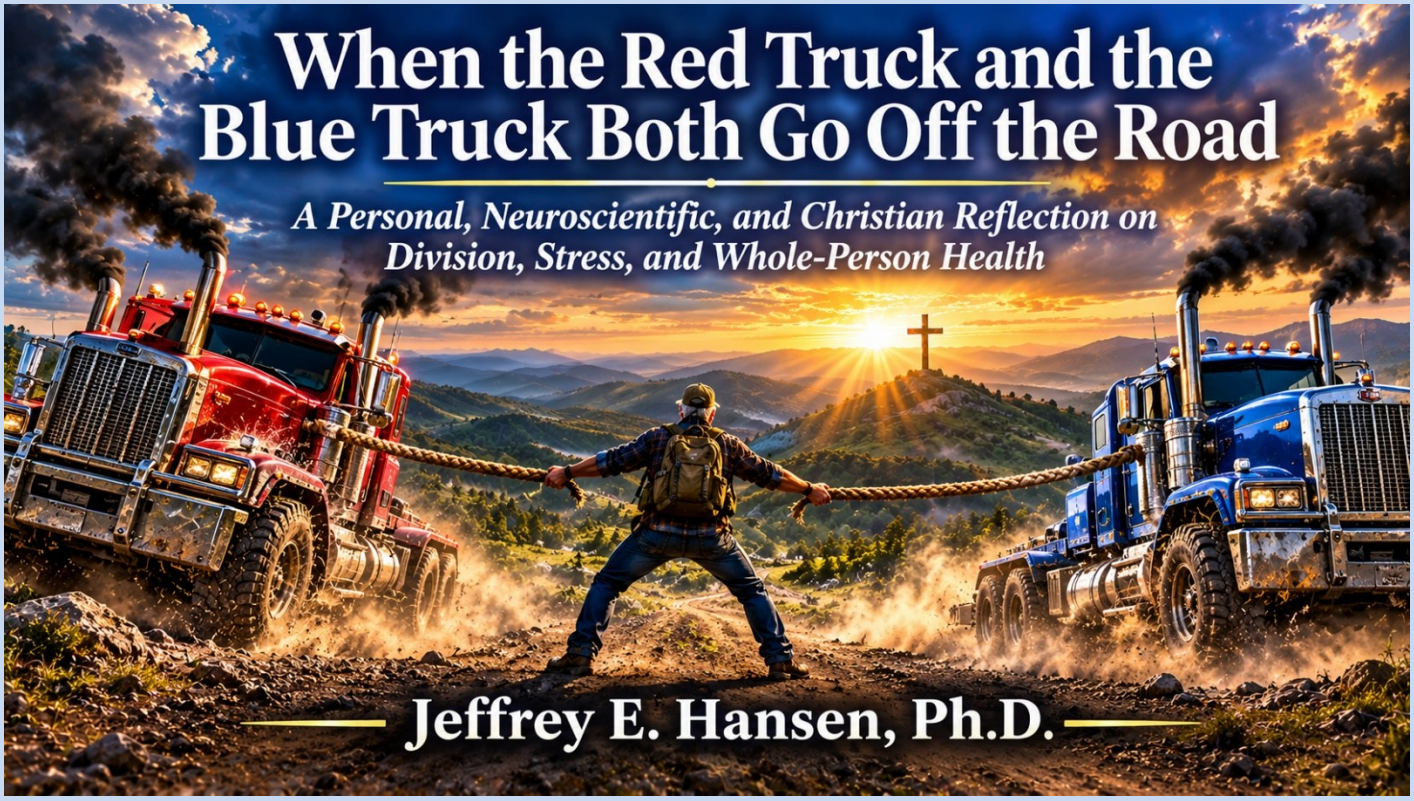

Enough Nonsense. Nobody Gets a Free Pass

I'm a conservative. I'm a Christian. And after more than four decades as a psychologist, I have become painfully aware of the extraordinary capacity of otherwise intelligent human beings to manufacture certainty out of very little evidence. I include myself in that observation. But at 72, I must confess that my patience for political theater, intellectual arrogance, and sanctimonious nonsense is wearing remarkably thin.

I've written plenty about progressive ideology, particularly what I see as its utopian promises, selective reading of history, and occasional willingness to reshape inconvenient facts to fit a preferred vision of reality. I've spent considerable time studying socialism, Marxism, and their historical consequences. I'm no James Michener, but I've done my homework. And I am often astonished by how quickly people who speak the language of compassion can become downright vicious when challenged. Still, I don't want this essay to be another spanking of the political left. I've delivered a few of those already. This time, I'd like to turn around and give some folks on the right a good old-fashioned butt-smacking. They've earned my attention, too.

The People I Used to Admire

Four names come immediately to mind: Tucker Carlson, Candace Owens, Megyn Kelly, and Benny Johnson. I used to enjoy all four of them. Tucker's sharp wit and willingness to question powerful people were refreshing. Candace struck me as exceptionally articulate and fearless. At one time, I even entertained the idea that she might make an impressive president. These days, I wouldn't

trust her political commentary without a very large fact-checking apparatus standing nearby. Megyn Kelly's legal mind, verbal agility, and ability to take an argument apart used to delight me. Benny Johnson's humor and energy, alongside his professed Christian convictions, were appealing in their own way.

But something changed in my experience of listening to them. Or perhaps what changed was simply my willingness to tolerate the increasingly dramatic claims, insinuations, and declarations of certainty. Owens and Carlson trouble me most. Kelly can be insightful one moment and astonishingly overwrought the next; her coarse language doesn't improve the experience. Johnson is a more recent concern, but I find myself hearing the same escalating urgency and speculative connections. These are my assessments of their public commentary, not verdicts about their character or mental health. And I certainly don't suggest that all four make the same claims or bear the same responsibility for what they say.

Questioning institutions is not the problem. Governments can mislead, corporations can conceal, and journalists sometimes discover wrongdoing precisely because they refuse to accept an official explanation. But suspicion is not proof. An aviation ground stop, a banking outage, and a technological failure occurring near one another may be worth investigating; their proximity alone doesn't make them parts of a coordinated plot. Somewhere between asking a good question and announcing a hidden truth, intellectual discipline can fall right off the truck.

When a Bright Brain Starts Connecting Too Many Dots

As a psychologist, I find the possible mechanisms fascinating. The human brain is built to detect patterns, anticipate danger, assign meaning, and construct stories that help us navigate the world. Bright, verbally fluent people can do these things with remarkable speed. Their talent often allows them to see relationships others miss. But here's the rub: the ability to construct an elegant explanation is not evidence that the explanation is true. Sometimes intelligence makes a person more capable of defending a bad conclusion, not less likely to reach one.

Dopamine contributes to motivation, reward learning, prediction, and the assignment of significance to events. In psychosis research, Kapur (2003) used the term aberrant salience to describe the attribution of unwarranted importance to stimuli or associations. His model concerns psychosis; I am borrowing the idea as an analogy, not applying his clinical theory to these commentators. I'm not claiming that any commentator has elevated dopamine or a psychotic disorder. We can't know that from a podcast. But the concept gives us a useful analogy for what can happen in public discourse: a coincidence begins to look revelatory; a speculation becomes a pattern; a pattern grows into a grand narrative. And every fresh revelation attracts attention, applause, clicks, money, and another reason to keep going.

Then add the physiology of perceived threat. Sympathetic activation, adrenaline and noradrenaline, and the body's cortisol-regulating stress system can sharpen vigilance while, under some conditions, making reflective flexibility harder. Arnsten (2009) described how stress-related signaling can disrupt the prefrontal networks we depend upon for working memory and top-down control. The amygdala and connected salience systems help flag what seems important or threatening. Prefrontal networks contribute to inhibition, reconsideration, and evaluating alternatives. The default mode network, which has long interested me, participates in self-referential thinking, autobiographical meaning, and identity. None of these systems functions in isolation, and no broadcast lets us measure another person's neurochemistry. Still, together they help explain why a compelling story about danger can become so deeply entwined with how someone understands himself and his place in the world.

Now imagine a career built around being the person brave enough to uncover what everyone else supposedly misses. The audience rewards each dramatic disclosure. Critics are waved away as naïve, compromised, or cowardly. Eventually, the question 'Could I be wrong?' may be replaced by 'Why can't everyone else see what I see?' It's a seductive progression. What began as curiosity can become a self-sealing explanation of reality, one that interprets disagreement as further confirmation. I don't know whether any of these four commentators has traveled that road internally. I do know that the public incentives point in that direction, and I find the pattern troubling wherever it appears.

Where Did the Brakes Go?

That brings me to a word I wish received more attention outside psychology: metacognition. It means, in part, the capacity to examine our own thinking. Can I distinguish inference from fact? Can I acknowledge contrary evidence? Can I reconsider an interpretation? Can I apologize without turning my apology into another performance? We all get things wrong. The question is what we do after we discover it.

There can be something almost grandiose about the public persona of the commentator who seems certain he or she possesses uniquely privileged insight. Rapid speech, heightened intensity, sweeping theories, and enormous self-confidence can superficially resemble clinical phenomena we encounter in other contexts. But resemblance isn't diagnosis. I cannot label these people manic, bipolar, narcissistic, or psychotic from a television appearance, nor do I need to. An environment that rewards confrontation and punishes self-correction can produce an alarming public style without anyone having a psychiatric condition. The danger I am talking about is primarily epistemic: the gradual loss of a disciplined relationship with evidence.

And Christianity adds another layer. When commentators invoke faith, righteousness, or moral authority, I expect more than a Bible verse wrapped around an angry accusation. I expect the

virtues their faith professes: truthfulness, charity, repentance, restraint, and the willingness to confess error. Christians are not immune to pride; heaven knows I am not. But the name of Jesus should never become a permission slip for exaggeration or contempt.

Two Diesel Trucks and One Very Tired Psychologist

Sometimes I feel as though I'm tied between two enormous diesel trucks, one blue and one red. My arms are attached to one, my legs to the other, and both drivers are flooring the accelerator in opposite directions. I'm somewhere in the middle wondering if either one has heard of brakes. It's a ridiculous image, but it captures the emotional exhaustion of watching people on both sides pull the country toward mutually exclusive certainties, with ordinary citizens caught in between.

On one side, I encounter versions of progressive politics that treat a hoped-for utopia as more important than the stubborn facts of history and human nature. On the other, I encounter versions of conservative commentary that turn every malfunction, coincidence, or disagreement into the possible signature of some shadowy plot. Neither tendency belongs to everyone in its political camp. Thoughtful progressives and thoughtful conservatives absolutely exist. I know some. I like some. I learn from some. But reasonable people rarely get the same applause for saying 'I don't know yet' as the loudest voices get for declaring that they alone know what's really going on.

Where are the people who can be principled without becoming ideological captives? Where are the progressives who can criticize progressive nonsense and conservatives who can call out conservative nonsense? Where are the adults who can sit across a table, concede a legitimate point, challenge a false one, and part as friends? I haven't given up on them. I just wish somebody would hand them a microphone.

The Physiological Price of Living at War

And here's where this circus stops being merely irritating and becomes a legitimate health concern. We were not designed to live as though every headline were a five-alarm fire and every neighbor with a different opinion were an enemy. The sympathetic nervous system prepares us to mobilize when danger is real, while the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis helps coordinate a hormonal stress response. Those responses are useful when a threat requires action. But an endless diet of alarm, indignation, and suspicion can make perceived threat feel constant, even when we're sitting safely in our living rooms. A political disagreement is not the same as physical danger, and a podcast isn't automatically toxic. Yet repeatedly interpreting ordinary life through the lens of impending catastrophe is hardly a recipe for restorative calm.

Bruce McEwen (1998) gave us an extraordinarily useful framework for this: allostasis, the body's ability to achieve stability through change, and allostatic load, the cumulative physiological wear

and tear associated with stress systems being activated too frequently, remaining activated too long, or failing to recover efficiently. Think about an engine built to accelerate hard when necessary, but never permitted to idle. Over time, the cost isn't just emotional fatigue. Dysregulated stress responses can contribute to elevated blood pressure, disturbed sleep, changes in immune and inflammatory signaling, metabolic problems, and impaired cognitive flexibility. That doesn't mean political polarization causes every illness. It means that a chronic sense of threat can become biologically consequential. We may be arguing over the nation's future while quietly compromising our own health in the present.

The parasympathetic system, including vagal pathways, is part of the body's capacity to regulate and recover. Cardiac vagal regulation is often studied using aspects of heart rate variability, although HRV is not a simple scorecard of how healthy, virtuous, or relaxed someone is. Supportive relationships can help buffer stress, and the stakes extend beyond momentary discomfort: Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010), in a large meta-analysis, found that stronger social relationships were associated with a greater likelihood of survivals. We cannot claim that everybody watching angry news has 'no vagal tone.' But there is a meaningful difference between living in a world of perpetual enemies and inhabiting one where disagreement doesn't cancel belonging. We need the ability to come down from the alarm, to laugh, to listen, to share a meal, and to remain connected even when we disagree.

And the story may reach all the way to our cells. Elissa Epel, Elizabeth Blackburn, and colleagues reported an association between chronic life stress and shorter telomeres, the protective structures at the ends of chromosomes (Epel et al., 2004). Later meta-analytic research found a much smaller average association between perceived stress and telomere length than early accounts sometimes implied (Mathur et al., 2016). So no, we cannot say that listening to one more conspiracy theory literally clips years off your telomeres. The more defensible point is no less important: the relationship between sustained stress, biology, and aging deserves serious attention. What kind of country are we building if we teach one another to remain perpetually frightened, enraged, and disconnected? What good is winning an argument if we are losing our peace, our relationships, and perhaps some of the physiological resilience that makes healthy living possible?

Keep Your Eyes on Jesus

And perhaps the most surprising reason I haven't given up comes from the very beginning of Christianity. Jesus didn't assemble a carefully screened team of like-minded political moderates. Among the Twelve was Matthew, a tax collector associated with a system serving Roman rule, and Simon, called the Zealot, a designation evoking intense Jewish zeal and, at least potentially, a very different attitude toward Rome (Matthew 10:3–4; Luke 6:15). We should be careful: Scripture does not tell us that Simon belonged to a specific revolutionary organization or record

a political argument between those two men. Nevertheless, consider the contrast represented in that little group. Jesus invited people whose histories and loyalties were hardly natural ingredients for a harmonious committee meeting.

And they were hardly models of moderation when they arrived. When a Samaritan village rejected Jesus, James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven on the people. Fire from heaven! That's not a strongly worded editorial; that's a rather spectacular overreaction. Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:51–56). When the disciples argued about which of them was the greatest, He answered by redefining greatness as service rather than power (Luke 22:24–27). And when one of His followers reached for a sword at His arrest, Jesus stopped the violence and healed the wounded servant (Luke 22:49–51; John 18:10–11). Again and again, His followers reached for status, force, or vindication, and Jesus redirected them toward humility, mercy, and a kingdom that refused to operate by the world's usual rules.

That's what moves me. Jesus did not bring these men together by pretending their differences didn't exist. Nor did He simply bless each man's strongest impulses and call them righteous. He challenged them. Corrected them. Loved them. He called them beyond the identities and resentments that might otherwise have defined them. Their unity was not founded on agreeing about Rome, winning the argument, or discovering an enemy they could all despise. It was founded on following Him. He understood the spiritual cost of hatred and estrangement; and while the Gospels are not neuroscience textbooks, His call to mercy, peace, service, and belonging resonates deeply with what we now know about the human need for connection and regulation.

Perhaps that is what we are missing. Listening endlessly to the most inflammatory voices on either side, allowing their indignation to become our own, is not how I understand Jesus calling us to live. Jesus knew the spiritual cost of resentment and contempt. He did not teach physiology in the language of the HPA axis or vagal regulation, but His invitation to reconciliation, mercy, and shared life speaks to the very conditions in which human beings can find safety and connection. We don't need more self-appointed saviors shouting from the left or the right. We need the courage to call out falsehood on our own side, the humility to recognize the limits of our knowledge, and the grace to remember that the person across the aisle is not automatically our enemy. This isn't an argument for abandoning convictions or refusing hard conversations. It is an argument for refusing to turn every conversation into combat. I will remain a conservative. I'll continue to challenge ideas I believe are harmful. And I'll continue to hold conservative voices to the standards I expect of progressives, because loyalty to a tribe is a poor substitute for loyalty to truth.

And that means making a decision about whose voices I will invite into my home and, ultimately, into my nervous system. Goodbye, Tucker Carlson. Goodbye, Candace Owens. Goodbye, Megyn

Kelly. Goodbye, Benny Johnson. And across the aisle, goodbye, Don Lemon, Joy Reid, Rachel Maddow, and Keith Olbermann. I am not claiming that all eight say the same things or that every word they speak is wrong. I'm saying that I no longer want the outrage, the suspicion, the theatrical certainty, and the contempt that I associate with so much of this political media culture setting the emotional temperature of my day. Your services, ladies and gentlemen, are no longer required.

Why? Because that kind of division is dangerous to community and corrosive to the life I want to live. It risks drawing me away from the way Jesus calls us to treat one another, and it is no favor to my health. Call it my neuro-bio-psycho-social-spiritual well-being—an ungainly five-dollar mouthful, perhaps, but I mean every part of it. Neuro speaks to the brain, autonomic regulation, and our capacity to return from alarm to calm. Bio means cardiovascular, immune, metabolic, and cellular health. Psycho means judgment, emotional balance, identity, and resilience. Social means attachment, friendship, belonging, and the freedom to disagree without becoming enemies. Spiritual means faith, meaning, forgiveness, and our relationship with God. Injury in one dimension can reverberate through the others; healing and connection can do the same in the opposite direction. None of these operates in isolation. If those two diesel trucks insist on roaring away in opposite directions, they can have the road. I'm not going to let either one tear apart my judgment, my conscience, my physiology, or my relationships. I'll keep asking questions, examining evidence, and challenging foolishness, including my own. But I will no longer mistake perpetual outrage for moral courage.

When the noise grows so loud that I can scarcely tell who is speaking truth anymore, I'll remember a tax collector and a Zealot sitting in the same circle, two hotheaded brothers being told to put away their fire, and a Savior who washed feet instead of demanding applause. That's where I want my eyes: on Jesus. Not the red truck. Not the blue truck. Jesus.

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