

So I was reading an interview the other day with this real asshole Tom Homan who used to run ICE when Trump was president the first time around. And he's called the father of family separations. And now he's the so-called border czar And what he's saying is that he's going to do it again. He's going to deport illegal parents with or without kids. He's bad news and we really need to prepare for it. And one way of being prepared for it I think is to look at what happened the last time that Trump and Homan and his cronies set about to separate families at the border.

You know during Trump's first term when he was proposing and trying to institute outrageously terrible policies it took it seemed images of crying toddlers and grieving mothers to mobilize Americans against him and his enablers, and I think that this speaks to something deeper in the American electorate that can teach us something about what mobilizes people politically and why. Because my contention has always been that we need to find ways to speak to people's deepest instincts and needs and emotions and even fears in order to build political power. So I'm going to revisit the sentiments that I think lay behind the opposition to family separations the last time and try to offer a deeper understanding of what those sentiments were and what they meant.

Now if you remember the outpouring of spontaneous indignation about forced family separations at the border spanned the whole political spectrum. We had some Republican legislators upset the Pope. Christian evangelicals came out against it, even the UN Commission on Human Rights said it was wrong. The depiction of children who lost their mothers sparked greater and more intense resistance than most of Trump's other frankly offensive and provocative initiatives. And you know it's worth noting that we didn't see either at the time that same degree of passion about children who were about to lose their health insurance, if you remember. And we certainly don't read much about the heartbreaking stories of latchkey kids Raised in families usually headed by single mothers who are working for stagnant wages barely making ends meet I mean these kids will never appear on the cover of Time magazine They're invisible in many ways Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb once wrote a great book called The Hidden Injuries of Class because these injuries and these children are hidden from view So the question is why family separations elicit the outrage that one might have expected about oh I don't know child poverty Why did it take stories and images of grieving parents and children to wake people up to the cruelty of Donald Trump and the Republican Party I mean on one level it's obvious the statistics about poverty convey suffering at a distance don't they A frightened sobbing child is up close and personal Instead see I think our moral outrage reflects first and foremost the universal importance of attachment in human life The central importance of the earliest connections between parents usually it's mothers as primary caretakers and their children I mean child development experts and therapists have warned for a long time that any disruption to these ties these attachment bonds in the course of development results in tremendous grief and distress If the rupture is great enough it causes trauma that indelibly damages kids' brains and developing psyches and predicts when they become adults an increased incidence in heart disease and anxiety disorders obesity criminality even addiction So see I think we react so strongly to stories of broken attachments Because all of us have experienced even in the best of circumstances some version some degree of exactly that kind of loss When we see it on TV it resonates with unconscious reservoirs of grief and trauma in all

of us Let me explain that a little bit more because even in the best of circumstances growing up invariably involves some degree of loss I mean losses that are connected to separating from our caretakers that dogs are tracks throughout development I mean for every step forward there is a sort of letting go a loss that has to be metabolized or mourned in some way We learn to walk you know but we also miss the lap And we may assert our wills and defy our parents but we also miss surrendering to their care and protection And we leave our parents behind when we go away to school but then we feel homesick There's loss And we relive these separations when we become parents as we watch our kids grow up and need us less and less over time And of course if you add into this formula actual real losses of people dying in one's family then the grief and sadness become even more intense Loss is normal But it also see triggers and aligns itself with other issues and it gets complicated So you know in many families not all families but many families parents are either physically or emotionally too often absent or neglectful In these circumstances kids are forced to cope again now aren't they with Great feelings of loss and abandonment and disappointment They feel bereft and again abandoned and either they cover it up with defensive stoicism I don't need anyone or they get into dependent relationships in order to put a band-aid on the problem It's no surprise see that such children and the adults they'll grow up to become have inside them these pockets of grief and sadness and loss all of which get evoked by depictions of desperate children being taken away from their parents So if each of us has within us a reservoir of grief and longing and other painful affects then we have to ask the question well what does the mind do with painful affects like this Well these feelings that are so uncomfortable trigger defenses And one of the main defenses is we get angry and even indignant in response Because we know that anger often masks sadness don't we I mean we manage these feelings more or less well We don't all get depressed It's not a sign of mental illness Sometimes actually being aware of the What I'm calling these memories and reservoirs of loss and grief help us empathize with other people who are feeling the same things But so what does it have to do with the public's reaction to the travesties resulting from Trump's and this jerk Holman's 0 tolerance policy they called it Simply put it's this When we see children mistreated and orphaned at the border Pictures of a child wailing in response to being taken away from her mother or being forced into some cold shelter We identify with both that child's loss of his or her parents as well as the parent's loss of their child we quite naturally then become outraged indignant protest and we want to rescue those who are suffering And that empathy that I think most of us instinctively feel could be conscious or unconscious But what's clear is that our own warded off pain is activated by the suffering we see in these families So if attachment and loss and empathy weren't enough reason to account for the outrage at these border separations let me add one other factor that I think creates an almost perfect storm here namely that these children are intrinsically innocent We almost always view children as innocent don't we I mean this is why child sexual abuse is so emotionally incendiary to most people even to hardened convicts That little immigrant girl crying at her mother's feet unable to get her attention because her mother's being interrogated You know the depictions of children in cages stories of staff being forbidden to hold the child or touch the child for whom they're caring Accounts of parents freed from jail unable to find out where their kids have been relocated or even if they are alive They all impale us in especially painful ways In part because innocent beings children are being made to suffer even though they've done nothing wrong Their intrinsic innocence in other words enables them to make legitimate claims

on us for protection and care And we do respond and we howl in protest at the injustice of it all Guilty people deserve punishment Innocent people deserve love and protection It's as simple as that And this is why naturally right-wing commentators are cynically impugning the characters of at the very least the parents that bring children to the U or the adult drug smugglers that are apparently carpet-bagging kids in and out of the country If the adults are guilty then we shouldn't be making such a big deal about at least their pain should we I mean right-wing extremists like the lunatic Ann Coulter even try to tarnish our perceptions of the orphaned children themselves and back at the original child separation crisis she referred to them as child actors mean can you believe it Of course you can believe it because Coulter's real intention was clear was to counteract our instinctive deep empathy for these kids counteract it with the claim that the kids were faking it were not innocent and therefore didn't deserve our empathy and indignation See I'd argue that this innocence thing is important because in our society it's not easy for any of us to feel innocent when we suffer We're raised in this society to believe that there's a meritocracy right And if we suffer At least in that arena it's our own fault See over and over again we're made to feel responsible for whatever pain and suffering afflicts us even when we're plainly innocent And as a result I think what we do is we project our innocence into and onto children So many of us you see are burdened I think by feeling guilty responsible self-judgmental And we look upon young children as free of such burdens in a way that we secretly understand but unsuccessfully covet We idealize and protect the innocence outside of ourselves the innocence found in children in part because we can't locate and defend a sense of innocence inside ourselves When people do a bad thing to a child they are exploiting the inherent vulnerability of an innocent being who can't defend him or herself and who depends on adults for protection And as with child abuse a special top spin of this trauma is that the very people in authority who should be looking out for the child are the ones inflicting pain Such a betrayal you see excuse me not only evokes similar but long forgotten experiences in all of our personal backgrounds but it also just seems to shit on the investment that we have that Somewhere somehow there are beings in the world who are truly legitimately innocent And when that is sullied or tarnished in some way we react with a special vicarious indignation And so it makes sense that forced family separations should be psychologically quite explosive and should have triggered widespread outrage which they did See when deep feelings are evoked in the political arena especially when they involve kids and families public opinion can shift quickly Now that sentiment isn't usually enough to fuel a political movement But I would say this that the outpouring of emotional distress moral outrage and political activism that resulted from Trump's cruel immigration policies remind us I think should remind us that the vast majority of people are actually capable of empathy for those who are powerless Masses of people we should remind ourselves on the so-called left can stand up for the victims of a tyrannical government Progressives should take heart from this I think and figure out how to elicit empathy for the millions of kids frankly and their parents who suffer from social and economic injustice in our country and are every bit as innocent as those families at the border If our movement primarily bases its credibility on abstract values or generalizations let's say about economic disparities it will fail to energize people to come out of their isolated everyday lives and fight in the public arena Instead we have to ground our strategies in approaches that speak to people's capacity for and longing to be cared for and seen and to take care of each other In that process of doing that we tap into universal feelings of loss and universal desires to protect others from those painful feelings I

mean Trump and the right do this all the time tapping into people's deeper emotional fears and insecurities by these crazy notions of the other invading raping and ruining our lives infesting America he says Progressives need to figure out how to speak to people's hearts as deeply to make the personal into the political like many of us did around these border separations So I'll end with something that Elie Wiesel once wrote that I liked quite a bit He argued that the opposite of love art faith and even life itself the opposite is indifference When we lead from the heart expressing our most fundamental longings we're not only better for it as people but we have a better chance then of changing