

Question Authority!

“There are two parts to the human dilemma. One is the belief that the end justifies the means. That push-button philosophy, that deliberate deafness to suffering, has become the monster in the war machine. The other is the betrayal of the human spirit: the assertion of dogma that closes the mind, and turns a nation, a civilization into a regiment of ghosts, obedient ghosts, or tortured ghosts.”

--- The Ascent of Man, J. Bronowski

Try to understand the mechanisms of American society, and look at them closely. The mechanisms, one author claims, are fairly obvious if we look at our societies unclouded by hypothesis. One mechanism is that our system clearly works. Another is that it has enormous problems that are not being addressed anywhere near fairly and farsightedly.

The dramatically detrimental activities of humankind on Earth are facilitated in certain ways, and impeded in others, by governments of the world's nations. The political Right, ascendant in the United States today, is characterized by strong ideals, powerful convictions, inflexible doctrines, and a rather undemocratic and inegalitarian authoritarianism. Their basic premises are cleverly persuasive, partially because their doctrines are reinforced by television and print media that are largely owned and controlled by wealthy Conservatives.

“Crime doesn't pay ... as well as politics.”

--- Alfred E. Newman

We are given the illusion that the Right is morally right, even though their doctrines are less than adequately humanitarian, and are suspiciously congruous to the favoritism of narrow vested interests. Politicians engineer consent, manipulating the persuasible masses by using the knowledge that people are strongly influenced by insecurity, gullibility, and the need for being trustful of, and guided by, authority figures.

War is a terrible tragedy for those who die, those who are wounded, those who are tortured, and everyone whose lives are disrupted and perverted by the accompanying violence and hate. The unbridled military power of post Cold War America creates horrific potential for injustices, and the increasing likelihood of limitless calamities. Materialistic ideological convictions, neoconservative aggression, preemptive warfare, and the self-righteousness of the powerful in justifying the imposition of their beliefs on others is ever more clearly wrong. The belief that idealistic ends justify repulsive and atrocious means is frightening.

The prisoner abuse scandal of May 2004 is obviously only “the tip of the iceberg” of torture, humiliation, manipulation, harshness, and flagrant abuses of power. We are meddling with forces beyond our understanding in undertaking our crusade to “free” Iraq and Afghanistan and make them into Westernized countries safe for democracy, Christianity, and materialism. We have fallen into a trap of colossal foolishness to disrespect the sovereignty of other nations in waging war under false pretense in the Mid East. Uncertainty and danger are tremendously heightened by our interfering in the affairs of other nations, and by the arrogance of our neoconservative leaders.

“The United States is the self-appointed puritan, moralistic, self-righteous strong-arm preacher of the world.” Why do we allow our leaders to make us so?

Public Servants, Priorities, and Proprieties

Lobbyists, wartime opportunists, giant corporations, Conservative politicians, and religious extremists moved swiftly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to interpret events in such a way as to advance their causes. Legislation was advanced to do such things as retroactively eliminate the Corporate Alternative Minimum Tax; to attach a rider to defense spending bills that would open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling; to let coal and electricity producers pollute more freely; and to rescind the Environmental Protection Agency order to clean up PCB's dumped by giant General Electric into New York's Hudson River.

Bill Moyers said the following, speaking about these activities to the Environmental Grantmakers Association in a Keynote Address just one month after 9/11/01: **“If I sound a little bitter about this, I am --- bitter, yes, and sad. Our business and political class owes us better than this. After all, it was they who declared class war twenty years ago (with the Reagan revolution), and it was they who won. They're on top. If ever they were going to practice the magnanimity of winners, this was the moment. To hide now behind the flag while ripping off a country in crisis fatally --- fatally --- separates them from the common course of American life.”**

Rev. Jerry Falwell said that pagans, “abortionists”, feminists, gays, lesbians, and the ACLU helped the attacks happen, presumably by making God mad so that He lifted the supposed special “veil of protection” that had kept enemies from attacking America on our own soil since 1812. (He did soon thereafter repent for his inflammatory and divisive comments at that time of national tragedy. One hell of a nice guy!)

Three years have now passed since the attacks of September 11th. We have had a lot of water under the bridge, and emotions have cooled a bit. As only the tip of the iceberg, the government has several fraud investigations going on costs being charged by Halliburton and other war profiteers. Greedy contractors are ripping off the American people.

Our priorities today are being dramatically skewed by the prideful power-hunger controlling elite, by partisan political maneuvering, and by rigid ideological beliefs. Stern, steady, resolute, righteous --- no flip-flopping they proudly point out. They will not admit to any mistakes. But an incredible misallocation of resources to the military is taking place. They can only get away with it by playing on party loyalty, nationalism, jingoism, cronyism, rigid beliefs, misleading rhetoric, secrecy, and our fears, our anger, our desire for retribution, and our being divided.

The Good Ole Boys are making themselves awfully comfortable in power. They are eroding the public's trust, and making the government less representative. They are effectively saying Damn You to poor people, and women, and children, and gay people, and atheists, and liberals, and environmentalists, and future generations --- and Yay!, they say (I suppose), to embryos, rich people, war profiteers, polluters, and Christian religious fundamentalists.

It often takes a crisis to get our undivided attention and to spur us into action --- this is self-evident to reflective historians, and is proven by the odd failure of the Federal Government to deal effectively and seriously with counter terrorism, despite increasing warnings that led up to September 11th, as detailed in Richard Clarke's book, Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terrorism. My passionate opinion is that we have missed our opportunity on the 9/11 crisis, and that we must not wait for the looming crises of ecological calamity. Visionary, purposeful, committed action is required to transform our economy and our government in ways that will ensure security, fairness, sustainability, fiscal responsibility, prosperity, and peace.

Deliberating Human Destiny

History shows that no civilization or empire lasts forever. Civilizations begin with vigor, developing new ideas, new institutions, technologies, and artistic forms. As they grow in power and complexity, they inevitably become convinced that they alone embody truth and deserve prerogative. They assert their control and influence, spreading their ways abroad, conquering others and plundering resources. An empire emerges, which ironically has always been a sign of the advanced stages of the life cycle of the civilization.

The historical cycle of growth, climax, and then decay is seen to repeat itself with variations, but without exceptions. Economic imperialism has always been the beginning of the end. We can clearly see that the United States has been acting with exceptional economic imperialism in the last 50 years, sending its military all over the globe to protect access to resources and markets for its Corporate interests. **It is ominous that the United States is now beginning to exhibit many of the classic signs of decay that characterized the decline and fall of the Roman Empire: a bloated and overextended military, widespread political corruption, increasing plutocracy, public apathy and cynicism, wild swings in the economy, spectacles of diversion and entertainment, and a massive influx of peoples and their customs from abroad.**

Chill out, America! Let us dump the aggressive leaders, embrace community values and cooperation, strive for greater fairness and progressive values, and make the world safer, more sustainable and better for all.

Conflict resolution without resorting to war is becoming increasingly essential. If 6 billion people can not get along on Planet Earth today without violent and destructive conflict, it is hard to imagine how 9 billion will get along in the year 2050, when there will be highly probable water shortages, depleted topsoil and fisheries, disappearing forests and wetlands, diminishing supplies of fossil fuels and non-renewable resources, probable ecological havoc resulting from pollution and global warming, and increased social unrest due to crowding and scarcities --- and with attitudes of intolerance, ethnocentricity, and antagonism towards other people and other nations being fostered by greed, fundamentalism, radical extremism, and growing mutual insecurities.

The United Nations, or comparable international forums must be bindingly empowered --- ones in which disputes can be cooperatively and definitively addressed and resolved. Saner ways must be found to create a safer world. Capitalism must not be allowed to irresponsibly run roughshod over people and the environment. Authoritarianism and militarism cannot be allowed to persecute people and dictate public policies. And we cannot arrogantly ignore poverty and deprivations of opportunity and education, nor ruthlessly perpetrate injustices, encourage inequities, or allow oppressions. The United Nations was formed in 1945 to promote peace and international security and cooperation after World War II. International institutions like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization must be strengthened and democratized, in order to deal effectively with the globalization beyond national borders of industry, commerce, and finance.

“Shall we? That is, shall we go on conferring our Civilization upon the peoples that sit in darkness, or shall we give these poor things a rest? Shall we bang right ahead in our old-time, loud, pious way, and commit the new century to the game; or shall we sober up and sit down and think it over first? Extending the Blessings of Civilization to our Brother who Sits in Darkness has been a good trade and has paid well, on the whole; and there is money in it yet, if carefully worked --- but not enough, in my judgment, to make any considerable risk advisable.”

--- To the Person Sitting in Darkness, Mark Twain, 1901

Smart Motives

**"I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow,
than a sleepy and permanent planet."**

--- Jack London

Mankind craves meaning, personal worth, self-importance, ambition, deep aspiration, purposefulness, and respect, as well as such provocative motivations as grandiosity, heroics, and sexual titillation. Moderation, conservation, self-discipline, and solid basic values are by contrast BORING --- and not nearly as captivating, intellectually intriguing, emotionally engaging or stimulating as more powerful and rousing motivations.

This is a primary reason that we must redesign our economic systems to make the most socially and environmentally responsible choices more desirable by making them less expensive, using incentives and disincentives. This will create the conditions whereby people's automatic propensity to get the best buy will simultaneously be the best for society and the future. It is simple, basic common sense that our free-market system must not continue to allow the powerful to unfairly distort prices, manipulate markets, and waste resources. All products must be mandated to include the full true costs of production, including collateral damages to people's health and the environment.

Competition automatically drives businesses towards labor efficiency. Now, we must begin to enact policies that emphasize eco-efficiency, minimizing wasteful resource and energy usages. We must do this!

The basic premise that underlies all of our religions, our civilization, our philosophies, our thoughts and actions is that humanity is supreme in significance on Earth. **It is all about us.** This is natural. Yet this perceptual premise has been distorted throughout history into incredibly selfish and harmful courses of action. Today, this self-justifying attitude of the human race in ruthlessly dominating the world, and the accompanying lack of respect for the health of forests, fisheries, and natural ecosystems, is allowing incredibly destructive and shortsighted practices, such as the hyper-stimulating of consumption and the rapid depletion of the Earth's resources.

This "Ego conception" allows us to skirt responsibility for our actions, willingly justifying activities that degrade the fundamental ecological foundations of Earth's biosphere. A contrasting "Eco conception" recognizes our interdependence with all life, and is more holistic, more rational, more responsible, AND MORE NECESSARY.

American individualism since 1776 has defined itself through three principal principles: liberty, opportunity, and responsibility. As our country has grown, we have recognized that the idea of community must modify our individualistic impulses, creating a strength of diverse peoples who set aside their lack of shared blood, faith, traditions, and hierarchies to work together for the common good. To improve our societies, we must enact programs that occasionally favor people over profits, not merely figuratively singing hymns to family values and spouting fair-sounding rhetoric while pushing unfair, regressive, anti-democratic policies.

Contemplating Consumerism

Hyper-consumption is one of the central roots of the environmental crisis, rivaled only by rapid population growth. The fabric of our society is being frayed, and our values distorted, by consumerism. It is the primary goal of U.S. economic policy, unfortunately, to stimulate consumption.

“Need is a relative thing.”

Television Advertisement for the paramilitary, in-your-face, gas-guzzling Hummer

Consumerism has deeper roots than some mere mistaken materialism. There is a profound psychological component, which Advertising targets and stimulates, to create greater demand for products and services. We buy things for recognition, distinction, and a sense of personal worth. We buy them to be more attractive, to feel younger --- Sex sells! We buy things that we do not need --- doing so for fun, for recreation, or for a touch of luxury that makes us feel special. We become addicted to shopping, and Advertising makes Wants become more like Needs. We live in a world of manufactured desires and manipulated emotions.

Consumer capitalism is by its very nature unethical, in the context of ecological sanity. It is part of a global order that places profits above people and above the health of the environment.

Counterculture ideas of non-conformity, dissent and freedom “to do your own thing” have been cleverly co-opted and absorbed into capitalist orthodoxy. Advertising generally does not embrace any modicum of moderation, but rather an orgiastic, never-ending enthusiasm for buying things. It effectively seduces us into hopes of material self-fulfillment, of belonging, of being cool. In seeking our ego satisfaction in consumption and material things, three of the primary sources of human fulfillment appear to be withering or stagnating --- social relations, meaningful leisure time, and spiritual satisfaction.

“ ... this much is crystal-clear: our bigger-and-better society is now like a hypochondriac, so obsessed with its own economic health as to have lost the capacity to remain healthy.”

A Sand County Almanac, Aldo Leopold, 1949

The Ecological Revolution will require a re-evaluation of our true needs, and a recognition that the positive feelings we get from mindless consumption must evolve soon into a more sane human “modus operandi” --- one emphasizing more wholesome and non-material sources of fulfillment, which are the main psychological determinants of happiness: family and community gatherings, education, meaningful work, leisure time, creative and artistic pursuits, reading, cultural events, participatory sports, friendships, simplicity of living, spiritual practices, and the appreciation of nature.

Our societies should encourage values that serve the life of the planet, rather than increasingly imperiling it! As one ecologist observes: “The basic moral value of a sustainable society is simple: each generation should meet its needs without jeopardizing the prospects for future generations to meet their own needs.”

Ethical Exploration

Morals are concerned with the judgment of the “goodness” or “badness” of human action and character. Morals are derived from the customs and mores of a social group. In its origin, morality consists of the adherence to those customs that are considered essential to the health and preservation of the group.

History reveals a notion of which we are generally not aware: morals are relative. Hatred, for instance, becomes respectable in war, whereas it is a terrible threat to social order during times of peace.

Sociologists indicate that it is probable that all vices were once virtues. For instance, when humans relied on hunting to survive, aggressiveness and greed were necessary in the struggle for self-preservation, yet now they are more of a threat to society. The transition from hunting-and-gathering to the settled tilling of the soil had far-reaching impacts on moral conceptions. Hard work became more vital than bravery, and cooperation more necessary than violence. Chastity, early marriage, monogamy without divorce, and large families became fundamentally important on the farm. Birth control became immoral, and many children became a basic religious obligation, in obedience to socioeconomic necessities.

The Industrial Revolution, in its turn, changed the fabric of society and its economic imperatives. Cities grew. The need for extended education lengthened adolescence. The role of women changed dramatically, as children became more of a financial liability, rather than an asset on the farm. Marriage was delayed, and divorce lost its stigma. Individualism increased and competition intensified. Industries sought profit regardless of community good.

As a consequence of these social changes, the words “morality” and “immorality” are in a flux, drifting between old moorings lost and new ones yet to be found. A new, natural moral code is needed, one that is clear, certain, undeniable, and positive; a certitude encompassing both personal freedom and social responsibility, one that is consistent with the context of today’s societies, of human nature and of the compelling exigencies of our 21st century world --- that is, of moderation, sustainability, peace, social justice, planetary well-being, and ultimately, of our well-being and survival.

We in the United States must reclaim the moral high ground from the elite minority of conservative doctrinaire Traditionalists. The things that are truly right are those things that help people and society. What is really important is the overall health of our society, of the environment we live in, and of the planet’s supporting ecosystems. We must attune our vision to the common good and long-term consequences, and act accordingly to improve the world. Caring is the essence of ethical right action.

Mario Cuomo, the former three-term governor of New York, speaking of his mother in his 1995 book, Reason to Believe, says: “She taught us all perhaps the most important lesson: that what is right is usually also what is necessary; that in helping one another we almost always help ourselves.”

It is my conviction that we must now begin to focus our planning and policies on sensible and fair outcomes, and not allow greed, selfishness, judgmental attitudes or ethnocentric beliefs to dominate our decision-making.

An Ode to Sanity in Humanity

The human race chooses to regard itself as the primary purpose of Creation
Curiously imagining that there is a God, who made us in His own image
Using this worldview to justify the domination and depletion of nature
Treating all as merely real estate and resources, being clever but not sage.

We use up and exploit the natural world unsustainably
Unwilling to plan wisely, or to discourage rapid population growth
Sprawling across the Earth and destroying myriad habitats
Abusing, depleting, and polluting, upon my concerned oath.

Forests, lands, creeks, rivers, lakes, oceans and coral reefs
Even the atmosphere we inflict with deleterious impacts
And we deny to ourselves consequences, and our responsibility
Creating greater challenges and adversity, obtuse to the facts.

Fossil fuels are clearly limited, but we are like addicts to drugs
Selfishly unwilling to conserve, burning oil as fast as we can
As if there will be no tomorrow, no future generations to come
No others to care about, and no obviously better plan.

Special Interests and self-centered motivations drive our demands
And human perspective is rather myopic, short-term thinking in vogue
While the need for far-sighted vision grows greater day by day
And business-as-usual becomes more irresponsibly rogue.

We are losing track of seeing what qualities are important
Possessed by our possessions, seduced by our desires
Unalert to true values, personal growth and spiritual needs
Overwhelmed, unaware, deluded, and blinded by stoked fires.

How more succinctly can it be stated and understood:
More people, more pollution, more traffic and strife
Greater negative environmental impacts and less security
More danger to peace, more threats, a lesser quality of life.

We imagine our technology and intelligence will save us
We think we are not animals, not subject to a fall
We pretend our impact on planetary ecosystems is slight
Or perhaps more generally, we do not consider it at all.



An Ode to Sanity in Humanity

Our existence is precarious, like a proverbial house of cards
Appearing stable, yet vulnerable to surprises or sudden collapse
Yet humanity strives to grow and consume ever more and more
Gambling with the future, as if in a giant game of craps.

The Lessons of History give us a context and reason to mend our ways
To be proactive in protecting ourselves and our offspring
To seize the initiative in redesigning our economic systems
To become sustainable and restorative --- to contain our mad fling.

Positive solutions to our growing challenges actually do abound
And we would be wise to influence behavior with incentives and disincentives
To move in the direction of conservation, moderation, global health and sanity
Instead of figuratively puncturing our life rafts to make them leak like sieves.

A spirit of generosity is surprisingly good for the body and soul
Engendering positive feelings through open-heartedness and noble-mindedness
For the cultivation of good will produces both tangible and subtle satisfactions
And a lightness of being and a depth of humanity is our reward for natural kindness.

There is reason to be optimistic, hopeful, and enthusiastic
For life can be rich, fulfilling, beautiful, and profound
But we must embrace efficiency, pragmatism and wise planning
And strive to choose well, formulating policies that are sound.

The time has come to alter the course of our actions
To really improve our societies, modifying harmful activities
Protecting the Quality of our lives AND of crucial ecosystems
While respecting others, our communities, freedoms, and proclivities.

Humankind ought to begin emphasizing long-term considerations
Developing effective means to encourage wise societal choices
Moving beyond irresponsible selfishness, embracing new directions
New economic and political thinking, reflective all concerned voices.

Let us clarify the rational ends that humanity should pursue
And the moral principles that should govern our choices
Let us strive to make the world a better place for all
Recognizing what is truly important, and boldly lending it our voices.



T.T.

Evaluating Education

“Education is the most vital of social activities, and therefore the most eagerly abused by the contemporary power system --- whether that system is religious, as in the Middle Ages, or political-economic, as for the last century or so.”

--- The Aristos, John Fowles

“Creationism is not science. No body of beliefs that has its origins in doctrinal rather than scientific observation should be admissible as science in public education.”

--- The National Academy of Science

The evolutionist-creationist controversy is NOT one about science. It is a religious, political, and educational-curricula controversy stemming from:

- (1) The confusion between religious dogma and scientific understanding;
- (2) The attempt by creationists to subject science to ideological control; and
- (3) Public ignorance --- and far too much apathy in the face of highly motivated religious fundamentalists who want to propagate their points of view.

Evolution is a fact. It is only its mechanisms that are theory. It is difficult to imagining the incomprehensible sweep of time that has passed in the 4 billion years that life has been evolving on Planet Earth. Let us not allow religious dogma to intrude into the classroom!

“I reckon that they had stretched the truth of the matter so far that it should long ago have died of thinness.”

--- Mark Twain

John Dewey stated that the goal of education should be “to prepare young people to be reflective and critical citizens in a democratic society”. It could also be argued that teachers, school administrators, principals, local school boards and involved parents should have the greatest amount of input into the education process and into the design of good curriculum, rather than having the federal government exert greater control. Allowing business goals and standardized testing to have the highest priority in education seems quite foolish and misguided. The “No Child Left Behind” law is resulting in distinct inequities, inflexibility, rote training, high dropout rates, severe sanctions against underperforming schools, and a lower quality of public education. Thanks a lot for a terrible system, Texas! The inadequate funding of the law, and of education in general, is a very poor idea for our society.

The “No Child Left Behind” legislation seems like a very cynical approach to reform. Why does legislation passed by a Republican Senate and House of Representatives, and signed by a Republican President, always seem to provide poor results for society? It seems clear to the author that, like the Prescription Drug Bill, legislation is unfortunately written with the self-interest of Big Business in mind, with just enough bells and whistles to placate congressional liberals and to please the far right. (In the case of the Drug Bill, it is the giant Pharmaceutical firms, the HMO’s, and the Insurance Companies who benefit the most. And how can we accept the wrongful and deceptive suppression of the fact that the approved bill will cost \$530 billion instead of the approved \$400 billion?) America clearly needs greater honesty and fairness in its politicians. “Regime change” in Congress and the White House seems necessary!

Education and Empowerment

Women worldwide have far more to contribute than our bodies for sexual gratification and reproduction. More than our lives dedicated to child rearing and to loving support of our mates. Much more than our hard-working subservience, or our shopping and clerical skills.

The education and empowerment of women is one of the most significant goals to which humankind could dedicate itself. It would be a giant step towards fairness, ethical conduct, cooperation, social equity, conflict resolution, and population stabilization.

Women deserve more R-E-S-P-E-C-T! They are worthy!

I must be chaste until the day I get married, to please some of you men --- and others of you always seem to be wanting me to put out!

Ha! (Yikes!) Men are paradoxical! Tiffany Twain

The Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution simply states:

"Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

This Amendment was written in 1923 and introduced into Congress every year until it passed in 1972. It was then sent to the States for ratification, requiring 75% of the States to ratify it. Just 35 of the required 38 States have done so, and there it languishes.

Question: How can something so fair be opposed? Answer: Our country is unwilling to guarantee women constitutional rights equal to those of men because social conservatives consider equal rights for women to be a threat to the existing power structure.

Food for Thought!

Fodder for Change!!

The organization Population Connection publishes a frightening Timeline of the Bush Administration's Assault on the Rights of Women. It enumerates many of the actions taken by the government from January 2001 to November 2003 that erode the rights of women. Further, the National Council for Research on Women released a report in March 2004 revealing how the Bush Administration, contrary to its rosy rhetoric, has distorted, deleted, and misrepresented much of the information on women's issues on U.S. government websites and publications. This is only the tip of the iceberg --- it seems apparent that patriarchal propensities and Neoconservative radicalism are pernicious to women's rights! We must elect more enlightened and fair leaders, ones responsive to constituencies other than the right wing!

Feminine virtues are valuable for balance in a patriarchal society. Cooperation, caring, compassion, constructive communication, earnest conflict resolution, and wholesome connectedness are a necessary counterpoint to the usually more male characteristics of virile aggressiveness, ruthless competitiveness, male chauvinism, vindictive pride, intolerance, macho-dude violence, and insensitive impulses to control, exploit and abuse.

Human undertakings and understandings must be tempered with some nobility, gentleness, and a desire to share, to heal, and to embrace spiritual meaning, compassion, and love. Let us recognize the values of harmony, equanimity, and generosity, and let us strive to cultivate good will! Let us try to improve health and well being in human relationships, as well as in planetary ecosystems!