2025 - LIAM HOOPER, MDIV

Kinship and the Psychology of Divisiveness:
Patty Krawec & Keith Payne - Reading Reflection Prompts

"... in order to learn anything at all, we must first empty our minds of our cherished notions and assumptions. An open mind is a necessary prerequisite to learning. To receive a cup of tea, we must hold an empty cup. However great our knowledge, there is still an infinite amount more to be learned. "In this world," as Margaret Mead says, "no one can complete an education."
Chop Wood, Carry Water: A Guide to Finding Spiritual Fulfillment in Everyday Life. p 19

The authors of *Chop Wood, Carry Water* offer this wisdom from Margaret Mead in their chapter on the project of learning—about anything, as individuals as well as groups of human persons. As I continue to observe, wrestle with, and reflect on regular manifestations of America's rising divide, I remain curious about casualties, possible remedies, and potential practices for building relational communities that form buffers against recurring socio-political fractures. I am curious about lessons that have, perhaps, been missed and about what we can learn from where we are that will help us move, collectively, to a different, more humanely habitable place. I could be wrong, but I imagine I am not alone in such ponderings.

I also wonder if one of the factors in our contemporary divide might not stem from a likelihood that, in the mean, we co-inhabitants of cities and towns aren't really talking with one another about issues and concerns in relational ways, across differences in experience and perspectives, and that when we are talking, **we are not necessarily coming together holding empty cups**.

Referencing his and others' research in his book *Good Reasonable People: The Psychology Behind America's Dangerous Divide*, UNC-CH Professor, Keith Payne has proposed that human divisiveness, by nature, is ultimately grounded in two essential aspects of human psychology. The first of these is the phenomenon (once known as psychological, or cognitive, defense mechanisms) now called the psychological immune system. The psychological immune system is the collection of generally unconscious processes that shape, reframe, and manipulate our perceptions, impressions, sensations, emotions, memories, experiences, and the beliefs we form from them in order to minimize discomfort, neutralize threats, increase happiness, and promote well being.

The second psychological feature is an underlying orientation that Payne calls the Psychological Bottom Line, or the PBL. In simple terms, the psychological bottom line is the essential human tendency toward a need to believe that we—each of us, personally—are good, intelligent, well-meaning, reasonable people. And therefore, so too are the people in the groups to which we belong. After all, what sort of good, reasonable person would knowingly align theirself with others who are not also good and reasonable? Under pressure from outside inputs, the psychological immune system will contort our mental faculties into any necessary framework to protect and preserve the belief we are, no matter what, good reasonable people.

The psychological immune system is evolutionarily disposed to ensure that whenever we are met with threats to our sense of self, our core beliefs, and/or our worldview, we engage those threats

with a full cup of tea rather than an empty one—**and this tea is flavored with strong doses of our own particular beliefs, notions, assumptions, and cherished "facts."** This is so whether these "facts" are in fact verifiably true or simply *ideas we believe to be true*. Moreover, research demonstrates that verifiable facts, science, and/or other collections of data, alone, do not change the perspectives and conclusions drawn by the psychological immune system because the stakes are too high. At stake in sociocultural, political, and even religious conflicts is the psychological bottom line: the innate need to believe that we, and the members of groups we belong to, are good and reasonable people… and by implication, that we are able to discern what is good; have a reasoned and true sense of the world, circumstances, ourselves and others; and that we are able to weigh these factors and make decisions to act in accordance with our reasoned worldview and the good we have discerned.

Even as evidence suggests these psychological processes are indeed true forces, at any given time, realities in the world around us point to another, equally powerful and true reality: that we, each of us, are not only interdependently connected, we are kindred—every single one of us; and quite possibly, everything that exists in the world, all kin by nature. In her book *Becoming Kin: An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future*, Anishinaabe-Ukrainian author, podcaster, and activist Patty Krawec addresses this underlying reality and asks the question: "what does it mean to be good relatives—to not only recognize our kinship but to be good kin" (19)?

In answer—and with nuanced examples, thoughtfulness, and clarity of historical realities—Krawec proposes that we "must move from recognizing the fact of our relationship to actually existing together in reciprocal relationships," (p 19) which allows us to reimagine the relationships we have inherited and engage our responsibilities to each other and our earthly home. To this project, Krawec poses the further question: "how do we restore relationships and balance to what has been made so precarious?"

Placing the core tenets and postulations of these texts in conversation with one another invites me to **encounter them with the closest thing to an empty cup that I can muster**. As I journey with Krawec and Payne, I am finding that considering and reflecting on key passages alongside one another offers rich ground for discovery and imagining practices for relational cultivation.

Below are some of the passages I have chosen to consider together for insights and meaning-making. I offer these quotes (with no mandates or pressure) as conversation partners and dialogue prompts for any and all who wish to sit a while, fill their possibilities cup, and glean wisdoms from these two thinkers.

1 ~ Considering the Absence of Ideology and the Realities of Colonialism
From Keith Payne: *Good Reasonable People: The Psychology Behind America's Dangerous Divide*. (pp 63, 65)

(Payne referenced researcher Philip Converse who) … identified a few exceptions to this general lack of ideology. Politicians themselves had clear ideologies. They tended to be reliably liberal or conservative, and they were consistent in their views over time. Other "elites" such as journalists and academics whose fields relate to politics also showed evidence of genuine ideologies. And a minority of ordinary people who scored highly on a test of political knowledge showed a fair degree of coherence. But these groups make up a very small segment of the public. Converse estimated that around 15 percent of the population could be considered to have a political ideology. The other 85

percent, he concluded, were "innocent of ideology."

Most people have no ideology, if an ideology is understood as a coherent set of principles, or even a coherent set of issue opinions. What they have, instead, is group loyalties and the desire for their groups to dominate other groups. ... once people identify as part of a group, their psychological immune system kicks in to ensure that no matter what happens, they can see themselves and their groups as good and reasonable people.

From Patty Krawec: *Becoming Kin: An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future*. (pp 16-17)

Colonization has gotten inside our heads. It is more than driving cars and talking on iPhones, more than the food we eat or where we shop. We often put colonization in the past, dressing it up in sixteenth-century costumes. But as Patrick Wolfe has said, colonialism is a process and not an event. Settler colonialism came to stay in the Americas in the sixteenth century, but it neither started there, nor has it stopped. It cut its teeth on the Crusades, where the rape and violence enacted on Jews and Muslims were the price of Christian freedom. A violence that persists and finds expression in the burnings of mosques and synagogues, shootings, and travel bans. It sharpened its blade on the repeated expulsions of Jewish people from Europe and the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula, which banished Muslims from Spain. It consolidated its power over women through the fires of the witch burnings. And it arrived on these shores with the authority of the Doctrine of Discovery tucked beneath its arm, settling into our lands and our heads, shaping everything about how we live. It is an ongoing process of destruction and replacement, destroying Indigenous beliefs and lifeways and replacing them with churches and board meetings.

Wendy Makoons Geniusz and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson both write about biskaabiiyang as returning to our own Anishinaabe way of thinking. When we return to ourselves, we undo the colonialism that has gotten inside our heads.

We can only do this if we are willing to understand our history differently, if we take our stories out of isolation and put them together. We need to revisit the stories we tell ourselves—about how we got here—and see something different, see something that allows us to become relatives again.

Some Suggestions for Discussion:

1 ~ What might turning and returning to selfhood entail for you? For you and your direct kindred? If you are already on such a journey, what has it been like for you?

2 ~ Considering Krawec's offering, what specific examples of colonization as a continuing process can you identify?

3 ~ Are there connections between the processes and practices of settler colonialism and the phenomenon of the absence of ideology Payne discusses? If so, what are these connections? How would you name and describe them?

4 ~ On a more personal level: Has colonialism gotten inside your head? Can you identify ways that the form and functions of settler colonialism have infiltrated your basic assumptions, worldview, belief systems, and (perhaps) your sense of self?

5 ~ What aspects of your history, of your kindred stories, can you identify as areas that need to be revisited? What might that journey involve?

2 ~ Thick & Maximal Groups and Carrying Our Bundles

From Payne: (pp 34, 40, 41)

Scores of studies have found that people rate themselves as consistently morally good. Even people imprisoned for violent crimes view themselves as good people. According to one study, they rate themselves as not only kinder and more compassionate than other prisoners but also as morally superior to the average community member. If violent criminals manage to keep up a good opinion of themselves, it is even easier for the rest of us to overlook our more mundane flaws and failures to see ourselves as basically good people. ...

But our high opinions of ourselves are not about ourselves alone. We extend those high opinions to groups we belong to. Forming a tight connection between your identity and a group is what defines really belonging to a group. Everyone belongs, in a shallow sense, to an unlimited number of groups. ... But sharing a characteristic or an interest with these groups doesn't by itself mean someone belongs to a group. What really matters is whether their identity is bound up with the group. ...

(Payne notes that Holocaust survivor and psychologist, Henri Tajfel found that) ... the act of thinking of oneself as a group member was critical. To understand why Slovenians thought Bosnians were lazy or white Americans thought the same about Black Americans, you didn't need to look into the personal characteristics of the Slovenians, the Bosnians, or the white or Black Americans. You only needed to understand what the groups were in those societies and which groups were advantaged or disadvantaged. ... Groups like race, religion, and nationality tie our concept of belonging to the group to our concept of being a good person. They attach our small individual lives to a history and a purpose larger than ourselves. Because of that, they give us a sense of meaning and mission that few other parts of our life can rival. At the same time, these thick groups mean that whatever we do on behalf of our group, we do in service of a greater good. These are maximal groups. ... As soon as we draw a boundary that defines our in-groups, we have also defined our out-groups on the other side of that line. And the more intensely devoted we are to our groups, the more antagonistic we are to outsiders.

From Krawec: (pp 19-20)

At some point in the distant past, we began to pick things up and take them with us.

At some point, archaic humans not only fashioned tools; they began to carry these tools with them from one place to another. They began to carry decorative objects and things that held memory of other places and people. They decorated themselves with memory and story. They carried fire and the tools with which they created fire. And around these fires, our long-dead ancestors began to gather together, holding these objects and sharing the stories that were already ancient. Stories tied to feather and stone, tools and ceremonial items that explained who they were and how they were connected to the world around them. They began to carry bundles.

My bundle is a tangible thing. It is a box topped with a blanket that contains stones and pipes, an eagle feather, and a brass cup. It contains the fundamental medicines of the Ojibwe: tobacco and sage, sweetgrass and cedar. It contains matches and a lighter and a small cast-iron pan. These things hold story and memory, responsibility and care. They remind me of people and places, ceremonies and obligations I am only beginning to understand. My bundle is a container that holds knowledge and the responsibilities that I carry with me.

You have a bundle too. Think of what you would gather if you had to flee, the objects that mean the most to you. You look at them and see memory and history, connection and relationship. The items in our bundles have ancestors too: they have stories to tell us about the lives they led before they

arrived in our hands. These things that are precious to us connect us to relatives and histories, to memories and stories unspoken and relatives we may or may not wish to claim.

When I say return to yourself and pick up your bundles, I am asking you to look at those things with new eyes. Listen to their full history and remember your relationships and obligations.

Some Suggestions for Discussion:

1 ~ What points of connection do you note, if any, between the human tendency—or need—to carry bundles and the human evolution from expressing an underlying relational nature with emphasis on memory, story, and connectivity to the need to attach a moral-ethical superiority to ourselves and the people with whom we are connected which form the reasons for our belonging: namely, that our belonging is characterized by being good, reasonable people?

2 ~ Payne observes that, at least superficially, we all belong to infinite numbers of groups, to what groups do you see yourself belonging? Which of these groups do you feel are connected to your sense of self, to your identity?
How would you describe the defining characteristics of these groups?

3 ~ Krawec offers the suggestion that "*You have a bundle too*." Assuming this is so:
What would you gather if you had to flee?
She adds: "*When I say return to yourself and pick up your bundles, I am asking you to look at those things with new eyes. Listen to their full history and remember your relationships and obligations*."
What might returning to yourself and picking up your bundles involve?
What might it mean to listen to the full story of your bundled items?
What do you recognize as your essential relationships? What are your obligations?

4 ~ What, if anything, do you take away from these two teachings? How might these lessons inform, shape, or reshape your relational endeavors and your hopes for meaningful change in your communities?

3 ~ Multiplicity and the Cognitive Response Principle

From Krawec: (pp 36, 37, and 38)

We are *manomin.* The original peoples exist across the Americas in the distinct ways that we were created, fallen to earth or rising from holes as beings in this new world. We are in relationship with our Creator and the other beings created with us, as essential to the existence of the land and water on which we live as the land and water are essential to our existence. This is where we live and die, our bodies returning to earth, where they are taken up by plants and animals only to return to earth again. Webs of reciprocal, cyclical relationships.

Multiple creation stories, emerging from multiple gardens, describe the relationships of multiple peoples. There is not a single story to which we all must be reconciled. Not a single story with a single message. Not a single narrative that provides its bearer with authority and power to control the lives of others.

Western thinkers—whether theologians, historians, or scientists—look for how we arrived here so that they can position us as simply *earlier* settlers. This perspective of us—as people who wandered off from the garden, who wandered off from the truth—became a basis for authority over us. ...

Having a single creation story not only made ours wrong; it created a power differential that placed European Christians, who knew the truth, above the Indigenous peoples, who lived in darkness. Europe, dominated as it was by Christians, had a single creation story and had previously dealt with

difference by eliminating it or absorbing it. But the Americas had many; we had learned to live with multiplicity. ...

What if the early European colonists, instead of thinking of us as having wandered from the truth, had considered our own emergence as people in relationship with this place? What if they had seen God's presence in this place instead of emptiness and absence? What if the settlers, instead of reenacting the conquest of Canaan, had pursued relationship? What if they had sought kinship?

From Payne: (pp 42, 43, 44 and 45)

The cognitive response principle, in short, says that all persuasion is self-persuasion. Any message we send to other people is simply an occasion for them to listen to their own thoughts in response.

Our own thoughts turn out to be inevitably encouraging and refreshingly reassuring about our own perspective whenever our social identities are involved. One popular idea [for this] ... was that people simply ignored information that was inconvenient for their existing beliefs or desires. But that turned out to be wrong. When people are confronted with inconvenient information, they think more, not less. Their psychological immune system revs up, and they start spinning lots of ideas to defend themselves. And then, following the cognitive response principle, they believe their own thoughts rather than the original information that was presented to them. ...

In general, this tendency to believe our own thoughts is sensible and adaptive. Most of the thoughts we have as we go about our lives are true, and they have our own best interest at heart. ...

Learning new information is much harder, though, once the psychological immune system gets involved. ...

When I can't understand how someone can believe what they believe, I find it helpful to explicitly articulate little syllogisms from their perspective that start with the psychological bottom line premises. By the time I get to the end, their conclusion "therefore my belief is true" makes a lot more sense.

Adopting this perspective means that we have to let go of the default theory we normally apply to human thinking. We implicitly assume that people process information like a computer. They are presented with new information, they compare it to their existing knowledge, weigh the plausibility of the evidence, and draw a conclusion. Reasoning in this view works in a straight line from premises to conclusions. That theory works for topics where our social identities are not involved. ... [once they are]

... The new information rarely stands a chance. That's because once the psychological immune system is involved, reasoning operates not in a straight line but in circles. As soon as you reach a conclusion that conflicts with something else you want to believe, you go back and start again, trying some new arguments.

Some Suggestions for Discussion:

1 ~ Following Krawec's pointed questions (paraphrased):

How do you imagine things might be different in America if the colonizers had considered Indigenous relationships with this place as natural, normative, and sacred?

What if they had seen the lands here as good, rather than a wasteland of resources? What if they had seen those living here as human beings, valued them and their diversity, and chosen relationships over expulsion, eradication, and exploitation? What if they had pursued kinship?

2 ~ Consider Payne's summarial description of the cognitive response principle that *all persuasion is self-persuasion*.

What does this mean to you? Can you think of examples of this psychological process at work in our

civic discourse? If so, what seems most notable to you?
How might we as groups of concerned persons respond more helpfully and productively to our divisions? What solutions to our current divides would you propose?
Have you experienced the process of self-persuasion? What can you learn from that looking back?

3 ~ Krawec observes:
"*Having a single creation story not only made ours wrong; it created a power differential that placed European Christians*, who knew the truth, *above the Indigenous peoples*, who lived in darkness. Europe, dominated as it was by Christians, had a single creation story and had previously dealt with difference by eliminating it or absorbing it. *But the Americas had many; we had learned to live with multiplicity*."

What comes to mind for you as you reflect on this aspect of Indigenous experience?
What are your thoughts about how we might foster such a path toward learning, personally and collectively, to "unforget" the past, reimagine our future, and learn to be kindred living with multiplicity?
What is needed?
How do the psychological realities Payne posits offer helpful insights? How do his conclusions illuminate barriers or otherwise complicate the reality of inherent kinship?

References & Resources

Fields, Rick, et al. *Chop Wood, Carry Water: A Guide to Finding Spiritual Fulfillment in Everyday Life*. Tarcher/Putnam Books, 1984.

Krawec, Patty. *Becoming Kin: An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future*. Broadleaf Books, 2022.

Payne, Keith. *Good Reasonable People: The Psychology Behind America's Dangerous Divide*. Viking, 2024.