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1. [\*The professor who stood up to the mob; Students vilified Nicholas Christakis for defending free expression at Yale. It prompted him to finish his opus about 'good society', he tells Andrew Billen\*](#)

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***The professor who stood up to the mob; Students vilified Nicholas Christakis for defending free expression at Yale. It prompted him to finish his opus about 'good society', he tells Andrew Billen***

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Imagine a restaurant somewhere in America. A truck driver tips a waitress, as almost everyone does in the States, but why? He's not going to pass through again. This is the only time he will be served by her. More puzzling still, perhaps, how does this fit in with what the TV above the counter is showing: a society riven by crime, civil strife and political intolerance? What is the truth about human nature? Where should we, as observers of our species, be directing our attention? At the tumult on the screen or the kind, etiquette-observing customer? The American sociology professor Nicholas A Christakis has the answers in a tremendously readable new book, *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society*. It brims with good news about human nature - although had he never written it, his gaze would probably have been on the guy giving the waitress her 15 per cent anyway. "My sister Katrina says I'm the master of positive reframing, that I see everything in a good light," Christakis tells me on the phone from a hotel in New York.

His mastery of reframing is fortunate. This friendly American academic who spent an earlier career as a doctor working in hospices was four Hallowe'ens ago involved in a vicious row at Yale University, where he teaches. His supposed crime was not even his. His wife, Erika, who was a lecturer at the time in early childhood education at the university and shared with him the job of being master of one of its residential colleges, had written a letter to undergraduates questioning whether they really needed the guidance that the university had just issued on what Hallowe'en costumes would be appropriate to wear so as not to offend minority students (by wearing Mexican sombreros, for instance).

In it, Erika wrote: "Nicholas says, if you don't like a costume someone is wearing, look away, or tell them you are offended. Talk to each other. Free speech and the ability to tolerate offence are the hallmarks of a free and open society."

For this, students amassed outside the Christakis' campus home, called him "disgusting", accused him of neglecting student welfare as the head of a residential college, and called on him to go. "Who the f\*\*\* hired you?" asked one. On the lawn outside his house, Christakis took this for two hours, listening politely and explaining his position, but not apologising. Several clips of the face-off can be found on YouTube.

Eight months later Christakis stepped down from the college post, although he remains at Yale, and last year received the university's highest honour, the Sterling Professorship. Erika, however, gave up teaching at Yale. She

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later wrote in The Washington Post that she and her family had been used as "tinder for a mass emotional conflagration". Blueprint is dedicated to her. "The world is better the closer you are to Erika," Christakis writes.

Christakis really does not want to talk about this. His voice drops when I asked if the affair shook his faith in human nature. "No. Not really."

This makes him sound almost superhuman - or Buddhist perhaps? "No, I mean, bad things happen? My mother was ill for most of my childhood. I was a hospice doctor, for God's sake, for 20 years. I took care of people who were dying, young people who died after months of serious illness. There's injustice in the world. There's way too much awfulness, of all kinds. There's illness, warfare and hatred, but there's also goodness."

Rather than despair, Christakis, who is 56, took his first sabbatical and finished Blueprint, the magnum opus he had started five years earlier. It is a multidisciplinary tour de force ranging from how sailors survived being shipwrecked (best tip: work as a team and be decent to one another) to experiments in social networks conducted from his wonderfully named "human nature lab" at Yale.

It is a continuation, he tells me, of his work on the evolutionary origins of friendship, but that was not the only reason he wrote it. "I became progressively more irritated that the scientific literature has this obsessive focus on the horrors of humanity, on our propensity for tribalism and violence and selfishness.

"I was, like, 'Hey, wait a minute.

There's other stuff too.' And here's the kicker as far as I'm concerned: the good qualities must outweigh the bad. The benefits of a connected life must have outweighed the cost or we would not be living socially."

Blueprint is likely to be controversial for several reasons, but what is already making people angry is the contention that humans are basically good.

Human nature fell into disrepute after the Second World War. If the Holocaust proved anything, it was, as the novelist Iris Murdoch said, that we are not "fundamentally decent chaps".

Christakis, however, queries whether societies that produce such horrors are functioning ones. "You would not say that the society where everyone is killing each other is a society at all. It's not a society: we are just murdering each other and living alone."

So did the economist Adam Smith get it wrong when he said that working societies came from the competing self-interested efforts of its members? "Actually, I think it's precisely the opposite. I think the markets are the products of our co-operative nature. We come together to make markets. You can't make a market with yourself."

His book has certainly brought people together. An interview with him last month in The New York Times attracted more than 1,400 comments, many accusing him of complacency. One read: "It is easy to believe society is basically 'good' if, like the professor, you are White, Male, and so intelligent that you teach at Yale, which also means you have a decent income."

"Well, first of all I come from a multiracial family," he replies. "My parents are Greek. They had three biological children and then adopted two others. I have a black sister and a Chinese brother. So I have some personal familiarity with that particular quote, but that person is off on a wild-goose chase. It's not about a specific individual's life experience. It's about our fundamental human nature."

He has seen its underbelly.

Christakis was brought up by his Greek parents largely in the US - his father was a business consultant, his mother a teacher turned psychologist who died aged 47 when he was 25 - but aged 12 he was caught up in angry anti-America crowd in Athens after the generals fell from power in 1974. His mother, asserting common humanity,

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dangerously pointed to her sons and said: "They are Americans." It sounds like her "Ich bin ein Berliner" moment, I say, and he says he wishes he had thought of that. She loved JFK.

Christakis suggests that the reason public discourse is so dire at present - Trump, Brexit - is that the end of the Cold War robbed us of a common enemy and we turned on ourselves. "I'm hoping that the book helps repair the social fabric a little bit."

He talks about the cult of burning witches. "Sometimes the people knew the person was innocent, but they got a delicious satisfaction from being able to do such an unjust thing because they were part of a mob. Mobs are awful things and they're also part of our human nature."

And, I say, look at social media. "It's awful. I think the anonymity makes it really bad. Mobs are a kind of hyper-sociality. They're like peacock feathers, the exaggerated expression of an otherwise good trait. The good quality is that you want to hang out with other people and suppress your own individual desire in the furtherance of the group. Then it gets carried away, and then you get mobs that burn people at the stake."

In describing witch-hunts, he does not hint that he was a victim of one, although when he writes in Blueprint that he has "seen the effects of overidentifying with one's group and witnessed mass delusions up close", we know pretty well when and where.

It seems to me, I say, that in the row between free speech and "safe spaces" at western universities we see the clash of two beneficial evolutionary pressures. One is the power to question received wisdom, the other to provide stable places in which to live.

"You've pinpointed a tension," he says. "Having a group of people who have different opinions about where predators and prey are might be quite effective at identifying the true location of the predators and prey. We don't want a group to reinforce fake news. We don't want a group to all agree, wrongly, that there is no lion there. We want someone to say, 'Wait a minute. I know everyone else says there's no lion there, but I see the lion and we need to get out of here.'" "On the other hand, you also want group solidarity. You want people to share beliefs with other people. The challenge is to get the balance right." And a university should be where we do both? "Yes. I would agree with that." It can be a safe space and intellectually rigorous? "Yes. Of course it can be. I'm trying to do my part."

So is Yale both those things? "I'm not discussing Yale. I'm talking about Blueprint." But more generally? "Come on! I want to talk about the book. I have done many other things in my life. I was a well-known scientist. I'm not interested in being defined personally or professionally by the ridiculous events of 2015."

Well, they're moving into the past now. "Thank God."

So why does the trucker tip the waitress? As the book says, the usual explanations of reciprocity (you scratch my back ...) and indirect reciprocity (the damage done to your reputation by not tipping) do not apply in huge populations. I suppose, I say musingly, such values just become internalised. "Yes, that's right," he says, as if addressing a rather slow student. "Natural selection has shaped us to be good."

It cheered me up reading it, I say.

Did it cheer him up writing it? "Of course it did. Just collecting all this evidence of our positive qualities is a kind of reframing of the world. Sometimes it takes a lot of effort to see what's right in front of our faces."

Mobs are awful things. They're also part of our human nature

## Graphic

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The professor who stood up to the mob; Students vilified Nicholas Christakis for defending free expression at Yale. It prompted him to finish his opus about 'go....

Nicholas Christakis. Above right: at the Yale student protest in 2015. Below: his wife, ErikaBlueprint (Little, Brown Spark, \$30) may be ordered from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

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