

Palaima: Let's explore who we are as human beings

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The end of the fall semester at the University of Texas always slams up against preparations for the holiday season. Since I was raised with deep faith in Roman Catholicism, the season for me, with 65 Christmases behind me, is still one of deep reflection on the message of the political revolutionary named Jesus Christ.

I can still feel how the small brick mission church — established in 1857 — of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary 20 miles south of Cleveland, Ohio, sheltered from the howling, snowy, dark wintry cold the working-class faithful who attended the 6:30 a.m. weekday masses that I served as a grade-school altar boy.

I am sure deep in my bones that Jesus would disagree strongly with the view recently put forward by psychology professor Paul Bloom in the Wall Street Journal that empathy, the capacity to feel and think how others think and feel, “is a moral train wreck. It makes the world worse.”

Bloom's statement and arguments in support of it are symptomatic of what the world has become and we within it. Empathy is the very foundation of the socially radical message of Jesus in Matthew 12.30-31. Jesus there enunciates the two greatest commandments defining our purpose on this planet. We are to devote our hearts, souls, minds and all our strength to a higher entity and love other human beings who come near to us.

Jesus here blew up the prevailing moral code: “Help your friends and harm your enemies.” The two new commandments instruct us to live in humility, aware of how far we fall short of the virtues that transcend our lives, and in kindness, treating other human beings as we would want to be treated. We are to do both, Jesus says, full throttle.

One step up and two steps back, sings Bruce Springsteen’s persona in his song of the same title. That is mostly what we spend our time doing, if we do aspire to lead our lives in service to a higher calling and focusing empathetically on the good we can do for others.

The publicly proclaimed values of UT, where I have taught for 31 years, are no longer recognizable to me. I recently sent my friend Ronnie Dugger, founding editor of the Texas Observer, an annotated copy of the inaugural address of UT President Richard Fenves. I marked in red phrases declaring the economic benefits of the university to our society and to individual students who attend the university. My text looks like a bloodbath.

A UT degree now is marketed as a ticket to a lifetime of higher earnings, a passport to consumer paradise. A degree is no longer a credential verifying that its holder has spent four years exploring who we are as human beings; how historically powerful figures in society find it hard to act outside their own self-interests; and why the history of our own country is full of violence and war and brutal forms of hatred. The faint echoes of the optimism of the civil and human rights movements — including gender and sexual orientation — of the Sixties are distorted. Listen. What you will hear is: “Ask not what you can do for others in your country, think of how you can succeed in an unrestrained capitalist economy.”

In my ethics and leadership class this fall, we studied for one class oral histories from the civil rights movement. Bob Zellner described how he went from his native Alabama to Mississippi where a white voter registration activist had been shot-gunned to death in broad daylight in the center of town. There were no white witnesses. Two black witnesses came forward. One was shot-gunned to death in his own

yard. The other disappeared forever. Zellner describes hanging onto the courthouse railing as whites who attacked the activists tried to carry him off and “disappear” him. He tells us what it was like to have his eye gouged and pulled from its socket.

Students later asked: “That wasn’t true. That was just a made-up story, right?” Some of these same students wrote to me — after viewing a mainstream documentary film focused on what American soldiers went through in Vietnam — “We were taught that we won the Vietnam War and prevented communists from taking over the world.”

The one selfish thing that we all should do at the end of the year is look at history and then treat others with love and understanding despite who we are and who they may be.