

## CHAPTER 2:

# Your Readiness for Advancing a Nurturing Society

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*We've got to find a way that's more compassionate,  
softer, that allows us to move forward towards the kind  
of lives that we really want to live.*

— Steven Hayes

**W**HAT DO we do about the mess we are in? We commit to a long-term, multipronged effort to reform all the major sectors of society. Sound daunting? It is. You have every reason to put this book down and watch TV. However, I don't think you would have gotten this far if you weren't passionate about making the world a better place.

For most of us, our dominant reaction to the current situation is distress, which often leads to either avoiding the whole situation or attacking those we don't agree with. Neither is good for us or helpful in getting to where we want to go. In the past three years, I have talked to hundreds of people who are angry at those who are fomenting hatred and division, frustrated at our apparent inability to influence them, and hopeless about what to do. It is understandable that millions of Americans have effectively turned their backs on political participation.

In this chapter, I want to address your psychological readiness for the long journey that will be needed if we are to take consistent and effective action during, as Lewis Powell put it, "an indefinite period of years." I can show you how to more effectively deal with your distress while simultaneously enriching the meaning in your life and making

an important contribution to bringing about the changes in capitalism that are so badly needed. And because we will not change the nation's direction unless we get better at dealing with prejudice and persuading others, I share what we know about reducing prejudice and present a brief primer on the principles of persuasion.

## Your Psychological Readiness for Pursuing Your Values

In my experience, at least two things get in the way of our taking effective action to promote the kind of society we want. One is that we find the current situation so distressing that we simply avoid paying attention to what is happening to the nation, our community, or our climate. The other is that we simply don't know what to do. In this section, I give you ways to deal with the distress you feel as you get clear about what you most value and get ready to take effective action. And in the remaining chapters, I cover things you can do to help create a society that does a better job of ensuring everyone's well-being.

What follows, then, is a short course on psychological flexibility as it applies to your values and actions about citizenship, your community, and the environment. I am indebted to Steven Hayes for his new book, *A Liberated Mind*, which informs much of what I write.<sup>1</sup>

Psychological flexibility can be thought of as personal pragmatism. We choose to do what works to live our values, even when our minds tell us we cannot succeed. In other words, we persist or change our behavior not because of what our minds tell us but in light of what seems to be working in living our values.

If you are like me, you often doubt your ability to make a difference in influencing change in society. However, hopelessness and despair don't have to be the enemy of effective action. If you wait until you feel strongly that you can prevail, you may wait a long time. Our thoughts are simply not a good guide to what we can accomplish. Accept your discouraging thoughts; thank your mind for them. Then do what seems likely to make a difference.

Months may go by without our working for things we value. However, our lives are richer and more meaningful when we make the pursuit of our values an everyday occurrence. In essence, I am proposing a pragmatic philosophy that involves acting in the service of our values, not

because it is easy or we are sure we are right, but because we choose to make our lives about those values.

Let's start with your thoughts and feelings. Being highly distressed about the state of the nation is understandable. Indeed, your distress speaks to your caring for the nation and the people in it. But how can you best cope with your distress, and, at the same time, work to make a difference?

A first step involves simply noticing your thoughts and feelings related to the problems this book addresses. If you have gotten this far, you probably had quite a number of distressing thoughts and feelings as I described the problems we have. You may have noticed that you tend not to want to have these thoughts and feelings. In the past, as a psychologist, I was oriented toward helping people not have distressing thoughts and feelings. But the research on acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) changed my thinking, and, indeed, the way I respond to my own thoughts and feelings. It turns out that it's more productive to relate to our distress using the skills involved in psychological flexibility.

The first psychological flexibility skill is *defusion*, a made-up word that means stepping back from your thoughts and feelings rather than being fused with them. For example, if you hear or read about an event in which someone has been ill-treated—a child molested, an immigrant parent separated from her child—see if you can step back from what you are thinking and feeling and just notice it. One way to do this is to say, “I am having the thought that this child has been molested. I am having the feeling of sadness about this poor child.”

To practice this skill, you might read some of my essays on the sorry state of American society, looking for examples of problems that distress you.<sup>2</sup> For each one, write down the feeling you have as follows: “I am having the feeling that...” Do this for ten different problems. Try the same thing with troublesome thoughts that come up each day. With daily practice, you can get good at seeing your thoughts and feelings rather than seeing the world through your thoughts and feelings.

We now come to the second skill: experiencing your transcendent self. Notice something about what you've just done. Suppose I read your list and ask you, “Who is having these feelings?” You naturally say, “I am.” Notice that the “I” is not any of those feelings. There is a sense in which the “you” who has these experiences and has had many other experiences is different from any of the thoughts and feelings you expe-

rience. See if you can notice that this observer self is not something that you can look at in the way you look at your thoughts and feelings. It is the “you” that looks. That observer self never changes. In a sense, it is a safe place from which you can experience all the things that are there to be experienced.

The third skill is acceptance of whatever thoughts and feelings you have, without judgment and without any effort to change, avoid, or get rid of those thoughts and feelings. Here some accepting ways to orient toward stressful thoughts and feelings:

- Hold your experiences the way you hold a delicate flower in your hand.
- Embrace your experiences the way you embrace a crying child.
- Carry your experiences the way you carry a picture in your wallet.

The fourth skill is *mindfulness*. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the developer of *mindfulness*-based stress reduction, defines it as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally.”<sup>3</sup> Many people use various forms of meditation to increase their *mindfulness*. However, Hayes points out that any practice that helps you focus on the present moment for the purpose of living your values is a form of mindfulness. For example, simply getting into the habit of paying close attention to what is going on in the present moment can facilitate your acting in ways that are consistent with your values. A mindful approach to living encourages us to pay attention to what our values imply for every facet of our lives. To advance nurturance in our society, how shall we interact with the people we work with or those who wait on us? What will we say or do when we see things that harm children? What do our values imply about how engaged we will be in civic affairs?

I believe these four skills lay the groundwork for you to become better able to deal effectively with the problems we currently have in our communities and society. The fifth psychological flexibility skill is getting clear about your values. As you get better at paying attention to distressing thoughts and feelings, see if the process puts you in better contact with what you really care about. For example, if you hear about another mass shooting, you may notice yourself having thoughts about how we need gun control legislation and feeling angry toward the organizations trying to prevent sensible gun control legislation. What does this say

about what you value? Safety for everyone? Concern for children? You can use this new way of having distressing thoughts and feelings to help you get clear about what is really important to you. From this perspective, you have no reason to fight these feelings or avoid them.

Here is an exercise that can help you develop the skills of defusion, transcendence, acceptance, mindfulness, and choosing your values. Each day for the next week, look for things that concern you about the state of the nation, your community, or the environment. Each day, try to find about five things. Make a table like the one below. Make a brief note about the event or news report that concerned you and the thoughts and feelings that came up. Then, in the fourth column, write what your thoughts and feelings tell you about what you value.

Event that concerned me	I had the thought that:	I had a feeling of:	What do my thoughts and feelings tell me about what I value?

Do this activity for a week and see if the impact of your thoughts and feelings changes. I suspect you will find that your ability to pay attention to your thoughts and feelings from the observer perspective strengthens your awareness of what you most value.

Uncomfortable thoughts and feelings are part of a process of moving toward committed action, which is the sixth psychological flexibility skill. Committed action is a matter of engaging in specific behaviors that are consistent with your most deeply held values. The rest of this book is about the actions you can take to contribute to creating the society you want. In each chapter, I describe specific steps you can take to help evolve a society that works for everyone. But before I get into these, here are some considerations about developing effective habits of committed action.

Developing new habits is best done in small steps. Trying to do too much at once is a recipe for failure. Whether you decide to go to the gym for an hour every day or completely change your diet, you put yourself at risk of failing and may end up completely abandoning the effort if you take on too much. If you are not accustomed to doing things to bring about societal change, your best bet may be to spend no more than fifteen minutes a day on whatever you choose to start working on. And even in doing that, go easy on yourself. If you don't do as much as you had planned, you may need to use your defusion and acceptance skills on the thoughts you have about being a failure or the feelings of hopelessness you have about being able to make a difference.

As you read the action implications in each chapter, make a note of the ones you *might* want to adopt. If you have feelings of being overwhelmed, notice them, and also note that the very act of reading this book is an important and challenging step in contributing to the change we need. Then, when you have finished the book, look back over the *possible* actions you listed and pick one or two you feel will best advance your values.

One more thing has come out of the research on psychological flexibility: *compassion*. Psychologist Paul Gilbert defines compassion as “a basic human kindness, accompanied by an awareness of the suffering of oneself and other living beings, coupled with a wish and an effort to relieve it.” Recent research shows that when people become more compassionate toward themselves and others, their compassion benefits them and those around them.<sup>4</sup>

It is easy to be compassionate toward those we love. The real change will come when we are compassionate toward those who differ from us and maybe even frighten us. The payoff of compassion can be seen when those who feel like enemies become our friends and allies, or at least stop thinking of us in negative ways.

It is clear that people can learn to become more compassionate toward both themselves and others, including those with whom they disagree. Hooria Jazaieri and nine colleagues at Stanford University published a study in which they tested whether people can learn compassion.<sup>5</sup> They randomized a hundred adults either to a nine-week course in compassion or a control group that took the same training, but only after the first group had taken it. The course included training in meditation about compassion toward others and toward one's self, as well

as about receiving compassion from others. The training led people to have significantly greater compassion toward themselves and others and to be more willing to receive compassion.

Similarly, James Yadavaia, Steven Hayes, and Roger Vilardaga tested whether people could become more compassionate toward themselves.<sup>6</sup> Their approach to doing that was based on ACT. They used an exercise to help people see the problem with trying to control one's thoughts. It goes like this:

“Don't think about chocolate cake!”

Try this for a minute. Really. Take a minute to see if you can do it.

Done? If you succeeded, it was probably because you thought about something else. But do you think that will work to suppress self-critical thoughts or thoughts about the state of the nation all day long?

Yadavaia and his colleagues taught people to step back from self-critical thoughts by imagining that the thoughts were written on leaves floating by in a stream. Participants were prompted to notice when they stopped seeing the thoughts on leaves and instead slipped back into believing the thoughts. Their assignment was simply to go back to putting their thoughts on the leaves.

A particularly powerful exercise involved people imagining they were small children again and were asking their parents for what they most needed psychologically. They then imagined being an adult and giving their young self what they needed. Finally, the program focused on self-kindness as a value and prompted participants to make a commitment to be kind to themselves.

The program increased people's self-compassion and reduced their distress and anxiety. It also enabled them to become more psychologically flexible. Indeed, the way that self-compassion helped to reduce distress and anxiety was by increasing psychological flexibility.

To summarize, your assignment for making your way in the world and getting ready to improve your country: (1) get good at noticing your thoughts and feelings, (2) keep noticing how the *you who observes* your thoughts and feelings is a safe place from which to observe everything that happens, (3) practice accepting your thoughts and feelings without judgment, (4) articulate your values, (5) cultivate your ability to act in the present moment in ways that are consistent with your most important values, (6) take action in pursuit of your values, and (7) apply these skills to strengthening your compassion for yourself and others.

I cannot emphasize enough how valuable this approach to living is. These skills have changed my life as well as the lives of my family members, my clients, and hundreds of thousands of people around the world. If you have problems with depression, anxiety, obesity, tobacco, alcohol, or other drug use or any other psychological or behavioral problem, you can find these skills enormously beneficial.

So I urge you to pursue psychological flexibility. You can find many additional exercises for cultivating these skills on the Portland Psych Therapy website. You may also find it useful to identify others who are into this way of being. You can go to the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science website to explore the rich array of resources that are helping millions around the world cultivate this new form of consciousness. Also, I highly recommend three other books: *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life*<sup>7</sup> and *A Liberated Mind*<sup>8</sup> by Steven Hayes, and *The Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris.<sup>9</sup>

In my view, psychological flexibility and compassion not only define the kind of world we need to evolve but also define the way in which we can get to it. If you are already a political activist, you may not feel that you need these skills, but I submit that they are the key to achieving the changes you are working so hard to achieve. I say this not only because it will lower your distress as you work for change, but because this way of living will make you more effective in reaching the millions of people who need to be persuaded that a caring and compassionate society is far more likely to provide them with what they need than the materialistic, competitive, and angry society they currently inhabit.

Ultimately, the development of psychological flexibility is a radical approach because it gets to the root of our American malaise. Our national life has come to be suffused with materialistic and selfish values that erode our interpersonal and community relations. In response, we can seek to make all our relationships more nurturing.

You may not change the course of history, however, you can make your life more meaningful if each day you act to make the world more like what you want it to be. If you are saddened by the hate and ridicule that our current national life seems to be fostering, you can move against it through acts as simple as listening to a stranger you meet and affirming his or her worth. Indeed, affirming a person's values is the first step in persuading them to adopt a new belief.

## Why Caring Relationships Are Foundational for the Society We Seek

It might seem that promoting values such as compassion, empathy, kindness, and caring is irrelevant to achieving the many public policies we need, such as a higher minimum wage, stronger government regulations, and a tax system that reduces economic inequality. However, the individual and policy level are intimately related. How likely are Americans to vote to forgo some personal benefit in the interest of ensuring that we have fewer poor people if they feel no empathy toward poor people?

It will be particularly important to encourage these values and actions among the wealthy, since wealthier people are less likely than poorer people to be compassionate. In an article in *Scientific American*, Daisy Grewal summarizes the evidence.<sup>10</sup> Drivers of luxury cars are more likely than drivers of cheaper cars to cut drivers off. When people were asked to compare themselves with either people who were worse off or better off, the ones who compared themselves with those who were worse off were more selfish. Surveys of people about their compassionate feelings showed that less-affluent people reported greater compassion than wealthier people. Wealthier people were also more likely than poorer people to say greed was “justified, beneficial, and morally defensible”—exactly the viewpoint the conservative billionaire coalition has been promoting for forty years. Finally, wealthier people were less good than poorer people at recognizing others’ emotions and less likely to pay attention to people they were interacting with. In other words, if you are my servant, you need to be watchful to be sure I am satisfied; I could fire you. I, on the other hand, don’t have to worry about how you feel.

The problem, then, is to figure out how we can cultivate these values and the goals and behaviors that go with them in entire populations—including wealthy people who place personal wealth above concerns about disadvantaged people. (And I recognize that some wealthy people already embrace compassionate values.)

Significant progress is underway. Behavioral scientists around the world have developed hundreds of treatment and prevention programs and have shown through thousands of careful experiments that they reduce human conflict and promote nurturing relationships. I reviewed this evidence when working on a recent National Academy of Medicine report.<sup>11</sup> Our reach is well into the millions.

Another reason for optimism about changing values comes from Dennis Tirch, a psychologist at The Center for Compassion Focused Therapy. He has practical experience in helping wealthy people become more compassionate. I asked him to give me his take on the possibility that we might help businesspeople become more compassionate. Here is what he said:

At our training institute and practice, The Center for Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) in Midtown East in New York City, we see clients from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, yet many of the people who seek us out are high-net-worth individuals, and people working in advanced executive positions. When I tell my colleagues that training in compassion has been one of the most successful and popular methods we have used in working with hedge fund managers, CEOs, and partners in corporate law firms, they are often surprised. We have found that intelligent, successful people are often inspired by the science that demonstrates the power of compassion in transforming our lives and our minds. We know from years of research that increased compassion for self and others can lead to greater well-being at every level, from our immune system functioning to our ability to overcome our social fears. Within the context of a warm, accepting and supportive psychotherapy or coaching relationship, many of our clients come to understand how living their lives from a place of compassion for self and others can enhance their experience of meaning and purpose in life.

Compassion training can lead to enhanced performance and greater satisfaction at the level of teams and organizations as well. As the work of Monica Worline and Jane Dutton has demonstrated, cultivating compassion in business organizations enhances their strength and functioning.<sup>12</sup> The Compassionate Mind Foundation in the UK has created an initiative for training compassionate leadership, having its first conference for compassion in business in 2018. Combined with the work of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University and The Greater Good Science Center in Berkeley, California, this represents a growing momentum towards training business leaders and organizational cultures in compassion. At the Center for CFT, we are seeing how strongly compassion training can change lives and business performance, up close.

While it might not be obvious at first, compassion isn't about being soft or weak. Compassion is an evolved human motive that represents our sensitivity to the presence of suffering we notice in the world and in ourselves, coupled with a commitment to take action to alleviate that suffering. When our compassionate mind is awakened and takes charge of our thoughts and actions, we are able to respond with greater courage, authority and flexibility. These qualities that are essential to effectively negotiating high- pressure situations, and to living effectively.

For example, I can recall working with a CEO who had begun mindfulness and compassion training to deal with chronic depression and anxiety. After cultivating self-compassion and greater psychological flexibility, much of her presenting problem was successfully addressed. However, she remained in compassion focused coaching to help her resolve some thorny questions about how to deal with restructuring the firm she led. After engaging her compassionate mind, she chose to take steps that would preserve thousands of jobs and ensure the long-term viability of the business rather than strip the company of its assets for short-term profit. While this choice might have seemed less than aggressive in maximizing immediate gains, her decision led to much greater return on investment in the longer term for her shareholders, the preservation of the welfare of thousands of families, greater public goodwill, and a strengthened corporate culture. (Details of this case have been anonymized and changed to protect the identity of those involved.)

Compassion, cooperation, mindfulness, and strongly interconnected human relationships are essential for the functioning of individuals, businesses, and communities. Current trends towards "culture capitalism" and institutionalized selfishness will fail in the long run, and it is the responsibility of psychology to help our governmental and business systems realize how we can get back on the right track.<sup>13</sup>

Caring relations are foundational for evolving a society that works for everyone. By helping people become more compassionate toward themselves as well as others, we can create a society in which an increasing number of people support policies that diminish harmful corporate practices and enhance the well-being of a growing proportion of the population.

## A Way Forward

In this troubling time, how can we move forward as a nation to address the erosion of the middle class, the precarious situations of millions of Americans, and the pervasive loss of optimism about the future?

I think we need to address this both as individuals and through organizations. At both levels, we need to get better at reducing prejudice and discrimination and at persuading others to join us in working toward a more nurturing society. If you are with me so far on the psychological orientation we need in order to get this done, let's consider how we can use psychological flexibility to reduce prejudice and how we can become more effective in persuading others.

### *Addressing the Problem of Prejudice*

When I began to work on this section of the chapter, I looked through my files for things I'd written on this topic. I found the following, which I wrote in 2008.

- I don't know how many times I cried the week Barack Obama was elected. I was, of course, not the only one. There was Jessie Jackson, tears running down his cheeks as he stood in Grant Park, listening to our new president.
- The next day, I was walking up the street near the University of Oregon in the pouring rain, huddled under my hood. A young black man was walking toward me, also hunkered down under his hood. Our eyes met, and he gave me the biggest, warmest smile. No hint of suspicion or reserve. We both knew the world had changed. I called Georgia and tried to describe it, but I choked up talking about it.
- All over America, millions of people felt a new sense of pride and wonderment. Around the world, millions of oppressed and demoralized people felt empowered.

It makes me sad to read this now, given the current sorry state of race relations. It turned out that many white people were threatened by having a black man in the White House. Over an eight-year period, undoubtedly aided by the growth of the Internet, the network of prejudiced groups grew. Then, when Trump was elected, they felt increasingly empowered to speak publicly about their prejudices and act on them.

I don't claim that what I have to say here about combatting prejudice will sway those who are entrenched in hate groups. But I think combatting prejudice is vital to bringing the vast majority of people together around values and behaviors of mutual acceptance, respect, and compassion.

My reading of the research leads me to conclude that three principles could help us address the problems of prejudice and discrimination. First, we need to create situations in schools, workplaces, and other settings where people can interact in congenial ways, identify and affirm common values and goals, and work together to achieve those goals. Second, we need to promote psychological flexibility that encourages us to notice and accept that we may have prejudicial thoughts, but that we can act on the basis of our most important values. Third, we need to increase the amount of entertainment, news, and social media that tells stories promoting acceptance of people who are different from us.

**Bringing people together around shared values and goals.** Elizabeth Paluck and Donald Green reviewed prejudice reduction research and concluded that one of the best strategies for reducing prejudice involves bringing people together to work for a common goal, in such a way that each person contributes to the group's success.<sup>14</sup>

The best evidence for this strategy comes from research in schools. An approach known as *cooperative learning* has consistently been shown to reduce intergroup prejudice. In it, students work together in small groups in situations where each group member has a unique contribution to achieving the group's product. This is called *positive interdependence*, whereby goals are structured such that individuals can attain their goals if (and only if) others in their group also reach their goals. This changes patterns of peer interaction; instead of competing with, ignoring, or harassing one another, peers promote each other's success. Cooperative learning teaches skills and norms for respectful and cooperative interactions in groups.

My colleague Mark Van Ryzin recently did a study in which he helped half of middle schools in a sample implement cooperative learning.<sup>15</sup> His sample of schools was so small (fifteen) that I didn't expect him to find much impact. I was wrong. He found that in the schools that did cooperative learning, students got along better. Victimization of marginalized students was reduced. Non-white students got more academic

support from their peers. Stress and emotional problems were reduced, and so was deviant peer group formation.

This strategy has potential for work organizations. Currently, the dominant approach to addressing discrimination in workplaces is diversity training. And although there is evidence that diversity training has benefits,<sup>16</sup> there is still much room for improvement. Unfortunately, many work situations are not structured so that shared goals are articulated and work groups cooperate to achieve them. This is why Paluck and Green call for more research in real-world settings, rather than in university laboratories. If we know that people from different groups are likely to encounter each other in workplaces, and that strategies that encourage people to cooperate in achieving shared goals and values can work, we should be doing numerous experiments in workplaces to test and refine these strategies.

**ACT for addressing prejudice.** Many people are motivated to not be prejudiced—not because they fear disapproval but because they genuinely desire to have warm relationships with others. Research by David A. Butz and E. Ashby Plant shows that people who personally value positive relations with others expect to have positive interactions and report having interactions that both they and the other person find positive. Even when they feel anxious about the interaction, rather than avoiding the interaction or worrying about acting out of prejudice, they lean into the interaction and seek common ground with the other person.<sup>17</sup>

This research is consistent with what ACT researchers have found. Rather than getting people to not have prejudicial thoughts, they teach them to accept their thoughts as thoughts and get clear about their values. The result is that people are more willing to acknowledge their prejudicial thoughts and more willing to act in caring ways toward people who are different from them.

I think I need to say a little more about what it means to accept a thought. It doesn't mean you believe it. It doesn't mean you should like it. It *does* mean you should notice that a thought is a thought, and not the thing the thought is about. In the midst of being worried and anxious about an unpleasant interaction you had with someone, it may help to notice that your worries are thoughts going through your head, not the actual events that just happened.

In one study, Steven Hayes and his colleagues looked at whether the stigmatizing attitudes that drug abuse counselors may have toward their clients could be dealt with through ACT.<sup>18</sup> Drug abuse counselors work with a tough population. Clients often don't show up for sessions and they frequently don't do what therapists suggest. Relapse is common. As a result, many counselors find themselves irritated with their clients and burned out in their work. Hayes reasoned that people become counselors because they want to help people. When they get angry or irritated with their clients, it is so inconsistent with their image of themselves as a caring person that they try to stifle their feelings. That just makes them feel more frustrated.

The research team randomly assigned counselors to receive either a one-day workshop on ACT or a similar-length workshop using traditional multicultural training that emphasized becoming aware of stigmatizing attitudes and the importance of changing them. A third (control) group got instructions about biological aspects of drug abuse.

The counselors who got ACT were encouraged to notice and accept their negative thoughts and feelings about clients. But in accepting them, they were also helped to see them as thoughts and feelings, not facts. At the same time, they were prompted to reconnect with the values that got them into their work, such as being able to help others.

In comparison with the control group, both the multicultural training and ACT groups had reduced stigmatizing attitudes toward clients immediately after the workshop. However, three months later, while the ACT group continued to experience a decline in these attitudes, the multicultural group had seen an increase in such attitudes and was, by then, no different from the controls. Moreover, at the three-month follow-up, the ACT recipients were significantly less burned out than were those in the multicultural group. Although people in the ACT group continued to have some stigmatizing attitudes, they rated them as less believable than did counselors in the other group. Hayes's analysis of the data indicated that it was the reduction in the believability of their stigmatizing attitudes that led to the reductions in burnout. Apparently, being willing to have stigmatizing attitudes but not believing them, and then re-committing to one's values with respect to helping people, is more effective than struggling to not have such attitudes.

A study by Jason Lillis and Steven Hayes on prejudice among college students provides another example of how this happens.<sup>19</sup> College stu-

dents who received training in ACT became more accepting of their prejudicial thoughts; however, they came to view them as thoughts, not as reality or the truth. They indicated as many prejudicial thoughts as people who did not get the ACT intervention, but ACT helped them clarify their values about people of other races. The result was that the ACT participants became more willing to spend time with people who were different from themselves and to participate in experiences involving cultural diversity.

Some studies have shown that people who are asked to interact with someone of a different race or ethnic group may be worried that they will appear prejudiced. Plant and her colleagues found that people who were trying to not appear prejudiced, out of fear that others would disapprove, avoided “sensitive” topics. However, their efforts failed; the people they interacted with and unbiased raters of their behavior perceived them as acting prejudiced.<sup>20</sup>

Think about how an ACT perspective could help. It would encourage you to notice prejudicial and worried thoughts about interacting with someone from a different group, but to focus on what your values are. Yes, you may be afraid you will say or do something that makes you look prejudiced, but what do you really want in the interaction? The Lillis and Hayes study showed that when you get clear about your values and don’t struggle to not have any given thought, you are more likely to approach such an interaction effectively.

**The power of media.** Another effective strategy that Paluck and Green identified is entertainment media. Movies, TV, and books that tell stories about stigmatized people can help people experience empathy and compassion for stigmatized people. For example, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is widely read in schools, helps young people empathize with the unjust treatment of the accused Tom Robinson, as narrated from the vantage point of an innocent child who has not learned to be prejudiced.

Recent research provides striking support for this thesis. Loris Vazalli and his colleagues in Italy studied the impact of the Harry Potter series on prejudice among young people.<sup>21</sup> They found that high school students who had read the Harry Potter books and seen the movies had significantly more positive attitudes toward gay people than did those who had not been exposed to the Harry Potter series. They also found

that an online sample of college students in the United Kingdom who had read the Harry Potter books had more positive attitudes toward refugees than did students who had not. Finally, in an experimental evaluation of the effects of the Harry Potter series, the researchers randomly assigned fifth-grade students to read either portions of Harry Potter books or unrelated material. The children who read the Potter excerpts developed significantly more positive attitudes toward immigrants than did the other group.

Then there is social media. In chapter 9, I describe how the advent of social media has amplified division and hatred at unprecedented levels. We are witnessing a mismatch between the evolution of social media and the cultural practices we have developed thus far to prevent division and hate. I discuss ways we can begin to address this problem.

To summarize, we can do a lot to reduce prejudice and discrimination. As we go forward in trying to make our society more nurturing, we need to help schools, work organizations, neighborhoods, and communities make more and better use of strategies for increasing people's ability to interact compassionately and cooperatively with all kinds of people. We also need to create entertainment media that promote tolerance, compassion, and caring.

### *Persuading People*

The principles of personal pragmatism suggest that if you are seeking to influence people, you should use the most effective strategies—even if those strategies run contrary to your strong inclination to criticize or argue. Matthew Hornsey of Queensland University in Australia has shown that people reject criticism from anyone they do not see as a member of their group.<sup>22</sup> For example, in one study by Hornsey and his colleagues, 188 Australian university students viewed a set of comments from a person who criticized Australians for being “intolerant of immigrants and racist toward indigenous Australians.” The researchers told one group of students that the criticism came from an Australian and told another group it was from someone in the United States, Canada, or England. When students believed the critic was a non-Australian, they were significantly more likely to dislike them, think their argument was not constructive, disagree with them, and reject the idea of any need for reform of discrimination. They rejected the outsider's argu-

ment even when government statistics and scholarly citations buttressed the criticism.<sup>22</sup> In sum, Hornsey and others found that criticism can actually make members of a criticized group more resistant to criticism.

On the other hand, taking the perspective of people you disagree with does work. It enables you to step back from being entangled in their statements and helps you communicate with them. This is not the same as agreeing with them. It is a matter of searching for common ground.

As a candidate for president, Barack Obama spoke of the racial divide in the United States in a speech that has come to be called “A More Perfect Union.” In it, he captured precisely what I mean by taking the other’s perspective:

I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.<sup>23</sup>

He explained the perspective of both white and black people, without criticizing either group. After describing the injustices that have harmed and impeded black people’s progress, he suggested a distinctly pragmatic way of thinking about it:

Anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.

He then took the perspective of many white people:

Most working- and middle-class white Americans don’t feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience—as far as they’re concerned, no one’s handed them anything, they’ve built it from scratch. They’ve worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their

pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero-sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company. But they have helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation.

The Hornsey studies show one reason that taking the other's perspective can help.<sup>24</sup> Recall that people reject criticism or disagreement from people they feel are not a member of their group. However, when they feel that someone outside their group is genuinely sympathetic to them and their interests, they soften and are more willing to accept input.

One of the best examples of how this can work comes from research on motivational interviewing. Bill Miller, a psychologist at the University of New Mexico, discovered that people who have a drinking problem can be influenced to reduce their drinking if a therapist or counselor interviews them in a supportive way.<sup>25</sup> The therapist asks sympathetic questions about how the client's life is going and paraphrases what the client says in ways that communicate empathy. The therapist avoids confronting the person. People can be more willing to listen to people who communicate caring for them.

Through judicious reflective listening, the therapist helps the client notice the discrepancy between his or her goals and current behavior. For example, the therapist might explore ways the client's drinking has interfered with his or her relationship with his or her spouse. If the client seems resistant, the therapist accepts that, too, rather than argue.

Peter and Susan Glaser, experts on interpersonal communication and persuasion, published a book called *Be Quiet, Be Heard*.<sup>26</sup> The title captures their strategy in four words. You can be more influential with people if you listen to them with empathy and show them you're paying attention to what they think and feel. If you don't already do this, you

might start by listening to children and family members and friends. When you come in contact with people you disagree with, you can practice thoughtful listening and connection and see if you can find common ground around values you share.

Geoffrey Cohen and David Sherman reviewed considerable evidence showing that affirming the values of others makes them more open to what we have to say.<sup>27</sup> For example, in one study, when people who had expressed prejudice toward Arabs were asked a question that enabled them to describe something positive about themselves (e.g., “When were you creative?”), they were more willing to believe an Arab’s description of discrimination that he or she had experienced.<sup>28</sup>

I have to confess that I am puzzled by the number of people who voted for Trump and still stand by him. A year into the Trump presidency, I saw a CNN piece on Trump voters in Youngstown, Ohio.<sup>29</sup> Five voters—two of them black—said they were quite satisfied with him. One explanation might be cognitive dissonance: people don’t like to be inconsistent, especially if they have taken a public stand. They would rather stick to their position than admit they made a mistake.

And here is another consideration. Youngstown has suffered enormously in the past thirty years. It went from a city full of well-paying manufacturing jobs to one with an unemployment rate of 7.4%.<sup>30</sup> The population was 95,000 in 1990; it was 64,000 in 2018.<sup>31</sup> Try taking their perspective. As I elaborate on in chapter 11, their government—which has been both Republican and Democrat over the years—has failed them. They are understandably angry and disheartened. Along comes Trump, who speaks to their anger. Specifically, he speaks to their anger at the kinds of people who supported the policies that led to the demise of Youngstown—who promised better and gave them worse.

Finally, lest you think it is not really possible to bring people together from across the political and opinion spectrum, you should know about the work of the America in One Room experiment. This project has shown that, through carefully structured discussions in small groups, you can bring together people who have quite diverse opinions on the major issues of the day.<sup>32</sup>

## We Can Do This

You can reduce your own distress and make a greater contribution to working our way out of the mess we are in by adopting a mindful, accepting approach to your own thoughts and feelings rather than arguing in your head or with people you disagree with. Instead, get clear on your values and take steps to advance them. That may be a matter of finding organizations you support and putting your energy and resources into their success rather than fighting Trumpians in your head. In your contact with people you disagree with, try reflective listening and see if you can find shared values.

If we are going to repair the nation, we must understand the perspectives of the millions of people who have been harmed in the past forty years and address their concerns. This isn't a matter of getting into arguments with them about how they feel about immigrants or minorities. It is a matter of joining them around policies that will improve their circumstances—policies, by the way, that also will improve the well-being of minority group members and immigrants.

I was born on D-Day, June 6, 1944—the day the Allies invaded Normandy. Stephen Ambrose has written about D-Day.<sup>33</sup> After describing the efforts of Americans across the country to make the weapons to help win the war, he tells what happened when news came that the Allies had landed in France. All over the nation, people stopped what they were doing and waited anxiously for news of whether our forces would succeed. Ambrose takes us to a café in Montana. When news of the landings came over the radio, everyone fell silent. They waited for more bulletins. We were united.

I hope we can channel that same sense of shared care and attention now—this time, to come together around a positive vision of the society we want to build, one that ensures everyone's material and social well-being.

Humans have a strong evolutionary history that makes us prone to work together against a common enemy. But it will not work to have our enemy be our fellow Americans. Attacking each other will simply maintain the atmosphere of divisiveness and model the very behavior we are trying to reduce. So, if it takes enemies to motivate an effective movement, let them be climate change, economic inequality, conflict, and division. Let us fight with empathy and compassion for ourselves

and others. For these are the qualities that will bring people together and preserve our sanity as we work toward a more nurturing world. In the end, these are the very qualities we must seek as a nation.

In the remainder of this book, I describe the reforms needed in the key sectors of society. There is no guarantee that we can achieve all the reforms needed, but if we make our lives about the values we have for ourselves and our society, we are not only far more likely to achieve our goals, we are far more likely to experience compassion for ourselves and those around us and to have greater meaning in our lives.

## Action Implications

### *Personal*

#### **Start small and build a habit.**

What can you do to bring about the changes you desire? Taking civic action is a little like trying to develop any new habit—exercising more, saving more, losing weight. If you have not done much in the way of participating in civic affairs and politics, you may face two obstacles. First, you may feel overwhelmed by all the things that are needed and not know where to start. Second, you may feel hopeless.

Here is where the pragmatic approach to life will come in handy. First, don't struggle with feelings of hopelessness or being overwhelmed. Trying to control them won't work. They are a testimony to your caring about the nation and the depth of trouble we are in. Second, start to develop a habit of spending a little bit of time each day doing something that could help move us forward. Just like trying to exercise more, you don't want to start with three hours in the gym. That will make the new habit feel so aversive that you will soon find a way to wiggle out of it. Instead, devote fifteen minutes a day to doing something for the nation.

In 1974, I began the practice of getting up and writing for fifteen minutes first thing in the morning. It was initially hard to get into the groove of writing, but I eventually got to the point where I could click into whatever I was working on without fussing about whether I needed to read something first or whether what I had to say was worth writing.

I have published about 250 papers and several books since then. Start a habit.

In your first fifteen-minute stint, make a list of things you could do. One thing you could do is to find statements on the Internet that promote the kind of world you want and forward them to others on Twitter, Facebook, etc. Another is to identify organizations you think are making a difference. Give money to them. Encourage your friends to do so. Build an online social network of people who are working to address the nation's problems.

**Read more about a pragmatic approach to living.**

- Chapter 5 of my book *The Nurture Effect*<sup>54</sup>
- Other readable and helpful books on a pragmatic way of living:
  - Russ Harris's *Happiness Trap* and *ACT with Love*<sup>35</sup>
  - Steven Hayes's *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life* and *A Liberated Mind*.<sup>36</sup> In the latter book, he brings everything he has learned about psychological flexibility together. It is a profound description of a pragmatic way of living that I believe is fundamental to the changes we want to see.
  - Dennis Tirch's *The Compassionate-Mind Guide to Overcoming Anxiety*<sup>37</sup>

**Stop paying attention to arguments against things you like and attacks on your views.**

These kinds of attacks are designed to do two things: (1) get people who might be sympathetic to side with the attackers and (2) get progressives so pissed off that they counterattack in ways that further drive disaffected white people toward Trump. Need proof? Look no further than Thomas Edsall's June 28, 2018, article in *The New York Times*, "Don't Feed the Troll in the Oval Office."<sup>38</sup>

**Cultivate your skills in listening to and taking the perspective of others.**

A place online that can help you get better at listening is the Living Room Conversation.

**If you are a behavioral scientist...**

Do research on positive messaging to find the most effective ways to promote prosocial values. Do research in the “real world” on strategies for reducing intergroup conflict and prejudice. The evidence from laboratory studies indicates what will work, but it needs to be translated into practice action on a large scale. The funding, promotion, tenure, and recognition and awards systems in the behavioral sciences need to be restructured so that funds are available to do such studies and the scientists doing them are rewarded.

**If you are an educator...**

Use cooperative learning strategies and programs such as the PAX Good Behavior Game<sup>39</sup> to promote cooperation and caring in schools.

*Policy*

**Become an advocate for good public policy.**

Having led efforts to get people to advocate for political candidates, I know that many articulate people have strong feelings about the direction our politics should go but are quite hesitant to advocate for their political views. I hope the suggestions I give for pursuing sanity in an insane world will help you get more comfortable and effective in persuading others.

One immediate and simple thing you can do is try to shift conversations away from enumerating the many ways in which groups and political leaders are doing things you don’t like and toward both the positive values you share with others and the things people and organizations are doing to improve our situation.

*Organizations*

**Join Values to Action ([valuestoaction.com](http://valuestoaction.com)).**

I created this nonprofit organization to form a network of people who are working to bring about the reforms needed throughout society. By joining, you can participate in building the movement to bring about change. In the remaining chapters of this book, I suggest ways in which

the major sectors of society can be reformed. I am assembling networks of people who work together at the local, state, national, and world levels to advance the value of caring for every person. As you read the rest of this book, think about what it would be like to become part of such a movement.

**Support groups that are working to reform capitalism. Check out the following websites:**

- Conscious Capitalism
- Run for Something
- Democratic Socialists of America
- Indivisible
- Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee
- Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee
- Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee