

# Listening beyond the echo chamber

## Hope for healing our polarization — for the long run

BY AMY UELMAN

I CAN'T WAIT FOR IT TO BE OVER. THE U.S. presidential election, that is. After a long, hot summer of violence on a global, national and local scale, is anyone not dispirited and exhausted by the intensely vitriolic campaign rhetoric?

But wait — do I really believe that the morning after the election our deep divisions will instantly heal? No. In fact, for some time now, cultural analysts have been warning us of the elements that have been coming together to concoct the toxic brew of polarization that is poisoning our social and political life.

As journalist Bill Bishop observed in *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (2008), the wide variety of choices that many have regarding where to live, where to congregate, the activities in which to engage, as well as the plethora of options for cable and internet viewing and consumption, have led to a tendency for like-minded people to converge. When they come together, they tend to create “echo chambers” that make it very challenging to connect with others who may have different political, social, cultural or ideological perspectives.

And even when we do try to connect across serious divides, we seem to have a very difficult time understanding each other. In his 2012 study, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt identified six foundations for morality. He noted that liberals tend to emphasize concerns regarding care, and on the flip side, harm, and fairness (equality)/cheating; while conservatives, in addition to these, tend to draw on four other moral foundations: liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation.

For example, contrast how liberals and conservatives might view San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the national anthem because he did not want to “show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.” Through the lens of care, equality, and

perhaps also liberty, this mode of protest may seem both appropriate and valuable. But when loyalty, authority and, in a certain sense, the sanctity of the flag are brought into the evaluation, we can anticipate a very different response.

When we sense the depths of these divides, discourse at every level, at every turn, feels impossibly difficult. What might be the antidote to this toxic brew?

For me, an initial step is imbedded in the animated film *Zootopia*. The allegory about a hopeful, naïve bunny and a cynical, cunning fox is a courageous invitation to be sincere about the ways in which we tend to misunderstand and hurt each other, notwithstanding our best intentions. And in that honesty, the film delivers a touching message of the power in letting ourselves and our relationships be regenerated by open communication, forgiveness and starting again in the effort to bridge our divides.

I think the next step is to purposefully seek out environments that engage in the hard work of getting beyond the “echo chamber” of conversation that can occur among like-minded friends. For example, one might invite a motley crew to read and discuss a book together; or simply sit with someone new at lunch; or perhaps try to reconnect with an estranged cousin who sees the world so differently.

How might we interact once we find these spaces?

As with any conversation in which we hope to truly engage with another person, it may be a good idea to try to unplug from technological distractions in order to communicate a readiness to listen with a focused heart and mind.

Then, I (figuratively) *take off my shoes*. Using an image that is frequently invoked to indicate the presence of God — the burning bush — Pope Francis has encouraged us to

Overcome misunderstandings. *Zootopia* offers a lesson about the importance of open communication in facing our differences and starting again



learn how to “remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5)” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 169). As I enter into a conversation with a person with whom I may encounter strong differences of opinion, this image helps me to assume a posture of respect for the dignity of the other and for the sacredness of their story — and to place that respect above the eagerness to get my point across.

What happens, to use Haidt's analysis, when I realize that that the other person is speaking in a register that feels unfamiliar to me? At this point — à la *Zootopia* — I try to admit that I may not have all of the elements that I need to understand the other person. Rather than jumping to conclusions, this is a chance to ask some sincere questions that leave the other space to frame the new information according to their own criteria and background.

And the ultimate antidote? Hopefully the result of this new brew is reciprocal gratitude for the chance to learn something new, for a fresh insight, or perhaps even for a growing relationship of understanding, trust, and friendship.

Or as Gazelle (voiced by Shakira) in the *Zootopia* theme song recommends: “Try everything.”



BY AMY UELMEN

**I**N *THE GIVER*, LOIS LOWRY'S 1993 dystopian novel for young adults, a superficial peace is purchased at the price of "sameness": the elimination of all sources of potential difference, including color, memory, climate, topography and emotional depth.

As 12-year-old Jonas learns, his people made the choice to go to Sameness: "We relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences. We gained control of many things, but we had to let go of others."

But should the ancient perspective come in handy for making important decisions, the Community chooses one person to be the "Receiver of Memory" — and trained to access past memories, including the reality of pain and the perception of differences.

### Sameness revisited

For many reasons it is a novel well worth taking up or revisiting, especially to reflect on what could happen to individuals and communities when life's most intimate experiences — birth, parenting, vocational and career discernment, and death — are sheared of any receptivity to the transcendent, and then handed over to authoritarian control.

But what struck me as I read the book with 2018 eyes were the instructions aimed to prepare Jonas to enter his apprenticeship with the Giver, in order to become the new Receiver of Memory. How does one emerge from the conditioning of sameness in order to be receptive to a deeper reality, able to understand and process pain and conflict?

"Sameness" had generated some insidious communication practices. For example, it was considered rude to ask other citizens questions that might make them uncomfortable. Children were conditioned to speak without filters, shearing communication of any contextual nuance. To filter one's speech was considered lying. The Community also left no

# Beyond "sameness"

Imagine a world where all of the sources of conflict and pain have been eliminated. What's the catch?

room for privacy. Children were required to share with their parents their conscious feelings and even their subconscious dreams, according to a daily schedule.

Jonas's instructions exempted him "from the rules governing rudeness." He was now permitted to ask any question of any citizen, and to receive answers. His own communication could now be filtered: "you may lie." He was also granted, and in a certain sense even required, to begin fostering a sense of privacy. He was not permitted to discuss his training with others, including his parents, and he was prohibited from dream-telling.

In the first somewhat awkward interaction with the Giver, Jonas timidly indicated his interest in the Giver's life story and memories, adding as was customary, "I apologize for interrupting." With that, the Giver added another rule: "No apologies in this room; we haven't time."

### What is truly rude?

When we consider applying these rules, the lines are tricky. How might one distinguish between the unhealthy retreat from challenging questions that generate "sameness," and what is truly "rude"? At what point do filters that seem to smooth out social interaction and communication actually become "lies"? At what point might even seemingly courteous apologies become an obstacle to effective communication?

All these questions are further complicated by the intersubjective and intercultural dimensions of how we interpret other's efforts to communicate. When working in a non-U.S. context, I have been gently teased (prodded?) by friends who tell me that I would make much more progress if I were less direct. Notwithstanding the good and loving intentions on all sides, my straightforward style was received by some as abrasive and rough.

Many are fatigued by cultural interactions that feel increasingly rude, coarse and inconsiderate. Interactions are further poisoned by the confusion of "fake news," accusations of "fake news," and outright lies. But as *The Giver* depicts, the flattened world of Sameness — the artificiality of echo chambers and always-cushioned social interactions — is no more attractive.

### Time to reflect

Amidst these challenges, of all the instructions Jonas received, I am especially drawn to the indication to cultivate a sense of privacy, or perhaps the better word is interiority. My own anxieties about communication with others are often quelled, or even healed, when I consistently take that quiet time I need to reflect, meditate and pray.

In teaching I notice a similar shift, when students recollect their own thoughts in writing prior to seminar discussion. Interestingly, there seems to be a direct


correlation between the time we take to gather our thoughts and sense of direction, and our openness to receiving the sincere thoughts of others.

Also in my closer friendships, I have sought to cultivate the kind of trust that welcomes sincere challenge and appreciation of deep differences. Generally, we meet in person and we set aside ample time to simply be with each other. I take off my watch and put away my cell phone. Giving each other the benefit of the doubt, we agree to receive clarifying or challenging questions as a gift. We have the freedom to stop mid-sentence, backtrack, reformulate and try out other ideas, without worrying that what we have just said is fixed in stone or already under the bright and unforgiving lights of social media.

When I take the time to cultivate a sense of interiority and nurture these kinds of friendships, I generally find I am more cautious about labeling the differences I encounter in my work and public interactions. I sense that I have greater access to the insight I need to welcome others as they are, and even to discern in our conversations their sincere desire to connect, learn and grow.

### Preserving openness

Shortly before his death, Thomas Merton wrote a striking prayer that highlights a further layer in this dynamic: "O God, we are one with you. You have made us one with you. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts."

In our frenetic world so full of tensions and distractions, when we "fight" to cultivate a sense of interiority and for friendships that bring us beyond our "comfort zones," we also invite into our lives and our relationships a presence of love — "You dwell in us" — which can in turn inform all of our efforts to communicate. 

# Facing the prejudices within

A reflection on Harper Lee's  
*Go Set a Watchman*

BY AMY UELMEN

**T**HE METRO TRAIN IN WASHINGTON IS NOT usually a talkative space. But one evening this past summer I happened into a particularly talkative car. A lady had struck up a conversation with a young woman, perhaps in her early twenties, commenting on the t-shirt she wore with the name of an organization for people with disabilities, and said, "They do great work." The young woman, in town for the annual conference, proudly shared that she had just been elected as the youth representative for the board.

After that lady got off, a group of four or five behind us were conversing somewhat loudly among themselves. I did not hear the word they used that so bothered the young woman, but she ventured forth to explain to the group her involvement in the organization and express her concern and dismay: "I want to tell you this word has been used to put people with disabilities down. Please don't use it."

Taken aback, one of the men immediately ceded: "We are obviously in the wrong, and we apologize." The car fell completely silent.

The young woman got off a couple of stops later, and the group immediately proceeded to berate her incessantly for the next ten minutes: "I should have given her a dollar to just shut up; she better grow up; she will hear much worse in life," and so on.

I struggled within — should I say something in her defense? I worried that it would

just make things worse ... The person beside me was also visibly uncomfortable. As I was getting off at my stop, I left it to a comment to her under my breath: "We have a long way to go."

As I walked home, I wondered what kept the group from being gracious, not just with their lips, but in their hearts? What kept them from stepping into this young woman's shoes, to appreciate her courage, to take in stride her communication limitations, and to welcome the opportunity to learn something new? I think it may have been because they felt shamed.

In that shame, they felt they had something to prove — to themselves and to the rest of the Metro car: that they were not insensitive in the way that she had called them out to be. Perhaps this sense of shame is one dimension of what kept their hearts locked to a more empathetic and humble response. How might we do better?

I received an unexpected answer to my question a short time later, when I devoured in one sitting the new Harper Lee novel, *Go Set a Watchman*. Atticus Finch, the beloved icon of integrity and justice portrayed in Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is toppled from his revered pedestal, as his now twenty-six year old daughter, Jean Louise, "Scout," grapples with the ugly face of racism and racial tension as manifested in her small Alabama town in the 1950s.

A masterful artist, in the first third of the book, Lee pulls you completely into her



world. Through the interactions and dialogue among the characters and vivid selective memories, you get to know them and sense that you might even understand something about them. Perhaps for this reason Jean Louise's awakening to the ugly reality that sears through the heart of the novel is so devastating and so shocking.

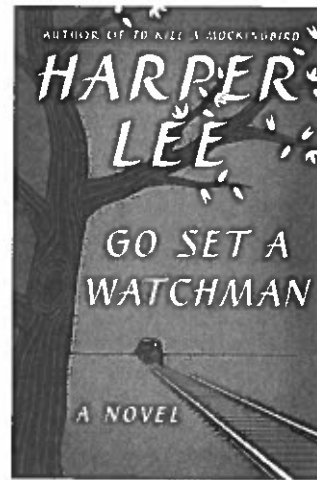
What I found especially striking is Lee's depiction of how intertwined are the dynamics of race and class — and how these interactions condition and limit in incredibly complex ways the capacity of people to understand each other across these lines. No one in this novel is left off the hook. In fact, those who see themselves "blind" to the impact that race and class have had in our society have no special access to justice or compassion — on the contrary. All idols are smashed, and we are each left with our own "watchman," our conscience, prickling with the uncomfortable thought — with whom do I align in this story, and what do I think now of the limitations revealed in this posi-



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Revealing moments. Even a subway ride is a chance to face previously unknown prejudices in ourselves or others



Learning through art. A scene from the 1962 film adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Harper Lee's new novel (*Harper Collins, 2015*) challenges readers to rethink the complexities of racism

tion? It is a book that will be under my skin for some time.

Returning to my encounter on the Metro, *Go Set a Watchman* led me to a number of insights on how to face with more honesty the ways in which we fail to understand and inadvertently hurt each other across a host of differences — whether because of ignorance or blindness, or simple thoughtlessness.

First, as Dostoyevsky put it: “Beauty will save the world.” As an art form, the novel itself created a space to work through some of my own biases and perhaps even the shame that these produce. Reading a novel is not being publicly called out. Interacting with the characters provided the simultaneous distance and intimacy I needed to face some of my own demons and limitations when it comes to race and class.

Literature, like music and other art forms, can help us not only to unlock our empathetic imaginations, but also to find healing for the shame that we might feel as we work through our blind spots.

Second, I think I can say without a spoiler alert that the narrative extends a profound invitation to appreciate the intentions of others and the complex journey which may have brought them to hold the positions that they do. At the same time, an important distinction can be drawn between trying to *understand* another person and *agreeing* with their position. The narrative is careful not to collapse this exercise into naive or platitudinous pleas to all just try to get along. On the contrary — it suggests that the conversations that unfold on this sacred ground of trying to understand each other, precisely in our deep differences, are what hold the most promise to unlock our hearts to reasoning together about the deepest meaning of justice, equality, and protection of the dignity of each person.

Finally, and related — in a time when our social and political life is intensely polarized, with a consequent uptick in name-calling, and specifically in deployment of the word “bigot,” one of Lee’s characters intro-

duces a very helpful definition of this word.

“What does a bigot do when he meets someone who challenges his opinions? He doesn’t give. He stays rigid. Doesn’t even try to listen, just lashes out.”

In the novel, Jean Louise had every reason to condemn the wrong of racism. In the encounter that I witnessed on the Metro, the man’s first response was correct: “We are clearly in the wrong.” And that is what makes *Go Set a Watchman* so deeply challenging: it stands as an invitation to recognize, even in the midst of what we see as clear “wrongs” that generate real harm in our society, that we can still open our hearts to try to understand why others see the world in a certain way or react in the way that they do. And this, I believe, is our best hope for laying the foundations for our steps toward racial and social justice. LC

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