

SOMETIMES THE PROBLEM WITH THEM IS US

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Quotations:

Pogo: We have identified the enemy and it is us!

All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And everyone else is They.

Rudyard Kipling

Across the planet, an entire generation of young men and women are being convinced to give up the one thing that exists for sure—their own lives—for something that has never been proven—the Afterlife.

Thomas Christian Williams, reflecting upon the writings of Constatin-Francois Volney

Reading / Here's the story for all ages this morning:

My undergraduate college was in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, way up in the middle of Lake Superior. But I worked summers near Detroit. (Show hand-map of Michigan locating both.) Those two places are 600 miles apart, about the same distance from here to Detroit but all inside the state of Michigan. So when I was done working for the summer, or after I would come home for Christmas and it was time to return to school, I would begin driving north. Then stop where

Shirley lived for our last goodbyes which usually lasted until midnight. Then I would continue on North because driving at night, especially with a full moon was very pretty, little traffic, and it seemed safer. Except one winter night with nearly a foot of snow on the highway when I drove right through a herd of elk. But that's another story.

The people from the upper peninsula have always been separated from the people of the lower peninsula by about five miles of water that is called the Straits of Mackinac. When I was little, my family used to cross those straits on big ferries that were also ice breakers that would climb up on top of the ice in the winter and break through so people could get across. But by the time I was in college, there was a bridge built between those two parts of Michigan. The bridge is six miles long and was the longest suspension bridge in the world when it was built. But it connected us who lived in the lower peninsula that them who we call UPERS who lived in the U.P., the upper peninsula. There were days when it was really cold, snowy, and windy crossing that bridge. Even scary.

We here at UUFR have talked about also building a bridge. Only our bridge wouldn't have to be six miles long with towers that soar 550 feet into the air. Our

bridge would only have to be about 100 yards long to reach from our church to the Mt. Vernon Church across James Wharf Road. Those kinds of bridges can be scary too. Five people died building the Mackinac Bridge, but the job got done. It took quite awhile. But a good plan was put together, and now there's a bridge that I crossed many times going back and forth to school. I wonder what it would take to design a plan for a bridge across James Wharf Road, from us to them? I guarantee no one would die building such a bridge.

Main Talk:

We humans are tribal. It's in our genes. It's evident in the way we see each other as either "us or them." Those particular genes get in our way. They manifest themselves almost every time we encounter another human who has imagined beliefs that differ from the beliefs we have chosen for ourselves. It is the phenomenon of converting issues of importance and many of not so much importance as issues of Us and Them. The more we are aware of this tribal characteristic, the more we can work with ourselves to reduce the degree to which it gets in our way.

Darwin wrote, “ There can be no doubt that a tribe that includes many members who, from possessing in a high degree of the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes, and this would be natural selection.” No surprise that the US & Them tendency remains with us today.

Both you and I are the subjects of strong attempts to manipulate this tribal Us and Them tendency. Preparing patriotic soldiers or radical extremist for war is only one example. There are experts at getting us to recognize the code. Anything that conveys a code is both itself and the thing it represents. So anyone we meet is both himself, John Doe, and a pointer to some general concept that might be called “those Americans.” These “symbols” make it easier to think of “the Americans” as an unchanging real object in the world. But it also makes it easy to think of killing particular Americans because of what America does. Most people would hesitate to injure or kill an individual flesh-and-blood person: but we rip up symbols easily. Those Japs. Those Chinks. Those Gooks. Those Krauts. Those Jews. Those Arabs. Those Christians. Those Americans. Those Yankees. And, from the struggles of the 1790’s, those Virginians. So a challenge about human

kinds is figuring out exactly how this mental code causes us to see people only as symbols of a category and react accordingly. What about the human-kind faculty that permits us to forget the doubleness of code—to forget that people are people?

A word aside here to clarify when I'm speaking today about human kind, not as one word meaning Homo sapiens as it usually does. It means the kinds of humans of which we are all different but all members of certain kinds of humans that share a common category or "kind". My kinds can be male, senior, half-Dutch, relatively slim (who used to be skinny), and a UU along with thousands of other "kinds" that pertain to me. You could even call me a proud Jeffersonian so long as I get to pick among the thousands of kinds that pertain to Thomas Jefferson since neither slave-holder nor bankruptcy nor dead are among my current aspirations.

Since beliefs are the prime driver of building an "US and Them" perspective in any one kind, let's look first at the accuracy of those beliefs for certain kinds of kinds. We all know we tend to confuse our beliefs between the words "fact" and "opinion". Now this may wander a bit close to science to which linguist Noam

Chomsky bristles by saying that chemistry has nothing to do with my OPINION about how the hot water in my cup turns to tea. Francisco Gil-White of the U of Pennsylvania who studies ethnicity counters with: "it does not matter to me what truck drivers or lawyers, etc. usually mean by "ethnic group". We feel sure we know what we mean when we talk about races, nations, and cultures: we may think we know what we're doing when we classify a stranger and then use that category to understand him. But from a scientific point of view, we generally don't know what we are talking about. " Thank you, Francisco.

Sometimes what you're sure you know is not what's going on. One way you can tell it's an error is that you'd never apply such crude generalizations to yourself. And just to shine a light on the importance of this point, allow me to remind you of the famous Stanford University experiment under psychologist, Philip Zimbardo, and his colleagues wherein a group of students were divided into two kinds, prisoners and guards, in a basement complex of cells. The experiment had to be stopped in a matter of a few days as both kinds got into their stereotypes of what they imagined their positions implied toward one another. What is true about our hunches about personality types and occupations is true as well of our beliefs about other categories of human beings—cultures, nations, ethnic groups,

racess, religions, castes, and political affiliations, to name a few types. Our intuitions may get one by day-to-day but they don't square with what scientists are learning about how the brain and mind work.

Another classic psychology research study divided a group in two by the toss of a coin. They found that even with such a trivial distinction, people discriminated in favor of their in-group members.

Of course, I don't have the problem. I just apply my common sense to my beliefs.

Common sense tells you that unguided accidents can't design a complicated biological machine like an eye. Wrong, say evolutionary biologists. Eyes need no design and, in fact, have evolved many separate times out of whatever parts could serve. Common sense says that time moves at the same rate everywhere.

Not so, says relativity theory. It's part of the job of science to explain why you can't trust what you are sure you know, and then give you today's best picture of what's really happening.

This may be a touchy subject, challenging our beliefs about “them” especially as we think about politics, social justice issues, and other areas where we like to think we have a secure identity of Us and Them. So let’s avoid that touchiness and travel half way around the world to Uzbekistan to look at an Us or Them of others. A team led by Raphaëlle Chaix of the French National Center for Research analyzed genetic markers in the male lines from five different ethnic groups: Kazakhs, Turkmen, Uzbeks, Qogirate, and On Tort Uruw. All knew the facts of their group’s descent, each from a different common ancestor particular only to their group. But the analysis showed that members of each ethnic group were no more closely related to fellow ethnics than they were to men in the other tribes. One might say the Uzbekistan tribes learned they were all US-es with no THEMS.

Another issue is the sorting out the difference between a human kind as a cause vs. a human kind as an explanation. Explanations come to mind after an event as when we say, “Ethnic hatred was one of the reasons that Yugoslavia fell apart.”

A conversation I had over dinner in Belgrade with a knowledgeable and well placed Serbian shortly before things went sour in that country provides the example. He predicted exactly what shortly happened in the ongoing political

power struggle not related to ethnicity. Causes are forces that really exist in the world, whether we know it or not. To say that “ethnic hatred” caused Yugoslavia to come apart is to say that ethnic hatred actually made something happen. Though it is obvious that cause and explanation are different ways of thinking about human kinds, most people slip from one to the other without noticing.

Among the “race realists” is Phillip Ruston of the University of Western Ontario, who identifies that some races have smaller heads than others indicating relative intelligence because a smaller head indicates a smaller brain size. However, women’s heads are typically smaller than men’s but women do not score lower on intelligence tests. In fact women are generally far superior in intelligence than US (indicate men)...or so I have been told...by some of THEM. Further, any human kind’s average scores on those tests turn out to be sensitive to stigma. As I’ve mentioned before, ethnic Koreans in Japan find themselves treated as outsiders in many subtle and unsubtle ways. Although I've never heard Koreans in Japan called "gaijans", which means "foreigners", Korean families who have lived in Japan for 5, 6, 7 generations have no path to citizenship. They score less well than Japanese people on IQ tests. But test results of Koreans in Korea are equal to those of the Japanese. Some Darwinians claim that genetics can even

predict your proneness to religious mysticism and divorce (again, never mind your circumstances or stigmas).

We chuckle at these beliefs but we are just as secure in our US group knowing what we know.

Every description of a human kind—every statement like “Muslims are peace loving,” the Chinese peasants are “hard working”, or “Californians are casual”—is also an act of persuasion. If I say it and believe it, and then you hear me and may believe it too, then the human kind we’re talking about becomes more like what we say. In our minds, anyway. No doubt this explains why human kinds can appear to change over the centuries, so that Europeans no longer believe that Spaniards are severe and grim, Turks dignified, and Greeks frivolous, as they apparently did in the time of David Hume's writings. Well, maybe Greeks being frivolous hasn’t changed so much.

See, there I go!! Jim Triantifello in my high school class was anything but frivolous.

At one point there was thought to be a distinct, physically real human kind: people who, according to medicine a century ago, had abnormally large thymus glands. They turned out to have normal innards. The doctors were misled because their examples of the human body came almost exclusively from the ranks of stigmatized people. And stigmatized people, because they are stigmatized, have smaller immune-system glands and larger stress-related glands. By the time better categories came along, thousands of unnecessary cases of thyroid cancer had been created by useless radiation treatments based upon older beliefs. The nature of human kinds is all there, in that story. The way these categories change over time, even though we feel they are eternal. The way they have real consequences, even if we later learn they were not a good match with reality. The way they cause physical changes in people, like those shrunken glands. That leads us to put the cart before the horse, and imagine that the physical change caused the category, instead of the other way around. And, finally, the way that mistaken, unjust, senseless, and cruel human-kind judgments will be included in textbooks and lectures and endorsed by smart, confident, educated people.

John Locke, at the end of the seventeenth century and at the end of more than a thousand year obsession with God shutting aside reason, tried by reasonable means to persuade both his compatriots and his contemporaries that acceptance of religious differences was the only true Christianity. That same rational can be extended to many other areas including ethnicity, politics, and visions of the future where one thinks only we know what is right, what is just, and what is best for society. But then reason kicks in when we recognize those with a different view are equally if not superiorly intelligent, honest, compassionate, and forward-looking only with beliefs and perspectives that don't match our own. Whereas we have considered these individuals mostly us in almost every other way, they suddenly become them. Our arrogance about what we believe can blind us to understanding them and possibly discovering a better way to a better world.

We have four issues—how does the ever-changing mind relate to unchanging institutions? How can people be seen as only tokens of their human kind? How many different, separate processes make up kind sight? And how should we understand human kinds as causes and explanations?

The Law protects “us”—citizens of a particular nation, law abiding members of a community. Concern for others’ rights has been steadily expanding through human history, from the early days of focus on the immediate family expanding out to the clan, the tribe, the whole people, and finally the entire human race. This abstract and unemotionally evolving idea of “all humanity” is, in theory, the basis for a universal law already: the UN Charter holds that each and every one of us has the same basic human rights. Understanding humanity makes it clear that humanity probably will never reach the ideal state in which all people are equally concerned—non-theoretically—with the rights of others. For good and for ill, Homo Sapiens is inescapably a tribal animal.

That doesn’t mean the ideal is not to be aimed at. Many great and important human institutions are based on ideals. We fail, but without the ideal of the perfect marriage, the perfect citizen, the perfect state, how could we realize the imperfect versions we have?

Continued progress in mind science on problems like racism, war, and prejudice will be felt somewhere between the high reaches of theory and the tick-tock of

everyday life. That's a wonderful phrase, the tick-tock of everyday life. I wish I would have come up with it but I stole it from writer David Berreby who is credited with a few other words you have heard from me.

In other words, our rules of thumb for getting through the day-to-day world, those beliefs some scientists call folk physics, folk biology, and folk psychology, have some relationship to scientific accounts of the world but not a perfect one. And the more those scientific accounts develop, the less they resemble the world we evolved to see and the mental maps we use to see it. So we should no more expect science to confirm the human kinds we believe in than that it should confirm folk physics and folk biology. If one begins with the assumption that blacks and whites are different, and then go looking for measurements that reflect that difference, we will find them. If we begin with the assumption that owners of SUV's are different from owners of mini-vans, we will find measureable differences between those two groups too. (In fact somebody did.) Same with "science fiction fans" and "people who don't like science fiction. And same with UU's or any other self-selecting group. Human beings have so many points of similarity and of difference that a line can be drawn between any sets of people, at nearly every level of description, from their molecular biology to the political

opinions they express. We have heard words in this room based upon assumptions drawn in that manner, some grossly erroneous assumptions.

Very few people would disagree as we've seen at the political and psychological levels, once a human kind is believed in, it has consequences for the people placed in that category. Racial and ethnic groups are real the way money is real—because people believe they are and act on those beliefs.

The moral of these stories is simple: the code is in your head, where you make and remake your version, every day. Human nature shaped that power, with its special opportunities and vulnerabilities, but it's you who wield it. Your human-kind code makes nothing happen, for good or for ill, unless you choose to act.

Ethnic tensions, religious strife, political conflict, clan rivalries, and the like never harmed anyone, and never will. People do the harm.

In other words, the Us-Them code does not own you, you own it. This power to believe in human kinds, and to love or hate them, is part of your human nature.

You could think of it as a set of buttons and levers, built in to your mind. You didn't choose the control panel, but you can decide how to live with it. Push your

own buttons and pull your own levers, for instance. Or look away, and let someone else do it for you—the politician, the propagandist, the ethnic chief, the family patriarch, the activist, the documentary or movie maker with an agenda, the minister, the hack writer, or anyone in this pulpit--yes, they would love to do it for you. Even some congregations can begin to differentiate our human kinds into US-es and Them-s. Human kinds exist because of human minds. They're in your head, bound to your fears and hopes, your sweat glands and your gut. But how you chose to live with them is up to you.