

A Kinder, Gentler Nation—Really?

March 1, 2026

By

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There's an episode of the *King of Queens*, popular at the turn of the century, in which Arthur Spooner, a senior citizen played by comedian Jerry Stiller, is worried he might be having cognitive issues after having been exposed to mold dust.

"Let just put that to a test," he says to his friend Spence, "I've always been able to debate any topic and tear down opposing arguments with pinpoint logic ... We'll pick a topic and we'll see if I can hold my own ... How about this, should the United States normalize relations with Cuba?"

"Alright," Spence says. "The Cold War has been over for ten years. Cuba is no longer a threat, but instead it could be a valuable ally and trading partner. So, it makes perfect sense to normalize relations with Cuba."

Arthur responds, "You moron! What do you know about anything! You're a frightened little drone and can't even get a woman! If you're so keen on normalizing something, why don't you start with your face!" Arthur then smiles and says, "I've still got it."¹

Funny as it is to see enacted on a sitcom, this is a good example of how many of us nowadays, no matter our political persuasion, treat those we disagree with by belittling and attacking their character. Liberals—or some who fancy themselves liberals—are as quick to use these kinds of *ad hominem* attacks against their opponents as anyone else. Although, it's hard for me to consider them liberals if they don't respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Yet the instinct to attack outsiders, be they from other clans or tribes, other lands or countries, other religions or cultures, other political parties, or identity groups, and so forth, has been with us throughout human history; probably because it was an important survival strategy for our primitive ancestors. Sticking with what has worked in the past was a lot less dangerous than venturing into new territory, new ways, or new relationships.

This instinct is part of what biologists refer to as "Kin Selection," a term coined by William Hamilton in 1963. It "holds that individuals of any sexually reproducing species will behave altruistically toward kin in proportion to the number of genes they share. Parents and children, and full brothers and sisters, share 50 percent of their genes, and so will behave more altruistically toward each other than toward first cousins, who share only 25 percent."² The fewer genes we have in common with others, including more distant relatives, the less altruistic we are inclined to feel toward them, and even less toward those we have no direct relationship with at all.

In the grand scheme of life, the survival of the information within us—our genetic code and our beliefs—is all that matters. We are but its hosts and have evolved to unconsciously want to protect it with ferocity until we have outlived our usefulness. We are little different in this respect than the

poor mayfly that has no mouth or anus because it exists only long enough to reproduce, or the unfortunate spider I saw just this week that was consumed by her offspring the moment they hatched. In nature, it is information, not its hosts, that matters.

This explains why we are so ready to fight over our differences with others, believing we are defending the right way of life or some divine truth, when in reality we are driven by the parasitic nature of information that needs us to protect it long enough for it to be replicated and, perhaps, become dominant. As evolutionary psychologist Robert Wright says in his book, *The Moral Animal*, “the closest thing to a generic Darwinian view of how moral codes arise is this: people tend to pass on the sorts of moral judgments that help move their genes into the next generation.”³ In other words, our ideas about right and wrong, no matter how sure we feel about them, unconsciously justify doing whatever we can, to whomever we must, to insure our way and our ideas are protected and survive us. This is why primitive religions, no matter how superstitious and absurd, have persisted to this day.

From an evolutionary perspective, this is the “selfish gene” at work, the tendency of information to want to reproduce itself and dominate its particular pool, be it the gene pool, or the meme pool. Like all creatures, our instinct, wired into our neurology, biology, and emotions, is to survive. But this isn’t for our benefit as mortal individuals. It is for the benefit of the potentially immortal information within us that lives on only by being passed along to new hosts before we die. It’s not a conscious process, just part of our code that has evolved to optimize information’s continuance. It’s like a logic gate—if it’s repeatable, then keep doing it. If it’s new, then fear it—written into our behavioral code.

This is also why we have evolved to care more about those who are most like us than those who aren’t. Our concern for others emanates like ripples on the water. Our instinct is to care more for those akin to us, especially our offspring, followed by our siblings, then our cousins, then our friends, then our tribe, until our concentric circles of relationships are so distant, they become so meaningless to us that we care little for those beyond them. If we don’t feel related to them, that is, or can’t relate to their ways, their culture, or their ideas, then we feel little obligation to care about them. We may even feel threatened by them and find an excuse to justify “neutralizing the threat,” to use a military term.

We tend to do this with ease because, unlike other mammals, humans have largely lost our instinct to recognize members of our own species as such; the ability, that is, to readily recognize the humanity of other humans. A lion will recognize a lion as such, for example, even if it has never seen that particular lion before. But, for us, according to social psychologist Erich Fromm, “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.”⁴ This explains racism, the false belief that there are

different races of people; and white supremacy, the idea that one of these races is superior to all others.

If we see others as being inhuman or subhuman, we feel justified in treating them however we must in order to protect our ways and ideas from being overcome or simply diluted or made impure from exposure to outsiders. As with racism, this attitude explains the various prohibitions against “mixing” that have cropped up throughout human history. It’s an attitude similar to the belief that we are defined more by our ethnicity or the nation we are from than by our common humanity. Where we are from, our family, our culture, are meaningful, but they do not make us any more or less human than those from different places, families, and cultures.

Humans are, in many ways, like any animal, driven by our survival instincts and the drive to reproduce. Yet we are also unique in our ability to act with introspection and self-awareness, just as we are doing today by considering some of the psychological explanations regarding our instincts and behaviors. What makes us different from other animals is that we often want to rise above our unconscious instincts, to take charge of our behaviors, and to treat all people with care and respect. These better angels of our nature have also been with us throughout human history, as evidenced by admonitions from every religion to treat others, especially outsiders, with kindness and respect.

The Hebrew scriptures say, “The stranger living with you must be treated as one of your native-born.”⁵ The Christian scriptures say, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.”⁶ Sikhism says, “All are my friends now, there being no enemy or stranger.”⁷ Hinduism says, “the divine Twins create between us and the strangers a unity of hearts.”⁸ The Japanese *Ofudesaki* says, “All the people of the whole world are equally brothers and sisters. There is no one who is an utter stranger.”⁹

These are just a few examples, and I think they reflect the sentiments expressed by George H.W. Bush when he ran for U.S. President in 1988, calling for “a kinder, gentler nation,” through volunteerism— “a thousand points of light,”—and by promoting what he called “decency” in public life. By the looks of things today—Russia’s war against Ukraine, Israel’s decimation of Gaza, the United States government’s hostility against the whole world—Bush’s vision is far from a dream come true. As I said, nowadays almost everyone, including liberals, once devoted to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, readily demonize anyone with whom they have differences.

Today I wonder if this might have something to do with an unrecognized flaw in Bush’s vision to begin with. As pleasant as kindness and gentleness sound, it may surprise you to learn that they are rooted in the very sentiments that cause us to favor those more like us, while fearing and, often, abusing those who are different.

Both these terms, *kinder* and *gentler*, are essentially the same word. They both come from the same Proto-Indo-European word, **gen-* / **ǵenh*, meaning to “give birth,” “to beget,” “to produce,” “to give” or “bring forth life.” It’s the root of words like *generate*, *genesis*, and *gene*, and is the root of both *kinder* and *gentler*. It is also the root of *kin*, *kinship*, and *kindred*.

Etymologically speaking, *kin* and *kind* are the same word, which helps us understand why, historically and instinctively, we have tended to reserve most of our kindness for our kin, for those genetically akin to us as well as those we consider to have been “born of the same cloth,” or “kindred spirits,” referring to those who share similar qualities, cultures, identities, ideas, and so forth.

Interestingly, it is also the root of *king*, which explains those who once felt united by being part of one *kingdom*. And it’s the root of “kindle,” a word, like birth, that means “to bring forth,” or “to ignite.” Even the word “engine,” shares this root, a machine that is brought to life. Engines, candles, infants, are things we bring forth, and, in the process, become our kin and, thus, deserving of our kindness and gentleness. But if we don’t feel this connection, then, for far too many of us, they are not.

And this is why our societies fail to become kinder and gentler, because we behave as if our differences define who we are far more than our common humanity does. Those closest to us, genetically or ideologically, are our kin, our kindred spirits, our own kind, and, therefore, we reserve kindness for them. In this way, we feel good about ourselves, knowing that we are kindhearted people while often turning a blind eye to the abuses our kind are committing against those beyond the distant ripples of our concentric circles of relationships.

Today, moreover, the bonds of nationalism are weakening around the world, including here in the U.S. Being an “American” doesn’t have the ring for many of us that it once held. We feel more bonded with those who share our political ideas than with those “born” upon our shared parcel of land. Our fellow Americans are no longer our “fellows.” Their different ideas, ways, and politics make them too different for us to understand or accept. They feel threatening to us. They are not our kin and, therefore, do not deserve our kindness.

It’s not just political divisions. Many Americans, as with the citizens of other nations, feel more akin to those in their own identity groups, and are poised to demonize any outsiders who dare question their assumptions about truth and reality. Empirical experience is subservient to their “lived experience,” and any who suggest otherwise, as Arthur Spooner would say, is a “moron” and must be demonized into silence and obscurity.

This makes sense considering we are living during the decline of Nation States due to the globalization of human relationships and systems. Unable to cling as easily to our national

identities, we retreat into smaller relationships, or, as with Russia, Israel, and now the U.S., we attempt to reestablish firm national borders and boundaries by attacking perceived outsiders, giving us the false assurance that we are too powerful to be threatened by the new reality, the uncharted territory, the uncertainty before us.

So, the problem with President Bush’s vision wasn’t that it was too grandiose, but that it was too small to succeed before it ever began. No country, let alone the world, can become kinder and gentler unless it widens its circles of inclusion, its concept, that is, of who our kin are. In the U.S., as in any nation, we cannot become kinder and gentler to one another until we stop demonizing our political opponents or those outside our identity groups. And we can’t develop a kinder and gentler world, ending all the horrific wars and other hostilities, until we see the people of every nation—the Gazans, the Ukrainians, the Iranians, the Cubans, and the many immigrants and refugees already among us—as our kin.

And to accomplish this we must acknowledge and truly feel what we already know is true—whether we want to admit it or not—that all people share a common humanity, that all people are our kin and are, therefore, deserving of our kindness and gentleness.

The famous Lakota medicine man, Black Elk once shared such a vision. “I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world.” And as he stood there, looking at the world, like the first men on the moon, seeing everything all at once, Black Elk saw, “in the center one mighty flowering tree sheltering all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.” Holy means wholeness and oneness. And that’s the perspective we must embrace and foster if we truly want a kinder and gentler nation—only it can’t just be the mere desire to make one nation great again. It must be a desire to make the whole world great for the first time, by accepting that all people are part of one human family. They are our kin and they deserve our kindness.

¹ *King of Queens*, S5 E16, “Golden Moldy”

² Fukuyama, Francis. *The Origins of Political Order* (p. 30). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

³ Wright, Robert, *The Moral Animal*, Vintage Books, New York, NY, 1994, p. 146.

⁴ Fromm, Erich, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, CT, 1973, p. 148.

⁵ Leviticus 19:33-34

⁶ Hebrews 13:2

⁷ Karnara, M.5, p. 1299

⁸ 7.52.1-2

⁹ Tenrikyo, Ofudesaki, 13.43-45