

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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WHEN POLITICS GET IN THE WAY OF EMPATHY

A couple of days ago, Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid (D-NV) broke several ribs and facial bones when a piece of exercise equipment broke, causing him to fall. Taken to a Las Vegas-area hospital, Senator Reid was discharged within 24 hours, returned to his home in Henderson, and by yesterday, was making plans to return to Washington for the beginning of the 114th Congress. Obviously, Senator Reid is one tough hombre.



This is not the first time the senator has injured himself while exercising: in 2011, Reid dislocated his shoulder and suffered a black eye after slipping while exercising in the rain. Despite the fact that he's 75, Reid is a dedicated "gym rat." As a young man he was an amateur boxer and at age 33, competed in the 1972 Boston Marathon, completing the 26-mile course in a very respectable 3:11. (By comparison, at age 20, Rep. Paul Ryan completed Duluth's "Grandma's Marathon" in 4:01:25.)

While reading news stories about Senator Reid's latest gym-related injury, I thought it might be instructive to see how various sites reported it. Sampling nearly a dozen different major sites, I found the reportage to be, in the main, fairly objective and straightforward. What was neither objective nor straightforward were comments from readers of the various sites. Those receiving their news about Reid's mishap on mainstream or progressive sites -- *Los Angeles Times*, *Huffington Post*, *MSNBC.com* -- tended to be empathetic,

reasonably even-handed and hoping for his recovery. Conversely, those receiving their news from conservative or Tea Party sites -- *Breitbart*, *Daily Mail*, *News Max*, *Powerline* -- tended to be callous, cruel and deeply partisan. In other words, how one feels about the plight of Senator Reid has a lot to do with one's political persuasion.

A sampling of reader comments will indicate the wide divergence of responses:

Mainstream & Progressive Websites

- ✓ "Glad he was not hurt too badly. The man's a Progressive obstructionist, but no one wants anyone else hurt." (*Los Angeles Times*)
- ✓ "I hope Senator Reid is all right. In some ways it was a bad ending to a worse year. I'm sure all of the real Christians will wish him well and the ones that pay lip service will only make fun of this incident." (*MSNBC.com*)
- ✓ "It's a shame some people feel the need to politicize everything. The guy got hurt.... whether you agree with his politics or not shouldn't stand in the way of human decency." (*Huffington Post*)

Conservative & Tea Party Sites

- ✓ "Here's hoping we start the new year off on a positive note and a nasty hospital-acquired infection finishes off this lecherous cretin once and for all. I'd even pop open a bottle of bubbly for that celebration. Here's to you, antibiotic-resistant bacteria! (*Zerohedge.com*)
- ✓ "I presume the incident involved the exercise equipment preferred by politicians: booze and hookers." (*Powerline Blog*)
- ✓ "Here's hoping for a long, painful, and ultimately unsuccessful 'recovery'." (*News Max*)
- ✓ "He needs to report to the death chambers for processing!" (*Breitbart*)

Upon reading Annie the essay up to this point, her response was, "My goodness: how malicious!" Well yes, many of the comments do evince a wide streak of maliciousness . . . and vindictiveness, spite and just plain cussedness. To all those who opined that Reid's accident occurred due to his being intoxicated, I would remind them that the Senator is a Latter Day Saint, and does not imbibe. To all those who hope he will be subjected to "one of Obama's' death panels," I would remind them -- as if it will do any good -- that there is no such thing, regardless of what Sarah Palin, Michelle Bachmann Louis Gohmert claim. And for all those whose major objection to modern America is

that "we no longer heed the word of God," I ask a simple question: "How can anyone claim to be 'a person of faith' while hoping and praying for the agonizing death of a fellow human being?"

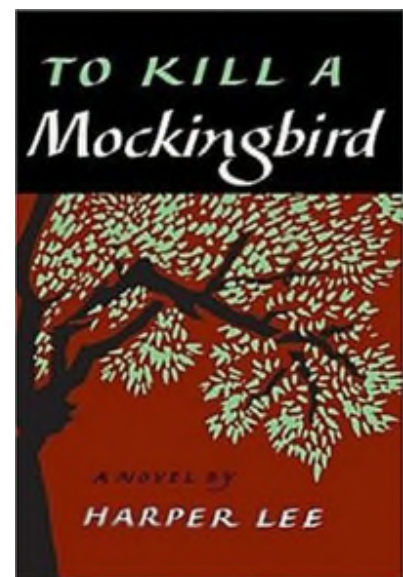
Politics, have become so partisan, so nasty, so cruelly divisive, as to get in the way of empathy. They have put an all but lethal monkey wrench into what used to be called "human relations." There are studies showing that people have far less trouble imagining themselves marrying a person of a different color or religion than a person of a different political persuasion. And some -- myself included -- would think twice about moving to certain areas of the country because of its politics. Simply stated, I don't think I could feel comfortable living in, say, South Carolina or Oklahoma. I know people there wouldn't be too comfortable with me.

Back in March 2012, the journal *Psychological Science* published a study by University of Michigan social psychologists Ed O'Brien and Phoebe Ellsworth entitled [*More Than Skin Deep: Visceral States Are Not Projected Onto Dissimilar Others*](#). Their study found that empathy -- the ability to understand and share someone else's feelings -- vanishes when people have different political views. How sad. How terribly sad. Their research indicated that "*Dissimilarity may represent a boundary condition for embodied cognition and inhibit an empathic understanding of shared out-group pain.*"

Sadly, O'Brien and Ellsworth could offer no solution other than suggesting "*(T)he need for a better understanding of how people's internal experiences influence their perceptions of the feelings and experiences of those who may hold values different from their own.*"

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* -- published more than a half-century before O'Brien and Ellsworth's study -- author Harper Lee wrote "*You never really know a man until you understand things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.*" Or put in another, slightly more familiar way, "*Don't judge a person until you've walked a mile in their shoes.*" This has long been understood as the empathy's starting point. Empathy depends not only on a commonality of experience, but on emotional intelligence -- that which enables a person to empathize with someone, without the need to have felt likewise in the past. Basically, it's the mental projection into the emotional state of mind of another person, allowing you to identify their feelings. For an in-depth discussion of empathy and emotional intelligence, check out Steve Mueller's brilliant website [*Personal Development*](#).

Modern politics have all but knocked the emotional intelligence -- and concomitant ability to empathize -- out of many people. But it need not be. In the new year, why don't we proclaim a truce; a cessation of emotional hostility, of seeing those we disagree



with politically as being agents of the devil? Yes, I know it sounds rather Pollyanna, but should we pray for each other's pain and misery?

I for one hope and pray that Harry Reid will have what in Hebrew we call שלמה רפואה (pronounced *r'fuah sh'layma*), "A complete and speedy healing." And not just because we're both Democrats and I tend agree with him more often than I do with, say, Mitch McConnell.

I wish him well because that's just what human beings do.

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