

# Anxiety and Equality

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A Sermon  
by Unitarian Universalist Rev. Andrea Abbott  
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We have had a kindergartener living with us for awhile and so I have had a chance to see the changes in education from the time my children were that age, many, many years ago and today. Since my youngest was in kindergarten in the mid-80's to the present day it seems to me that the self-esteem movement has changed but not necessarily in a helpful direction. It was, therefore, heartening to find that I was not alone in that assessment. The book I'm about to quote, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, has become, for me, the go to book, because it addresses so many issues that confront us today. Though it is a sound source for political information, the chapter on anxiety really brings home the message of its subtitle: Why equality *is* indeed better for everyone, even if, like certain medicines, many people may find the taste unpalatable.

There is a phrase I first heard in the women's movement of the 70's which seems to be still current. "The Personal is the Political". It was a phrase coined because so much of women's lives were involved in what was considered the personal, from our bodies to our families to our domestic duties, a new way of looking at politics, a way not rooted in the public sphere, needed to be articulated before much sense could be made of the inequalities between men and women.

This phrase was carried over into many other struggles. In order to make sense of inequalities, of certain kinds of oppression, the old walls between public and personal lives needed to be broken down. This is still true in the era of Donald Trump. We need to understand, now more than ever, both the power politics that have led to this change but also the underlying culture that makes people into active supporters of policies many, if not all, of us regard as despicable. WE also need to understand the cultural changes that have rendered many people helpless or apathetic. For me, this quote from *The Spirit Level* was very helpful. The chapter in question begins with a report on the rising levels of anxiety and depression in developed countries at the same time that studies also showed a rise in statements indicating that people were increasingly self-confident. How to reconcile these two trends? The authors go on to give the following explanation:

“Over the years, many research groups looking at individual differences in self-esteem at a point in time...began to notice two categories of people who came out with high scores. In one category, high self-esteem went with positive outcomes and was associated with happiness, confidence, being able to accept criticism, an ability to make friends, and so on. But as well as positive outcomes, studies repeatedly found that there was another group who scored well on self-esteem measures. They were people who showed tendencies to violence, to racism, who were insensitive to others and were bad at personal relationships.”

Aha moment! This began to explain what seemed to me to be a problem with the focus on self-esteem in the schools. Self-esteem has been taught as doctrine for

over thirty years now with a disregard to the reality on the ground, particularly the playground, the real world in which children live, move and have their being. It doesn't do a lot of good to have children do various things that say they are good and worthy when, once they are at recess, they know they're going to be smashed to pulp physically or verbally. It either produces cynicism, not always a bad thing, or cognitive dissonance on a vast scale. Children are not from another planet. They are human beings and are as sensitive to social position, if not more sensitive, than adults. I'd like now to quote the epigram which began this section of the book. It's by Ralph Waldo Emerson. "'Tis very certain that each man carries in his eye the exact indication of his rank in the immense scale of men, and we are always learning to read it."

The task for psychologists interested in this phenomenon was to differentiate between these two groups, and so they did and found that:

"The healthier kind (of self-esteem) seemed to centre on a fairly well-founded sense of confidence, with a reasonably accurate view of one's strengths in different situations and an ability to recognize one's weaknesses. The other seemed to be primarily defensive and involved a denial of weaknesses, a kind of internal attempt to talk oneself up and maintain a positive sense of oneself in the face of threats to self-esteem. It was (and is) therefore fragile, like whistling in the dark, and reacts badly to criticism. People with insecure high self-esteem tend to be insensitive to others and to show an excessive preoccupation with themselves, with success, and with their image and appearance in the eyes of

others. This unhealthy high self-esteem is often called ‘threatened egotism’, ‘insecure high self-esteem’, or ‘narcissism’.

The chapter goes on to document the rise in rates of narcissism. This, when correlated with the increasing levels of anxiety *and* the relationship of that to drug use and other self-destructive behavior is chilling indeed. And, maybe the most chilling of all, the effect on national politics. Are the inmates running the asylum?

Perhaps we should back up here a moment and consider the whole idea of self-esteem. It seems to be something that affects the poorest of people and the wealthy. It also seems to be a subject fraught with confusion. And it seems a particularly American phenomenon.

One of the famous lines of a famous document is something considered a self-evident truth—“That all men are created equal” It’s an interesting truth in that it left out over half of humanity and, within the half that were included, in practice, it left out a very large number of men. It also set the stage for anxiety by stipulating that all men were *created* equal. Not were equal, or should remain equal but were created equal. After that, if you wanted to maintain or exceed your equality, it was up to you. Therefore, your problems with inequality were your failure. No one’s fault but your own.

It also failed to specify just what equality meant and so, into that vacuum, rushed the defining characteristic of equality in the U.S.—money. How rich, how powerful, how influential, how learned, how healthy, how beautiful, how famous, increasingly many of these categories depend on money, in a society in which everything is up for sale. And so, as income becomes more unequal, rising anxiety is an inevitable response.

It's a response that is remarkable democratic. It obviously affects the poor, but it also affects the rich because people are not interested in how lucky they are compared to the very bottom but they are intensely interested in how they measure up with their peers and especially with those just a little above them, the level which they might be able to achieve. And, like children on the playground, we are all pretty accurate about where we stand. And there is proof that this knowledge relates to stress. A series of experiments that measure stress by the levels of a hormone related to preparation for threats reveals that threats to our self-esteem or social status where we could be judged by others *particularly where we had little control over the outcome* produced larger levels of stress than other threats. We are social animals and we are also competitive animals, vigilant to status changes as if they were actually life threatening. That is why self-esteem is not just a nice idea. It may be that true self-esteem is in the same category as

air or water or food. And that is why attempts create self-esteem that are not based on reckoning with the true causes of inequality result in a distorted view of the world and of oneself.

Now this is of particular interest to me because I live and speak at a church in an area that is extremely depressed. Recently, Oswego County found itself with the distinction of having the highest unemployment rate in New York State. This is an area in which Trump and Tea Party candidates receive a tremendous amount of support. White working class and poor support of Trump has been much discussed but support for radical Republicans is also high among the relatively affluent as well. But, then, these people aren't saying, "Oh good, I'm better off than my poor neighbor. They're looking anxiously at the guy down the street who just put in a bigger garage. And, we could continue this thought up the ladder to explain why social anxiety affects even billionaires. And this returns us to the idea that a more equal society, a society that doesn't have the largest gaps in history between rich and poor, may help everybody. Even the billionaires.

Addictions of racism, homophobia, blaming the victim—all these addictions keep many people from feeling their own anxiety. The personal becomes the political which becomes the personal again. Like all addictions, hard to break the

addiction to anger and hatred because of the fear of the emptiness that exists without them.

But, of course, these addictions work equally well on every part of the political spectrum and, as people who have always been equal to the task of self-examination and self-criticism, it is necessary for us to examine ourselves for signs that we have succumbed to these temptations. Anger and protest can be pretty heady things for everyone.

Arlie Russell Hochschild's book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* was important to me as an attempt to understand my neighbors. She focusses on the people of the Louisiana Gulf, people who have seen their lives transformed out of all recognition by the effects of giant oil companies and their subsidiary industries. While the oil companies brought jobs and a certain amount of prosperity to this impoverished state, it did so at the cost of rural communities with settled ways of life and culture. Both the infrastructure built by the oil companies and the resulting pollution had rendered many communities uninhabitable. The effects of Hurricane Katrina were also still felt in the area. Both natural and human disasters had virtually wiped out the fishing industry that had been part of that area for centuries and had left behind a

legacy of cancer and other diseases, blighted natural areas that were mourned by many of those she interviewed and homes so damaged or toxic that they could not be sold and were abandoned. What mystified the author, a sociologist from Berkeley and a self-described liberal, was that the people who had been most affected by these events were also the most likely to resist any kind of governmental intervention. They were incredibly hostile toward environmentalists and supported the very policies of deregulation which had allowed these catastrophes to happen.

They did not doubt that the large oil companies had destroyed their beloved environments, their communities and even the lives of those they loved. They simply felt that this was how progress happened and that they had sacrificed so that many people could benefit from what the oil companies did. They saw this sacrifice, even of their own health and their loved ones' health, as something to be endured, something to be proud of, their contribution to the nation.

The author, who comes from a very different background and set of assumptions, wanted to understand why and how these people could see the same set of events that she did and come up with such different conclusions. For me, that, too is one of the defining questions for our country, how has it

happened that we do not understand each other? How can we have become so separated from each other that we can no longer talk to each other? What are we throwing away when we can no longer hear each other's perspectives?

The heart of the book is the author's attempt to encapsulate the way the people she got to know saw the world. She calls it the deep story and describes it this way:

What is a deep story? It's a story that feels true to you. You take the facts out, you take judgment out. It's as felt.

You're on a—waiting in line for something you really want at the end: the American dream. You feel a sense of great deserving. You've worked very hard. A lot of these guys were plant workers, pipefitters in the petrochemical—you know, it's tough work. So you've worked really hard. And the line isn't moving. It's like a pilgrimage up, up to the top. It's not moving.

Then you see some people cut in line. Well, who were they? They are affirmative action women who would go for formerly all-men's jobs, or affirmative action blacks who have been sponsored and now have access to formerly all-white jobs. It's immigrants. It's refugees. And from—as felt, the line's moving back.

Then they see Barack Hussein Obama, who should impartially be monitoring the line, wave to the line cutters. And then you think, "Oh, he's their president and not mine. And, in fact, he's a line cutter. How did he get to Harvard? How did he get to Columbia? Where did he get the money? His mom was a single mom. Wait a minute."

And then they begin to feel like strangers in their own land. They feel like the government has become a giant marginalization machine. It's not theirs. In fact, it's putting them back. And then someone in front of the line turns around and says, "Oh, you redneck," you know. And that feels insult to injury. It's just the tipping point at which they feel not only estranged—I mean, demographically they're getting smaller. They feel like they're religious in an increasingly secular

culture. Their attitudes are denigrated, and so they're culturally denigrated. And then the economy begins to shake. And then they feel, "I need another leader."

The author checked this "deep story" with the people she had come to know and received affirmation that this was indeed how they felt. And I'm sure, though there are different issues for the people I know, this is also how many of them feel. Perhaps this explains the addictions and other self-destructive behaviors that have hollowed out the communities I know as surely as unemployment and poverty have. But addictions are hard to cure, indeed, they resist being cured, and self-destructive behaviors can include political actions that feel so good, even as they destroy the very communities that people love.

Two things strike me about this deep story. The first is that it is a very passive story. People wait in line. They do nothing but wait. This struck me as a perfect story for a consumer culture, a culture that carries a message that one's lives are to be purchased, not made, not created by one's own efforts but purchased and so a life spent in a line, as in a line at a store is an excellent metaphor for our times.

The second thought I had was about geometry. A line is a configuration with a head and a tail, a first and a last. It is something that is hierarchical and it lends

itself to competition. Where am I in the line? Where am I in relationship to other people? How can I get ahead? AS everyone who has ever waited in a line knows, a line invites anxiety and resentment. Why is this taking so long? Who is holding me up? How did they get in front? But life is only a passive line if one sees it that way.

There are other geometrical figures. I'd like to think that Unitarian-Universalists don't see life as if they are passive bystanders in a row. I think for us life is a circle, round as the earth is round, a circle that has no first and no last but is shaped as arms that reach out to hold each other, to encourage, to comfort, to include. Not to keep back, to withhold, to push ahead and push aside.

In this new world that we face, we have the opportunity to make clear who we are and what we stand for. We have the opportunity to show how healthy self-respect and genuine self-esteem can be created and how anxiety can be overcome by fairness and kindness. We can bend the line into a circle. Of course we need to stand up to those who would prey on the most vulnerable. Of course we need to stand against the forces that would turn this world into a desolate desert. But we need to do so powered by our convictions and our values. We can take the opportunity to demonstrate a different way of living, a way that invites

everyone into the circle of love and care, into the circle of genuine human flourishing. All we have to do is live our principles, steadfastly, stubbornly, and, in the words of one of our hymns, show to all a new community.

I'd like to close with this poem by Edwin Markham

" Outwitted"

“He drew a circle that shut me out-  
Heretic , rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle and took him In !