

# Commentary... Understanding each other

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Judging by recent letters to the editor in *The Nugget*, some residents of Sisters Country who have been vaccinated against COVID-19 are running out of patience with those who resist vaccination and mandates to wear masks in public spaces, such as our local schools.

But as Jonathan Haidt said in an interview in *The Atlantic* about the nature of political disagreements, "Does anyone really think we are going to win people over by insulting them and spouting hatred toward them? Or are we going to win them over by listening, one on one, as individuals, human to human, American to American?"

In his book, "Righteous Minds: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion," Haidt offers insights that may help us to understand those on the other side of the vaccination/mask debate.

He offers us the metaphor of an elephant and its rider:

The elephant represents the intuitive processes we use to make most of our decisions, propelling us toward people, experiences, and resources that will benefit us and away from those that might cause us harm.

The rider's job is to seek out information that confirms the elephant's intuition and to use this information to justify the elephant's actions.

Some people's intuition (and certainly the intuition of those who run in their herd) is that the vaccines against COVID-19 have dangerous side effects and so taking them is not safe. Similar intuitions may apply to wearing masks.

In support of their original intuition they offer up research from "experts" who cast doubt on the effectiveness/safety of the vaccines and masking.

Because intuition (the elephant) led them to their stance on vaccination and masks, appeals to reason will not prove effective, no matter how many studies we try to show them or experts we cite.

Only by listening, striving to understand how intuition guided their thinking about vaccination and masking, can we hope to further any dialogue.

Evolution may help us to understand why some parents at the last school board meeting were so irate about their children being forced to return to school masked.

Human evolution, says Johnathan Haidt, took place at

both the level of the individual and the level of the group. The most fit humans survived to pass along their genes to their descendants. But those who tried to go it alone often didn't survive for long.

Individuals who banded together for mutual defense, who hunted, gathered food, and raised offspring cooperatively, were more likely to outcompete others for limited resources, thereby increasing their chances of survival. Group cooperation was also favored by natural selection.

There exists an inherent tension between the individual, focused on their personal welfare, and the group, whose success requires everyone to set aside their personal agendas (at least temporarily) and work cooperatively for the benefit of the group.

Getting this balance right is critical, because communities who fail to honor individual rights soon lose the cooperation of their members.

The proper exercise of power by those in authority is so critical to the success of a community that according to Haidt, humans come "pre-wired" with a moral sensitivity to authority and its potential for abuse.

Even our early ancestors had experience with tyrannical leaders who neglected the needs of the clan in favor of the power afforded by their position. Clan members would band together to oust oppressive leaders.

When parents in our community tell us that the balance of power has shifted too far in favor of the group's welfare, depriving them of the right to determine what's best for their children, we should try to understand their concerns.

When our parents feel heard, they will be more likely to consider the welfare of others living in the community, including the medically vulnerable, as they exercise their right to make decisions about their children's welfare.

Understanding the world from the perspective of our parents is the best way to enlist their cooperation when we ask them to send their children to school with a positive attitude about wearing masks (or vaccinating against COVID-19).

We must strive to strengthen our community by listening to all of our voices.

*Additional source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/jonathan-haidt-pandemic-and-americas-polarization/612025/>*

## CLARIFICATION

In last weeks' *Nugget* the story about Habitat for Humanity's annual volunteer recognition event (*August 25, page 1*) incorrectly reported that Diana Harris was in her Habitat home for 15 years. It is 19 years.

Harris was not the second, but the ninth, to pay off a Habitat mortgage in Sisters since 1991.

Typically, Habitat funds 25- to 30-year loans, and hers was a special circumstance having received a grant that reduced her mortgage term.

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