

The Empathy of United States President Joe Biden, the Soul of America, and Humanistic Psychology

Elliot Benjamin, Ph.D., Ph.D.

Introduction

If I had to choose one word to represent the revolutionary movement of Humanistic Psychology that Carl Rogers brought to the world, this word would be ‘empathy’. Engaging in genuine empathic relationships between people, inclusive of therapeutic, educational, and social relationships in all contexts of life, are the hallmarks of the Humanistic Psychology movement that has had enormous impact all over the world for over half a century (Benjamin, 2011; Rogers, 1961; Schneider et al., 2015). It has been over 50 years since I read Carl Rogers’ (1961) book *On Becoming a Person*, and I recently described my experience of reading this book as follows:

The radical concepts at that time of being genuine and caring as a ‘real’ human being in therapeutic relationships spoke to me in my deep inner core. I gradually transitioned from the world of behavioristic psychology to the world of Humanistic Psychology, and I have been a steadfast proponent of Humanistic Psychology in the half century that has followed. (Benjamin, 2020, pp. 6–7)

And the word ‘empathy’ is the word that has become the most defining representation of United States President Joe Biden (Baldoni, 2020; Cillizza, 2021; Eskew, 2018; Kelly, 2015; Wehner, 2020). Biden entered the United States presidential primary contest on the day of my 69th birthday, 25 April 2019, motivated in particular by the violence in the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally, and conveyed that ‘We are in a battle for the soul of this nation’ (Memoli et al., 2019).

Fast-forward over a year and a half later, to 7 November 2020 when Biden gave his presidential election victory speech and

conveyed his unwavering belief that ‘We must restore the soul of America’ (Radelat, 2020). I can remember how movingly shocked I was when I watched Biden’s video that announced his presidential candidacy,¹ as I felt the caring, passion and ‘empathy’ from former vice president Joe Biden (Benjamin, 2020). I knew right then and there that in spite of my progressive leanings toward Democratic candidates like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, I was going to become a staunch supporter of Joe Biden, as he spoke to me in my inner core of feeling the utter horror of the despicable inhuman qualities of the president of the United States at that time, Donald Trump.² Biden’s vision of ‘the soul of America’ was part and parcel of both his own exemplary example of lifelong empathy, and of what he believed was the empathy that America deep down still possessed. In this regard I declared my intention of supporting Joe Biden to be the next president of the United States:

Biden announced his candidacy... through his passionate video denouncing Trump for his ‘very fine people on both sides’ comment pertaining to the neo-nazis at the 2017 Charlottesville Unite the Right rally, and I knew as soon as I saw the video that I would be supporting Biden for his presidential bid. (Benjamin, 2020, p. 2)

At the present time as I write, Joe Biden has been the president of the United States for nearly two months, and in this article I will examine how authentic the empathy portrayal of Biden has been during this time, in the context of both Biden’s belief that ‘We must restore the soul of America’ and the basic tenets of Humanistic Psychology.

Biden's Empathy and the Soul of America

In July 2021 at a Humanistic Psychology online presentation, I will be conveying my thoughts and feelings about the horrific 6 January 2021 Washington D.C. capitol insurrection, as well as what I experienced as relevant, comforting and inspiring related statements from Joe Biden, as follows:

I believe that the 6 January capitol insurrection is a terrifying representation of the political hatred and potential deadly violence that is pervasive in the United States. The second impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump showed in harrowing graphic detail how close it came to the rioters assassinating Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who were successively next in line to the United States presidency. Over a hundred police officers were assaulted, some of them were hospitalized with serious injuries, and one was killed. It is horrifying to me that a number of members of Congress were in imminent danger that day of being murdered by the mob.

The potential for deadly political hate violence in the United States has been greatly stimulated by the presidency of Donald Trump, but I take some comfort in the reassuring words of our current president, Joe Biden, which were stated soon after the capitol insurrection, before the complete picture of the deadly violence that the insurrectionists were intending to carry out was fully known. Nevertheless, these words by Biden, along with earlier statements he made about fighting against the rise of hate in the United States, are comforting to me, as it is such a stark contrast with the words of our former president; and I view them as a sign of at least some degree of hope for our country's future. Along these lines, here are a few statements about combating hate from Joe Biden that I have pieced together (Smith, 2020, p. 2; Smith & Memoli, 2019, p. 3; Telegraph Reporters, 2021, p. 3), which I think speak forcefully to the moment that is before us:

Hate is on the rise again, and we're at a defining moment again in American history.... As a country, we must condemn the incitement of hate.... To storm the Capitol, to smash windows, to occupy offices, and to threaten the safety of duly elected officials is not protest. It is insurrection.... The work of the moment and the work of the next four years must be the restoration of democracy... not stoking the flames of hate and chaos.

However, although I greatly appreciate these words from Joe Biden, I also must say that I have concerns about his phrase 'the restoration of democracy'. My concerns are related to my questioning how much of a bona fide 'democracy' ever truly existed in the United States. For Biden, I understand that he believes in 'the soul of America' as a sacred benevolent force of goodness, and that his mission is to restore 'America's soul' after the rampant and polarized hate and destruction that our country has recently experienced, accelerating greatly over the past four years with the presidency of Donald Trump. But it can well be argued that America's history is anything but 'benevolent', as conveyed in Howard Zinn's (1980/2003) *A People's History of the United States*, as our country's history has included slavery, racism, sexism, violence, and imperialism and war, with immense influence on our government from big business and the wealthy that has resulted in extreme, unfair and unsustainable income inequality. In our current times this extreme growth in income inequality has become an existential threat to the survival of our democracy, especially when combined with new global competition, loss of jobs, political extremism, systemic racism, accelerating climate crises, a raging pandemic, social media disinformation, and the growing threat of white supremacy, as recently demonstrated through the Capitol insurrection.³

A forceful depiction of some of the factors that have resulted in my uneasiness about the phrases 'the restoration of democracy' and 'restoring the soul of America' can be seen in the impactful essays of political philosopher

Christopher Schaefer (Benjamin, 2021; Schaefer, 2019). In this regard, Schaefer (2019) described some of the pitfalls of the United States as follows:

To restore American society to the promise of its founders and to renew the social contract between government and its citizens, it is essential to limit the power of financial and business interests.... The ideology of oppression and the forces of fear, hatred, egotism, and division threaten to overwhelm us.... As American citizens we have allowed political, cultural, and economic elites to manipulate us in order to pursue their own wealth and visions of power at our expense.... The question we face, then, is whether we can accept that our history is one of both high aspirations and noble truths, and of crimes against both the human and natural world. (Schaefer, pp. 51, 102, 142)

As Schaefer has conveyed, the history of the United States is indeed one of both ‘high aspirations and noble truths’ and, at the same time, ‘crimes against both the human and natural world’. Thus, when Biden talks about ‘restoring the soul of America’ and ‘the restoration of democracy’, I think it’s important not to forget our lessons from Zinn and Schaefer, and to paint an accurate picture of both the highs and the lows of the history of the United States. All things considered, in my view Biden in his first two months as president has been a much-needed respite and redemption from the horrific ordeal of the four long Trump years, as I discuss in more detail below. However, it is also the case that some of Biden’s recent decisions and actions have been a source of concern and disapproval from minorities and progressives, inclusive of his bombing in Syria (though he spared the lives of a woman and two children by deciding against bombing a second Syrian target), opening up a closed immigration border facility, and acceptance of the Senate parliamentary decision to reject the \$15 minimum wage inclusion in the Senate Stimulus package (De Luce & Lee, 2021; Haque, 2021; Neumann, 2021).

The capitol insurrection did not come out of nowhere, as its seeds have been with us for hundreds of years, as Zinn and Schaefer have conveyed in no uncertain terms. However, at the same time I agree with Biden that we as a country should strive toward our ‘better angels’, and it is exactly with this in mind that I am so thankful that we now have a US president who exemplifies such a high degree of empathy; and as already argued, this empathy is part and parcel of the basic premises of Humanistic Psychology.

Biden’s Empathy and Humanistic Psychology

It is common knowledge that Joe Biden exemplifies the quality of empathy to an extraordinary degree in the very fibre of his being (Baldoni, 2020; Cillizza, 2021; Eskew, 2018; Kelly, 2015; Wehner, 2020). The following was written about this quality of empathy in September 2018, nearly eight months before Biden entered the 2020 presidential primary:

Joe Biden is the ultimate ‘comforter in chief’, a role Americans used to expect from their presidents and one that Trump is preternaturally unable and nearly always unwilling to play.... When he speaks about grief, you know Biden has been there: ‘There are times when life can be so cruel, pain so blinding, it’s hard to see anything else.’ And his personal tragedies, the loss of a wife, an infant daughter and grown son, give his words of reassurance deep resonance. (Eskew, 2018, p. 3)

And this characterization continued into the ordeal of the 2020 presidential election, as two weeks before the election, the following was written about Biden’s quality of empathy: ‘Biden has been out front and acting on his empathy.... Biden feels empathetic because that is who he is. He acts on empathy because he feels he must.’ (Baldoni, 2020, pp. 3–4). And then the day before the election we have this far-reaching description of Biden’s empathy and

its quite possibly beneficial impact on the United States:

In the entire history of American presidential campaigns, there may never have been a wider gap in empathy than between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. And it has rarely mattered more.... Biden is cut from a very different cloth... [F]or example, Biden's lifelong struggle with stuttering, for which he was at times fiercely mocked.... After Biden's wife and daughter were killed, he wrote, 'The pain cut through like a shard of broken glass. I began to understand how despair led people to just cash it in; how suicide wasn't just an option but a *rational* option.'.... Through that journey of grief, Biden not only found purpose; he also forged within himself greater empathy and compassion.... Joe Biden has almost a superpower in his ability to comfort and listen and connect with people who have just suffered the greatest loss of their lives.... I actually believe something in [Biden's] life experience can benefit this country at a moment it desperately needs it.... Some measure of integrity and dignity will return to the presidency; that the unprecedented, intentional effort by an American president to divide us will end; and that a person who has experienced grief and grace in his life can use what he's learned to help bind up our wounds. (Wehner, 2020, pp. 1–4)

And after nearly a month as United States president, the following was written after Biden's first presidential town hall:

Perhaps the biggest contrast between Biden and the man he replaced in office is empathy. Former president Donald Trump had none; Biden is all empathy, wearing his heart on his sleeve. The town hall format played to Biden's strength in that regard.... Biden told several questioners to talk to him after the town hall in order to help deal with their specific problems. And in one striking exchange, a mother with her 8 year-old daughter stood up and asked Biden what to tell kids who are worried about getting Covid and dying. 'Don't be scared, honey', the President told the little girl, speaking directly to her as he told her that kids don't usually get the coronavirus, and when they do they very

rarely pass it on. It was a grace note – and one that would have been unimaginable during Trump's presidency. (Cillizza, 2021, p. 1)

I personally found Biden's first prime-time speech on 12 March 2021 to be particularly moving and empathic, as I experienced a genuine caring and concern from him with regard to the severe challenges that all Americans have lived through during the past year with the coronavirus pandemic.⁴

Empathy has been described in various ways by a number of humanistic psychologists since Rogers' (1961) ground-breaking use of empathy as a cornerstone of his client-centered therapy. For example, Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (2015) said the following in regard to empathy, humanism and narrative research:

Empathy is premised on continuity, recognizing that kinship between self and other offers an opportunity for a deeper and more articulated understanding. Empathy becomes an attitude of attention to the real world based on an effort to connect ourselves to it rather than to distance ourselves from it. (p. 327)

Jeanne Watson and Arthur Bohart (2015) described how experiential therapists in managed care respond empathically to clients:

Experiential therapists facilitate clients' experiencing by responding empathically to their inner experiences. This requires that therapists be attuned to their clients' inner worlds and felt senses. One way of remaining attuned is to listen to the poignant aspects of clients' narratives. (p. 587)

And in my experiential advocacy that Humanistic Psychology play a dominant role in the job of the mental health worker, I said the following in regard to caring and empathy and Humanistic Psychology:

From my own experience as a mental health worker, it is very clear to me that there is a rich source of opportunity to engage with clients in an authentic, real, and caring

relationship that is the essence of humanistic psychology... In spite of all these behavioral, medical, and managed care expectations and requirements, I have seen that the humanistic realness, genuineness, and empathy of the mental health workers somehow tend to sneak into relationships with their clients. When you are spending 6 to 40 hours a week with one client, it is difficult to not become personally and emotionally involved with your clients. (Benjamin, 2011, pp. 84–5, 106)

However, according to Maurice Friedman (2015), who had concerns about the common use of the word ‘empathy’, engaging in effective therapeutic interactions in a Humanistic Psychology context of Martin Buber’s (1958) I–Thou encounter requires that the therapist not ‘lose’ himself or herself in the client, but somehow must have his or her foot simultaneously in both his or her own world and the world of the client:

Inclusion, or imagining the real, means a bold swinging to the other with the most intense action of one’s being, through which one experiences, to some extent, what the other is thinking, feeling, perceiving, and willing. Yet the therapist must not leave his or her own ground.... This is how it differs from the much used term *empathy*. Empathy, in the strict sense, means to leave one’s ground so as to go over to the other. (p. 452)

Friedman’s (2015) concerns about the use of the word ‘empathy’ are mirrored by the renowned meditation and mindfulness teacher Sharon Salzberg (2020), as she distinguished between empathy and compassion:

While empathy is essential, if we over-identify with the person or people hurting, the empathy turns into empathic distress, where our own discomfort ironically takes center stage. We collapse or run away. I see the process in sequential terms. The empathy is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition for compassion to arise.... Compassion implies boundaries... balance... stability rather than shakiness; and clarity rather than overidentification.... Deep compassion is suffused with equanimity. Compassionate

action is then imbued with wisdom – realizing what we can do, what we can’t do, and what we cannot control. (pp. 129–30)

Undoubtedly the concept of empathy ‘in the strict sense’ vs compassion is a complicated and important avenue of consideration, but for the present purpose of viewing Joe Biden’s life of genuine caring of others in a Humanistic Psychology context, I feel comfortable using the word ‘empathy’. For as far as I can see, Biden’s life of service to others has gone hand-to-hand with his own healthy boundaries to engage in a profound enjoyment and appreciation of his own life, which is deeply inter-connected to the lives of his wife, children, friends and pets.⁵ And Biden’s life immersion in ‘healthy’ empathy appears to be culminating in the service of his quest to ‘restore the soul of America’, in spite of my own reservations about this terminology that I have described above. Just a quick glimpse from his first two months in office in regard to some of his empathic executive orders regarding minorities, immigration, sexual preference, and restoring families that have been separated, and his courageous, successful, and historic 1.9 trillion dollar stimulus package to help people in the United States get through the coronavirus pandemic, which he proudly focused upon in his empathic prime-time speech⁶ (Eleveld, 2021; Sieff, 2021; Sullivan, 2021), is for me part and parcel of empathy in the best sense of the word, whether it’s called empathy or compassion, and is a wonderful representation of the essence of what Carl Rogers (1961) imparted to the world in his foundational work of Humanistic Psychology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although the legitimacy of the phrase ‘the soul of America’ is debatable, clearly Joe Biden has exemplified the personal quality of empathy in virtually all of his undertakings, both personal and professional/political, throughout his life. It is no small matter that we now have a president of

the United States who is known far and wide as being a genuine, caring human being, especially in such stark contrast with the former US president. And it is exactly Joe Biden's exemplary modeling of empathy that is part and parcel of the basic foundations of Humanistic Psychology.

Notes

- 1 See Joe Biden's 25 April 2019 entering the presidential campaign video at <https://tinyurl.com/35sz3zrm> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- 2 See Benjamin, 2020, and a number of my other essays on Trump on the Integral World website at www.integralworld.net, and in AHPb publications at <https://ahpb.org/index.php/self-society-journal/>.
- 3 This paragraph is largely due to personal communications from David Estey, whom I very much thank for sharing his consequential ideas about this.
- 4 See Biden's 12 March 2021 prime-time speech at <https://tinyurl.com/sw2u7m5y> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- 5 See Kelly (2015) for Biden's 2015 speech to Yale University graduates that demonstrates his lifelong commitment to his wife, children and friends; numerous articles about Biden's lifelong harmonious marriage, devotion to his children, dedication to his friends, and his two dogs who are currently in the White House, are readily available.
- 6 See note 4.

References

- Baldoni, J. (2020). How empathy defines Joe Biden; available at <https://tinyurl.com/zzk5j2f8> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Benjamin, E. (2011). Humanistic Psychology and the mental health worker. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 51 (1): 82–111.
- Benjamin, E. (2020). The coronavirus pandemic, the Trump presidency, and Humanistic Psychology; available at <https://tinyurl.com/77m5vbu8> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Benjamin, E. (2021). Extended review essay: Healing and re-imagining the United States in the time of Trump. *AHP Magazine for Self & Society*, no. 6, Winter 2021; available at <https://tinyurl.com/ym4w4red> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Buber, M. (1958). *I and Thou* (2nd edn, R.G. Smith, with a postscript by M. Buber). New York: Scribner.
- Cillizza, C. (2021). 6 takeaways from Joe Biden's CNN Town Hall; available from <https://tinyurl.com/2khw8vz8> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Eleveld, K. (2021). An unapologetic Biden is finally saying goodbye to the centrism that hobbled Democrats for decades; available at <https://tinyurl.com/mubwpzpn> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Eskew, C. (2018). Joe Biden reveals character, empathy, values; available at <https://tinyurl.com/bfub2zd9> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Friedman, M. (2015). Therapy as an I–Thou encounter. In K.J. Schneider, J.F. Pierson & J.F.T. Bugental (eds), *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2nd edn (pp. 451–56). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Haque, U. (2021). America doesn't have time for the Democrats to get it this wrong; available at <https://tinyurl.com/bb6vmyrc> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Josselson, R. & Lieblich, A. (2015). Narrative research and humanism. In K.J. Schneider, J.F. Pierson & J.F.T. Bugental (eds), *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2nd edn (pp. 321–34). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Kelly, A. (2015). Joe Biden's advice on compassion and family, in his own words; available at <https://tinyurl.com/4s498m8p> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Memoli, M., Seitz-Wald, A. & Smith, A. (2019). Biden launches 2020 presidential bid, says 'we are in a battle of the soul of this nation'; available at <https://tinyurl.com/4j3u7j9n> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Neumann, S. (2021). Biden administration says reopening migrant children border facility was a 'difficult decision'; available at <https://tinyurl.com/24uerben> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Radelat, A. (2020). Victorious Joe Biden: 'We must restore the soul of America'; available at

- <https://tinyurl.com/jax3auhm> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Rogers, C.R. (1961). *On Becoming a Person*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Salzberg, S. (2020). *Real Change: Mindfulness to Heal Ourselves and the World*. New York: Flatiron.
- Schaefer, C. (2019). *Re-imagining America; Finding Hope in Difficult Times*. Stroud, UK: Hawthorn Press.
- Schneider, K.J., Pierson, J.F. & Bugental, J.F.T. (eds) (2015). *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2nd edn. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Sieff, K. (2021). Biden announces efforts to reunite migrant families separated by Trump administration; available at <https://tinyurl.com/4s4c2ddv> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Smith, A. (2020). ‘Fanning the flames of hate’: Biden slams Trump for ‘encouraging violence’ in Portland; available at <https://tinyurl.com/3syhndch> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Smith, A. & Memoli, M. (2019). Biden delivers most significant speech yet on race, says silence on hate ‘is complicity’; available at <https://tinyurl.com/5farb8cf> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Sullivan, K. (2021). Biden signs historic \$1.9 trillion Covid-10 relief law; available at <https://tinyurl.com/277fr4jm> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Telegraph Reporters (2021). ‘This is insurrection’: Joe Biden’s speech in full as US Capitol is stormed; available at <https://tinyurl.com/4e4mrtd4> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- Watson, J. C. & Bohart, A.C. (2015). Humanistic-experiential therapies in the era of managed care. In K.J. Schneider, J.F. Pierson & J.F.T. Bugental (eds), *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology: Theory, Research,*

and Practice, 2nd edn (pp. 585–600). Los Angeles: Sage.

Wehner, P. (2020). Biden may be just the person America needs; available at <https://tinyurl.com/p2mxunxd> (accessed 22 April 2021).

Zinn, H (2003). *A People’s History of the United States*, 2nd edn. New York: Harper & Row (orig. publ. 1980).

About the contributor



Elliot Benjamin has a Ph.D. in mathematics, a Ph.D. in psychology with a concentration in Consciousness and Spirituality, is currently a psychology mentor/Ph.D. committee chair at Capella University (www.capella.edu), and was previously a mathematics professor for 21 years. He has published four books and approaching 200 articles in the fields of Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology, philosophy/spirituality and awareness of cultural dangers, parapsychology, the creative artist and mental disturbance, progressive politics, pure mathematics, and mathematics enrichment. Elliot lives in Maine, is married, enjoys playing the piano, tennis, and ballroom dancing, and has an author’s website that can be viewed at www.benjamin-philosopher.com.