

Polarization and the Student Mental Health Crisis: Lessons on the Future of Democracy from Jonathan Lear

Jeff Frank

St. Lawrence University

Ralph Waldo Emerson wanted to be shocked into believing his neighbors were human. From where he stood, they appeared to be conformists (or bugs, or ghosts) and not humans with heart and agency.¹ Stanley Cavell called this attitude the problem of skepticism concerning other minds, and a main dimension of Cavell's philosophical project was to teach that this skepticism can strike all of us, and that it isn't a problem with a solution.² Rather, skepticism concerning other minds is something we must learn to live with in better and worse ways. When we make the effort to understand others while making the effort to be understood, we learn the limits of our human capacity to acknowledge the human in others and in ourselves. We may find, as Emerson dramatizes, that other humans don't strike us as very human at all. At other times, the urge to be understood in our full complexity can so overwhelm us that we do everything possible to reveal ourselves as more than a voiceless extra in a world where others play leading roles.

Living through highly polarized times, I fear that more than a few of us shared some version of Emerson's thought, wondering about the very humanity of our neighbors. The Covid pandemic did little to bring the country together in an appreciation of our shared humanity and mortality. Simplifying, one group of Americans thought the other cruel-hearted, inhuman, for putting others at risk, while the other group of Americans thought the other inhuman, sheep-like, for following pandemic-related restrictions. Similar polarized reactions occurred around the attack on the Capitol and in response to protests for racial justice. Reading the ways these events were covered in traditional media (let alone amplified and distorted by news outlets), it can feel as if we don't inhabit the same world. We are becoming unintelligible to each other, we are losing interest in making ourselves intelligible to people we deeply disagree with, and we are losing interest in understanding what it would mean for our neighbors or compatriots to hold the views they do while still counting them as one of

us (humans, Americans).

One reason for this lack of interest is because the stakes are high, and the facts so obvious. It is obviously wrong that people feel justified in attacking the Capitol. And even though this is true, is it worth wondering why some people who condemn this act don't do so in as full-hearted a way as we do? Is it worth making the effort to understand someone who thinks that the country is heading in the wrong direction, largely because they've experienced so much upheaval in their life and that most of the hope and change the other side talks about only seems to leave them further behind, if not actively despised. What about people who seem unmoved in the face of climate disaster, denying its significance or existence? Even though they are wrong about the planet's warming, is that all there is to it? Maybe they are less willing to accept the changes that need to happen to mitigate climate disaster because they know that the transition to clean energy will only leave them further behind. At this point they have pride. What comes next? They will be at the whims of tax breaks and tax credits to heat and cool their homes? We all know how kindly the government can treat people dependent on their care. One needn't be anti-government to wish we had more faith that government can manage everything from foster care programs to how we support military veterans. The cost of care shouldn't come at one's dignity or self-respect. Understanding this doesn't mean denying the realities of climate disaster, though it may give us a way of humanizing our neighbors.

Further examples and issues run in all directions from here. To ground this investigation, imagine how what Cavell labels skepticism concerning other minds is playing out in classrooms and family conversations across the United States. Imagine how our mental health crisis intersects with this skepticism. Teachers are in a hard spot. As a teacher, one must see the best in children, even children who voice family beliefs that the teacher might find—and might be—repugnant. As well, families may deeply disagree with their child's teacher's politics. A parent might wonder how a teacher could ever see the best in their child if their teacher is a Trump supporter, a Democrat, an advocate of socialism, Pro-Life, Back the Blue, Defund the Police, and so on. Finally, as children see that holding the wrong beliefs—however this is defined in the child's mind—can cause people to find themselves on the outside—cancelled,

shunned, un-American, deplorable—what does this do to their mental health? Though schools love to say mistakes are the only way we learn, children know better. They see what happens to someone who says the wrong thing, and this saying the wrong thing—very understandably—scares them, often in ways we adults aren't fully grasping. To be clear, this is not a simplistic indictment of what some call liberal cancel culture. It is deeper than that. Children across the political spectrum witness how friendships are severed, and families are torn apart because of our politics, and this makes them incredibly anxious.

I may have lost some of you already in this tangle of assertion and reflection. But I press forward as someone who is a member of what I think is a shrinking population of Americans who live in politically mixed communities with politically mixed schools. Many teachers in the schools my children attend do not share the political affiliation or beliefs my wife and I share. As well, many of the children who attend school with my children come from homes that hold very different beliefs than the ones we hold at home. I rely on the teachers teaching my children to care for them, and I also rely on the fact that my neighbors will step in if they see anything that very obviously threatens the wellbeing of my children. This is a cause for both hope and obligation. Because I trust the human goodness of the people in my community I *strongly* disagree with politically, I also feel an obligation to stay in human contact with them, by seeking to understand where they come from when we disagree, attempting to make myself understood when I seem most unbelievable to them. As mentioned at the start of this paragraph, I don't expect everyone to want to follow me here. I have my positionality as a white man married to a white woman actively co-parenting four young children together. This provides me with many privileges and with certain cares and insights that aren't going to be universal or even broadly shared. But like others trying to make their way in politically mixed communities in polarized times, I am searching for anything that may prove useful in bringing people closer together instead of driving us further apart. I am actively looking for ways that we might continue fighting for our politics without fighting our neighbors, neighbors who will *never* share our beliefs. How do we stay in contact knowing we may always disagree?

It is with this line of thinking in mind that I turn our attention to

Jonathan Lear's work on mourning, especially at it relates to America's Civil War (1861-1865) and the ongoing threat of climate disaster.³ In a way, Lear's thinking reminds me of Pauline Boss, especially her recent work in *The Myth of Closure*.⁴ Boss suggests that American history is a scene of ambiguous loss. Someone who benefited from and lived in a world dependent on the inhuman and dehumanizing practice of slavery may both abhor the evil of slavery while also feeling a sense of loss for some aspects of the life that disappeared with the abolition of slavery. The loss is ambiguous because a person can both know that slavery is thoroughly evil while wishing that one could still have aspects of the life that slavery made possible. We may want to judge and condemn that person—and we have every right to do this—but we might wonder if Boss is right to have us appreciate that there might also be something very human at work here worth our attention. What Lear does in his latest book, *Imagining the End*, is to show that the world of the former slaveholder may be closer to our world than we'd like to think. To see what he may mean, we can think about how even the most ardent environmentalist who acknowledges how humans have destroyed the earth may also—at times and in some moods—mourn those things that human destruction made possible, like world travel and access to world goods and cuisines. At times, I think about my youth devoted to playing American football. It was central to my life, I played in college. At the same time, I experienced a major injury and would never want my children to play this sport and question whether colleges should sponsor it. Nonetheless, accounting it, on balance, as bad if not morally suspect, doesn't mean that there isn't a part of me that mourns that my children won't be able to experience what I enjoyed about the sport.

It is easy to misunderstand these examples and this way of thinking. Thinking about loss and mourning isn't to draw false equivalences or apologize for evil. What both Boss and Lear intend, as I read them, is to suggest the possibility of building something like common ground around the ways that we humans might wish to mourn things that we know were made possible through evil or wrongful means. Just because we name and know something to be evil doesn't mean there isn't loss when we lose what was made possible because of that evil. Pretending there isn't loss seems to deny something important, and it

forecloses building something like common ground around an aspect of our common humanity. And it is this common ground around our inability to mourn that I find interesting when I think about polarization in our time. It is easy to revile someone we disagree with, especially when they mourn what was made possible through injustice and evil. But what if we recognize, before jumping to judgment, that we also mourn in similar ways but based on different reasons and for different causes? Shouldn't it be possible to unequivocally denounce evil while also appreciating that there are things we will mourn and miss when the world changes based on our growing ethical, moral, and political awareness? That a view from a house perched on a cliff over the ocean shouldn't exist but views from the house provoke deep wonder, nonetheless?

Maybe not. But maybe our mental health and the mental health of our children depends on taking this mourning more seriously. When we don't allow for mourning, we say that something is beyond the pale of the human. The child who loves his uncle cannot understand why that uncle is no longer allowed at dinner (because the uncle is gay or because he refuses to apologize for what he sees as the good things Trump did in office). The child wants to say that he misses his uncle without needing to get into an argument about ideas that are important but that don't connect to the person of his uncle and the love that the child still feels for him. Jonathan Lear's reading of *Antigone* as it relates to the Civil War is instructive on this point. At the heart of *Antigone* is the conflict between Antigone, who wants to bury the body of her dead brother Polyneices, and Creon, who proclaims that the body must remain unburied, as Polyneices was a traitor to the state.⁵ Though the play has been read in many ways, Lear focuses on the tragic refusal to mourn. Though Creon is right to want to punish a traitor, he oversteps the bounds of humanity by refusing the human need to bury and mourn the dead. Lear then does something truly provocative, claiming that Abraham Lincoln played Creon during the Civil War by refusing to bury the Confederate dead at Gettysburg, delivering his Gettysburg address to a field of unburied and un-mourned Confederate soldiers who were waiting to be moved to Richmond, Virginia to be buried later. And just as Creon's refusal to let Antigone mourn caused her to overstep in many ways (shunning her sister and abandoning the very possibility of compromise), Lear

suggests that Lincoln's refusal may have contributed—in a way—to the creation and perpetuation of the Lost Cause mythology. The monuments that are now being toppled in Richmond are right to be seen as the racist symbols they are. But being right on this reading of the Lost Cause iconography shouldn't render Lear's reading invalid or un-useful. Would the southern Antigones have reacted in the ways they did—memorializing if not valorizing the Lost Cause—if Lincoln and others in the north found ways to allow for mourning? What Lear seems to suggest is an alternative history where America found a way to mourn the Confederate dead in a way that didn't valorize or justify their cause and that didn't cause undue harm to enslaved people and their descendants. This may be an impossible thought to think, but even at the time when the Civil War was fresh in the minds of Americans, Herman Melville, especially in the prose supplement to his Civil War poems, wondered what it could look like to mourn the devastating losses of the Civil War without valorizing the efforts of Confederates to prolong slavery.⁶ How different would the United States look right now if Lear's alternative history were our reality?

I will focus on two lessons that emerge from this line of thinking. The first is about what happens when we don't find ways to mourn or when people are denied the possibilities of mourning, especially in cases where the losses they've experienced are tied to known evils. To start, I think Lear's Freudian perspective makes sense at especially this point. Something that is repressed or forcibly repressed will find its outlets. Denied an opportunity to mourn in a socially productive way, more devious and deviant forms of mourning will emerge. The persistence of antiblack racism in the United States has many sources, and one source might be the fact that white people don't know how to mourn the loss of their white privilege. To be extremely clear, white supremacy is not a good thing and we are better off without it. But it is might also be experienced as a loss for people who enjoy its exercise. To take this line of thinking in a slightly different direction, not giving people the space to mourn may also make it more likely that they will maintain positions they know to be wrong, because they don't want to face what we might think of as a double shame. Many people are ashamed when they are wrong. Double shame happens when someone is ready to do the work of change and making amends, and they are

only made to feel further shame at their original wrongdoing. I understand that this is a sensitive topic, and I hope I am not indulging in what Kate Manne labels “himpathy.”⁷ Instead, I think there is something understandable about a refusal to change if there is no hope that the work of changing will matter. Consider the logic: they’ll hate me either way, so I’ll just keep taking the easy route of not changing. If this way of thinking strikes us as humanly understandable, then we might need to think more about ways that the reformed Confederate or the reformed misogynist can feel that the work of change is worth the effort. This is an especially important point for schools to be mindful of. A child who turns their back on the ways that their family thinks will experience loss and shame. If that child turns away from their family and to a school community that constantly reminds them of what they used to say and that shames them for their association to their family, what do we expect will happen? By opening spaces for children to mourn the connections they are losing, are we unduly harming their classmates who remain under threat by the types of things that child used to say? This isn’t a rhetorical question. Rather, I think it addresses the twin problems of polarization and student mental health. We need to support the mental health of children who realize they don’t mean what they’ve said in the past, that they were just repeating the harmful beliefs of their parents, but this cannot come at the cost of undermining and further harming the mental health and wellbeing of their classmates. Extending understanding in one direction can appear like cruelty and callousness to those subjected to injustice.

The second line of thought I take away from Lear’s recent thinking is about common humanity and self-knowledge. Lear addresses critics who accuse him of “having sympathy for the Confederate cause or for being insensitive to the evil of slavery.”⁸ Saying, “This is not true.” He immediately goes on to write, and this is worth quoting at length:

I do, however, have sympathy for people who are trying to live a *kalon* [noble, fine] life but who, for historical and cultural reasons, along with character flaws of their own, get caught in a vision that is wildly wrong and profoundly unjust due to misunderstandings and misperceptions and social pressures—and then waste their lives, sometimes doing terrible harm, in

a cloud of misapprehension and falsity.⁹

This line brought me up short. Life is tremendously difficult, and upon reflection, many successes in life seem more due to luck than our goodness or good sense. This is a point James Baldwin makes across his writings.¹⁰ People with wealth and privilege like to believe their status is a marker of their inherent goodness and superiority. And they use this to belittle and demean people without status as inferior and lacking virtue. Like Baldwin, Lear draws our attention to the fact that most of us humans are doing what we can, but that too many of us come to a less than ideal fate. While it is tempting to judge people who don't share our luck, to do so is to exercise very little self-knowledge and to betray a lack of interest in our common humanity. So, what if our neighbors and compatriots were duped by a politician and we weren't. Does this really make us better humans? Or might we be falling for other dangerous myths that they've been immunized against. Aren't we all just one step away from needing someone else's understanding? As Seamus Heaney's translation of *Antigone* puts it: "Our luck is little more than a short reprieve."¹¹ Though we may be in the superior position now, able to choose whether to grant our neighbor the freedom from shame they desire, we might not inhabit this position for very long. What would it mean to live with this understanding? We must stand against all the injustice that we can presently see, but maybe any success we have shouldn't cause us the hubris to believe that we won't be brought low tomorrow by injustices we are perpetuating now but that remain invisible to us. Maybe we were blessed with parents, or teachers, or good fortune that caused us to avoid injustice up to this point. But this doesn't mean this luck won't run out. This realization, I suggest, should cause us to be vigilant and understanding. Vigilant, because we might be committed to injustice now and just don't know it. Understanding, because other people might be better than we know, and the main thing that differentiates them from us is a luck that is just waiting to turn.

Life is tremendously difficult. Tragedy and misfortune can strike us all. Bernard Williams noted that our world is much closer to the world of Greek tragedy than we like to acknowledge.¹² What I take him to mean is that our sense of progress and security is often little more than a wishful illusion. Many of us are one small step away from evil and tremendous loss. If a handful of

things changed about my life, I know I would be a different person, and probably a much less good one. Though I would like to think I would never turn any future pain or misfortune I experience into hatred for others, that may just be wishful thinking. This isn't false humility. Instead, I see it as a clear-sighted appreciation for the fact that most of us are easily deluded when it works in our favor. As so, maybe our neighbors and compatriots who hold misguided beliefs are closer to us than we are willing to admit. And maybe our moralistic concern with being right and wrong obscures the fact that our greatest fear is losing the people we love and the tremendous pain and un-selfing that would come with it. Maybe our greatest hope is that people will mourn us when we die. And just maybe our mental health crisis is due, in part, to the fact that no one is willing to live this acknowledgement. As Jonathan Lear teaches, maybe what is most wonder-inducing about we humans, is all the ways we are capable of fooling and deluding ourselves about what we are ultimately about and after. Instead of giving the impression that it is causes that are worth dying for, we might live in ways that very clearly communicates to children that their death would leave an incredible void in the world that will demand and call forth profound mourning.

Living in a polarized world, it is easy to believe that the death of our enemy might be an occasion for celebration. This is a tempting feeling, but as Sophocles teaches, it very often leads to dehumanization and uncontrollable destruction. As children learn that the adults in their lives might celebrate the deaths of their enemies, death itself loses some of its power, because it becomes something without the power to provoke the desire to mourn. Without intending it, I worry that we are teaching young people that unless they are always on the right side of every issue, then they are living lives that will be impossible to mourn. As a defense against this realization, some young people are putting on the armor of righteousness, pointing out the flaws of others while ignoring the deep human need for self-acceptance. This cuts across our political divides. How many young people avoid realizations about their own sexuality by calling out the "sins" of their classmates? And as Emerson realized many years ago, the neighbor who raises large sums of money for the right causes can be the same person who goes home and terrorizes their family and those closest to them. This

isn't a simple recognition of hypocrisy but speaks to ways that failure to mourn gets deflected into a refusal to accept human fallibility in ourselves and others.

If I am reading *Lear* correctly, I see him suggesting mourning as a way of counteracting harmful self-righteousness. We can be anchored in our work for justice without dehumanizing others. Fighting for, or finding ourselves on, the side of the true and the just when it comes to one issue isn't a guarantee that we will act with truth and justice regarding all issues or in all aspects of our life. As mentioned earlier in the paper, this should be a cause for vigilance, but it must also make us more understanding of ourselves and others. And this is the note I want to close on. I fear that too many young people today feel terribly unlovable. From the moment someone can cast a judgment on them—either from the left or the right or everywhere in-between—they are learning all the ways they don't measure up. As a result, many don the armor of the team of their birth, or the team of the people they most admire, and mete out unto others all the judgments that have rained down upon them. All this time they are learning to deflect their attention away from their real need—our real need—which is the need to feel that we will be mourned when we are gone. As we expand our vision of justice, it is essential that we create spaces for people to process their wrongdoing and to mourn their past beliefs and deeds. This is not the same thing as condoning those past beliefs deeds. Rather, it is a gesture of hope that teaches how reflecting on loss and luck can create the type of common ground we desperately need in our polarized world. Children need to be able to trust that they won't be punished for repeating what they've learned at home before they have a chance to experience the power of personal transformation and the liberation of being recognized as a changed and changing person. Instead of the double shame that is the fate of too many today, young people can experience the possibilities of mercy. Not so that they receive easy exoneration or cheap grace, but so that they see the good of continued vigilance while learning the power of mercy so that they might extend that mercy to others and themselves. This, alone, won't solve the problems of polarization or address the full extent of our mental health crisis. But a mercy attuned to the ways that mercy can liberate and cause further harm offers a promising tension we might live with into a better future.

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