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OPINION



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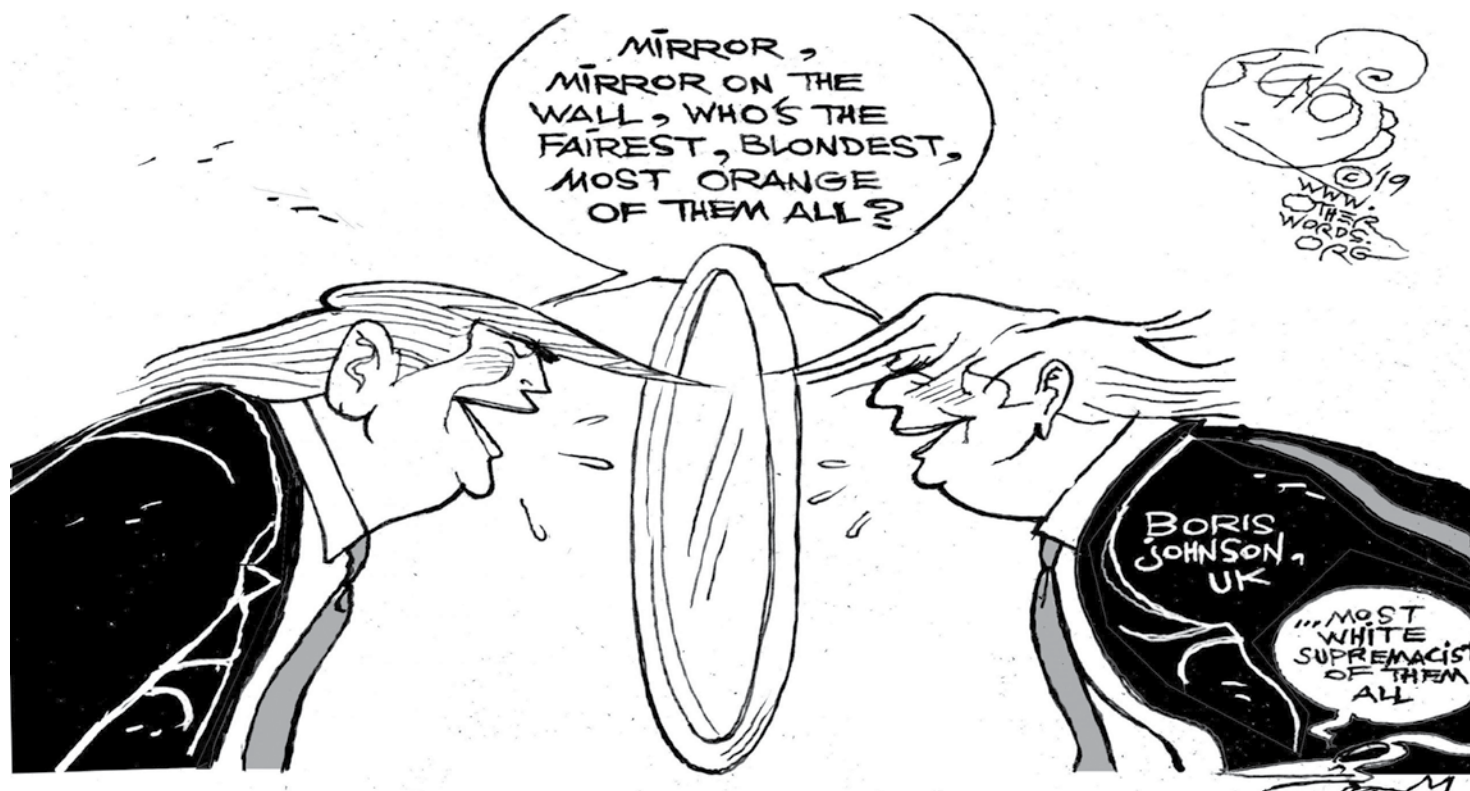
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Anger and Forgiveness in Our Politics

We can work together for the betterment of all



BY LESLIE D. GREGORY AND TOM H. HASTINGS

Forgiveness is a popular topic. Forgive your cheating spouse and put it behind you. Forgiveness is how you achieve closure and can move on. Forgive your lying boss or co-worker—how can you reduce your toxic workplace stress unless you just let it go?

“Forgiveness is for you, not for the perpetrator.” That is the common refrain. And it has precedence in philosophy: “Anger: an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.”—words attributed to both Seneca the Younger and Mark Twain. The assumption is, if you want anger gone—and you should—you must forgive. That will calm your heart, ease your mind, and soothe your spirit.

But what if anger is a good thing in many cases?

Rosa Parks was asked why she decided to risk her well being, her freedom, her employment, possibly even her life by refusing to obey a command in December 1955 by an Alabama white bus driver to give her bus seat to a white man and move to the back of the bus? She said that she was propelled by anger at what violent racists had done

to Emmet Till, the young black boy from Chicago who was accused of whistling at a white woman while he was visiting family in Mississippi. His body was found lynched, tortured, disfigured, and tied to a weight in the river.

Rosa did great work and lived long. She sparked one of the greatest upheavals of nonviolent citizen demands for basic civil rights in the history of the US.

Both Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. wrote frequently about anger and its value in the freedom and liberation struggles they led. Gandhi, who was born and raised in the Steam Age, had the best metaphor, noting that anger is much like steam; you can let it build up until you explode destructively or you can harness it to do great and difficult tasks.

The rise of anger in our politics did not start with Trump, though it worsened badly beginning with his campaign and has carried on into his time in the White House. The difference in the anger expressed in bigoted terms is significant and one wonders how Latinx voters can set aside the anger in being called animals by Trump? One wonders how the tiki torch-wielding white nationalists can draw down their rage against people of color? We have to ask where we are headed if this full head of steam continues to build up?

Clinically, equanimity might be a factor in reducing hypercortisolism, a condition produced by overproduction of cortisol by the adrenal glands in response to threat. Perhaps we are indeed now the Not-So-United States of Adrenaline Overload and our national

heart is at risk.

Achieving equity in our society may be one of the best ways to find social, collective equanimity and thus help heal our body politic as surely as finding our inner calm and balance can help heal our individual bodies.

If so, investigating processes of restoring civil discourse and reaffirming common decency might involve some admixture of acknowledgement of hurt and harm to our polity, some bits of apology, elements of graciousness however grudging, a smattering of forgiveness, and some long term deeper work on our history of traumas to each other.

A great starting point would be to seek health care coverage and access for all, by whichever path a bipartisan coalition might choose. Republicans can call it “VA for Every Patriot” and Democrats can continue to use Medicare for All (while maintaining private insurance for those who prefer it, so a “public option). Everyone wins.

Health care in America costs more than in any country on Earth,

but VA for Every Patriot would radically reduce costs while greatly improving access, attenuating over time the horrific health care outcome disparities such as black mothers of every income class dying in childbirth at rates that skyrocket by an order of magnitude more than white women’s.

If Democrats believe racism is a threat to public health, Medicare for All is the single fastest and most realistic way to begin to mitigate that threat. If the Republicans want to stand up for their base of poor whites, VA for Every Patriot will help measurably.

Then, we pray, everyone can calm down a bit and continue to work together for the benefit of all, slowly forgiving themselves and others for this time of acrimony and chaos.

Without this work, we fear for our democracy and for the human and civil rights of all of us.

Leslie Gregory is a certified physician assistant and is the executive director of Right to Health. Tom Hastings of Portland is director of PeaceVoice.

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