“Why do we believe differently about the same things?”

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“There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to truth; not going all the way, and not starting.” Buddha

“A funeral procession once passed in front of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and he stood up out of respect. When he was told the person in the coffin was Jewish and not Muslim, he said: ‘Was it not a living (soul)’?” Bukhari:V2N399

When I went to Victoria University, at the University of Toronto, these words were carved into the red sandstone above an entrance: “The truth shall set you free.” Jesus

They say that perspective is everything.

In the 1970’s, there was a Jewish joke about a Russian school inspector who was questioning the children. He pointed to one of the boys and said, "Who is your father?" The boy replied, "The Soviet Union."
He then asked, "Who is your mother?"
"The communist party," came the reply.
"And what do you want to be when you grow up?"
"I want to be a worker for the glory of the state and the party."

The inspector then pointed to one of the girls and asked, "Who is your father?" The girl answered, "The Soviet Union."
"Who is your mother?"
"The communist party."
"And what do you want to be when you grow up?"
"A heroine of the Soviet Union raising lots of children for the state and party."
The inspector looked around and saw someone he thought might be a Jewish boy tucked away at the back. He pointed and said, "What's your name?"

The boy replied, "Jacob Abramovitch."

"Who is your father?"

"The Soviet Union."

"Who is your mother?"

"The communist party."

"And what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"An orphan."

You are probably aware of the famous doggerel poetry of the six blind men of Hindustan who approached an elephant to describe it to their own satisfaction. One leaned against it and thought it was like a wall. A second felt the tusk and thought it to be like a spear. A third got hold of the trunk and thought it was like a snake. A fourth got a hold of a leg at the knee and said it was like a tree. A fifth got a hold of the ear and swore that an elephant was like a fan. The sixth found a swinging tail and declared that an elephant was like a rope.

The poem concludes:

"And so these men of Hindustan
Disputed loud and long
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong
Though each was partly in the right
And all were in the wrong
So oft in theological wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean
And prate about an elephant
Not one of them has seen!"

When I founded World Wide Listening, I invited Rabbi Dow Marmur to speak. Holding up a Bible, his opening words to a Christian community were these: "Why is it that the one thing we have in common is the one thing that divides us?"

The Sandy Hook shooting has been much in the news lately with two reactions to the same facts: "The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun, is with a good guy with a gun." This from the NRA, who are death on limitation of assault rifles and ammunition magazines. Their solution? Armed guards in the schools and teachers with guns. With exactly the same facts staring them in the face, advocates of gun control want a ban on assault weapons and magazines, background checks for everyone including gun show sales. They are arguing for less guns, not more in America.

There are still people in the world who believe in a flat earth rather than earth being a sphere. If one's perspective is to be on the earth to contemplate the question and one
sees a mountain and an ocean it makes no sense that the earth might actually be round. But change the perspective to a spaceship outside of the earth orbiting the planet and the flat earth society’s arguments become silly at best.

We are bitterly divided in America over many things- the debt ceiling, guns, health care, social security, war, defense spending. You name it we seem to be divided on it. One of my Canadian friends recently said that he thought that America was becoming ungovernable.

Jerry Brown was interviewed on the California budget and he was asked about the ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans. The Governor said that he had done everything from inviting Republicans to his home for a meal, a game of golf, in fact anything he could think of, all to no avail. He said that the Republicans represent different constituencies from the Democrats, who largely represent the cities in California. There was thus an ideological log jam. Then he said, fortunately in California there was the initiative process that allowed a direct vote for the people which allowed the raising of taxes for schools. That was how he was balancing the budget. Asked whether there were national implications or lessons, Brown only said that the logjam had to be broken, but how this was going to be done was not immediately clear.

The point is the same in all of these situations: Why do people believe differently about the same things? It's a massive problem that if we don’t solve, will split America. It is a problem at the heart of violence in religions, territorial disputes, and is at the heart of going to war. What do we do about it?

There was a time when the practice of medicine was based on fantasy and magical cures. How did medicine achieve the stature it has today? A commitment to the scientific method and careful experiments that were repeatable in trial after trial. From these experiments and trials, a body of knowledge was developed and the practice of medicine changed dramatically for the better.

Before the scientific method, so called doctors, were like the blind men of Hindustan grabbing an ear or a tail and describing the problem from there. A lot of people died from these sincerely held so called ‘cures’.

When it comes to religious and ideological divides, do not the same principles also apply? Here, as in medical science, there are feedback loops. We know for instance using the scientific method and verification from feedback and data that cooperation works better than competition. Forgiveness is better than resentment for our bodies and general health. If we were but to take off the ideological glasses, but for a moment, we would actually see!

What keeps us back?
Fear!
Thinking that we will lose our identity, or friendships, or money, or even our souls. Fear and guilt are powerful forces but they don’t serve our health well at all. Their product is the stress of trying to maintain against all comers what we have been told is the so called truth. We are afraid to even consider that another person might be right and so we plunge on into dysfunction after dysfunction.

Is there a better way?
Yes! It is to let the truth set us free!

A woman, an atheist, was interviewed on NPR. She had lost her husband in a plane crash and a beautiful relationship ended in this tragedy. She found no answers as to how to handle her grief that was not religiously based. She could not believe in a God who would take her husband from her. She didn’t believe that her husband was with God. For her he was just rotting in the ground.

I loved her honesty and her search for meaning. Why? Because to believe in God for her was to kid herself and that was not satisfying to her. Better to be honest and doubting than happier and deluded.

But she had another option or two. She decided that the way to cope with her grief was to set up a group of people who could talk to one another who were also atheists and needed to find meaning for their lives. And the successful setting up of this group helped her enormously. Why? She had brought some goodness out of this tragedy!

If we think about God as Goodness rather than as a great someone who fixes everything we will have got below the surface of things. If we say “How could a God of Love let my husband die?” and then dismiss that concept of God and choose instead to comfort and love others who cannot believe in that concept of God either, we have moved into love. St. John in the Christian New Testament says: “Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, for God is love.”

The point of St. John here unmasked is this: If we are engaged in loving and caring for others we know God, whether we realize it or not, for the essence of God is goodness and love. That is why a response to tragedy that cares for others heals us— because we have tapped into those things that last forever and thus are able to transcend death and tragedy. We might stumble on this truth, or get there by the road of faith. It doesn’t matter how you get to where you need to go but you will know when you get there!

Why? Because you have the truth.
But you say to me, all fanatics and ideologues say that they have the truth. That is where we need a more scientific approach to life. That is where we need to pay attention to feedback loops. That is where we need to take the ideological glasses off and look at the results of what we believe.

For instance: Violence begets violence. Forgiveness brings about peace. Hate produces more hate. You say to me:
“If we follow the truth how do we know that we are not deceived and have got it all wrong?”
This way! **The truth, if it is truth, sets us free every time.** The truth, if it is the truth, opens our eyes to see the whole picture— the whole elephant. How wonderful to be able to let go of the idea that an elephant is some kind of a wall or snake or rope or fan and instead to look into those wise eyes. The elephant is then free to be an elephant and we are free to be ourselves.

Sylvia Boaz Leighton decided to make her life mission to give away home baked cookies. She started baking cookies for her college dorm during the finals and has continued ever since. She wanted to encourage smiles on people’s faces and hearts. Her husband modified their kitchen so as to set her up for her mission. She began to dress up as a cookie fairy— a big black hat, gold and black sunglasses and size 11 shoes. One afternoon, dressed like this, she ran into a group of students at the university. As Sylvia approached the group they started to laugh and ridicule her. Her face heated up with embarrassment. Shaken by the experience, she reached the sanctuary of the library where she worked. She couldn’t get those young people out of her mind until she realized that they didn’t see her as a person but as a foil for their jokes. She began to think about those students and where this kind of thinking would take them in later life. Suddenly, she felt compassion for them just as if they were her own children.

Over her coworkers protests she decided to return, at the same time, the next day in her same getup. She wanted to see if she could get them to accept her looking unusual. As she approached the bus stop the hoots and whistles were deafening. The girls sat in a huddle and looked a little embarrassed and so Sylvia said loudly: “You hurt my feelings yesterday. I am an old lady trying to stay in shape. You should be encouraging me rather than putting me down and you’d better hope that your future wife looks as good as I do at my age.” The girls suddenly cheered. Then she asked the group whether they would be there at the same time tomorrow because she had a surprise for them. One of the boys said “She’s probably going to bring a gun!”

Of course, the next day she brought cookies— two kinds wrapped in individual bags for each person and tied with ribbons. The people at her work thought she was nuts. One friend even offered to go with her for protection but Sylvia wanted to go alone. This time at the bus stop the students were very quiet. With a big smile Sylvia handed out the cookies and asked them their names. She suggested that they encourage people and make a difference in the world. As she walked away, one of her former and loudest critics said ‘What’s *your* name again?’ She told him and he said: “Thank you Sylvia!”

As Mark Twain once said: “The common eye sees only the outside of things, and judges by that, but the seeing eye pierces through and reads the heart and the soul, finding there capacities which the outside didn’t indicate or promise and which the common eye couldn’t detect.”

May we each discover that: “It is only with the heart that one sees rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye!”