

Calling all Angels
Helping to Heal our Necrophilous, Autistic, Authoritarian Society
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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Prior to the recent election I watched and read the news obsessively. Now that it's over I can hardly bring myself to keep up with it. I know I'm not alone because several have told me they're feeling the same way. Reality isn't always easy, sometimes the truth hurts, and it's natural for us to want to avoid things that cause us pain and anxiety. Yet, as unpleasant as it is, I do keep up with the news because I know that avoiding our problems is no solution, that I must have the fortitude to face reality so as not to become delusional, to face my pain so as not to repress my emotions and become mentally or physically ill, and, as an activist, to face the challenges before me if I am to be an effective agent of change.

In facing all of this, I'm struggling to understand exactly what has happened and how it could have happened, for it seems reasonable that we must understand what went wrong before we can find a solution. I've heard others attempt to frame the matter, and suggest how, as a minister, I ought to frame it for others. Some say we shouldn't worry about any of it because we're learning some grand cosmic lesson that will help us all transcend to a higher level of consciousness. Others say we should each simply work on our own issues, our own intolerance, hatred, anger, and greed, so that our own goodness will radiate outward and eventually transform the entire world. Some say we can't blame those who voted for these circumstances because they are just misguided individuals with legitimate concerns who aren't accountable for the choices they make. Still others tell me we must blame ourselves because liberals are so unwilling to talk with those who think differently, and that we are condescending, and believe we understand the meaning of compassion and justice better than anyone else.

I will not go into the reasons I do not accept these frameworks, only that I do not. I bring them up now because I want you to know that I am aware that many of us are trying to figure out what has happened and why, that I realize there are many opinions, and, likely, many pieces to a complicated puzzle. I can only offer my piece of the puzzle, shaped by my own studies, outlook, analyzation, and, yes, my own biases. I say this because it is often the case that people disagree with what I say because they dislike the implications of my conclusions. In logic, this is a fallacy known as, "the Argument from Consequences," or the, "Outcome Bias," which rejects an argument simply because its implications are undesirable.

A crude example is of a patient who says, "But doctor, my leg can't be broken because I'm running a marathon this weekend." Another is, "Humans can't be the cause of Global Warming because that would mean we have to change our ways." Or, "Hey, you can't blame those who put Trump into office for putting Trump into office because that's not nice." The obvious fallacy in these examples is that they don't consider the validity of the argument, only the appeal of the outcome. The doctor has an x-ray to support the diagnosis. There's lots of scientific data proving humans are responsible for Global Warming. And, at least, in accord

with our nation's electoral rules, Trump won the election because enough people voted for him. Just because broken legs, global warming, and millions of Americans voting for Trump are inconvenient truths, doesn't mean they are untrue.

The argument I made the Sunday after the election, the argument I continue to make, the argument I will make again today and have made many times long before anyone could have imagined a Trump Presidency, is that too many in our society mindlessly react to fear. I realize that to make a sound argument, that to understand a particular, I must first consider a universal, meaning I must make a generalization, even if it doesn't apply to everyone. And the first universal I accept, as the basis of my argument, is that *fear too often influences our decisions*.

I'm using these terms, *universals* and *particulars* because in logic it's possible to draw conclusions about a particular based upon a universal, but not about a universal based upon a particular. Here's a simple example: All dogs wag their tails, Spot is a dog, therefore, Spot wags its tail. In this example, we go from a universal truth about dogs wagging their tails to determine that a particular dog wags its tail. But arguing; Spot wags its tail, all dogs wag their tails, therefore, Spot is a dog, is not valid. Spot could be some other kind of animal that wags its tale, like a cow swatting flies or even a frightened rattlesnake.

Likewise, to say Trump voters made a decision, fear too often influences our decisions, therefore, Trump voters were influenced by fear, is unreasonable. Just as we need additional information in determining what kind of animal Spot is, we need additional information before determining the motivations of millions of particular voters. More specifically, just as we need to know something universal about dogs that makes every dog a dog, we would need, in this case, to understand something universal about fear before labeling a particular decision fearful. For simply making a decision doesn't necessarily mean it's motivated by fear, any more than having a tail necessarily make something a dog. So, the question is, how do we know when a decision is based on fear or not? What is universally true about fear that makes it possible for us to recognize it in particular situations, or as the basis of a particular decision?

If *fear too often influences our decisions*, then isn't it logical to conclude any decision, whether to eat chocolate cake or voting for a Democrat could also be motivated by fear? Maybe there's some truth to this. Chocolate cake, after all, is a type of comfort food, and, I will admit, although Hillary Clinton wasn't my first choice, I voted for her because I was terrified of the very alternative we've ended up with. Nevertheless, I'm only arguing fear *too often* motivates our decisions, not that we are always fearful and that every decision we make comes from fear. What we need to understand is what the universal features of any particular fear-based decision are. What makes decisions based on fear different from other kinds of decisions? What makes a dog different from other kinds of animals with tails?

But before addressing this, before exploring what fear based decisions look like, especially when made collectively, allow me to explain why I believe, or, in logical terms, why I have concluded, that fear is, in general, such a powerful motivator in our lives. My reasons, or,

again, in logical terms, my premises for this conclusion, are based upon my understanding of evolutionary psychology and brain science.

Although Evolutionary Psychology can be traced back to both Darwin¹ and Freud,² it didn't come into its own until relatively recently, around the turn of the 21st century, and is based on the belief that human psychology can be explained by understanding its biological advantages; by how, in short, certain attitudes motivate us to behave in ways that increase our chances of surviving and reproducing. A few years ago, in 2007, as I've mentioned at length in previous sermons, mental health researchers, led by Kevin J. Flannelly, introduced a particular branch of Evolutionary Psychology called, *Evolutionary Threat Assessment Systems Theory*, or ETAS Theory, for short, which suggests the neurological structures that help us evaluate the potential threat in any situation are the initial motivating factor in all we think and do. As one of its proponents, Cognitive Therapist, Paul Gilbert, succinctly explains, "the most important question faced everyday by all animals, including humans, is whether their immediate environment is dangerous or not."³ In other words, the first think we do in any situation is try to determine if we're safe.

Once an organism senses it is safe it normally returns from a state of hyper-alertness and anxiety to a state of relative calm, or homeostasis. But this isn't always the case, especially for some people with chemical imbalances or who have been traumatized in ways that prevent them from self-regulating, causing them to remain in chronic states of fear and anxiety even when they are safe. I gave a sermon a few months ago arguing this is true of the Fundamentalist mindset, which researchers have determined is characterized by paranoia, among other qualities, and thus ought to be classified as a disorder in the DSM. More than a few people responded with the outcome bias fallacy after that sermon, let me tell you.

That's all I'll say about my first premise, except to narrow in on the two main points, that our primary emotion, according to ETAS, is fear, and, secondly, it is possible to chronically remain in heightened levels and unhealthy, unnecessary states of fear. We start from fear and can get stuck in fear.

My second premise for concluding fear often motivates us is based upon my understanding of the triune brain structure. The oldest part of the brain, the brain stem, also called the R-complex, or Reptilian brain, is the part that responds instinctively to every situation through fight or flight. It's an important part of our biology for this very reason, because it automatically (instinctively) regulates our vitals, like respiration, pupil dilation, digestion,

¹ "In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation, that of the necessary acquirement of each mental power and capacity by gradation." —Darwin, Charles, *Origen of Species*, 1859, p. 488.

² "From Darwin I borrowed the hypothesis that [humans] originally lived in small hordes, each of the hordes stood under the rule of an older male, who governed by brute force, appropriated all the females, and belabored or killed all the young males, including his own sons." —Freud, Sigmund, *Moses and Monotheism*, (Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Hew York, NY, 1939, 1967), p. 168.

³ Flannelly, Kevin J., and Galek, Kathleen, *Religion, Evolution, and Mental Health: Attachment Theory and ETAS Theory*, **Journal of Religion and Health** (2010) 49-337-350, Published online, March 17, 2009, Springer Science & Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 340.

heartrate, the urge to procreate, with no thought whatsoever. In other words, we don't have to think about living to live. Living just happens, we can do it in our sleep, and the R-complex helps us survive by causing us to fight or flee at the slightest hint of danger, also without thinking.

The second layer of the brain, the Limbic system, sometimes called the mammalian or emotional brain, is also autonomic, meaning we don't have to think about it for it to take over. This is why we are seldom in control of our emotions. We don't decide, "I think I'll feel happy now," or, "I'm never going to feel angry or depressed again." We can, through discipline, gauge how we respond to our feelings, but we can't stop ourselves from feeling them. There are several primary emotions, as well as many secondary or auxiliary feelings, but the one that, again, seems to have special place in our neurology is fear. This is so because to the left and right sides of the limbic system are two almond shaped structures called the amygdala, which cause us to remain hypervigilant, ever on the lookout for danger. As Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* says, "the human amygdala," which is "relatively large compared to that in any of our evolutionary cousins...⁴ reacts instantaneously, like a neural tripwire, telegraphing a message of crisis to all part of the brain."⁵ He calls it an emotional hijacking during which, he says, "it triggers the secretion of the body's fight-or-flight hormones, mobilizes centers for movement, and activates the cardiovascular systems, the muscles and the gut." It also releases norepinephrine into our system heightening our sensations, and takes over the rest of the brain, including the thinking part.

This thinking part, the third layer of the brain, the neocortex, meaning "new brain," is responsible for executive function, or thinking ahead, considering the consequences of our actions, as well as empathy, considering how our decisions will impact others. Unlike the older two layers of the brain, the R-complex and the limbic system, which are autonomic and instinctive, thinking ahead and considering the welfare of others takes effort and intention, and is easily "hijacked" by our instincts and emotions. Again, as Goleman puts it, "there was an emotional brain long before there was a rational one."⁶ And that emotional brain, again, is rooted most deeply in fear.

So, without going into further explanation, I hope I've laid out a good argument for accepting my premise about fear, that it is often a strong motivator in human decisions, given that it is so fundamental to our psychology, biology, and neurology. If this is so, what then are the indicators that a particular decision is based on fear? I've already mentioned one indicator, paranoia, which might express itself, for instance, as extreme xenophobia, the fear of people from other places. A couple of weeks ago, for example, Trump fulfilled one of his xenophobic promises by issuing an executive order preventing Muslims from seven different countries, including those fleeing for their lives, from entering the U.S. And just this week, he ordered ICE, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement branch of the Department of Homeland Security, to begin rounding up the millions of undocumented Mexican immigrants he's

⁴ Goleman, Daniel, *Emotional Intelligence*, 10th Anniversary Edition, A Bantam Book, Random House, New York, NY, 1995, 2005, p. 14

⁵ Ibid., p. 14f.

⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

promised to export. In many cases, these have included people with no criminal records violently seized from their homes and workplaces. Given some of his racist comments and behaviors, like claiming Barack Obama wasn't eligible to be President because he's really an African, we can be appalled but not surprised by his appointment of white nationalist, Steve Bannon as his Chief Strategist; or Jeff Sessions to head the Justice Department, a man who has opposed Civil Rights, voting rights, the NAACP, and was denied a judgeship in 1986 because he was deemed too racist.

These actions, deplorable as they are for many of us, represent the fulfillment of Trump's campaign promises and should not surprise any of us, including those who elected him. Choosing to do so was, at least in part, a xenophobic decision.

Another symptom of fear is ignorance, which is not a word I use casually. Ignorance is no judgement of someone's intelligence. Ignorance is a choice to avoid acknowledging what's right in front of us—to willfully ignore it because we cannot accept its implications. Ignorance is the ultimate expression of the Outcome Bias. It's also a defense mechanism the prevents us from acknowledging our fear by helping us pretend there's nothing to be afraid of, no global warming, no people different from us, no news we don't want to hear; we simple turn to Fox, or MSNBC, or Breitbart, or Rush Limbaugh, to help keep us from bursting our own bubbles.

In the early days of psychology such chronic ignorance, the habit of avoiding information that bothers us, was called *autism*, which was different from the condition we now call by same name. As the founder of developmental psychology, Jean Piaget once explained, “the sole functions of autistic thought is to give immediate and unlimited satisfaction to desires and interests by deforming reality so as to adapt it to the ego.”⁷ Briefly put, the ego, the part of us that says “I,” has the ability to make things up. “For reality is infinitely plastic for the ego,” Piaget continues, “since autism is ignorant of that reality shared by all, which destroys illusion and enforces verification.”⁸ Again, in short, when we ignore reality outside ourselves, the reality shared by all, the empirical facts, we are, in classical terms, behaving autistically.

We should also keep in mind the root of this word, *autos*, means “self,” referring to a mindset that deludes itself by only believing self-generated images and ideas that may have no basis in reality. So, autism, in the classic sense, is almost another word for self-centeredness. In recent years, researchers have found those suffering from what we now call autism have little to no activity in the mirror neuron area of the brain, the part that allows us to recognize what others are feeling. As Jonah Lehrer writes in his book, *How We Decide*, “They looked at human faces with the part of the brain that normally recognizes objects. A person was just another thing. A face generated no more emotion than a chair.”⁹ The troubling thing about this, a Lehrer points out, is that, “moral-decision making is about sympathy...¹⁰ The ability to

⁷ Gruber, Howard E. & Voeche, J. Jacques, eds., *The Essential Piaget*, Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, NJ, 1977, 1995, *ibid.*, p. 111.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Lehrer, Jonah, *How We Decide*, Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York, NY, 2009, p. 186.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

sympathize with others leads to fairness.”¹¹ Those suffering from what we call autism today cannot help how their brains work, but I cannot help but wonder if this same inability, or, at least, unwillingness, to recognize the feelings of others, isn’t true of autism in the classic sense. Whether it is ignoring hard evidence like global warming, science, or birth certificates, or not recognizing the plight of others, like the desperation of political refugees, or by poking fun of a disabled reporter, Donald Trump demonstrated such ignorance often during his campaign, something none of us could have missed; and ignorance, again, is rooted in fear, the same kind that makes me anxious about the news.

The final indicator of fear based behavior I’ll mention is that which psychologist Erich Fromm calls the *necrophilous orientation*, which he describes as, “the quintessence of evil, the most severe pathology and the root of the most vicious destructiveness and inhumanity.”¹² This orientation also comes out as *authoritarianism*, the attempt to control and punish others, but, at its root, such bullying, reflects a fascination with death and destruction. Fromm says the necrophilous person dwells on the past, not the future, and is obsessed with what he calls, “law and order,”¹³ a term Trump used often in his campaign. “He loves control,” Fromm says, “and in the act of controlling he kills life. [For] He is deeply afraid of life, because it is disorderly and uncontrollable by its very nature.”¹⁴ So, this authoritarian, destructive mindset is also rooted in fear, just as every bully is deep down a coward, which is especially frightening given Trump’s nonchalant comments about using nuclear weapons since we have them—the ultimate attempt to bully and control the entire world, another attitude his supporters could not have missed prior to the election.

These characteristics, then, fear of others, ignorance, and the authoritarian and destructive behavior associated with the necrophilous orientation, are the premises I use to help identify a fear based decision, which, as I have just argued, I have concluded explains Trump’s victory. Granted my logic is inductive, not deductive, meaning it has, at best, only a probability of being true, but not a certainty of it. I chose to present my case rather coldly and logically today because I want to demonstrate the kind of thinking I believe is almost nonexistent, yet extremely necessary in our society today. It is also a challenge for those who dislike my conclusion to tackle my premises and the validity of my argument, not my inconvenient conclusion about mass fear.

But the main reason I have brought all of this up is in the hope that I have rationally argued that the underlying problem, the thing we need to fix, is the rampant fear affecting our society by preventing us from making thoughtful and compassionate decisions. So, it is here, close to the end my sermon, that I will begin to soften and appeal to your emotions, emotions that I hope are now balanced by the reason of my argument. For if the root of our problem today is that fear influences too many of our decisions, then it’s up to us to help those driven by fear to calm down. It’s up to us to comfort them, to remind them it’s going to be okay, that there’s no need to stay in the fear.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 181.

¹² Fromm, Erich, *The Heart of Man*, Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1964, p. 37.

¹³ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

This is why I have titled this talk, *Calling all Angels*, because in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures the first thing the Angels always say is, "Be not afraid." And the word *angel* comes from the Greek word meaning, "messenger," or, "one who announces." This means that each one of us can be an angel in our world by announcing this good news, "Be not afraid." Be not afraid of your neighbors. Be not afraid of Muslims or Islam. Be not afraid of those who look, think, or act differently than you. Be not afraid to look at what is. Be not afraid of science. Be not afraid of the news. Be not afraid of facts. Be not afraid of the future. Take heart, have courage.

This is our work. This is what our faith calls upon us to do at this moment in history. This is what our neighbors need from us, to be comforted and encouraged. They need us to appeal to their compassion when so many others are appealing only to the fears in all of us. But we cannot do any of this if we dismiss the conclusion just because we don't like its implications; if we are unwilling to admit that Trump didn't walk into office alone, but was put there by millions of people who supported his xenophobic, ignorant, authoritarian, destructive message. How could this have happened? How could so many good people have allowed this to happen? I argue it is because of fear, and that the opposite of fear is love. For, "Perfect love," as the Christian scriptures say, "casts out all fear." So, I really am calling all angels, calling on you to be angels, to cast out fear by offering comfort and courage to all you meet. Be not afraid.