. I can keep checking myself. That I must do.

Further, I can be vigilant over against those who try to influence me. For example, the cable opinion shows or Talk Radio – let me mention three: Rush Limbaugh, Glen Beck, Keith Obermann. There are many others but in the case of these three I have to ask, are they appealing to my better angels or to my demons? Are they stoking my fears, my prejudices, my darker emotions or aiding me in being civil, open and fair? Living with such awareness is the best way to be

a critical listener and not just one of the sheep being led to aberration, hate and even violence.

Let me cite one example. A writer I have come to appreciate is Robert Wright who writes an occasional column in the *New York Times* on culture, politics and world affairs. On June 29, 2010 he wrote, "The Myth of Modern Jihad." It concerned the response of Daniel Pipes to the Times Square bomber's confession in which Shahzad said, "I'm going to plead guilty a hundred times over. I consider myself a mujahid, a Muslim soldier."

Pipes, I've discovered, is located on the right end of the political spectrum, known for his anti-Islamic position. (His father before him was an anti-Russian crusader.) Daniel Pipes is a Harvard Ph.D. and has lectured there and is presently at Stanford. His pedigree thus indicates scholarly achievement. His response to the Times Square bomber's confession, however, bespoke his anti-Muslim bias and confirms what I stated above about how none of us escapes bias. Wright responds to Pipes' response to the bomber's confession:

This got some fist pumps in right-wing circles, because it seemed to confirm that America faces all-out jihad, and must marshal an accordingly fierce response. On National Review Online, Daniel Pipes wrote that Shahzad's "bald declaration" should make Americans "accept the painful fact that Islamist anger and aspirations" are the problem; we must name "Islamism as the enemy." And, as Pipes has explained in the past, once you realize that your enemy is a bunch of Muslim holy warriors, the path forward is clear: "Violent jihad will probably continue until it is crushed by a superior military force."

At the risk of raining on Pipe's parade: If you look at what Shahzad actually said, the upshot is way less grim. In fact, at a time when just about everyone admits that our strategy in Afghanistan isn't working, Shahzad brings refreshing news: maybe America can win the war on terrorism without winning the war in Afghanistan.

As a bonus, it turns out there's a hopeful message not just in Shahzad's testimony, but in Pipes' incomprehension of it. Pipes exhibits a cognitive distortion that may be afflicting Americans broadly – not just on the right, but on the center and left as well. And seeing the distortion is the first step toward escaping it.

Cognitive distortion. Wright points to it even more sharply and confirms the tendency that afflicts all; but in Pipes' cognitive distortion Wright sees hope.

Now on to the second cause for hope: Pipes' confusion itself. For these purposes, it doesn't matter whether Shahzad was telling the truth, because Pipes certainly thinks he was. Pipes applauds Shahzad's "forthright

statement of purpose,” adding, “However abhorrent, this tirade does have the virtue of truthfulness.”

So then why doesn't it bother Pipes that Shahzad's depiction of Islamic holy war as defensive counter-attack is *the opposite* of the depiction Pipes has peddled for years? How can he possibly hail Shahzad's comments as confirming his worldview?

It's only human nature. Once you decide that some group is your implacable enemy, your mind gets a little warped. Virtually all incoming evidence is thereafter seen as consistent with that model.

The same tendency to which he points in the case of Pipes' reaction to Shahzad's confession was at work in the Cold War according to Wright:

This cognitive distortion reared its head in America's previous cosmic struggle. Just about all cold war historians agree that Americans bought into the “myth of monolithic communism.” Once we decided that the communist menace was a single, vast, implacable force, we failed to appreciate, for example, tensions between Russia and China that in retrospect seem obviously important. We had our model, and we were sticking to it. Pipes has his model, and he's sticking to it. He needn't *dismiss* evidence inconsistent with it, because he can't really see the evidence to begin with.

This same tendency may now be impeding America's ability to conduct the war on terrorism wisely....

The analogy with communism is worth dwelling on. People warned that if Vietnam fell, the dominoes would keep falling until America itself was under communist control. After all, Russia and China – the sponsors of our Vietnamese enemy – would join with the Vietnamese government to use Vietnam as a forward base if we were chased out. You know – kind of the way al Qaeda would join with a Taliban that controlled any chunk of Afghanistan to torment America.

Wright ends the piece suggesting what Rifkin would affirm.

I've been kind of hard on Pipes – in parts of this column and in an earlier column. So I'm glad to have the opportunity to emphasize that he's just an example of the human mind at work, albeit a particularly revved up example. It's only natural to attribute to your enemy more cohesion and menace than is in order. We used to do this with communism, and now we do it with radical Islam – and radical Muslims, for their part, do it with us. It's a temptation we all have to fight. Maybe if we fought it as hard as we fight other enemies, we'd have fewer of them.

Because this whole train of thought has been so much with me, over the past decade or so, I've taken note – even before Rifkin's *Empathic Civilization* – of moments that have changed the face of history. And since reading Rifkin and deciding to address this matter today, I've clipped instances of reconciling moments when I've become aware of them. For example:

In April-May 1940, nearly 22,000 Polish officer corps, intellectuals, professors, lawmakers, and professionals were murdered by Russia in the Forest of Katyn in Russia. The whole occasion is now being studied. (The official Russian version points to German responsibility.) That historical tragedy has been annually remembered by the Poles. Recently there has been communication between the Poles and the Russians. On February 10, 2010, Prime Minister Putin invited his colleague Donald Tusk to attend a Katyn memorial in April. The visit took place on April 7, 2010, when Putin and Tusk commemorated the 70th anniversary of the massacre. On April 10, 2010, a plane carrying the Polish President, Lech Kaczynski, his wife and 87 other politicians and high ranking military crashed in Smolensk killing all 96 aboard. They were on their way to attend the 70th anniversary of the massacre. That was the occasion for an op-ed column by Roger Cohen, appearing in the *New York Times*. Cohen wrote,

My first thought, hearing of the Polish tragedy, was that history's gyre can be of an unbearable cruelty, decapitating Poland's elite twice in the same cursed place, Katyn.

My second was to call by old friend Adam Michnik in Warsaw. Michnik, an intellectual imprisoned six times by the former puppet-Soviet Communist rulers, once told me:

"Anyone who has suffered that humiliation, at some level, wants revenge. I know all the lies. I saw people being killed. But I also know that revanchism is never ending. And my obsession has been that we should have a revolution that does not resemble the French or Russian, but rather the American, in the sense that it be for something, not against something. A revolution for a constitution, not a paradise. An anti-utopian revolution. Because utopias lead to the guillotine and the gulag."

"Katyn is the place of death of the Polish intelligentsia," Michnik, now the soul of Poland's successful *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper, said when I reached him by phone. "This is a terrible national tragedy. But in my sadness I am optimistic because Putin's strong and wise declaration has opened a new phase in Polish-Russian relations, and because we Poles are showing we can be responsible and stable."

Michnik was referring to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's words after he decided last week to join, for the first time, Polish officials

commemorating the anniversary of the murder at Katyn of thousands of Polish officers by the Soviet Union at the start of World War II. Putin, while defending the Russian people, denounced the “cynical lies” that had hidden the truth of Katyn, said “there is no justification for these crimes” of a “totalitarian regime” and declared, “We should meet each other halfway, realizing that it is impossible to live only in the past.”

The declaration, dismissed by the paleolithic Russian Communist Party, mattered less than Putin’s presence, head bowed in that forest of shame. Watching him beside Poland’s Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, I thought of Francois Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl hand-in-hand at Verdun in 1984: of such solemn moments of reconciliation has the miracle of a Europe whole and free been built. Now that Europe extends eastward toward the Urals.

I thought even of Willy Brandt on his knees in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1970, a turning point on the road to a German-Polish reconciliation more miraculous in its way even than the dawning of the post-war German-French alliance. And now perhaps comes the most wondrous rapprochement, the Polish-Russian.

Cohen concludes the piece on a strong note of hope.

So do not tell me that cruel history cannot be overcome. Do not tell me that Israelis and Palestinians can never make peace. Do not tell me that the people in the streets of Bangkok and Bishkek and Tehran dream in vain of freedom and democracy. Do not tell me that lies can stand forever.

Ask the Poles. They know.

Another recent event on the world scene is the attack by Israel troopers on the flotilla heading toward Gaza in an effort to break the Israeli blockade. I need not rehearse that event. I refer to it only to give another example of how empathy or the lack of it has serious consequences. A *New York Times* editorial just yesterday records the continuing discord between Israel and Turkey, as the flotilla was supported by Turkey and nine Turkish citizens were killed in the Israeli operation.

After the Flotilla
Published July 9, 2010

Nearly six weeks later, Turkey and Israel are still stoking anger over the disastrous Israeli attack on a Gaza-bound aid ship. Their posturing and threats are playing into the hands of extremists. Both countries need to find ways to cool things down.

Turkey is furious about the death of eight Turks and one Turkish-American in the raid. Israel claims that its soldiers acted in self-defense and that the flotilla was organized by radical activists, supported by Turkey, who were bent on provoking an incident. Israel's government has opened its own review, with outside observers, but has resisted calls for an international investigation – the only chance of getting Turkey to answer questions.

Since the raid, Turkey has recalled its ambassador from Jerusalem, halted military exercises with Israel and banned Israeli military planes from its airspace. It is now threatening to sever all diplomatic ties if Israel does not apologize, compensate the victims' families and accept an international investigation.

Israel has withdrawn its defense advisers from Turkey, warned Israelis against visiting their once solid Muslim ally and impounded the seized ships. It is refusing to pay compensation or apologize.

Of course, this is a minor moment in a massive international problem. Nonetheless, one sees how hardened positions lacking the empathic dimension can create a threat to global peace and well-being for all Earth's children.

One more example. This one again creating hope coming from yesterday's *Times*. The headline: "For Final, South Africans Put Past Aside." The "Final," of course, refers to this afternoon's World Cup Final between The Netherlands and Spain. The editorial notes many in South Africa will cheer for the Dutch because of the long colonial connection, even though what is brought to mind by that connection is apartheid and the oppression of blacks for so long.

Reading that I was reminded of Nelson Mandela and the movie *Invictus*. If you haven't seen it, do so. It is an inspiring movie about the inspiring man, Mandela, who after serving a total of 27 years in prison for his engagement in winning human rights for blacks, was elected the President of South Africa in 1994, serving a five-year term and, because of his age, choosing not to run for a second term.

The movie records how Mandela used the South African rugby team to unite the nation. He realized the power of sports to bring people together. In 1995 South Africa hosted the Rugby World Cup and it was a powerful uniting force in South Africa, the Springboks defeating New Zealand in the final. Mandela presented the trophy to Springbok captain, Francois Pienaar, wearing a Springbok Jersey with Pienaar's number 6 on it. That was a major step forward black and white reconciliation.

Mandela had early experience with the Methodist tradition. It was, however, the Hindu Gandhi who influenced Mandela, putting him on the path of *Satyagraha*

– non-violent resistance – in South Africa. And Gandhi was greatly influenced by the Way of Jesus.

I read from the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5: 38-48. Jesus transcends what was an advance in human relations – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – in other words, response in proportion to the injury. No taking of a life for a minor offence in other words. The Mosaic tradition had made progress to get to that point. But Jesus goes all the way – no violence. In his own ministry non-violent resistance was his way. And the power of that non-violent resistance brought him to a crisis point. The powers that be, imperial and collaborating religious leaders condemned him to death – crucifixion. He died the way he died because he lived the way he lived. He died for a cause, the cause of God as he understood God and his people on whose behalf he brought his historical moment to a crisis. A cross, not a place of atonement for the sin of the world in my understanding but a place of integrity, authenticity, giving the seal of faithful love to his life and ministry. Therefore a symbol ever after of love and faithfulness to the end.

I have on occasion confessed that for most of my ministry I did not preach on the Sermon on the Mount. I didn't know what to do with it. My Christian faith was a salvation cult. I honestly, desperately desired people to believe and be saved. The Jesus of atonement provided salvation to be experienced here and consummated in the hereafter. I was sincere. I was passionate, and I missed the glory and wonder of Jesus. I just didn't "get it" and I'm afraid the vast majority of the Christian church still doesn't get it.

Love your enemies, he taught. Love beyond the bounds of your clan, your tribe. Take your cue from God whose sun shines on the evil and the good, whose rain falls on the gardens of all indiscriminately. In a word, be mature as your Father in Heaven is mature. The Greek word *telios* is translated "perfect" but that gives the wrong impression. The word really means having attained the purpose/end for which one is created – thus perfect in the sense of full grown, mature.

Talk about empathy! There you have it. The Greek word for love is *agape*. It is God's love. It is a love that sees the value of another and affirms it. It is not *eros* – erotic love, though that is one of creation's great gifts. It is not *philia* – brotherly (sisterly) love, wonderful as that is. It is *agape* – the love that in loving creates worth and value in the other.

In the anguish of crucifixion Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing." That takes my breath away! True to the end. Loving to the end.

Do we need a new American Dream? Dear God, yes! In a world become a neighborhood there is only one hope of survival – loving our enemies until they become friends. Refusing violence, making an end of war.

I regret it took me so long to find the Way of Jesus and move ever so slightly toward maturity – the maturity that is God-like.

God have mercy on us all.

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