

## 9/25/12 – Beyond Dogmatism and Cynicism

This is the age of....take your pick. It has been called many things. One is the age of abundance. Its easy to see why. After all, a great many middle class Americans and others around the world live longer, more comfortable, safer lives, filled with more opportunities for travel, education, entertainments, distractions, etc. than were enjoyed by royalty and the richest citizens of Europe just two centuries ago. But there are problems with this label.

First of all, modern societies never seem never to have found a way to even come close to reconciling abundance with equality, perhaps the two most widely cited supposed benefits of modern times. Currently, it seem like things are getting worse. In a column recently published in the Washington Post, Harold Meyerson reminds us,

Profits and dividends are up and wages are down — which is why, as University of California economist Emmanuel Saez has documented, all income growth in the United States in 2010 went to the wealthiest 10 percent of households, and 93 percent to the wealthiest 1 percent. Profits and dividends are up largely *because* wages are down, as JPMorgan Chase chief investment officer Michael Cembalest has documented. “U.S. labor compensation,” Cembalest wrote in a newsletter to the bank’s major investors last year, “is now at a 50-year low relative to both company sales and U.S. GDP.”

Of course, this says nothing about the millions of Americans (and their children!) and others around the world who live in dreadful poverty, who as it is often said live just one serious accident or illness away from economic devastation. Unfortunately, remarkable economic progress and increased abundance in many sectors of the “third world” today to a great extent reproduces this disparity in income and wealth.

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Second, as most of us know even if we don’t know what to do about it, money can’t buy you love or bring happiness. One of the main myths of modern society has been that under circumstances of increased abundance that make personal liberty and a democratic way of life possible, social peace, individual well-being, and cultural life will almost automatically flourish.

Our time also has been termed the age of anxiety, by the poet W. H. Auden and others. In his book *The Age of Insanity: Modernity and Mental Health*, the psychologist John Schumaker takes this idea one step further. Schumaker summarizes a vast amount of research by medical anthropologists and others that documents the remarkably higher incidence of emotional illness and behavioral disturbance in fast-moving modern as opposed to stable, only gradually evolving traditional societies. Something about our way of life seems to predispose us to greater amounts of anxiety, depression, interpersonal tensions, loneliness, spiritual depletion and the like.

For example, Schumaker notes, its hard to assess but some researchers suggest there is evidence for as much as a tenfold increase “clinical depression” in modern Western societies over the last half century. Also, he observes that there appears to be a “notable absence of postnatal depression in the vast majority of non-Western cultures” (p. 59). Research indicates that at least 50 percent of women in our society experience “maternity blues” and approximately 20 percent go on to develop more serious postnatal depression. But among the Kipsigis people of Kenya, for example, medical anthropologists can find no evidence whatsoever for postpartum depression. In that culture, a predictable pattern of practices, rituals, and gifts following childbirth mark out a “distinct culturally acknowledged postnatal period,” one that “confirm[s] symbolically the new mother’s elevated standing” in the community, affords her “pampered social seclusion and mandated rest,” and provides assistance with her new responsibilities for a time from community members (ibid.). In such a cultural universe, who could get depressed!

Of course, it is impossible to return to such a simpler way of life, which we would find horribly confining and conformist, anyway. And we can think of no good reason to want to go back. It makes more sense to try to be brutally realistic about our cultural condition and think seriously about how to address it creatively. The Front Porch Project hopes to make a contribution to such an effort.

Cure often depends on an accurate diagnosis. What, then, are the sources of this modern epidemic of anxiety, depression, and other individual and social pathologies? Schumaker has some very interesting things to say about this. He suggests that in traditional, more collectivist cultures, individuals have access to and feel supported by “socially sanctioned identity templates” and have recourse to shared “cultural coping strategies” in times of loss, conflict, or moral confusion. To a great extent, they know who they are and generally what to do in the face of a challenge, tragedy, or crisis.

Schumaker argues that we pay a big price for having so few shared meanings and common coping strategies in our kind of society. To an impossible extent, individuals have to devise or invent answers of their own to human life’s many stresses and crises of meaning. With limited experience and resources, operating in considerable emotional isolation, they have to innovate many of their own coping techniques, workable defenses, credible answers to ethical dilemmas, or convincing consoling or meaning-giving philosophical or religious beliefs. Moreover, they have to cope actively and often “through personal control, direct action, and confrontation with others (p. 15).” Thus, they may be saddled with excessive personal responsibility in a situation of limited resources and support, a virtual recipe for chronic emotional strain and idiosyncratic, unreliable coping. Or, overwhelmed and/or discouraged, they may withdraw into debilitating passivity and emotional “deadness” (p. 26). Any of this sound familiar?

Finally, Schumaker sets forth the rather simple but very useful idea that anyone can experience maladies like depression and anxiety under difficult circumstances but a

society's shared meanings and coping strategies (all sorts of rituals and practices) raise the threshold that has to be reached for pain, suffering, confusion, or loss to afflict us in a serious way. Apparently, our way of life falls short of that threshold often, for many people.

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Like all of us. Schumaker is a lot clearer about the problem than a solution for it. With a certain amount of fear and trembling, we suggest the following as a first step in making a dent in it. Taking a clue from Schumaker, it might be helpful to think of ourselves as living in an age of uncertainty. Great uncertainty, and probably an unprecedented degree of uncertainty. People in traditional societies are often aware of different ways of life with their different customs, folkways and religious beliefs. But they encounter them only occasionally, through trade, war, or the occasional traveler and most of the time could continue to live and think in a cultural and religious comfort zone. When Europe and then progressively other places in the world became industrialized, individuals are uprooted from accustomed local and tribal ways of life. Old groups are broken up and become a economic "labor supply." They are scattered in the factories of the cities, significantly isolated and cut adrift. We tend to forget how brutal and crushing this upheaval was for many people and communities.

Of course, traditional folkways and religious beliefs persist for many individuals communities, and churches. Moreover, this upheaval, however tragic for many, has served worthy purposes. It helped break the grip of ossified custom that hampered human creativity and helped undermine cruel, arbitrary, and oppressive authorities. That's all to the good. But so far as a sense of meaning in life and the shared cultural coping strategies Schumaker describes are concerned, things will never be the same again.

In this brave new world, we have a much more palpable sense of how our beliefs and way of life or worship are just one kind among many, in history and the wider world. Our beliefs and values are relativized. It becomes increasingly difficult to experience our way of doing things or the objects of our ethical or religious beliefs as anchored in reality or reflecting the true nature of things. They come to be seen and experienced as just our personal or subjective beliefs and values, the ones we just happen to hold. We start to think of them as things are "true" only in some fuzzy sense because they "work" or do something for us. Often we imagine that they bring us some kind of material or psychological benefit or payoff. We largely lose touch with the idea that than things might "work" for us—that is bring joy, consolation, or an ethical sense of direction—because they draw us closer to realty or God in a meaningful way.

A major difficulty with this purely pragmatic or "instrumental" approach to making sense of and justifying our beliefs and values is that, well, pardon the expression, it just doesn't work very well. It involves trying to make sense of what were traditionally called "higher" values—meaningful, life-giving, empowering, guiding ideals and principles—in terms how they produce various "lower" outcomes or benefits for us, things like

pleasure, security, social cohesion, success, longevity, and the like. (From time to time, one runs across an article about a conservative preacher somewhere who insists that Christians, of the fundamentalist variety, of course, have better sex than non-believers! That is almost certainly false. In any case, its quite irrelevant.) If enjoying those outcomes are really what life is all about, who needs lofty ethical or spiritual ideals?

The noted psychoanalytic theorist and social philosopher Erich Fromm, who wrote in the middle of the last century, had a nice way of putting the problem. He treasured modern freedoms, personal liberty, individual autonomy, and truly thinking for oneself, as should we all. But he argued that the modern notion of freedom was disturbingly “ambiguous,” as he put it. We modern souls, he suggested, know a great deal about what we want to be “free from,” such things as dogmatic, autocratic beliefs and values, or irrational constraints on our freedom and creativity. But we know much less about what we want to be “free for” or “free to.” We are amazed how often in discussion or teaching people respond immediately to this idea and can come up with all sorts of examples of it in personal or social life.

Fromm extracted a host of insights from this idea. He pointed out the consequences of a lack of conviction about important “ends” in living beyond just multiplying and refining the “means,” tools, or techniques by which we can acquire whatever we happen to want at any given moment. Freedom without direction, or power without purpose, we might say. We still have a basic human need to belong somewhere, to identify with something, or to move toward some kind of goal. But we are intensely uncertain about what to aim for. In the absence of a convincing “freedom for,” we tend to go along with the crowd. We fear disapproval and lacking anything worth standing for (except approval) we tend to be led by the nose by whatever “sells” in the marketplace. We even seek to adapt our personal qualities of feeling and belief to mesh with the impulses or preferences of others. Fromm called this a “personality market.” He suggested that its confusion and stress was perhaps the major source of emotional and interpersonal problems in living today.

Hungry for substance but unable to find it, in Fromm's view, we tend to sell out our freedom to fanaticism, the illusion of total fulfillment in romantic love, craving the approval of others, pursuing “success” as currently defined (often its just that we don't want to “fail”), numerous escapisms, or just going shopping. We tend to become interchangeable cogs in the social machinery treat others and ourselves as somewhat depersonalized objects.

Fromm himself never came up with a convincing alternative to this situation. That is a story for another day. Still, his analysis seems illuminating.

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If all this talk about conformity and lack of core convictions sounds dated, corny, or a little moralistic, maybe that is because not a lot has changed since Fromm wrote

except that we have become quite cynical about the problem. In fact, let's wrap these opening remarks with the suggestion that, very broadly speaking, there are two common ways of failing to meet the challenge of living with uncertainty. To put it another way, two basic ways of failing to live creatively with differences that we have to take seriously but can never completely resolve. These two ways are dogmatism and cynicism.

We need to remember that this kind of uncertainty extends to the most basic human questions. Many people sense an enormous spiritual vacuum or void of meaning in modern life. Some of them respond by turning to established religion of some sort, others by crafting an idiosyncratic spiritual orientation or path of their own. Indeed, sophisticated individuals sense a great deal of profundity and wisdom in the world's great spiritual traditions. They admire Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Desmond Tutu and others who are hardly gullible, naïve, or submissive souls. They stood on their own two feet and thought for themselves to an amazing extent.

Still, many deeply serious and thoughtful people find notions of God or transcendence implausible and not to be life-enhancing. They prefer a kind of secular, stoic courage in the face of mortality and tragedy coupled with a concern for social justice and other cultural goods as the highest form of human integrity and dignity. Moreover, many of us feel poignant religious and sharp anti-religious inclinations within ourselves that are difficult to reconcile. With effort, individuals may resolve this sort of tension somewhat satisfactorily. But neither view nor any of their many variants is likely ever to win out decisively in our cultural universe.

In the face of such uncertainty, many resort to dogmatism. Blatantly or subtly, they close off alien or different perspectives. They put them out of mind or keep them at a distance. Religious fundamentalisms and rigid, polarizing political ideologies, rife in the modern world, represent the kind of dogmatism that copes with uncertainty by forcefully insisting on the unquestionable or final truth of some system of belief or code of conduct. However, it is more difficult than one might think to hold to such a position. One is continually confronted with real difference, with other people and viewpoints that clash with one's own but are hard to portray consistently as entirely unreasonable or implausible. These "others" stimulate the seeds of diverse convictions or values that are present in all of us. Trying to suppress them by insistently cranking up the dogmatism actually tends to destroy any peace of mind it once might have provided.

Instead, faced with unending certainty and doubt, many people put on the mantle of utter skepticism or cynicism—in different ways, of course, and to different degrees. They try at least to give up the quest for any sort of clarity, conviction, or sense of meaning in the midst of confusion. They may try to remain detached, or seek just to live in the moment. However, it actually is quite hard truly to abandon that quest. Virtually all of us form some convictions along the way about what amounts to a better or good life for us and for humans in general, in an ethical or spiritual sense. In our cynicism, we commonly overlook how precious these ideals are. We forget how essential they can be to whatever sense of purpose or self-respect we possess, without which despair comes

easily. Resorting to cynicism often puts us into painful conflict with ourselves and those we love, and undermines any protection or resolution we hoped it might give us.

Is there a credible alternative to dogmatism and cynicism? In a way, exploring that question is what the Front Porch Project and this blog are all about. The ridiculously short answer is, “conversation.” That may sound like weak medicine in a violent world. But Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and prominent public intellectual, writes, “The only alternative to violence is conversation.” He certainly doesn’t mean polite, tea party conversation. And he doesn’t mean purely pragmatic conversation about dispassionate matters, like the exchange of information or problem solving, where personal involvement is limited (unless, of course, someone’s ego gets involved in a childish or neurotic way). He has in mind dialogue, be it playful or intense, about things that really matter to the quality or direction of our lives. This kind of conversation is not so much a means to any end or result as it is the end or purpose itself. It is the place and the way we experience, struggle with, and sometimes deepen being human. It’s the very stuff of life.

Many of the entries to follow in this blog, we hope, will shed light on this kind of conversation or interchange as it takes place in discussion among friends and citizens, in reading, in social and political activity, and in the arts and music between performers and those who witness and are affected by the performance. It also take place in very private reflection, meditation, and prayer, which actually are, in part, a kind of conversation with the universe and with all sorts of personages and images and messages that impinge on us from history and our own lives, to which we relate with fear, love, hate, admiration, longing, and so forth. There is a lot of truth to the old cliché, “In solitude we are least alone.”

To simplify (hopefully not too much), we might say that genuine meeting and fruitful conversation require two main things. One is real courage of one’s best convictions at the moment. The other is a vulnerable openness to be challenged and sometimes changed by others that are new or different. There is no possibility of having the strength, courage, or wisdom to be genuinely open unless one has crystallized some real convictions. And unless one is truly open to having them be refined and revised, they soon lose their vital and life-giving quality. So, there is nothing tame or tepid about conversation. Conversation can easily turn violent and that can foster more violence that all too easily spins out of control. Yet it can’t be avoided, especially in a world marked by much difference and great uncertainty like ours.

Its no wonder so many people try to avoid the full measure of this challenge with cynicism or dogmatism. Many sincere religious people today insist that there is no way cope with our situation except by finding some genuine external authority to rely on and guide us, which they find in tradition, scriptures, or compelling religious leaders. We are all for authority in some sense and for consulting these sources on a regular basis. But we have to face the fact that they themselves represent interpretations of human life that have to be reinterpreted by us from time to time in changing circumstances. What comes to have authority for us is the understanding or judgment or wisdom that

emerges from the process of interchange with human and, some feel, divine others, if and when we allow ourselves authentically to go through that process. We are not little gods who can fix or master this life process, nor can we appoint other little gods to do it for us. We have to live it for ourselves, together.

And, sometimes, the bottom falls out. The distinguished Eastern Orthodox theologian Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, who died in 2005 at the age of 98, wrote: "I don't think that any Christian of our times, unless he be a saint, has not flirted with absolute atheism, experienced as an abyss at his side."

One wonders, can there be any compensation for the occasional pain of such conversation, or for the loss of the possibility of any final or certain truth about the human struggle? If there is, it is in the quality and experience of the relationships this kind of conversation and shared adventure bring. Uncertainty and mystery are no longer the enemy but are essential ingredients in the mix. A chief Front Porch principle is that truth emerges between us in a living process. Indeed, it is the process of the struggle, rather than any enduring product, that is most real and important. Alfred Adler touched on this idea many years ago. He wrote, "We are not concerned with the possession of truth, but with the struggle for it."