

POINTS TO PONDER

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The United Way launched a fund raising campaign to collect a million dollars to build a shelter for the homeless in Cleveland. It solicited multi-thousand dollar donations from several Cleveland Corporations. From individuals, it solicited donations of 10, 25, 50 or 100 dollars. My friend Eric had just sold his small business for a nice profit and so he donated \$10,000. The United Way director was impressed with so large a sum from an individual donor, and he wrote Eric a note thanking him for this "selfless generosity". That evening, my wife and I were shopping at the mall and we met Eric's wife, also our friend, who told us that for some time she had needed \$9500 to replace the floor of the kitchen at their house, and she lamented the fact that her husband had just given away 10,000 much needed dollars, leaving the kitchen in its decrepit state. She called her husband a "wasteful fool".

The gulf between the two adjectives used to describe my friend i.e. selfless and wasteful is so wide that it gave me pause, to hear them both used, with understandable justification in each case, to characterize the same act. Adjectives are said to modify or describe a person, a noun or an action; but as this example demonstrates, adjectives often tell us more about the describer than they tell us about the one or the thing being described. Eric's \$10,000 donation is a fact, in our minds as well as in the minds of the wife and the United Way director. But each of the two adjectives gives us additional information about the mind of an additional person.

The point I submit to you to ponder is: BEWARE OF ADJECTIVES, for they require a lot of scrutiny, without which they can easily be more misleading than modifying, as grammar classifies them.

Furthermore, an individual's same characteristic or quality can get different descriptions in different situations. An example is someone's tendency to express one's disagreement frankly and without hesitation. When an African woman refuses to comply with a white man's order to avoid using a bathroom that is for whites only, and she politely expresses her disagreement with him, her act is deemed assertive. An employee's polite disagreement with the boss may be described as obstructionist and indicative of the employee's disinterest in remaining employed. And when an Iraqi citizen politely expressed disagreement with Saddam Hussain, the act was always suicidal.

The next point to ponder, goes back to the United Way Director's use of the word "selfless" to describe Eric. Selfless, as defined in the Webster Dictionary means "having little or

no concern for oneself especially in matters of money, fame, position, etc.” The second definition for selfless is “unselfish”.

Was Eric unselfish when making his donation? Did he have “little or no concern for himself”? I have known him for a long time and I know he is of normal mental health and is normally concerned for himself. **Would Eric have made the voluntary donation if he did not consider the act good?** Is it **unselfish, or selfish** for one to do what one believes is good? We acknowledge the fact, that sane persons generally do what they consider beneficial, in one sense or another, and avoid doing what’s regarded harmful. If we agree that most people usually do what they deem good for them, then we need to highlight the additional notion that selfishness is doing what is good for the doer **AND ALSO** is harmful to others; while goodness or virtue or any synonym thereof, is when the action of one person parallels or promotes the good of others, and the more such others, the better. And finally I want to submit that selflessness is nonexistent or rarely exists.

What Eric did was what he deemed good, and therefore it was a selfish act; just as it is selfish of each of us to brush our teeth, take our medicines, drive under the speed limit and tell the truth. We are ALL selfish, because we like ourselves. Those of us who don’t like themselves are clinically depressed, and some of them kill themselves.

My third point to ponder, starts from, and then moves beyond selfishness which I claim is often not bad. Our awareness that there is strength in numbers, and our constant quest for our own good, lead us to ally ourselves with those whom we **perceive** are similar to ourselves in some way, and oppose those we **perceive** are different from us in that same way. A person seems similar to, or different from ourselves, depending on a **POLARIZATION POINT**. Polarization around family linkage gives Tribalism, around some political inclination gets Partisanship; country allegiance produces Patriotism and fealty to subdivisions of a country begets Provincialism. And most commonly it seems, we have polarization around a religion or sect of a religion, hence Secularism. Even the fans of a sport team strongly rally together, and are against fans of an opposing team.

I will use the term Tribalism to refer to all such types of “isms”. I also stress the second important feature of Tribalism, which is: While we maintain a bond with similar individuals..... toward those we deem different we direct opposition, ridicule, animosity or anything else that arises from the less admirable side of our nature.

Of especial note is that when the polarization point is a religion or a sect of a religion, we get the most durable form of tribalism. Whereas selfishness is often not bad, **tribalism..... almost always is**. One can argue that Tribalism is good when a war, for example, unites all the differing factions of a country that is engaged in war. But this so called benefit is far out-

weighed by the horrible harm of war. History shows that most if not all wars are instigated by tribalism; whether polarized around blood-ties, country or religion. Even sport is a reason to become tribal and fight. During the 1960's, El Salvador, the smallest country of Central America invaded part of its larger neighbor Honduras because of a dispute over a soccer game. During the 1980's, British soccer fans attending their teams' competitions in Europe, caused riots in which many were killed, and more were injured. After that, British fans were banned from soccer matches held in the main Continent. Even in our own advanced country a yarmulke-wearing friend of mine, told me that his own father remembers reading signs in New York restaurants that said "Dogs & Jews not allowed" which reminded me of the equally infamous "Dogs and Negroes not allowed". In this club a gentleman informed me that as recently as the 1960's, Cleveland law firms did not desire to employ Catholic lawyers even if they were white.

A prominent aspect of tribalism is that its avowed adherents identify with it simply because it was handed down to them from their parents or their community, without the disciple having given the matter any thought whatsoever. Take the current controversy between the Shi'aa and the Sunna among the world's 1.5 billion muslims, of whom 20% belong to the first group and 80% are Sunni. Unlimited strife and unmentionable horrors were and still are inflicted by one group onto the other. If one asked any member of either group about the main difference between the two groups, one would, in the overwhelming majority of cases, get an answer about a historical situation that is totally mis-reported. So neither side correctly knows the cause of the schism. A tiny slice of muslims may mention some quasi theological differences, which are- in reality- mere trifles or window dressings. That is due to the fact that more than 99% of muslims in either camp are ignorant of the theological differences, because knowledge of those requires dedicated study. And yet, we have been witnessing a three year sectarian conflict in Syria, a conflict in which every atrocity has been committed. My interest in Shakespeare led me to try to learn all I could about the facts of life in England during the sixteenth century. I learned that the major, if not only cause of animosity and suffering was whether you converted to Anglicanism or remained Catholic after Henry VIII seceded from the Roman Catholic Church and appointed himself head of the Anglican Church he created so he can annul his own marriage despite Rome's opposition.

Tribalism that is polarized around religion is notoriously destructive because its proponents are so self-assured. They deem themselves empowered, to do mischief and mayhem; empowered by a higher power, even though the very existence of that power is firmly believed only by those who call themselves "TRUE BELIEVERS".

Psychology teaches that a delusion is firm conviction without connection to reality; and the divorce from reality is the essence of insanity.

The next point deals with the buttons that exist in each of us. When a person's button for goodness is pushed, good deeds or words come out of the person. Conversely, evil results when one's button for evil is pressed. Respond to someone with a stern countenance and harsh tone of voice, and you will be assured of obstinacy or frank animosity in return. Use a smooth, smiling approach and you are likely to be rewarded with willingness to understand, if not unrestrained cooperation. Push the button of praising someone and you will always get a smile and friendliness, even if insincerely tempered by self effacement. Walk into a British lift, and bestow on its occupant your polite silence and it will be paid back to you with interest; that is lack of even eye contact. Venture into a Cleveland elevator and announce to the strangers in it, your praise of the Indians' current winning streak (if such eventuality exists) and that will earn you smiling looks and a second to your motion.

We all seem to possess the same set of these buttons, though with slightly differing thresholds for activating each button in each person. And at different occasions we use different nouns or adjectives for each of these buttons and/or the results they generate, though all such words aggregate under one of two umbrellas.

A prominent feature of Tribalism is the observation that of all the items that serve as polarization foci for Tribalism, religion is clearly the most powerful polarizing force. That may be due to the fact that religion has a celestial aspect whereas everything else is of worldly nature. Or it could be that people-even those not religious- resort to religion especially in crucial moments when they are most desperate; or in times of most significance such as a birth, a death, a wedding or the introduction of their teenager to the society of adults.

What is this powerful force? What is religion? My attempt to answer this question led me to try to learn as much as I could about each of the three monotheistic religions, using for each one, sources from the proponents of that same discipline. And so, I learned that each of these religions has a set of guidelines for human thought, human emotion and human behavior; the three forming the triangle that is the human psyche, according to our classic scientific teaching. I also noticed that the guidelines are essentially similar in all three religions. They all recognize our goodness buttons and our buttons for evil; and each tries to promote and encourage the former buttons while also suppressing or discouraging the latter ones. Clearly the logical result of this undertaking is a better life for the individual and the community. The proponents of religion highlight this fact, and say that religion is therefore the source of human morality; a fact that is not easy to disprove. Religion's other benefit to humanity is the introduction of the concept of order in the universe, an order administered by an entity that is super human, super powerful and super benevolent. Though improvable, this concept has for so long been so comforting to so many, in the most unknowable and hence most disturbing aspects of their existence such as their origin and their ultimate destiny. However it is also this

very concept that is used to justify all the wickedness that religion is blamed for: the abuse, discrimination, persecution, banishment, torture and murder of non-conformists. And this reality is decried by the opponents of religion, even though it results not from religion but from human tribalism that employs religion as a Polarizing point. Still note that while religion forcefully condemns the human shortcomings of theft, untruth and murder plus other ills, it does not apply equal effort to condemn Tribalism, maybe because the teachers and leaders of religion owe their status to the fact that it is partly maintained by religious tribalism. If people were less tribal for religion, there would be less need for religious leaders.

Please ponder this point: It is possible to view religion with a factual eye that is free from both the adoration of its proponents and the humiliation from its opponents. It is possible to be grateful for the contribution of religion to our morality and also be aware of our immorality. That is to say that our Tribalism has turned the purpose of religion on its head, so that it is used to push our buttons for evil instead of our buttons for goodness. Also, the beneficial role of religion has been replaced by the duo of Science and the Law. The law regulates our life as optimally as possible, prohibits and punishes the bad behavior that we are prone to, is constantly debated and monitored, and can be modified as needed. Religion is immune to all that. And science has better explained the disturbingly unknown aspects of our universe while clearly admitting its shortcoming where it does fall short. Religion on the other hand gives us explanations designed for people of the past and sternly admonishes us when we point at the shortcomings of its explanation.

Our founding fathers have recognized and canonized this, by separating religion from government, a characteristic that is one of the very admirable features that distinguish our country. But this separation has lately been suffering attacks from those who, because of religion, feel they have a superhuman mandate to circumvent or curtail it, and have been making so much effort to move us closer to the theocracy that rules such places as Iran. What other than religion impels us toward the un-American and unchristian attitude of opposing a benevolent practice such as gay marriage? Why else would one of the States of our great Union legislate maltreatment of those whose sexual preference differs from ours, and furthermore leave the enforcement of that law to unmonitored individuals instead of members of law enforcement who are monitored?

After my many questions, I now move to *your* questions, suggestions and objections.