

**Subject:** Eremos Consulting Newsletter - Spring 2013

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## EREMOS CONSULTING GROUP

*Facilitating Transformation for  
Clergy, Congregations,  
Nonprofits and their Leaders*

Serving Colorado and the Rocky  
Mountain Region

### **I know that's what you think you think, but is it really?**

**I'd like to say a few words this month about confirmation bias.**

And by that I do not refer to eighth graders who want to skip religious education classes. Confirmation bias refers to a psychological phenomenon first identified by Peter Watson in the 1960s. **It is the tendency to seek out and interpret new evidence in ways that confirm what you already think.** There are a number of well known scientific experiments that document the existence of confirmation bias, but you probably don't need to read about those to understand that this bias exists. You could do a simple thought experiment of your own.



The next time you are about to relax in your easy chair to watch the evening news, **try turning to a channel that you believe presents the news in a political slant that is not your own.** Examine your feelings as you do this. Are you engaging in a comfortable act of philosophical open-mindedness --

#### Spring 2013 - In This Issue

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**HealthyCongregations**  
Leadership Series 2013  
presents

Ronald W. Richardson

on



act of philosophical open mindedness -- merely gathering information from another point of view? Or do you feel any emotional resistance to turning to that channel? Are you steeling yourself for the disagreement you predict you are going to experience? Are

there any tell-tale signs of stress or reluctance? Are you arguing with the TV? Doesn't it *feel* better to turn to the channel where you are less likely to disagree with the commentators?

**The psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains that confirmation bias lies at the very basis of our moral thought.** He says it is our **morality** that binds us together and makes humans a "groupish" species. But morality binds us in *small* groups and we use what we think we know (our ideas, morals, ideologies) to defend our group from outsiders. In Haidt's words, "**morality binds and blinds.**" The blinding part makes overcoming confirmation bias very hard to do. In his 2011 book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Haidt explains why this is. He demonstrates, with multiple examples from psychological experimentation, that intuition precedes rationalization. **No matter how much we want to believe that our morality or our politics or philosophy begin with reason, it just isn't so.**

**Evolution has hard wired our brains to respond to threats with fright, flight, or fight reflexes and these responses occur instantaneously and subconsciously.** Threats can range from the imminently dangerous, touching a hot stove; to the very subtle, someone objecting to our chosen political candidate. Both of these are perceived by the subconscious as a threat -- to our epidermis or our identity -- before the conscious mind is aware the threat exists. With the hot stove this is a good thing, because by the time the conscious mind could examine all the evidence and weigh all the alternative courses of action regarding the hot stove our fingers would already be medium rare. The amygdala helps us out by jerking our fingers away before the frontal cortex has even registered that a stove exists.



**However, in politics, or religion, the threats to our identity, from someone else's rejection, are more subtle than a scalded pinkie.** While our reaction starts in that same ancient (in terms of evolution)

## Polarization in Society and in Congregations: Understanding It and Addressing It

A livestreaming Conference  
on

**Friday, May 17, 2013**

For more information contact  
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*Polarization continues to be a growing phenomenon in our society and in our churches. A symptom of emotional process in society, we have to understand it in a larger context.*

*Building on the work he first presented in his book Polarization and the Healthier Church: Applying Bowen Family Systems Theory to Conflict & Change in Society and Congregational Life, Dr. Richardson will go deeper into the polarization process and ways it may be at least ameliorated, if not ended.*

**There will be two ways to participate in this event:**

A gathering in Denver on May 17th We will watch the livestreaming together, and have a chance to discuss this with others in attendance. A small fee will be charged to cover logistics

unconscious core, before we realize it our entire mind has time to build up defenses in the form of rationalization, intellect, dogma, or tradition. But the fact that our emotional responses precede our ideology is so *unobvious* that it even seems offensive to suggest that we reach our political or philosophical identities from any launching point other than pure reason.

**Haidt's book received a lot of attention last year because he moved beyond his observation that intuition precedes rationalization to identify six core (unconscious) foundations for moral thought.** These support the (conscious) rationalizations made by liberals and conservatives to justify the directions their intuitions had already chosen.



**Haidt's six core foundations:**

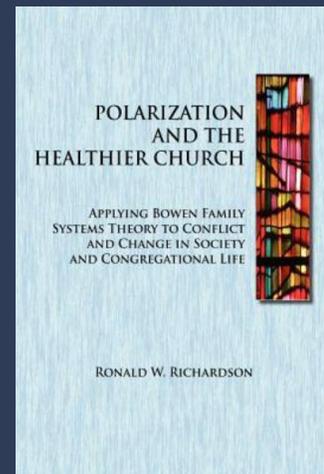
- 1. care/harm**
- 2. liberty/oppression**
- 3. fairness/cheating**
- 4. loyalty/betrayal**
- 5. authority/subversion**
- 6. sanctity/degradation.**

His thesis is that **conservatives** base their moral philosophy on all six foundations more or less evenly. **Libertarians** rely most heavily on the liberty/oppression foundation with much less weight to the other five. **Liberals** rely most heavily on the foundation of care/harm, always alert to protect victims of harm or discrimination even if it means overturning tradition, authority or challenging the sacred. (Hint: that last part can be offensive to conservatives who depend on authority and sanctity to support their morality.)

**A few months ago I saw Dr. Haidt being interviewed on Bill Moyer's PBS program**, explaining his research, giving examples of the six foundations, explaining how anyone of any political stripe could use this information to better understand and more effectively (and politely) communicate with persons at different points on the political continuum. He spoke in a calm, soft voice about his upbringing as a liberal from the northeast, raised in a nonobservant Jewish family. While continuing to be a liberal nonbeliever, he declared that in his observation, conservatives have an advantage in understanding liberals because conservatives use all six foundations including care/harm. Liberals, on the other hand, are more at risk of

will be charged to cover logistics and food.  
Contact Elizabeth Thompson if you would like to attend.

Stream directly to your computer if you would prefer to watch this from your office or home then go to [www.healthycongregations.com](http://www.healthycongregations.com) Congregations. and register directly with Healthy



**Make Plans NOW to join us!**

being confounded and frustrated by conservatives who cherish authority and revere loyalty, or by libertarians for whom individual liberty is a higher value than protection from harm. Haidt also had kind words for Christianity and its core values of humility and patience.

I saw this interview on the [PBS website](#) and therefore had a chance to read comments posted by other viewers. I was most struck by



comments from liberals appalled that Moyers had allowed on his program this ultra-conservative posing as a scientist who would say approving things about conservatives.

For me it was the most amazing display of confirmation bias. Obviously the people who were posting did not want to hear anything kind about persons that their intuitions had led them to reject, so they came up with rationalizations that, in my perception, were contradicted by the book, by the speaker, and by the host of the program.

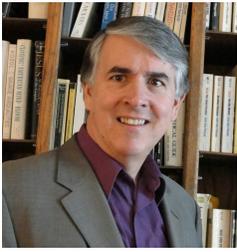
**It is important to remember intuitions are not always right.**

Sometimes we are wrong when we "fight or flight". Of course, the people we most disagree with can be wrong too. You should not give up your principles simply because they began with intuition. We have a frontal cortex and it evolved for a reason. Literally, for reasoning. Just remember, confirmation bias is a powerful and ancient enemy of reasoning, especially when we are unaware of the strong emotions tying us to our identity.

**I commend this important book to you, especially if you are involved in any organization where there is a diversity of religious or political thought.** You may find helpful information on how others in your world think, and the kinds of vocabulary, metaphors and images that would best convey your principles to someone whose moral foundations are not the same as yours. As our country grapples with how to avoid plunging off fiscal cliffs, and is staggered by the slaughter of innocents, we have much to talk about as a people. As you listen to other voices, I would urge you to consider first how they make you *feel*. Make an effort to consider where their feelings and your feelings are coming from. Take a deep breath. Then come, let us *reason* together.

Peace,

*Phil*



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This Has Been A Difficult Newsletter  
to Write

**Recent events with the murders in Colorado, as well as earlier mass shootings in Connecticut and other parts of the country including Aurora, have left all of us reeling.** Many people have written eloquently about the complexity of issues that are intertwined and have helped bring us to this point-**guns** and the issues of liberty, safety, and the right to self-defense; **mental health** and the issues of funding and stigma, and the civil rights for those who have not committed any crimes; **violence** in the media and the issue of tolerating and exploiting violence in our society; debates on **video games** that may or may not train the brain to enjoy "taking out" others; debates on the role of race, economics, suburban and urban expectations; and of course, the **debate about where God is or isn't as the tragedies unfold.**

**March is also the time for two significant religious holidays- Passover and Easter - two holidays that celebrate the miraculous that intercedes in difficult times.** The candles are lit to remember that light overcomes the darkness and to proclaim that we are not alone, that God is still present and working in our world. Despite the end of the Mayan calendar, the world is not ending even though it does seem that the world has gone crazy. We are called to put aside our fear and our incessant focus on scarcity, and instead to share the abundance. God continues to call us to be faithful and to remember. But God also calls us to action and to do good works in our everyday lives.

**Is there anything new that can be said about any of this?** We had planned to focus on the confirmation bias phenomenon in this newsletter issue for Eremos Consulting Group, but deliberately decided to wait until after the election cycle was over so that hopefully our readers would be able to hear this information without political overtones. Instead we find ourselves releasing this information in the midst of murders and holidays, and intense political as well as personal debates.

**"Trust the process"** is a saying that is used often in therapeutic and pastoral education settings, so we are trusting the process that writing about confirmation bias will be helpful to us as individuals, leaders, organizations, congregations, communities, and as a nation in the dialogue that is ensuing on what we need to do going forward.

**So I repeat ... we are all reeling** from the emotions that are swirling in and around us, trying to come to terms with how we have gotten to this point in our nation. And those emotions are already driving the disparate and at times, vindictive comments and calls to action on Facebook, Twitter, sermons, editorials, media chatter, as well as in conversations at coffee shops, schools and workplaces. We are responding with fright, flight, or fight reflexes based on our already existing stances, and we are not listening to one another!



So may we hear again the words of the angels which are spoken each time they appear in scriptures, **"Do not be afraid."** It is our hope that we can put aside the fearful responses so that we can build a better world. It is our hope that we can shine a light into the darkness and miraculous things will happen.

Blessings on each of you during this religious as well as political season. **May you listen for and experience the angels of God in your midst.**

Peace,

*Elizabeth*

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