

**Bridging Our Divides:**  
**Why Liberals and Conservatives Need Each Other**  
**Part 5: Authority**  
**October 7, 2018**  
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Scriptures: Joel 2:28-29; Matthew 6:24; Luke 22:24-27

## **I. The Great Re-Formation**

*Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your elders shall dream dreams, and your youth shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2:28-29)*

Wouldn't it be great to live in a time like the prophet Joel foresaw centuries ago? I mean, with all the political infighting, economic uncertainty, climate change predictions and such, we could all use a little break in the clouds, a little sunshine on our faces, and a whole lot of inspiration of the Holy Spirit to lift our vision, couldn't we? It seems like there is no better time for a new Great Awakening to lead us down a different path than the one we appear to be on.

Be careful what you ask for.

Prophetic visions like that of Joel and other biblical sages certainly seem appealing on the surface. Who wouldn't want to be filled with the Holy Spirit and dream grand dreams or see grand visions? Yet, with great dreams and visions come great change. With change comes tumult. We may look back many years later with the benefit of hindsight and see that something new and wonderful happened, but the process in which it happens can get pretty messy.

Consider how the process of Awakening works on a very small scale.

Melanie and I had it easy when Arianna was born in 1991. We were at Princeton Theological Seminary at the time. I had just transitioned from the Masters of Divinity program to the Ph.D. program. Throughout the Masters program, plenty of our friends had their first children, and one by one we watched them disappear from any kind of social life and look increasingly haggard. So we were prepared for the worst when Arianna was born. Instead, we got the best.

Arianna was the most low-key, low-maintenance baby we'd ever seen. We could take her to restaurants in her car seat and she'd sleep or just be her quiet baby self the whole time. Our social life didn't miss a beat. I must admit we felt a little smug about it, too, looking at all our disheveled friends with their infants throwing up and toddlers throwing tantrums. We started thinking our good fortune wasn't fortune at all but the result of our "superior parenting skills." Then our second child, Maren, entered our lives two years later. Let's just say our views changed after that!

Maren is another story. Well into Arianna's early years, she was not only quiet, happy and easy-going, but she was a major rule-follower. You didn't have to ask Arianna twice to do anything if she knew the rule behind the action.

I remember once when Arianna was around 6 years old. We were sitting on the living room couch watching a PBS special on the history of rock n' roll. Jimmy Hendrix was on the television playing "Wild Thing" at the Monterey Pop Festival of 1967 as David Crosby gave a running commentary of what it was like to be there. Suddenly, Hendrix threw down his guitar, doused it with lighter fluid and set it on fire. At that point, Crosby came back on the screen saying, "Man, when Jimmy did that, we all realized there were no more rules in rock n' roll anymore. No more rules!"

Shocked, Arianna looked up at me with eyes as wide as saucers and said, "But Dad, there *are* rules. And one of them is, '*Do not play with fire!*'"

I wanted to capture that moment in amber and set it on my dresser. I knew quite clearly that one day Arianna's innocence, her enthusiasm for rule-following, and her respect for authority – including parental authority – would dry up and blow away like an autumn leaf.

It all started with makeup – which meant there were boys. Boys?! I told her at the time that she couldn't date until she was 35, but she just didn't seem to care about Dad's rules anymore, even perfectly sound rules like that one ...

In fact, the entire rules of engagement between Arianna and her parents changed seemingly overnight. Suddenly Dad was no longer the wise and loving sage whose every word was considered sacrosanct and trusted. No, Dad was now the embarrassing, clueless guy. I couldn't even hug her goodbye when I walked her to the bus stop anymore. I had to stop a block short of the bus stop so she wouldn't be so "uncool."

Arianna's path from obedient rule-follower to teenage outlaw was a perfectly natural and inevitable development. It's one that takes place when a child moves into a higher

state of awareness than they were before. Awakening. Awakening to ways of thinking and feeling that you never dreamed possible. Awakening to a different sense of selfhood. Awakening to the wider world and to the presence of other people who you used to think were disgusting but who are now kind of cute. And of course, awakening to the fact that those in authority don't necessarily have all the answers.

In other words, when you hit puberty, you start doing the prophet Joel kind of stuff – “dreaming dreams” and “seeing visions” – and these dreams and visions challenge your view of everything and everyone who is associated with the old way of life.

Thankfully, both Arianna and her parents survived her teenage years. She's a very intelligent, responsible, and creative adult. And we can hug again. Even in public!

Aside from the continuance of hugs, however, none of the other adult stuff would have been possible if Arianna had remained her rule-following, authority-respecting childhood self. As brutal as her pubescent awakening was at times, it served a good and necessary purpose.

Arianna's still a rule follower, actually. Some of the rules she follows are the exact same ones she followed as a child. Some are different. But in both cases, she now follows *her own* rules, not someone else's. This is what it means to become an adult. You enjoy the rewards, and live with the consequences, of becoming your own person.

As my friend and sociologist of religion, the late Phyllis Tickle observed, about every 500 years Western Civilization essentially goes through a puberty-like awakening all over again. Years later we may look back and call these times “Great Awakenings” or “Renaissances,” but they're really times when we essentially go through a lot of messy, teenage stuff and all hell breaks loose for a while. People start burning guitars, literally or figuratively. Parents pull their hair out wondering where they went wrong. It's not what's *wrong* that provokes the tumult. It's what's *right*. As with a teenager in the house, if you all survive those years, your life is generally better. Everyone is happier; more satisfied with who they are or who they are becoming.

For example, consider the most commonly acknowledged vast Great Awakening to sweep over Western civilization: the Great Renaissance of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. Most people assume that the Renaissance would have been a great time to be alive. Spring was in the air. Everything seemed to be flowering – art, literature, science, politics, economics, philosophy, and theology. Everything seemed to be blossoming in response to some general, creative outpouring of Spirit.

Yet the average person's experience of the Renaissance was not one of glee and creative exuberance, but of chaos and anxiety. New dreams and visions led to new ideas and awareness. New awareness led to radical shifts in the ways in which human society was organized and structured. During the Renaissance, new political and economic systems came into being, as did new political alliances. New cultural and educational centers arose. The center of social life shifted from the rural countryside controlled by feudal lords, to cities controlled by merchants and bankers. Even ideas about what it means to be human, and how we are related to the Divine, were shifting radically during the Renaissance.

The shifts were so deep, broad, and pervasive that seemingly wherever one turned, old institutions were crumbling and collapsing in on themselves in response to the new ones. In whatever areas you had attachments to the old way of life you felt directly threatened as, one by one, the old ways were decommissioned and replaced.

As all this was taking place, and no one had the benefit of hindsight to judge who was right, consider how it would have felt to live during the Renaissance. Who could you trust? The philosophers of old, or the new ones? Scientists defending the old world-views or those who constructed a vastly different model? Would you trust the old economic system, which was based on sharecropping and bartering, or the new system, which was based on money offered for the first time in human history by national banks? Would you support the established government, or join the revolution? (And if you joined the revolution, what would happen to those national banks?)

So vast was the crisis of trust during the Renaissance that even the most commonly acknowledged center of spiritual life – the Roman Catholic Church – was plunged into utter turmoil. For a while, two different popes vied for people's allegiance. In fact, for a number of years, three popes fought each other – two in Italy and one in Avignon, France. Each pope excommunicated his rivals, claiming to be the one true pope. That's how deep the crisis was in the institution that most people turned to for stability and vision in troubled times.

You see, this is what happens when God fulfills visions like the prophet Joel's – when young people see visions and old people dream dreams and those on the bottom of the social hierarchy trade places with those on top.

Apparently the "heavenly" doesn't break into our world without first breaking it apart. About every 500 years, a spiritual Awakening results in a spiritual crisis that turns the old way of life on its head. Rules are broken. Authority is questioned. Institutions crumble. Guitars are burned ...

Those who have benefited from the old authoritative structures – in politics, economics, art, science, philosophy and religion – tend to defend them tooth and nail. Those who have not benefited from these same institutions and structures tend to cheer on their demise and promote new ones.

The problem is, not all old ways of doing things are bad. And not all the new ways of doing things are good. Again, it's like when a child goes through puberty. Sometimes (okay, *often*), teenagers assume that their parents don't know a thing when they enter puberty. They fight traditional forms of authority, cast aside all forms of "normative" behavior, and take up the mantra, "I've gotta be free to be me."

Yet, parents seem to grow wiser as the child moves beyond puberty into adulthood. The child looks back and realizes that at least some of the rules, and some of the norms, actually help them be free to be themselves. Others don't. So they create their own "norms" based on what they consider to be the best of the old way of life and the best of the new. When Humpty Dumpty eventually gets put back together again, you find a rich mixture of new and old that have come together in such a way that life is better, not worse.

## **II. "I fight authority, authority always wins ..."**

At this point you might be asking yourself what all this stuff about teenagers and the Renaissance has to do with you.

If you are feeling a bit exhausted amidst all the social and political turmoil of our day, or hopeless, you may want to give yourself a little break. In case you hadn't noticed, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century you lived through a Renaissance that would make the Great Renaissance of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries look like child's play.

Skeptical? Consider these facts: In the year 1900, the first patent on record in the New York City Patent Office was a paper clip. By the year 2000 we were cloning sheep! In 1900, astronomers believed that the Milky Way was the only galaxy in the universe. By the year 2000, we had launched a telescope into space and found there to be at least 100 billion galaxies.

It's not just technology that blossomed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1900, forced labor, or legalized slavery, was practiced in nearly 200 countries. In the year 2000, legalized slavery was virtually non-existent. In 1900, approximately 40% of all children died before their fifth birthday. Now the number is 4%. In 1900, women had the right to vote

in just one country. Now the number is nearly 200. In 1900, less than 200 scholarly articles were published per year. In 2016 2,550,000 scholarly articles were published. In 1900, the share of adults (15+) with basic skills to read and write was about 20%. In 2016 it was 86%.

I could go on, but you probably get the point by now. If you were born at the beginning of the last century and lived until the end, you witnessed greater change than any person in human history ever witnessed before you. Wherever you turned, technological innovation turned with you – and turned things on their heads right before your eyes. Social and political institutions were in upheaval. Economic systems surged, then collapsed and resurged. Religious beliefs – and the institutions that supported them – flowered and bore fruit, then shriveled and fell to the ground. Their seeds scattered wherever the wind took them, resulting in tiny shoots everywhere whose future will very much depend on whether they fell on good soil or rocky soil.

Five hundred years from now (if civilization survives), people may look back and see that the Great Awakening, or Renaissance, we just experienced not only surpassed that of the last Great Renaissance, but was the result of a tectonic shift in human consciousness that surpassed every Great Awakening for at least 2,000 years.

The last Renaissance was followed by the Reformation. The Reformation was really about wrestling with the *crisis of authority* that the Renaissance provoked. Who got to decide which of the “old ways” were still valid and which should be discarded? Whose “new ways” would be considered “the way” or “the truth,” or “the life”? All of these questions of authority were fought out during the Reformation – which could also be called the Great Puberty that followed the Great Awakening.

That’s where we are (again) now. The New Puberty that followed one of the greatest Great Awakenings in human history. Is it any wonder why it’s not just guitars people are burning but entire institutions?

In Jonathan Haidt’s book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Haidt notes that there is a deep division between liberals and conservatives with respect to authority and the institutions that people commonly consider authoritative. Conservatives tend to defend older authoritative structures, viewing new ones as signs of social and cultural regression. Liberals tend to reject old structures of authority, believing that leaving them behind is a sign of social and cultural progression.

While Haidt doesn't say this, I think political and religious "conservatives" are like parents and "liberals" are like pubescent teenagers arguing with one another over how to live with one another.

If you consider yourself a "liberal" either politically or religiously and are offended that I've compared you to a pubescent teenager, bear in mind that teenagers often pick up on where the energy is flowing in society long before their parents do. As Jesus himself said, "Out of the mouths of babes and infants ..." That's who picks up on the Spirit's impulses first.

If you consider yourself a "conservative" and are offended by my comparing you to an "out of touch parent," bear in mind that a whole lot of parental wisdom isn't as "out of touch" as their teenagers think they are. When all is said and done, both the parent and the teen show great wisdom – and great folly. In the end, the folly doesn't matter so much provided that both the parent and the teen begin to recognize each other's wisdom and integrate it into a new way of being "family."

Next week, I'll have a few suggestions about how some people are already beginning to live in this new mode of being "family" and the implications it has for the rest of society. But for now, I leave you with this suggestion:

If you are exhausted and hopeless about where things are going in our country, bear in mind that you may be right to have lost hope, or there may be something you're not presently seeing. Personally, I have no idea whether we'll survive this period of adolescence with the family intact. However, I do have a pretty clear idea of what is causing the unrest. Just as in the Great Renaissance of old, and just as the prophet Joel envisioned in his own day, new awareness is breaking into our world that is the result of a massive in-breaking of the Holy Spirit. Just as has happened before, the Holy Spirit has to break things apart even as She's breaking in.

So you may want to consider amidst the turmoil and confusion: What new gifts has the Holy Spirit given us that has turned things on their heads? What new awareness has arisen, what new possibilities does this new awareness bring? Instead of cowering in despair, you may want to dream some dreams.