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Pushing Back Against Polarization and Division

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I. Introduction: As I'm sure you are already aware, polarization and division have been growing within the United States and also across the globe. There is polarization and division between countries, between political parties within countries, within communities, between family members, between people who have been friends and colleagues for many years, and even between brothers and sisters in Christ in all of these categories. We are not just struggling with disagreement about big issues (like abortion, racism, LGBTQ related questions/issues, immigration, environmental protection, how to balance the budget, the war in Ukraine, the Israel/Palestine conflict, separation of church and state, etc) - we are sliding into a level of polarization and division that is becoming increasingly destructive, painful, and dangerous. We no longer see the people on the other side of these issues as good citizens who just disagree with us through ignorance or misunderstanding, or even good citizens who disagree with us because they have been deceived, but rather (increasingly) as enemies, who are lazy, careless, immature, selfish, greedy, cruel, and even willfully, consciously evil.[1]

I know that in my own experience, I have never before struggled so intensely with fear and anger around these issues of conflict. I have never before struggled so intensely with sliding into non-relational enemy mode when I think about these issues, and with judging people who hold opposing positions regarding these difficult questions. I have even found myself sliding into non-relational enemy mode to the point that I don't want to see or talk to brothers and sisters in Christ who have been friends and colleagues for many years.

Years ago I read a description of a prophetic vision regarding the enemy's end-times strategy against the Church. One of the most important points of this vision was that the primary strategy of the enemy was to cause division on every possible level of relationship, to the point that there would be so much division, even between Christians, that the Church would be completely disabled.[2] When I see the division and polarization that are growing like cancer in our society, I can't help thinking of this sobering prophetic vision.

I believe that the Lord is especially calling Christians to deliberately, intensely push back against this polarization and division that is destroying the fabric of our families, friendships, local churches, ministries, communities, countries, and the global Church.

II. Disintegration into enemy mode: I am more liberal/progressive regarding some issues, and more conservative/traditional regarding other issues. Furthermore, I am committed to the stressful, unpleasant discipline of regularly listening to sources on both sides of each of the big

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[1]There may be players on the public stage who are truly mean, dishonest (or at least profoundly self-deceived), greedy, vindictive, lazy, selfish, immature, etc. But in this essay I am talking about the people on the other side of the argument who are our friends, family members, neighborhoods, fellow parishioners, and colleagues in ministry – people who we previously believed to be honest, good-hearted followers of Jesus.

[2]Rick Joyner, *The Final Quest* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1996), page 17.

disagreements. So I regularly engage with both progressive/liberals and traditional/ conservatives. My experience is that most people on both sides on all issues regularly fall into enemy mode. And when people are in enemy mode, they often present arguments and evidence in ways that are biased, they often exaggerate, they often parrot talking points that they have not verified (and that later turn out to be false/misleading), they often parrot "evidence" that they have not verified (and that later turns out to be false/mistaken/ exaggerated), they deliberately stir up anger and fear to rally the troops, raise money, and get votes, and they sometimes even deliberately lie.

Enemy mode: Before going further, I want to define/explain "enemy mode" -- a term I will be using frequently throughout the rest of this essay. In *Outsmarting Yourself* I talk at length about relational circuits, relational mode, and non-relational mode. When our relational circuits are online and we are in relational mode, we will see the people we are engaging with as relational beings and we will feel relationally connected to them. We will be aware of their true hearts, we will feel compassionate concern regarding what they are thinking and feeling, and we will perceive the relationships involved to be more important than the disagreement we are arguing about. When our relational circuits are online and we are in relational mode, we will even perceive the people on the other side of the disagreement as allies; and as part of this allied attitude we will want to *join* with them in the *collaborative* process of exploring the situation together, we will want to understand their perspectives, and we will want to *join* with them in the *collaborative* process of discerning the truth together.

In contrast, when we lose access to our relational circuits - when our relational circuits go offline and we slide into **non-relational mode**, we will see the people we are engaging with as problems to be solved or resources to be used, as opposed to seeing them as relational beings, and we will not feel relationally connected them. We will not be aware of their true hearts, we will not feel compassionate concern regarding what they are thinking and feeling, and the disagreement we are arguing about will feel more important than the relationships involved. When we are operating in non-relational mode, we will perceive the people on the other side of the disagreement as adversaries. And instead of wanting to understand their perspective, and joining with them in the collaborative process of discerning the truth together, we will tend toward judging, interrogating, and trying to "win."[3]

Enemy mode is the dark end of non-relational mode, where we don't just see the people we are engaged with as resources to be used or problems to be solved. In enemy mode, instead of seeing the people on the other side of the disagreement as children of God, who have honest differences with respect to how they understand the issues, we see them as selfish, immature, lazy, greedy, dishonest, cruel, malicious enemies.

III. Triggering: Our society is now so polarized around these big disagreements, with the stakes so high and with so much fear and anger associated with the issues being discussed, that most people talking about them are at least subtly triggered (and often not so subtly). As discussed in detail in *Outsmarting Yourself*, when the toxic content from old trauma gets triggered forward it almost always turns off our relational circuits and pushes us into non-relational mode.[4] In

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[3]Karl Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself: Catching the Past Invading the Present and what to do About It*, second edition (Libertyville, IL: This Joy! Books, 2014), pages 109 & 110.

[4]Karl Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself*, second edition, pages 113-115.

addition to turning off our relational circuits, triggered toxic content from the old trauma will often get transferred onto the specific issues, which will impair our discernment and increase our reactivity around these issues. Furthermore, triggered toxic content from the old trauma will often get transferred onto the people on the other side of these big disagreements, which will directly cause us to have much more negative perceptions of their hearts and their character. Unfortunately, each of these pieces make us more vulnerable to being sucked into enemy mode, and they are especially poisonous when they all mix together.

Intervention: Fortunately, there is something we can do to dramatically decrease the way in which triggering pushes everybody into enemy mode around the big disagreements. We can learn to recognize when our relational circuits go offline.[5] We can learn to quickly bring our relational circuits back online.[6] And we can work diligently to resolve any trauma that is getting triggered.[7] As we learn to recognize when our relational circuits go offline, as we learn to quickly bring our relational circuits back online, and as we get more healing, we will spend less time in non-relational mode when we do get triggered, we will have fewer unresolved traumatic memories, and we will get triggered less often. Putting these pieces together, we will be much less vulnerable to getting sucked into enemy mode, and we will spend much less time being stuck in enemy mode.

IV. Deliberately stirring up fear and anger: Deliberately stirring up fear and anger (and even hatred) is an effective short-term strategy for rallying troops, raising money, and getting votes. Unfortunately, fear and anger are the emotions that most directly turn off our relational circuits and push us into enemy mode. As disagreements get increasingly polarized and intense, people on both sides increasingly stir up fear and anger (and even hatred) in order to "win at any cost." And this pushes more and more people on both sides into enemy mode.[8]

Intervention: When you hear a juicy (but also alarming and/or inflammatory) story or "fact" that supports the position you hold, ***please*** verify it before repeating it. And even if you do verify it, ask yourself whether it will really further God's purposes to repeat it. Especially ask yourself whether it will further God's purposes in settings where the others already agree with you, and your contribution will only amplify the fear and anger that are already present. And please don't get sloppy and accidentally exaggerate - if you're not sure about a number, don't share it. For example, I was recently having a discussion/argument with a friend regarding DOGE, and whether their efforts were helpful or destructive. As part of his argument for the necessity of their drastic, outside-of-normal-channels-for-budget-cuts actions, he cited a moderately absurd research project that was wasting 800 million dollars. The research project itself, as well as the horrifying amount of money supposedly being wasted on it, both seemed hard to believe, so I checked into his claims after our conversation. To my dismay, the research project was real. But I also discovered that the budget for the whole project was 8 million dollars as opposed to 800 million. It turns out that my friend had made a valid point, but he had also

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[5]Karl Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself*, second edition, chapter 16, pages 129-160.

[6]Karl Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself*, second edition, chapters 17-23, pages 113-115.

[7]Karl Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself*, second edition, chapter 7, pages 73-86.

[8]It's appropriate to "stir up fear" when you're trying to get people out of a burning building. And Jesus got angry when He encountered injustice. But my perception is that leaders/influencers on both sides of our current disagreements stir up anger and fear in ways that are toxic.

misremembered/exaggerated by **two orders of magnitude** - that's **ten-thousand percent**. Again, if you're not sure about the accuracy of inflammatory evidence, please don't share it.

And please, please don't indulge in knowlingly exaggerating in order to increase the power of your "facts" in the service of winning an argument.

Another way to summarize these points is: Train yourself to refrain from throwing gasoline on the fire - train yourself to refrain from repeating alarming and/or inflammatory information when it won't further God's purposes in any way, *and especially if you're not even sure it's accurate*. (I know that it can be tempting to throw gasoline on the fire, and that it can feel good in the moment, but when you do this you are actually helping the enemy to further increase polarization and division.)

Don't participate in "enemy" bashing: Please don't participate when others are ranting about how the "enemy" (the people on the other side of the disagreement) are so terrible. Attune to their distress, and to how scary/upsetting the issue is, but don't participate in bashing the "enemy." And if you are in a position of leadership on either side of any of these big disagreements, please do not use fear and anger (and even hatred) to rally troops, raise money, and get votes. If the other side is engaging in activities that are destructive, then oppose these activities with any countermove that is legal and ethical, but please do not energize your supporters with fear, anger, and hatred. These produce intense short-term energy that can produce short-term benefits, but the long-term destruction outweighs the benefits. Again, please do not stir up fear, anger, and even hatred in order to rally supporters, raise money, or get votes.

Finally, we need to get in the habit of regularly asking the Lord to help us see the "enemy" through His eyes.

V. Leaders/influencers on both sides who are not operating in good faith: A sobering, costly complicating reality is that there are leaders/influencers on both sides who are *not* coming to the disagreement in good faith. There are leaders/influencers on both sides who are selfish and/or immature and/or lazy and/or greedy and/or dishonest and/or cruel and/or malicious. And these influencers/leaders are deliberately embellishing, exaggerating, and misrepresenting some information, they are deliberately withholding important information, and they are sometimes deliberately, knowingly telling outright lies. The key point here is that huge amounts of misinformation is constantly being poured into the public discourse by leaders/influencers who are knowingly embellishing, exaggerating, misrepresenting, and lying.

AND THIS MISINFORMATION IS EXTREMELY TOXIC/COSTLY. One of the most toxic effects of deliberate, persistent misinformation is that it makes it extremely difficult to have honest, good-faith, productive conversations. It is extremely difficult to have good-faith productive conversations, from the perspective of "lets look at the evidence together and discern the truth together," when the leaders/influencers we listen to are giving us "facts" that are fundamentally incompatible. For example, if you and I are lost, and we are looking at the *same map* as we try to work together to figure out where we are, we can pretty easily have a productive conversation. If I start out believing that we are in Newton KS while you are convinced that we are in Denver CO, we can look at the map together and pretty easily have a productive conversation along the lines of:

  You: "The map says that Newton KS is in the middle of millions of acres of totally flat wheat

fields, but we're kind of surrounded by mountains. I'm thinking the mountains would indicate that I'm right about being in Denver."

Me: "Wow. That's a really good point. I was really, really hoping that we were in Newton because I'm trying to get to Hesston KS, which is only seven miles from Newton. But you're totally right about the mountains - from what the map says, there's no way we can be in Newton if we're surrounded by mountains."

In contrast, if we are lost and we are looking at *different maps*, we are in real trouble. If you have a map (produced by leaders *you* trust) that shows Denver surrounded by mountains and Newton in the middle of flat wheat fields, but I have a different map (produced by different leaders that I trust) that shows Newton in the mountains and Denver in the wheat fields, it will be extremely difficult for us to work together. Before we are able to work together to find our way home, we will have to have a very long, very difficult conversation to figure out whose leader's to trust and whose map to trust.

Intervention: Repeatedly remind yourself that the person you are talking to may have a good heart, and may be truly trying to serve the Lord, but has been deceived regarding important "facts." Remind yourself that their disagreement with you may be based on wrong information that they will not easily surrender (they have heard it from sources that they currently believe to be trustworthy). And when you discover that the person you are talking to has been deceived, make a very persistent, deliberate effort to see their good hearts. You can fight the sources of misinformation in any way that is legal and ethical, but don't judge the hearts of those who have been deceived. Also, consider the possibility that you may hold mistaken opinions based on wrong information from sources you have assumed to be trustworthy.

Boycott/defund bad-faith leaders/influencers: When you discover that a source is not trustworthy, *please, please, please stop listening to them*. Again, deliberate, persistent lies from leaders/influencers are extremely destructive and extremely expensive.

My perception is that most of the people on the right are convinced that most of the leaders and influencers on the left sometimes (or often) lie. And I also perceive that most of the people on the left are convinced that most of the leaders and influencers on the right sometimes (or often) lie. I would like to encourage grace for a wide gray zone in the middle, where disagreement and misinformation can be mistaken for lying.

But it also seems clear to me that there are people on both sides that knowingly lie. When overwhelming evidence proves that a person or news/entertainment outlet has knowingly persisted in lies,[9] then please, please, please stop listening to them. If you continue listening to known liars because (overall) their content makes you feel good, you are supporting/strengthening people who are pouring poisonous misinformation into the public discourse. Furthermore, you will certainly be deceived yourself -- if they lie on a regular basis, there is a zero percent chance that you will fully detect and neutralize all of their lies. (You will be especially vulnerable to swallowing their exaggerations, distortions, lies, and false narratives because these will be mixed in with content that you agree with and that makes you feel good.)

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[9]For example, you discover that thoroughly documented communication reveals that leadership at the highest levels of the news/entertainment outlet you usually listen to knew the material they were presenting was untrue, but that they decided to continue consciously, persistently promoting falsehoods because it's what their viewers wanted and would make more money.

VI. New dramatic misinformation from Artificial Intelligence: Another sobering, costly reality is that Artificial Intelligence is now generating dramatic misinformation. For example, just in the last several weeks (August 2025) I have started coming across Youtube clips that present themselves as if they are legitimate news/journalism, but then turn out to be AI generated "entertainment" fiction. These clips usually portray a prominent Republican/conservative as thoroughly trouncing a prominent Democrat/progressive (or vice versa) with respect to some important issue,[10] and they present *lots* of supporting evidence along with detailed descriptions of how the evidence had been thoroughly verified. The only problem was that *everything* about the story, including the supporting evidence and the purported verification, had been fabricated by AI.

For example, one Youtube clip I encountered just last week was supposedly reporting on a defamation lawsuit which a Democrat senator had just brought against a Republican spokesperson. According to this video clip, the Republican had knowingly engaged in defamation that was truly horrific, and the mountain of evidence was utterly airtight. Multiple previous staff had come forward as whistle-blowers, and they described how the Republican had ordered them to spread character-destroying, career-destroying "information" that they all knew was false. Furthermore, these whistle-blowers produced piles of emails from the Republican supporting every aspect of their testimonies, and these emails had purportedly been documented and verified in every possible way. Finally, the defendant ended the hearing with admitting that the allegations against her were all true, and then groveling and begging for mercy. But again, *everything* about the story, including the supporting evidence and the purported verification, had been fabricated by AI. After watching through the clip, my spontaneous reaction was to feel like the whole picture was just too much to be true – if it was really true, it would be headline news. So I started a thorough inspectio of all the details for this particular post. When I clicked on the "more" option for the box that provides additional information, and then scrolled down to the bottom, I found the following disclaimer: "This is a dramatized fictional commentary created for political storytelling, education, and entertainment. Some elements are imagined through AI..." And for a similar Youtube clip, the disclaimer stated: "The stories presented on this channel are entirely fictional and crafted solely for entertainment. Any resemblance to real events, individuals, or situations is purely coincidental and unintentional. These narratives are not intended to depict, reference, or represent any actual occurrences, persons, or entities." Which is confusing in addition to sobering, since the whole clip uses the names of actual political and public figures about a hundred times.

My experience so far is that these disclaimers are buried to the point of being hidden. And this is confirmed by the comments – hundreds of people commenting as if the story is true. **Nobody** commenting, "Hey! This is just an AI generated fabrication!!"

And again, this kind of misinformation is extremely toxic/costly. Can you imagine how difficult it will be for two people to have a constructive conversation if each of them has watched and believed opposite versions of this kind of video? They will each be utterly convinced that there is overwhelming, incontrovertible, thoroughly verified proof that the other side is wrong.

Intervention: 1. Please, please, please check for disclaimers, especially when you encounter a

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[10]The algorithms that feed you content know what you want to see, and will usually present clips/blogs in which a favorite representative for your side trounces a despised mouthpiece for the "enemy" point of view.

blog or clip that seems too good to be true.[11] And remember that the disclaimers tend to be very hard to find. Please also warn your friends regarding this phenomena, and encourage them to check for disclaimers. 2. Boycott/de-fund the sources of AI misinformation, to the extent that they can be identified. 3. I think the first amendment is a really good idea, but I think we should support legislation to prohibit/limit this kind of misinformation. At the very least, the people posting this stuff and making money off of it should be required to post the disclaimers prominently (for example, at the beginning, middle, and end of the video clips), as opposed to burying them in the tech details that aren't even visible unless the viewer takes extra steps.

VII. Enemy-mode, biased, diagonal arguments: We engage in diagonal arguments when we bring our strongest argument points and evidence onto the field, but only acknowledge the enemy's weakest argument points and evidence. Then we engage in biased, mock battles in which we demonstrate how our intelligent, strong, mature, honest, unselfish, altruistic positions easily vanquish the enemy's ignorant, weak, immature, bad-faith, selfish, cruel positions. So many of us are so entrenched in enemy mode, and so afraid of giving any ground to the enemy, that most public proponents on each side of most big disagreements engage almost exclusively in diagonal arguments. Each side presents only its strongest supporting arguments and evidence (while deliberately avoiding/ignoring/denying arguments and evidence that might undermine its position). And each side presents only the enemy's weakest arguments and evidence (while deliberately avoiding/ignoring/denying their strong arguments and evidence). Our whole society is so polarized and entrenched in enemy mode that most people on opposing sides of the big arguments are not working together to try to find the complicated truth in the middle, but rather engaging in diagonal arguments that focus only on winning the battle and destroying ("owning") the enemy.

Pro-life/pro-choice example: Conflict around abortion provides painfully good examples of diagonal arguments.

In the many years I have been hearing both sides of this energized, polarized debate, I have never once heard the pro-life side acknowledge that their reasons for believing that we become persons with souls at conception are not based on science, but rather on their interpretation of scripture and evidence from spiritual experiences.[12] I have never heard them acknowledge that Christians wanting to pass laws against early-term abortion based on scripture and spiritual experiences would be like Muslims wanting to pass legislation requiring all of us to live under Sharia law based on their interpretation of Islamic scripture, or like Jews wanting to pass legislation requiring all of us to eat only kosher foods based on their interpretation of the Old Testament. And I have never heard pro-life advocates acknowledge that even expert embryologists cannot distinguish an early human embryo from a chimpanzee embryo or even a pig embryo. They

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[11]For example, if you find yourself thinking, "Wow! I can hardly believe that my side has such a compelling argument with such a huge pile of airtight evidence. In fact, with such a compelling argument and such airtight evidence it's a little puzzling that this isn't front page news, and that _____ (fill in the blank with the names of your enemies) aren't already in jail."

[12]For example, I have facilitated Immanuel Approach sessions in which the recipients appear to have in-utero memories of self-awareness and interacting with Jesus from early pregnancy when they would not yet have had a brain. In one particularly dramatic example, the recipient remembered her parents arguing about whether or not to abort her. Not only did she display autobiographical memory from long before this would have been possible neurologically, but she also understood the words her parents were speaking to each other (how did she know English before she was even born?). Furthermore, she verified all of the details with her parents, both of whom were astonished and horrified.

present talking points and a narrative that portrays pro-choice advocates as knowingly murdering children for purely selfish reasons - they talk as if non-Christian pro-choice advocates, with strong scientific evidence arguing against early embryos having any conscious experience (they have no brain or even nervous system), and strong scientific evidence indicating that early human pregnancies are no different from early pregnancies for chimpanzees or pigs -- are knowingly murdering human children because they are selfish, immature, deliberately self-deceived, or even malicious and/or evil.

On the other hand, in the many years I have been hearing both sides of this polarized, adversarial, even hateful debate I have never once heard the pro-choice side acknowledge that pro-life advocates might be earnest people of integrity with reasons for their position that are totally valid in light of their religious beliefs and personal experiences. I have never once heard the pro-choice side say anything along the lines of, "we disagree with their conclusions because we do not accept their scriptural arguments and their spiritual experiences as valid evidence, but we can see that they are people of integrity and that their position is valid and understandable in light of what they believe. We totally understand the intensity of their pro-life position because from their perspective, abortion is the same as euthanizing a two-year-old if the mother decides that they do not want the child." And I have never heard pro-choice advocates acknowledge that "My body my choice" is actually not accurate, but that they should rather say, "My body and my child's body, but only my choice" - I have never heard them acknowledge that the woman carrying a pregnancy is making a choice for herself, and also a choice for another person (the unborn child). And I have never heard them acknowledge the parallel between "My body my choice" with respect to abortion and "My body my choice" with respect to a woman using her body to kill a two year old child. (Nobody seems to have a problem with passing laws to forbid the second scenario, even if it means controlling the body of the murderer by putting them in jail.) Rather, the pro-choice side portrays pro-life advocates as horrible oppressors who lie about their true agenda and really just want to exercise toxic, oppressive, misogynistic control over the bodies of women.

Intervention: Learn to recognize Enemy-mode, biased, diagonal arguments. Challenge them when you notice others making them, and discipline yourself to not engage in them yourself.

Boycott/defund the extremes: If you notice some sources (leaders, influencers, news outlets) regularly engaging in Enemy-mode, biased, diagonal arguments, then stop listening to them. Stop watching them. Stop supporting their platforms in any way. And while you are defunding/boycotting the extremes, find and support sources that are more balanced and fair.

VIII. Only hearing one side of the story: As mentioned above, I regularly read and listen to both liberal/progressive and conservative/traditional sources. And from regularly studying both sides, my observation is that some sources present very one-sided content that is heavily biased toward supporting the liberal/progressive perspective, and other sources present very one-sided content that is heavily biased toward supporting the conservative/traditional perspective, but almost no one provides a truly balanced perspective that presents the strongest arguments and evidence on both sides. Furthermore, our current information technology is set up to exacerbate one-sided, biased perspectives. And finally, our brains are wired in ways that exacerbate one-sided, biased perspectives.

   A. Biased information technology: For most of us, the material we read, watch, and listen to
   is largely determined by internet search-engine algorithms that give us more and more of what

we prefer, which just happens to correspond with what we already believe (see section # below). So our web browsers will feed us articles, podcasts and youtube clips that present arguments and evidence that support the positions we are already leaning towards (or already firmly believe).

B. Biased (even knowingly dishonest) news outlets: There are news/entertainment outlets that are increasingly driven by a business model of "give our viewers what they want, regardless of truth or balance." Just as with internet search-engine algorithms, news/entertainment outlets have also discovered that people want to hear evidence and arguments that support what they already believe, and they do not want to hear evidence or arguments that support the opposing position with respect to any given conflict. News/entertainment outlets have learned that *most people prefer biased, diagonal evidence and arguments that support what they already believe.* And they often give their viewers what they want, in order to maximize profits, even though this approach increases destructive polarization and division.

With respect to at least one news/entertainment outlet, there are thoroughly documented internal emails between leadership at the highest levels that explicitly acknowledge, "Yes, we know that what we are saying is untrue, but it's what our viewers want to hear. So we will continue to present this material, as if it is true, in order to keep our viewers happy and thereby maximize profits."

C. Brain science -- system 1 and system 2: Unfortunately, the problems with how our current information technology and news outlets reinforce polarization and division are exacerbated by the way our brains are designed. In his best-selling *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman describes two systems in our brains.

System 1 likes simple, clean narratives with closure and no loose ends, and these simple, clean narratives will feel more comfortable and require less mental effort to maintain. System 1 does *not* like complicated, grey situations with no clear, definitive right answer. System one will subtly-but-significantly pay attention to and remember arguments and evidence that support what it already believes. It will tend to ignore evidence and arguments that indicate a more complicated picture. It will lean toward, "The Republicans are responsible, trustworthy, and support Christian values, while the democrats are irresponsible, dishonest, and anti-Christian" (or the opposite). And it will lean away from a more complicated picture, in which both Republicans and Democrats have both strengths and weaknesses, and in which the best answers will require the two sides of each disagreement to work together to hammer out a more complicated understanding in the middle.

Unless we deliberately make the effort to see the more complicated, more nuanced, more accurate picture, our brains will intuitively, spontaneously, most-easily come up with a model that is simple, black and white, and in which all of the pieces fit together. We will come up with this simple, black-and-white model quickly, with little effort, and it will feel mildly pleasurable. In contrast, in order to see the more nuanced, more accurate picture, we need to make a deliberate effort to think more carefully. This more-careful thinking takes a lot more effort, it goes much more slowly, and it feels mildly to moderately uncomfortable.

Because of these ways in which our brains work, we will spontaneously, automatically, involuntarily tend to notice and embrace arguments and evidence that supports a simpler, more

comfortable model (usually the model we start with, and usually the model we currently hold). And we will spontaneously, automatically, involuntarily tend to ignore and discard arguments and evidence that challenge our initial simple model.

The following is one of many intriguing, sobering quotes from Dr. Kahneman's discussion of these phenomena: "It is the consistency of the information that matters for a good story, not its completeness. Indeed, you will often find that knowing little makes it easier to fit everything you know into a coherent pattern."[13]

For a thorough, fascinating, compelling discussion of the huge pile of brain science that supports this assessment of how our brains work, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*.[14]

D. Brain science - what you see is all there is (WYSIATI): Dr. Kahneman also describes another humbling, sobering aspect of how our brains function - we are *profoundly* blind to the absence of information that we have not yet discovered. That is, if there are important arguments and strong evidence that we are not yet aware of, we have ZERO subjective sense of something being missing. If we are not already aware of it, our intuitive, subjective experience is that it doesn't exist. Dr. Kahneman calls this aspect of how our brains function "What you see is all there is" (WYSIATI). If you don't already see it, if you are not already aware of it, then it doesn't exist.

Charlotte and I bump into this phenomenon every morning when we play the *New York Times* Spelling Bee word game together. We quickly get all of the words that flow relatively easily, and then we have the intensely compelling subjective perception that we have found them all. We have absolutely ZERO subjective sense that there are still more words out there, but that we just haven't found them yet. There can't possibly be any more. Then we find three more. Now there really can't possibly be any more. And we find five more. Now there really, really can't possibly be any more. And we find four more…etc. Even after going through this scenario many hundreds of times, it still feels subjectively strange how we are so utterly unable to sense that there is anything missing.

The point with respect to this conversation is that when one-sided thought leaders present all of the strong arguments and evidence supporting the position you hold, present a few weak points supporting the enemy's side of the argument, and leave out all of the arguments and evidence pointing to weaknesses in your position, you will have ZERO subjective awareness of the important material that has been left out. And your conclusion will be something along the lines of, "I am aware of everything that needs to be considered, and my conclusions based on the evidence and arguments that have been presented are therefore valid. There is no possible explanation or justification for the enemy's position, other than incompetence, ignorance, laziness, or deliberate dishonesty and corruption."

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[13]Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2011) page 87.

[14]Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2011) pages 19-105.

Slow.[15]

E. Hugely disproportional resources when we only listen to one side: When we only listen to one side of a disagreement, we give our side HUGE resources while allocating minimal resources to our "enemies."[16]

With respect to the side we listen to and agree with: We spend many hours listening to the smartest proponents for the side of an argument we agree with. And these smartest proponents have spent thousands of hours carefully formulating the strongest arguments for our position and carefully searching for the best evidence supporting our position. Furthermore, these smartest proponents have spent thousands of hours carefully searching for weaknesses in the other/wrong/enemy position, and carefully searching for evidence verifying these flaws/weaknesses. If we do our homework, we will also spend many hours engaged in these same activities for ourselves - carefully formulating strong arguments supporting the position we agree with, carefully searching for evidence to back up these supporting arguments, carefully searching for weaknesses in the enemy positions, and carefully searching for evidence to verify these weaknesses.

With respect to the other/wrong/enemy side of the argument: In contrast, we never listen to the strongest proponents arguing for our enemy's position. If we listen to the other side of the argument at all, we usually only hear enemy proponents who have actually been chosen by people on our side for the very purpose of showing how stupid/wrong/bad they are). "Watch our smartest and most articulate conservative think-tank leader humiliate an unprepared liberal college student," or "Watch our smartest and most articulate liberal university professor humiliate an unprepared conservative truck driver."

Many people make no attempt to try to understand their enemy's positions, and if we do put any effort into defending our enemies it usually looks like this: We occasionally spend ten to fifteen minutes asking ourselves, "What on earth can they be thinking? What arguments and/or evidence can they possibly have to support their (ignorant, wrong, selfish, immature, mean, evil) beliefs and behavior? What arguments and/or evidence can they possibly have to prevent them from just agreeing with us?"

And guess what? Listening to our champions humiliate their weaklings, along with the occasional ten to fifteen minutes of half-heartedly trying to figure out what their arguments and evidence might be, will not be as effective as the smartest, strongest proponents on their side spending thousands of hours carefully formulating the strongest arguments for their position, carefully searching for the best evidence supporting their position, carefully searching for the weaknesses in our position, and carefully searching for evidence to verify these weaknesses.

F. Courtroom analogy: To help us get a feeling for just how important it is to not let ourselves only listen to one side of the story, let's look at an analogy. Can you imagine either the prosecutor or defense attorney going into a courtroom and saying to the judge, "Your honor, I think we can save a lot of time and energy if you just let me present both sides of this case."

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[15]Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2011) pages 85-88.

[16]These are patterns I have carefully observed and thoroughly confirmed in myself. Moderately thorough observations of others would indicate that pretty much everybody else does the same thing.

Can you imagine what would happen to justice if judges started allowing this insane proposal, and if the one side that was allowed speak then proceeded to present the strongest possible case for their side of the argument and the weakest possible case for the other side of the argument?

To make this analogy even more accurate (and even more sobering), what if there were no fact checking, so that the team that was allowed to present only their side of the case could exaggerate the evidence supporting their points, and minimize (or omit entirely) the evidence supporting the opposing arguments. And what if they were allowed to simply lie about important points?

You may try to convince yourself that this analogy is exaggerated. I wish it were so. Having exercised the painful, tiring discipline of regularly listening to sources from both sides of each argument, I have observed all of these phenomena within echo chambers on both sides of all the big arguments.

Interventions: We need to deliberately, proactively search out sources that present the other side of each disagreement. And we need to deliberately listen to **strong proponents** on the other side of each disagreement. These strong proponents for the "enemy" perspective will be happy to present the strong arguments and evidence (that we have previously been unaware of) that support their position, and they will be happy to present the strong arguments and evidence (that we have previously been unaware of) that point out weaknesses in our position.

And again, boycott/defund the extremes and those who knowingly deceive. It will be impossible to come to agreement if we let ourselves listen to leaders, influencers, and news/entertainment outlets who sometimes give us maps that show Denver surrounded by wheat fields and Newton surrounded by mountains.

IX. Practical tips for listening to the other side of the argument: If you usually watch only CNN and you try to force yourself to watch a full hour of Fox, or if you usually only watch Fox and you try to force yourself to watch a full hour of CNN, you will grind your teeth down to the gums and your blood pressure will go so high that your head will explode. So I am NOT suggesting that you try to watch a full broadcast from an outlet that usually presents the "enemy" perspective.

I am also NOT suggesting that you listen to pundits who just present clever sound bites, but with no logic or verifiable facts to support their points. It is maddening to listen to a clever YouTube influencer who just spouts polished talking points and one-sided narratives that you disagree with, and that you perceive to be exaggerated, biased, misguided, or even dishonest. And it is maddening to the point of being unbearable when these influencers present talking points and narratives that you know to be one-sided, and that are leaving out important evidence and arguments that support your side of the argument. I am also not asking you to torture yourself by watching this kind of content. (Or maybe it would be good to take in just a small dose on both sides of the argument, to convince yourself that I am right about this phenomenon being sadly common.)

What I *am* encouraging you to look for is proponents for the other side of the disagreement who present arguments that you will be able to recognize as making sense and raising important questions. And look for proponents who present "evidence" that you can check with a reasonable amount of work, and that, if true, painfully challenges the talking points and narratives that you prefer.

What I have been doing, and what I would invite/encourage/challenge you to do is to sample short articles and YouTube clips from both sides of the argument on specific issues. I would also encourage you to find sources that present actual facts (that can be verified with a reasonable amount of checking). And one more time: find sources that are not known to routinely present material that is later proven to be untrue.[17]

X. Summary of interventions:
▸ Stay out of enemy mode.
  • Learn to recognize when your relational circuits go off, and learn to bring them back on as quickly as possible.
  • Embrace a lifestyle of healing so that you will have less and less unresolved trauma, and thereby be less and less vulnerable to getting triggered.

▸ Ask Jesus to help you see the "enemy" through His eyes.

▸ Boycott/defund the extremes and the liars.

▸ Don't stir up fear, anger, and hatred to "win at any cost" -- don't pour gasoline on the fire or participate in "enemy" bashing.

▸ Deliberately listen to strong proponents on both sides.

XI. Conclusion/summary:
When we apply the principles and implement the interventions described above, we will discover that the people on the other side of the argument (who we often truly see as our enemies if we are totally honest), are not nearly as stupid, incompetent, selfish, immature, greedy, careless, mean, corrupt, dishonest, stubborn, and even evil as we had previously believed.[18] We will often discover that they have just been hearing one side of the story. And depending on which source(s) they are reading/watching/listening to, they may be getting a biased (or even deliberately dishonest) presentation of just one side of the story. Furthermore, in addition to the huge bias that always comes with hearing just one side of the story, they are probably often triggered when they think and talk about the issue. When we keep our relational circuits on and see their true hearts, we will often discover that the "enemy" are human beings, children of God, and even people of integrity with an understandable position.

My plea is that we explore the evidence together - carefully, honestly, in a balanced way, and

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[17]If they have proven themselves to be untrustworthy, you should not allow yourself to just accept what they say whenever they say things that you want to believe. At the very least, discipline yourself to rigorously fact-check sources that have been proven to be untrustworthy. If you observe yourself carefully, you will be sobered to notice how quickly you challenge the source, demand fact-checking, and automatically doubt the validity of "supporting evidence" when you are listening to a narrative/talking point you disagree with. You will also be sobered to notice how easily you accept a narrative/talking point that you like, without challenging the source or fact-checking. Furthermore, when (if) you do fact check narratives/talking points that you like, you will be sobered to notice how gentle your fact checking becomes when it is applied to content you like/agree with – you will be sobered by how readily you accept fact-check "evidence" that seems to support the talking points and narratives that you agree with/like.

[18]And again, there may be players on the public stage who are truly mean, dishonest (or at least profoundly self-deceived), greedy, vindictive, lazy, selfish, immature, etc. But in this essay I am talking about the people on the other side of the argument who are our friends, family members, neighborhoods, fellow parishioners, and colleagues in ministry – people who we previously believed to be honest, good-hearted followers of Jesus.

from the perspective of being on the same team. Let's discern the meaning/conclusions together -- carefully, honestly, in a balanced way, and from the perspective of being on the same team. And then let us work together to find the best solutions - again, carefully, honestly, in a balanced way, and from the perspective of being on the same team.

If we can do this, we will hugely push back against the polarization and division that I believe is one of the enemy's biggest strategies for increasing darkness and opposing God.