

So, today I want to talk about a concept that's not primarily about politics. So, if you're looking for some deep psychological analysis of political life, it won't be this webcast. Because this one's going to be about psychology, and about the way the mind works, and about a concept that I have found so fascinating and useful in understanding my own life and the life of my patients that I think it's just worth putting out there and seeing if you all, as an audience, will find this as interesting as me.

So, it starts with this: the question, why do we cry at happy endings? I mean, whether it's real life, or a movie, or something you're reading, the situation might objectively, I think, be happy. But we find ourselves wanting to cry. It happens all the time. We call it tears of joy. But what sense does that really make, right? It turns out, it makes a lot of sense, and it explains a lot about human psychology.

So, say you're watching a movie in which the main character is facing some loss, or maybe it's a rejection, or an abandonment, or is facing a danger. I mean, the situation might well be objectively quite sad, but we're not crying yet. Then, let's say the hero escapes disaster, comes home, finds love again, reunites with the person who's been lost. All of these things, you know, really objectively happy events, right? But then we find ourselves crying. Crying, we could say, with happiness or with relief. But what does that really mean?

And I think the best example of this phenomenon is very appropriate for this season. It's the Christmas film *It's a Wonderful Life*. You know, the hero, George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, sacrifices his own interests, his own welfare, for everyone else in the town of Bedford Falls. I mean, he gives up his dreams of college and travel, to help his family and to protect the citizens of the town from the evil banker, Mr. Potter.

One after another of his dreams—travel, education, meaningful work—are dashed by his taking care of the needs of others. His self-sacrifice and generosity eventually lead to bitterness and a failed suicide attempt. That's how bad it is. His situation is objectively desperate and agonizing and really sad. We feel for him, but we don't cry yet.

But, at the end, everything gets resolved. It's really the quintessential happy ending, isn't it? The townsfolk gather around George to show their gratitude and their love, and his sacrifices are finally recognized and repaid. In the last scene, as the whole crowd sings *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* and then *Auld Lang Syne*, George finds a copy, if you remember, of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, with a brief handwritten note from his guardian angel on the inner pages. And it reads: "*Dear George, remember, no man is a failure who has friends.*"

Now, we're all crying. Viewers don't cry at the depiction of George's despair, but there isn't a dry eye in the house when he's loved and rewarded at the end. Again, we cry at the happy ending.

Now, what is going on psychodynamically, you might say? And I think the answer was given by a brilliant article, probably published over 60 years ago, by the San Francisco psychoanalyst Joseph Weiss. Weiss explained it this way: we, all of us, regulate our emotions unconsciously. I

mean, we don't rationally decide what to feel, but it's equally true our emotions don't just randomly burst into the open without rhyme or reason.

No, because on an unconscious level, there's a hidden logic to the how and why of our feelings when we experience them consciously. And that logic has to do with safety, with unconscious perceptions and judgments about psychological safety.

So, here's the heart of the matter. Here's the punchline of this: we only allow ourselves to feel distressing feelings when it's safe to do so. We protect ourselves, in other words, instinctively.

So, you know, let's take these movie examples—you know, and everyone has a couple of movies that always turn on the waterworks, we say. When the hero suffers a painful loss, the viewer, if the movie's any good, identifies with the hero, right, and feels these things too. We feel empathy for poor George Bailey, but the viewer's mind—our minds—unconsciously and automatically protect ourselves from becoming too overwhelmed by painful feelings. So, it keeps these feelings in check.

We defend ourselves, in other words, from becoming too flooded with feeling. All of us do this automatically, all the time. We feel George's pain, but we hold back the full measure of sadness that his plight, you know, really should evoke.

However, when the story, you know, reaches a positive resolution—the happy ending—then it's safe enough to experience the sadness and the tension that was always there, but which couldn't be felt. It looks like we're upset about the happy ending, but the sadness actually comes from the earlier situation. The happy ending only makes it safe enough to feel it. The danger's past, in other words, and we can feel what's always been there.

So, we, as human beings, go about our business, feeling things here and there, seemingly spontaneously, and we don't really know about the highly complex judgments—but remember, they're unconscious judgments—that our minds are making about danger and safety all the time.

Now, I mean, here's an example of kind of a cousin to this phenomenon: you're in an extremely cold environment. You're freezing. And then you enter a warm house. What happens? Well, what often happens is, you begin to shiver. It's as if your body can finally recognize, can finally feel, how terribly cold it's been when you're out of danger now, in a warm place.

And, of course, an extreme version of this phenomenon, you see all the time in patients with PTSD. Prolonged and threatening situations of danger—again, like what happens in combat—in which an individual is relatively helpless, we know, are traumatic. To survive, feelings and thoughts have to be repressed.

It's only when the person returns to safety, back home, that symptoms appear—you know, nightmares, startle reflexes, panic attacks. The soldier, in this example of PTSD, relives his or her frightening experiences when it's safe to do so.

You see, when someone's in danger—think about it—his or her focus really has to be oriented towards surviving and mastering that danger, whether it's enemy fire, severe cold, or just intense feelings of grief. Your mind—our minds—have to put first things first and deal with the threat that's pressing. The feelings that were appropriate to that threat—whether they're horror, or fear, grief, loss, rejection—they have to be repressed, so that they don't interfere with the task at hand, which is, what? Managing the situation that's threatening and surviving.

It's only when it's safe to feel these things, when the danger's passed, that our minds let us feel them.

So, I think this is such a fascinating phenomenon. I think it's one of the— I don't know—one of the main ways that, umm, psychotherapy works, actually. I think that often what happens in my work with my patients is that I am creating the conditions of safety in which the patient can look at, think about, recollect, feel, and express painful things that they have endured throughout their life that it hasn't been safe enough for them to feel, and even know they have those feelings.

And so, I think this is a key engine in psychotherapy. And, you know, I was thinking about its relationship to politics, even though I said in the beginning it's not going to be primarily about politics, but I had this funny memory of years ago—maybe only four or five years ago.

See, I cry fairly readily, I'll have to confess, at certain kinds of great oratory. But, you know, I mean, I can be moved by soap operas and TV commercials, but I can tell you that presidential politics rarely triggers tears. So, four years ago, in the 2020 presidential election, I was surprised when I found myself tearing up, or even crying, at some points during the Democratic Convention that was held virtually, if you remember.

For instance, I teared up during Michelle and Barack Obama's speeches, and I welled up a little when Elizabeth Warren told her story about her Aunt Bea saving the day. And I even started to weep a bit during the many vignettes of Joe Biden reaching out to train engineers, grandmothers, stutterers, and assorted, you know, adorable children.

The tribute to John Lewis made me cry. Even Amy Klobuchar brought tears to my eyes when she recounted how demoralizing it was that one of her first Senate speeches was to an empty chamber, only to be surprised afterwards, if you remember, by an encouraging call from then-Vice President Biden, who'd been watching on closed-circuit TV.

So, look, I mean, I have a lot of criticisms from the left of establishment Democratic politicians. I would never say I'm a great Amy Klobuchar fan, or, boy, Joe Biden, he was the reincarnation of Bobby Kennedy or Martin Luther King. Never would admit to that.

But, I had to really look at what was going on when I was experiencing this upsurge of tears. And, really, what it was, was the tears were coming up from the past. And the past was the years of Republican hegemony and Donald Trump, and the ways in which, during those years, those dark years, we, on the left—liberals—really had to endure a great many losses and disappointments.

And it was only, in a sense, at these moments in the Democratic Convention, where they seemed hopeful, and passionate, and inspiring, that I could let myself feel some of the things that I had always felt.

So, I'm a little—it's a little embarrassing to admit that, but maybe a few of you have experienced something similar. And I just think that this is the issue. You know, the unconscious minds—our minds—are pretty brilliant. They protect us. They help us adapt and survive. And they tell us when it's safe enough to feel difficult feelings, don't they?

We, in other words, are always on the lookout for happy endings.