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Conservative and Liberal Storylines

Early this morning ten years ago I got a phone call from my brother in New Hampshire: "This is Charlie. Do you have your TV on?"

"I don't watch TV during the day," I said, "particularly before I wake up."

Charlie is immune to the Kraft sardonic humor. "You gotta turn it on," he said. "Someone flew a plane into the World Trade Center. Roger is inside."

Roger is our little brother. That morning his construction crew was renovating an office on the 34th floor of Tower 1. At 8:48 he heard a deep, dull thud and the building moved about two feet. A small explosion in the central corridor was followed by the sound of tinkling glass everywhere. Outside a blizzard of broken glass, pieces of steel and office papers swirled in the air. "Those SOBs did it again," someone shouted. Everyone headed for the exits.

Everyone, that is, except Roger and another guy. They searched the floor to see make sure no one was injured and left behind. By the time they started down, the stairs were packed. People moved urgently but calmly. Every so often someone called out, "Injury!" and everybody squeezed to the right to let a wounded person hurry past. Many had flash burns – skin draped unnaturally.

By the time they reached the 20th floor, the air was acrid. Firemen were heading up, each with 60 pounds of air tanks, axes, hoses and other equipment.

By the time they reached the lower floors, a river of water poured down the stairs. "Cracked sprinklers," Roger said.

The bottom floor was a jumble of debris in an inch of water. When the plane hit, the elevator cables snapped. The elevators dropped, hitting the bottom with such force that they exploded, scattering glass walls and buckling two-inch marble floors like paper.

A police officer calmly encouraged everyone to keep moving. "Stay under the overhangs," he said, "There's a lot of falling debris."

Roger saw a few more of his construction crew. They walked north together. Cell phones didn't work. Most landlines were dead. Finally Eddie reached his wife. She took the home phone numbers of the other guys to call their families.

When they were fifteen blocks north, a billow of smoke flowed up from the south. "They bombed the Stock Exchange," someone said. In reality, the tower they'd been in was disintegrating.

Late that afternoon, Charlie relayed word that Roger was okay. Late that night Roger made his way to his home in eastern Pennsylvania.

Aftermath

In the next few days, the world came together more than I'd ever experienced. From all over the country people rushed to help as selflessly as if their own families were in the towers. From all over the world, people expressed horror and sympathy. A few celebrated that attacks. But more than any time I could remember the world united with us. Audacious master criminals had attacked us. The world was ready to organize a massive

police action to find the thugs. It was ready to support our healing.

But the Bush administration a different vision. They envisioned the world as inherently dangerous. These were an outbreak of malevolent forces. We were at war with evil. We were on our own. The only way to combat evil was to be strong and tough and apply all the force we had.

President Bush presented this frightening scenario so effectively that he convinced congress and most Americans that Saddam Hussein, a secular nationalist, was personally connected with the Islamic fundamentalist jihadist. Our intelligence community doubted this. United Nations inspector Hans Blix asserted that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction. But Bush used fear and images of mushroom clouds to say we must go to war against what he called "the threat gathering against us."

War is not civil. War is the failure of civility because it legalizes mass murder. It is a measure of last resort. Thus the majority of the civilized world was horrified when the United States launched a preemptive war on Iraq without authorization of the United Nations.

We won the war. Seven weeks later, on May 1, 2003, we had destroyed their army, blown up their infrastructure and toppled their government. George Bush stood on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* under the banner "Mission Accomplished" and correctly declared victory.

From that moment forward, we were no longer at war. We were an occupying army. Political opponents rally behind a leader in time of war. But nobody likes occupation. Wars can be won. Occupations are rarely won. So Bush declared both victory and that we were at war: we weren't occupiers but engaged in a nebulous global war on terror.

In the ten years since the fall of the World Trade Center Towers, the so-called "War on Terror" has killed or wounded many thousands of people, reduced our status in the world, burnt through three trillion dollars, contributed to economic breakdown and more.

Many disagree with this storyline as I've presented it. And that is fine. Actual events are more numerous and nuanced than this brief telling. They can fit different interpretations.

Storylines

The plane crashes of September 11, 2001 were a dramatic set of events that drew us together. The stories we tell about those events interpret their meaning and tell us what we should do about them.

Events are like territory. Stories are like maps. There is one world, one set of events, one territory. And there are many different maps giving that territory different meanings and guiding us to different actions.

This morning I want to suggest that the maps are more important than the territory in shaping our future. This is a major lesson of September 2001. Storylines tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies. What actually happened that day is less important than the stories we tell ourselves about what happened.

To illustrate, consider a simpler set of real events. At the beginning of his book, *Cracking the Code: How to Win Hearts, Change Minds, and Restore America's Original Vision*, Thom Hartmann describes walking onto the deck of his boathouse one morning. A wild goose stood on the deck. It bobbed its head, flapped its wings and ran toward him hissing and nipping. Thom thought the goose was psycho. He called it "Goosalini."

Thom got a broom. Every time he went out, he used the broom to fight off the goose and reclaim his deck.

Several days later, Thom told his neighbor about Goosalini. His neighbor lived on a boathouse right next to Thom's. The neighbor said a goose was on his deck as well. Only this one was a female sitting on a nest of eggs.

Suddenly, Thom's storyline changed. The bird was not Goosalini. It was Proud Papa protecting his children.

Thom put the broom away. Rather than fight the goose, he looked for ways to live with it until its family was strong enough to move on.

Notice there was one set of events: a goose telling Thom to stay away. And there were two different stories: Goosalini and Proud Papa. Both were coherent and reasonable explanations of the known facts. But they suggested very different courses of action: fight Goosalini versus support Proud Papa.

The stories are not the events. The maps are not the territory. But the stories tell us what to do more than the events.

Chain of Being

When we hold a coherent story dear to our hearts, it is difficult to see it dispassionately. In our politically polarized world of strongly held opinions, it's difficult to see them objectively.

To get some perspective let's step back from the events of recent years and go back 450 years to the origins of the conservative and liberal storylines.

Prior to the 17th century, there was one major story in the West that explained human nature, religion and world order. It was called "The Great Chain of Being." It said power and wisdom flow down from God to the church and from the church to kings, aristocrats, craftsmen,

peasants and serfs. For an aristocrat to seek advice from a peasant on any important matter was unthinkable. Aristocrats are closer to God and wisdom. It would be weird for him to consult someone on a lower rung of the Chain of Being.

Hobbes

This storyline began to come apart in the 17th century. It was a time of upheaval and revolution. One of the seminal thinkers was an English political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. In 1651 he published *Leviathan*, in which he declared the divine right of kings was dead. Radically, he brushed aside the Great Chain of Being and radically declared all men are created equal.

Since all were equal, they all had equal rights to own property, equal rights to be represented in government and rights to do what they wanted provided laws did not explicitly forbid it.

In the years to come, these principles would become the foundation of both conservative and liberal storylines. But he made one assertion that would become central to the conservative storyline and that liberals would not accept.

Hobbes believed all men were created equal *because* they were equally dangerous. He thought human nature was essentially selfish and evil. Left to our own devices, we'd fight each other constantly.

Hobbes wrote that without the iron fist of the church or king to constrain our self-centered corruption, "*there is no place for industry ... no culture ... no navigation ... no commodious building ... no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death.*" And in his most quoted line he said, "*And the life of man [will be] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.*"

Hobbes' pessimistic view of human nature is the origin of the modern conservative storyline. Riane Eisler and others believe in the "dominator culture": evil human nature must be dominated lest it degenerate into chaos. By extension, the government of we the (evil) people must also be constrained because it is made up of flawed humans. Corporations, on the other hand, are governed by the morally neutral "free market." So amoral corporations are superior to immoral government.

Thom Hartman writes:

*The conservatives' core belief is that if our essential (evil) human nature is not restrained by something – God or priests or corporate bosses – harm will come to society. This is why conservative morality is nearly always focused on restraining individual behavior, particularly private behavior (With whom are you having sex and in what positions or ways? What are you smoking, drinking, or snorting? Is there a fetus growing inside of you?). And why they're enthusiastic to "privatize" functions of government, taking the commons out of the hands of We the (evil) People and putting it into the hands of morality-neutral corporations that, in their minds, answer only to a mechanistic and morally neutral "free market."*¹

Locke

Back in the 17th century, a generation after Hobbes published *Leviathan*, John Locke (who, incidentally, was a Unitarian) published *Two Treatises of Government* in 1689. Locke refuted Hobbes. Locke said that natural law is real and doesn't require war. The role of government should be to know natural laws and reflect them in manmade laws.

¹ Thom Hartmann. *Cracking the Code: How to Win Hearts, Change Minds, and Restore America's Original Vision* (pp. 20-21). Kindle Edition.

Locke said we have a right to "life, liberty and estate (or property)." But animals don't hoard vast resources. So natural laws forbade the accumulation of too much wealth. It was up to government to determine what the limits of accumulations might be.

Jefferson

The Founding Fathers of our country were liberal children of the Western enlightenment. Thomas Jefferson (another Unitarian) took Locke's "life, liberty and estate" one step further when he wrote in the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The substitution of "happiness" for "estate" was intentional. The Founding Fathers believed in the essential goodness of human nature. Happiness is our "original state." So natural law and reasonable manmade laws support life, liberty and happiness.

Thom Hartmann sums up the fundamental difference to this day between conservatives and liberals:

... conservatives think amoral institutions like corporations, or moral institutions like churches, are morally superior to immoral/evil humans, and so constraints on governments run by immoral/evil human voters should come from religion and the power of the supposedly amoral marketplace.

Liberals, on the other hand, believe that amoral institutions like corporations and corruptible institutions like churches are inferior to moral/good humans, and so want constraints on government to come from the voters/citizens themselves, anchored in the

core concepts of human rights and human needs.²

Classical conservatives see the only role of government to be restraining people and will happily fund armies, police, prisons and surveillance. They chaff against everything else from schools to social security to environmental protection.

Classical liberals see the role of government of we the (good) people as supporting us in realizing our potential, enriching the community and caring for each other in times of misfortune, just as Jesus and other prophets taught.

The Founding Fathers (who were classical liberals) enshrined these ideals in the Preamble to the Constitution. They articulated six roles of government, only one of which was to “provide for the common defense.” The other five were about helping us enrich society and realize our good potential:

We the People of the United States, in Order to (1) form a more perfect Union, (2) establish Justice, (3) insure domestic Tranquility, (4) provide for the common defense, (5) promote the general Welfare, and (6) secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America. [numbering added]

Caveats

Having distinguished between conservative and liberal storylines let me add two caveats:

One: Conservatives and liberals are looking for the same things. All of us want happy families, good education, opportunities for our children, freedom to speak our minds, safe communities,

good healthcare, a pleasant environment and so forth. We just disagree on the best way to get there.

Two: It’s a mistake to assume that someone’s feelings on a particular issue defines them as liberal or conservative. Specific issues are complex. People can approach them from different perspectives. There are proud conservatives actively concerned about global warming. There are conscientious liberals who oppose abortion.

The difference between conservatives and liberals is the storyline behind the issues: how they see human nature (bad or good) and the role of government in response to human nature (restraining people or supporting people).

Right?

Which storyline is correct?

It’s interesting to note that Thomas Hobbes and John Locke lived in very different times.

Hobbes grew up amidst great poverty and upheaval. England was a third rate power eclipsed by the Dutch and the Spanish. London was filled with poor and desperate people. He assumed that poverty and crime were the norm – he saw them all around.

Locke grew up a generation later. England was a rising mercantile power. London had a growing middle class. The Enlightenment was taking hold. Poverty and crime were down. Arts and charity were up. He assumed these were a reflection of our core nature.

I suspect they were both right. Hobbes described tendencies of desperate people. Locke described tendencies of safe and secure people. When we are stressed, our lower reptile brain goes into fight or flight mode. When we feel safe and secure, these lower centers relax and we

² Thom Hartmann. *Cracking the Code: How to Win Hearts, Change Minds, and Restore America’s Original Vision* (p. 23). Kindle Edition.

operate from higher centers that control compassion, empathy and cooperation.

For seven thousand years there was not one recorded incident of a suicide bomber killing random people in Iraq. After foreign occupation and months of shortages of water, food, electricity and safety, suicide bombings were commonplace. Desperate people do desperate things.

Today

I am a religiously progressive minister serving a liberal religious movement. Our core principles speak of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the interdependent web and ways we can support and encourage one another.

I believe the liberal storyline that our core nature is good. And I think there is some truth to the conservative storyline in that human nature is flawed. We are all capable of messing up. Particularly when are frightened or scared we can do frightening or scary things.

So I think it is in our selfish best interest to help one another feel safe and secure – to help uplift us to a higher standard of living and manifest our higher capacities.

Together we can pool our resources and build roads and bridges, schools and hospitals, support arts and parks and enrich our common wealth – the things that we enjoy together. Gandhi said that the measure of civilization is not the Gross National Product but how we treat the poor and disempowered. Together we can care for the sick, injured, aged, lonely and confused.

And since we humans aren't perfect, together we can defend one another from

illegal criminals. We can also regulate and constrain legal criminals who try to subvert the economic system for their private benefit and deplete our natural resources for private profit. And we the people, through the agency of our elected government can do this better than corporations that by their very charters, are narcissistic – beholden to their corporate welfare not the public welfare.

And I believe our Founding Fathers got the ratio right: about one sixth of our resources to protect ourselves from scary or crazy people and five-sixths for domestic tranquility, general welfare and supporting the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity – our children.

Mission and Values

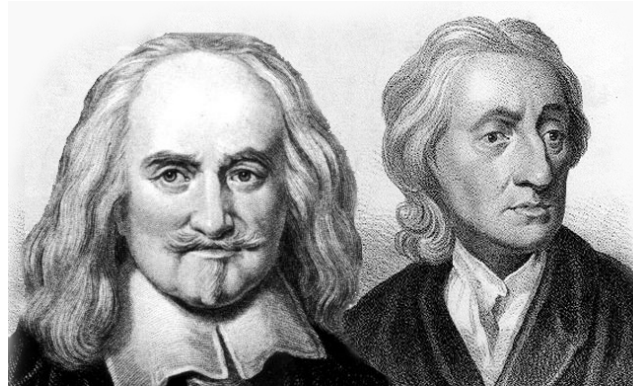
Unitarian Universalism has always been a faith willing to engage the messiness of the real world. Our focus is not a narrow partisan agenda. It is a broad vision based on deep religious principles. It is a world view and storyline embodied succinctly in our mission and values statements.

On this eleventh day of September, let's remind ourselves again of our vision, our storyline and our hopefully self-fulfilling prophecy. Will you join me in our mission and values?

*We come together to deepen our lives
and be a force for healing in the world.*

*We value the goodness in everyone,
the openness and curiosity
that illuminate that goodness
and the love and courage that sustain us.*

May it be so.



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