

## Building a Hate-Free Zone

Reverend Harris Riordan

This Fellowship is a pretty happy place. None of us are perfect. We get on each other's nerves once in a while. We have disagreements and disappointments. But they hardly ever escalate beyond a deep sigh and a roll of the eyes. Places like this are exactly what the world needs. In fact, the world needs more of them, more circles of hope, of positive energy. It needs more zones where people are working to be hate-free.

Hate is a problem we human beings cannot afford. When warriors fought hand to hand, close enough to hear and see their enemies, the tragedy of hate was localized. You did not have to be drawn into the conflict. For much of our existence, 30 or 40 miles distance was the same as being a world away. When horses were domesticated the safe margins increased, but still one could move on, to another settlement, another city, a place that was safe. It no longer exists. There are too many of us on this globe, our tools for destruction too fast and powerful. The best a person can do is move to an unlikely target. But who can predict where that might be?

It seems to me there are only two possible responses to this 21st century reality. One is to decide that because this is the way it has always been, this is the way it will always be; that peace is a fool's mission, and can never be secured except in certain areas for some period of time. And so the best plan is to be the biggest and strongest in your own corner of the world. Or one can be a religious, and believe that in the face of all this evidence to the contrary, peace is possible. I, for one, will throw my lot with the fools. Peace is, must be, our future. It won't arrive in my life-time, I know, and probably not in my daughter's, but there is no better way to spend my years than moving towards it, even if I bring peace closer by only an "inch".

Like the Transcendentalists, I believe that Revelation is not sealed. Creation is not finished. We are evolving. It is our responsibility to evolve in the best way we know how. It is not enough to say that hatred and violence are bad, to moralize against them. We need to understand hatred, and find its antidote, and create a culture of peace.

One place to start is to look in the brain. In the 1950's, Paul MacLean, a neurologist, claimed that in our heads there are actually three brains. The oldest, comprising the brain stem and cerebellum, is the reptilian brain. It is very like what lives in the skulls of lizards and snakes. It is instinctual, rigid, obsessive, compulsive, ritualistic and paranoid. It repeats the same behaviors over and over again, never learning from past mistakes. It controls muscles, balance, autonomic functions like breathing and the heartbeat. This part of the brain is always active, even in the deepest sleep.

Wrapped around that is the old mammalian brain, or The Limbic System. This corresponds to the brain of most mammals. It is concerned with feeding and sexual behavior, with fleeing or fighting. It is the seat of emotion. Fear, rage, pain, pleasure, and joy are known there. The limbic system determines whether you feel positive or negative about something. And it has a great deal to do with what gets your attention.

The limbic system is binary. It knows only yes/no, agreeable/disagreeable. It makes no further refinements. If the limbic system learns that snakes are dangerous, it will react to every snake and everything that looks like a snake in the same way. Better to jump back from a garter snake than put your foot on a rattler. One could say that this brain's job is to scan the world for novelty, looking for food, opportunities to mate, and threats. It draws us toward the first and gets us away from the second. When it sees that we are trapped, it sets us into fight mode.

In order to keep the species alive, the limbic system moves fast. We flinch at loud noises before we are aware that we even heard them. Because it happens so reflexively, we think of it as if it were an instinct, but it is not. It is a way of perceiving, judging, responding to the world -- a way of thinking -- that happens outside of consciousness.

It has vast connections with the neocortex, the newest part of our brains. All primates have a cortex. But in humans it is largest and most wrinkled. This is the gray matter most of us consider essential for our humanity, it is the seat of language, of music and art. MacLean refers to it as "the mother of invention and the father of abstract thought." Though it moves at a snail's pace compared to the limbic system, the neocortex makes distinctions and continues to refine them. Here is the human ability to identify an individual occurrence, a particular instance, and follow it through to a new idea, a new map of the world. Most of what is between our ears is neocortex, and this is why humans have an almost limitless ability to manage shades of gray.

There are no borders in the triune brain. The reptilian, old mammalian, and neocortex are always in dialogue with each other. Beyond autonomic functions, nothing is purely limbic or purely cortical, but a mixture of both. MacLean thinks that the limbic system is the seat of our value judgments. That in effect, it is this part of the brain that lets us know whether our gray cells have a good idea or not. If the limbic system approves of the notion, it will feel true and right, and we somehow have more confidence to go with whatever it is. If not, we put little weight behind it and move on, looking for the next idea that feels better. Because emotions originate here, and because it works only in stereotypes, the limbic system is where hate begins.

The phrase "being of two minds on something" may be absolutely correct. The neocortex may see life one way and the limbic another. Such disagreements probably happen more than we realize. The triune brain explains how we can live in two different worlds without feeling conflicted. We can believe that all people are created equal, and do our best to live it out, and at the same time shy away from or not see certain types of folk. How many of us white folk who know that racism is one of our nation's sins, have found ourselves nervous if we are alone in the company of a group of young black men? And then feel ashamed by our own response?

That nervousness, that "I'd rather be someplace else" sort of feeling, is the limbic system at work. It only knows stereotypes and absolutes. It constructs a world of good and bad, us and them. And it learns those lessons quickly, deeply, and early on. The limbic system is fully developed by the time a person is seven or eight. The neocortex continues to develop into our twenties. If your culture tells you that African-Americans are not safe,

you catalogue it and move on. That cringe of shame or embarrassment, that "what's wrong with me?" is a sign that the neocortex is working. It is seeing individuals, their eyes, their smiles, their stance, their clothes. And it takes only another few seconds for you to realize that these four young men could be strangers on their way to work, or members of a yet-to-be-famous string quartet. All such experiences, whether they break down institutional racism, sexism, homophobia, or any other prejudice, may be evolution in action.

What neurology tells us is that our higher cognitive functions are hijacked more often than we want to admit. Have a hard day at work, come home and find reasons to yell at your partner, your kids, or the dog, and you've been hijacked. Get so frustrated with the folks you love that you could throttle them, and you are being hijacked. They may have chosen that moment when you were tired and hungry and stressed, to be particularly outrageous, and all of a sudden mean things are coming out of your mouth. If the trouble is more than situational, things can grow nasty, even hateful, in a short time.

Whatever aggression and hate we know in our lives begins when one hijacked brain sets off another brain hijacking. Our lives are made better by everything that strengthens the neocortex against being over-run.

One strategy is to have a meditation practice or prayer life. Whether a person prays to God, or concentrates on a candle flame, the practice of focusing the mind, of holding it still on one object, seems to strengthen the neocortex and make a person more resilient against those hostile take-overs.

But here are a few others:

Practice speaking and thinking in specifics. Identify any source of anger, pain, or threat with as much detail as possible. This is not only a better form of communication, upping the chances that the offending party will learn how not to do whatever they did, but it keeps us from falling into a generalized, globalized state of "this always happens and you're always to blame." That state opens the door to hate.

Empathize. Practice developing an "us/us" perspective. Empathy is not the same as sympathy. You need not agree to see things from an opponent's point of view. You only need understand how they arrived at where they are. Often, with those we are closest to, a little bit of empathy will resolve the problem. But it is also effective with people we will never like. To understand one's competition is to find ways to outwit them. Even in a very conflicted situation an "us/us" attitude helps foster reconciliation after the shouting is done.

Educate. Information, education, challenges the stereotypical patterns of the limbic system. Certainly the more you know about a group, a culture, an issue, the less likely you will be to fall into prejudice. But there is value in the process itself. The more rigorous and sophisticated an education is, the better it is for the brain. The brain is like a muscle. The more we practice discernment, the more nuanced and flexible our approach to the world becomes. What works for individuals also works for societies.

American political discourse these days is filled with "limbic speech". All sides are equally guilty. Wouldn't it be better if republicans and democrats, conservatives and liberals, spoke in specifics and stopped shouting generalities and casting blame? Could we as citizens find ways to make our media and elected leaders do just that?

This past week there were candlelight vigils all over the country in support of Cindy Sheehan. It may be that this is the beginning of a more visible anti-war movement. If we are to escape the pains we knew during Vietnam, all Americans will have to learn to speak the truth carefully. We need to challenge each other to take the lead in establishing a hate-free zone in our larger community, as we have done here in our Fellowship.