

A Psychologist's View

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It's been a mystery to me. The phenomenon of Donald Trump. This man is as stupid as they come. Yet he is able to reach people and create passion for his ideas. How does he do that?

As a student of human behavior and cognition, I was drawn to the conversation on a recent CNN "Smerconish Show." The guest speaker was Scott Adams. You might know of him as the creator of the comic strip Dilbert. He said that he has studied hypnosis and persuasion his entire adult life. He was promoting his new book "Win Bigly: Persuasion in a World Where Facts Don't Matter." I already knew that Donald Trump was a master manipulator who used the techniques of persuasion with laser precision. Early on I saw that he was able to seduce a significant segment of the population. Like Scott Adams, I was one of the few who predicted (realistically feared?) Trump's triumph.

I agreed with Adams when he said that Trump is a master persuader who has been able to weaponize his skill set. Using well-known techniques, Trump is seemingly able to bypass the rational centers of the mind and hit directly at the (irrational) emotions. Hypnotists and psychologists have long been aware that decisions are rarely made entirely by our rational minds capable of thinking things through. More often decisions are made by our emotional centers that "feel" what's right.

I was unaware during the CNN interview that Adams was a Trump supporter. Because I had also understood Trump's persuasive powers before most other people, I didn't assume Adams was in Trump's camp. Then I read the book.

The book reads like a friendly tutorial on the techniques of persuasion, using Trump's

words and actions as examples of how it's done. But I didn't have to read past page 2 to get my first "What the Hell?" moment. Adams wrote, "I expected Trump to rip a hole in the fabric of reality so we could look through it to a deeper truth about the human experience. And he did exactly that."

Wait a minute! Yes, I believe that Trump bypasses our rational centers. I guess you could call that "ripping a hole" in the fabric of reality. But. A deeper truth?? No.

Outside the fabric of reality is emotion. Emotions which we experience and feel "as if" they are truth. Emotions create feelings which we can actually experience physically. These feelings seem real but the beliefs that accompany them are often distorted and destructive to the individual. This is the entire basis of cognitive therapy.

Following your emotions can lead you astray. Thoughts and beliefs unmoored to rational thought are fantasies, hopes and dreams. They may have their value, but they are not "true." They are made up. They are clouds that can easily solidify in the mind until we come to think they are as "real" as apples. But they are not.

I have spent over 30 years helping people to discover their irrational beliefs. Inevitably they feel freer and happier when their personal emotional experience is consistent with objective reality.

On page 19, Adams tells us that "Persuasion is all about the tools and techniques of changing people's minds, with or without facts and reason." This is true. What he does not mention is that persuasive techniques can be used to help people (as do psychotherapists) or to harm them (as did Jim Jones). Simply being persuasive does not make you "right" or "good" or "wise."

On pages 24 and 25, he says, “If you have ever tried to talk someone out of their political beliefs by providing facts, you know it doesn’t work.... facts are weak persuasion. If you’re using super strong persuasion, you can be wrong on the facts, and even the logic of your argument, and still win.”

Regrettably, I think we are all aware by now that this is very true for a significant segment of our population. Where Adams goes off track, in my opinion, is that he confuses being a successful persuader with being “right.” For example, on page 10, “When Trump’s critics accused him of laziness, ignorance, and cruel intentions, I saw a skilled persuader who knew what mattered and what didn’t. Apparently, he was more right than wrong on his priorities, because he won the election.”

As a psychotherapist, I also see Trump as a skilled persuader. But his only priority may be his own narcissism. If he is successful at persuading a large number of people that he can speak directly to their fears, and hopes

and that he has the power to save them from life’s pain, does that make him “right?” Or is he merely taking advantage of his superior persuasive skills to get what he wants for himself?

Yes. Trump is a successful persuader. But successful for whom? For the American people or for Donald Trump?

Since joining the Democratic Party a few months ago I have met so many wonderful people. What I have noticed is that Democrats are very good at creating well-reasoned, cogent arguments. It is great to meet such an intelligent, articulate, and rational group of people.

In a recent email to me, Michael Cantwell wrote, “All too often Democrats win the intellectual arguments but lose the emotional ones and thus [we] need to get better at reaching the gut as opposed to the brain.” I couldn’t agree with him more.

As Rachel Maddow might say, “Watch this space. More to come.”