

Election 2016: A Proposal to Counter the Divisiveness

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Anxiety

The world is much smaller now. It has changed rapidly in a short period of time, much of it within the timespan of less than one generation. As a result, anxiety is more pervasive in today's world both for individuals and for societies as a whole. Now people's nervous systems are intricately connected through the internet. These connections are on a global scale, and the information travels through the network at tremendous speed. This is new.

With this global, pervasive and instantaneous connectedness, people have a hard time shielding themselves from the anxiety that courses through these worldwide networks. It is difficult to isolate oneself. The new stress of this pervasive anxiety leads to a sense of a loss of control for individuals.

Generally, when faced with the need to gain some control in situations of threat and anxiety, a typical human response is to focus on what is outside of self in an attempt to control others and the outside world, in order to regain inner control. This leads to emotionally based decision-making at the expense of thoughtful planning. The focus is primarily on controlling the anxiety instead of solving problems.

As a therapist I have worked with anxiety for over 40 years. Unlike most prevailing models of psychotherapy, my practice has always been based in systems theory and not individual theory. There are myriad ways in which the difference between these theories plays out, but with anxiety the difference is stark. Simply put, from systems theory, anxiety is in the system, not in the individual. This does not mean there is no anxiety in an individual person, just that it is not contained in that person. The anxiety flows through the person as the person is embedded in the systems they live in. As a family therapist, this is how I have always worked with people in dealing with their families, workplaces, organizations, neighborhoods and so on.

The focus of the work in systems therapy is always on how one manages one's self in the patterns of these various systems. This approach can provide relief from the problematic patterns in one's family, for example with chronic marital conflict, problems with children's behavior, health crises, or in the workplace with the stresses of conflict with co-workers or a boss. The work involves a focus on self to understand how he or she participates in the dynamics of the systemic patterns that maintain the behaviors that create the problems and the stress. When successful, the anxiety does not disappear, but the person is freer from getting caught up in it, instead of remaining trapped in maintaining the old pattern.

This is how I have worked with my clients for my whole career. This new world of electronic connectedness with the internet, email and social media, has not changed at all the foundation of the process of therapy, but it has changed the social context in which that work takes place.

The 2016 presidential election in the USA has provided a dramatic example of this change. In my professional world many therapists report that the stress generated by the election and its aftermath is so widespread, that people are paying their therapists to help them with this common problem. Now, with the continual "breaking news" - 24/7, there is no respite from the constant coverage of the politics.

Even before the election, the global media had presented viewers with the anxiety from around the world, particularly that created by terrorism. When the world was smaller, before this pervasive, digital connectedness, people were protected from the constant exposure to the anxiety, which has become chronic. So this constant exposure is a new challenge for us and our brains.

But at the same time, the disruption created by the US election provides an opportunity for people to change themselves, which can be an effective vehicle for changing society. Because the US is a democracy, people can come together and organize to change the system by focusing on themselves and not the external societal patterns. That may sound idealistic, but my proposal is specific, concrete and practical. It addresses the helplessness people feel about not being able to effect change in large systems as individuals.

Divisiveness

One major and entrenched problem that has emerged from the election, which can be understood as a fundamental, underlying factor in the turmoil present before and during the campaign, is the divisiveness. This pervades multiple domains of society, the political and governmental ones, as well as the social ones of citizens with one another, whether it is family members, friends, co-workers or neighbors.

What is the solution? Obviously it is to work toward unity. Here is where systems thinking diverges from conventional thinking about human behavior.

Divisiveness has become a stable pattern. It is maintained by a continual other-focused orientation driven by the need to manage anxiety. The underlying assumption is that the people outside of me, who hold positions in conflict with mine, are a threat, and I need to oppose them in order to manage my own anxiety about feeling helpless and out of control, in addition to my expanded exposure to the global anxiety. While this plays out in arguments with people who disagree with one's positions, it is just as corrosive in the joining with others who agree with one's positions in opposition to the others who don't.

This divisiveness was a major dynamic throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, and has not abated since the election. It certainly continues to divide the politicians, but just as importantly, it continues to divide the citizens in the country. The focus of this essay about a productive response to the election, is on working with the divisiveness in the citizenry, the body politic, not in the arena of the politicians, but in the domain of people as they interact with family members, co-workers, neighbors and others. That is the place where change can happen as people can engage one another directly and find common ground.

What is different about my proposal is the assumption that the divisiveness is a systemic pattern. It is maintained by the ongoing interactions of everyone in the country. This means that unity will not come about by the opposing sides finding compromise. That is not a change in the systemic pattern because it maintains the dynamics of the opposing sides. Unity means each side changing, and thereby discovering common ground to operate from and develop new solutions from there.

As with any pattern larger than oneself, the operative factor is to recognize how one participates in maintaining the pattern, and how one can change how one responds to

the pattern. This begins with the work of shifting to an orientation of self-focus, and can lead to a process of engagement as a productive response to divisiveness.

But what does it take to change large, societal patterns like this current divisiveness as an individual? It takes individual people in smaller systems changing how they participate in the patterns where they have access to engage others face-to-face. A relevant concept here from systems theory is that of a niche. A component in a system like a cell in an organ, or a department in an organization or a transistor on a circuit board, does not have access to all the components in the larger system that comprises it. A single component operates in a niche from which it interacts closely with parts of the system, which interact with other parts of the system, which interact with even more remote parts of the system, and in this way the single component functions as an important part of the overall, larger operations of that system.

My proposal is that conversation is the mode for beginning the process of change, and that individuals can change larger systemic patterns by engaging in conversation from their niches in smaller systems, like families, workplaces, neighborhoods, churches and so forth. When people can interact in language, disciplining themselves to focus on self, they can control their yielding to the anxiety in the system, and then the other person experiences relief and an openness to being heard.

The goal initially is not to come to a resolution of the differences, but just to be heard. Operating from other-focus is protective, and when it becomes a pattern overtime, the divisiveness becomes stable and protective for everyone, so that no one gets heard. On the other hand, self-focus allows vulnerability as one puts one's positions out there for others to agree or disagree. From there solutions can emerge as people are able to participate together in the effort to get to common ground.

However, changes in stable, systemic patterns create disruptions. It is not a matter of getting back to a period of unity from the past. It is a matter of developing a new integration that allows for more differences, without the reactive polarization of the current divisiveness.

Another important element of my proposal about conversation as a medium for changing systemic patterns, it is that to be powerful, it must be face-to-face. As I described in the beginning of this essay, there is more anxiety in the global network of the internet as people are able obtain information, but also communicate through social

media. The anxiety flows through these networks. However, face-to-face conversation differs sharply from the process of communication in social media. For one, people can post anonymously, to the extent that often a person does not know who one is communicating with. There is a lack of personal presence that is an essential part of a conversation in person. Secondly, the flow of the statements is linear, off-on; one after the other. This is in contrast to a conversation where there is coordination at the same time, with for example: spontaneous laughter; productive interruptions; and useful silences while maintaining clear contact. Thirdly, the anxiety that flows through a digital chat is not the same as the anxiety of face-to-face encounters in which a people are vulnerable and open as their nervous systems are present to each other.

Mag/Min

My framework of Magnification/Minification is the practical tool I propose for generating more engagement with one another in conversation in order to counter this divisive thrust that has become more intense post-election. Mag/Min is a comprehensive framework for self-improvement and systemic change, using a process of changing one's pattern of decision-making.

In this situation of the stability of the pattern of divisiveness after the election, the effort for change can be framed in terms of making decisions that are different from one's typical pattern of decision-making. Specifically that means making decisions that allow engagement in conversation with others, in contrast to ones that lead to problematic, oppositional encounters.

It should be noted that Mag/Min is a comprehensive and robust framework, based in theory, that cannot be condensed into a brief summary here. However, the reader is encouraged to read my Primer on this website that will provide enough of a basic understanding of the framework to be able to grasp its use in this essay. Nevertheless, I can still present the core ideas of the Mag/Min and how they relate to the pattern of divisiveness.

There are two patterns of decision-making: Magnification and Minification, and they define who you are. Magnifiers will make decisions based on the assumption that any task to be attempted will almost always work out, despite the odds against it. They 'magnify' the possibility of a favorable outcome. Minifiers will make decisions based on

the assumption that any task to be attempted will seldom work out, despite the odds in favor of it. They 'minify' the possibility of a favorable outcome.

Everyone makes decisions based on these distortions of magnification or minification to varying degrees all the time. Over the course of your life this becomes a pattern and ends up defining who you are. At the extremes both are equally dysfunctional and lead to lives of chronic problems. However, the pattern can change. Both can learn to be make better assessments about the actual probability of a favorable or an unfavorable outcome as the basis for decisions to be made. Because this pattern defines your Self, changing the pattern changes the self and your relationships. And this changes your life.

The direction of change is different and opposite for Magnifiers and Minifiers. To change this automatic response to challenges instead of taking it on forcefully and ignoring limits, Magnifiers need to stop, and consider accepting limits and when appropriate, say "no." In contrast, to change this automatic response to challenges instead of stopping and accepting limits as inevitable, Minifiers need to consider pressing on when appropriate, and say "yes."

Mag/Min is a dynamic that operates in language. Therefore, to experiment with changing one's patterns of responses in making decisions, involves monitoring one's language. Mags can work to control expansive expressions and Mins to control narrowing ones. This requires a disciplined effort because one is working with habitual brain responses. The payoff is in making better decisions based on a better assessment of the situation for what is possible and what is not.

For the purpose of this essay about divisiveness, the payoff lies in changes in one's relationships because one can interact differently with others. In dealing with people who do not agree with one's positions about the election, the reactivity of the Magnifier typically is to focus on the other, and attempt to control the limitations created by the disagreements. This attempt to relieve the anxiety about limitation can take the form of arguing to get the other person to agree or of giving up, thereby eliminating the limitation. The Magnifier ultimately assumes this conflict will work out by winning the argument or failing that, assumes it does not really matter, because it will work out some other way.

In contrast, when interacting with others who disagree with one's positions about the election, the typical reactivity of the Minifier is likewise to focus on the other, but attempt to relieve the anxiety of feeling powerful in one's convictions by trying to be quiet and find ways to accept the other's positions in some compromise, or give up, thereby eliminating the potential for a sharp disagreement. The Minifier ultimately assumes this conflict will never work out because it will lead to a never-ending argument, or if they drop out of the argument, assumes there won't be any other means of resolving the differences anyway.

In efforts to engage others around differences these two reactive assumptions of the Magnifier and the Minifier about the possibility of a favorable outcome, in the end inhibit listening and productive conversation. This is because managing one's anxiety with other-focus makes it difficult for either person to be present with each other.

On the other hand, if Magnifiers can stay calm and allow the limitation of hearing the disagreement from the other without trying to change the other; and if Minifiers can stay calm and allow the potential of their position in the face of disagreement with the other without yielding, systemic change is possible.

Summary

I will summarize this proposal for changing the stable pattern of divisiveness, post-election 2016, in the form of a guide for how to effect change in larger, societal dynamics as an individual person.

Guide

- What is the primary vehicle of change?

Conversation as the mode of interpersonal interaction

- What to do?

Engage others in face-to-face conversation through a disciplined effort over time.

- How to do the conversations?

Manage anxiety generated from the larger systems by allowing **vulnerability** in interactions with others from one's niche in smaller systems.

- How to allow the vulnerability?

Monitor the reactivity of **other-focus**, which is protective and blocks vulnerability, and shift to more **self-focus**.

With other-focus under control, use **Mag/Min** as a guide for experimenting in language with interactions that are different from the old pattern.

Mags – work to tolerate more limitations

Mins – work to tolerate more potential

- What are the next steps after the initial changes?

Operate from the **long-term perspective**, understanding disruption as part of the change process. Again, use Mag/Min as a guide: Magnifiers will want to dismiss the significant struggles in dealing with this disruption, assuming they are not an impediment to unity. Minifiers will want to emphasize the difficulties with a skepticism about whether unity is possible.

Allow new patterns to develop, and then maintain one's own changes from one's niche as the systems push back. The challenge is to **maintain changes on through the disruption** of the status quo and not yield to old patterns, both at the levels of individual relationships and of the larger systems one interacts with.