

# Preface

*"It was the best of times,  
it was the worst of times,  
it was the age of wisdom,  
it was the age of foolishness,  
it was the epoch of belief,  
it was the epoch of incredulity,  
it was the season of Light,  
it was the season of Darkness,  
it was the spring of hope,  
it was the winter of despair.*

*We had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way— in short, the period was so far like the present period ..."*

-- Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

You've got an Uncle Frank. Everyone does. He watches Fox News and reads Breitbart. He thinks that Barack Obama is a globalist puppet and Hillary Clinton is an insufferable traitor.

You've also got an Aunt Sally. Everyone does. She watches CNN and reads *The New York Times*. Depending on the day, she thinks that Donald Trump is a drooling idiot or a Russian master spy. She likes Bernie Sanders but voted for Hillary Clinton because she's a woman.

Both Uncle Frank and Aunt Sally are basically good people. They're honest and considerate. They're sincere. They're intelligent and educated. But God help you if they're seated next to each other at your wedding. You'll have to recite your vows loudly enough to be heard over the acrimonious argument that's emanating from the pews.

Uncle Frank and Aunt Sally are sane, but they believe crazy things. They believe those things with a fervor and fanaticism that make them seem even crazier.

Multiply that situation by a few hundred million cases, and you've got America in 2018. You've also got Great Britain, France, Germany, and other countries that are tearing themselves apart.

Both Uncle Frank and Aunt Sally think that the world is going to hell.

But what they don't know is that *they* are the ones driving it there.

They're not doing it on purpose, but they're doing it. Why? And how can they stop doing it? How can they -- and we -- return to some version of sanity?

That's why you have this book. It's not magic. It can't solve the problem by itself. But it provides some of the answers. Solving the problem depends on you.

People like Uncle Frank and Aunt Sally often have real, substantive disagreements that they could resolve. The problem isn't simply that they disagree. They disagree about a lot of things without getting angry.

But some issues make them feel that disagreement marks a line between "us" and "them." Someone who belongs to *them* is an enemy, enemies are evil people, and evil people must be defeated or destroyed -- before they destroy *us*.

Of course, Uncle Frank and Aunt Sally aren't actually crazy, so they don't consciously believe those things about each other. However, in the heat of an argument, it's how they feel. Those feelings can spill over into their normal lives. They won't shoot at each other, but they might end up not speaking to each other for 10 years. And when the feelings occur in people who really *are* crazy or in the grip of mob hysteria, they cause hatred and violence. Lives are destroyed: sometimes figuratively, often literally. Peaceful societies disintegrate into warring tribes.

What can we do about it?

## See the big picture

There are things we can do. We can't fix the problem completely because it comes from human nature. We can only reduce the damage and minimize the risks. That depends on seeing the big picture.

There's a story about three blind men examining an elephant. The first man grabs one of its legs and says that an elephant is like a tree. The second grabs its tail and says that an elephant is like a rope. The third grabs one of its ears and says that an elephant is like a leaf. Meanwhile, the elephant is not amused by all that inappropriate touching, so it stomps the men into mush.

If the men had been able to see the entire elephant, they would have proceeded with greater caution. Sadly, each of them could perceive only a small part of the situation. Result: mush.

Most books about social discord focus on a single topic in a single way. Many of the books are excellent. However, they're like the three blind men examining an elephant. Their narrow focus prevents them from seeing how different problems connect to each other. This book shows the connections, including:

- How beliefs divide "us" from "them."
- *Why* beliefs divide "us" from "them."
- How beliefs can unite or divide people and societies.
- Why beliefs that seem to conflict often don't really conflict.
- Why we feel such hostility toward "them," and they toward us.
- How our biology biases our judgment about other people and groups.
- What history shows about the problems and their solutions.
- What we can -- and can't -- do about the problems.

Nobody can "fix" the world completely or permanently. But you can make it better. Don't worry about what you *can't* do. Just do what you can: "even the angels can do no more."