

Are You A Cognitive Fascist?

By Dallas Dixon

Growing up I was taught that only bad people were racist. Then I found out that a close family relative would not sell his house to a black family. And the family lyrics were don't worry about it, you can't change it, he is too old and set in his ways. And, also racistly, I think I half bought it. That leads me to say as I've said at Fisher many, many times that I am a racist and you are most likely one too. My definition is if you act racistly, make a move, thought, wish, or prayer that is based on a race analysis rather than a personal one, you are a racist. No different than if you do a homicide once, you are a murderer. There are some who say only white people can be racist because the white forbearers invented the system to oppress, so how can the victims be racist?

In my view, this is one of those statements that sound right, in fact is historically correct, but doesn't hold up in the whiz of the world. Racism is catching. Even though my people invented it, it is catching to all people – black, white, yellow, brown, red and, wherever it lands and isn't vomited back up can be unleashed perniciously on whomever.

Sexism, fatism, classism is the same, I am all of these and as a fat person, my fatism can scar other folks, fat or not, like nasty. And homophobia, my number 1 ism works the same way. My daughter is gay and I'm becoming as fast as I can, but I'm homophobic under my acceptance. It's like the flu, cancer, dementia – silently deadly sin.

But, when I am shedding and fighting all my prejudices, God showed me another that is as nasty in its effect. All the other groups will roll their eyes – it's the prejudice against folks, many elderly, but across the board, who do not have the cognitive ability or memory to function in our cognitive fascist world.

The -ism shows up in the other -isms weighing them down in a world that institutionally sets them up for defeat, as the dominant world gathers the reward for victory that they believe is because of their higher level thinking, or worse yet, character. When they don't acknowledge the role that privilege plays in their cognitive, heterosexual, middle upper class, white, male world. I'm not turning a blind eye to smartness, ingenuity, hard work, creativity, foresight, but neither should we turn a blind eye to the institutions – from the tax code to education that allows curdled cream to rise to the top.

So, with dementia, God has shown me what it's like to be in the world with a brain and memory capacity different than what I would secretly and pridefully believe is all from me – my ability to multi-task and read folks better than others. Now, when there is a discussion, I don't follow the lines of thinking, don't read the subtleties, get bored that I can't keep up, and miss the double entendre – I say to myself that I will never win another argument with my wife. True, but actually that is a good thing.

Cognitive fascism is not a term I invented. It comes from two pieces of dementia literature that every caregiver and every person living with dementia should read as early in the process as possible. The first is *Dementia living in the memories of God* by John Swinton, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012. The second is *Redefining Dementia: Between the World of Forgetting and Remembering* by Nador Robert Shabahangi, Ph.D., December 2005.

Here are the ten coolest things I learned from each:

Swinton:

1. Pivotal Question – Who will I be when I have forgotten who I think I am, who they are, and who my God is? ‘Can anyone in the land of forgetfulness talk about your righteousness?’ (Ps 88:12)
What does it mean to be known, loved, and held by God when you have forgotten who God is and you can no longer recognize yourself? Introduction Pg. 3
2. Wellbeing, peace, health...has to do with the presence of something (not the absence or reduction of anything) it has to do with the presence of a specific God in particular places who engages in personal relationships with us. The presence of such a God often brings upon dissonance and physiological disequilibrium, but always for the purpose of the person’s greater wellbeing understood in redemptive and relational terms. Intro Pg. 7-8
3. If the primary focus of theology is on the cognitively aware subjective self, and if that very self is perceived to be dissolving... then dementia care will result in the forgetting of experiences of people with dementia. This dual forgetfulness – one the product of neurology, the other of outcome of hyper-cognitive assumptions will inevitably lead to practices which are ill-informed, and potentially destructive. Intro Pg. 14
4. Most people say that those with profound intellectual abilities lack the ability to think. Pg. 58
Hyper cognitive cultures will inevitably construct dementia in particularly negative terms, thus there is an explicit and implicit negative cultural bias toward diseases which involve deterioration in intellect, rationality, autonomy, and freedom. Consequently our relationships with them are negative. Often men and women with dementia are being downgraded to descriptions that devalue them and make unique and sensitive human beings into an instance of some category devised for convenience and control. Pg. 80-81
Alzheimer’s victims, mentally infirmed. Pg 82
5. Malignant interactions need not be perpetrated out of malice. Often they occur because of thoughtlessness, lack of insight, or lack of awareness about the negative effects of particular attitudes, behavior, and relationships. If we are taught to see people with dementia in particular ways, we’ll assume we should respond to them accordingly! Pg. 83

6. The way we position a person with a relationship will determine how we respond to her and will also reveal what we think of her even if things are unspoken. Pg. 89
7. God's memory is the place all other memories are held.
8. We are not what we remember. Memory is something that is done for us, rather than something we achieve on our own. Pg. 198
9. If care is fundamental to what it means to be human and to act faithfully toward God's creation, then to be a recipient of care is profound and a vital aspect of the process. Pg. 171
10. The possibility of many people with dementia being or becoming non-persons is very real. Pg. 145

Shabahangi:

1. Rather than a debilitating disease that leaves those afflicted in a sad and lamentable state of existence, dementia may be another, altered state of consciousness as valuable and important as our every day or 'normal' way of being. Pg. 1
2. Our conception of personal and societal growth is embedded in our dominant framework, striving for more – whether more memory, more proven outcome, or more years to live – represent pleasure and gain. Pg. 1
3. In fearing end resisting dementia, we do not allow it to fully reveal itself to us. On the contrary, we shut out those we label as demented. Pg. 2
4. For if we pause long enough to understand the phenomenon of dementia – not just its biological causes and concomitant physical manifestations we will discover something – human about those who experience the condition. The discovery may allow for a reconnection to our own essence. In doing so, we give ourselves an opportunity to contact deeper layers of who we are. European Americans perceive dementia as an illness. Chinese Americans interpret dementia as a consequence of aging. Latino and African Americans referred to dementia as the result of a person having lived a difficult life. Pg. 3-4
5. People with dementia are not focused on conscience reality alone.
6. The otherness of dementia folks is grounded in the realm of imagination and the human thirst to be creative. Pg. 4
7. If we were to move 'a thousandth of an inch' away from the prevailing definition of dementia, we might find that those with dementia don't lack in expressing their sensitivities, emotions, and human essence as they look at the world from a different angle. Pg. 5

8. While moving at their own pace, demented folks, do what we, in our twenty-four seven world have forgotten to do. They tune into their feelings, observing objects and circumstances in their own ways. Their behaviors are typically non-linear, and their actions non-directed.
9. The medical definition of dementia does not allow for any other possibility than the one it proposes: The person with dementia “is less than normal” and hence nothing can be gained or learned from them. We can appreciate them for what they show us, from their place of forgetfulness, staying open to the unknown. Dementia can be an invitation to remember something we may have forgotten in our hurried life.

As much about being, as much about doing, as much about wonder as about knowing, as much about forgetting as about remembering.

Are you still a cognitive fascist?

Dallas Dixon began to fall in love with God when he was 40. He is married to his wife Sonia, for 30 plus years, and has two daughters Alia and Ariel, and two almost daughters Kayla and Sara, and a granddaughter Lefty Rolwood.

He is a graduate of Princeton University and Seton Hall University. A former criminal defense attorney, Dixon transitioned to education upon founding the Emily Fisher Charter School in Trenton, New Jersey in 1998. He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's/Vascular Dementia in 2014. He spends his time in Maine and in New Jersey.