

Humanistic Dialogue between the US and the UK: Change the Rhetoric!

By **Elliot Benjamin, Ph.D.**

On 18 September 2019 I had the pleasure of facilitating a discussion sponsored by the British Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHPB) that was stimulated by my AHPB Wednesday evening talk at the Study Society, Colet House, Hammersmith in London, entitled *Creative Maladjustment, Progressive Politics, and Humanistic Psychology*.¹ The discussion was engaging, stimulating and lively, and was filled with much passion and sensitive listening, as many of us shared our respective alarming concerns about the present drastic political situations in the United States and Great Britain.

There were 11 people who attended this event, with myself and my wife Dorothy representing the US and the remaining attendees coming from the UK. The discussion topics ranged through merging progressive political action into Humanistic Psychology, the dehumanisation of excessive social media manipulation, hate crimes stimulated by the rhetoric of US president Donald Trump and UK prime minister Boris Johnson, the normalisation of prejudice, discrimination and violence, the escalation of violent extremist reactionary movements, the destruction of democracy, and a number of other topics. But what struck me the most, as I think about all that I experienced that evening, was a repeated passionate plea from Brian Thorne, who is an international Humanistic Psychology leader and authority on the work of Carl Rogers.² Brian eloquently,

passionately and persistently conveyed that what was needed was a ‘change in the rhetoric’; i.e. a change in rhetoric from hatred and violence to compassion and love.³ And this is what has stayed with me more than anything else that I heard during our stimulating humanistic dialogue between the US and the UK that evening.

When Brian eloquently conveyed his argument for a change in the rhetoric, I immediately thought about the US Democratic presidential candidacy of Marianne Williamson,⁴ and I portrayed my thoughts to the group. Marianne Williamson has been well known in American ‘new age’ circles as a spiritual guru for over 40 years,⁵ and her reaching the presidential debate stage for the first two Democratic primary debates was quite impactful to me. True to her character and her political writings,⁶ Marianne spoke up in the debates, whenever she was given any speaking time, for the ‘spiritual’ needs of America, as she talked about the ‘dark psychic force’ that is permeating us, and the need for Americans to ‘reach into our hearts to reclaim our love for democracy and the passion for the possible’.⁷ As Marianne wrote in her book *A Politics of Love*:⁸ ‘A politics of love sees the world through reverent eyes, viewing love, not economics, as the most enlightened organizing principle for human civilization’ (p. 27), and ‘Where there is love, possibilities are endless. But they do not emerge from the world

as we know it; they emerge from a place that is beyond our normal waking consciousness' (p. 224).

Of course Marianne's candidacy was taken with quite the grain of salt, as she stimulated much laughter and ridicule for her 'love' and 'spiritual' political perspectives, and especially for her 'dark psychic force' (Corasaniti, 2019). But she also stimulated enough support to sustain her through the first two Democratic primary debates, and she received some praise for a number of her statements at the debates (ibid.). However, my main point right now is that I think Marianne Williamson exemplified what Brian Thorne conveyed for a 'change in the rhetoric', and that her courage and dedication to bring her love/spirituality/politics beliefs into the concrete public political arena, and her partial success in doing this, was to me nothing short of extraordinary.

However, at the present time in the United States we are smack in the middle of whether we are going to be able to successfully navigate Brian's plea for a change in the rhetoric. President Trump was impeached but not removed from office, and there are concerns that the impeachment process and trial may have hurt the Democrats in their mission to beat Trump in November (Dartagan, 2019; Glasser, 2019; Lorenzana, 2020). But for me the worst nightmare is the thought that through Trump's wealth and political influence, his social media manipulation inclusive of support from Facebook,⁹ the very possible renewed election interference from Russia and other countries (Falconer, 2019), and numerous additional disturbing scenarios, it is quite possible that we could have Trump for four more years. In this event there would certainly be no change in the rhetoric, and I am afraid that the United States would be digging itself – along with the rest of the world – into a hole which may very well be too late to ever get out of.

Furthermore, at the present time the whole world is in the midst of the horrific coronavirus pandemic, with the United States having the most coronavirus cases of any country in the world; and it is unknown what effect this will have on the public response to Trump in November.¹⁰ Trump is now

promoting his success as measured by hopefully only between 100,000 and 240,000 Americans dead, as opposed to 2 million, whereas the reality is that many Americans have died, and many more will die, because of Trump's negligence in dealing with the pandemic to begin with.¹¹ And I believe that Trump's motivation in foregoing his Easter Sunday church and back-to-work brainstorm is not a function of any kind of human compassion, but rather is solely a manifestation that his aides have convinced him that his re-election would be seriously jeopardised if he is not perceived as showing concern about how many Americans die.¹² But I find it particularly disturbing that a week before Easter Sunday, Trump demonstrated his lack of concern about how many Americans will die as he prioritised catering to the immediate favourable reaction from his base, as he suggested that perhaps we should 'reconsider' going to church on Easter Sunday – which translates to me into many of his followers taking his suggestion to heart, resulting in many more people dying.¹³

In my previous writings I have conveyed my concerns about the prospect of defeating Trump in 2020 by a Democratic presidential candidate who is 'too progressive', in particular by Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders (Benjamin, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). In spite of the fact that my own personal leanings certainly favoured the political platform of Warren or Sanders, I was very afraid that the system of the United States electoral college, with its priority of reaching a sufficient number of middle-of-the-roaders in the battleground states, could easily backfire in terms of defeating Trump if the Democratic candidate was too progressive (Benjamin, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). Needless to say, I am very relieved that the Democratic candidate is going to be the centrist candidate for whom I have advocated, viz. former vice president Joe Biden (Benjamin, 2020d; King et al., 2020).

While in one sense it seems possible that there may very well be a change in the rhetoric with regard to the United States getting rid of Trump and moving toward human empathy and compassion,¹⁴ at the same time a number of Republicans, spearheaded by attorney general William Barr, had done all in their power to prevent this change in the rhetoric from happening, by trying to invalidate the whole

impeachment process and take the rhetorical emphasis away from impeachment and move it toward criminally investigating the ‘origins of the Mueller report’ (Dartagan, 2019; Glasser, 2019; Sherman & Palmer, 2019; Sumner, 2019). Apparently these Republicans were able to effectively invalidate the impeachment process to a disturbingly large extent (Dartagan, 2019; Glasser, 2019; Lorenzana, 2020), and it is only because of the precarious current existential threat of the coronavirus that the criminal investigation of the origins of the Mueller report has been put on hold (Lewis, 2020).

In the 2019 book *We Are Indivisible: A Blueprint for Democracy after Trump* by the progressive grassroots Indivisible founders Leah Greenberg and Ezra Levin,¹⁵ there is a stimulating and enlightening portrayal of the enormous challenges for Democrats to win elections based upon the electoral college, gerrymandering, and voter suppression – with a host of creative, fascinating, idealistic proposed solutions, inclusive of ending the filibuster and working toward proportional representation in the House and Senate. Greg Sargent (2018) in his book *An Uncivil War: Taking back Our Democracy in an Age of Trumpian Disinformation and Thunderdome Politics*, gave a particularly incisive (and alarming) analysis of how Republicans have managed to undermine US democracy through their practices of gerrymandering and voter suppression.

Indivisible founders Greenberg and Levin (2019) have made it very clear that they don’t believe in voting for ‘the lesser of two evils’ in the primaries, but rather to ‘vote your heart’ in the primaries and then ‘vote your head’ in the election. But the problem as I have viewed it is that if we ‘voted our heart’ in the primaries, then voting our heads in the election may not be sufficient to beat Trump. Until recently, Bernie Sanders was still challenging Joe Biden for the Democratic nomination even though it was mathematically not feasible for Sanders to obtain it, and I strongly believed that Sanders should drop out of the race and endorse Biden, as Sanders supporters voting for Biden may be an important component for the prospect of the Democrats beating Trump in November (Schmookler, 2020).

With this perspective, I participated in an online

Indivisible meeting, as Indivisible where I live in Maine has recently shifted their meetings to this format, just as Indivisible and essentially all political organisations have done in all places. Toward the end of the meeting, when everyone was asked to give their closing thoughts or future agenda items that they had, I hesitatingly asked the group what they thought about Bernie Sanders dropping out of the race, given that Joe Biden is the presumable Democratic nominee, as I said that I was concerned that Sanders’ continued candidacy and severe criticisms of Biden could be helping Trump to get re-elected.¹⁶ And I was pleasantly surprised that my concerns were taken quite seriously, as some people voiced their agreement, and the topic was put on the agenda to be discussed more at length at the following week’s meeting. I knew that Indivisible as a whole did not like Joe Biden, and that their favourite candidates had been, first, Elizabeth Warren and then Bernie Sanders. So I didn’t expect a very receptive response to my suggestion that perhaps Bernie Sanders should drop out of the race, and some people voiced their opinion that Sanders wanted to influence Biden to make Biden’s platform more progressive; but I could see that I had stirred a few people to seriously think about this. This motivated me to take things further and suggest to the Indivisible Northeast coordinator that perhaps it is time for Indivisible National to consider again the question of endorsing a Democratic presidential candidate, and that I believed it should be Joe Biden, to be consistent with the Indivisible mission of defeating Trump in November.¹⁷

Well, the Indivisible Northeast co-ordinator responded initially as I expected her to, conveying to me how Indivisible had given their highest scorecard ratings to Elizabeth Warren, followed by Bernie Sanders, and that Joe Biden received low ratings. She did not think that Indivisible National was interested in doing another endorsement survey, as they’d done one a few months ago and the response clearly indicated that Indivisible members generally did not favour a presidential endorsement. She went on to say that perhaps things could be re-evaluated if Biden were to make his platform more progressive, which I think we both knew would never happen to anywhere near the extent it would take for Indivisible to have a change of heart towards Biden. Finally she said

that once the Democratic nominee was chosen, that Indivisible would follow through with their Indivisible ‘pledge’¹⁸ to completely support whomever the Democratic candidate was, to work toward the goal of beating Trump in November (and as it turned out, I was glad to see that Indivisible ended up doing this a few hours after Sanders dropped out of the race).

I wasn’t surprised by the response I received, but I pursued the communication, and asked the Northeast coordinator if she would be open to conveying to Indivisible National the inclination of Indivisible Bangor, if I were to bring this up at next week’s meeting and Indivisible Bangor were to strongly advocate for a re-appraisal of the endorsement issue. I was pleased to receive a much more agreeable response from the Northeast coordinator, as she said yes, she would be open to bringing this up to Indivisible National if Indivisible Bangor advocated for another endorsement appraisal.

However, as I thought about it more, I realised that if it were to somehow happen that Indivisible National actually endorsed Biden, this would likely have the effect of alienating Sanders’ supporters from Biden even more than they already are. And if Indivisible National endorsed Sanders, then it would just be vice versa. So I came to the conclusion that working for an Indivisible endorsement of Biden at that time was not the way to go, not if I maintained my mission of beating Trump in November, as getting Sanders’ supporters to vote for Biden is an important piece of this process. Now that Sanders has finally dropped out of the race, I think that it is extremely important to focus upon reaching as many Sanders supporters as possible, with the goal of inducing them to vote for Biden in November.

At the next Indivisible Bangor meeting my Biden/Sanders issue came up again for discussion, and some of the response was similar to that of the week before, in regard to the belief that Sanders was staying in the race to have an effect on making Biden’s platform more progressive, as well as an acknowledgment of my concern about the danger of Sanders weakening Biden and, consequently, helping Trump to get re-elected. There was also a concern expressed that the public could view a

false equivalence between Biden and Trump, and therefore Sanders should be ‘nice’ to Biden, and it was conveyed that Sanders debating Biden again would likely have no effect on either the primaries or the general election. As it has turned out, in his dropping out of the race statement Sanders said he would support Biden, but that he would continue to work toward promoting his ideas and policies to influence Biden to make his (Biden’s) platform more progressive (King et al., 2020; Sullivan & Bradner, 2020).

However, what had the most effect on me from this Indivisible meeting was that I learned that Biden has being accused of sexually assaulting one of his former campaign staffers, in an incident that purportedly occurred in 1993.¹⁹ I was afraid as soon as I heard this that this could be the magic bullet that Trump needed to get re-elected if this story were to go mainstream and to mushroom. The accuser is a Sanders supporter, and she changed her story from last year, at which time she was one of a number of women who claimed that Biden had engaged with them in inappropriate touching, but nothing about sexual harassment to anywhere near the degree of this accuser’s 2020 allegation.²⁰

I don’t know what the truth is, but at the time I was concerned that if this allegation were to go mainstream and mushroom, then the difference this made could be just enough to give Trump the edge to get re-elected. But in all fairness to Biden, these allegations are coming from a woman who is a Sanders supporter who changed her claim from last year in regard to Biden committing sexually inappropriate conduct against her; she is the only woman who has claimed that Biden committed sexually inappropriate conduct, and there were no witnesses to her claim.²¹ Furthermore, I learned from someone who posted a comment in my article about Trump and the coronavirus (Benjamin, 2020d) that Biden’s accuser had made a statement a few years ago praising Biden for his work supporting violence against women, which appears rather incongruous with her sexual assault allegations.

Thus weighing all the evidence, at this point I choose to believe that Biden is innocent of these allegations. But either way, Biden is now officially

our only hope in November to get rid of at least the Trump half of the ‘deadly duo’ (Benjamin, 2020d; King et al., 2020). Putting everything together here, both the coronavirus and the danger of Trump getting re-elected, I am trying my best to not sink into calamity thinking, but rather to maintain a positive state of mind that the ‘change in the rhetoric’ toward human empathy and compassion that Brian Thorne eloquently called for during my London presentation will prevail.

In closing, here is an account from Humanistic Psychology’s esteemed elder Maureen O’Hara (2019) conveying, in her own eloquent language, Brian Thorne’s plea for a change in the rhetoric that we had the good fortune to listen to during that stimulating engaging September evening in London:

I believe that despite the looming threats which often appear to block out the light of hope, we are in fact witnessing a transformative insurgency at the core of which is a new consciousness.

There are ‘persons of tomorrow’ everywhere engaged in large and mostly small creative and effective initiatives addressing the multiple challenges humanity faces in the 21st century.... It is urgent that as an alternative to the current narratives of despair, fear and division we promote narratives of hope and solidarity not just with other humans but with all the species on the planet.

These narratives already exist in the hearts and minds of those who are making a difference. We are in this together. The culture our descendants will inhabit will be created by the actions, stories and choices we make now. (pp. 147, 149)

Notes

- 1 See Benjamin (2019a) for my article in AHPb Magazine *Self & Society* upon which my London AHPb talk was based; see <https://ahpb.org/index.php/events/> for a brief description of my talk; and see Benjamin (2020a) for a condensed version of the discussion that my talk prompted.
- 2 See Thorne (2005) for Brian Thorne’s autobiography, in which he describes his initiation into mysticism and ‘the unconditional love of God’ a few months before his 9th birthday, after witnessing a Good Friday public procession in a park. I think that

Brian’s plea for a ‘change in the rhetoric’ during my London talk is consistent with his childhood realisation after this Good Friday event: ‘At such a tender age I realized that my task was to tell everyone I met that they were beloved’ (Thorne, 2005, p. 11).

- 3 See note 2.
- 4 See Williamson (2019) for a description of Marianne Williamson’s love/spiritual/politics perspectives.
- 5 See, for example, Williamson (1996).
- 6 See note 4.
- 7 See note 4.
- 8 See note 4.
- 9 For a description of Facebook’s recent disturbing decisions about publishing political adverts containing content with dubious accuracy, as well as on the possible Trump/Republican influence on Facebook, see the articles by Eric Boehlert (2019a, 2019b).
- 10 See Benjamin (2020d) and the references therein for a description and discussion about both the horrific current expansion and destruction of the coronavirus as well as the deadly potential dangers of having President Trump in charge of how the United States deals with the virus. See Fiddler (2020) for a description of how much of the public is currently dissatisfied with Trump’s response to the coronavirus crisis; Dzhanova (2020) for a description of how Trump’s approval ratings increased based upon his response to the coronavirus; Lewis (2020) for a description of how Trump’s failed coronavirus response was a boost to his Democratic rival Joe Biden; Kos (2020) for predictions of how many Americans will die from the coronavirus and a perspective on Trump’s selfish political motivation, as opposed to any degree of human compassion, with regard to changing his previous Easter Sunday church and back-to-work expected policy; and Pennyfarthing (2020) for Trump’s statement that perhaps we should ‘reconsider’ going to church on Easter Sunday.
- 11 See note 10.
- 12 See note 10.
- 13 See note 10.
- 14 See the 8 November 2019 *New York Times* article by Martin and Glueck (2019) that describes a survey in six key battleground states; and a 29 March 2020 *Politico* article by Steven Shepard (2020) for a description of how Biden is leading Trump in three different polls (including one by Fox News), despite Trump’s initial coronavirus approval bounce.
- 15 See www.indivisible.org for the Indivisible website, and Benjamin (2019a) for a further description of the Indivisible organisation.
- 16 See Benjamin (2020d) for an initial description of my participation in the online Indivisible meetings in

which I advocated that Bernie Sanders drop out of the race.

17 See note 16.

18 See note 15.

19 See Democracy Now! (2020), Hoft (2019), Houston (2020), Marcetic (2020), and Walsh (2020).

20 See note 19.

21 See note 19.

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