

Dolly, Indivisible: Reaching Across the Cultural Divide in America

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker, Beacon UU Congregation, October 23, 2022

There are those who call her the Jesus of the Appalachians. Dolly Parton, all twangy cornball vernacular, pink butterflies, and big hair and extraordinary talent. Dolly would never call herself that. Yet, even hardnosed NY journalists who spend time with her say she gives off healing power. You just feel good when you are around her.

Disclaimer – I am a fan. I like Dolly, respect her musical talent, and deeply respect her drive, her philanthropy and her inherent kindness. This is no hatchet job. Yet, Dolly offers a fascinating conundrum, even a challenge, in 2022. Can you have as much influence as Dolly Parton and not take stronger stances on dire social issues like racism or marriage equality or feminism, or well, just about anything you might name? And how exactly is Dolly so beloved by Americans all across the political and ideological spectrum. Her concerts are like a local census. She's more than merely "crossover." Gay men in Key West and evangelicals in Little Rock adore her and identify with her equally. Is this the result of a well-deployed PR campaign, or a savvy approach to being an exemplar rather than a loudmouth?

One scholar who has studied Parton's appeal and her place in the social history of white Southern women says this: "She's embraced by feminists and **queer folks** at the same time she is declared a queen by Confederate apologists. Dolly-as-mountain-girl anchors her to an ancestral white home in the imaginations of white people, while her class-conscious and gender-transgressive performance of whiteness becomes a signifier for white progressives who embrace gender fluidity and working-class ideals." You wouldn't believe how many scholars are into Dolly. Bless their sweet hearts! A journalist tweeted last year: "Dolly Parton, sitting in a pew onstage, just got a stadium full of New Yorkers to shout 'Amen,' And then: "Nothing says #Pride like a stadium full of gays singing 'Here You Come Again' with Dolly Parton."

Dolly Parton, who has given free books to thousands of children, who strives for fair wages at her Dollywood theme park (which keeps her childhood holler afloat) and who gave \$1 million to Vanderbilt University to develop COVID vaccines. Yep – Dolly isn't an anti-vaxxer.

When it was brought to her attention that the Dixie Stampede attraction at Dollywood was offensive, she changed it to The Stampede and expunged all of the nostalgic antebellum allusions to the Confederacy (including cringe-worthy bathroom

signs that said Northerners only and Southerners only). And here's what she said about that to a reporter from Billboard Magazine.

"There's such a thing as innocent ignorance, and so many of us are guilty of that. When they said 'Dixie' was an offensive word, I thought, 'Well, I don't want to offend anybody. This is a business. We'll just call it The Stampede.' As soon as you realize that [something] is a problem, you should fix it. Don't be a dumbass. That's where my heart is. I would never dream of hurting anybody on purpose." No one decided to boycott her. There as one incident, though, when she recorded the theme song, "Travelin Thru" for the film TransAmerica about a trans woman driving across the country with her son. Someone tried to rustle up the mob to cancel her and it went nowhere fast.

Dolly was speaking to Billboard in July 2020 as the country was engulfed in protests following the police killing of George Floyd. The interviewer asked her what she thought of the movement. "I understand people having to make themselves known and felt and seen," Parton said. "And of course Black lives matter. Do we think our little white asses are the only ones that matter? No!"

This kind of deft political quasi-answer is the sort of move Parton's been employing her entire career. She expresses empathy rather than partisanship— she understands why people have to make themselves known, even if she's not showing up at a protest herself — and she affirms that she loves everybody. And since she loves everybody, of course their lives matter. When asked if she is a feminist or for labor movements, especially in light of her anthem, 9-5, she finally relented after deflecting the question for years and expressed her support for women's equality. She even thought it was a ridiculous question given what she sings about and what she has done with her life. Dolly is a poor girl who wore a coat of rags, a working class warrior with talent who got rich and shared her wealth with folks in need, with children, with medical researchers.

At one point, the Tennessee legislature considered a bill to put up a statue of Parton on the Capitol grounds. Her response: Parton asked the legislature to remove the bill from consideration. "Given all that is going on in the world," she said in a statement, "I don't think putting me on a pedestal is appropriate at this time." She also turned down a Congressional Medal of Freedom from Donald Trump. She feigned humility, but many felt she just didn't want to be photographed with him. Then came the appearance at the Emmys in 2017 with her former co-stars, Lily Tomlin and Jane Fonda, both notoriously outspoken liberal activists. "Back in 1980, when we made that movie, we refused to be controlled by a sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot," Fonda said, quoting one of the repeated lines of *9 to 5*. "And it's true in 2017 we still refuse to be controlled by a sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot," Tomlin chimed in , to vociferous applause. Parton, between Tomlin and Fonda, went wide-eyed and took a step back from the microphone, although she continued smiling gamely. Fonda threw an arm around Parton's shoulders

as she went on with award show patter about best supporting actors, and then Parton stepped forward with her go-to deflection move: a boob joke. “Well, I know about support,” she cracked, gesturing to her chest. “Hadn’t been for good support, Shock and Awe here would be more like Flopsy and Droopsy!”

Dolly has often quipped - when in doubt make a boob joke. How do you think they might fly with your MAGA hat wearing Uncle on Thanksgiving? A boob joke in response to his declaration that the prophet of QAnon is a patriot? Or he mentions his concern about Jewish space lasers or Democratic pedophile rings, led by Tom Hanks of all people – the Jimmy Stewart of our generation!

Admiring Dolly and being Dolly are two very different things, and her shtick is much harder to pull off than she makes it look. Navigating the divides in America is even harder now than it was for Doug Muder, who shared his experiences the UU World article “Political Empathy” that Pia read earlier. 2013 – them’s the good old days, somewhat innocent compared to what we’re grappling with in 2022. If you’ve come here this morning, having read my sermon description, expecting either a Grand Old Opry music fest or some answers to how to solve the ever deepening and dangerous fractures in our country...sorry, no can do. Still not the oracle of Delphi or a Nobel prize winning social anthropologist.

That said – I’ve uncovered some fascinating and ultimately helpful ideas in my research for this service. I read one alarming article that posits that America could be divided in to twelve distinct nations in the next half century or so, and that this may come to pass if we cannot sustain democracy across our divisions. Arizona would be part of the nation of Aztlan, by the way.

Apparently, more than half of all Americans want to secede from the Union NOW in one direction or another. 31% think a civil war is likely within the next five years, Gulp. The author says this fragmenting into 12 nations is inevitable because large nations are unwieldy and democracy crumbles when a nation cannot get real representation at scale. He suggests that this may actually enable us to get along better. He asks what we are actually trying to preserve? In his words, “Our lack of shared values? The sham of corrupt politics? Apple pie and baseball?” And he lifts up one of the most damaging dimension of our society (one I have warned about and preached about) – Toxic Individualism, flag-wrapped as freedom.

He promotes free-market tinyism and city-states (modeled on Rome and Athens) and asks: “Do you think extreme left wokies are ever going to find common ground with Q-Anoners and Election Deniers ?” In other words, are we all going to sway together to “Islands in the Stream,” as if we were shoulder to shoulder at a Dolly Parton concert?

He warns that the alternative to his 12 nation tinyism proposal is a corporate controlled one-nation Earth where everyone conforms or gets crushed. It’s provocative

and chilling, to be sure. And the theory deserves further inquiry. That said, we have the country we have now, a mid term election is looming, and we are in peril, deeply riven by competing ideologies and sources of truth. Dolly, alone, can't save us.

A noteworthy book that was first published in 2012 is being rigorously discussed anew by pundits, scholars and podcasters, of all stripes. Its called The Righteous Mind by Jonathan Haidt (Height?) It explores the science of morality and values formation- how we live in matrices which bond us together around ideas and beliefs. It's also about group think, righteousness, flexibility and rigidity. Ask yourself: Do you have a righteous mind, one with no flexibility of belief? Are your attitudes so hard-wired and fixed that there is not leeway for persuasion?

Thanksgiving is coming up. Dolly may be the only safe topic at the dinner table, well, along with some keto-friendly, low carb recipes for stuffing and the finale of House of the Dragon (its on tonight, btw) We enter the holidays with some sort of armor on these days, believing its ok to agree to disagree, because who wants Uncle Ned throwing the turkey through the bay window over an argument about student debt relief? I do love a meme I saw this year, though: "Sure, we can be friends and disagree," says one woman. The other replies, "Yes, gurrll.... about pizza topics, but not racism, marriage equality, reproductive choice, or voting rights."

Our beliefs are hardwired to our emotions more than they are to our brains. Did you know that? And to persuade someone with differing truths and views, you need to appeal to their emotions and their moral foundations. Haidt tells us that we have two systems at work in controlling our cognitive processes – reason and emotions. And, believe it or not, our rational minds function in service to our emotional responses.

We are also tribal and groupish and bind ourselves to teammates with shared values, and this team-building can actually shut down open minded thinking, especially if we've made a belief iron clad, sacred and untouchable. We actually lose the ability to think clearly and are easily triggered by a challenge to their shared beliefs. This is a danger for us as progressive UUs, too.

In 2018, a pair of researchers discovered that after the 2016 election of Trump and the rise of conspiracy theorist and groups like The Proud Boys, Thanksgiving Dinner became an hour shorter. Political polarization is actually reducing the amount of time Americans spend with their loved ones. They concluded that 34 million person-hours of cross-partisan discourse were eliminated due to the effects of an intensely negative Presidential campaign. What can we do to have better conversations? Any conversations at all beyond awkward avoidance? Researchers say that the key is to stay positive and respectful and foster a discussion based on understand the other person, rather than trying to discredit them. Ask questions, be curious, be open to how others see the world, no matter how absurd it may sound to you. Better Angels, a group founded to foster more constructive dialogue, suggests these approaches: One-on-one conversations, when

possible. Find commonality with the other person. Stay calm. Avoid gotcha questions, don't label with words like racist or snowflake. Don't dominate and need to win. Encourage storytelling.

The way to change people's minds – make them less righteous, is to mirror the other person's framework, to appeal to their deeply held values. For instance, conservatives were more open to supporting same-sex marriage when it was contextualized this way – “Same sex couples are proud and patriotic Americans who contribute to the American economy.” Liberals go wrong by missing this approach and making arguments instead based on liberal talking points. Conservatives didn't do much better, by the way.

Of course, its quite difficult, and perhaps even disingenuous to argue from values that aren't central to your own worldview. But it may open doors and minds. For example, Aunt Millie passes the cranberry sauce and proclaims that “All those liberals want to turn our country into a socialist regime like China.”

You respond: “Aunt Millie, I know we're both proud to be Americans, and I how much it has meant to our family to have Medicare and Social Security, The GI Bill, WIC for childhood nutrition and Head Start so little Jimmy could go to preschool. I'm grateful for all of those things too and they are all part of the Democratic Socialist system we already have in America. More like Sweden than China because we have freedoms. And, by the way, most of these programs were spearheaded by Democrats like Roosevelt and Johnson.” This may not end the discussion but it may move the needle, even if Aunt Millie says, “Well, I don't know about that.” Aaarrrgh! Facts – so pesky.

In 2017, a non-profit brought together folks at more than 1300 dinners called The People's Supper Project. The idea was to encourage the participants to build bridges across their divided beliefs, to engage in brave and engaging dialogue; to be honest but not judgmental, to use “I” statements and resist giving advice. (resources and cards) Jonathan Heidt himself commented on this project, saying: If you really want to open your mind, open your heart first.” Like Dolly. Sure, there are some folks who label Dolly a cop out and that she should just come out and say what she believes. I'd say that in the main, she does, through her actions. She uses her enormous platform to be a fountain not a firehose. A model rather than a megaphone. And in doing so, I believe she inspires others to ask: WWDD? What would Dolly Do? (there's a T shirt and everything). What else would we wonder about the Jesus of the Appalachians - big blonde hair, rhinestone dresses, pink butterflies, boob jokes, and all?
So Blessed be Dolly. Blessed we. And Amen.

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