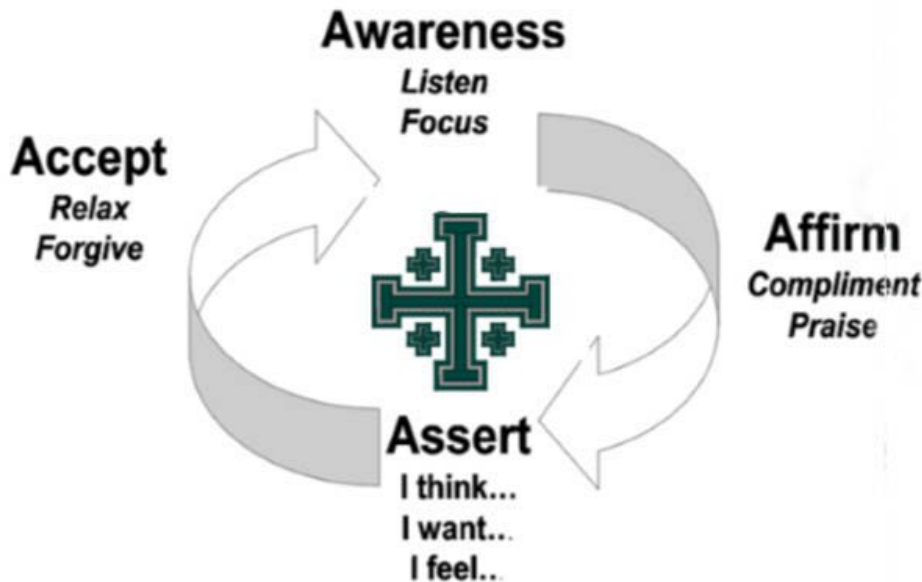


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## Do No Harm! John Wesley, Linda and My Best Friend

by [Tom DeLoughry](#)

February 19, 2019



Snagit User

Illustration Courtesy of Dr. Tom DeLoughry

### *A United Methodist Reporter Exclusive*

The Quadrilateral (Scripture, Tradition, Experience Reason) misses an important step that can help us to more fully follow God's will: "Do No Harm" – Wesley's first general rule.

As a former Catholic who has worked for the past forty years teaching mind-body spirit programs to seniors, adults and teens, I've often written or said: "I don't know of a better way of doing religion than the Methodist church." I have praised the virtues of the Quadrilateral and admired how input from both ministers and laity shapes Methodist theology.

But recently, in the midst of a discussion about Scripture and human sexuality, I came to two jarring conclusions: Shouldn't we weigh the "harm" of our decisions to

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the church and its members? And shouldn't we consider how the well-established "blindness of bias" equally affects both progressives and conservatives?

## **The Blindness of Bias**

For years my wife and I have taught in our stress management programs that "feelings influence the facts we see." But now there is a growing consensus among psychologists (such as Dr. Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*) that the impact of feelings does much more than influence what we see. He suggests that all of us, progressive and conservatives, unconsciously select information that support our bias. **The bias comes first, then our rational minds choose information to justify our feelings.**

Let me illustrate with a secular example. If you like a particular politician, don't you gravitate to positive articles about that candidate while dismissing the negative articles? The opposite is true if you dislike the politician: Don't you secretly relish any negative stories, laugh at insulting jokes and dismiss the positive stories?

There is enough richness in the Bible to support many different beliefs. Thus, historically, those who have supported slavery and opposed female ordination have gravitated to Biblical passages that support their bias. Those with opposing views have quoted other Scripture that supports *their* biases.

Here's a quiz for you: Do you feel uneasy when seeing a same sex couple holding hands or kissing in a movie? Would you be upset to learn that one of your children is gay? If your answer

is 'yes' chances are you are uncomfortable with homosexuality. This is very common, and doesn't make you a bigot. However, your discomfort *might* make it more likely you'll focus on one of the culturally-bound passages in the Bible that prohibit homosexuality. And you'll ignore the command to "love God with all your heart, being, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

According to Dr. Haidt's research, liberals tend to focus on issues like fairness and justice, while de-emphasizing other issues necessary for a healthy society: like loyalty and authority which are important to conservatives. Both are important for a strong society (and a strong church!) so it's important that we listen to each other.

Like canaries who first notice bad air in a mine, liberals are particularly sensitive to injustice, while conservatives place more importance on the rules. A church that is all liberal or all conservative will not be as strong, as one in which both liberals and conservatives listen and learn from each other. Isn't that right?

When you're gay, you don't "come out" just once. Instead, you endure the stress of coming out each time you meet someone new at work, in church or in your neighborhood. How would it affect *your* mental health if you knew about half the

people you met thought you were a sinner, or maybe a pervert, even though you had no control over the way that God created you?

Homosexuals don't have a higher suicide rate because they are mentally ill. In 1976, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. Instead, they suffer from social and religious stigma.

As recently as fifteen years ago, I supported the ban on same-sex marriages, despite an up-close view of the pain my counseling clients suffered. I remember Linda, a short, round blond teen with a bad front tooth, whose parents had kicked her out when they learned she was gay. As she bounced often from one unstable situation to something worse, she turned to drugs to ease the pain. Suicide was never far from her mind. I don't think I helped her very much. Nor, despite my best efforts, did I help dozens of others like her.

Then, one day, my best friend told me he wanted to be a woman. I was shocked and appalled, and we had some very loud arguments about the choice he was making. But I stuck with him through the transition because I knew, if the situation was reversed, he (now she) would do the same for me. Now she is vibrant leader in a United Church of Christ congregation.

Why should she, or anyone, be denied the full comforts of the Christian faith? Why should she be denied the blessings of Christ if she ever chooses to consecrate her love with someone else?

I wish that when I was counseling Linda, and others like her, I knew that there were Christian congregations that would love her and accept her. Their embrace would have been immeasurably more healing than my meager counseling skills.

### **A Thought Experiment**

For just a moment, try this thought experiment: Since you probably don't have time to read Dr. Haidt's book detailing the dozens of studies that support his conclusion, just imagine that he is right: *Our bias comes first, then our rational minds choose information to justify our feelings.* What if the rules against homosexuality *might* be a projection of our collective discomfort? If so, as our biases became crystalized into church rules, haven't we have elevated our feelings into the Word of God? And, almost literally, crushed the souls of nearly ten percent of our population who are unable to change the way that God created them?

Can you imagine a greater horror?

I might be wrong. As mentioned above, my biases changed fifteen years ago and so did my position on same sex marriage. Maybe they'll change again.

But if our biases (conscious and unconscious) have such a pervasive impact on our perceptions, shouldn't awareness of our biases, and awareness of the potential harm we cause, be part of any theological discussion? ...before we tear our church apart? ...

before we continue to stigmatize nearly ten percent of our population who need to feel Christ's love?

Being biased comes with being human. But we can become more aware of them, and God's will for us, through prayer. A petitionary prayer like, "Lord, help me" is a good start. But **an intentional prayer is better**, especially if we meditate on an *awareness* of our feelings; *affirm* and be grateful for the goodness in ourselves and our enemies; *assert* our intent to do God's will; and *accept* or forgive ourselves, others and God.

These four *Satisfaction Skills* (awareness, affirmations, assertiveness, acceptance) – which reflect the major points in *The Lord's Prayer* – can not only be used for **prayer** but also to **manage stress, improve communication and increase sensitivity** to those whose opinions, gender, generation, race, religion or sexual orientation is different from ours.

We have consistently found that nearly 90 percent of church leaders who learn these skills report that they are helpful in **forgiving themselves, others and God**. Free downloadable booklets, videos and related information can be downloaded for free from <http://www.caringteams.org/>

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by **Tom DeLoughry**

February 19, 2019

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