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Can Patriotism Be Compassionate?
by Jeremy Adam Smith

“I don’t mean love, when I say patriotism,” writes Ursula K. Le Guin in her classic 1969 novel The Left Hand of Darkness. “I mean fear. The fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression.”

In some corners, patriotism has a bad name. “Patriot” is mildly defined in my desktop dictionary as a “supporter of one’s own country”—and yet my thesaurus suggests the word “patriotism” can be synonymous with jingoism, chauvinism, nativism, and xenophobia. Particularly during times of war, patriotism does indeed seem to go hand-in-hand with dehumanization of outsiders, as well as intolerance of internal dissent.

But that’s not the whole story. Patriotism also drives people to extremes of altruism and self-sacrifice on behalf of the homeland—as the cliché has it, war brings out the best and worst in human beings. Shared support for a country strengthens social bonds among its citizens and provides an incubator in which trust and compassion can grow among them.

Thus patriotism helps tie us together within national borders, but there’s a catch: It seems to diminish our ability to see the humanity in citizens of other nations. That’s why national holidays like the Fourth of July always present me—and many windmill-tilting idealists who’d like to foster peace and cross-group understanding—with a Gordian knot: We feel forced to choose between country and humanity.

But does that have to be the case? Can one celebrate the Fourth of July without hating and fearing other countries? The short answer to the second question is yes… probably. In fact, when the Greater Good Science Center analyzed the results of its “connection to humanity” quiz, we found plenty of people who identified with both country and humanity. They are not mutually exclusive.

Indeed, so far the research literature suggests that the problem is not with patriotism itself. Human beings are built to be part of groups, but groups do not have to be self-focused and belligerent. New psychological research points to how we can feel authentic pride for our country—and still be citizens of the world.

Why does patriotism exist?

In his 2012 book The Righteous Mind, moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that morality arises from intuitions, not reasoning, and that our intuitions rest upon six foundations, which he defines as a series of binary opposites like Care/Harm; Fairness/Cheating; Loyalty/Betrayal; and Authority/Subversion.

The values of the political Left, he says, derive mainly from the foundations of Care and Fairness—while conservatives tend to more highly value Loyalty. This makes "patriotism" a special property of the Right.

To define the Loyalty foundation, Haidt describes a classic 1954 experiment by social psychologist Muzafer Sherif, who pitted two groups of 12-year-old boys against each other in an effort to understand how collective identities are formed. The boys quickly forged tribal micro-cultures and "destroyed each other's flags, raided and vandalized each other's bunks, called each other nasty names, made weapons…."

When morality rests upon the Loyalty foundation, says Haidt, right is anything that builds and defends the tribe; wrong is anything that undermines it. Thus violence against members of the other tribe is moral, and betrayal of one's own tribe is the worst crime of all. That sounds terrible to people whose morality rests upon Care and Fairness—and the reason why, for example, conservatives vilify whistleblowerEdward Snowden while many liberals hail him as a hero.

But Haidt argues the Loyalty foundation has deep evolutionary roots and cannot be wished away by those who prefer Care as a basis for morality. Humans have always had to band together to survive and thrive, and bonding with some seems to naturally involve excluding others.

This is true down to a neurochemical level. Oxytocin, for example, has been nicknamed the "love hormone" for its role in bonding people with each other. But what's less well known is that oxytocin plays a role in excluding others from that bond. One 2011 study found that Dutch students dosed with oxytocin were "more likely to favor Dutch people or things associated with the Dutch than when they had taken a placebo." Furthermore, they were more likely to say "they would sacrifice the life of a non-Dutch person over a Dutch person in order to save five other people of unknown nationality." We can just as well call oxytocin the "patriotism hormone"!

This is only one example of how our bodies are seemingly built for group cohesion and loyalty—which makes traits like patriotism an intractable part of human psychology.

Even liberals and radicals who imagine themselves to be above tribal squabbling can be easily observed exhibiting the same behaviors as the 12-year-old boys in Muzafer Sherif's experiment. When I was an undergraduate student activist, I thought nothing of defacing the posters and banners of the campus "White Student Union." I still think the agenda of that group was repulsive—and it's worth noting that Haidt's research into political difference grew out of research into feelings of disgust—but I now realize that my actions followed an unconscious, evolutionary script. I wasn't promoting a higher ideal; I was just trashing the other team, largely because I enjoyed the self-satisfied shot of dopamine I got when I spray-painted "RASCISM SUX" on one of their banners. My friends cheered me on; I was strengthening bonds within my tribe by committing an anti-social act of vandalism against another tribe.

Four paths to a more compassionate patriotism

So is there a solution? Or are we simply doomed to follow these scripts?

In her 2011 essay, “Teaching Patriotism: Love and Critical Freedom,” the philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum argues that while there are many dangers inherent in teaching patriotism, we still “need patriotic emotion to motivate projects that require transcending self-interest.” Just as strong attachment to parents can serve as a template for healthy relationships throughout life, so secure attachment to one’s nation can give us the confidence to respect other people’s countries.

Nussbaum searches American history for leaders who were able to build a more compassionate, cosmopolitan patriotism, such when Martin Luther King, Jr., argued in 1967 that opposing war is the “privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation’s self-defined goals and positions.”

Nussbaum draws on history and philosophy to make her case for a new brand of patriotism, but does her argument cut against human nature, as some allege? The answer is no—recent psychological research points to many steps we can take to extend the legacy of King. As we celebrate this Fourth of July, here are four for us to consider.

1. Make love of humanity an explicit goal.

Evolution bequeathed to us a brain that is wired for connection to the group, which is what makes patriotism such a two-edged sword, cleaving “us” from “them.” And the brain is very, very good at spotting differences in its environment, including racial differences. As the essays in the Greater Good anthology Are We Born Racist? reveal, we cannot stop ourselves to going into high alert when we encounter something out of the ordinary or someone different from ourselves.

Does this mean that prejudice and xenophobia are inevitable? No, because the human brain is also adept at overcoming fear and adapting itself to change. Study after study finds that repeated exposure to other peoples and cultures erodes prejudice.

The brain has one other advantage in the effort to transcend xenophobic nationalism: It is goal oriented. If we tell ourselves—and tell our kids—that extending compassion and forgiveness to people of other countries is a worthwhile goal, “the brain can do that, though it may take a bit of effort and practice,” as neuroscientist David Amodio writes in his Greater Good essay about overcoming racism,“The Egalitarian Brain” .

Group formation and loyalty are indeed natural and supported by our bodies, but we are also very well equipped to overcome our kneejerk fears or prejudices. We just need to give ourselves opportunities for reflection on our biases—and dedicate ourselves to overcoming them.

2. Teach that compassion and empathy are unlimited resources.

The argument for a narrow, self-interested patriotism starts with the idea that there is only so much good feeling to go around—and that therefore we need to ration fellow-feeling for those closest to us.

But more and more studies reveal that this premise is false. “In my research, I have found that the limits of empathy are actually quite malleable,” writes psychologist C. Daryl Cameron in “Can You Run Out of Empathy?” His studies find that people will ration their

empathy and compassion for the in-group when they worry help for the out-group will be too costly or ineffective. But, he explains:

People's expectations about empathy can have powerful effects on how much empathy they feel, and for whom. Identification with all humanity is an empirically documented individual difference that predicts more empathic emotion and behavior. And research with mindfulness interventions suggests that training people to approach, rather than avoid, their emotional experiences can decrease fear of empathy and increase pro-social behavior.

In short, "The research so far says empathy isn't a non-renewable resource like oil. Empathy is more like wind or solar power, renewable and sustainable." Knowing this to be true is one of the steps that allows people to extend their fellow feeling beyond their immediate circles, to encompass a broader swath of humanity.

3. Extend self-compassion to America.

Both liberals and conservatives would benefit from applying some self-compassion to themselves as Americans.

As a group, American liberals, progressives, and radicals tend to be harsh with our own country—I say "our" because I count myself among them. We decry our history of slavery and racism, the genocide of Native Americans, wartime atrocities committed in our name, illegal actions by intelligence agencies, and more. The most thoughtful and self-conscious critics are aware that we are harsh in part because we blame ourselves: we identify with our nation, take responsibility for its worst actions, and are ashamed. That's a valid manifestation of patriotism, in my view—but one that can interfere with taking positive action to make things better.

Meanwhile, many rock-ribbed conservatives treat any criticism of America as a personal blow to their self-esteem. "People who invest their self-worth in feeling superior and infallible tend to get angry and defensive when their status is threatened," writes University of Texas psychologist Kristin Neff, who could be describing the Bush administration. Neff's solution to both these psychological dilemmas is self-compassion: "People who compassionately accept their imperfection, however, no longer need to engage in such unhealthy behaviors to protect their egos."

As she writes in "Why Self-Compassion Trumps Self-Esteem":

As I've defined it, self-compassion entails three core components. First, it requires self-kindness, that we be gentle and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical and judgmental. Second, it requires recognition of our common humanity, feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering. Third, it requires mindfulness—that we hold our experience in balanced awareness, rather than ignoring our pain or exaggerating it.

For the Right, these are all qualities that could help build a kinder, gentler, less defensive patriotism. For the Left, feelings of shame can make us come down harshly on ourselves and our countrymen without also recognizing our nation's positive qualities—the values

and accomplishments that motivate us to connect with other Americans and celebrate our shared identity. For both groups, research by Neff and her colleagues finds that self-compassion actually leads to greater compassion for others. If you know how to identify and address suffering in yourself, you are better able to do the same for other people.

But will self-compassion reduce our will to change and challenge injustice? Here, the research says absolutely not. “We think we need to beat ourselves up if we make mistakes so that we won’t do it again,” says Neff. “But that’s completely counterproductive. Self-criticism is very strongly linked to depression. And depression is antithetical to motivation: You’re unable to be motivated to change if you’re depressed. It causes us to lose faith in ourselves, and that’s going to make us less likely to try to change and conditions us for failure.”

When we are compassionate with ourselves, however, we can admit that we made a mistake—and then simply try to do better next time. That’s a citizenship skill worth cultivating.

4. Embrace authentic, not hubristic, pride.

Pride is a natural emotional response to success and high social status, but some forms of pride are healthier than others.

Many recent studies have revealed the downside of what psychologists call “hubristic pride,” which is associated with arrogance and self-aggrandizement. As Claire E. Ashton-James and Jessica L. Tracy write in their 2011 study of how pride influences our feelings about other people, “Hubristic pride results from success that is attributed to internal, stable, and uncontrollable causes (‘I did well because I’m great’).”

In contrast, “authentic pride results from success attributed to internal, unstable, and controllable causes (‘I did well because I worked hard’),” and is closely associated with feelings of accomplishment and humility. Their experiments—as well as several others by GGSC-affiliated scientists—have closely linkedhubristic pride to prejudice, impulsivity, and aggression. Authentic pride had exactly the opposite effects, encouraging self-control, compassion for others, and positive attitudes toward out-groups. Other research by UC Berkeley’s Matt Goren and Victoria Plaut finds that the negative effects of pride are mitigated if we are conscious of the power and privilege granted by our status.

So the challenge is fairly clear: to cultivate authentic, power-cognizant pride among citizens of the United States. If we feel pride, it should be in the accomplishments of our fellow citizens and in any contributions we ourselves have made toward making our country and community a better place, however small and local. Pride of simply being born American leads to hubris, which leads to bigotry and belligerence. For pride to be authentic, it must be something we feel we have earned.

The best American leaders have always made that distinction. We all know this line from John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” But few seem to remember the next line: “My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.”

The brutal Cold War context of these words is almost lost to us now, but the higher ideals behind them are not ambiguous. Kennedy presented himself as a patriot of the United States and as a citizen of the world, seeing no contradiction. These words are, at root, an appeal for authentic pride—citizenship as something that must be earned, in a nation that is part of a community of nations. Those are ideals worth celebrating on the Fourth of July.