

Uncommon Sense

Providing Clarity, Promoting Intelligence

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Issue: # 036

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Greetings!

It is said that there are actually Two America's -- those consisting of the red states (code language for conservative values) and the blue states (liberal or leftist values).

I always find it fascinating how Conservatives are seen by Leftists, and vice-versa. Dennis Prager, a Conservative, has often described it this way: "Conservatives think Liberals are wrong; Liberals think Conservatives are evil."

In this issue of *Uncommon Sense*, I am doing something that may surprise some of you. I am including a guest column by a liberal. Nicholas Kristof, who writes for the *New York Times*, reports on a study that analyzes how conservatives and liberals see each other, and how their ideology affects multiple dimensions of their respective lives -- including the kinds of dogs they tend to buy as pets. I republish it here.

As we get closer to Election Day, (November 6th) all of us will have to decide what kind of America we want to have, both for ourselves and for future generations.

OK, let's get started.

Warm regards,

Ara Norwood



The Dangers of Complacency

One of the major reasons that many of us do not enjoy sustained success is due to a tendency towards complacency. This is something that none of us is wholly immune to; it is a siren call that tempts all of us.

The sources of complacency are legion. Consider if any of these ring true for you:



- You have a string of successes in a short span of time and become deluded by your own good fortune, presuming -- usually erroneously -- that your past run of success will automatically continue for the foreseeable future without any effort on your part.
- You imagine that you have paid your dues, fought and won many of life's battles, and now it's your time to coast, take it easy, and live off the laurels of the past.
- You hit a barrier, a brick wall of sorts, and believe very strongly that the wall is impenetrable. You assume you simply cannot progress beyond that point. You become accustomed to the status quo.
- You lose that special spark to be an achiever. You feel bland, tired, worn out, and buffeted by the complexities of life, leaving you in a mental state of merely trying to survive, rather than striving to create.

Whatever the source, complacency relegates individuals (and teams) to a life of mediocrity. But there is a way out.

Try this: the next time you set a list of tasks to accomplish for your workday, write down the tasks as you normally would, then review the task list and ask yourself these questions:

Can I reword these tasks to be more precise, more defined, and more concrete? Can I move them from vague aspirations to clearly definable achievements that demonstrate true accomplishment rather than mere activity?

Revamp your list with the above guidelines in mind.

Then review it again. This time, ask yourself the following:

If this list represented, to use an Olympics metaphor, a Silver Medal performance, what would I have to tweak to make it more in line with a Gold Medal performance? How can I make this task list more robust and more lofty?

Finally, maintain perspective and humility. I remember I once got into a squabble with a fellow who's been a kind of mentor to me over the years. He took exception to my use of the term *bi-monthly*, claiming I misused the term as, in his mind, its meaning was strictly limited to "every other month" when I was using it in the sense of "twice a month." This rather learned gentleman chastised me strongly, pointing out confidently that his copy of the Oxford English Dictionary allows for no such meaning as "twice a month".

Being a curious sort, I went to the library and looked up the word in the OED and discovered that the word can be defined either way. My mentor, erudite though he was, was simply incorrect. As I pointed this out to him as diplomatically as I could, his only response was something to the effect that I had way too much time on my hands (which was probably a valid point.) But it would have been both foolish and fatal for me to now believe that I tower over this giant of a man -- a fellow who had lived a life completely void of complacency, having published more books than I have essays, and having accomplished very notable work in a wide variety of fields. Smugness is the twin sister of complacency and must be avoided as one would the plague.

Guest Editorial: Politics, Odors and Soap by Nicholas D. Kristof

Conservatives may not like liberals, but they seem to understand them. In contrast, many liberals find conservative voters not just wrong but also bewildering.

One academic study asked 2,000 Americans to fill out questionnaires about moral questions. In some cases, they were asked to fill them out as they thought a "typical liberal" or a "typical conservative" would respond.

Moderates and conservatives were adept at guessing how liberals would answer questions. Liberals, especially those who described themselves as "very liberal," were least able to put themselves in the minds of their adversaries and guess how conservatives would answer.

Now a fascinating [new book](#) comes along that, to a liberal like myself, helps demystify the right - and illuminates the kind of messaging that might connect with voters of all stripes. "The Righteous Mind," by Jonathan Haidt, a University of Virginia psychology professor, argues that, for liberals, morality is largely a matter of three values: caring for the weak, fairness and liberty. Conservatives share those concerns (although they think of fairness and liberty differently) and add three others: loyalty, respect for authority and sanctity.



Those latter values bind groups together with a shared respect for symbols and institutions such as the flag or the military. They are a reminder that human moral judgments are often about far more than just helping others. Some of Haidt's most interesting material is his examination of taboos.

His team asked research subjects pesky questions. What would they think of a brother and sister who experimented with incest, while using birth control? Or of a family that, after their pet dog was run over, ate it for dinner?

Most respondents were appalled but often had trouble articulating why; we find these examples instinctively disturbing even if no one is harmed. (One lesson of the book: If you see Haidt approaching with a clipboard, run!) Of course, political debates aren't built on the consumption of roadkill. But they do often revolve around this broader moral code. This year's Republican primaries have been a kaleidoscope of loyalty, authority and sanctity issues - such as whether church-affiliated institutions can refuse to cover birth control in health insurance policies - and that's perhaps why people like me have found the primaries so crazy.

Another way of putting it is this: Americans speak about values in six languages, from care to sanctity. Conservatives speak all six, but liberals are fluent in only three. And some (me included) mostly use just one, care for victims.

"Moral psychology can help to explain why the Democratic

Party has had so much difficulty connecting with voters," writes Haidt, a former liberal who says he became a centrist while writing the book.

In recent years, there has been growing research into the roots of political ideologies, and they seem to go deep. Adults who consider themselves liberals were said decades earlier by their nursery-school teachers to be curious, verbal novelty seekers but not very neat or obedient. Some research suggests that conservatives are particularly attuned to threats, with a greater startle reflex when they hear loud noises. Conservatives also secrete more skin moisture when they see disgusting images, such as a person eating worms. Liberals feel disgust, too, but a bit less.

Anything that prods us to think of disgust or cleanliness also seems to have at least a temporary effect on our politics. It pushes our sanctity buttons and makes us more conservative.

A University of Toronto study found that if people were asked to wash their hands with soap and water before filling out a questionnaire, they become more moralistic about issues like drug use and pornography. Researchers found that interviewees on Stanford's campus offered harsher, more moralistic views after "fart spray" had been released in the area.

At Cornell University, students answered questions in more conservative ways when they were simply near a hand sanitizer station.

Our ideologies shape much more than our politics. We even seek pets who reflect our moral outlook. Researchers at YourMorals.org found that liberals prefer dogs who are gentle but not subservient, while conservatives seek dogs who are loyal and obedient.

In short, moral and political judgments are complex and contradictory, shaped by a panoply of values, personalities - maybe even smells.

Little of this is a conscious or intellectual process. Indeed, Haidt cites research that a higher I.Q. doesn't lead people to think through their moral positions in a more balanced, open way (although they are more eloquent in defending those positions).

There's even extensive research finding that professors of moral philosophy are no more moral than other scholars.

And do you know what kind of books are disproportionately stolen from libraries?

Books on ethics.

Correction

In issue #30, I made a rather serious misstatement.

In that issue, I defined *e pluribus unum* as meaning "From the one, many."

This was due to a careless mental gaffe, for the term (which I knew quite well) means precisely the opposite: "From the many, one."

I noticed this mistake a few days after I sent out Issue #30, but when MB's keen eye called the error to my attention just this week, I felt a public correction was in order.

From Ara's Journal

Sometimes I notice that certain people go through life being someone else's doormat. They are verbally abused, treated badly, and generally buffeted by the abrasiveness of bully's. They are victims.



Other times I notice people who get punched (metaphorically) and they make it a point to punch back. These individuals are not victims; they are prone to defend themselves, quick to hold their own. They are assertive.

Still other times I come across that rare individual who does not return force when force is used on them. (I'm not talking about physical force.) This third type of person might be on the receiving end of someone else's snide remarks, but are neither victimized by it, nor do they feel any need for retaliation. Such persons are . . . remarkable.

Those who know me know that there are certain

circumstances in which I find it almost impossible to resist the urge to cross swords with an adversary, or even a colleague or friend when there is some good-natured banter going on. Sometimes the issue might involve some news from the world of professional sports, other times it might involve some social issue, or something political in nature, or even the defense of my religious convictions from bigots.

But just as often, I am averse to engaging with persons who are prone to argue, debate, or wrangle just for the sake of doing so. I find such persons unseemly.

Conversely, I aspire to emulate the fine examples of men and women who are in no way intimidated by the loud voices of disdain coming from others, and who also have no need to argue, defend, or debate. These fine examples allow others to express themselves as they (the others) deem necessary. They don't feel a need to defend themselves and often give nothing more than a dignified silence as their only retort.

This is an example that seems to be a valid and valued alternative to the noisy, strident voices of contention and discord that prefer squabbling to understanding and controversy to enlightenment.

The World of Words

Building Your Power of Expression

Feckless, adj.

Pronunciation: 'fekləs

Meaning: This rich word has quite a bit of reach, and is a suitable term for describing anything or anyone that is unthinking, irresponsible, indifferent, incompetent, or ineffective.

Usage:

- *His performance was marred by feckless attempts to repair the damage.*
- *It is a shame you chose to lead with her feckless statement.*



- *I am opposed to the feckless exploitation of the world's natural resources.*

Subscribers, the Special Report "11 Ways to Beat the Odds" is now complete and has been sent out. If you have not received it, please communicate that to me via email (ara@aranorwood.com).

For more information on my work, follow me on Twitter ("Ara Norwood"), or on Facebook (keyword "Leadership Development Systems") or via my website: www.aranorwood.com

Sincerely,

Ara Norwood
Leadership Development Systems