

Led by emotion

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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[This is Bishop Paul Marshall's January 2008 column for secular newspapers, usually 600 words or less and different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by [The Morning Call](#), Allentown, on the first Saturday of every month. It usually appears also in six or seven additional papers at some point during the month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. Some 120 columns have been published over the past eleven years. If your newspaper does not publish the column and you might consider speaking with the editor about that, please email [Bill Lewellis](#).]

The reason, it seems, people cannot converse rationally about certain subjects is that they aren't being rational at all.

A team led by Dr. Drew Westen at Emory University has demonstrated scientifically what most of us who work in professions involving values have long suspected. People do not approach key issues intellectually, but rather vote and act from their emotions.

In *The Political Brain* (2007), Westen tells how MRI technology was used to demonstrate that committed Democrats and Republicans alike do not go to the reasoning parts of the brain, but to its emotional centers when responding to data that challenge their political allegiances.

His work demonstrates an emotionally biased pattern in people with fixed party identification when they respond to difficult issues: first is party loyalty, then feelings about the personalities of leaders, and last – he says most people don't get this far – their feelings about the issues. Finally the part of the brain that senses reward (or a “fix”) kicks in and the issue seems resolved without having actually been engaged.

Westen also points out that people will vote for the candidate who raises their fears rather than the one who attempts to inspire ideals. Between equally popular candidates, the votes will go to the one who invokes images of impending doom, the “trouble in River City” that the Music Man used to sell band equipment.

It would be comforting to think that you and I are exceptions to Westen's overall conclusions, that we judge each issue on its merits according to the best data we can get. Mostly, we aren't exceptions. In my experience, people who tend to be liberal about one thing are liberal about most things; the same for conservatives. Including me.

I have been a bishop in the Episcopal Church since 1996, and feel like I have been attending the same meeting for twelve years. That is, twice a year we bishops gather to worry publicly about how we are getting along with each other, engage in some exercises in “listening” to each other on the topic of homosexuality, and issue a statement to the church about how hard we are trying to get along with each other. Certain feel-good humanitarian concerns are addressed. We go home.

Never in those twelve years has there been a meeting for bishops principally focused on how best to equip their dioceses to do the work of evangelism and stewardship, work that is key to the church's purpose. My New Year's resolution is to attempt to raise the real issues whenever attending the next installment of the same old meeting .

I mention my own denomination because I do not wish to wash anybody else's linen, but I do read the papers, and know the degree to which democratically-governed churches prominently represented in our region are similarly paralyzed: we are acting as though the issues that strangle us can be solved intellectually when we are in fact processing them emotionally.

Westen's book has a prescription for how to put his own party back into power, but winning elections is not my concern here.

What his book suggests to me is that unless and until church groups find ways to come clean with themselves about our emotionality around issues that divide us, we will never get to the point where reason or revelation can make any difference.

No one's mind was ever changed against his will. For the will to be open to thought, feelings have to be acknowledged and dealt with. Perhaps when we acknowledge our fears, hopes, and aspirations as such, the pussy-footing will end and the field will be clear enough for constructive thinking to begin.

[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at www.diobeth.org.]