

SENIORS FOR PEACE - TALK - 1.25.10

With all of the disastrous circumstances in the world -- those caused by nature (earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes) - and man made disasters (genocide, terrorism, warfare) there may be some value in trying to remind ourselves of what we mean by a good society, a society in which justice is the norm. This investigation involves a slight excursion into philosophy, but I make no apology for that. It is important, or so I believe, to think as clearly as possible and to use every resource available when it comes to decision making, whether in the social, political, or domestic areas of our lives.

Whether we recognize it or not we all have an idea of what we think we mean by justice - somehow it's involved with concepts of equality, equal opportunity, and equal treatment, particularly by courts and the law. But when we look about the world what we discover is injustice, oppression, and in some cases almost unimaginable suffering. Even when the cause of disaster is not man made, as is the case in the earthquake in Haiti, the consequences appear to be unequal. For example, the earthquake in Haiti was of slightly less magnitude than the 1989 quake in San Francisco but the results are almost astronomically different. For example, loss of life: 63 died in the Loma Prieta quake, the figure for Haiti could escalate into six figures. Statistical comparisons can be very misleading. There is, however, one comparison that is not misleading: building codes, medical facilities, fire and police protection are taken for granted in affluent countries whereas the absence of all of these in one of the world's poorest nations, Haiti, obviously magnifies the extent and intensity of human suffering. And one final comparison: the property damage in the Loma Prieta quake reached six billion dollars. In Haiti the estimate is in the millions; that's because the buildings, intact, were simply not worth much. But the cost for rebuilding in Haiti in relation to average income is seven times more expensive than in the US. The cost of poverty is best measured in human lives.

With such gross inequities in the world, such disproportionate suffering, are the very ideas of justice and equity meaningless? Other than the obvious linguistic proposition that without a notion of equity we could not speak of an inequity, there appears to be something more fundamental. It has to do with the fact that as human beings we have the ability to choose A over B, not as an animal choice prompted by instinct, but as a rational choice based on ideas of what is good and bad, just or unjust. Does our ability to choose depend solely on what is available, in other words, circumstance? Here it gets a little more complicated. It can be said that there is a level of thought, and of choice which is not under the thumb of the immediate. It is much more abstract than, say, hot or cold, sweet or sour, empty or full; however it goes to the core of our existence as social beings.

Aristotle, in the fifth century BC, argued that we cannot talk about justice without first having a notion of a good society. And another philosopher, Plato, made the claim that only philosophers were capable of deciding that question. Setting that aside, the Aristotelean view is that whatever supports the good society is just. A different approach emerged, primarily in Europe, in which justice is to be measured in utilitarian terms. We know it today as the doctrine of the greatest good for the greatest number. A counter approach looked upon justice as other than a zero sum matter. In a zero sum world justice for one is necessarily at the expense of another. In a non zero sum world justice is measured in terms of cooperation rather than competition and the application of principles of justice can be of benefit to all. In his book, *Justice*, Harvard professor, Michael Sandel calls this a communitarian approach.

Another approach which I haven't mentioned thus far, Sandel labels Libertarian. This is the view that holds that the individual is paramount in the scheme of things and that any restriction on this freedom is unjust. Competition between individuals in a free market may result in inequities - however, any effort to limit the freedom of any member of a society is to deny freedom. The so-called Welfare State is, in the eyes of Libertarians, the principal enemy of freedom and justice.

Let's go back to something I said a moment ago to the effect that we all have a sense of what is right or wrong, just or unjust. A problem arises when we recognize that we may each have a different idea about the good or the just. The utilitarian view solves this problem by insisting that the greatest good for the greatest number is what constitutes justice. The libertarian says, "No, it's the freedom of the individual that is important, not some statistical measurement."

These ideas, along with the communitarian view, i.e. what is important is the good of the community (community defined as a social contract) - and here's where it gets more difficult: there can be many different kinds of contracts depending upon your political philosophy - whether we subscribe to an Aristotelean elite, a Hitlerian dictatorship, a Buddhist separation from life, or a western liberal ideal of democracy.

Immanuel Kant in the 18th century and John Rawls in the 20th, ignored questions like these. Kant insisted that as rational beings that very rationality give us a built in sense of justice, what he called a categorical imperative. Rawls approached the question in a different way. He began by observing that no one is exempt from the special circumstances of his or her own existence and that that inevitably influences our idea of justice. Here is how it put it: "affections, devotions, and loyalties that they believe, they would not, indeed could and should not, stand apart from...They may regard it as simply unthinkable to view themselves apart from certain religious, philosophical, and

moral convictions or from certain enduring attachments and loyalties." Rawls then proposed that we establish what he called "a veil of ignorance" between the abstract question and our individual circumstance and examine what the concept of justice means devoid of any logical contradiction or any individual circumstance. He insisted that "we separate our identity as citizens from our moral and religious convictions and that governments may not endorse a particular conception of the good. Citizens may not even introduce their moral and religion convictions into public debate about justice or rights. For if they do, and their arguments prevail, they will effectively impose on their fellow citizens a law that rests on a particular moral or religious doctrine." That was Sandel's summary of Rawls position. It reminds me of leaning back in a chair and leaning back until the chair and you fall over backward. Theoretically, this is what we ask Supreme Court Justices to do, not fall over backwards but divorce their decision making from their personal religious, moral, and political beliefs. That made sense in the early days of our republic when there was an understandable fear of a return of religious or political domination. But in today's world where party loyalty or religious doctrine or economic interest has produced a stalemate in our political discourse, when, in fact, there is no discourse, only contending party slogans, one can develop a certain nostalgia for Rawl's view of a neutrality not indebted to individual circumstance. Ironically, liberal thinking in the 1970's sought to claim the high ground of neutrality. Regrettably they ended up ceding all moral and religious discourse to the religious right. From President Reagan on, the likes of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Rush Limbaugh, and Glenn Beck have, almost unopposed, attacked liberals for their assumed detachment from religious and moral values.

In our lifetime we have witnessed the assassination of four remarkable men who introduced concepts of justice and the good society from a perspective not tied to dogma or blind loyalty. Obviously, I'm thinking about John and Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, but most of all Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., each of them, in their different ways, an advocate for peace and justice for all peoples.

MLK was our nation's most eloquent advocate for a value based policy and political action agenda. It was neither utilitarian nor libertarian. Neither was it a result of a contract among equals nor a result of pure thought. It was grounded in the Christian doctrine of love and suffering. Remember that the Christian meaning of to suffer is to allow. This involves acceptance of the other. Here is how Martin Luther King put it in the 1963 speech in Washington. "In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggles on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force." And on April 4, 1967, literally one year before he was shot down, King had this to say at the Riverside Church in Manhattan: "Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may see the basic weakness of our own position, and if we are mature we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition." And earlier in the same speech: "This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation and for those its calls 'enemy' for no document from human hands can makes these humans any less our brothers."

For many it is not difficult to take exception to the views of Martin Luther King. Most of the arguments go something like this: "Dr. King, evil does exist in the world and it answers to no voice but its own. There are times when it becomes a moral imperative to resist evil by force. Non-violence is akin to surrender and it is morally wrong to surrender to evil." This is the classic argument against pacifism and it is also the foundation for the concept of a just war. Today we are told that the 'evil' that we face is not fascism or communism - those are twentieth century evils - today it is defined, particularly by the United States and other western nations, as international terrorism. In the nonwestern world it is more likely to be seen as domestic or nation based terrorism.

Does the doctrine of nonviolence have an answer to the charge that it fails to confront evil? An adviser to President Obama, Harvard professor Stephanie Powers, favors a US policy of armed intervention in cases of genocide. Usually, Kosovo and Somalia are cited as examples of a success and a failure in the effective use of force to stop genocide. But a debate over the use of force in specific instances misses the point. History is littered with wars, revolutions, and terrorist acts. The very persistence of force as a means to an end raises the question of whether it an inevitable aspect of life. Are we doomed to an endless repetition of the past? And as weaponry becomes more deadly does this change the picture? The Trojan War left a city in ruins, families destroyed, and nothing accomplished. Post World War II and the so-called victory of the Western Alliance and Russia over the Axis powers, resulted in one time Allies becoming enemies, i.e. The US and Soviet Union. War does not produce peace, but it effectively plants the seeds for more wars.

It may seem somewhat ridiculous to suggest, along with MLK, that "soul force" is superior to physical force. Soul force works over time. Physical force is a short term phenomena with long term consequences. I think nonviolence is

a more useful term than soul force. It is both a principle and a tactic. The consequences of non-violence are cumulative, not as immediate as a blow to the jaw or a missile from a drone aircraft. And it would be foolish to assume that in many instances force will not decide the day. It will, again and again. But here's another way to look at it: Violence produces a future that is an illusion.

We may think that after war there can be real peace. That's the illusion. The future of war is war. Non-violence offers the potential of peace. Will non-violence eliminate evil? Not if you believe that evil exists. And different cultures can have different definitions of evil. Yes. Evil exists. And in that sense we all have blood on our hands. That's part of what Hannah Arendt called "the human condition." At the same time, the human species is not programmed for failure. We are rational, willful creatures and we can make choices. And that obvious fact leads us into a real and unpredictable world. My own position is much too extreme for many, and that's not hard to understand. My choice is for non-violence over the use of force without exception. Every use of force -- between individuals, armies, religions, or political movements -- I see as a step backward. It is the denial of the inherent rights of another human being and, by extension, myself.

But what if it is the intention of another human being (and here I'm speaking symbolically) to deny me my right to exist? Whatever happened to self-defense? Obviously, each of us has a built in instinct for self preservation. In order to survive we are involved in an uninterrupted negotiation with the world. The key word here is negotiation. The value I place on non-violence extends into my choice of means. The use of force, even as a means of self defense, shuts down negotiation and denies both parties their inherent freedom. There is a counter argument that says "Yes, but freedom is not the issue here. The issue is survival." And my reply is, that whatever the intent, the means employed will determine the results and when the means chosen is force it does not and cannot result in peace. At the same time I must recognize that my actions in not resisting an oppressor by force may result in the loss of life other than my own. And this is what I meant when I mentioned earlier that we all have blood on our hands, regardless of which side of the line we may find ourselves. For such is the nature of existence and there is no such thing as a straight line dividing good from evil.

For example, let's examine what is frequently called the War on Terror. President Bush described the concept in his speech before a joint session of Congress following 9/11. Needless to say, the idea did not begin there. In a book titled "International Terrorism: Challenge and Response," published in 1979, and in a later book titled "Fighting Terrorism: How Democracies Can Fight International Terrorism," Benjamin Netanyahu, the current premier of Israel fully developed the argument as it related at that time to Israel and Palestine. And only a few months before Sept. 11, in a speech before a group of Middle East experts, he put forth the following propositions: (1) In the 21st century, you cannot achieve a military victory unless you achieve a political victory to accompany it; and you cannot achieve a political victory unless you achieve a victory in public opinion; and you cannot achieve a victory in public opinion unless you persuade that public that your cause is just. And (2) It doesn't make any difference if you are on the side of the angels or the side of the devil. Anyone fighting in the international arena of public opinion must argue the justice of his cause. Hitler argued for the justice of his cause and Stalin argued for the justice of his cause. They all had propaganda machines. Whether you are right or you are wrong, you must argue the justice of your cause.

This is the classic argument that insists that justice is what most benefits a particular group -- a variation of "the Lord is MY shepherd. I shall not want." It is also an accurate reflection of how nation states and organizations like al Qaeda approach the question of justice -- in a fashion diametrically opposite to the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Let's examine a little more closely the relationship between justice and terror. The use of the word terror can be misleading, if not downright sloppy. After all, terror is generally understood as "intense, sharp, overwhelming fear." And that emotion can be touched off by many different kinds of events -- earthquakes, for example. A much more accurate word is terrorism. Terrorism - meaning the use of terrorizing methods, or a method of governing, or of resisting a government. And obviously, a terrorist is one you uses or favors the use of terrorizing methods. Does that include both suicide bombers and predator drones. Presumably there is a difference between civilians and combatants. But I'm not sure that difference holds up. And warfare blurs the distinction even more. The London blitz and the carpet bombing of German cities, Dresden for example. Pearl Harbor and the firestorm that engulfed Tokyo. What really is the difference, certainly not in the infliction of terror. The usual answer is that out goals are just and the goals of the enemy are unjust. But in the last analysis this leaves us firmly in the Netanyahu camp. Justice is whatever you want it to be, so long as you are the decider as to what is and is not just. That's a long way from MLK's view of justice as applicable to all, not just a few.

One could respond by saying that moral principle is irrelevant in today's world, that concepts of justice as applied to all peoples simply doesn't work. My response to that is "How can it be moral if it does not apply equally to all?" Morality for a few, whether as a result of a social contract or divine dispensation, contradicts the very notion of morality as universal. In short, it is the opposite of morality. It is incommensurate with any idea of justice for all. And it is the inclusion of everyone, without exception, that gives the idea of a just society its validation and its strength. To put it in a slogan: In a just world, the terrorist has no cause.

A number of recent events including an election in Massachusetts; a Supreme Court decision on political campaign spending; the failure of efforts at healthcare reform; bonuses on Wall Street; and an unemployment rate that continues to rise, place questions about morality and political choice under a magnifying lens. You may not think this is the case, but consider the following questions:

We place great faith in fair elections. A candidate who campaigned against health care reform as advocated by the late Edward Kennedy was elected to replace him. What does this tell us about elections?

The Supreme Court ruled five to four that the First Amendment permits corporations to spend money on political campaigns, but not on individual candidates. We all respect the First Amendment. We say we believe in free speech. Does this decision support that belief?

Freedom of the individual and a belief in the self correcting ability of a free market not impeded by regulation as the foundation of a just society -- against a counter view that it is the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens from dangerous financial practices, and to provide employment programs in times of recession -- both of these belief systems begin with an idea of a just society. Philosophy prowls the halls of Congress, but we hear of it only in terms of party labels, deeply entrenched loyalties, slogans - in almost anything except civil political discourse and debate. Think of it as a jar once filled with liquid. Most of that liquid has crystallized into a solid, but there is some liquid left which sloshes back and forth now to the right, now to the left, and back again. These are the independent voters and they end up having a disproportionate power to determine the outcome of elections. But these voters are not the problem, they are part of the solution - they are free to choose in contrast with those -- Republicans or Democrats -- who are more committed to party victory than the long term needs of their constituents, and for whom political debate is secondary to party victory.

In so many ways this represents the triumph of Frank Luntz, the Republican pollster and strategist who, along with Karl Rove, engineered Republican successes during the Bush years. Luntz, as you may recall, ignored all debate over issues and stressed knee-jerk responses to words like freedom, socialism, government interference, right to choose (ones doctor, not a woman's right to choose), and a host of other terms. Campaigns were then built around the repetition, in any available media, of these button pushing methods. They lost out to an even stronger appeal to frustration with government, executive transparency, a need for change, and the end of a unpopular war. But in the first year of the Obama administration hot button issues such as frustration with government and abstract terms such as socialism, have begun to appear useful again. They came up with the tea party metaphor, (meaning fighters for freedom against a repressive government). It doesn't matter that the original target was George III and the New England Tea Company. In our knee-jerk media-world, it has become possible to use this against a centrist Democrat. That this defies logic is irrelevant, it produces instant opposition to what is now seen as a political enemy.

It simply doesn't matter that a whole spectrum of political beliefs attached their hopes to the election of Barak Obama. It doesn't seem to matter that he inherited an encyclopedia of problems: a collapsing economy; two wars; a near absent regulatory system for everything from carbon emissions to financial regulations; and on and on. It doesn't seem to matter that the multiple agendas within the coalition that brought him to office, has produced the complaint that President Obama is not moving quickly or energetically enough on MY issue. But to a Frank Luntz it matters, and matters a lot. He has managed to tap in to a vast reservoir of unease, a feeling that things are not right and that change is a necessity. But the locus of that feeling has shifted away from, let's call it the Obama coalition, to, at the opposite extreme, the Tea Party folk. Obviously there are many other factors in what has been described as a post election backlash to the Obama presidency, but the co-option of the cry for change is important in a world where voter opinion is shaped, not by civic discourse, but by, as Benjamin Netanyahu observed, a propaganda machine.

I began by talking about ideas of justice and notions of a good society. I've ended by talking about how justice depends upon what we have been persuaded to believe. And along the way I touched upon Martin Luther King's view that justice exists as a principle independent of circumstance or political persuasion. Hopefully, these are questions which we can talk about.

What about the recent Supreme Court decision? Does a corporation have the same rights as an individual?

With regard to health care. There are those who argue that is the responsibility of the individual. Other say, no - the health of its citizens is a responsibility of the state. What is the proper role of corporations in a health care system.?

These are only a few of the questions we might want to address. I'm sure there are many more, but first things first - who's first?