Ethical Therapy in a Polarized World

Advanced Topics in Law & Ethics

Taught by Debra Manchester, LCSW

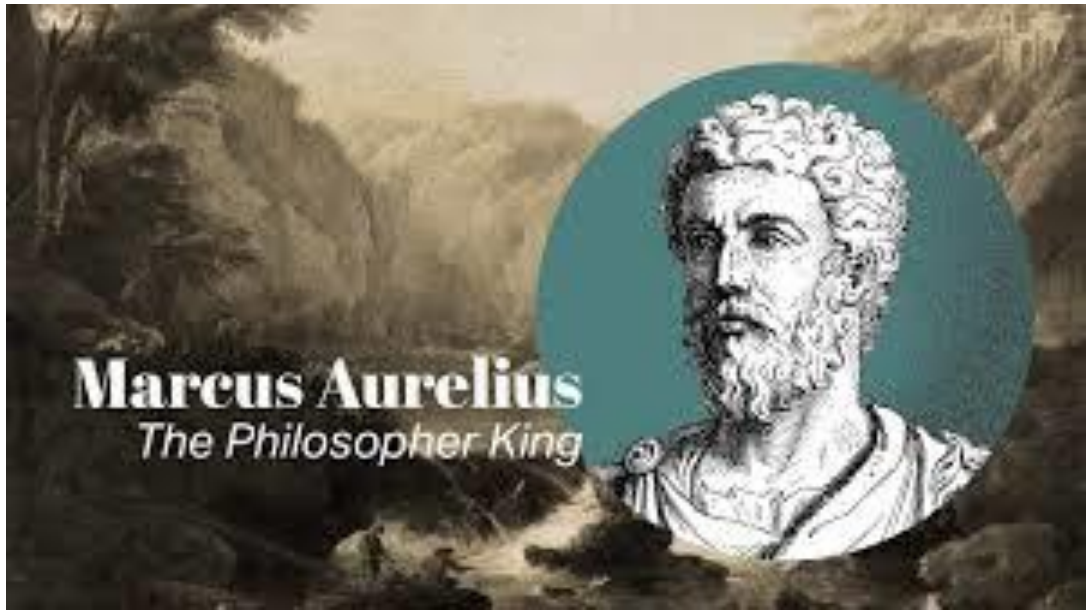
November 15, 2025

In 1. Right Thing, Right Now by Ryan Holiday

The Herculean Choice: Vice or Virtue?

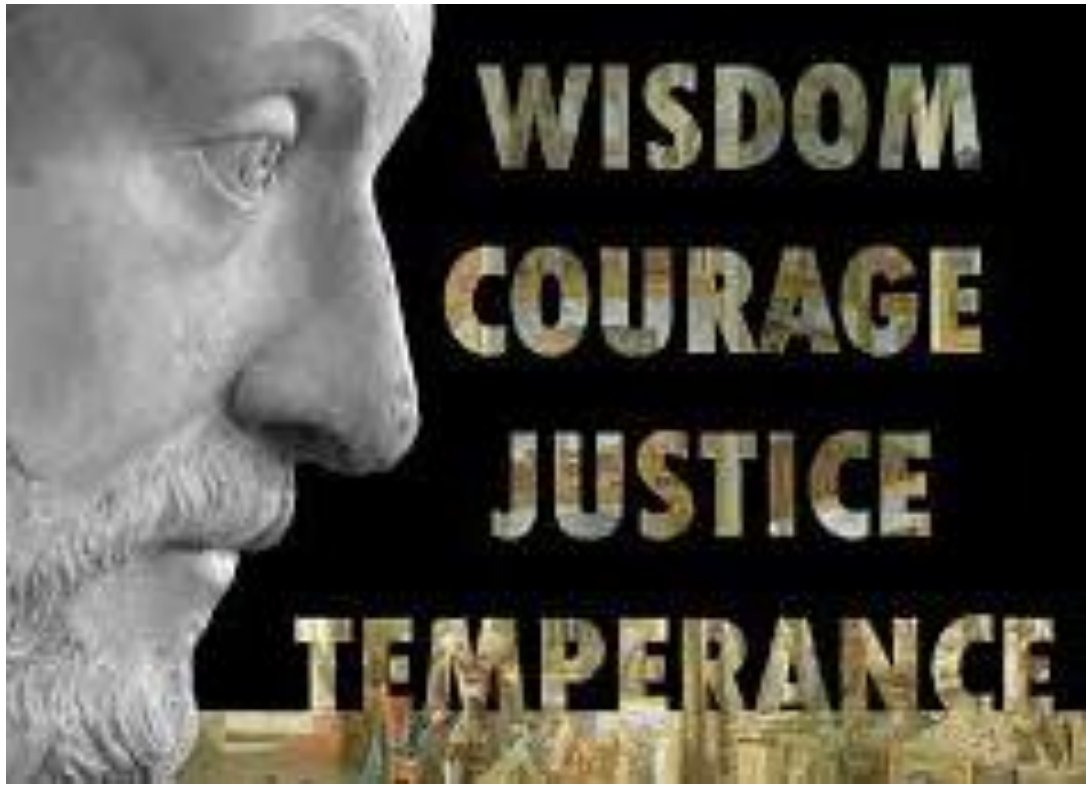
4 Cardinal Virtues:
“The Touchstones of Goodness”

- Courage (bravery, endurance, honor, sacrifice)
- Temperance (self-control, moderation, balance)
- Justice (fairness, service, kindness)
- Wisdom (knowledge, truth, self-reflection)



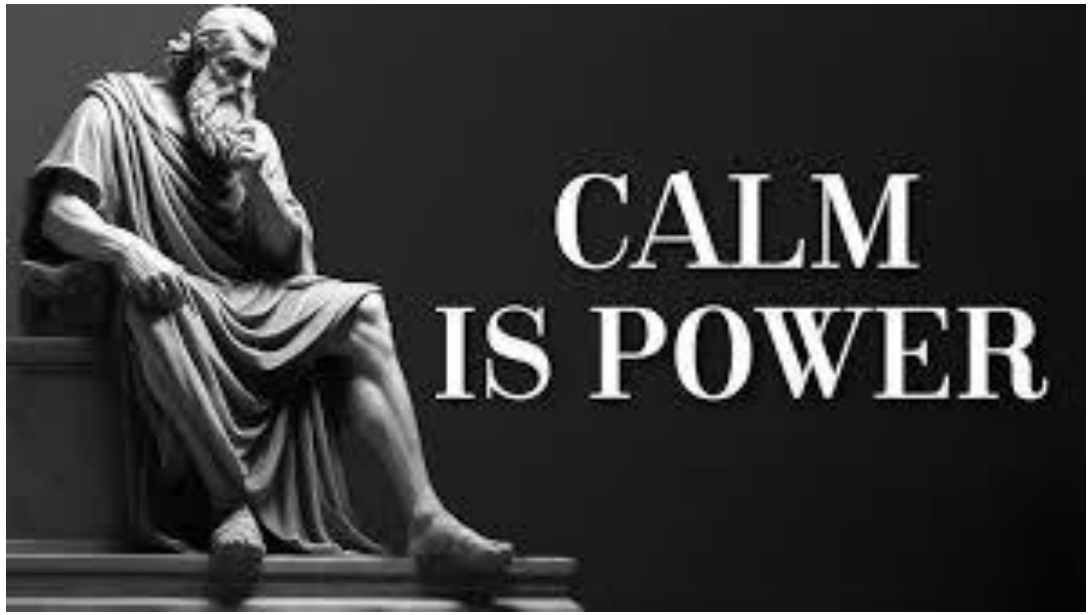
Resurgence of Stoicism Worldwide

- Interest is at an all time high in 2025
- Recent trends show strong engagement from young adults approximately 18-35 but also in the leadership community, late 30’s through 50’s
- Often viewed as the Western counterpart to mindfulness or Buddhism, attractive for practicality and secular ethics



Resurgence of Stoicism Worldwide

- Not just an ancient doctrine but seen as a versatile “operating system” for leadership, self-mastery & daily emotional regulation appealing to business executives, therapists & coaches
- Social media, newsletters, YouTube, Stoicon make Stoic ideas accessible to a new generation seeking clarity and calm amidst constant change



My Course Outline

I. A description of the problems polarizing our country

II. A look into hypotheses to understand why we are where we are

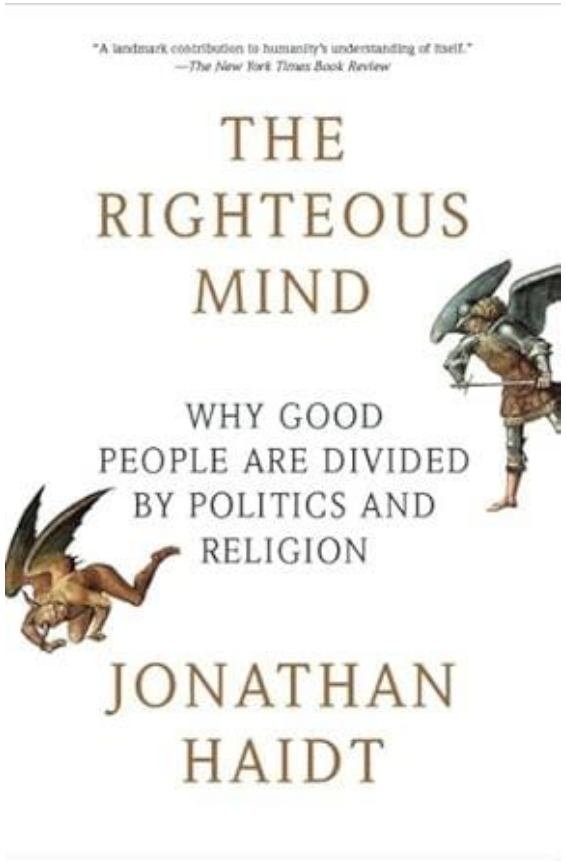
III. Why are moral values and decisions so impervious to reason

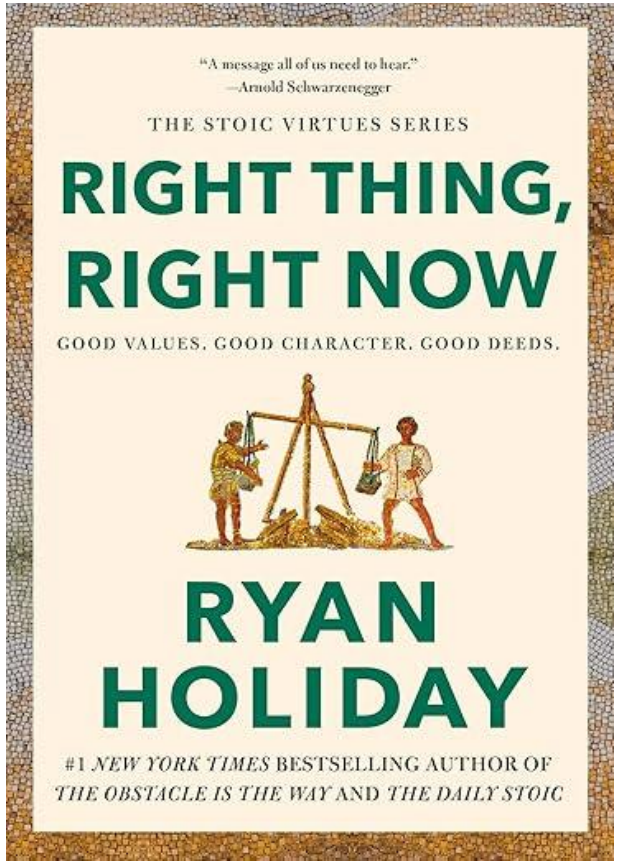
IV. The importance of learning how to bridge our differences

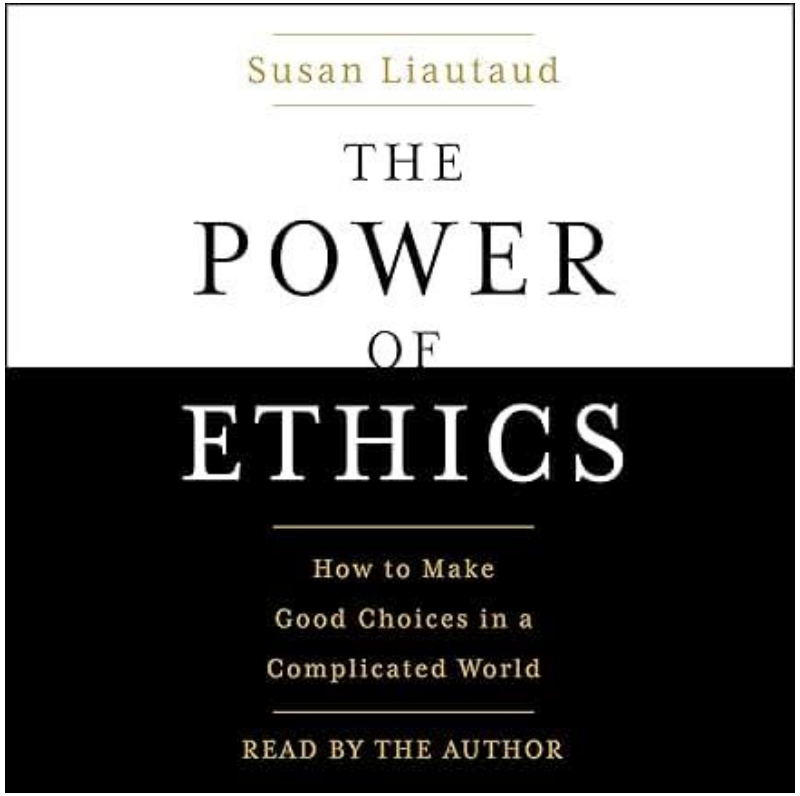
V. How to remain strong and effective in the face of fear

Where I turned to prepare this course

- Susan Lieutaud, Professor of Ethics at Stanford University
- Jonathan Haidt, Ph.D. & Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business
- UC Berkely Changemakers: Openness to Opposing Views
- Ryan Holiday, author of series on Stoicism
- Other articles and videos shared in Bibliography


"A landmark contribution to humanity's understanding of itself."
—The New York Times Book Review
THE RIGHTEOUS MIND
WHY GOOD PEOPLE ARE DIVIDED BY POLITICS AND RELIGION
JONATHAN HAIDT


"A message all of us need to hear."
—Arnold Schwarzenegger
THE STOIC VIRTUES SERIES
RIGHT THING, RIGHT NOW
GOOD VALUES. GOOD CHARACTER. GOOD DEEDS.
RYAN HOLIDAY
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE OBSTACLE IS THE WAY AND THE DAILY STOIC


Susan Liautaud
THE POWER OF ETHICS
How to Make Good Choices in a Complicated World
READ BY THE AUTHOR

I. The Problem

- FEAR
- CHAOS
- REACTIVITY
- CONFLICT

A Turning Point in History: “Truth” dies

- 2017: conversation between Chuck Todd and Kellyanne Conway when he was confronting her about Trump lying about the size of the crowd at his inauguration. She says: “You’re saying it’s a falsehood and Sean Spicer gave alternative facts to that.”
- He says, “Wait a minute, alternative facts are not facts. They are falsehoods.”
- An hour later, Susan askes to teach a new course at Stanford. “Ethics of Truth in a Post-Truth World”

Reference

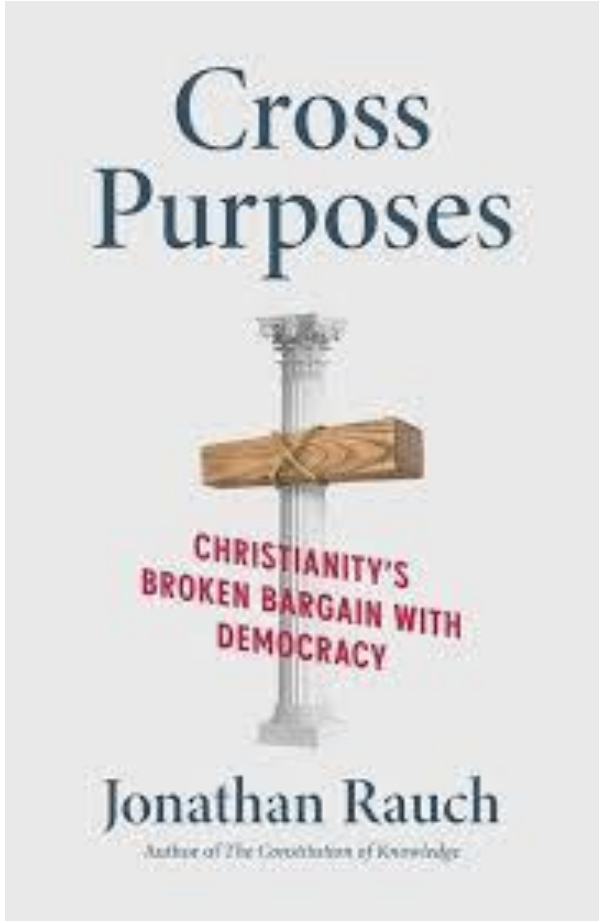
2.The Power of Ethics: How to Make Good Choices in a Complicated World by Susan Liautaud, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2021.

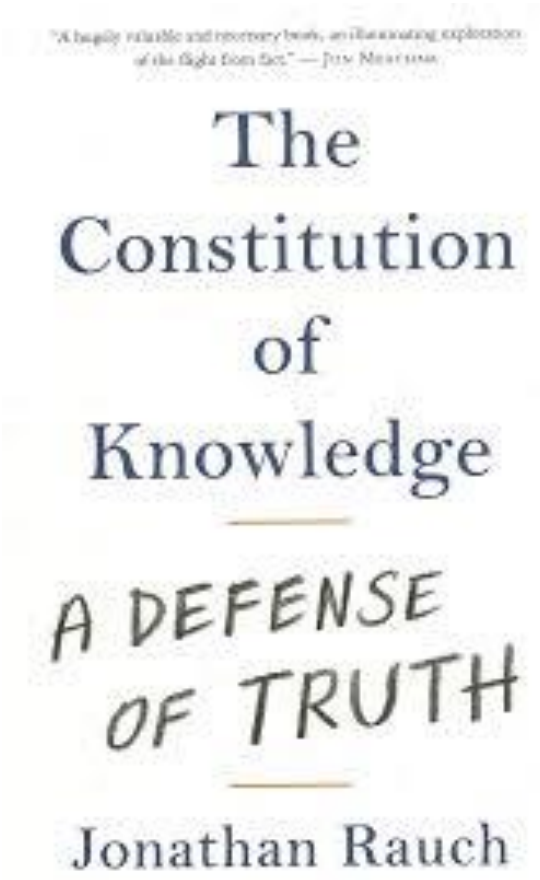
She teaches cutting edge ethics courses at Stanford and is the founder of The Ethics Incubator

Susan Liautaud interviews Jonathan Rauch

3.Ethicsincubator.net. Opening and 5 min on cancel culture

Jonathan Charles Rauch is an American author, journalist, and activist.





Jonathan Rauch
Author of "The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth"
in Conversation
with Susan Liautaud

Jonathan Rauch
Cancel Culture Is Social Manipulation...
Whether Left, Right or Center

How Many of You Knew These Words Were Banned by Trump?

Elisa Brietzke: Understanding and navigating the repercussions of the politically polarized climate in mental health, 2023

Over the past 2 years it has been possible to observe an unexpected and overwhelming effect of the political climate in psychotherapy patients, with these discussions taking center stage in multiple sessions, in a way that has not been observed since 9/11.

Dept. of Psychiatry, Queen's U. School of Medicine, Ontario

Elisa Brietzke article

5. Recent surveys showed:

42% of Americans experienced political disagreements with coworkers resulting in stress and discrimination

One popular dating app found a 187% increase in mentions of political affiliations in its chats.

80% of respondents who self-identified as Republicans believed that the Democrat Party had been taken over by Socialists

80% of respondents who self-identified as Democrats believed that Republicans are racists.

Elisa Brietzke article

Study involving a sample of 604 Dem and Rep patients found that 2/3 of patients reported engaging in discussions about politics with their psychotherapists with better quality therapeutic alliance when they thought the therapist shared the same political views.

In the same study, 87% of therapists discussed politics with their patients in sessions and that 63% of them reported some degree of self-disclosure of their political views, which happened more frequently when they perceived their patients as sharing their own political views.

Interview with Andrew Hartz

4.“People Underestimate the Cost of Silence”

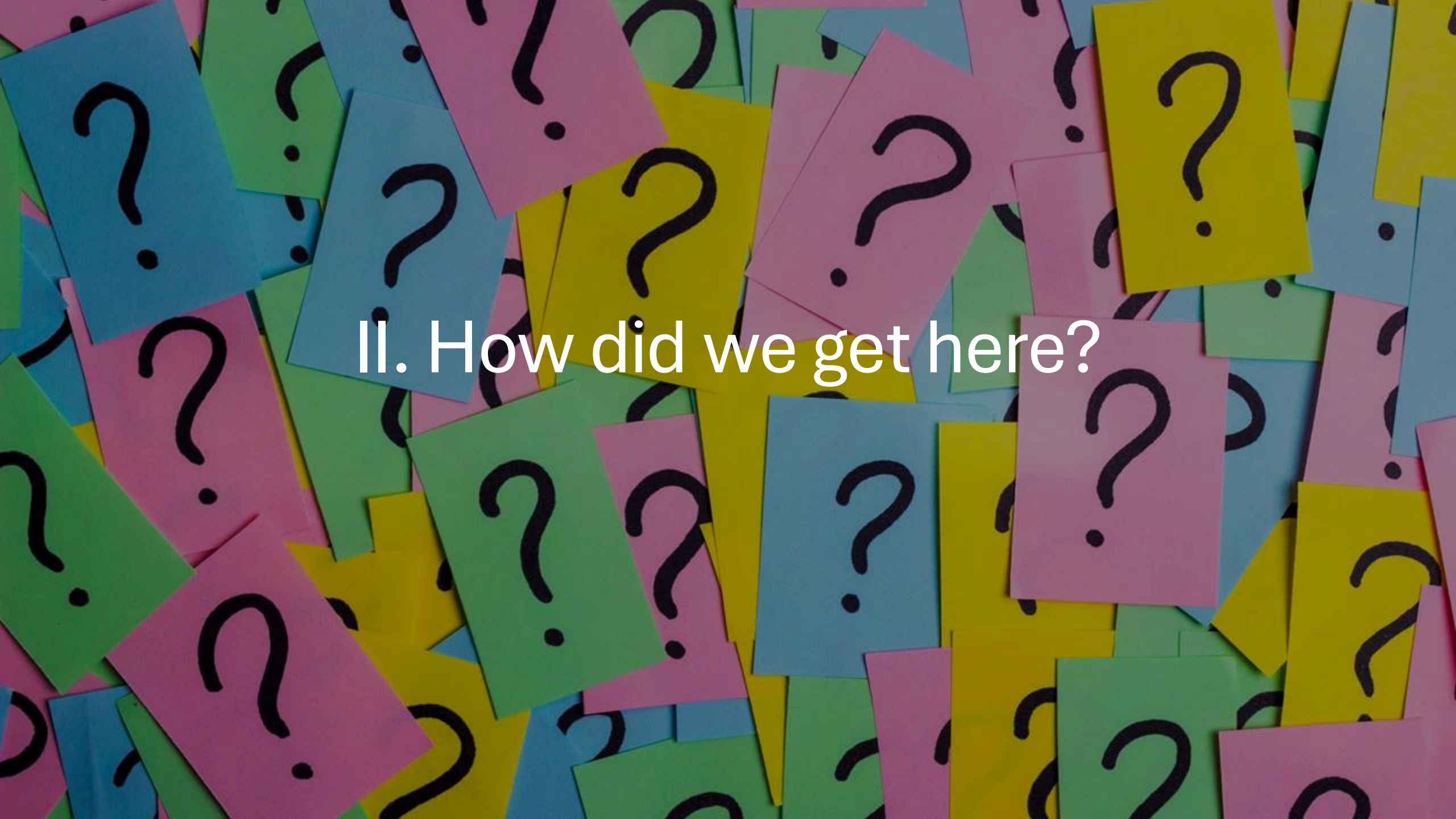
This is an interview with Heterodox Academy- a leading membership organization for faculty, staff and students. Founded with the idea that universities must remain places the welcome diverse viewpoints. They have a podcast called Heterodox Out Loud.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMZIl-dw-ks

MENTAL HEALTH
NEEDS DIALOGUE
member
stories

How many of you have faced these things?

QUESTIONS FOR AUDIENCE


II. How did we get here?

6 Forces Driving Ethics in Wrong Direction

1. Binary or black and white thinking
2. Power of individuals or groups detached from ethics or info
3. Contagion- how unethical behavior spreads
4. Crumbling pillars/weakend traditional foundations
5. Blurred boundaries e.g. between humans and technology
6. Compromised truth and erosion of trust and facts

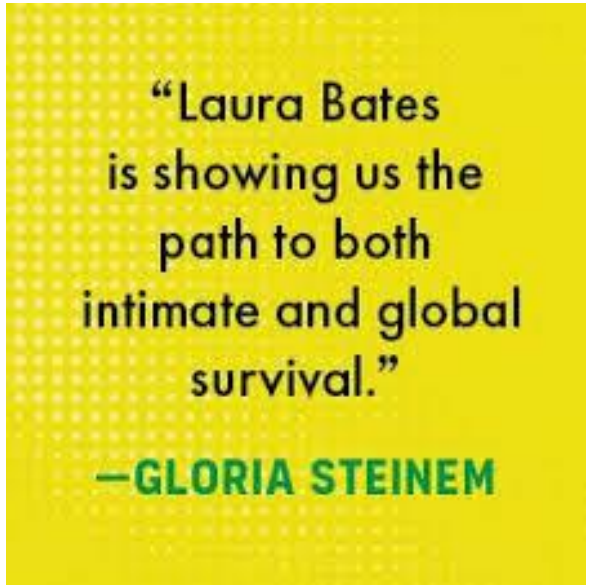
Banished Binary

- Binary decisions involve a choice between two clear options. You may have to weigh the pro's and con's.
- Most ethical dilemmas are not binary. They involve shades of gray and risks and benefits on both sides.
- This force necessitates moving past "right vs. wrong" thinking, recognizing complexity and nuance. Think SYSTEMS theory
- Ask questions like when and under what circumstances?

Scattered Power

The internet, AI, the widespread and uncontrollable distribution of powerful technologies across individuals, corporations and countries has made regulation and oversight difficult posing many ethical challenges

Scattered power left unchecked spreads unethical behavior and begets other dangerous forms of unethical behavior.

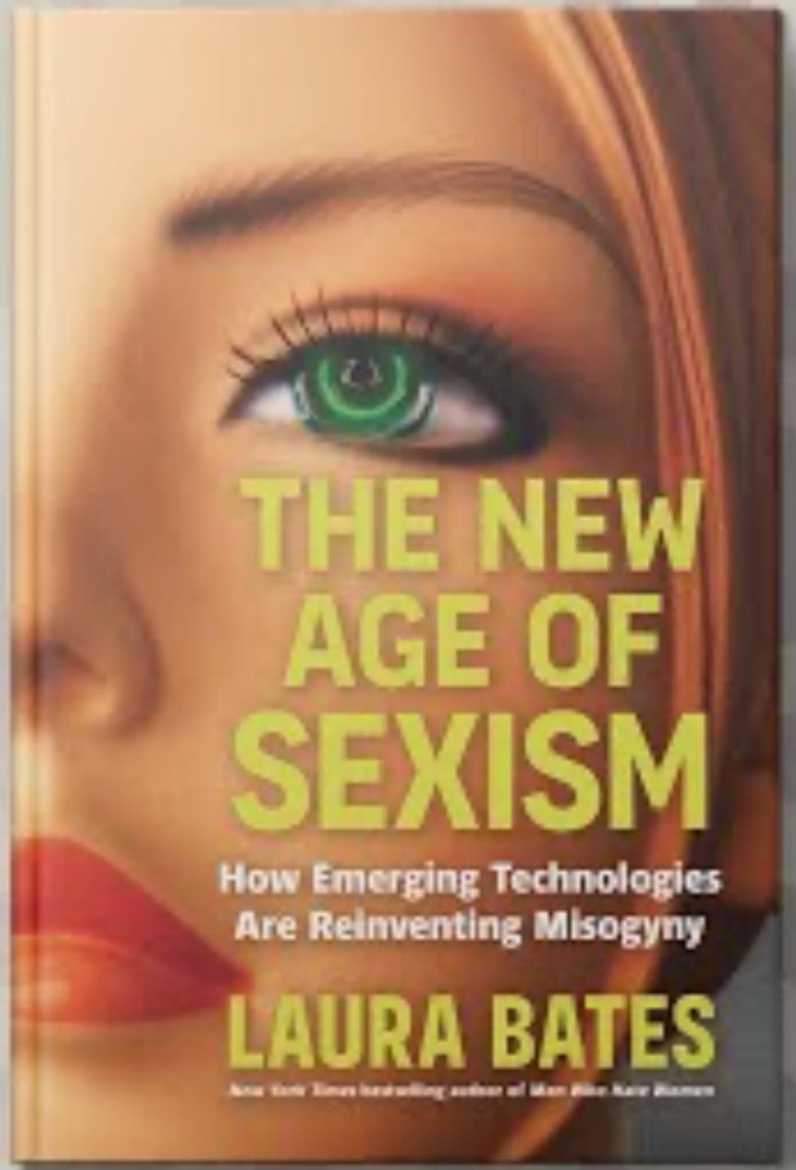


Laura Bates Interview

The Everyday Sexism Project exists to catalogue instances of sexism experienced on a day to day basis. British feminist writer, Bates founded The Everyday Sexism Project in 2014

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Iqjc5NXAvI

PBS NEWS HOUR



Contagion

- The spread of behaviors, ideas and decision-making.
- We tend to focus on eradicating and punishing unwanted behaviors but leave unchecked the CAUSES of contagion of harmful decisions and their consequences.
- The behavior spreads to the point where it is normalized: Everyone else does it therefore….
- The drivers of contagion are the reasons or motivations that incite people to make ethically good or poor choices.

Crumbling Pillars

- For centuries we shared common expectations of how we behave ethically in society. Guided by 3 pillars:
- 1. Transparency: the open sharing of important information
- 2. Informed consent: agreeing to something based on an understanding of the action and the consequences
- 3. Effective listening

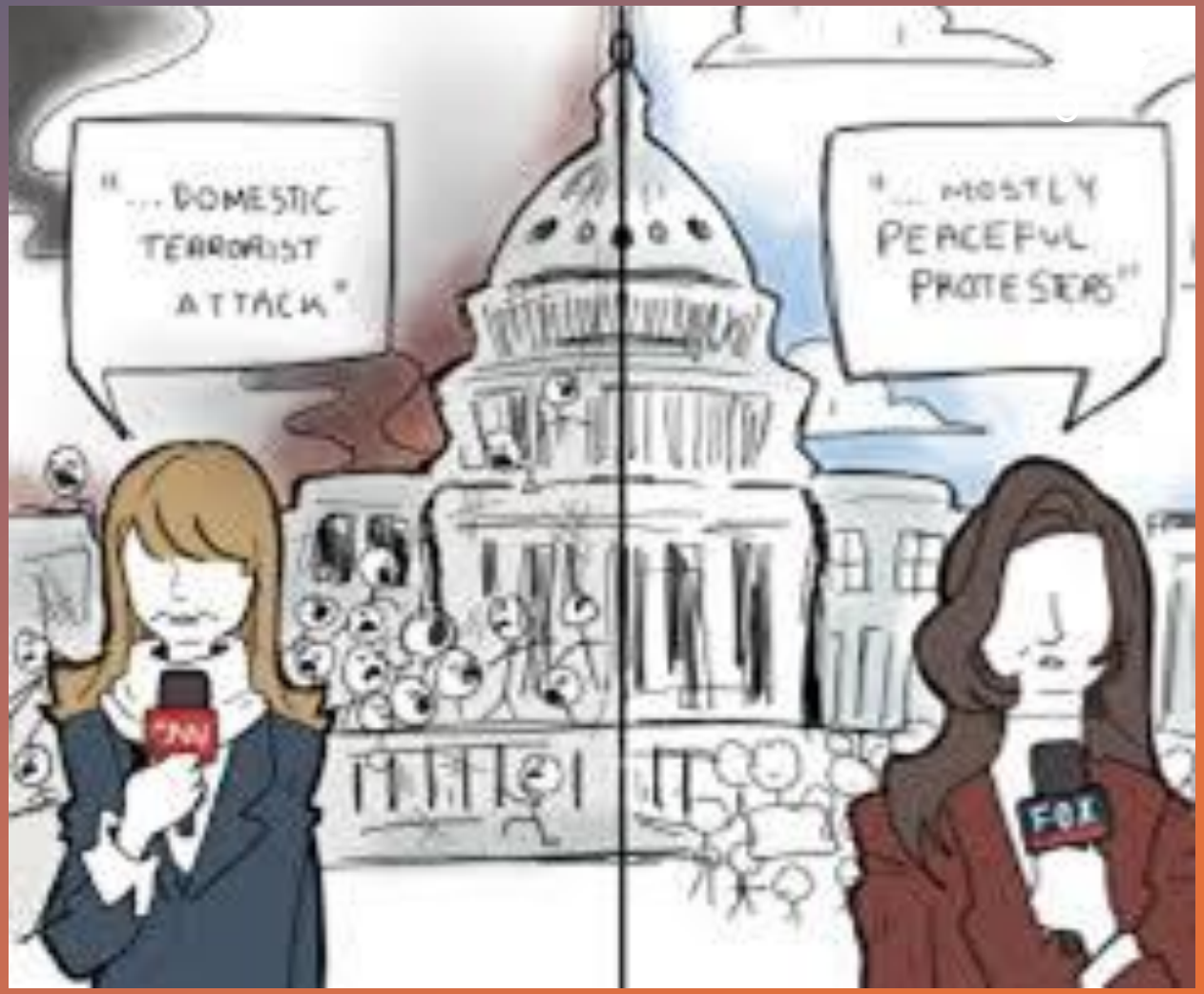
Blurred Boundaries

- The increasingly blurred juncture where machines cross over into human realms-we are in uncharted territory
- In our field, kids turning to AI as comfort, for advice
- The use of algorithms to feed us news and “information”
- We will have to live with the consequences of of where we draw the lines between what is ethically acceptable and what is not

Compromised Truth

- “Compromised truth is the single greatest threat to humanity: It topples our ability to make ethical decisions. It undercuts trust and our distinction between right and wrong. It sets everyone of the drivers of contagion of unethical behavior into motion…and it undergirds every societal risk we face….”-Susan Liautaud
- As you consider information, pay attention to indicators of compromised truth: disregard for experts, lack of context, curated truth.

Sources of Bias in News



How did we get here?

The uncontrolled play of false news

Social media, increased useage during lockdown and after

AI

The dark web used by foreign players and extremists

Algorithms

Fear mongering

Money manipulating media

III. Why are moral values and decisions so impervious to reason?

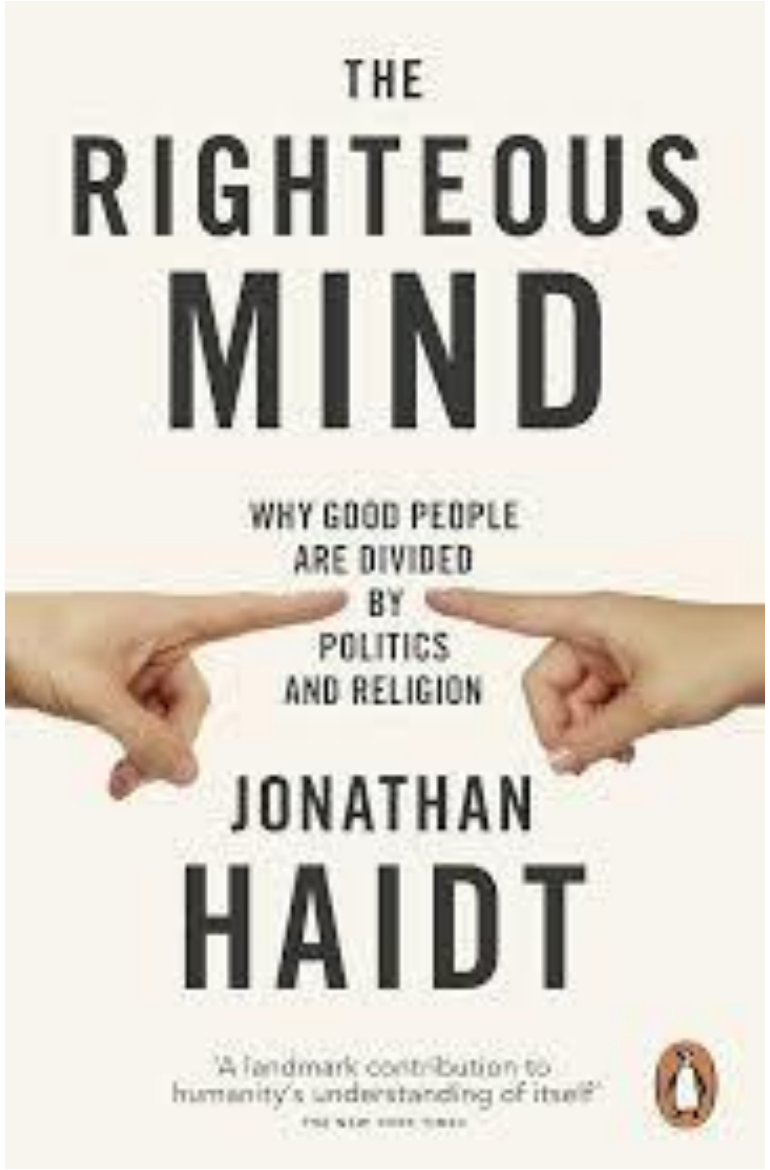
Cory Booker

“This is a moral moment.

It’s not left or right, it’s right or wrong.”

A Detour into Neuroscience & Evolutionary Psychology

Why reason alone will not solve this problem



Moral Foundations Theory

Theory in social psychology to explain where morality comes from & how humans across cultures develop shared moral themes and also why moralities can differ. This can help us unpack the emotional roots of political and religious conflict

Morality is based on several innate psychological foundations and then shaped by culture and experience

Evolutionary Psychology

- These foundations evolved as adaptive responses to social survival challenges
- Each is also influenced by social norms, childhood upbringing and personal experience
- Individual's sensitivity to each foundation can be measured through tools like the Moral Foundations Questionnaire

Moral Intuition over Reason

Our minds are designed to be moral. We are hard-wired to be moralistic, judgmental and self-righteous

THE MIND: a large elephant of automatic processes and intuition with a much smaller rider of controlled processes and reasoning

What is the elephant and the rider

The elephant represents automatic processes including emotion, intuition, sensory input.

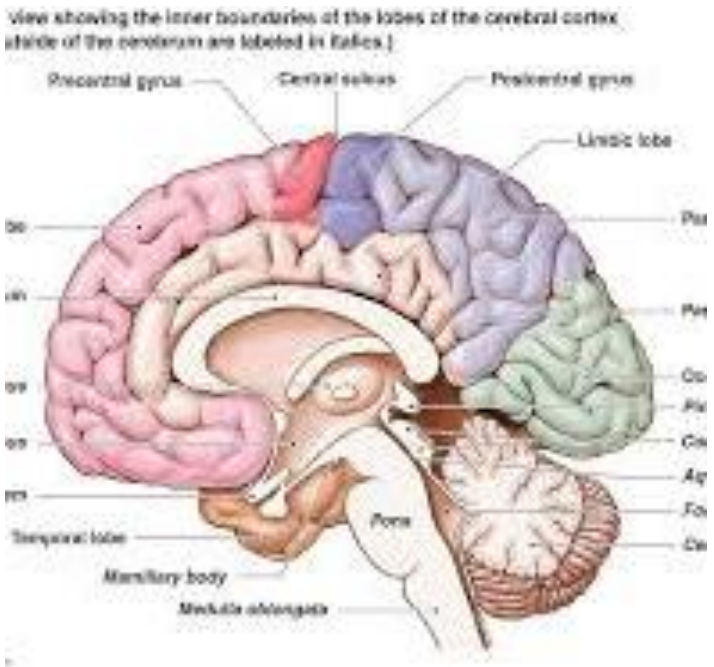
The rider is language-based reasoning. The rider evolved to serve the elephant. It makes up a story to explain the elephant.

Brains evaluate everything in terms of potential threat or benefit- approach or avoid. Affective reactions are so integrated with perception that we like/dislike instantaneously

If you want to change people's minds on a moral or political issue, you have to talk to the elephant first!

Descartes Error by Antonio Damasio

- Patients with brain damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (just behind and above the bridge of the nose)
- When damaged their emotionality dropped to almost zero. They had no deficits in IQ and had full knowledge of right and wrong but were unable to make decisions.
- Damasio postulated that gut feelings and bodily reactions are necessary to think rationally
- Other Studies with fMRI during moral issues show insula, amygdala and vmpfc (#8. Greene, JD et al.)

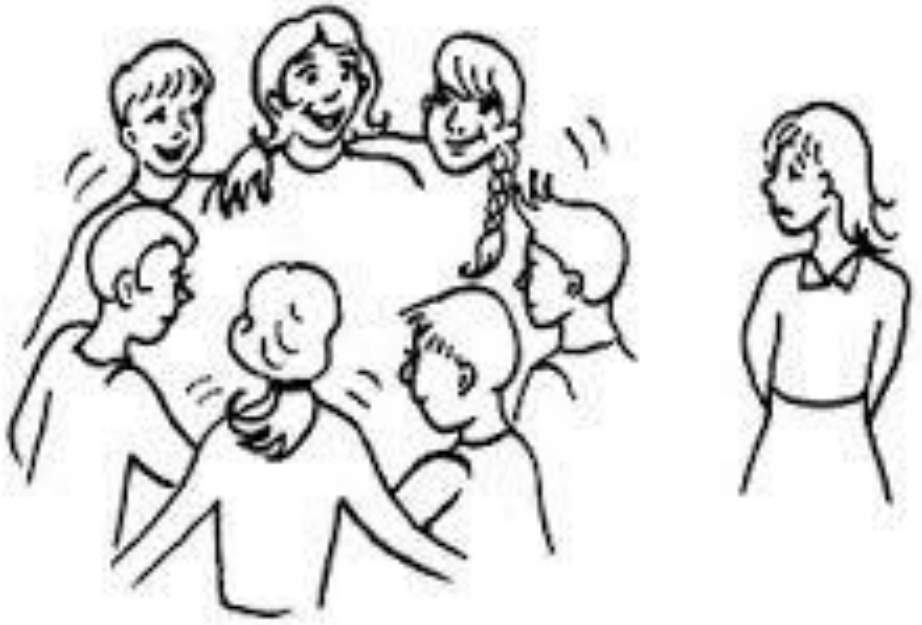


MFT identifies 6 core moral foundations

- Care/harm: sensitivity to the suffering of others driving compassion, kindness
- Fairness/cheating: worry about justice, rights, reciprocity
- Loyalty/betrayal: value on allegiance to one's group or family
- Authority/Subversion: Respect for tradition and authority
- Sanctity/degradation: feelings about purity, cleanliness and protecting the body and soul from degradation
- Liberty/Oppression: desire for personal and group freedom

Morality Binds and Blinds

- It unites people into cohesive groups
- It makes people more resistant to understanding outsiders
- Group rituals and collective identities encourage cooperation but heighten tribalism



One Hypothesis to explain differences

- Liberals and conservatives emphasize different foundations.
- Liberals focus more on care and fairness
- Conservatives value all 6 more equally

Studies mostly done with WEIRD people

- Wealthy
- Educated
- Industrialized
- Rich
- Democratic
- The WEIRDer you are the more you see a world of separate objects vs relationships AND the more you are outliers

The Moral Domain Varies across World Cultures

Include ethics of community- emphasizing duty, respect for one's elders. Service to the group, negation of the self

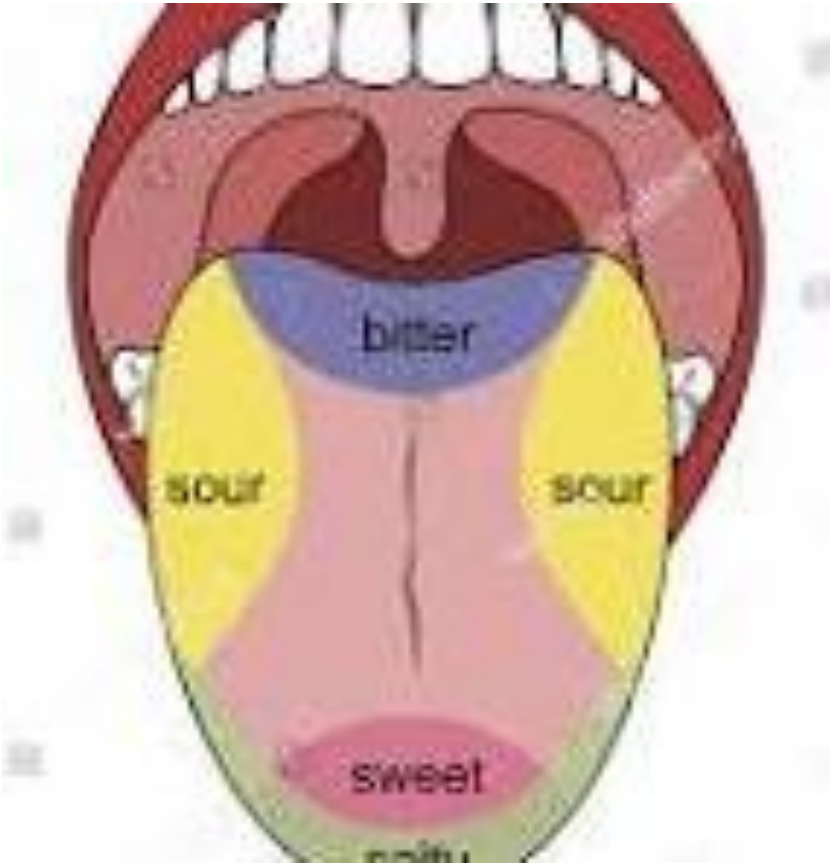
And ethics of divinity- treating the body as a temple, concepts of purity and pollution

WEIRD cultures & Western cultures focus more specifically on the ethic of AUTONOMY with moral concerns about individuals harming, oppressing or cheating other individuals

The Righteous Mind: 2nd Metaphor

A tongue with 6 taste receptors:

Care/harm
Fairness/cheating
Loyalty/betrayal
Authority/Subversion
Sanctity/degradation
Liberty/Oppression



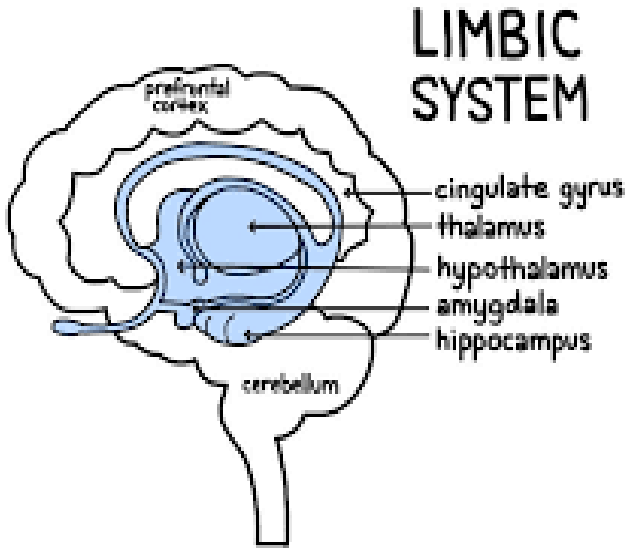
Another Take on Our Moral Outrage

"Powerful insights that will change how you see the world (and hopefully make you a little less angry)."

—Jonah Berger, best-selling author of *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*

Agrees with Haidt

- Outrage and moral condemnation are driven by gut feelings
- Providing facts or objective evidence is not an effective strategy
- Sharing personal stories of harm and suffering are more successful and fostering understanding and empathy



A Different Hypothesis

- Feelings of HARM act as the “master key” of morality
- From evolutionary psychology: early humans were not apex predators. We evolved to be aware of potential harm and banded into small social groups for protection.
- We are hard-wired to be vigilant for potential harm

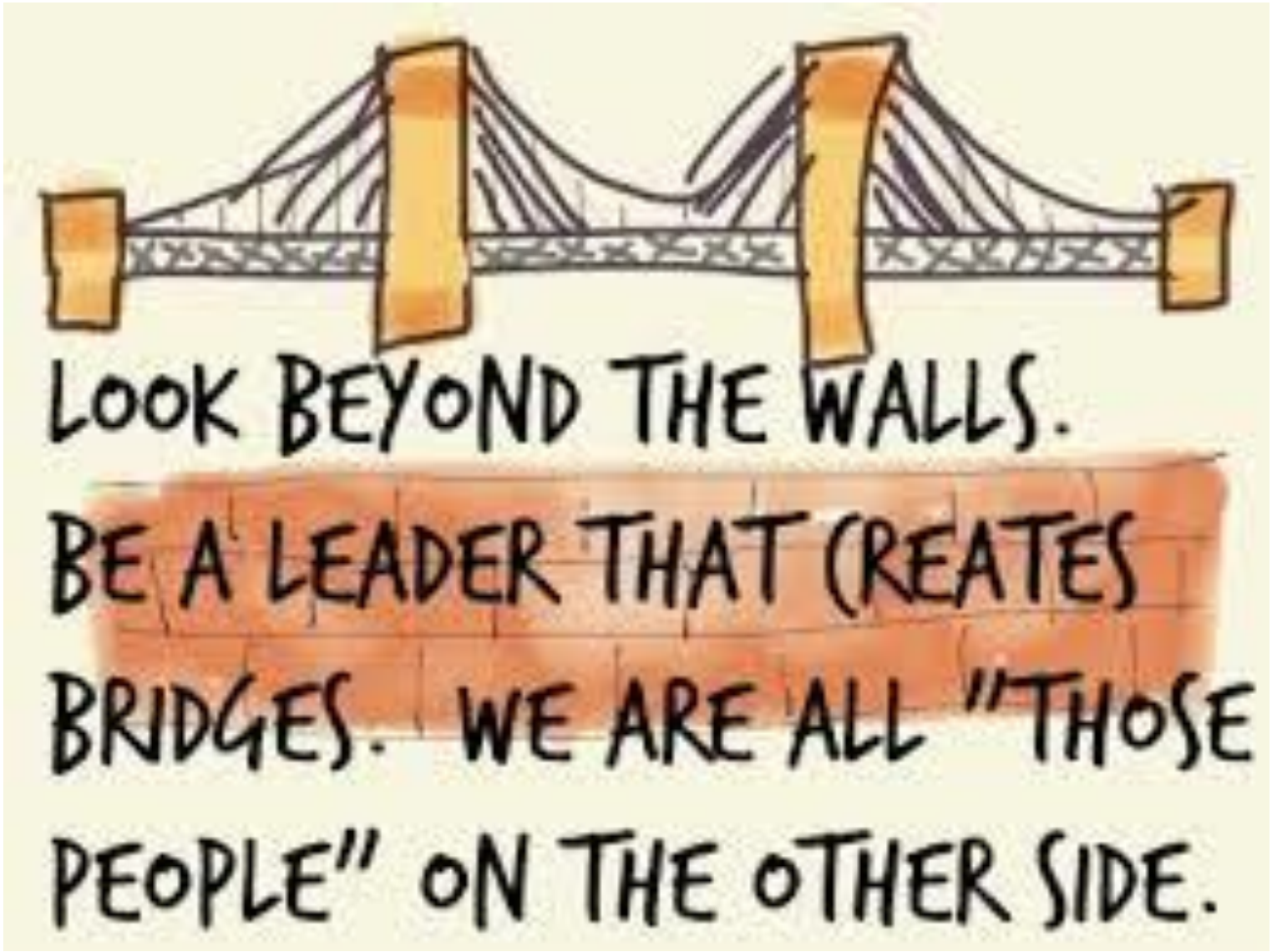
Disputes Jonathan Haidt

- Gray challenges the myth the liberals and conservatives have fundamentally different types of moral minds arguing that both groups moral views revolve around perceived threats and vulnerabilities making us highly sensitive to harm
- Take away message is that beneath fierce political and moral divisions, people are driven by the same fundamental instinct: the desire to protect themselves and others from harm
- We can bridge divides by sharing stories of who we see as vulnerable- listen to one another's fears and experiences

What rules ethics/morality of therapists?

- Where are our blind spots?

IV.. How Can We Build Bridges Instead of Walls?



UC Berkeley Changemakers

Openness to Opposing Views

Berkeley Changemakers

- Involves more than 80 faculty from 32 academic departments
- Over 13,000 students have enrolled in their courses since 2020

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SwanhEBwSg

Reference #9

OFFICE HOURS

Bridging Differences

Why should we be open to opposing views?

Julia Minson, Assoc. Prof of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School of Government & Frances Chen, Assoc. Prof. of Psychology at U. Of British Columbia reviewed dozens of studies from 1984-2021

- Studying receptivity to opposing views and teaching how to do it more effectively since we know receptiveness is critical in building both personal and professional relationships

APA Ethics Code: Preamble

“Psychologists respect and protect civil and human rights and the central importance of freedom of inquiry and expression in research, teaching, and publication. They strive to help the public in developing informed judgments and choices concerning human behavior.”

Minson and Chen's Research Findings

"A pernicious problem confronting virtually all human societies is people's unwillingness to engage with views and opinions they do not share, particularly those they find antithetical to their most dearly held and identity-relevant beliefs"

It is insidious because it prevents groups from effectively solving entire classes of other social-coordination problems that rely on thoughtful engagement with opposing views.

Resources from Minson & Chen article

- The Receptiveness.net website, part of the group's research project, invites visitors to take an 18-question quiz to measure their receptiveness to opposing viewpoints and compare it with scores of others with similar demographics.
- The site also provides an interactive algorithm anyone can use to assess how receptive their written messages are likely to sound to those reading them.

What signals openness?

Frequent acknowledgement (I understand that…

Expressions of positive affect (I'm glad that you…

Hedging (sometimes, maybe)

Low on negation (does not, will not, should not)

Low on explanations (because, therefore)

Being polite and formal has little to no effect

Disagree but stay connected

“Two highly receptive individuals might consider each other’s ideas deeply and, after concluding that reasonable people might endorse either perspective, walk away agreeing to disagree”

“A person who is thoughtfully engaging with our perspective is far more difficult to write off as ill-intentioned or irrational,” the authors explain. They thus invite behaviors normally reserved for those on our side — thoughtful consideration of their arguments, politeness, and willingness to interact in the future (actions that they, too, will interpret as cues of receptiveness).”

Minson and Chen Review of research

"People in a receptive mindset are more willing to expose themselves to balanced information on both sides of an issue, give more equal attention to information supporting both perspectives, and evaluate relevant arguments more equitably,"

Scholars have identified linguistic cues that people use to express and assess one another's level of receptiveness.

It doesn't matter if you ARE open but how you are perceived by the other

HEAR to be receptive

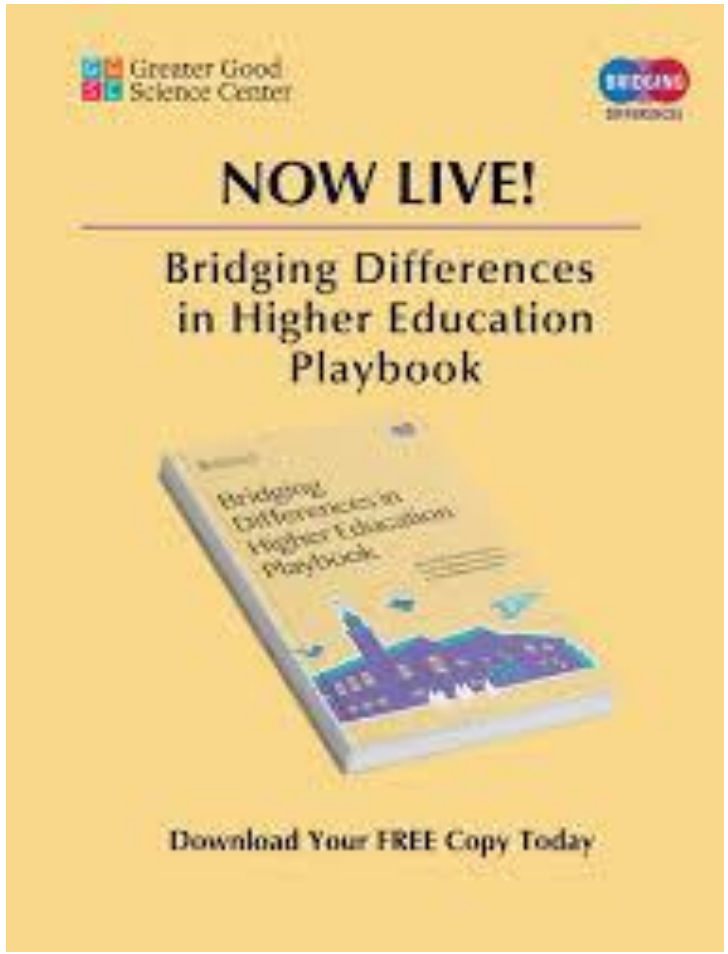
- **H**edge your statements (Some people tend to think…)
- **E**mphasize agreement (we both are concerned…)
- **A**cknowledge other's perspective (active listening)
- **R**eframe to the positive

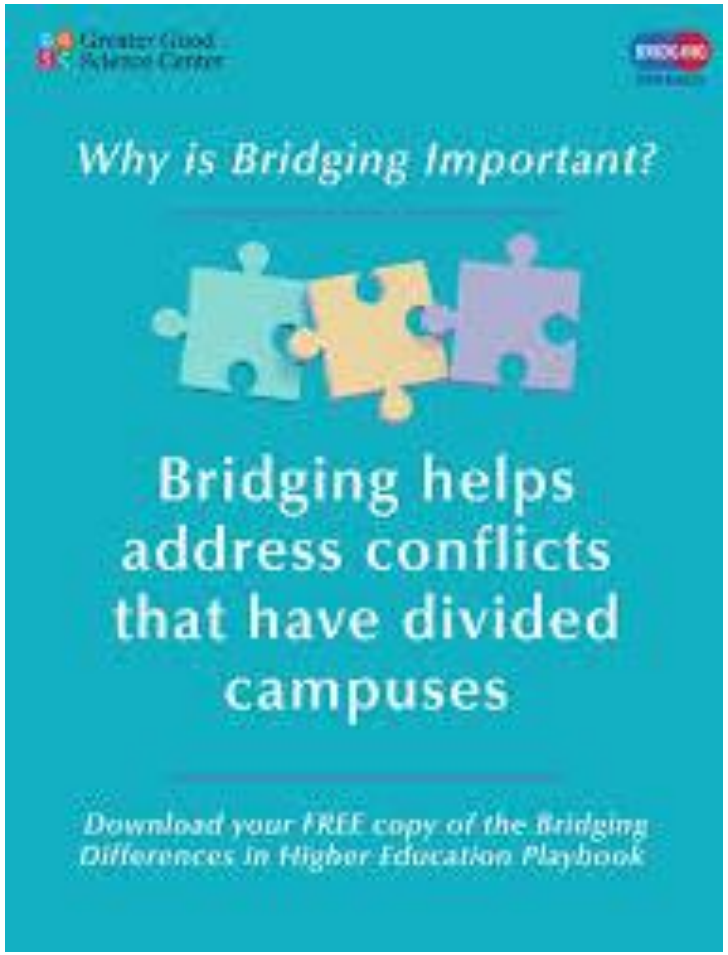
Be direct. I really want to hear and understand.

Be alert for your own stereotyping or false beliefs

Periodically restate what you have heard.

Get Your Free Download and Pass on to Clients!





Benefits of Bridging Differences Playbook

- It strengthens families
- It reduces violence
- It is better for our health
- It makes us smarter
- Its good for the bottom line
- It supports good government

Questions or Comments

V. What can we do in the face of fear?

A Brief History of Stoicism

Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium (present day Cyprus), an influential philosopher born around 334 BC. Zeno's teachings were centered around the pursuit of a virtuous life, the development of moral and intellectual excellence, and living in harmony with nature's laws. He emphasized the importance of rationality, self-discipline, and moral integrity, considering them paramount to achieving true happiness and tranquility. Stoicism teaches the maintenance of composure and rationality in the face of life’s adversities, fostering a resilient mindset.

Zeno’s Vision

Beyond personal virtue and tranquility, **Zeno** envisioned a unified and egalitarian society. He proposed a radical concept of a cosmopolitan city where all humans would live under a shared set of laws, transcending the existing boundaries and divisions.

Marcus Aurelius, Seneca & Epictetus

Marcus Aurelius was the Emperor of Rome from 161 to 180 AD. His philosophical insights, penned during his tumultuous reign, are collected in the enduring work *Meditations*

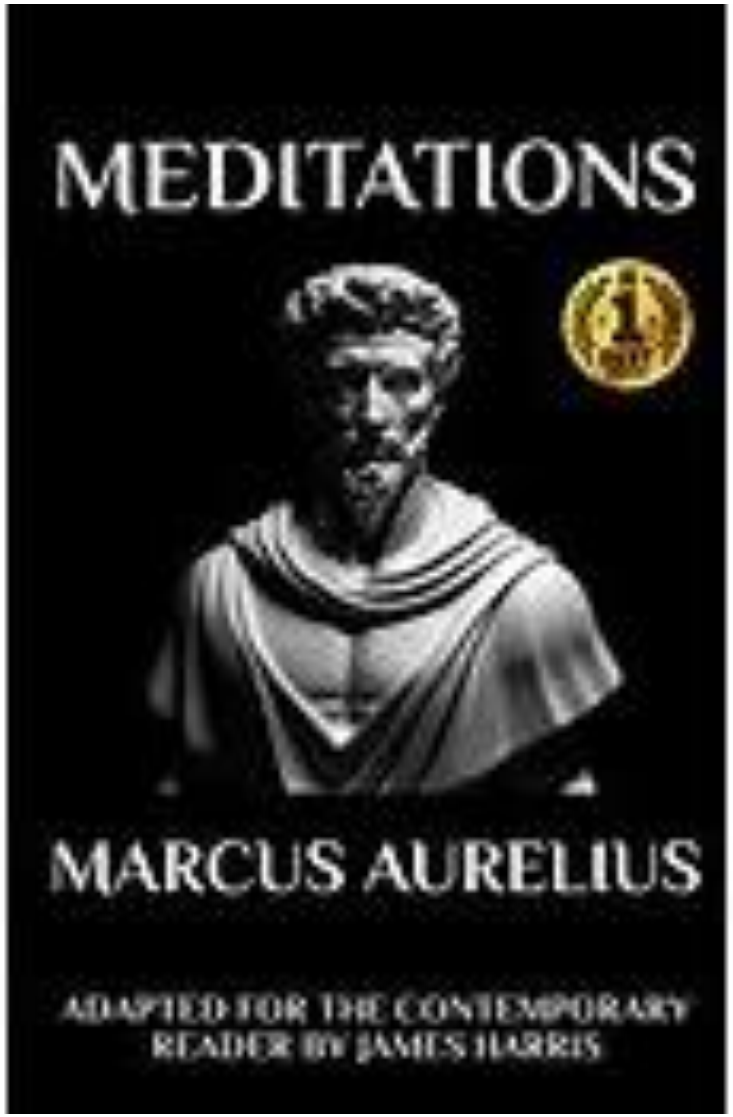
Seneca was a prominent philosopher, writer and advisor to Nero who wrote *Letters to Lucilius, On Anger, On the Shortness of Life*

Epictetus, born a slave, began to teach philosophy in Rome around 89 AD. He established his own philosophy school, disseminating the principles of Stoicism to a broad audience, wrote *Discourses*

Stoic Perspective

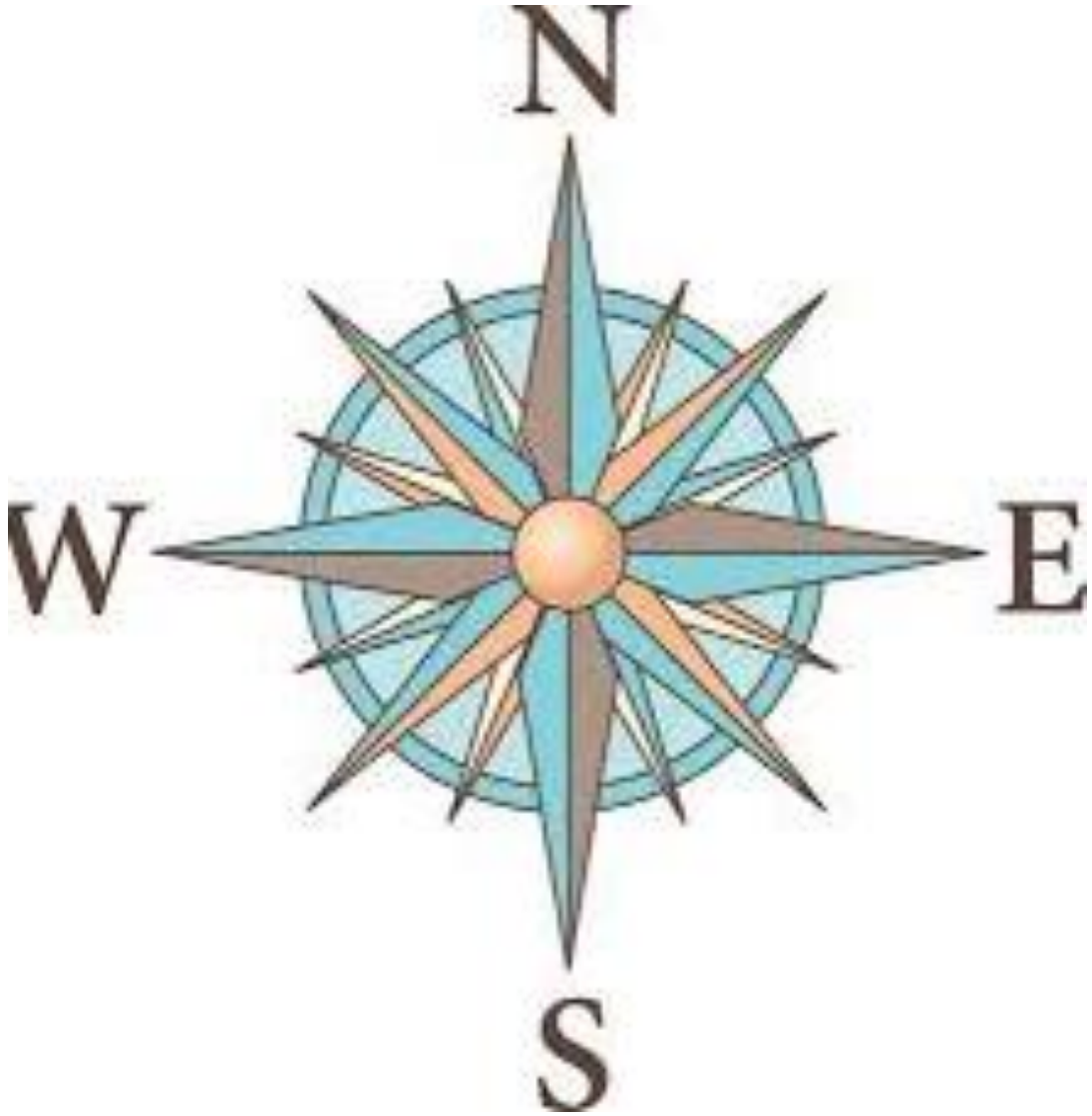
“Injustice is a kind of blasphemy. Nature designed rational beings for each other’s sake to help---not harm—one another, as they deserve. To transgress its will, then, is to blaspheme against the oldest of the gods.”

-Marcus Aurelius



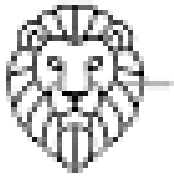
What was Virtue?

- 1. Courage
- 2. Temperance
- 3. Justice
- 4. Wisdom
- They are interrelated and inseparable and guide us in the right direction



4 PILLARS OF STOICISM

Wisdom: Knowing what you can control and acting rationally. It's about seeking truth and making sound decisions.



Courage: Facing fears and challenges with strength. Acting rightly, even in adversity.

Temperance: Practicing moderation and self-control. Avoiding excess to maintain balance and harmony.

Justice: Treating others fairly and contributing to the greater good. Doing no harm and acting with integrity.

APA Code of Ethics

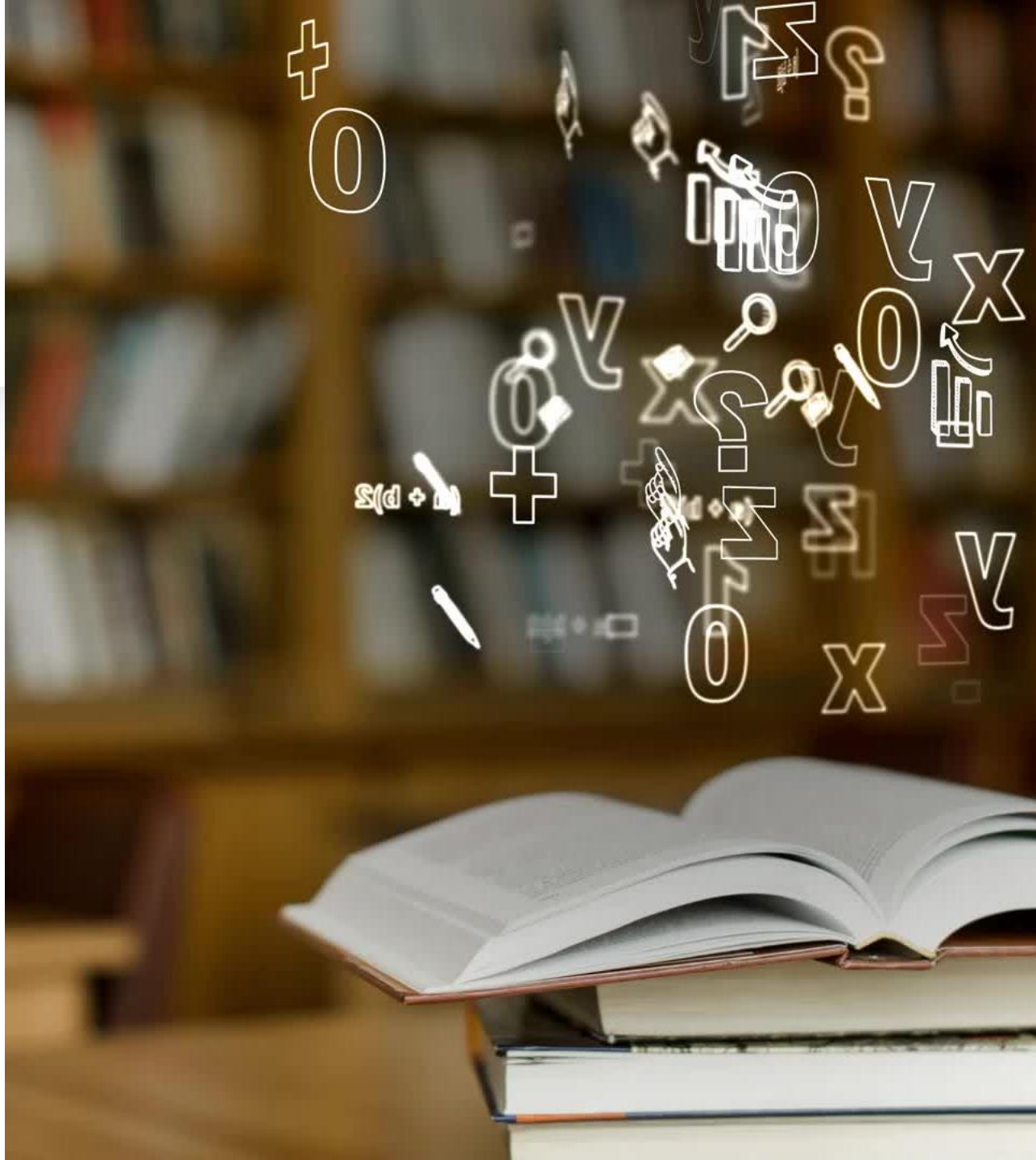
Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence

Principle B: Fidelity and Responsibility

Principle C: Integrity

Principle D: Justice

Principle E: Respect for People's Rights and Dignity



APA Code of Ethics: On Justice

Principle D: Justice

Psychologists recognize that fairness and justice entitle all persons to access to and benefit from the contributions of psychology and to equal quality in the processes, procedures, and services being conducted by psychologists.

Psychologists exercise reasonable judgment and take precautions to ensure that their potential biases, the boundaries of their competence, and the limitations of their expertise do not lead to or condone unjust practices.

Justice as a Way of Life

Courage is putting your ass on the line

Self-discipline is getting your ass in line

Justice is holding the line:

What you will do

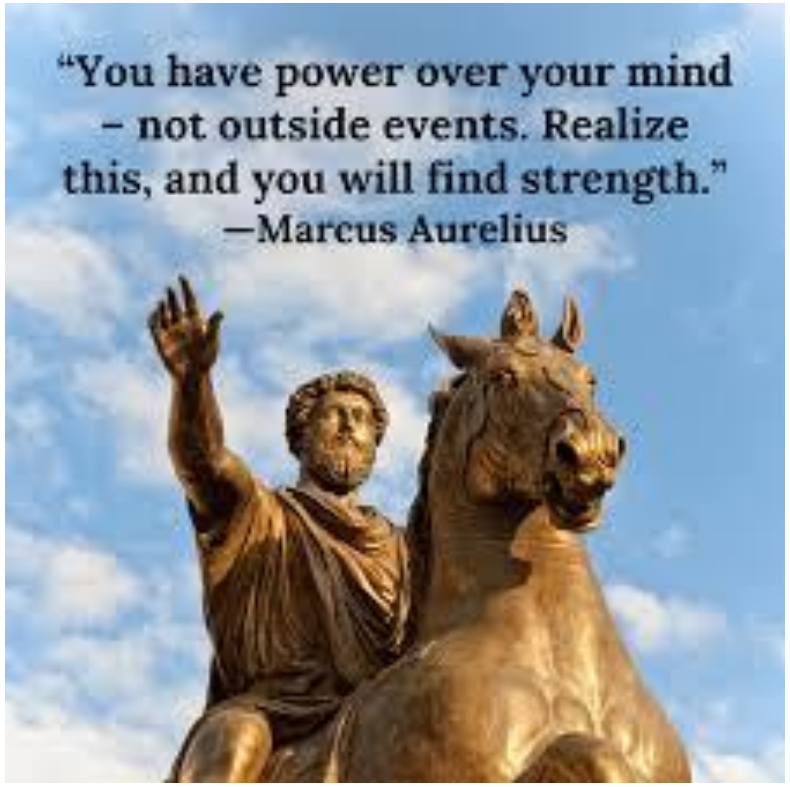
What you won’t do

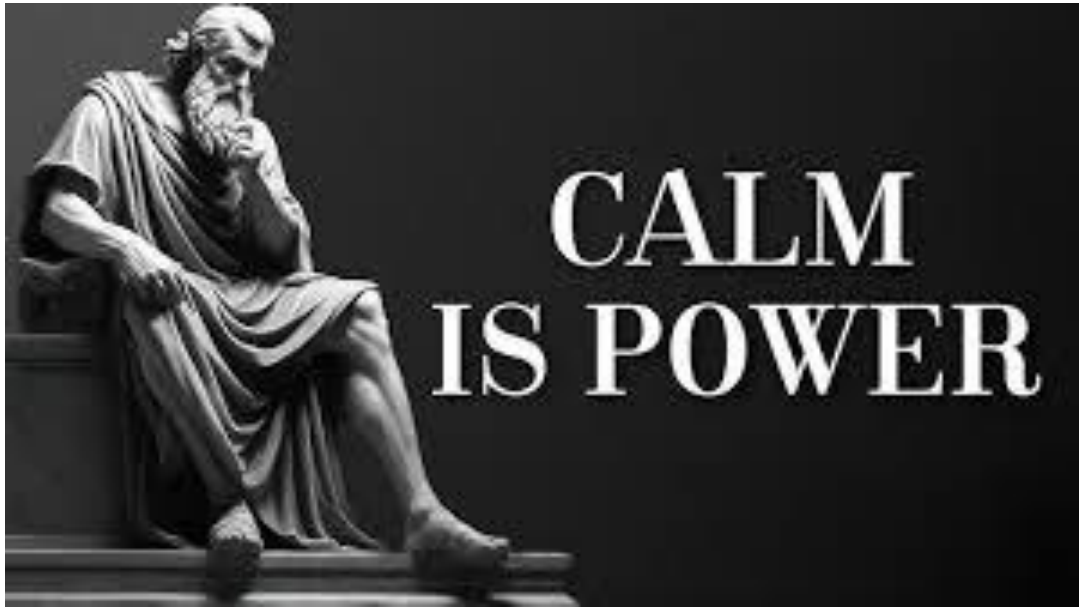
What you must do

How you do it

Whom you do it for

The process is about doing the right things, right now. Not worrying about what might happen later, or the results, or the whole picture.
Ryan Holiday


"You have power over your mind
– not outside events. Realize
this, and you will find strength."
—Marcus Aurelius


CALM
IS POWER

The Right thing: The Golden Rule

“In a world of so much uncertainty, in a world where so much is out of our control, where evil does exist and regularly goes unpunished, the commitment to live rightly is a redoubt in the storm, a light in the dark….Do what is right. For yourself. For others. For the world.”

-Ryan Holiday

NASW Code of Ethics

“The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.”

“Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients.”

Core Values are service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence

Stoics job is to try to save the world or at least not try to be part of the problem

“My study of history has led me to believe that there is a kind of dark matter inside the human race. It’s different from evil…but it is a kind of dark oppositional energy that goes from issue to issue, era to era. It’s rooted in self-interest, self-preservation, in fear, in not wanting to be inconvenienced, not wanting to change, not wanting to have to get involved.

Any philosophy that hardens you to the plight of other people or that rages instead of loves—these ideas are the plagues of our times.”

-Ryan Holiday

Take Courage from the Ones Who Came before Us

History Teaches

Carrie Chapman Catt was an American women's suffrage leader who campaigned for the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which gave U.S. women the right to vote in 1920.

“Everybody counts in applying democracy. And there will never be a true democracy until every responsible and law-abiding adult in it, without regard to race, sex, color or creed has his or her own inalienable and unpurchasable voice in government.” 1917

Getting Women the Right to Vote

To get the world ‘male’ in effect out of the Constitution cost the women of the country fifty-two years of pauseless campaign. During that time they were force to conduct fifty-six campaigns of referenda to male voters; 480 campaigns to get Legislatures to submit suffrage amendments to voters; 47 campaigns to get State constitutional conventions to write woman suffrage into state constitutions; 277 campaigns to get State party conventions to include woman suffrage planks; 30 campaigns with 19 successive Congresses.

International Woman Suffrage Alliance

IN 1913, for the first time Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Mohammedan, Jewish and Christian women sit together in a Congress uniting in a common plea.

Many attempts to divide them. Southern women criticized for associating with Black women, Northern women with lower-class women. Put together a broad coalition at meeting in Budapest.

Carrie Chapman Catt quotes

Service to a just cause rewards the worker with more real happiness and satisfaction than any other venture of life.

Roll up your sleeves, set your mind to making history, and wage such a fight for liberty that the whole world will respect our sex.

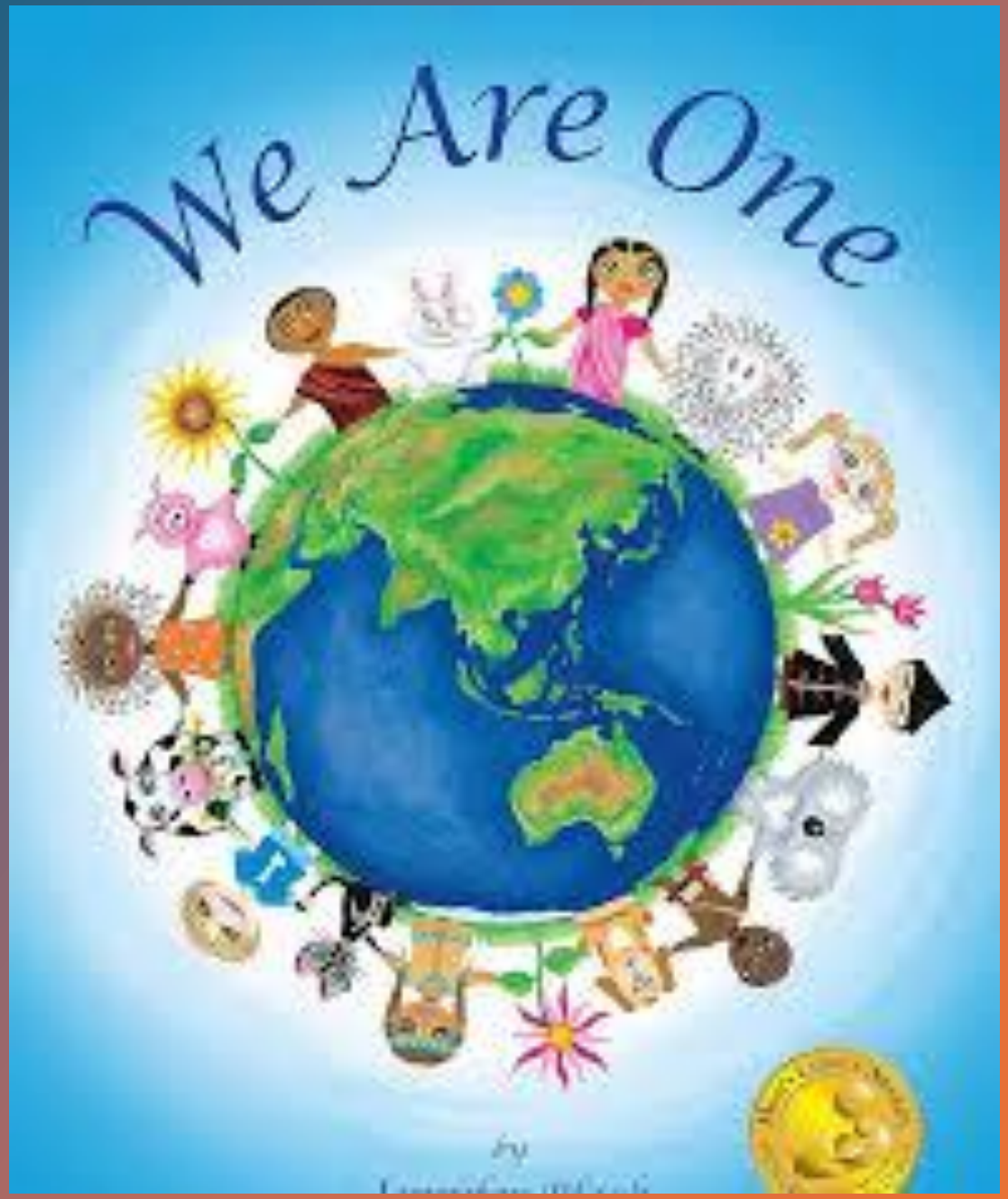
If we learn from the experience, there is no failure, only delayed victory.

Martin Luther King Jr.

What unites the Stoics and Martin Luther King is their shared emphasis on the ideas of human equality, universal brotherhood, and the power of love.

In his book *Strength to Love*, King quoted the words of Epictetus offering moral advice for those involved in the civil rights movement: “It is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of hardship or death.”

“A time comes when silence is betrayal.”



Martin Luther King Jr.

When he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, King emphasized in his acceptance speech that “this call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men.”

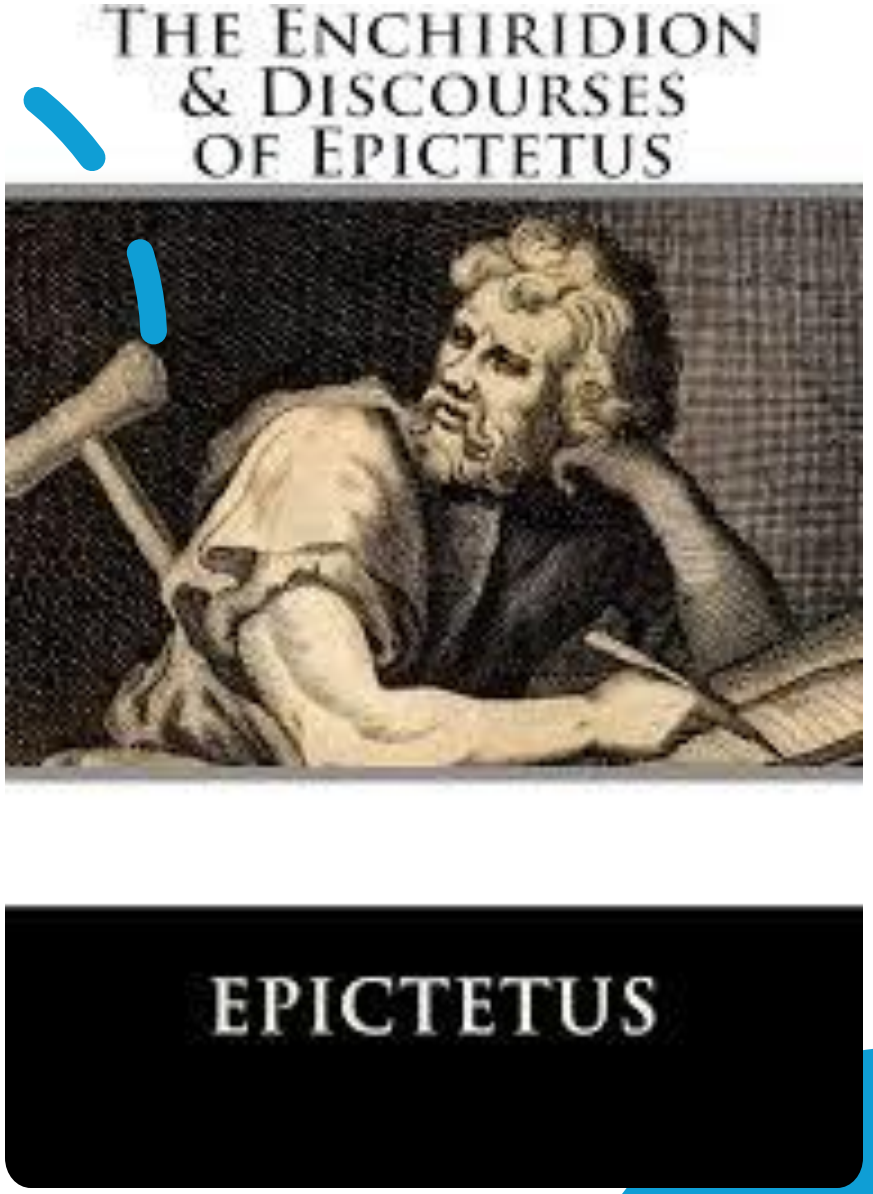
“We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.”

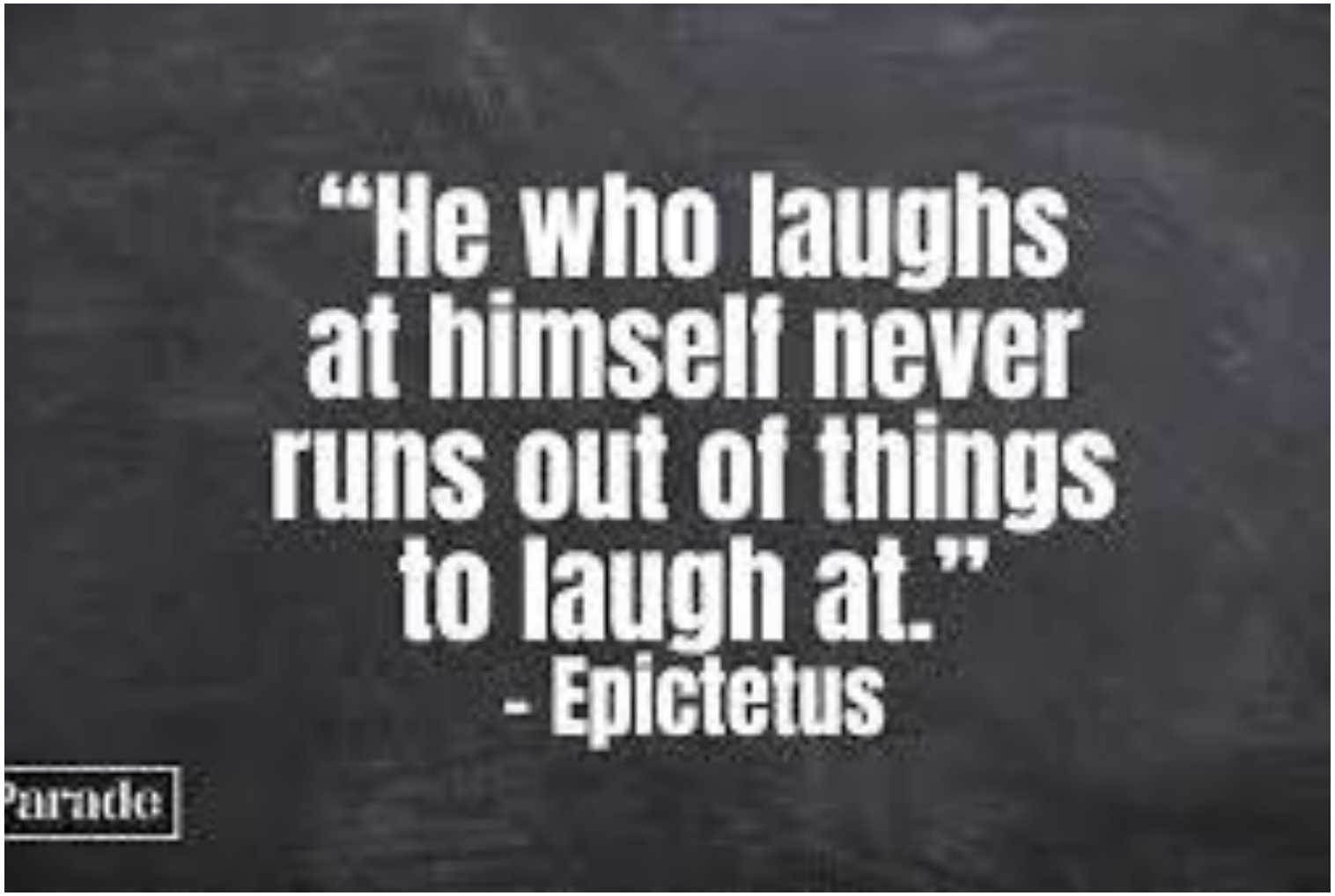
Abraham Lincoln

- Favorite phrase: This too shall pass.
- Do what you can, endure what you must. Make the best of it.

Epictetus, born a slave in 55AD

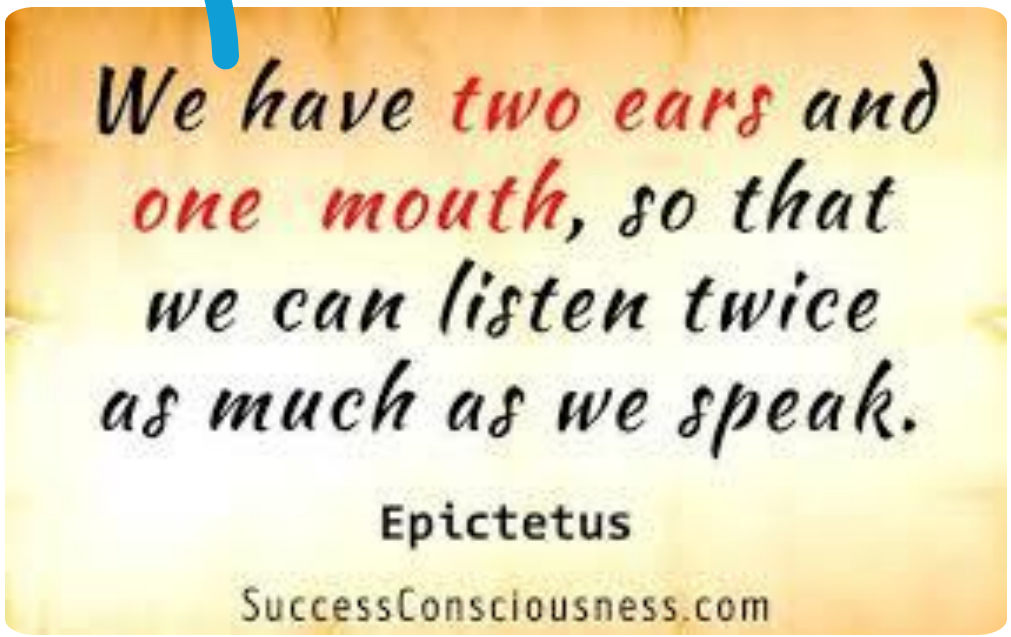
- Much of life is beyond our control but we can command what matters most- our opinions, impulses, desires and aversions. It is the power to master our interior world that makes us invincible.
- Too often we place our happiness in the hands of others- this is a self-imposed bondage.




"He who laughs
at himself never
runs out of things
to laugh at."
- Epictetus
Parade

Learning from Epictetus

- What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about things. We can change the way we feel by changing the way we think. We are as responsible for our emotions as we are for out thoughts and actions.
- Relabeling



“He who laughs at himself never runs out of things to laugh at.”
- Epictetus
rade
It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.

Marcus Aurelius on Difficult People

- “People will continue to do what they do, even though you may explode in protest.”
- “When someone else’s faults bother you, stop and look at yourself and think about your own similar faults, like wanting good things, money, pleasure or fame.
- When you wake up, say to yourself: Today I will be dealing with people who are meddling, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious and uncharitable. They are like this because they can’t tell the difference between good and evil.

Zeno’s Best Quotes

- ***Happiness is a good flow of life.***
- ***Man conquers the world by conquering himself.***
- ***Well-being is realized by small steps but is truly no small thing.***
- ***We have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen more than we say.***
- ***He who is greedy is always in want.***
- ***Man’s proper work is the practice of the virtues, which alone produce happiness.***

Thank you for everything each one of you do!!!

Democratizing Ethics

- Ethics are all of our responsibility. Individual decisions can ripple outwards and contribute to a more just society. Current era is one of moral decline when ethical voices are needed.

CAMFT Social Policy Statements

The CAMFT Board of Directors has prioritized the publishing of Social Policy Statements to raise understanding and awareness about the impact of social and systemic issues on mental health and well-being, and to emphasize the importance of culturally responsive training for mental health clinicians.

CAMFT is aware that social justice issues are dynamic developmental processes responsive to evolving social, political, economic, and other world circumstances, as well as clinical, ethical, and legal considerations.

CAMFT Has Taken a Stand on…

- Gender affirming care and transgender rights in August, 2025
- Funding of Health and Human Services in April, 2025 and Medicaid in Feb, 2025
- Marriage equality for all LGBTQPIA2S+ individuals (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and trans, queer and questioning, intersex, asexual or agender, and two-spirit)
- Detrimental effects of misogyny. August, 2022
- The Impacts of Forced Family Separation and Detention
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion