

BY DOLLY CHUGH

THE PAST AND PRESENT

U.S. History Has Good and Bad. Let’s See Both.

First, we have to understand why our minds make it so hard to have a nuanced view. Then, we have to get beyond that.

AT TIMES this year our headlines were as much about past events as current events. Debates over what to teach our children about the past, how to preserve and present the past, and who to commemorate from the past divided and exhausted us.

While there may be some Americans who wish to only share the best or worst of our past, I believe that most of us

are willing to broaden our understanding of our country’s history to look at both the best *and* the worst. But we often can’t—not for intellectual reasons but because

of unrecognized psychological ones. Understanding those psychological roadblocks is a formidable challenge. But it’s crucial to do so if we want to get past them.

In our minds

Let’s begin with the four reasons our minds sometimes make it hard to have a more honest, nuanced view of our history.

First, our minds tend to play down our wrongdoing from the past.

In theory, a moral transgression in the past versus one that is happening now or in the future should be similarly problematic. But, according to research by psychologist Eugene Caruso, we experience a “wrinkle in time.” Our minds are asymmetric judges, applying harsher moral judgment to present and future transgressions than past ones.

This muting of the past leaves us less prone to being appalled by historical atrocities.

Second, our minds tend to overplay sweet memories that favor our ancestors from the past.

Research shows we are drawn to a sentimental form of his-

tory—nostalgia—which leads us to feel more loved, more protected, and even more competent in our ability to start and maintain relationships. Nostalgia is often tied to the identities that we care most deeply about, such as our family or national identity. And, nostalgia is big business—in fashion, advertising, music and tourism, among other things.

Third, our minds struggle with the negative emotions that our country’s complicated past gives rise to.

When we learn about historical atrocities, particularly ones that expose our limited knowledge, contradict the narratives we believe, or implicate our own ancestors, we might experience shame, guilt, disbelief or anger. In response, we have a natural desire to pull away from the new knowledge and perhaps even re-

fute it, rather than try to better understand it.

Fourth, our minds want to pick either a beautiful or a brutal narrative.

Contradictions, though, pocket our history, beginning with forefathers who had an extraordinary vision of equality, and simultaneously enslaved other humans. Do we feel pride or shame, honor or horror? It’s so much less psychologically painful to pick one path than to grapple with both ideas at the same time.

Tools to use

While the past is in the past, we can address the psychological challenge, however formidable, in the present. We have tools that will help, and I anticipate (and hope) that our debates will take on more psychological nuance as we shift from arguments over *whether* to explore our his-

tory more fully to *how* to do it.

For example, research shows the importance of returning to our values again and again as a way of inoculating us from setbacks. We can see that most easily in how we deal with our children. The daily arguments over curfews or messy rooms or study habits can cause us to shut down (“Do whatever you want”) or double down (“I’m your parent and you’ll do what I say”). Instead, it’s helpful to remind ourselves and our children that a parent has three jobs—to teach them, to protect them and to love them. Just doing that can ground us, and enable us to stay engaged, resilient and calm.

Similarly, when we confront a historical event, it can help to reflect on questions like, “Which American ideals do you most value?” and, “How do you hope others see your country?” You

can even write out your responses, share them with others, and reread what you have written. Think of it as a values booster shot. Even when our emotions are spiking like a fever, our values can bring us back to an equilibrium.

Embrace paradox

Additionally, research by Wendy Smith and others shows that we are capable of embracing paradox, rather than rejecting it. It doesn’t always come naturally. But we simply need to give ourselves permission to allow multiple truths to coexist.

Take a current example: the idea of hybrid workplaces. Many people are happier and more productive working from home or in a hybrid workplace. At the same time, many company cultures benefit from the spontaneity and relationship building that happens when people are in-person.

In a paradox mind-set, we allow both of these things to be true. When both are true, we can challenge our either/or assumptions, and be more creative in finding solutions.

Tools like these are within arm’s—or mind’s—reach at any time, and will allow us to engage with the past in more nuanced ways. We simply need to accept that the formidable challenge will require us to be intentional in our approach.

In doing so, we become what I call “gritty patriots.” Psychologist Angela Duckworth defines grit as “passion and perseverance in pursuit of a meaningful, long-term goal.” Love of country is not something we are entitled to; it is something we work toward, with grit.

As we grapple with what to teach, how to preserve and who to commemorate, one thing seems to unite many of us. We love our country. And, we are looking for a way forward.

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BY JEFF SLATE

MUSIC

Brandi Carlile Pays It Forward

The artist, who recently received seven Grammy nominations, reflects on the joy of getting back on the road, and what comes next

WHILE the music industry struggled, coming back in fits and starts as the pandemic receded, the genre-straddling musical artist Brandi Carlile’s year was epic beyond all measure. Her memoir, “Broken Horses,” released last year, became a worldwide bestseller. And her album “In These Silent Days” racked up seven Grammy nominations in November, and led to a massive tour that stretched throughout this year.

That tour, most notably, included a stop at the Newport Folk Festival, where Ms. Carlile, 42, brought her hero, Joni Mitchell, on stage for Ms. Mitchell’s first live appearance in 20 years. And, capping off her exceptional year, in November Ms. Carlile joined another of her longtime heroes, Elton John, at Dodger Stadium, for

what was billed as his final U.S. concert performance. Ms. Carlile spoke to The Wall Street Journal about her year, getting back out on the road, the importance of honoring those who inspired you and nurturing the next generation of artists, and the challenges faced in 2023 by the live-music industry. Edited excerpts follow; see more of this interview at [wsj.com/yearinreview](https://www.wsj.com/yearinreview).

ments, calm my heart, and I can control myself. I can feel my feet on the ground and be there in the moment. I didn’t know how to do that in my 20s and 30s, so I love having these latter-day affirmations.

• **WSJ:** And taking a cue from Elton, you’ve really

gling to find places to play. And then when they do get gigs, it’s such stiff competition, because they’re competing with artists with much, much larger audiences who are in town on the same night. Or they have fans who can’t afford to come to their shows because of how expensive ticketing is getting. So, I

• **WSJ:** And what’s on tap for you in 2023?

• **MS. CARLILE:** I need to take a beat and think about maybe writing a song again. Because I haven’t written songs in a really long time. I need to get into a creative head space again, because I’ve been working really hard, being on the road and working with my band and just being a little bit recklessly nonstop. So, I’m going to take a minute and reflect on all this beautiful stuff that’s gone down in the last year.

Mr. Slate is a New York writer and musician. Email him at reports@wsj.com.