Character and . . .

Crisis

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Healing a Fractured World

Josh Thomas

Abstract

Disagreements among people are a natural part of the human experience. But when we lose sight of what we are arguing for or who we are arguing with, disagreements can have larger, longer-lasting effects. Media, leadership, and bias all influence our perception of issues and those who disagree with us, a concern which can lead to critical rifts in society, as well as emotional and physical effects on our individual health. A focus on character virtues will help us mend the crisis and keep us—as a society and as individuals—healthy despite our differences.

Diagnosing a Crisis

It was a day that probably started out like many before, with plans to socialize around a favored pastime of college football. Fans would cheer for their favorite team, share some food and drink, maybe engage in some light-hearted trash-talking with opposing fans. On this particular day, a group had gathered to watch Southeastern Conference rivals Alabama and Texas

Diagnosing a Crisis

A&M battle in a game that likely had serious implications for both teams' chances for a championship. As the game reached its closing moments (Alabama's only regular season loss of the 2021 season) two men began arguing over which team was *actually* the better team—regardless of the game's outcome. But the argument intensified, and the owner of the home asked the men to leave. They continued to argue outside, leading to one of them firing a gun. A few hours later a 27-year-old man was dead at the hospital ("Argument"). Several lives were permanently and tragically changed over a simple disagreement about sports.

If situations like this can happen with something as benign as sports, what happens when the disagreements are over much larger and more impactful issues? Contentious elections and politics. Racial tensions. Global pandemics, masks, and vaccines. Every day we hear of a new crisis in the news cycle. Rather than drawing closer together, our society feels like it is drawing more lines of division and seemingly living by the idea that if you aren't with us, you're against us. And with each new event comes more fracture and less healing. We see examples where someone is invalidated or "cancelled"[1] simply because of an opposing view. Some seem to believe that if you think differently then there is no possible way anything good can come from you. The other side = evil. Plain and simple. No shades of gray. Too many times people seem to take the position that they will

change when the other side does. If someone behaved badly towards them or their position, they are justified in reciprocating. It even feels as if people have lost the ability to "hear" the other side's argument, becoming so insulated from alternative views that they are unwilling—or perhaps unable—to listen to someone who doesn't think like them. This is a disheartening thought.

Unwilling to "hear" the other

What we see in the media, in political debates, news shows, on social media, and even during school board meetings presents a worrisome trend of division in our culture. People have always disagreed and will continue to do so. Disagreements often appear to be minor, and are even beneficial as they challenge our thinking. Those types of disagreements are not what should be thought of as a crisis. But when disagreements linger and beliefs become more firmly entrenched or influenced by emotion, it breeds anger and more serious divisions form. The world feels as if it is in crisis—a fracture point has been reached.

This is a call for healing. A fractured bone heals with proper treatment. By emphasizing the role character plays in our interactions with other people we can discover hope that our societal fractures will heal as well. We need to reshape how we hold conversations and how we disagree with others. Let's find common ground again. Let's love our neighbor as ourselves, even if we don't like what they say or what they believe. If we understand what caused the break we can consider how healing strategies such as civility, humility, compassion, and integrity bring healing in the midst of our crisis.

Fracture: How We Reached a Breaking Point

Fracture

Human bone can fracture when it is subjected to stresses from various forces, and determining an exact cause is not always easy. Fractures occur due to a significant traumatic force or an accumulation of smaller forces over time. Reducing the number or magnitude of potential stressors helps reduce the occurrence of fractures. Metaphorical fractures might be addressed in much the same way. The better we understand the things that create division and influence our thinking, the better equipped we are to discuss possible solutions. Media amplification of extreme views, compounded by our own biases and the lack of good leadership, results in misperceptions and mistrust of the other. This othering of people who hold different views from us feeds our fear and the decline of commitment to good character. Together these stressors on our society have brought us to a critical breaking point.

Media Amplification   A significant contributor to the crisis is the perception (or misperception) of what others think and believe. However, the sound bites, shouting voices, and extreme positions often misrepresent what people actually believe. The really bad, extreme stories get reported because that's what makes news. They are the loudest voices that produce the strongest reaction, which drives ratings and net traffic. And the more we see these examples the more we normalize them and assume that's how everything (or everyone) is.

Research conducted by the nonpartisan organization, More In Common, highlights this concern. The researchers surveyed 2,100 American adults and identified what they termed the "perception gap," or the difference between reality and what people suspect of others. Participants were asked if they agreed or disagreed with statements on various issues, then asked to estimate the percentage of their political opponents who agreed or disagreed with similar statements. The results showed that people were likely to strongly overestimate the extreme positions of the other side. 55% was the estimated proportion of Democrats and Republicans thought to hold extreme views on various issues; the number who actually held extreme views was 30%. In specific examples, Republicans estimated 52% of Democrats agree that "most police are bad people" when the actual number

was only 15%. Democrats estimated 49% of Republicans deny "racism exists" compared to the actual number of 21% (Yudkin et al.). It seems clear that what people "think" they know may not actually be accurate.

Past events are not protected from division either. In a post-9/11 poll by the Washington Post and ABC News in 2002, many people (55%) viewed the attacks as something that brought the country together for common purpose and made us better (Clement). But leading up to the 20th anniversary of the attacks, another Post-ABC poll found that 46% of people felt the attacks changed the country for the worse. Paul Cantor, English professor at the University of Virginia, argues that the view of America as a happy society full of consensus is rooted more in idealism than realism. He believes that the country has always had a sense of discord and it was this realization that guided the founding fathers to emphasize a system of checks and balances so that no one group could have too much control. Cantor believes that, due to problems like news media fighting for audience, media outlets began presenting everything as a crisis. "The human ability to mobilize around a crisis is diminished when everything is a crisis" (Fisher). This highlights another of the challenges we face: there is a clash between a nostalgia for a romanticized past and a progress-at-all-costs mentality, with many caught in the middle.

The view of America as a happy society full of consensus is rooted more in idealism than realism.

While the media overreacts and fuels the public's perception gaps, it turns out we may have more in common than we realize. A good majority of people fall into what Hidden Tribes refers to as the "Exhausted Majority." People in this group still hold very differing views on some specific topics, but they also share similar views on some key issues. The Hidden Tribes report noted four key ways this Exhausted Majority was united:

1. Fed up with polarization

2. Forgotten in public discourse because they are quieter voices

3. Flexible in their views based on the situation rather than holding rigidly to a set of beliefs

4. Belief that we can find common ground.

According to a 2018 Hidden Tribes survey of over 8,000 Americans, over 3 in 4 believed that the differences aren't so great that people can't work

together ("Hidden Tribes"). Perhaps we just need to step back and change our perspective.

Biases   Misperceptions of others also arise because we filter information through our conscious and subconscious biases. Why does it seem like so many disagreements have only two clearly defined sides? This is known as binary bias. When an argument is characterized as having only two sides it is easier to oversimplify to support one position and dismiss the other (Grant, ch.8). It is difficult to find common ground if the only choices are "abolish the Electoral College" or "the system is fine exactly how it is." Recognizing there may be nuance to a particular debate brings opportunity for further discussion, even if it ends with "agree to disagree." A different type of bias, confirmation bias, is revealed when someone is more likely to lend credibility to evidence that supports their position while dismissing evidence that opposes it. A related idea is desirability bias, where someone is biased toward believing something they want to be true. This may cause people to view information as fact if they desire it to be true and unwilling to consider that it may actually be false (Grant, ch.8). As an example, if someone is accused of domestic violence, how likely are you to believe their guilt if they happen to be an athlete on your favorite team? What about if they are on a rival one?

"Disagreement is unavoidable. But division is always a choice."
—Andy Stanley

Lack of Leadership   A lack of leadership, mixed with a loss of trust in authority, also can be a source of division. When those in leadership or positions of power and influence use inflammatory rhetoric or promote "us vs them" mentality, their supporters follow suit.[2] Connect this with a general human nature to rebel against authority,[3] and trust in our leaders and our institutions erodes (especially if they hold a position we disagree with). Universities, government offices, religious institutions, science—these are all things that we as a society used to have at least some implicit trust in. Pastor Andy Stanley addressed this in a speech to Georgia state legislators. "Disagreement is unavoidable. But division is always a choice," he said. ". . . Unfortunately, in your world, there are advantages to division. You can raise more money when things are divided. . . . [But] if you need an enemy in order to lead, you're a poor leader" (Foust).

The Christian Church provides other examples of how things have changed. We find Christians who are shouting, making demands, and equating any

form of disagreement as being persecuted for their faith—a faith that then must be vigorously defended. Yet one of the core messages found in both the Old and New Testament is to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself (Deut. 6.5; Lev. 19.18; Matt. 22.35-40). The early Church opposed Roman authority by loving and serving those who persecuted them.

Christians are even turning against their leadership, and on each other. In a powerful article in *The Atlantic,* Peter Wehner opens with a story of an elder election within a church that failed due to a disinformation campaign. This campaign spread a claim that the new elders were going to sell the church building to Muslims. No such thing was going to happen, but people were willing to believe it. Wehner states the Church is facing a crisis as members find a stronger identity in their own convictions or politics than the Church's core message. Rather than their personal convictions being shaped by Biblical teaching, they shape Biblical teaching to their convictions. The common purpose of following the teachings of Jesus and sharing them with others is being fractured by disagreements over racial injustice, poverty, vaccine and mask mandates, and more. Yet despite its fractured state, Wehner allows that he still sees hope in Jesus and the Church.

This example also highlights the negative potential of group identity. What group we are a part of and who we surround ourselves with often affects how we view those in other groups. This may contribute to a negative perception of them, especially among more extreme groups.

Fear   It should also be understood that the fear of things, especially the unknown or misunderstood, influences division. When we are fearful of things we have an internal desire to defend and protect ourselves and others. That protective mechanism may explain why we have strong reactions to things that seem to be mild on the surface, such as something on the news or posted on social media. Fear can be beneficial when it keeps us from dangerous situations but it causes harmful rifts when we fear people because they have different views or are different from us. Fear can make us angry, and anger can lead us to hate things we don't understand. And it's easy to see that many people are suffering due to hate.[4] When our fear overtakes us to the point that we get angry at others,

What group we are part of and who we surround ourselves with often affects how we view those in other groups.

and that anger turns to hate, fractures begin to form. Unfortunately, the unscrupulous can manipulate our fears and use them as an advantage to gain power, followers, or ratings—all it takes is stating we should be afraid of something and then providing the "solution" to remaining safe.

Why does it matter that simple disagreements can blow up into bigger things? Isn't it important to be passionate, and stand up for what you believe? Of course. But there is also a concern about getting so worked up over issues, sometimes to the point of a physical response. A fractured bone affects the function of the rest of the body. Our cultural fractures can affect the health of our communities, but also of one's individual body. A research study on media coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings found people exposed to repeated media coverage of the events indicated higher acute stress than people who were actually at or near the bombing sites themselves (Holman et al.).

As early as the 1920s, Walter Cannon was credited with identifying the acute stress response. He named it the "fight-or-flight response" and it explains how our body responds to perceived harmful circumstances. When dealing with a perceived threat, the body undergoes a number of physiological changes to deal with the situation. Heart rate increases, airways and blood

vessels expand, metabolism increases to deliver fuel to active muscles. These responses prepare the body to perform the necessary actions for either choice: fight the threat or escape the threat (flight). In addition to the physiological responses, there are obvious psychological influences to this response as well ("Stress"). How we perceive our circumstances likely determines whether we see them as potentially harmful or not.

Acute stress response

We might understand the fight-or-flight response if a T-Rex is eyeing us as a snack, but would it really be a factor in a disagreement? Actually, yes. Pastor and counselor Beth McCaw describes crisis as a time when real or perceived stressors overcome our real or perceived ability to deal with our demands. McCaw observes people as having stressors or demands that must be dealt with and having resources and coping strategies to do that. Crises arise when the demands outweigh the resources to handle them. The crisis response may be cognitive or visceral.

Cannon's fight-or-flight response can also be connected to another scientific theory discovered around a similar time period, Hans Selye's General

Adaptation Syndrome ("General Adaptation Syndrome"). This theory identifies a three-stage process that describes how the body responds to stress in both acute (short-term) and chronic (long-term) circumstances. The stages are (1) alarm reaction, when the fight-or-flight response occurs; (2) resistance, as the body adapts to the stress; and (3) exhaustion, when the body's ability to adapt to or resist the stress is compromised. Stages 1 and 3 in particular are significant in our crisis of disagreement.

When a person perceives disagreement as a threat (the alarm stage) and the fight-or-flight response is engaged, one of the serious concerns is the possibility of escalation. While hopefully rare, we have seen instances (as previously mentioned) where death has resulted. But even short of death, how much violence has been born of disagreement?

Chronic stress has been linked to increased risk of physical disease and a negative influence on brain health.
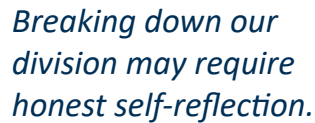
A concern with the exhaustion stage is the long-term effect it has on our health. It is well documented how chronic stress has been linked to increased risk of physical disease and a negative influence on brain health ("Protect Your Brain"; Bernstein; Yaribeygi et al.; McEwen). If we are in a constant state of disagreement, leading to chronic stress, there is potential for significant harm to our wellbeing in the form of anxiety, effects on brain health, and other health concerns. People are fighting over mask mandates, or the lack thereof. Others are fighting about how Democrats are destroying the country. Or is it Republicans? It can be exhausting.[5]

Decline in Character Commitments   An unfortunate observation in these societal fractures is a decline in people's commitment to character. In many charged issues one can observe a lack of civility, humility, compassion, and other virtues as people on all sides of a debate lay claim to the moral high ground. But is a lack of character a cause of our division, or a result of it? It may be that it is both.

Perhaps ironically, people are even divided over what displays good character. Consider the example of Ellen DeGeneres and George W. Bush. A photo of the two of them together at a Monday Night Football game in 2019 set off a storm on social media, with many upset with DeGeneres due to the strong political differences between the two of them. Ellen defended herself to critics, saying that she felt it was important that people not have to agree on everything to be friends, and that she could be nice to someone

who held such different beliefs. In a CNN article Chris Cillizza applauded Ellen's notion that she could still be friendly towards a person even if she strongly disagreed with their political stance, contrasting her behavior with liberals and conservatives who take advantage of division to rally support. "There's no question that exploiting divisions can be good for promoting your own politics," writes Cillizza. "But it is a terrible way to go about trying to fix what's broken in our politics and our culture" (Cillizza). Mehdi Hasan from *The Intercept* holds an opposing view from Cillizza, arguing that Bush's alleged war crimes when he was President and negative behaviors as governor of Texas disqualified him from any kindness (Hasan). Many of the responses to DeGeneres echoed these two trends, with some viewing her as showing good character and others viewing her as lacking character.

A troubling aspect of our misperceptions and the influence on disagreement is the tendency to silence the disagreement, the person who says or does something we don't like. Research among Gen Z, Millennials, and the over-40 population in the United

Breaking down our division may require honest self-reflection.

Kingdom highlighted how disagreements can even exist about how one might respond to someone who holds different views ("Democratic Repair"). The survey asked whether it was more important to protect free speech or to stop offensive speech. Gen Z responders were evenly divided, Millennials favored free speech (43% to 23%) and the over-40 group favored it even more (60% to 17%). The report also noted that Millennials were the least likely of any age group to express support for the rights of people with extreme views to express those views. This illustrates how changing views among different generations can contribute to our division. Some feel strongly that certain types of speech should have consequences. Others view this as infringing on their right to free speech and equate it to censorship. This is more challenging when there is not consensus on where we draw the line between speaking one's mind and when it becomes offensive. Our own experiences can affect us as well. I think of my own children, hearing them fighting as one yells "He said ---- about me!" Meanwhile I'm sitting right there and heard nothing of the sort. But the intent of the words was interpreted differently by my child. As a society we tend to "fill in the blanks" ourselves around the words that we heard.

Clearly people interpret words differently. To some the meaning of the First Amendment is that they (or someone they agree with) are allowed to say anything they want, no matter how harmful or inaccurate, without

repercussion. Many would agree there are certain types of speech that should not be accepted or encouraged in our society, and people are right to speak out against it. At the same time, care should be taken to not swing too far in the other direction. Shouting down opposition for simply being on the other side (e.g. the perceived "wrong side") of an argument does little to bring understanding and resolution. It mostly creates more division. It runs the risk of misunderstanding the opposition in the clamor to get what we want. There has been a shift from "I don't have to be friends with them" to "I don't have to be nice to them" and this lack of civility comes out in our interactions with and attitudes towards others.

This is not to say that people should not engage in issues or fight for change, but to consider how to do it in a healthy way for everyone. Perhaps you don't think that you can be friends with someone who disagrees with you, but you can still demonstrate civility. Our decline in civility makes it very difficult to demonstrate compassion towards others, and without compassion it is hard to heal together.

Healing: Responding with Character

If we are going to work together and find common ground again, I believe that good character is vital to the process. Let us act in good faith towards our neighbors and be aware when our or their ideals affect how we act towards people. Amid discord, we can demonstrate compassion and empathy. If change is going to happen, it may be necessary to extend an olive branch and not worry about our group identity or others who share it. If we wait for "the other side" to do something first,

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we may not see change. To quote Henry Cloud, "The truth is it is difficult to trust someone based on the demand for mutual performance" (83).

Breaking down our division may require honest self-reflection, or at least admitting we don't know everything. The ability to think critically about our closely held beliefs is a hard thing for us to do but can go a long way towards helping fix things. Be able to identify when your position (or someone you agree with) might be wrong. Recognize potential limitations or flaws of arguments. This may help us to be more open-minded and willing to listen

to those on the other side. As Pastor Andy Stanley described it, the "messy middle" is where problems get solved (Foust).

There are specific steps that can be taken to start. Be challenged to try them out and see what results.[6]

1. *Realize that the loudest (and perhaps most frustrating) people or views may not represent the majority.* Look for the exhausted majority, the ones who want to see positive changes but aren't shouting about it. It is probably not realistic to think we can find a solution to every divisive issue that will satisfy all people. To do that would require a sacrifice or concession on some things, and some people seem unwilling to give an inch. Be aware of the impact that the media has on this and be intentional about countering it.

2. *Take care in how you use social media.* While I can appreciate those who have completely eschewed the use of social media, for many it is a significant connection to information, and to friends and family. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that what we are seeing can be flawed and possibly biased information (regardless of which side it is coming from). That article you read from a post on Facebook (assuming the original poster read more than the headline) might be designed to draw a reaction so that it gets shared more, driving ratings and clicks.

3. *Think like a scientist.* In his book, *Think Again*, organizational psychologist Adam Grant describes four mindsets we often have when engaging in discussions. The preacher mindset focuses on promoting and protecting our ideals. The prosecutor identifies flaws in the opposing argument and pushes for victory. A politician mindset wants to campaign, win an audience, and keep "constituents" happy. Acknowledging that there is a place for these three in different scenarios, Grant also cautions that it can lead to a reluctance to change our views. Grant argues in favor of the scientist mindset, being willing to look at new and different information to see where we might be wrong and to learn new things (Grant 18–19). Being aware of our potential biases is important in being able to do this in a meaningful way. This also demonstrates humility in a willingness to admit we don't know everything and can learn from others.

4. *Distinguish blame from contribution.* Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project argue in their book *Difficult Conversations* that blaming someone creates a judgment about

a person in a situation, while discussing what or who has contributed to a situation moves toward understanding (ch.4). It may be a subtle distinction but it has impact. Which is more likely to lead to a solution, judging someone or understanding them?

5. *Engage in active, authentic listening.* Stone, Patton, and Heen list three purposes of difficult conversations: to learn the other's story, to express your own views and feelings, and to problem solve together. Active listening is a set of skills involving inquiry, paraphrasing, and acknowledgement that can be practiced to aid these purposes. Don't listen to respond, listen to understand. Take time to hear their points and rephrase them back to the person to confirm you heard their view correctly. Don't judge or argue, but understand where they are coming from and try and learn what experiences may have brought them to this viewpoint. Once you can see that you can understand them (whether you agree or not), you can respond. It is also important to do this authentically rather than just rigidly follow stated guidelines. Active, authentic listening is an important step in being civil, which is, in turn, an essential part of having meaningful conversations with those we disagree with.

6. *Value a person more than a position.* Just like the stereotypical family that has the one crazy uncle (why is it always an uncle?), we can see the value of people and relationships despite differences on the issues. Being nice or civil to someone does not mean that we agree with or accept everything they do or say, but it will help us to treat others with compassion. Consider a viral photo taken during an Iowa High School football game between Charles City and New Hampton. The photo shows Charles City player Mario Hoefer stretching out a cramp for a player on the opposing team. In an article on Today.com, Hoefer explained that he saw the New Hampton player go down and grab his calf after a play. Having dealt with cramping himself, Hoefer observed that no one had yet noticed the player and come to help. So he stopped and helped the player stretch out the cramp until the athletic trainers got there. Hoefer stated that he just wanted to help and would do it over and over again. "We've played each other for years now. It was more like a

Mario Hoefer and Carter Steinlage

brotherly thing to help him out" (Hanson). Seeing through the competition to the value in the person makes room for compassion.

7. *Build strong communities by caring for others.* This is something that is vital and in real danger of being lost. Valuing our community and those in it is a contrast to viewing people as "the other." If people continue to choose division it risks creating permanent fractures in our communities, and if that happens something of real value will be gone. Don't overlook starting small. Individual efforts in our communities have the potential for larger ripple effects. It may not change everything, but it will certainly have a positive impact on the places where we work, play, and live. Anthropologist Margaret Mead identified the earliest sign of civilization not as clay pots, iron, tools, or agriculture. Instead her evidence was a healed femur bone. Mead said that competitive, savage societies showed clues of violence and lack of pity. Skulls were crushed, pierced by arrows, and more. But a healed femur indicated that someone cared for the injured, hunting for them, bringing food, nursing them back to health at their own personal expense (Brand and Yancey 68). I would rather live in a community that is healed, not broken.

Concluding Thoughts

Society is fractured, stressed by misinformation, media amplification, failures in leadership, and our own fears and biases. By recommitting to virtues of character like civility, compassion, and humility, we can start to make positive changes to overcome these fractures.

We are not all the same. We have different beliefs, different cultures, different experiences. We all want to live a good life, and the attempt to do so will sometimes come into conflict. What I hope we desire is that our conflicts create circumstances of healing instead of fractures. Rather than letting our differences create discord and develop into larger issues, let us lead with character. Let us overcome fears and misperceptions and display grace and compassion. Let's have conversations and look for common ground. Applied properly, stressors on human bone will make it stronger. Let's hope we as people can do the same for our society.

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Notes

[1] The phenomenon of "cancel culture" has roots in social media and typically involves the attempt to silence a person, business, organization, etc., that says or does something deemed to be offensive to someone else. This may translate into not buying products, not listening to them, or generally blacklisting them permanently.

[2] Self-check: Did you immediately picture a specific example? Why? Is that fair?

[3] Paul Cantor notes that pop culture is fascinated with this, promoting anti-establishment, rogue characters or groups who take down the "Big" target elites or experts (Fisher). It is one of the reasons that some are so quick to accept conspiracy theories.

[4] It's okay if you heard that in Yoda's voice.

[5] Let's not get into gif or gif or 1 vs 2 spaces after a period.

[6] Pastor Robert M. Franklin, Theology professor at Emory University, shared his own suggestions for fixing our divide. Read them and consider his wisdom.
1. Reset the national tone.
2. Restore respect for facts, evidence, and science.
3. Affirm leaders who are courageous, competent, and demonstrate integrity.
4. Restrain from taking cynical cheap shots at those who are honestly trying to improve our society.
5. Begin every difficult conversation with humility and humor.
6. Be generous to strangers.
7. Educate yourself about the experience of others who are different.

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