

# Fear and Loathing

Categories: Uncategorized

The recent election exposed many fault lines in our democracy. The chief among them was the amount of fear and the kind of fear that was demonstrated by our nation. It is clear at this point that we have not really recovered from the twin twenty-first century traumas of 9/11 and the economic crises of 2008. Both showed us that we were vulnerable to attack from enemies we had hardly noticed before. The terrorist attack on 9/11 left us feeling fearful that something else might happen to us. We feared what those we did not know or understand might do to us. The economic meltdown came with a sudden fury that decimated whole communities and gave us a sense that we had no real power over our own financial future and the elites who were unaccountable would decide our future for us.

These disruptions caused our nation to turn inward and to turn on each other. We developed a fear of the "other" and what they might bring to our safety or our welfare. They caused us to doubt each other and to doubt the institutions we thought might protect us. Even if we were not affected directly, we have all been affected indirectly.

The recent election showed us how fearful and angry we have become. Before the election the supporters of Trump were angry at all sorts of things. Some we mad at immigrants, Syrian refugees, liberals, the government and anything that seemed to threaten the life they love and the values they hold. They feared for their economic future. And that fear turned to anger. Now that Trump has won, they are hopeful he will do all he promised.

Before the election, the Clinton voters were hopeful of the changes she might bring but are now fearful of what a government under Trump might create. Will we roll back the progress that minorities of every stripe have made? Will we become a nation of fascists led by an authoritarian strongman who cares little for others? This fear has driven thousands to the streets to vent their frustrations.

The simple truth is that we do not know what the future holds for our country and that is perhaps the scariest thing for all of us. My aim here isn't to take sides or to try to reflect on either side. The reality is that we are all in this together. What happens to one of us, affects all of us.

Martin Luther King pointed out in his letter from the Birmingham jail that "in a real sense all of life is interrelated. All of us are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly." With that as our profound truth, what are we to do with this fear and loathing that permeates the land?

I know that schools are immersed in trying to cope with the outcome of our reversion to the reptilian brain that now seems to control our body politic. Schools have seen uptick in racial, homophobic, and anti-Semitic actions. Bullying, which under the best of circumstances has been an ongoing problem, seems to have increased dramatically.

So our first role, as it is with medicine, is to do no harm, but we must go further to insure that no harm is done by others. We have to try to protect the most vulnerable whoever that might be. We should move swiftly and forcefully to make certain that students know that, even if the rest of our society seems scary, the school is a safe place.

But that is really only the beginning. As I have pointed out in previous articles, we must help our students reconnect to the core values of our country. We have to help them remember and understand the expectations of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” that undergirds our democracy. They must understand what rights and liberty mean. They must see their obligations to their fellow citizens. They must also be taught the duties and obligations we each have as citizens-not the least of which is the need to vote.

Even that will not be enough. We have to help them move out of their reptilian brain which produces only fight or flight options. The truth is that the human brain has enormous capacity to reason. We have to help them use that part of their brain. They need to understand how to step back, rather than rushing forward. They need to learn the power of perspective. They need to learn how to find facts amidst the fiction that permeates our culture. They need to learn to listen to each other in thought and respect. I have always been struck that even for adults, listening is mostly just waiting for a pause in the conversation to throw in your opinions. Real listening means actually accepting and thinking about what others are saying.

The power of social-emotional learning has never been more obvious. We need to become a nation where empathy rules over emotionality and where kindness trumps cruelty. If we can begin to do that, the future, while still being unknown and unknowable, will be a bit less frightening and offer a sense of hope and possibility which is what the future should always be for all of us, but especially for our children.