

The Breakdown of the Healthy Mind

It is not new for people to disagree, nor is it necessarily a bad thing. After all, the last time all of humanity agreed on a single course of action, the forbidden fruit was eaten (Genesis 3:6). Disagreement can be healthy for a healthy mind. Actually, it is an essential part of learning. As none of us are perfect ("All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God," Romans 3:23), disagreement, if done to promote a healthy mind, will either teach one something new, or create a stronger conviction in one's original opinion. Maybe even both at once.

I am not speaking of a healthy mind as in being free of mental disorder or disease, but rather whether it is efficient or not. In this respect, an unhealthy mind is closer to obesity than say, a cancer. Barack Obama, in his book *The Audacity of Hope*, praised the founding fathers for deliberately pitting divergent groups against each other so that a rough consensus of the American will could be determined. From this amazing insight on the American system of government, however, he drew a false conclusion. "Implicit ... in the very idea of ordered liberty was a rejection of absolute truth, the infallibility of any idea or ideology or theology." I feel this explains much of his presidency, as well as what has been going on in our country after he left office. I believe our nation has an unhealthy mind, and I hope to demonstrate why I believe so in this paper.

We live in a country where "tolerance" is being forced upon us in every form imaginable, but the very ones crying so desperately for tolerance are violently hostile to any deviation whatsoever from their message. We live in a country that is open to almost anyone who can get here, yet anyone who is worried about how this affects drug smuggling or human trafficking is labeled an extremist. Conservative speakers at colleges are called fascists. Blacks who speak out against socialist policies are called Uncle Toms or worse. The president after Obama was called "racist" simply for implementing policies required by national laws, something he swore an oath to do. Just recently, people who would not wear masks were accused of being cruelly insensitive. This list could go on and on, but it is not my intent to create an endless list of self-evident problems. I want to speak about the source of the problems, and what might be done to fix the core problem. I don't believe our country is fundamentally ill; I believe it is our way of thinking that is ill.

Canadian philosopher and Jesuit priest Bernard Lonergan identified four steps a healthy mind needs to take. First, the mind must be attentive and take note of facts. Next, it must process the information. The third stage is to judge the processed information. The final step is to be responsible with the judgment rendered, and the cycle begins again.

A) Being Attentive: The first step, being attentive, is simply a gathering of facts and information. This is why proper education is so important. If all we do is immerse ourselves in gossip, or read bestseller list books, or watch movies and TV shows that pander to the masses, we have already jeopardized the health of our minds. Now, I'm not saying a little mindless entertainment will harm the mind any more than a light snack between meals will the body. It's about nourishing the body first and then offering a little pleasure as a reward. One must be careful where one gets information. Many so-called "media" sources are not in the business of passing on useful information. At best, most of them are failing projects, and desperately trying to gather viewers at any cost. At worst, they are deliberately attempting to present a toxic ideology instead of meaningful facts. A good news source presents facts and lets the audience make their own conclusions.

B) Processing Information: The second step, processing the information, is simply trying to make

sense of what was learned. Using scientific terms, one should make one or more hypotheses based on the information. In everyday usage, we can call it one or more opinions. In this stage, being open-minded is critically important. The truth is not always pleasant, so one's opinion should be shaped by what the facts suggest instead of what the mind wants to see. Having discussions and debates with others is a great way to help keep one honest in this matter. Honest debates are the beginning of great things. And they can happen anywhere, from co-workers around a water cooler to congressmen addressing the people's elect. But here is where a mind's health faces great challenges. I will address two key problems.

1) Poor Attention Span: When one doesn't have many facts to support an opinion, then the opinion usually has little value. The person is either very susceptible to being manipulated by others, or will become hostile (admitting one is ignorant is difficult to do). It's easy to tell someone who has strong opinions but is weak in knowledge. Name-calling, avoidance, gaslighting, and other deflection techniques are commonly used. Holding on to one's cherished opinions without facts to support them, or (worse yet) holding on to opinions despite the facts, is the sin of pride. It is much better to admit to one's ignorance (one can always learn more later) or to concede a point, especially on minor issues.

2) Using Information as an End in Itself: Just like it is not always wrong to indulge in non-serious information sources, using information as an end in itself sometimes has its place as recreation. One friend might think one team is the best because of its winning record. Another thinks a second team is the best because of gross proceeds made at the gate and the advertising contracts it has. A third might think a team is the best because he used to watch them play with his family as a child. These opinions are ends in themselves, as the "right" answer only needs to suit oneself. But newsworthy debates have real world consequence, affect many people in profound ways, and are not for entertainment purposes. People's lives will be affected for better or worse, and often as a matter of life or death. While every voice does have a right to be heard, it is wrong to speak just to be heard. It is also wrong to bring up points that have been legitimately debunked. Finally, it is wrong to bring up non-relevant points. But in today's culture, there is a marked lack of logic (logos) to public debates. Instead, logos is replaced with emotional appeals (pathos) and popularity contests (ethos).

C) Making Judgment: The third step, judgment, is different. While the first two steps often suffer from "eating the wrong things," this step is often left hungry. This should not be a surprise, as we are constantly bombarded every day with warnings to not judge others. Jesus, of course, never gave into this toxic peer pressure. It was His insistence on defending the truth that led to His crucifixion, and He never wavered on what the truth was. At some point, we must finally decide on a truth. And truths, by definition, must exclude some things from it as being non-truth. By declaring a truth, we must close our minds to some degree (this is better addressed in the final step), which is where we are told we are wrong (and usually to those whose minds are completely closed). But to do otherwise means indecision, and we become easily manipulated (consider the hypocrites I've been lamenting throughout the paper). In his book, Obama explicitly states once, and implies several other times, that he feels uneasy about abortion' as well he should. He made it clear that this uneasiness comes from his belief against absolute truth existing. I don't want to review his entire presidency, but if he officially approves of abortion on grounds that to do so otherwise would be absolutism, then how can he champion the rights of blacks? If there is no such thing as an absolute truth, then can someone with slaves be called wrong anymore than a woman who wants an abortion? If we do not accept any truths as absolute, then we have no right to call any action wrong. But in reality, everyone actually believes in absolute truth. Some people can recognize and identify these beliefs they hold to be absolute truth, while others are in a state of cognitive dissonance and being manipulated by the unscrupulous. While the pathology of the nation's unhealthy mind begins at step one, its symptoms become quite evident here.

D) Being Responsible: The final stage, being responsible, is even less healthy in our culture than making a judgment is. If judgment is going hungry, then being responsible is anorexic. Much could be said on this, but I want to focus on prudence. Even after a consensus for the truth has been reached, there is still the pragmatic matter of unforeseen consequences. For this paper, I do not care to argue whether or not certain outcomes should have been anticipated; to me that is a distraction from what needs to follow. Once a truth has been decided and acted upon, it will create new facts that need to be taken into account. A healthy mind, therefore, operates in a circle. We must always take steps to see if our "truth" can stand the test of time, just like scientists reproduce previous experiments under different (but relevant) conditions to see how well the theory stands up to challenges. If our "truth" fails in practice, then we ought to humble ourselves, accept we made a mistake, and go through the process over again to find a new truth. If, however, our idea of "truth" is able to weather attacks made against it with little or no adjustments, then we can grow in confidence that this truth is really real. "By their fruits you will know them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Just so, every good tree bears good fruit, and a rotten tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree bear good fruit." (Matthew 7:16-18)

Our country has failed miserably in the last two steps of this process. Our country is wallowing in its horrible, collective mental illness. Anyone who is speaking against the insanity (step three) is being increasingly censored. Rather than admit many policies are disastrously wrong (step four), they are being hailed as "heroic" and "monumental." Today, our youngest children are being exposed to pornographic material and told to hate who they are (too wealthy, too white, too male, too heterosexual, etc.). We have exercised bad judgment, and it is time to be responsible for what we have created. We know the path; we need to walk down it. We have a choice to reject those giving us bad fruit and to stop condemning those who bear good fruit, or we can face the consequences: "Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 7:19)

Raymond Mulholland
Original Publication Date: 15 October 2023