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So I'm starting us out today with a historical mystery. In 1957, there were two young women, both in their 20s, both living in the same city, both members of the same political group. That year, both decided to commit violent attacks. One girl took a gun and approached a soldier at a checkpoint. The other girl took a bomb and went to a crowded café. But here's the thing: one of those girls followed through with the attack, but the other turned back. So what made the difference?

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I'm a behavioral historian, and I study aggression, moral cognition and decision-making in social movements. That's a mouthful. (Laughs) So, the translation of that is: I study the moment an individual decides to pull the trigger, the day-to-day decisions that led up to that moment and the stories that they tell themselves about why that behavior is justified.

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Now, this topic -- it's not just scholarly for me. It's actually a bit personal. I grew up in Kootenai County, Idaho, and this is very important. This is not the part of Idaho with potatoes. We have no potatoes. And if you ask me about potatoes, I will find you.

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(Laughter)

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This part of Idaho is known for mountain lakes, horseback riding, skiing. Unfortunately, starting in the 1980s, it also became known as the worldwide headquarters for the Aryan Nations. Every year, members of the local neo-Nazi compound would turn out and march through our town, and every year, members of our town would turn out and protest them.

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Now, in 2001, I graduated from high school, and I went to college in New York City. I arrived in August 2001. As many of you probably are aware, three weeks later, the Twin Towers went down.

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Now, I was shocked. I was incredibly angry. I wanted to do something, but the only thing that I could think of doing at that time was to study Arabic.

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I will admit, I was that girl in class that wanted to know why "they" hate "us." I started studying Arabic for very wrong reasons. But something unexpected happened. I got a scholarship to go study in Israel. So the Idaho girl went to the Middle East. And while I was there, I met Palestinian Muslims, Palestinian Christians, Israeli settlers, Israeli peace activists. And what I learned is that every act has an ecology. It has a context.

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Now, since then, I have gone around the world, I have studied violent movements, I have worked with NGOs and ex-combatants in Iraq, Syria, Vietnam, the Balkans, Cuba. I earned my PhD in History, and now what I do is I go to different archives and I dig through documents, looking for police confessions, court cases, diaries and manifestos of individuals involved in violent attacks. Now, you gather all these documents -- what do they tell you?

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Our brains love causal mysteries, it turns out. So any time we see an attack on the news, we tend to ask one question: Why? Why did that happen? Well, I can tell you I've read thousands of manifestos, and what you find out is that they are actually imitative. They imitate the political movement that they're drawing from. So they actually don't tell us a lot about decision-making in that particular case. So we have to teach ourselves to ask a totally different question. Instead of "Why?" we have to ask "How?" How did individuals produce these attacks, and how did their decision-making ecology contribute to violent behavior?

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There's a couple things I've learned from asking this kind of question. The most important thing is that political violence is not culturally endemic. We create it. And whether we realize it or not, our day-to-day habits contribute to the creation of violence in our environment.

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So here's a couple of habits that I've learned contribute to violence. One of the first things that attackers did when preparing themselves for a violent event was they enclosed themselves in an information bubble. We've heard of fake news, yeah? Well, this shocked me: every group that I studied had some kind of a fake news slogan. French communists called it the "putrid press." French ultranationalists called it the "sellout press" and the "treasonous press." Islamists in Egypt called it the "depraved news." And Egyptian communists called it ... "fake news." So why do groups spend all this time trying to make these information bubbles? The answer is actually really simple. We make decisions based on the information we trust, yeah? So if we trust bad information, we're going to make bad decisions.

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Another interesting habit that individuals used when they wanted to produce a violent attack was that they looked at their victim not as an individual but just as a member of an opposing team. Now this gets really weird. There's some fun brain science behind why that kind of thinking is effective. Say I divide all of you guys into two teams: blue team, red team. And then I ask you to compete in a game against each other. Well, the funny thing is, within milliseconds, you will actually start experiencing pleasure -- pleasure -- when something bad happens to members of the other team. The funny thing about that is if I ask one of you blue team members to go and join the red team, your brain recalibrates, and within milliseconds, you will now start experiencing pleasure when bad things happen to members of your old team. This is a really good example of why us-them thinking is so dangerous in our political environment.

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Another habit that attackers used to kind of rev themselves up for an attack was they focused on differences. In other words, they looked at their victims, and they thought, "I share nothing in common with that person. They are totally different than me." Again, this might sound like a really simple concept, but there's some fascinating science behind why this works. Say I show you guys videos of different-colored hands and sharp pins being driven into these different-colored hands, OK? If you're white, the chances are you will experience the most sympathetic activation, or the most pain, when you see a pin going into the white hand. If you are Latin American, Arab, Black, you will probably experience the most sympathetic activation watching a pin going into the hand that looks most like yours. The good news is, that's not biologically fixed. That is learned behavior. Which means the more we spend time with other ethnic communities and the more we see them as similar to us and part of our team, the more we feel their pain.

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The last habit that I'm going to talk about is when attackers prepared themselves to go out and do one of these events, they focused on certain emotional cues. For months, they geared themselves up by focusing on anger cues, for instance. I bring this up because it's really popular right now. If you read blogs or the news, you see talk of two concepts from laboratory science: amygdala hijacking and emotional hijacking. Now, amygdala hijacking: it's the concept that I show you a cue -- say, a gun -- and your brain reacts with an automatic threat response to that cue. Emotional hijacking -- it's a very similar concept. It's the idea that I show you an anger cue, for instance, and your brain will react with an automatic anger response to that cue. I think women usually get this more than men. (Laughs)

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(Laughter)

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That kind of a hijacking narrative grabs our attention. Just the word "hijacking" grabs our attention. The thing is, most of the time, that's not really how cues work in real life. If you study history, what you find is that we are bombarded with hundreds of thousands of cues every day. And so what we do is we learn to filter. We ignore some cues, we pay attention to other cues.

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For political violence, this becomes really important, because what it meant is that attackers usually didn't just see an anger cue and suddenly snap. Instead, politicians, social activists spent weeks, months, years flooding the environment with anger cues, for instance, and attackers, they paid attention to those cues, they trusted those cues, they focused on them, they even memorized those cues.

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All of this just really goes to show how important it is to study history. It's one thing to see how cues operate in a laboratory setting. And those laboratory experiments are incredibly important. They give us a lot of new data about how our bodies work. But it's also very important to see how those cues operate in real life.

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So what does all this tell us about political violence? Political violence is not culturally endemic. It is not an automatic, predetermined response to environmental stimuli. We produce it. Our everyday habits produce it.

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Let's go back, actually, to those two women that I mentioned at the start. The first woman had been paying attention to those outrage campaigns, so she took a gun and approached a soldier at a checkpoint. But in that moment, something really interesting happened. She looked at that soldier, and she thought to herself, "He's the same age as me. He looks like me." And she put down the gun, and she walked away. Just from that little bit of similarity.

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The second girl had a totally different outcome. She also listened to the outrage campaigns, but she surrounded herself with individuals who were supportive of violence, with peers who supported her violence. She enclosed herself in an information bubble. She focused on certain emotional cues for months. She taught herself to bypass certain cultural inhibitions against violence. She practiced her plan, she taught herself new habits, and when the time came, she took her bomb to the café, and she followed through with that attack.

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This was not impulse. This was learning. Polarization in our society is not impulse, it's learning. Every day we are teaching ourselves: the news we click on, the emotions that we focus on, the thoughts that we entertain about the red team or the blue team. All of this contributes to learning, whether we realize it or not.

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The good news is that while the individuals I study already made their decisions, we can still change our trajectory. We might never make the decisions that they made, but we can stop contributing to violent ecologies. We can get out of whatever news bubble we're in, we can be more mindful about the emotional cues that we focus on, the outrage bait that we click on. But most importantly, we can stop seeing each other as just members of the red team or the blue team. Because whether we are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, atheist, Democrat or Republican, we're human. We're human beings. And we often share really similar habits.

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We have differences. Those differences are beautiful, and those differences are very important. But our future depends on us being able to find common ground with the other side. And that's why it is so, so important for us to retrain our brains and stop contributing to violent ecologies.

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Thank you.

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(Applause)