

**The Color Purple**  
**Finding Common Ground in a Divided Nation**  
By  
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November 16, 2025

The message my title conveys ought to be plain. When mixed, blue and red, two primary colors, make purple. The two primary political parties in the US are signified by red and blue. So, let's remember that we all share far more in common than not, kumbaya, sermon over. "*All we are saying, is give peace a chance.*"

Obviously, making peace is a lot more complicated than that. I'm not speaking merely about the US, for instance, but about political division and disputes elsewhere around the world. I'm using red and blue as a metaphor of human division everywhere; and finding a way for people anywhere to live and work and progress together, regardless of their differences, is what purple is meant to signify. In other words, my message is intended to be far more cosmopolitan than its title suggests.

To make this point, I do want to discuss the reasons why we are all far more alike than we are different, including, especially, ideologically speaking. But my main intention is to address how we can keep this awareness before us, and the kinds of communication our society and world need to maintain the relative calm and cooperation necessary for all of us to progress and prosper together.

To begin, although it should not need stating, there is no such thing as different "races" of human beings. There are not black, brown, white, red, or yellow species of humans. The slight differences and similarities in appearance between us are indicative of small genetic adaptations to the specific climates and environments inherited among various groups of people. But just as Chihuahuas and Great Danes are both dogs no matter how different they appear, we are all human beings no matter how different we look, sound, or think.

Science informs us that there is more genetic variation between two chimpanzees living in the same troop than there is between any two people on the entire planet.<sup>1</sup> Biologists, archeologists, paleontologists, and the like are still trying to figure out why this is so, but the answer remains a mystery. The point here is that we are all far more related to each other than most of us realize or that some want to admit.

Most animals don't suffer from this confusion. Ethologists have shown that nearly all animal species possess *innate mechanisms* for recognizing members of their own kind, and—equally important—*innate inhibitions* against harming them. Even in species that fight vigorously for territory or dominance, these conflicts almost always stop short of lethal force. Ritualized displays, threat postures, and submission signals act as biological brakes, preventing intra-species killing. In other words, animals are equipped with instinctual cues that both identify the conspecifics and protect them from harmful aggression.

Humans, by contrast, lack these automatic inhibitions. Because our sense of “who is one of us” is filtered through learned symbols—language, culture, appearance, ideology—, rather than instincts, we can withdraw recognition of another person’s humanity with alarming ease. And once that recognition is withdrawn, the natural brakes that protect members of the same species no longer function. In his book on human destructiveness, social psychologist Erich Fromm has a chapter on paleontology that’s subtitled, “Is Man One Species?” The answer, as I’ve already explained, is, yes. Yet, Fromm says, “[Man] does not recognize or identify conspecies as easily as [other] animals. For him, different language, customs, dress, and other criteria perceived by the mind rather than by instincts, determine who is a conspecies and who is not, and any group which is slightly different is not supposed to share the same humanity.”<sup>2</sup> This explains why, as he goes on to say, humans often experience and treat strangers as if they “belonged to another species...<sup>3</sup> Among many primitive peoples even a man of another tribe or living in a neighboring village some miles away is looked upon as a complete stranger or even not human, and hence is there no empathy with him?”

Alas, this isn’t just so of “primitive peoples” but of primitive thinkers who feel detached from other humans based on which neighborhood they live, what school they go to, or what team they root for, as well, of course, as their religion, their politics, their sexuality, the color of their skin, what country they are from, and so on. Yet there is also an innate desire in us, except for the most malignant of narcissists and sociopaths, to live in relative peace, which is why, since the beginning of our time on Earth, we have established religions that, at their best, require us to live in peace, especially by being kind to strangers.

The Hebrew scriptures say, “The stranger living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt.”<sup>4</sup> The Christian scriptures say, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus said, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”<sup>6</sup> Sikh scripture says, “All jealousies have vanished in the society of the Saints. All are my friends now, there being no enemy or stranger.”<sup>7</sup> Hinduism says, “Let us have concord with our own people, let us have concord with people who are strangers to us; the divine Twins create between us and the strangers a unity of hearts.”<sup>8</sup> Buddhism says, “Although there are northern men and southern men, north and south make no difference to their Buddha nature.” The Japanese *Ofudesaki* tells us, “All the people of the whole world are equally brothers and sisters. There is no one who is an utter stranger.”<sup>9</sup>

Adhering to this principle of being kind to strangers allows societies, over time, to widen their circles of inclusion. As Fromm put it, “Only in the process of social and cultural evolution has the number of people who are accepted as being human increased.”<sup>10</sup> Yet our instinct for “stranger danger” remains strong and isn’t entirely unwarranted, which is why we still teach our kids not to speak to strangers and tell them grim fairytales about the perils of talking to big bad wolves and accepting invitations into delicious looking gingerbread houses. In short, no matter how relatively peaceful and prosperous a particular society might be at any given point in its history, there always

remains some tension between just how much strangeness ought to be permitted. When societies are socially and economically stressed, they become less tolerant of differences and more readily blame their woes upon those most considered to be the strangers among them.

In Nazi Germany it was the Jews who were scapegoated in this way. Today, in the US, as in much of the world, immigrants are being wrongly blamed and treated like subhumans. But whatever patch of ground any of us is born on has no more to do with our relatedness and humanity than do the slightest of genetic differences between us. When it comes to the question of our humanity and the right to be treated with dignity, nationality is as much a fiction as race is. There are no such things as an American species, Venezuelan species, Vietnamese species, Russian species, Chinese species, African species, and so forth. As Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce once said, "The Earth is the Mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it."<sup>11</sup> We are all brothers and sisters.

In addition to the false belief that we are divided by race and nationality, we also believe, or at least behave as if, our various ideologies make us different species, which has too often been the greatest cause of wars and injustices between us. Dividing into "ideological tribes," as we often refer to them, is the main cause of incivility in the US today, as well as in many other places in the world. I don't think I need to waste time providing any examples of this because such incivility has become so rampant it exists almost everywhere we turn, including, as I have seen all too often, within liberal communities and organizations. This instinct to dislike, feel threatened by, or mistreat someone we simply disagree with has become the zeitgeist of our day. Few of us are immune to the initial sensation of disgust or fear when encountering ideas contrary to our own, although some of us are better at recognizing and overcoming them than others.

So how do we overcome our instinctive hostility toward those we perceive as so different from us that we feel justified in mistreating them? First, as the great religions have attempted to teach us, be kind to strangers; not just those from strange places, but those with ideas and ways that seem foreign to us. Why? Because they are primarily our kin and deserve to be treated with basic human dignity. To do so, we must recall that we are all human beings, we are all very closely related, and we have much more in common than any of our perceived differences. Focusing on our differences is what divides us by causing us to fear and dislike one another. Seeing our similarities and relatedness is what enables us to live in peace and to prosper together.

Sociologist Amitai Etzioni's book, *The Monochrome Society*, is one of the clearest attempts to push back against the idea that we are hopelessly fragmented into warring cultural camps based on race, ethnicity, and ideology. Drawing from large national surveys conducted by NORC, Gallup, and other long-running opinion studies across racial, ethnic, and political groups, Etzioni shows that Americans express *substantial agreement* on a broad range of core values. Large majorities—often 70–90 percent—endorse fairness in public life, equal treatment under the law, and the belief that opportunities should be widely available rather than restricted to privileged groups. Survey data also reveals broad consensus that personal freedom is essential but must be exercised with responsibility and consideration for others. Similarly high levels of agreement appear on

commitments to integration, mutual respect, and the idea that society should support those who work hard, play by the rules, and contribute to the common good. Despite our many differences, often amplified in the news and on social media, Etzioni's research shows that Americans share a deep moral infrastructure—common aspirations, common expectations, and a common sense of civic obligation.<sup>12</sup> Many “assume that people's pigmentation, or, more generally, racial attributes, determine their visions, values, and votes,”<sup>13</sup> he says. But “American culture is basically much more of one color, if one looks at conduct and beliefs rather than pigmentation and other such external, skin-deep indications.”<sup>14</sup>

But this doesn't mean there aren't also some major differences between a lot of us, yet it does suggest the possibility that despite those differences all of us still share a lot more in common than not—first and foremost our common humanity, our kinship, that led the sages of old to admonish us to be kind to strangers, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and that we are all brothers and sisters. It means we also share common needs and values that transcend red and blue, left and right, conservative or liberal, but aren't discussed much by the Parties, Politicians, or news media. In their now 25 year old book, *The Cultural Creatives*, Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson have identified roughly 50 million American adults—and tens of millions more in Europe—who share a coherent cluster of values, like deep concern for the environment and global issues, a desire for social and economic justice, emphasis on relationships and community, commitment to personal and spiritual growth, and support for gender equality and the well-being of children, among others. They invest time in developing and maintaining relationships, want to be involved in making a better world, and are unhappy with both the left and right in politics, but still want something more than the mushy middle. Another thing this potentially enormous voting block has in common is that “they are missing self-awareness as a whole people.”<sup>15</sup> Each cultural creative thinks they are all but alone in the world. So, what would happen if this “tribe of millions of *cultural* relatives,” as Anderson and Ray describe them, “with the same values and worldview and life priorities,”<sup>16</sup> realize they exist and come together as a unified social force?

Thus, in addition to being kind to strangers, we must realize they may not be strangers after all; that they are our biological, ideological, and ethical kin. If we go beyond our superficial differences, we have many common values and goals. To foster this mindset, we should discover and pay attention to news and information sources that are as unbiased as possible. Certainly not from those that only provide opinions about the news that you want to hear; like those I playfully like to call Faux News and BSNBC, or CNN, considered by many to be the Crisis News Network. (Have you ever noticed they refer to every story as “breaking news?” They even have a show called “Breaking News.” The whole point of the term is that a story is so urgent it's worth breaking into your regularly scheduled programming to report. A show called “Breaking News” is an oxymoron. But I digress.)

I don't think it's wise to listen to both Faux News and BSNBC if the intent is to gain a balanced viewpoint. Nor am I suggesting you don't watch, listen to, or read sources like these at all. If you understand logical fallacies well enough, you can expose yourself to them and distinguish what's

happening in the world from the biased framing many, so-called, “journalists” package them in. But the problem with turning exclusively to such sources is that the news they tend to cover is about hyped stories that divide us, not the larger challenges and problems we all share in common and should be most concerned about.

In my view, for example, the lead story of every newscast and front-page headline of every newspaper ought to be about how much glacier melt occurred today, how many species went extinct, how many climate-change related disasters struck and how many people around the world are suffering because of them. The Epstein files, the latest live police chase, or celebrity trial, and so on, pale in comparison to what should have been the real top story day after day for decades. If it were, perhaps we would have done something to adequately address Global Warming a long ago. This point isn’t another digression because the health of our planet is the greatest example there is of something we all need and share in common.

But, again, the point is that we must literally think outside the box when it comes to news and information. Just because it’s covered extensively in the media doesn’t mean it’s the most important thing or only thing for you to know and be concerned about. My rule of thumb is to ask how does this story impact human welfare and/or individual unfolding? I rate the Epstein files low on the scale of significance. The extrajudicial killing of Venezuelan boaters is a crime against humanity and ends the lives of real people, so it’s higher on the scale. The rise of authoritarianism in the US, threatening the freedoms of us all, is even higher. And, as noted, Climate Change is among the highest of them all. So, outline your own newscast. What are your concerns? What do you most need and care about? What does humanity need, then seek out reliable information about those matters.

Recognizing complete neutrality is impossible, here are some of the news sources I recommend.

- The Associated Press (AP), which is known for wire-service-style reporting that offers little opinion and the basic facts, who, what, when, where, and why. The downside, again, is that humans are determining which stories are covered, and they may not be chosen according to my scale of importance based on the humanistic ethic. In other words, there may be more important stories out there that the AP doesn’t cover.
- BBC News is rightly cited as a centrist organization with less ideological bias than many, although, as we’ve heard of late, it’s far from perfect. Pay attention to it with a critical eye.
- PBS NewsHour also offers relatively balanced coverage of the news, although I’m not sure the choice of what it covers is as balanced or thorough as we need it to be.
- Reuters is a global agency that emphasizes the “Trust Principles” of independence, integrity, and freedom from bias. It’s worth paying attention to a source that is at least committed to and trying to adhere to these principles.
- If you have other favorite news sources, you can check also take advantage of AllSides.com, a media-bias rating tool that maps how different outlets lean; and newsguardtech.com, a browser tool that rates news sites on reliability, transparency, and so on.
- In recent months, I’ve added AI generated news to my media sources. It tends to headline whatever the mainstream news is covering, but in a just-the-facts manner, and I can ask it to include news

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about the issues I most care about in my daily briefing, including climate and tech news—top stories I’m not otherwise likely to hear about. I just say, “Alexa, news.”

By turning our attention to human welfare and individual unfolding, that is, to issue like climate health, human health, economic health, global peace, freedom, democracy, and so forth, we are not only caring for strangers, but automatically tapping into the concerns, challenges, and even accomplishments and victories that matter most to all of us, no matter our differences. And that’s the final point I want to make. None of this has been about blending our differences together so that they go away. The color purple is about committing to live together, work together, and prosper together no matter our differences because we realize there is always so much more that we have in common. It’s okay for us to identify as red or blue, because the color purple reminds us that blending does not erase our individuality; but enriches it. It is the hue of wisdom, compassion, and shared purpose. May we, as one human family, learn again to see the kinship that lies beneath the surface—to remember that we are one species, one people, and one fragile, beautiful world.

<sup>1</sup> Gribbin, John, & Cherfas, *The First Chimpanzee*, Barnes & Noble, Inc., U.S., 2001, p.144.

<sup>2</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, CT, 1973, p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 19:33-34

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 13:2

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 25:35

<sup>7</sup> Karnara, M.5, p. 1299

<sup>8</sup> 7.52.1-2

<sup>9</sup> Tenrikyo, Ofudesaki, 13.43-45

<sup>10</sup> Fromm, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Freedman, Russell, *Indian Chiefs*, Scholastic Inc., New York, NY, 1987, p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> Etzioni, Amitai, *The Monochrome Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2001, pp. 7-16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> <sup>3</sup> Ray, Paul H., and Anderson, Sherry Ruth, *The Cultural Creatives*, Harmony Books, New York, NY, 2000, p. 39.