Patriotism and Education

The Psychology of Patriotism

Patriotism is so compelling, Mr. Bader explains, because it promises to satisfy some of our deepest psychological needs. And the vulnerability that those needs create can be exploited by either the Right or the Left.

By Michael J. Bader

PATRIOTISM can be a force for good or evil. American patriotism helped vanquish fascism; German patriotism helped create and sustain it. Wars of national liberation depend on patriotic fervor to oppose colonial rule; unfortunately, ethnic cleansing draws on this same fervor. Appeals to the transcendent value of the nation-state can be progressive or regressive.

But regardless of the purpose to which patriotism is harnessed, all forms of it share similar psychological dynamics. Patriotic symbols such as the "nation" — including its manifestations in images like the flag or the Founding Fathers — represent the fulfillment of our longings for connectedness and safety. In this sense, the nation is a metaphor for a family. Families serve the function of providing psychic security and attachment. We project onto ever-expanding forms of social authority the longings originally satisfied by parents in childhood.

It's easy to see the workings of these two needs in our collective responses to the attack of 9/11 and to the devastation visited on New Orleans and the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina. In the first instance, people looked to government to provide security and defense, including a muscular retaliation against our enemies. On a symbolic level, we looked to our leaders to provide the protection and strength usually associated with fathers. In the second instance, people looked to government to provide care and nurturance, a safety net — qualities associated in our culture with mothers.

While patriotism draws a great deal of its energy from the unconscious mind, it is not reducible to it. That is, social attitudes and behaviors are the products of a complex interplay between the rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, private and public factors. Nevertheless, one of the reasons that patriotic fervor can be so passionate — and, as a result, so vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation — is that its roots lie in deep levels of the psyche.

Patriotism is a container for a range of psychological needs that originally play themselves out in the family. Over 50 years of psychological research have established that human beings have an innate need for attachment and recognition and that not only is the satisfaction of this need essential for psychological and physical survival, but its frustration is one of the primary sources of mental suffering.[1] I see such suffering ever day in my consulting room — families in which parents can't empathize with their children or each other, or narcissistically use their children, or neglect them altogether. I see children who grow up taking care of others instead of themselves or who retreat from intimacy because of fears of rejection and abandonment.

Furthermore, the helplessness of the human infant and its absolute dependence on adult caregivers for survival generates a powerful need for protection and an idealization of the power and authority of these caregivers. When parents are protective and reasonable, children grow up with a basic sense of security and an ability to rely on others. When parents fail to protect children and exercise their authority in arbitrary, frightening, or inconsistent ways, children grow up with a basic sense of insecurity and difficulty trusting others. Unfortunately, this latter scenario is all too common.

However, the fact that our needs for connection and security are often thwarted does not mean that they

MICHAEL J. BADER is a psychologist and psychoanalyst in private practice in San Francisco. He is a contributing editor of Tikkun *and co-founder of the Institute for Change, currently affiliated with the Service Employees International Union.*

go away. We continue to long for recognition and relationships of mutuality even as we often suffer from loneliness. And we continue to seek security even as we feel unsafe and unprotected.

In this context, it's easy to understand the powerful psychic meanings of patriotism. To feel like an "American," to identify with the "United States of America," is to feel at once safe and connected. Patriotism establishes a "we" that satisfies the longings for connectedness and affiliation that are so often frustrated in our private lives. And it offers an image of a strong and fair authority in relationship to which we can feel safe and secure.

Sometimes a movement can promote both liberal and conservative agendas.

These powerful satisfactions provided by patriotism become even more compelling when we consider how imperiled or absent they are in everyday social life. A great many sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers have written about the ways that a market economy based on an ethos of selfish individualism undermines communities, atomizes social life, alienates work, and tends to make relationships increasingly instrumental. From David Riesman's 1950 masterpiece *The Lonely Crowd*, to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970, to Robert Putnam's 2001 sensation *Bowling Alone*, social critics have argued that the decline in traditional communities of meaning in contemporary society has had disastrous consequences for the psychological well-being of citizens.

Thus the unfulfilled longings for attachment, recognition, and security first manifested and frustrated in early family life get further blocked in our everyday lives as citizens and workers. The suffering that results is often unconscious. As children, we invest our families with an awesome power to define the way things are and the way they're supposed to be. We experience our frustrations and psychological pain as *normal*, as somehow wired into the fabric of reality, fate, or our genes. Similarly, in a culture based on individualism, needs for community can seem foolish. We grow up cynical about the possibility that things could really be different and so we conclude that our suffering is illegitimate and unworthy of articulation. Our loneliness and collective insecurity become problems with no names.

Patriotism, appeals to national pride, invocations of historical purpose, symbols of collective unity (the flag, the Constitution, etc.) all offer a symbolic resolution to unspoken and inchoate longings for relatedness and safety. For as much as there are powerful forces in our familial and cultural lives that create alienation and apprehension, there are forces acting as an undertow against the prevailing waves. To the extent that people continue to need to feel safe and connected, they will make do with whatever they can find to satisfy these needs.

Political movements on both the Left and the Right seek to link their partisan agendas to the evocation and satisfaction of these frustrated longings. Linguist George Lakoff, for example, has argued that liberals speak to values arising from a conceptual paradigm that he calls the "nurturant parent" — including the values of empathy and responsibility for others — while conservatives appeal to a mental metaphor involving discipline and self-reliance that he terms the "strict parent." Both models seek to address needs for connectedness and security, albeit in radically different ways.

Thus the political exploitation of our collective passions and distress is ubiquitous in our public lives. The passions evoked by politics must, of necessity, involve an encounter with deep-seated human longings. Whether people are marching against abortion or against the war in Iraq, intense emotions — and not simply cognitive beliefs — are on parade.

Sometimes, in fact, a movement or institution can use the power generated by its success in satisfying the psychic needs of its members to promote both liberal and conservative agendas. For example, the hugely successful fundamentalist megachurch run by Rick Warren in Orange County, California, manages its rapid growth by encouraging the formation of small prayer groups that function to provide social and emotional support and affiliation, as well as spiritual development. And Warren's Saddleback Church simultaneously supports a conservative social agenda and has invested heavily in creating a safety net for the homeless in Orange County.[2]

However, while both Left and Right seek to take advantage of the frustrated longings for community and safety, the conservative side has done so more successfully of late. In the post-9/11 climate, conservative and neoconservative ideologues used the need for pro-

tection that so many Americans felt to promote dubious justifications for war with Iraq and a massive increase in the police and surveillance powers of the government.

Similarly, conservatives have been more successful than liberals in using one other crucial political technique in their attempt to create an experience of community and safety: namely, the evocation of a demeaned "other." While liberals are certainly guilty of this maneuver when they express their disdain for caricatured Evangelical Christians, conservatives are especially skilled at evoking prejudice and erecting devalued caricatures. For example, the satisfying sense of "we-ness" that accompanies being an "American" is deepened and solidified by the creation and demonization of an "enemy." It used to be the Communists; now, it's the terrorists. Membership in a group is enhanced if there are people who are excluded. If these people on the outside are "bad" or "dangerous," then it enables those of us on the inside to feel good, righteous, and safe. This process of exclusion and demonization is the essential dynamic behind all forms of ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, and homophobia.

The feelings of insecurity and disconnectedness that plague us in our personal and social lives can be blamed on the actions of some "other" who is then demeaned and attacked. This process of projection is deliberately used by conservatives to solidify their base. By creating an imaginary "us" and "them," they can then promise satisfaction of deep and legitimate longings for a community safe from both real and illusory threats posed from the outside. On the international front, the currently favored "other" is the swarthy terrorist. On the domestic front, the Religious Right has most recently focused on gay marriage. Both the terrorist and gay newlywed are used as lightning rods to draw out the collective passions of Americans looking to be temporarily relieved of feelings of insecurity and disconnectedness. Ironically, the us/them tactic ultimately serves to undermine a more authentic community that would better meet the psychological needs for connectedness of most individuals. Like a clique of schoolchildren who gain a temporary sense of belonging by demeaning other classmates, the Religious Right promises a temporary and partial remedy for the symptoms of an illness that lies at the heart of the system that they, themselves, promote and defend.

Such solutions — whether promoted by the Left or the Right — are transient and require the constant stimulation and reproduction of paranoid mechanisms. The real reasons that our longings for recognition and safety are continually frustrated are not substantively addressed by the creation of demeaned "others." While the longings are healthy, their frustration is the result of dysfunctional family systems, the ethos of individualism, the greed of the marketplace, the powerlessness people feel at work, and the violence resulting from discrimination and the deterioration of social safety nets.

In this sense, people who lean toward the more progressive end of the political spectrum have a chance, at least, to win hearts and minds, not by erecting an enemy against whom we can all unite, but by appealing in a healthier way to these same unmet needs for security and connection. As Michael Lerner argues in *The Left Hand of God*, progressives could begin to articulate a politics explicitly based on a recognition of the centrality of these desires, specifically condemning institutions that frustrate them, and fighting for social changes that increase the possibility of their real satisfaction.[3]

Schools can play an important role in a political project seeking to identify healthy solutions to the problems of disconnectedness and insecurity. Schools can teach and model empathy; provide recognition; encourage discussions of values, including those found in the various spiritual traditions; and confront prejudices born of the need to define the self in opposition to a demeaned "other." In other words, schools could try to create an environment in which the legitimate needs of children for connectedness and safety are gratified in ways that inoculate them against the psychological appeal of messages of racism, arrogant nationalism, and moral intolerance.

The psychological needs that drive patriotic fervor are universal. People will always need to be connected and secure. These longings can be gratified in healthy or unhealthy ways. They can be distorted and exploited in the interest of agendas that are immoral, or they can be addressed and gratified in ways that promote the general welfare. Like patriotism itself, the human psyche is intrinsically neither good nor bad. It all depends on the uses to which it's put.

---

1. For a good review of the relevant psychological literature, see Peter Fonagy, *Attachment Theory and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Other Press, 2001).

2. Malcolm Gladwell, "The Cellular Church," *New Yorker*, 12 September 2005, pp. 60-67.

3. Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).