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Reflection: Christian Leadership

Ken Evers-Hood: Checking our blind spots

To use Jesus' language in the Gospel of Matthew, we all have logs in our eyes. While we can't remove all the biases that cloud our judgment, we can remove their influence by being aware of them.

by Ken Evers-Hood

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September 10, 2013

Editor's note: This is the third in a series of essays about behavioral theology.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. Matthew 7:3-5 (NRSV)

I'm not really a car person, but I fully admit to enjoying the odd rental car from time to time. It's the small things that bring me pleasure. It's observing the brief ritual of getting in and figuring out where the engineers have configured the buttons and knobs and then fiddling with everything until I

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have it readjusted after whatever 6'9" behemoth sat in the driver's seat before me.

This is, of course, especially important when it comes to the mirrors.

Large or small, every car has blind spots. Every car creates areas that -- no matter how many eyes in the back of your head you tell your kids you have -- without properly adjusted mirrors and well-timed glances over your shoulder, you simply won't be able to monitor.

We don't feel bad about this. We don't think there is something deficient about ourselves. We accept that this is simply how it is.

With two eyes located where they are, and with the safety considerations that limit a car's design, there's only so much we can see. So we learn where the blind spots are, and we check them. We know that no amount of driving will make the blind spots smaller or go away. We know that blind spots are not something that will get better with time.

If only we were as accepting and aware of our cognitive blind spots.

One of the most significant contributions cognitive theory has made to interdisciplinary learning is the increased understanding of how our brains are like cars: they go incredibly fast, but they come with blind spots. Disciplines as diverse as economics and medicine have made significant changes in light of the heuristics our brains use and the biases these heuristics create.

The study of heuristics and biases derives from the dual understanding of the brain as working with a fast, automatic process that psychologists Keith Stanovich and Richard West call System 1 and a slower, reflective process they call System 2.

System 1 is the brain's ability to take in and process the enormous amount of data that enters our senses with every passing moment. System 2 is the brain's ability to focus on certain items presented for inspection by System 1 when they either require more attention or don't make immediate sense.

System 1 reflects our ability to drive a car at 55 mph on the highway while listening to music and having a conversation. System 2 reflects what happens when a car suddenly veers into the lane ahead of us and we stop talking and focus on the challenge until it's resolved.

The problem -- as anyone who has tried driving, listening to music, talking to another passenger and perhaps glancing at the cellphone to see who just texted (you know who you are) -- is that our System 1, while pretty amazing, isn't really great at doing all of these things at the same time.

Our System 1 uses shortcuts, which psychologists call heuristics, to make sense of vast amounts of data quickly. These heuristics create blind spots, which psychologists call biases, and the worst part is that we are largely unaware of how these biases blind us to what's really happening around us.

To use the language of Jesus in Matthew, we are all walking around with logs in our eyes.

It is easy for us to see the biases blinding others, but it is all but impossible to see the biases clouding our own perception. Further, cognitive theory indicates that the problem is more challenging than Jesus frames it, because the logs jamming our perception aren't really removable in a strict sense. We

is.

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can't change the nature of how our minds perceive the world.

Rather than actually removing the logs, what we are able to do is remove the influence of the logs by becoming more aware of them. And we become more aware of logs, like all blind spots, by checking for them.

The following is an incomplete list of some of the most significant heuristics and biases and how they relate to leading congregations.

Anchoring. Whatever we have most recently thought about strongly influences what we perceive next, even when the next thing is entirely unrelated.

In one experiment, Duke behavioral economist Dan Ariely asked grad students to write down the last two digits of their social security numbers. Then he held a mock silent auction in which the students were asked to record how much they would bid on various objects.

As ridiculous as it sounds, Ariely describes in "Predictably Irrational" that students who wrote down high social security numbers bid significantly more than students who wrote lower numbers. Just the act of writing down a high number is often enough to anchor us toward spending more. Demonstrating their blindness, all the participants strongly denied that the anchor had had any effect.

For church leadership, anchoring means, in part, that wherever parishioners spend most of their time colors their perception of their congregation.

Older congregants who spend much of their time with seniors may experience a congregation with even a small number of young people as being vibrant and healthy. Indeed, the congregation will seem dramatically younger than their normal crowd.

Younger families who spend most of their time with their peers may perceive this same congregation as being too old and not for them.

The point of addressing anchoring is not to get into an argument with either group about who is seeing the true picture but to recognize that the perceptions of each are powerful and real to them.

One of the roles of the leader will be to help each group begin to see the congregation from the perspective of others who are anchored differently. This is crucial, as these anchors will often determine whether people stay or leave, independent of the pastor's preaching or the fantastic programs being planned.

Framing. The *way* we say something is more significant than *what* we're actually saying.

In "Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness," Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein provide the perfect parable based on an actual study carried out by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, two of the founders of this field.

In the parable, a doctor tells a patient that five years after undergoing a particular procedure, 90 out of 100 patients are alive and well. In another iteration, a doctor says that five years after the procedure, 10 out of 100 patients are dead.

The data are exactly the same. Yet focusing on the number of those who live versus those who die makes an enormous difference to the person choosing between the two options.

Framing makes a huge difference in the life of the church, and faithful leaders do this well without even thinking about it most of the time.

Framing is crucial when it comes to working well with deliberative bodies, for instance. A few years ago, a leader approached me and said our congregation needed an AED (automated external defibrillator).

I agreed and asked her to come up with three proposed locations, recommending that she put what she believed to be the best choice in the middle of the list. This is anecdotal, but I find that church leaders presented with three viable and legitimate options will nearly always pick the option framed in the

middle. Not wanting to be seen as either cheap or wasteful, leaders are significantly attracted to middle options.

Since church leaders are always free to vote their conscience or propose alternatives, framing isn't manipulation. On the contrary, good framing can help deliberative bodies avoid wasting time on easy decisions.

Loss aversion. In theory, a rational person realizes that the intrinsic value of something is the same whether it is lost or gained. Actual human beings, however, feel the pain of losing something far more than they feel the pleasure of gaining the very same thing.

This helps explain why so many churches say they are willing to try anything to stay vital and alive but in reality are willing to try anything as long as "anything" doesn't mean changing and losing any aspect of their current life.

So often, pastors start working with a congregation that articulates an openness to change only later to resist, leaving the pastor feeling duped. Loss aversion indicates that it may be more complicated than the congregation pulling a bait-and-switch.

Loss aversion suggests that these congregations aren't lying about being mentally open to change. Part of them really does want change. But when they experience this change as loss, they experience more pain than they expect. It is all but impossible in the abstract to know how painful it will feel to change and then lose cherished members and beloved practices on the road to something new.

While sometimes it isn't possible to avoid the pain of loss, savvy leaders will do everything in their power to search for creative "third ways" that minimize loss and thus reduce resistance to needed change.

One of the best examples I've seen of a third way deals with gender-inclusive language. When I became a pastor, gender-inclusive language polarized many of the people I served. For people on both sides, it felt like a zero-sum game. If a church decided to use gender-inclusive language, some felt they would lose their ability to name God as their loving father. If a church decided against it, others felt they would lose their ability to name God as their strong mother.

I have forever been grateful to James Kay, my professor of worship at Princeton Theological Seminary, for his suggestion that we find ways of adding language rather than changing or reducing language.

Rather than changing the Trinitarian formula, for example, or rewriting the Lord's Prayer, practices which create loss, leaders should find ways to add inclusive language in other places. I use one of his specific suggestions to this day.

During the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, I lead us in the traditional version of the Our Father, but I open it by saying: "To the God who loves us with the strength of a mother, let us pray the way Jesus taught us to pray, saying, 'Our Father ...'" This way, we name God as Father and Mother, and so avoid much of the pain associated with loss aversion.

Optimism bias. Garrison Keillor is onto something when he describes Lake Wobegon as a place where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average. We all think we live in Lake Wobegon.

Two things are important about this bias for congregations.

The first is that it means congregations and denominations are unlikely to feel a crisis until it's too late to take meaningful action. They will tend to believe that everything is going to work out. Maybe some other church will tank, but not theirs. Leaders have to avoid drinking this Kool-Aid at all costs.

Leaders, of all people, must see and speak hard truths difficult for congregations to hear. However, leaders have to be extremely careful about how they communicate their concerns with their congregations. Not only are our congregations optimistic, but they simply can't and won't listen to words that challenge their optimistic visions of themselves. People who like hellfire-and-brimstone sermons don't like them because they appreciate someone being tough on them; they like them because they perceive the pastor being tough on *those other* people who need it.

At the most practical level, this means that leaders have to avoid recruiting for volunteer positions like Sunday school teachers by making announcements about how terrible it is that no one has signed up yet. How many times have you heard this kind of negative messaging? The optimism bias suggests that this strategy will be more effective at allowing leaders to vent than at achieving their goals.

Jesus says we're all walking around with logs in our eyes. The behavioral theorists aren't really telling us anything new. Rather, they are helping us understand the nature of these logs and how we might become more aware of them and lessen their impact on our ministries.

They are reminding Christian leaders of the humbling truth we know but forget: God is God, and we are not. All our reflection is embodied reflection. We think with brains that use heuristics, which generate predictable biases, and we won't be aware of this happening.

While we may not always be able to remove the logs, we can at least become aware of these blind spots and adjust how we theorize, communicate and lead.