

Preface by Brian D. McLaren

WHILE I WAS reading Dr. Wayne Baker's important and uplifting new book, a strangely disturbing sentence from another book, the author and title of which are long forgotten, snuck back into my memory.

I came across that chilling sentence back in the 1990's, when I was first exploring the discipline of systems thinking. It went something like this: If you want to destroy a bridge or building, you have to detonate several explosives in several places simultaneously; otherwise, the one part of the structure that has been weakened will be propped up by the others that remain strong.

I don't think many would write such a sentence in the years since September 11, 2001, when this kind of abstract architectural principle was tragically manifested in space and time.

But the sentence was—by a disturbing but vivid analogy—trying to convey an important insight about systems theory: Systems are remarkably resilient and

persistent. The subsystems that make up the system work together to maintain equilibrium. It is only when multiple subsystems are simultaneously weakened that a system can be brought down.

It's clear to me why that forgotten sentence came back as I was reading Dr. Baker's book. Multiple subsystems in our moral, spiritual, social and civic architecture have been under attack for a long time—if not by explosives, by corrosives.

Companies insert a little corrosion here and there to sell their products: Fear and resentment to sell guns, greed and pride to sell high-status gas-guzzlers, lust to sell pornography, and gluttony to sell high-fat, high-sugar foods.

Political parties drive in little—and sometimes not so little—wedges here and there to win the next election.

Websites, TV networks, and authors weaken trust and spread outrage trying to increase viewers, page-views, and readership.

Ongoing corrosive interventions like these at multiple key junctures could easily produce unintended consequences that could be sudden, unexpected, and disastrous.

And that's why Dr. Baker's ongoing Our Values project—and this new book *United America*—are so important. If we know that some forces threaten our moral, spiritual, social, and civic architecture, we are made responsible by our knowledge to respond. But if we respond merely by attacking those who are part of the problem—often with more ignorance than malice—we

will ourselves become part of the problem by infusing more resentment, antagonism, fear, and hostility into the system.

What we need, in words from the Bible's last and most apocalyptic book, is to "wake up and strengthen the things that remain." We need a healing outpouring of positivity, like a healing balm, to neutralize and overcome the corrosive acids of negativity that weaken our moral, spiritual, social and civic architecture.

The question, of course, is: What would such a healing outpouring of positivity look like?

And that's what Dr. Baker tells us in this book.

If we want to strengthen the key subsystems that make up the American system, we will promote the deep values that Americans share. That means that even in disagreement, we will practice civility and a respect for others. We will build on our common ground of both symbolic and critical patriotism. We will emphasize our shared love for freedom, security and self-reliance. We will celebrate equal opportunity, the dream of advancement, and the pursuit of happiness. And we will unite around a sense of wider connectedness.

Just as destructive interventions target multiple points in a system, healing interventions must arise system-wide. That's why Dr. Baker and his colleagues have presented their research in an accessible format that can be used to stimulate conversation all through the system: in churches, in faculty lounges, in libraries, in office conference rooms, in retreat centers, in classrooms, in online chats, around tables over meals.

In your hands, then, you hold a resource that can help you become a kind of reverse-terrorist and nonviolent activist— like “salt and light” to use another phrase from the Bible. You don’t have to sit idly by while corrosive forces weaken the ties that bind us together: You can help overcome corrosion with cohesion.

When others try to divide, you can respond positively: “Did you know that some researchers have proven that we Americans hold 10 values in common?”

When others speak in ways that intentionally or unintentionally weaken our shared moral, spiritual, social, and civic architecture, you can respond with an outpouring of healing and affirmation: “That may be true, but I’ve been reading about the 10 deep values that hold us together. If you’d be interested, I can tell you about them ...”

So, this is a book to be read ... but even more, it’s a book to be shared and translated into thousands of healing conversations across America.

Our values matter, and you and I can help them survive and thrive.

You are about to discover how.

—**Brian D. McLaren**

Brian McLaren is a best-selling author who has written more than a dozen books about building bridges across the chasms that can separate religious, cultural and political groups. He also is a frequent guest on television, radio and news media programs, talking about the challenge of peacemaking in a turbulent world.