

STRANGERS
IN THEIR
OWN LAND

ANGER AND MOURNING ON THE AMERICAN RIGHT

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1

Traveling to the Heart

Along the clay road, Mike's red truck cuts slowly between tall rows of sugarcane, sassy, silvery tassels waving in the October sun, extending across an alluvial plain as far as the eye can see. We are on the grounds of the Armelise Plantation, as it was once called. A few miles west lies the mighty Mississippi River, pressing the soils and waste of the Midwest southward, past New Orleans, into the Gulf of Mexico. "We used to walk barefoot between the rows," Mike says. A tall, kindly white man of sixty-four, Mike removes his sunglasses to study an area of the sugarcane, and comes to a near stop. He points his arm out the truck window to the far left, "My grandma would have lived over . . . *there*." Moving his arm rightward, he adds, "My great uncle Tain's carpentry shop was about . . . *there*." Nearby was the home of another great uncle Henry, a mechanic nicknamed "Pook." A man called "Pirogue" ran the blacksmith shop where Mike and a friend hunted scraps of metal that shone, through his boyhood eyes, "like gold." His grandfather Bill oversaw the cane fields. Miss Ernestine's, Mike continued, was to the side of . . . *that*. A slim black woman, hair in a white bandana, Mike recalls, "She loved to cook raccoon and opossum for her gumbo, and we brought her what we had from a day's hunt, and Choupique fish too. I can hear her calling out the window when her husband couldn't start their car, 'Something's *ailing* that car.'" Then Mike points to what he remembers of a dirt driveway to his own childhood home. "It was a shotgun house," he muses. "You could aim right through it. But it held the nine of us okay." The house had been

renovated slave quarters on the Armelise Plantation and Mike's father had been a plumber who serviced homes on and off it. Looking out the window of the truck, it's clear that Mike and I see different things. Mike sees a busy, beloved, bygone world. I see a field of green.

We pull over, climb down, and walk into the nearest row. Mike cuts us a stalk, head and tails it, and whittles two sticks of the fibrous sugarcane. We chew it and suck the sweetness from it. Back in the truck, Mike continues his reverie about the tiny bygone settlement of Banderville, finally dismantled only in the 1970s. About three quarters had been black and a quarter white, and they had lived, as he recalls it, in close, unequal, harmony. Mike had passed his boyhood in an era of sugar, cotton, and mule-drawn plows and his adulthood in the era of oil. As a teenager earning money over the summer for college, he had laid wooden boards through mosquito-infested bayous to set up oil-drill platforms. As a grown, college-educated man, he had trained himself as an "estimator"—calculating the size, strength, and cost of materials needed to construct large platforms that held oil-drilling rigs in the Gulf, and to create the giant white spherical tanks that stored vast quantities of chemicals and oil. "When I was a kid, you stuck a thumb out by the side of the road, you got a ride. Or if you had a car, you gave a ride. If someone was hungry, you fed him. You had community. You know what's undercut all that?" He pauses. "Big government."

We climb back in his red truck, take a swig of water (he has brought plastic bottles for us both), and continue edging forward through the cane as our conversation shifts to politics. "Most folks around here are Cajun, Catholic, conservative," he explains, adding with gusto, "I'm for the Tea Party!"

I'd first seen Mike Schaff months earlier standing at the microphone at an environmental rally on the steps of the Louisiana state capital in Baton Rouge, his voice cracking with emotion. He had been a victim of one of the strangest, literally earth-shaking environmental disasters in the nation, one that robbed him of his home and community—a sinkhole that devoured hundred-foot-tall trees and turned forty acres of swamp upside down, as I shall describe. That raised a big question in my mind. The disaster had been

caused by a lightly regulated drilling company. But as a Tea Party advocate, Mike had hailed government deregulation of all sorts, as well as drastic cuts in government spending—including that for environmental protection. How could he be both near tears to recall his lost home and also call for a world stripped of most government beyond the military and hurricane relief? I was puzzled. I sensed a wall between us.

Empathy Walls

You might say I'd come to Louisiana with an interest in walls. Not visible, physical walls such as those separating Catholics from Protestants in Belfast, Americans from Mexicans on the Texas border, or, once, residents of East and West Berlin. It was empathy walls that interested me. An empathy wall is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances. In a period of political tumult, we grasp for quick certainties. We shoehorn new information into ways we already think. We settle for knowing our opposite numbers from the outside. But is it possible, without changing our beliefs, to know others from the inside, to see reality through their eyes, to understand the links between life, feeling, and politics; that is, to cross the empathy wall? I thought it was.

I'd asked Mike Schaff to show me where he'd grown up because I wanted to understand, if I could, how he saw the world. By way of introduction, I'd told him, "I'm from Berkeley, California, a sociologist, and I am trying to understand the deepening divide in our country. So I'm trying to get out of my political bubble and get to know people in yours." Mike nodded at the word "divide," then quipped, "Berkeley? So y'all must be *communist!*" He grinned as if to say, "We Cajuns can laugh, hope you can."

He wasn't making it hard. At all, strongly built man in tan-rimmed glasses, he spoke succinctly, in a low near mumble, and was given both to soulful, sometimes self-deprecating, reflection and stalwart Facebook proclamations. Explaining his background, he said, "My mom was Cajun and

my dad was German. We Cajuns call ourselves coon asses. So since I was half Cajun, and half German, my mom called me half-ass.” We laughed. Mike was one of seven children his dad had raised on a plumber’s wage. “We didn’t know we were poor,” he said, a refrain I would hear often among those I came to know on the far right, speaking of their own or their parents’ childhoods. Mike had an engineer’s eye, a sportsman’s love of fish and game, and a naturalist’s ear for the call of a tree frog. I didn’t know any members of the Tea Party, not to really talk to, and he didn’t know many people like me. “I’m pro-life, pro-gun, pro-freedom to live our own lives as we see fit so long as we don’t hurt others. And I’m anti–big government,” Mike said. “Our government is way too big, too greedy, too incompetent, too bought, and it’s not ours anymore. We need to get back to our local communities, like we had at Armelise. Honestly, we’d be better off.”

Not only have the country’s two main political parties split further apart on such issues, but political feeling also runs deeper than it did in the past. In 1960, when a survey asked American adults whether it would “disturb” them if their child married a member of the other political party, no more than 5 percent of either party answered “yes.” But in 2010, 33 percent of Democrats and 40 percent of Republicans answered “yes.” In fact, *partyism*, as some call it, now beats race as the source of divisive prejudice.

When Americans moved in the past, they left in search of better jobs, cheaper housing, or milder weather. But according to *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans Is Tearing Us Apart* by Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing, when people move today, it is more often to live near others who share their views. People are segregating themselves into different emotionally toned enclaves—anger here, hopefulness and trust there. A group of libertarian Texans have bought land in the salt flats east of El Paso, named it Paulville, and reserved it for enthusiastic “freedom-loving” followers of Ron Paul. And the more that people confine themselves to like-minded company, the more extreme their views become. According to a 2014 Pew study of over 10,000 Americans, the most politically engaged on each side see those in the “other party” not just as wrong, but as “so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being.” Compared to the past,

each side also increasingly gets its news from its own television channel—the right from Fox News, the left from MSNBC. And so the divide widens.

We live in what the *New Yorker* has called the “Tea Party era.” Some 350,000 people are active members, but, according to another Pew poll, some 20 percent of Americans—45 million people—support it. And the divide cuts through a striking variety of issues. Ninety percent of Democrats believe in the human role in climate change, surveys find, compared with 59 percent of moderate Republicans, 38 percent of conservative Republicans, and only 29 percent of Tea Party advocates. In fact, politics is the single biggest factor determining views on climate change.

This split has widened because the right has moved right, not because the left has moved left. Republican presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, and Ford all supported the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1960, the GOP platform embraced “free collective bargaining” between management and labor. Republicans boasted of “extending the minimum wage to several million more workers” and “strengthening the unemployment insurance system and extension of its benefits.” Under Dwight Eisenhower, top earners were taxed at 91 percent; in 2015, it was 40 percent. Planned Parenthood has come under serious attack from nearly all Republican presidential candidates running in 2016. Yet a founder of the organization was Peggy Goldwater, wife of the 1968 conservative Republican candidate for president Barry Goldwater. General Eisenhower called for massive investment in infrastructure, and now nearly all congressional Republicans see such a thing as frightening government overreach. Ronald Reagan raised the national debt and favored gun control, and now the Republican state legislature of Texas authorizes citizens to “open carry” loaded guns into churches and banks. Conservatives of yesterday seem moderate or liberal today.

The far right now calls for cuts in entire segments of the federal government—the Departments of Education, Energy, Commerce, and Interior, for example. In January 2015, fifty-eight House Republicans voted to abolish the Internal Revenue Service. Some Republican congressional candidates call for abolishing all public schools. In March 2015, the Republican-dominated U.S. Senate voted 51 to 49 in support of an amendment to a

budget resolution to sell or give away all non-military federal lands other than national monuments and national parks. This would include forests, wildlife refuges, and wilderness areas. In 1970, not a single U.S. senator opposed the Clean Air Act. Joined by ninety-five Republican congressmen, Senator David Vitter of Louisiana, one of the most polluted states in the union, has called for the end of the Environmental Protection Agency.

And the Tea Party's turn away from government may signal a broader trend. During the depression of the 1930s, Americans turned to the federal government for aid in their economic recovery. But in response to the Great Recession of 2008, a majority of Americans turned away from it. As the political divide widens and opinions harden, the stakes have grown vastly higher. Neither ordinary citizens nor leaders are talking much "across the aisle," damaging the surprisingly delicate process of governance itself. The United States has been divided before, of course. During the Civil War, a difference in belief led to some 750,000 deaths. During the stormy 1960s, too, clashes arose over the war in Vietnam, civil rights, and women's rights. But in the end, a healthy democracy depends on a collective capacity to hash things out. And to get there, we need to figure out what's going on—especially on the more rapidly shifting and ever stronger right.

The Great Paradox

Inspired by Thomas Frank's book *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, I began my five-year journey to the heart of the American right carrying with me, as if it were a backpack, a great paradox. Back in 2004, when Frank's book appeared, there was a paradox underlying the right-left split. Since then the split has become a gulf.

Across the country, red states are poorer and have more teen mothers, more divorce, worse health, more obesity, more trauma-related deaths, more low-birth-weight babies, and lower school enrollment. On average, people in red states die five years earlier than people in blue states. Indeed, the gap in life expectancy between Louisiana (75.7) and Connecticut (80.8) is the same as that between the United States and Nicaragua. Red states suffer

more in another highly important but little-known way, one that speaks to the very biological self-interest in health and life: industrial pollution.

Louisiana is an extreme example of this paradox. *The Measure of America*, a report of the Social Science Research Council, ranks every state in the United States on its “human development.” Each rank is based on life expectancy, school enrollment, educational degree attainment, and median personal earnings. Out of the 50 states, Louisiana ranked 49th and in overall health ranked last. According to the 2015 National Report Card, Louisiana ranked 48th out of 50 in eighth-grade reading and 49th out of 50 in eighth-grade math. Only eight out of ten Louisianans have graduated from high school, and only 7 percent have graduate or professional degrees. According to the *Kids Count Data Book*, compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Louisiana ranked 49th out of 50 states for child well-being. And the problem transcends race; an average black in Maryland lives four years longer, earns twice as much, and is twice as likely to have a college degree as a black in Louisiana. And whites in Louisiana are worse off than whites in Maryland or anywhere else outside Mississippi. Louisiana has suffered many environmental problems too: there are nearly 400 miles of low, flat, subsiding coastline, and the state loses a football field–size patch of wetland every hour. It is threatened by rising sea levels and severe hurricanes, which the world’s top scientists connect to climate change.

Given such an array of challenges, one might expect people to welcome federal help. In truth, a very large proportion of the yearly budgets of red states—in the case of Louisiana, 44 percent—do come from federal funds; \$2,400 is given by the federal government per Louisianan per year.

But Mike Schaff doesn’t welcome that federal money and doubts the science of climate change: “I’ll worry about global warming in fifty years,” he says. Mike loves his state, and he loves the outdoor life. But instead of looking to government, like others in the Tea Party he turns to the free market. Mike’s mother had voted for the Louisiana Democrat Ed Edwards because he was Cajun and for Jack Kennedy because he was Catholic; “Democrat” wasn’t a bad word when he was going up. But it is now. Mike had long

worked for a small business and advocates a free market for businesses of all sizes, and from this yet another paradox seemed to unfold. Many Tea Party advocates work in or run small businesses. Yet the politicians they support back laws that consolidate the monopoly power of the very largest companies that are poised to swallow up smaller ones. Small farmers voting with Monsanto? Corner drugstore owners voting with Walmart? The local bookstore owner voting with Amazon? If I were a small business owner, I would welcome lower company taxes, sure, but strengthening the monopolies that could force me out of business? I didn't get it.

Wrapped around these puzzles was a bigger one: how can a system both create pain and deflect blame for that pain? In 2008, reckless and woefully underregulated Wall Street investors led many to lose savings, homes, jobs, and hope. Yet, years later, under the banner of a "free market," many within the growing small-town right defend Wall Street against government "over-regulation." What could be going on?

Maybe the best way to find out, I thought, was to reverse the "Big Sort," to leave my blue neighborhood and state, enter a red state, and try to scale the empathy wall. My neighbors and friends on my side of the wall are more or less like me. They have BA degrees or more and read the *New York Times* daily. They eat organic food, recycle their garbage, and take BART (the public rail system) when they can. Most have grown up on one or the other coast. Some are churchgoers, but many call themselves "spiritual" and don't regularly go to church. Many work in public or nonprofit sector jobs, and are as puzzled by all this as I am. When I started out, I had no close friend who'd been born in the South, only one who worked in oil, and none in the Tea Party.

In his *New York Times* essay, "Who Turned My Blue State Red?" Alec MacGillis offers an intriguing answer to the Great Paradox. People in red states who need Medicaid and food stamps welcome them but don't vote, he argues, while those a little higher on the class ladder, white conservatives, don't need them and do vote—against public dollars for the poor.

This "two notches up" thesis gives us part of the answer, but not most. For one thing, as I was to discover, the affluent who vote against government

services use them anyway. Virtually every Tea Party advocate I interviewed for this book has personally benefited from a major government service or has close family who have. Several had disabled elderly parents lacking private long-term care insurance, and had them declared indigent in order to enable them to receive Medicaid. Another man, whose wife suffered a severely disabling disease and whose care would have bankrupted him, lovingly divorced her to make her eligible for Medicaid. The able-bodied brother of a disapproving sister—both Tea Party—received SNAP benefits. The brother of another put in for unemployment during hunting season. Most said, “Since it’s there, why not use it?” But many were ashamed and asked me to dissociate their identity from such an act, which I’ve done. But shame didn’t stop those who disapproved of public services from using them.

MacGillis suggests that voters really act in their self-interest. But do they? The “two notches up” idea doesn’t explain why red state voters who were not themselves billionaires opposed taxing billionaires, the money from which might help expand a local library, or add swings to a local park. The best way to test the MacGillis idea, I figured, is to pick out a problem that affluent voters in poor red states *do* have, and to show they don’t want government help for that either. In other words, the two-notch-up voter may say, “Let’s cut welfare to the poor because I’m not poor.” Or, “Never mind improving public schools. My kid goes to a private one”—although no one I spoke to talked like this. But they do themselves face other problems the government could help with, which brings me to the keyhole issue in this book: environmental pollution. Through a close-up view of this issue, I reasoned, I could uncover the wider perspective that drove people’s responses to it and to much else.

To begin with, I wanted to go to the geographic heart of the right—the South. Nearly all the recent growth of the right has occurred below the Mason-Dixon line, an area that, encompassing the original Confederate states, accounts for a third of the U.S. population. In the last two decades the South has also grown by 14 percent. Between 1952 and 2000, among high school-educated whites in the South, there has been a 20 percent increase in Republican voters, and among college-educated whites, the increase was

higher still. In the nation as a whole, whites have moved right: between 1972 and 2014, they shifted from composing 41 percent of all Democrats to 24 percent, and from 24 percent of Republicans to 27. (White independents also grew during this time, most of them leaning right.) So if I wanted to understand the right, I would need to get to know the white South.

But where in the South should I go? In the 2012 election, in the nation as a whole, 39 percent of white voters voted for Barack Obama. In the South, 29 percent did. And in Louisiana, it was 14 percent—a smaller proportion than in the South as a whole. According to one 2011 poll, half of Louisianans support the Tea Party. Next to South Carolina, Louisiana also held the highest proportion of state representatives in the U.S. House of Representative's Tea Party Caucus.

As luck would have it, I had one contact in Louisiana—Sally Cappel, the mother-in-law of a former graduate student of mine. It was Sally who would introduce me to the white South and, through a friend, to the right within it. A Lake Charles–based artist, Sally was a progressive Democrat who in the 2016 primary favored Bernie Sanders. Sally's very dear friend and a world-traveling flight attendant from Opelousas, Louisiana, Shirley Slack was an enthusiast for the Tea Party and Donald Trump. Both women had joined sororities (although different ones) at Louisiana State University. Each had married, had three children, lived in homes walking distance apart in Lake Charles, and had keys to each other's houses. Each loved the other's children. Shirley knew Sally's parents and even consulted Sally's mother when the two got to "fussing too much." They exchanged birthday and Christmas gifts and jointly scoured the newspaper for notices of upcoming cultural events they had, when they were neighbors in Lake Charles, attended together. One day when I was staying as Shirley's overnight guest in Opelousas, I noticed a watercolor picture hanging on the guestroom wall, which Sally had painted as a gift for Shirley's eleven-year-old daughter, who aspired to become a ballerina. With one pointed toe on a pudgy, pastel cloud, the other lifted high, the ballerina's head was encircled by yellow star-like butterflies. It was a loving picture of a child's dream—one that came true. Both women followed the news on TV—Sally through MSNBC's Rachel

Maddow, and Shirley via Fox News's Charles Krauthammer, and each talked these different reports over with a like-minded husband. The two women talk by phone two or three times a week, and their grown children keep in touch, partly across the same political divide. While this book is not about the personal lives of these two women, it couldn't have been written without them both, and I believe that their friendship models what our country itself needs to forge: the capacity to connect across difference.

To begin with, I read what other thinkers had to say about the rise of the right. At one extreme, some argued that a band of the very rich, wanting to guard their money, had hired "movement entrepreneurs" to create an "astro-turf grassroots following." In *The Billionaires' Tea Party*, for example, the Australian filmmaker Taki Oldham had found that home-grown "citizen groups" challenging climate change were funded by oil companies, and argued that populist anti-government rage was orchestrated by corporate strategy. Others argued that extremely rich people had stirred the movement to life, without arguing that grassroots support was fake. The *New Yorker* staff writer Jane Mayer describes the strategy of billionaire oil baron brothers Charles and David Koch to direct \$889,000,000 to help right-wing candidates and causes in 2016 alone. "To bring about social change," Charles Koch says, "requires a strategy" that uses "vertically and horizontally integrated" planning "from idea creation to policy development to education to grassroots organizations to lobbying to litigation to political action." It was like a vast, sprawling company that owns the forest, the pulp mill, the publishing house, and pays authors to write slanted books. Such a political "company" could wield astonishing influence. Particularly in the years after *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, the 2010 Supreme Court decision permitting unlimited anonymous corporate gifts to political candidates, this influence is, indeed, at work. Just 158 rich families contributed nearly half of the \$176 million given to candidates in the first phase of the presidential election of 2016—\$138 million to Republicans and \$20 million to Democrats. Through Americans for Prosperity, the Koch brothers have circulated a pledge in Congress to curb the authority of the EPA.

Armelise Plantation, where Mike Schaff was born, and Bayou Corne,

where he lived and had hoped to die, were a few miles from a strip of the Mississippi now studded with petrochemical plants and popularly called, with good reason, “Cancer Alley.” Was concern about this issue in Mike Schaff’s interest? He thought so. No one was paying him to attend local meetings of the Tea Party, nor were they paying his neighbors, many of whom shared his views.

In *What’s the Matter With Kansas?* Frank argues that people like Mike are being greatly misled. A rich man’s “economic agenda” is paired with the “bait” of social issues. Through appeal to abortion bans, gun rights, and school prayer, Mike and his like-minded friends are persuaded to embrace economic policies that hurt them. As Frank writes, “Vote to stop abortion: receive a rollback in capital gains taxes. . . . Vote to get government off our backs; receive conglomeration and monopoly everywhere from media to meat packing. Vote to strike a blow against elitism, receive a social order in which wealth is more concentrated than ever before in our lifetimes.” His beloved fellow Kansans, Frank argues, are being terribly misled.

So how does it work to be misled? Can we be smart, inquiring, well-informed, and still misled? Mike was highly intelligent, consulted a number of news sources—although his main source was Fox News—and he talked politics endlessly with family, neighbors, and friends. Like me, he also lived in an enclave of like-minded people. Mike didn’t think the Koch-funded idea-machine was duping him. In fact, Mike wondered whether a Soros-funded machine was duping me. Purchased political influence is real, powerful, and at play, I think, but as an explanation for why any of us believe what we do, duping—and the presumption of gullibility—is too simple an idea.

Our home enclaves often reflect special cultures of governance tying politics to geography. This is the thesis of Colin Woodard’s *American Nations*. Rural areas in the Midwest, the South, and Alaska lean right while large cities, New England, and the two coasts lean left, he notes. Bound by a tradition of small-town governance and oriented toward Europe, New Englanders tend to believe in good government for the “common good.” Appalachians and Texans tend to be freedom-loving government minimalists.

Tracing their roots to a caste system, whites in Dixie states treasure local control and resist federal power—linked as that is to the defeat, 150 years ago, of the South by the North. Resistance to federal taxation, the historian Robin Einhorn notes, also originated in the South. Regional traditions are real, of course, but less immutable than Woodard suggests. And while the far right is strongest in the South, most of its members make up a demographic—white, middle to low income, older, married, Christian—that spans the whole nation.

Others point to the moral values of the right. In *The Righteous Mind*, for example, Jonathan Haidt argues, unlike Frank, that people are not misled but instead vote in their self-interest—one based on cultural values. While right and left both value caring and fairness, he notes, they place different priorities on obedience to authority (the right) and originality (the left), for example. Surely, this is true. But a person can hold a set of values calmly, or in a state of fury that brings a whole new party into being. What makes the difference between the two? Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson rightly argue that it is a unique coalescence of circumstances—predisposing factors and precipitating ones. Primary among latter were the Great Recession of 2008 and government efforts to forestall it, the presidency of Barack Obama, and Fox News.

While all these works greatly helped me, I found one thing missing in them all—a full understanding of emotion in politics. What, I wanted to know, do people *want to feel*, what do they think they *should or shouldn't* feel, and what *do they feel* about a range of issues? When we listen to a political leader, we don't simply hear words; we listen predisposed to want to feel certain things. Some broad emotional ideals are shared across the political spectrum but others are not. Some feel proud of a "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses" Statue of Liberty America, while others yearn to feel proud of a Constitution-abiding, work-your-own-way-up America.

At play are "feeling rules," left ones and right ones. The right seeks release from liberal notions of what they *should feel*—happy for the gay newlywed, sad at the plight of the Syrian refugee, unresentful about paying taxes. The left sees prejudice. Such rules challenge the emotional core of

right-wing belief. And it is to this core that a free-wheeling candidate such as the billionaire entrepreneur Donald Trump, Republican candidate for president in 2016, can appeal, saying, as he gazes upon throngs of supporters, “See all the *passion*.”

We can approach that core, I came to see, through what I call a “deep story,” a story that *feels as if* it were true. As though I were seeing through Alice’s looking glass, the deep story was to lead me to focus on a site of long-simmering social conflict, one ignored by both the “Occupy Wall Street” left—who were looking to the 1 and the 99 percent within the private realm as a site of class conflict—and by the anti-government right, who think of differences of class and race as matters of personal character. The deep story was to take me to the shoulds and shouldn’ts of feeling, to the management of feeling, and to the core feelings stirred by charismatic leaders. And, as we shall see, everyone has a deep story.

Visits and Follow-Arounds

But first, the people. I originally based myself in Lake Charles, a town of 74,000 in southwest Louisiana, some thirty miles north of the Gulf of Mexico. Half were white, half black, many of Cajun ancestry. Three percent were foreign-born. Twenty-three percent of residents had a BA, and the median household income was \$36,000 per year. Seated in Calcasieu Parish (Louisiana’s French heritage led to the use of “parishes” instead of “counties”), Lake Charles hosts seventy-five festivals in the surrounding area, and its Mardi Gras Museum claims the largest collection of Mardi Gras costumes in the world. It attracts tourists to its three large casinos and workers to its rapidly expanding petrochemical industry.

Once there, I scouted out members of the far right in a number of ways. To begin with, Sally Cappel and Shirley Slack helped set up four focus groups, two made up of liberals, two of Tea Party advocates. Each group met in Sally’s kitchen, and I followed up the Tea Party sessions with interviews of individual Tea Party advocates, sometimes interviewing their spouses and parents too. I say “interview” because I asked people to sign a

sheet describing my purpose before we talked. But at the end of two or three hours, they often said it was very nice *visiting with you*, and in truth, these sessions often turned into a mix of interview and visit.

An accountant I met through a Tea Party focus group invited me to a series of monthly luncheon meetings of the Republican Women of Southwest Louisiana, playfully quipping, “Maybe we’ll change your mind!” There I discovered a well-attended, highly-organized gathering of white, middle-aged, professional women, and a special table of teenagers in red T-shirts. At each luncheon I met new people at my table and made dates to follow up with them, often meeting their families and sometimes their neighbors. I was invited to visit two private Christian schools and to attend Baptist, Pentecostal, and Catholic church services and activities, including a 40s-Plus Pentecostal Gumbo Cook-Off. One woman at the Republican women’s luncheon was a Pentecostal pastor’s wife who introduced me to many in her church and invited me to join her and her friends in a game of Rook (a fifty-seven-card game of so-called “missionary poker,” which provides evangelical players a happy alternative to card games associated with gambling). I met a man whose great uncle had been the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan (a reason his grandfather had moved to another town) and met a white member of the Tea Party and strong Baptist woman who had adopted an African American baby and a South American child.

I also followed the campaign trails of a Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate and his Tea Party rival, which took me to the Acadian Village Pig Roast in Lafayette, a rice festival and boat parade in New Iberia, a get-out-the-vote event in Crowley, and a union meet-and-greet in Rayne. At each whistle stop, I chatted with my neighbors. A marine biologist and environmental activist, Mike Tritico—a political independent and son of a furniture store owner—told me of right-wing friends who vehemently opposed his activism. A tall man of seventy with a teacherly manner and encyclopedic grasp of local industry, he was seen as a recluse by some (he lived in a disheveled cabin in the woods of Longville), as a saint by others, and as a thorn in their side by state regulatory officials. I asked if I could tag along with him and meet his adversaries. Mike was game.

Over five years, I accumulated 4,690 pages of transcripts based on interviews with a core of forty Tea Party advocates and twenty others from various walks of life—teachers, social workers, lawyers, and government officials—who enlarged my perspective on my core group. From within that core group, I selected a small number who illustrated particular patterns especially well. With their permission, I followed them around, asking to see where they were born, attended school and church, shopped, and had fun with them, and tried to get a feel for the influences on them. While all supported the Tea Party, they varied greatly among themselves. Some went to church three times a week, others not at all. Some had seven guns, others three, of which some were behind glass, others in a bedside drawer. They differed in how they saw poverty. One man said, “I asked the security guy at our local grocery store what sort of stuff gets stolen from the store. He said it was mainly rice, beans, and baby food. That tells you something.” Others thought such reports were “exaggerated.” They differed in their fears. One man told me he had bought a secondhand medical book at Goodwill in case the economy “crashed and burned” and he had to set his own broken arm. Another stocked provisions in case we “all have to be self-sufficient,” and he had neighbors doing the same. Most were less alarmed. My core group differed in their suspicion of President Obama, too, and in their denigration of him. The Facebook page of one Tea Party advocate showed mug shots of President Obama, front and side, a name plate below his image, while another showed him in “public housing.” Most were angry, afraid, some in mourning for real losses, but in their emotional complexion, too, they differed widely among themselves. (For more on my research, see Appendix A.)

I was definitely not in Berkeley, California. For one thing, the occasional turn of phrase was different: “As fast as a duck can eat a June bug. . . . Up to my ass in alligators. . . .” One man referred to unadorned—yep-nope—speech as “talking Yankee.” Churches grand and humble studded the landscape, in some towns, one a block. Three aisles in Lake Charles’s largest bookstore were dedicated to Bibles of different colors, shapes, and print sizes, and to leather-bound Bible study notebooks. Some restaurants advertised “Lenten Season Specials,” appealing to the Catholic French Creole

and Cajun residents. Certain absences also reminded me I was not at home: no *New York Times* at the newsstand, almost no organic produce in grocery stores or farmers' markets, no foreign films in movie houses, few small cars, fewer petite sizes in clothing stores, fewer pedestrians speaking foreign languages into cell phones—indeed, fewer pedestrians. There were fewer yellow Labradors and more pit bulls and bulldogs. Forget bicycle lanes, color-coded recycling bins, or solar panels on roofs. In some cafés, virtually everything on the menu was fried. There were no questions before meals about gluten-free entrees, and dinner generally began with prayer. Farther east from Lake Charles and along the strip of petrochemical companies lining the lower Mississippi, I saw quite a few signs for personal injury lawyers (“Just call Chuck”). In the absence of the talismans of my world and in the presence of theirs, I came to realize that the Tea Party was not so much an official political group as a culture, a way of seeing and feeling about a place and its people.

I compared the student activity groups registered at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge (the alma mater of some I talked with) with those at the University of California, Berkeley, where I have long taught. At Louisiana State (a campus of some 30,000 had some 375 student groups), I found student chapters of the Oilfield Christian Fellowship, the Agribusiness Club, the Air Waste Management Association, the Society of Petrophysics and Well Log Analysts, and a War-gaming and Role Playing Society (WARS)—none of which had analogues at U.C. Berkeley.

U.C. Berkeley (with 37,000 students and 1,000 student organizations) listed Amnesty International and the Anti-Trafficking Coalition, Building Sustainability at Cal, Environmental Science Student Association, Global Student Embassy at Berkeley (to promote grassroots environmental cooperation)—groups with no analogues at LSU. Mike Schaff had graduated from Louisiana State University in Monroe and had joined the chess club, Circle K (Kiwanis), and a military fraternity called Scabbard and Blade. With an enrollment of 25,000, his university featured some 150 student groups. One group—Cupcakes for a Cause—raised money to help women veterans. Another group, the ULM Fishing Team, held monthly

tournaments. At Northeastern Louisiana State, student clubs included College Republicans and Young Americans for Liberty but not College Democrats.

Driving around Lake Charles, I noticed “Don’t Tread on Me” bumper stickers on the back of a few pickup trucks, showing a coiled rattlesnake with an extended tongue. The symbol, first created by a colonial Revolutionary War general in 1775, has been adopted nationally by the Tea Party. Although it came down in 2011, I saw an enormous “Where’s the Birth Certificate?” sign on Interstate 49 between Lafayette and Opelousas, publicly questioning President Obama’s birthplace. At the edge of a used-truck lot on Route 171 between Longville and DeRidder, an hour’s drive north of Lake Charles, a placard on the side of a wooden hut ominously proclaimed it the “Obama Smokehouse.”

Reminders of the racial divide were everywhere. In the Westlake cemetery, for example, a roadway divided the graves of whites and blacks. The grass around the whites’ graves had been recently trimmed while that around the black graves had not. Another example was a granite statue of a young Confederate soldier in front of the old Calcasieu Parish Courthouse, above a plaque thanking those who “defended the South.” No parallel sites commemorated slave heroes or victims of lynching. On my 2016 visit to Lake Charles, I noticed a small flag of the early confederacy—thirteen stars in the upper left, and red, white, and red bands to the right—at the base of this monument. Three of the five parishes of southwest Louisiana, not to mention the Jefferson Davis Bank and freeway, are named after Confederate officials of the Civil War, and the state has ninety Confederate monuments, some unveiled as recently as 2010. Only fifteen years ago, a cross was burned near a trailer in Longville, where one of my guides, Mike Tritico, and friends of his I came to know lived—the last known burned cross in the state. Six men were charged and sentenced by federal prosecutors. Race seemed everywhere in the physical surroundings, but almost nowhere in spontaneous direct talk.

A Keyhole Issue

I wanted to get up close. The best way to do that, I thought, was to come to know one group of people in one place, focusing on a single issue. This issue was not a case, as mentioned earlier, of well-to-do voters voting down government measures they themselves didn't need. Everyone I talked to wanted a clean environment. But in Louisiana, the Great Paradox was staring me in the face—great pollution and great resistance to regulating polluters. If I could truly enter the minds and hearts of people on the far right on the issue of the water they drink, the animals they hunt, the lakes they swim in, the streams they fish in, the air they breathe, I could get to know them up close. Through their views on this keyhole issue—how much, if at all, should government regulate industrial polluters?—I hoped to learn about the right's perspective on a wider range of issues. I could learn about how—emotionally speaking—politics works in us all.

As an oil state with a record of going light on regulation, Louisiana has suffered decades of severe environmental damage. During the time I was doing my research, the fracking boom also hit Lake Charles, and the town rapidly became the center of a stunning \$84 billion planned investment in southwest Louisiana—one of the biggest investments in American industry. Lake Charles had become ground zero for production of American petrochemicals.

I brought industrial growth into view through interviews with public officials—the mayor of nearby Westlake and the head of the Southwest Louisiana Task Force for Growth and Opportunity (which had just been given the assignment of planning for the arrival of 18,000 workers to be housed in “man camps”; 13,000 of these workers were from out of state, including Filipino pipefitters).

While in Lake Charles, I stayed at Aunt Ruby's Bed and Breakfast. By the edge of the bathtub in my quarters, I discovered a moisturizing body wash, on the back side of which were listed in small print the ingredients: petroleum, ammonium laureth sulfate, sodium lauroamphoacetate, ammonium lauryl sulfate, lauric acid, sodium chloride, hydroxypropyltrimonium

chloride. The same ingredients, it occurred to me, could be found in the plastic in my sunglasses, my watch band, my computer, my moisturizer. Lake Charles produced the airplane fuel that brought me there and the gasoline I was getting around on, and much of this was produced by companies close by.

To prepare for my journey, I re-read Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, a Tea Party bible lauded by the conservative radio pundit Rush Limbaugh and former Fox News television commentator Glenn Beck. Rand describes serving the needy as a "monstrous idea." Charity, she says, is bad. Greed is good. If Ayn Rand appealed to them, I imagined, they're probably pretty selfish, tough, cold people, and I prepared for the worst. But I was thankful to discover many warm, open people who were deeply charitable to those around them, including an older, white liberal stranger writing a book.

Given its liberal reputation, I worried about telling people I taught at U.C. Berkeley. I secretly hoped my Louisiana acquaintances would respectfully recall its seventy-two Nobel Laureates, its proud academic standing. But no. When I told one man that I lived in Berkeley, he immediately replied: "Oh, you got *hippies*." Another had seen a Fox News report of Berkeley students protesting fee hikes. They had linked themselves together with iron chains and stood before TV cameras on the edge of the roof of a campus building. If one fell, so would they all, which was, I guess, their point. "Did you say Berkeley students need an *A average* to get in?" someone asked me, incredulous. "The chain thing seems pretty stupid to me."

From across the table at a meeting of the Republican Women of Southwest Louisiana, Madonna Massey, a gospel singer, declared that she "*loved* Rush Limbaugh." In the past, I'd found Limbaugh harshly opinionated, and, incurious and offended, I'd routinely switched the dial. But now I told Madonna, "I'd love to talk about what you love about him." When we sat down a week later to sweet teas at a local Starbucks, I asked Madonna what she loved about Limbaugh. "His criticism of 'femi-nazis,' you know, feminists, women who want to be equal to men." I absorbed that for a moment. Then she asked what I thought, and after I answered, she remarked, "But you're nice . . ." From there, we went through Limbaugh's epithets ("commie libs,"

“environmental wackos”). Finally, we came to Madonna’s basic feeling that Limbaugh was defending her against insults she felt liberals were lobbing at her: “Oh, liberals think that Bible-believing Southerners are ignorant, backward, rednecks, losers. They think we’re racist, sexist, homophobic, and maybe fat.” Her grandfather had struggled as a desperately poor Arkansas sharecropper. She was a gifted singer, beloved by a large congregation, a graduate of a two-year Bible college, and a caring mother of two. In this moment, I began to recognize the power of blue-state catcalls taunting red state residents. Limbaugh was a firewall against liberal insults thrown at her and her ancestors, she felt. Was the right-wing media making them up to stoke hatred, I wondered, or were there enough blue-state insults to go around? The next time I saw Madonna, she was interested to know if it had been hard for me to hear what she’d said. I told her it wasn’t. “I do that too sometimes,” she said, “try to get myself out of the way to see what another person feels.”

As I walked with Mike Schaff through the sugarcane fields of the old Armelise Plantation, or sat with Madonna in the Living Way Pentecostal Church, I was discovering good people at the center of this Great Paradox. How could kindly Madonna oppose government help for the poor? How could a warm, bright, thoughtful man like Mike Schaff, a victim of corporate malfeasance and wanton destruction, aim so much of his fire at the federal government? How could a state that is one of the most vulnerable to volatile weather be a center of climate denial?

So, curious to find out, I began this journey into the heart of the right.