

BABIES AND BATHWATER

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July 11, 2004

“Don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater” is an expression that originated with the early American settlers. When water was scarce, they often used the same bath water for everyone in the family. You can imagine how dark the water was when the babies, who were last in the pecking order, were put into the tub. If you weren’t paying attention, it would have been easy to throw them out with the dirty water. I mention this because in our own lives, it is easy to throw out what is precious with what is unwanted.

For example, if we are critical thinkers we sometimes ignore our capacity to feel deeply, perhaps rejecting, in the process, a life of intimacy and passion. If we are predisposed to focus on facts and details we often don’t trust our intuition, which may result in not being able to imagine creative possibilities. If we are very analytical, we may not allow ourselves to express awe, and therefore never experience transcendence. And if we are liberals we may not accept the possibility of having any conservative values, which may lead to our being always open to a rapidly changing world but never finding something to cherish now.

The psychologist Abram Maslow writes, “the dichotomizing of science and religion, of facts from values cripples science and religion. Though we must disagree with most of the answers to the religious questions which have been given by organized religion, it is increasingly clear that the religious questions themselves-and religious quests, the religious yearnings, the religious needs themselves-are perfectly respectable scientifically. They are rooted deep in human nature.”

He goes on to say, “Any religion, liberal or orthodox, theistic or non-theistic, must be not only intellectually credible and morally worthy of respect, but it must also be emotionally satisfying.”

“No wonder that the liberal religions [Unitarian Universalists] and semi-religious groups exert so little influence even though their members are the most intelligent and most capable sections of the population. It must be so just as long as they base themselves upon a lopsided picture of human nature which omits most of what human beings value, enjoy, and cherish in themselves, in fact, which they live for and which they refuse to be done out of.”

“When we are well and healthy and adequately fulfilling the concept “human being,” then experiences of transcendence should in principle be commonplace.”

The main point is that when we over identify with one aspect of ourselves and deny another we disown a part of our humanity, choosing to be less than wholly human. At that point we are throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Margaret Wheatley writes, “The traditional contradictions of order and freedom, change and stasis, being and becoming--these all whirl into a new image that is very ancient--the unifying dance of the great polarities of the universe.”

I used to know Margaret, and like her believe that life is a unifying dance between what appears to be mutually exclusive forces that are in fact mutually dependent.

The energy of the universe expands and contracts. We as humans, individually and collectively, go through our lives in a process of alternating between stability and change. If I use a ladder as a metaphor for growth, our movement up the ladder is dependent on holding on and letting go. If we only hold on, we are stuck. Without movement, we atrophy; we decay and die, whether we are a person or a society. If we only let go, we lose control and fall.

One of the things I love about this fellowship is that we can talk about the things we were told as children not to talk about--sex, politics and religion. And since we just celebrated the Fourth of July and are about to participate in the presidential elections, I'm going to talk about politics.

I believe that many of the issues in our lives are being framed as a series of false choices. There is a false polarization that is negatively impacting us psychologically, politically and spirituality. In our culture, we have become artists at taking complex situations and reducing them to two mutually exclusive options. Issues are presented as either/or choices when often, our experience suggests a both /and approach. Our public life often appears as a mythological war between good and evil, which could be very entertaining if it weren't making it so difficult to have intelligent dialogue around critical issues.

Are you for or against taxes, welfare, warfare, regulation, law and order, national security, civil rights, free trade? Of course the real fun begins when you are asked to choose between two strongly felt American values--rights and responsibilities, life and choice, freedom and virtue.

The truth is, our culture is a rich blend of liberal instincts and conservative values--or is it the other way around? And they are not necessarily contradictory. We believe in social concern and self-reliance; we want to match rights and responsibilities; we think public moral standards should exist but are skeptical of too much meddling in the private affairs of others. Human nature and our two-party system inevitably encourage polarization.

Survival as a species has required that we learn how to quickly decide if a person or situation is threatening. The collective past experience of our tribe teaches us who to trust and who is dangerous. We develop “knee jerk” reactions to people and situations. In reality, this reaction sometimes helps and sometimes hurts us.

I was drafted out of college during the Vietnam War and was stationed in Fort Hood, Texas with the First Armored Division. I lived off post with Fran and soon to be first

child David. Early one morning I backed out of the house as I was saying good-bye to Fran. I sensed someone or something behind me in the dark and reacted without thinking. In one motion, I raised my hand and lowered my head to protect myself and at the same time raised my knee to my chest and kicked backwards--quite literally a knee jerk reaction. When I turned around, my friend Bob was lying in the street. I had kicked him right off the porch.

While my training was in the martial arts and my reaction somewhat extreme, most of us react without thinking to situations we find threatening. It's a survival instinct. For example, I was at a dinner party and a friend, after a few scotches, said, "the trouble today is people are getting too educated." My personality and training over the years has helped me to respond effectively or not at all to situations like this. But his comment cut to the heart of many of my values around the worth and dignity of every person and the need for education to responsibly participate in a democracy. I was hooked.

I had already learned not to kick my friends when I felt threatened so I quietly said, "where have I heard those words before? Oh, I know, and named every dictator I could think of. I originally thought my response was a brilliant retort to an asinine position but then realized that my only accomplishment was to stop the dialogue.

Dialogue is necessary for the survival of the democratic process, which is one of the UU principles. But, the number of Americans who vote suggests that, as a society, we have abandoned the public life. The lunatic fringe, on both sides of an increasingly polarized society, dominates the national debate. Slogans replace substance, and people manage the anxiety associated with complexity by aligning themselves with concepts like liberal or conservative, without always understanding what they mean.

We are increasingly identifying with a label and distrusting anyone associated with the other label as threatening. We protect ourselves by withdrawing or attacking. In fact, terms like Liberal and Conservative are frequently preceded by DAMN.... What we do less and less of as a society is question, listen and think. Our reactions are increasingly knee-jerk reactions. My experience suggests that someone is going to get hurt.

I'm interested in this subject because the words Liberal and Conservative have become misleading and are creating confusion, a false polarization and false choices. These terms are as imprecise as they are emotionally charged. I also believe fundamentalist thinking is showing up on both sides of this cultural divide, making meaningful dialogue almost impossible.

Are you left, right, center of confused? The terms left and right derive from the first French National Assembly. The pro-monarchist conservatives sat on the right and the revolutionary republicans sat on the left of a semicircular assembly. Today, European parliaments adopt a similar seating pattern. Of course, context is important in understanding these terms. But, generally speaking the Right is seen as against political,

economic and social change, the Left in favor of it. Historically, the Right in Europe was monarchist, clerical and favored the interests of the established propertied classes. The Left was identified with republicanism, anti-clericalism and the interests of the masses.

In similar fashion, if conservatism means anything it means the desire to conserve and specifically the conserving of tradition, existing values, traditions and the “inherited wisdom of the past”. Historically, in Europe, it supported the King and the Catholic Church and was against capitalism, science and democracy. In fact, conservatives valued a strong state because it protected hierarchy. Naturally, the more prosperous and successful members of any society are more likely to identify with its core values and institutions. They have more and want to protect it. Pessimism about human nature is often to be discerned with an associated stress on the need for domestic “law and order” measures and strong armed forces to repel international threats.

Liberalism was the desire for individual liberty. It was about individualism and freedom from the control of the aristocracy. It was against the primacy of the state over the individual and against the overarching importance of the sacred. As a result liberalism was about contractual agreements and free trade. Therefore, it supported capitalism and constitutional government based on individual rights. It quickly spread in trading cities such as Amsterdam. It was all about liberty, a more equal and humane social order, the rule of law, the right to own property, optimism about the future and a willingness to reform the existing system.

It turned into a contest between reason and faith; free inquiry and tradition; equality and hierarchy; secular law and divine law; choice and continuity; Enlightenment values and Medieval values; the individual and the state.

	CLASSICAL VIEW
	LIBERAL
	CONSERVATIVE
Reason	Faith
Free Inquiry	Tradition
Equality	Hierarchy
Secular Law	Divine Law
Choice	Continuity
Enlightenment Values	Medieval Values
Individual	State

In the United States, we rejected King George and made a point of separating church and state. There was no aristocracy. There was nothing to conserve. The United States government was a radical departure from the past. It built on the wisdom of John Lock, John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith, becoming the greatest example of liberalism in the world.

So, what happened?

Today, the United States is the most conservative country in the world when compared to other democracies. For example, a liberal in the United States would be considered a middle of the road conservative in England. How we're perceived has also changed. An eleven-nation survey of eleven thousand people by the BBC in June of 2003, which included America and its closest allies Israel, Britain and Canada found most people, thought America was a much bigger threat to global security than China, Iran, Syria, Russia or France. The only force considered more dangerous than the Bush administration was al-Qaeda.

So, once again, what happened?

Some say nothing. The polarization we see today is the same that existed between Jefferson and Hamilton. Remember the Federalist Papers?

One possible explanation is that most liberal democracies moved further to the left in their development becoming socialistic. In the United States, Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" and Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" also drifted to the left, but never came close to the role government played in Europe. Starting with liberal values like freedom, it was argued that people who lack life's necessities are not free. Government should insure against job loss, illness and old age.

Another possible explanation is that as a liberal country, American conservatism has little to conserve except that of liberalism. Some of the most cherished conservative values in the United States -- individualism, capitalism, free trade, constitutional government, and liberty are all classic liberal values.

This raises so many questions. Do words like liberalism and conservatism have meanings? Do they mean the same thing in England and in the United States? Do they mean the same thing as they did yesterday? Can the same idea be both liberal and conservative at different times and places? Do parties who claim these labels behave in ways consistent with their definition? Do liberals all think alike? Do conservatives all think alike? Is it possible to be a liberal fundamentalist? Is radical conservatism an oxymoron?

We could even ask if there are more contradictions within liberalism and conservatism or between them? For example, within conservatism libertarians put individual choice at the heart of their thinking; traditionalists cite received wisdom. Libertarians criticize mainstream liberals for putting too many shackles on the individual--primarily through big government. Traditionalists criticize mainstream liberals for giving individuals too many choices. Traditionalists abhor abortion as a sign of a sick society that values individual choice even above the life of an unborn child. Libertarians support abortion as part of their general support for individual rights. Business conservatives are instinctive dealmakers. Social conservatives are natural absolutists. Newt Gingrich made a balanced budget a centerpiece of the Contract with America; the current administration has at the same time cut taxes and increased spending. And sometimes it's about defining your terms. Most agree aid to single parent families is welfare and disagree on how to label the \$25 billion in direct subsidies to farmers.

Liberal and conservative presidents have cut taxes, led us into unpopular wars, and supported family values. Democrats have often been conservative and bigoted, supporting slavery and segregation. Strom Thurman was originally a Democrat. Republicans have often been liberal. It was Richard Nixon that signed off on Affirmative Action.

One way to understand all this is with the Maddox-Lillie model. It divided the electorate into four groups." Liberals" were those who supported state intervention in the economy but opposed its intervention on moral issues. "Conservatives" were the mirror image of liberals, opposing state economic intervention but supporting intervention on moral issues. "Populists" consistently supported state intervention, on economics and morals. "Libertarians" consistently opposed state intervention. This analysis distinguishes between the groups based on "social issues" and "economic issues" or morals and money.

Social issues would include things like abortion, education, pornography, and civil rights. Economic issues would include things like Social Security, Taxes, Regulation and Minimum Wage.

So, if we look at liberalism and conservatism today, recognizing that they share the same political principles differing only on their degree, and are huge coalitions [for example new democrats, neo conservatives etc.] that often camouflage contradictory preferences, it looks like this:

They also represent their own special interest groups:

So, here we have a situation where liberals who originally championed free markets, individual liberty and greatly reduced role for government and aristocracy is promoting a larger government. They believe that today it is a government of the people, by the people and for the people, as opposed to an aristocracy, which can do things that individuals and states can't do on their own like Eisenhower's Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, which authorized the creation of over 40,000 miles of interstate highway. This is an example where Liberals and Conservatives believe in a free market economy but

that Liberals advocate a greater degree of government support, defense and promotion of it. Other examples today are satellite communications and the Internet.

What is also obvious is that many of the values espoused by conservatives represent classical Liberalism: Individualism, Constitutionalism, Merit and the Private Sector. And it is also obvious that in a general sense Liberalism is still representing those in societies who are and were outside the center of power.

So, how do Liberals and Conservatives feel about some of the key issues being debated today?

LIBERAL	ISSUE	CONSERVATIVE
	Abortion	
	Cloning	
	Social Welfare	
	Farm Subsidies	
	Affirmative Action	
	National Health Care	
	Death Penalty	
	Strong Punishment for Crimes	
	Gun Control	
	Large Military	
	Low Taxes	
	Reduced Government Spending	
	Smaller Government	
	Low Regulation of Business	
	Gov't. Restriction of Personal Behavior	
	School Vouchers	
	School Prayer	
	Multilingual Education	
	Civil/Woman's/Gay Rights	

This is the real continental divide. What are we going to do? Let me summarize my three key points and make a request.

1. When we over identify with one aspect of ourselves³/₄for example our ability to think critically, and in the process disown another aspect of ourselves, for example our values, we deny our humanity and our potential for wholeness. As a result, we become less effective. We limit our ability to see a whole situation or problem, and a broader range of options or solutions. The world becomes a smaller place and our responses to it limited. We can only act on what we accept into awareness--at least consciously. In today's complex, competitive and rapidly changing environment it takes a whole person to be effective.

2. Too often, complex issues in our society are presented as a series of false choices. They demand an either/or response when a both/and reply represents an American consensus. For example, are you for us or against us? Are you pro-choice or pro-life? Where is their room with this kind of a question for Americans to express that they have never had an abortion, will never have an abortion, believe the procedure is overused and abused, but support it in a number of specific situations and in any case will not give up their freedom to choose. Our two party system, the competition for votes and more sophisticated marketing and communication ability has conspired to reduce complex issues to simple, mutually exclusive yes or no choices. We have a responsibility to ourselves and each other to avoid knee jerk reactions, to understand the issues and make informed decisions.

3. When English speaking people use the same word to mean different things in different places, and when the same word means different things at different times, and when these words are modified with words that have opposite meanings, and when politicians use these words to communicate their intent and then do the opposite, we need to either stop using the words or making sure we define our terms.

Given your reputation for clear thinking and human friendly values I invite you to do what you do best--notice, ask questions, think, communicate and help create an environment for intelligent, respectful dialogue.

There is a path between dogma and skepticism. We can find order without authority. We can reject the conservative's focus on the past which often results in sterility, and we can reject the liberal's focus on the future, which often results in naivety, and we can focus on the present. And if we don't throw out the baby with the bathwater, we can appreciate the realities and the possibilities that these two perspectives provide.