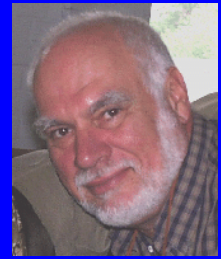


Bellicose Veins—the roots of violence in US culture

**BOTH HANDS FULL—A CASE FOR DIVERSITY
IN THINKING PATTERNS**

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Some years ago, I was facilitating an ecumenical discussion between Hillel¹ and Protestant campus ministers at the University of California at Berkeley. It was not an easy intercultural dialogue, largely because of the different positions being taken within the Protestant group vis-à-vis who had the correct interpretations of biblical and theological points. During one of the breaks, one of the Hillel rabbis commented on the process in words that have stuck with me ever since. He said:

“When there is a disagreement among rabbis, we tend to argue our differences in terms of ‘on one hand’ and, ‘on the other hand...’ This means that we go away with ‘both hands full’ of possibilities and ideas. I notice that when the Christians argue among themselves, it is about someone being right and someone being wrong. This means that the person who is defeated goes away with both hands empty and the person who has ‘won’ has nothing more than he started with—or perhaps less since he has probably lost the good will of those he disagrees with.”

Raw dualistic thinking patterns threaten diversity gains

No one who has listened to the logic of US administration positions during the past months can fail to notice that at least the rhetoric reflects an unvarnished dualistic thinking pattern that generates empty-handedness. If someone is right, then someone must then be wrong. If one side is good, then the others constitute an ‘axis of evil.’ Either someone is with us or they are against us. Friends who chance to disagree with us automatically become enemies, and therefore must be punished for their infidelity. Threats and violent behavior have replaced dialogue and collaboration. A form of mental fundamentalism threatens to overwhelm our diversity.

Having made significant strides in coping with diversity at home, today we appear on the world stage not only as poorly equipped to deal with diversity on an international level, but in the general worldwide consensus, as the most dangerous bully on the block. Instead of exploiting the Peace Dividend, we choose a Hobbesian gunboat diplomacy over culturally sensitive use of the vast diverse resources and experiences of our people and professionals and the democratic process of debating our policies. It is the purpose of this short article to ask why this is culturally so, and thereby to perhaps open the door to some more productive approaches that are also rooted in our cultural values.

It is *not* my purpose to offer a critique on the political positions of the current Bush administration, though many of these obviously deserve to come under scrutiny as examples of the kind of argument that is driving the US in a counter-diversity direction. Rather, I wish to point to a clear and present danger: thinking patterns stemming from truncated US cultural values and strengths and democratic processes are becoming real sources of conflict and

¹ <http://www.hillel.org/>

leading in the direction of violence, because we are failing to use the range of values and the diversity, thinking patterns and argumentative skills we possess.

Imploding cultural values

Dominant strengths in a culture always run the risk of “overplaying their hand.” They reinforce themselves, particularly when the culture is under stress, and therefore overshadow other important and complementary values in the cultural endowment, causing us to lose sight of them or even lose them altogether. Cultural dominance dislikes diversity. Ultimately unmitigated dominance leads to cultural implosion, because the requisite variety for survival in a changing environment is systematically eliminated by a “party line.” As in biological inbreeding, cultural inbreeding risks bringing out undesirable, unhealthy, even life-threatening traits.

It is not surprising that our domestic diversity gains are currently being compromised as stereotyping and profiling become the thinking and decision-making criteria for policing a fearful population. Many of us watched with great sadness as Canadian television showed US Muslims, some of them second and third generation citizens, (and some who just “look like” they might be Muslims) standing in line to exit the USA. They were moving to the north out of fear of their US next-door neighbors. The new émigrés are, however, only a few outstanding examples of the fear of the consequences of being different that grips countless other citizens, whatever they look like. At the same time aspiring entrants to the US are being turned away by our own immigration officials.

Strong words without debate

Dichotomous, dualistic thinking patterns and language are symptoms of a deeper ill, the absence of democratic and rational debate. Using strong language is not itself a problem, unless no debate is intended or allowed. Then it becomes demagoguery, a violence-prone deviation from essential US cultural values of free speech, fairness, pluralism, democratic process, and diversity. It is hard to encourage win-win solutions when these values are eclipsed by fear.

Debate and parliamentary processes are rooted in the Western intellectual tradition elaborated by the Greek and Roman philosophers and refined by the scholastic and Enlightenment thinkers. Yes, by “dead white men.” Traditionally high school debates were part of a training for democracy and were played out within a context of a contest or game in which we agree to “let the best man win” even when the “best man” is the woman.

Strong ideas and passionate speech become dangerous when there is no mechanism to explore them, when other voices are drowned out and discussion is aborted. In an attempt to protect the timid and less empowered, there is a US tendency (often found in the diversity movement) to rule out strong speech instead of finding ways to consult those without a voice and empower less forward voices to be heard. We should expect that, from the energy expended in a well conducted debate, issues will be profoundly visited and listeners will be given the richest possible set of choices about what to accept, believe, or act on. As Leonard Cohen sings, even the “homicidal bitchin’ that goes down in every kitchen to determine who will serve and who will eat,” tells us that “Democracy is coming to the USA.”² Freedom of Speech is sometimes like Kali and sometimes like Shiva, devouring old worlds as well as dancing new ones into

² <http://www.webheights.net/essential/democ.htm>

existence. It is lack of empowerment, lack of voice, and being steadily dissed in the family, the community, and the nation that leads to violence, not strong words and opinions.

Even when we start from “homicidal bitchin’” we trust, or at least we should believe that “getting it out on the table,” clear statements and argumentation for our positions, as well as “letting it all hang out” to show our emotional involvement in the issues, ultimately create clarity about what it is that we need to resolve. From this apparently impossible impasse, we move into stages of dialog, exploration of alternatives, and negotiation as the civilized way to live, work, and do business together. As the three-year old granddaughter of a friend recently remarked, the first rule for making the pie bigger and going away “with both hands full” is “Don’t hit!” It doesn’t work to call names, to hit, and then hold grudges. We need to understand the diversity in conflict styles to make conflict productive. Some years ago, Thomas Kochman³ observed that cultural styles differed between many US blacks (as long as you are shouting, you are not hitting) and many US whites (as soon as you shout you are likely to hit). This is a good example of how not understanding diversity in conflict styles creates more misperceptions and further conflict.

Seeking the true, the good and the useful through debate

Good debate sharpens the intellect, gathers and interprets data, and provides positions and viewpoints for finding out where we stand and where we want to go on an issue. This dialectic can reveal the holes in our logic and send poorly researched information packing. If one picks up the *Summa Theologiae*⁴ of Thomas Aquinas,⁵ one sees this Aristotelian pattern of debate used repeatedly:

- A Question
- Arguments for a position on the question.
- *Sed contra*, objections or “on the other hand” arguments
- Responses to the objections
- A summary resolution of the question on the basis of what the debate has revealed.

In Aquinas’ time it was the mark of a good professor at the University of Paris to hold disputations⁶ or intellectual tournaments using this approach for sounding out and integrating opinions as a way of advancing understanding and science.

Debate in the West has subsequently become bound up with the Hegelian dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis,⁷ which assumes that willy-nilly from conflicting forces there will emerge a better or greater or more evolved understanding or policy. To contain this process and keep it from being a Darwinian struggle for survival of the fittest, we require a social context that contains the arguments and keeps them from becoming destructive. Whether this is *Robert’s Rules of Order*⁸ or a set of socially understood boundaries, the context is meant to contain the reactions and prevent them from spilling over and polluting the ground from which they spring. Just as it takes male and female to continue biological life, it takes what have been traditionally defined as “male” (defense) and “female” (nurture) functions to guarantee survival, though, in any given case, either of these behaviors can be exercised by women or men. Debate requires a background of holistic thinking and community nurturance if it is to create rather than

³ Kochman, Thomas, *Black and White Styles in Conflict*

⁴ <http://www.intratext.com/X/ENG0023.htm>

⁵ <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/a/aquinas.htm>

⁶ <http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/disputation.html>

⁷ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel/>

⁸ <http://www.robertsrules.com/default.html>

fragment. It is not a matter of choosing one style over the other but recognizing the importance of and taking advantage of both.

The decline of debate

Long before radio and television talk shows, people used to pack the galleries of the Supreme Court to spend hours listening to famous lawyers debate the issues of the day. In US education and culture, however, there has been a decline of debate.⁹ Such debate as still exists is less and less an exercise in communication. One can only speculate why. Perhaps the answer lies in one or more of several elements: perhaps the general decline of educational resources and language skills, perhaps because we pursue politics by sound byte rather than discussion of issues, perhaps because commercial advertising is the only kind of persuasion we are generally exposed to, or maybe even because of a growing fear of each other.

Despite, or perhaps because of the often tangible rage seething beneath the surface and the danger it implies, USians have been becoming more and more conflict avoidant. This makes sense in a national climate where disagreement quickly results in violence, verbal (stereotyping and name-calling), psychological (threats and manipulation), or physical ("road rage" and war). The inclination, when confronted, is to smile and change the subject. Instead of debates and arguments promoting mutual appreciation, the result is, more often than not, fear and active dislike, stereotyping and name-calling, resentments and grudges. It is not very safe to argue in USA. There is little or no context for it. Not surprisingly we are culturally addicted to rules, laws, lawyers, and courts to solve our problems, and, when our fear leads us to think conflict inevitable, to preemptive strikes.

Social context supports conflict resolution

Productive disagreement requires social connection. When it is there, even name-calling can have the function of beginning a productive debate, if we allow it to happen. When Harry Belafonte described Colin Powell as a "house nigger" it seemed for a moment that this shock could have produced a very meaningful exploration of the roles and aspirations of black Americans and what foreign policy means from the variety of black perspectives. One could have discussed whether the diverse looking Bush Administration is integrated or assimilated and what message that sends. The issue that Belafonte raised was that having black faces is no guarantee of black presence.

Increasing competitive individualism, "it's-all-about-me-ness," and diminished social links in US culture have caused some French observers to note that while the US enjoys *liberté* and *égalité*, *fraternité* is certainly missing. "Both hands full" in a dialectical context requires connection and commitment to, as well as respect for one's opponent. When dichotomous thinking is separated from the element of debate or is used to actively discourage debate, it quickly becomes a weapon of mass destruction rather than a mentally and socially useful tool for resolving problems and meeting challenges. As a nation, as Lily Tomlin once put it, "We are all in this together, by ourselves."

Providing safe space for diversity to debate

The solution is not in the rejection of debate but in providing a safe space for it to take place and processes that allow it to come to full resolution. Impatience with such processes whether in the media (CNN cannot afford to behave like C-Span) or in the UN are conducive to rogue

⁹ <http://arapaho.nsuok.edu/~scottd/speed.htm>

behavior. Today the US public is given *panem et circenses*¹⁰ instead of participation in democracy. The Second Gulf War was presented as an off-season Super Bowl for the crowds, roused by Fox network commentators, to cheer or boo, short on real images, facts and interpretation, a chance to see our team wup the other in a contest almost as lopsided as the old game of lions versus Christians.

Two Deborahs, Tannen¹¹ and Flick¹² have commented profoundly on what is missing in US argumentation style. While in agreement with much of what both have to say, I would nonetheless contend that what is needed is more argument rather than less, more conflict rather than less, more resultant dialogue rather than less—with the proviso that we use our other cultural values of fair play, participation, diversity, and social solidarity to make it safe to do so. Supporting domestic as well as international fora for the resolution of our issues is the cultural as well as political challenge facing the United States today. As tedious as this may be, particularly to a control and action-oriented culture such as ours, it is essential if we are to benefit from our own and the world's diversity.

Living part-time in France, I have grown used to and enjoy the kind of Cartesian dialectic that can spring up at any moment in the living room or on the street. Differing perceptions develop into good, passionate argument and generally close, if not with agreement, at least with a mutual understanding in which everyone wins something, as well as having been energized and better connected to each other by sharing opinions and feelings. Good friends have good arguments. This, interestingly, has been the repeated position of French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin¹³, who, despite the political and popular abuse being heaped on France from the US side, continues to position France as the USA's best friend, since friends offer each other the gifts of critical insight and solid argument.

Yet, despite the pressing need for engagement in debate and dialogue, both domestic and worldwide, it is US individualism that is defining policy as we not only belittle or gag those who disagree with us, but actively attempt to marginalize the United Nations and exempt ourselves from international courts of justice.

Moral character and spiritual resources

Besides social context, the courage to argue one's point and listen to the others demands education for maturity and spiritual depth. Daisaku Ikeda reminds us that dialogue may be neither nice nor soft.

"We see in Socrates the steadfast commitment to dialogue, to verbal combat from which there is no retreat, and an intensity that is, in some literal sense, death-defying. Such dialogue can only be sustained by resources of spiritual energy and strength far greater and deeper than will be found among those who so quickly turn to violence."¹⁴

The lack of full democratic debate leading to dialogue, I contend, a great part of the cultural and spiritual crisis that the USA is now facing. Represented by the bully pulpit of its current

10 The Roman emperors in the 1st Century provided bread and circus games to distract the populace from more serious issues and to win their support.

11 Tannen, Deborah, *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*

12 Flick, Deborah, *From Debate to Dialogue: Using the Understanding Process to Transform Our Conversations*

¹³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2768503.stm>

¹⁴ *For the Sake of Peace: A Buddhist Perspective for the 21st Century* 3:41

political administration, the nation is seen to delight in arrogantly taking the moral high ground over what are explicitly described as “senile” and “underdeveloped” nations, e.g., those not worth talking to. Like disenchanted lovers we trade abuse with those we have branded rogue states and dictators after our gift-laden courtship with them has been soured by infidelity and divorce. Current rhetoric projects, and hopes to impose our own unraveling social fabric, which we too glibly fantasize as the world standards of “democracy” and “family values.” We visit our own right-wrong pronouncements on other cultures in which people find their connections with each other as important as being right, and, in many cases, the most important way of being right.

Is there a way out from here? Healing the stressed cultural values in this crisis, will require that “on one hand” we not abandon the value of clear thinking and debate, and “on the other hand” that we learn to understand the diversity of conflict styles as well as the diversity of conflict and conflict resolution styles in us and around us. It will require a close look at where our individualism is taking us. Hopefully this short examination of what seems to be missing can encourage you to value and foster an inclusive, diverse context for debate and dialogue both domestically and internationally. “Democracy is comin’ to the USA” in fits and starts and cultural self-criticism is an essential part of it. To cite Leonard Cohen once more, “It’s as if someone holds out a sandwich to you when you are starved. You take it and maybe you don’t like it.”¹⁵

15 From an interview in *Throat Culture* magazine, 1992. See: <http://www.webheights.net/speakingcohen/throat.htm>