

Downside UP

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Longing for a Just and Compassionate World

As the 2008 elections loom in front of me, I long for a different sense of our collective self, a different sense of society, and a different sense of who we are as Americans. Call it nostalgia. Call it unrealistic. I would call it love, justice, compassion, concern for the whole as much as – or more than -- the self.

Fortunately, there is a basis for my hopes as well as my longing. Think about these:

Costco's Got It Right

I love Costco. We don't live near or shop at one more than once or twice a year but my wife and I pay our annual dues to buy at Costco because they have a justified reputation for caring about their workers. They pay them decent wages and benefits. No 29-hour weeks for most workers when 30-hours is the minimum for health care benefits. Costco and other (if too few) employers don't assume that workers are just out for themselves, require coercion to keep them in line, and won't respond to personal caring and consultation as well as money.

In the United States, workers are insistently regarded by management as the enemy to be managed and fought, even when the evidence overwhelmingly belies that point of view. *Business Week* continually glorifies "take-charge," aggressive, and decisive CEO's with their astronomical "compensation packages" even when these CEO's, after sometimes succeeding for a while, continually dump messes on their successors. The fact is that companies like Costco are more efficient by every measure, starting with a 93% employee retention rate (in retail 50% is considered great) that obviates the need for constant employee retraining. (Been to Sam's Club lately? Remember Home Depot after they put in a military CEO, cut employees to part-time, and were clobbered by Lowe's.)

Justice and Compassion

Call me a bleeding heart. I don't care. We have become a society in which people who dare advocate for the poor, the weak, and the failed are portrayed as soft. The rhetoric has become an instrument of right-wing political dominance, decimated government services, and the greedy corporate rich. On the political right and in top business circles, it is routine to assert that "income is a measure of your worth to society." The hard-driving CEO/lawyer/real estate tycoon/investment fund manager is rich because he works harder and better. By comparison, everyone else is rabbit droppings.

Give me a break. It is especially absurd in our country because it, more than any other industrialized country, begrudges a huge percentage of our children even the bare bones of equal health care, schools, housing, food, and adult nurture.

Justice and compassion do not have to be about guilt – although that seems appropriate in a lot of cases. They are good for their own sake in all times and all places. We should do far better no matter what the cost.

Standing Up for My Country

I might have said “Standing Up for America,” but as a Latin Americanist – and an American – I see the common use of “America” (the entire Western hemisphere) for “The United States” (the real name of our country) as one more of so many ways we arrogantly appropriate superiority to ourselves. (The whole world does accept the word “American” – no choice.) But this is part of my point: I am proud of my country but not for the number of other countries it has invaded or bullied to pursue its own or its corporations’ self-interest -- the military definition which passes for patriotism today.

How about this: the next time someone questions your patriotism or love of country because of disagreement with current domestic or foreign policy, tell them how proud you are of your country. You are, for example, proud of those people from the turn of the 20th century to the 1960’s, who worked hard, and sometimes died, to create a more just and compassionate society. Here’s a mostly outsider, non-politician list of heroes for you: Mary Lease, Jacob Coxey, Jacob Riis, Ida Tarbell, Sara Iredell Fleetwood, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Eugene V. Debs, Robert La Follette, W. E. B. Du Bois, John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, George Perkins Marsh, A. Philip Randolph, Margaret Sanger, John L. Lewis, The Reuther Brothers, Frances Perkins, Eleanor Roosevelt, John Collier, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, Russell Means & Dennis Banks, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Look them up!

The Public Employee

It is fair to accuse a lifetime public university employee of bias in the matter of public employees, but there once was a day when public employees were revered for their relatively un-self-serving devotion to the public interest. I speak not of the privatized and exploited contract worker of today. I mean the relatively underpaid but secure public employee who is willing to work for less in exchange for a high level of job security, good benefits, and the chance to do good for society. Sure, the dull, obstructionist, bureaucrat is a stereotype with a basis in reality. I have known some. But my far more prominent models are not only the librarian and school teacher but creative and innovative people who could have been leaders in any field but chose public service. The Costco worker in a National Park Service uniform.

Their service puts the lie to the “I’m paid a lot because I am worth it to society” baloney. Here is a major excerpt from, of all people, Doug Shulman, George Bush’s appointee as the Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, in an October 6, letter to the editors of *Business Week*:

I take issue with the Welches’ [“hard-driving” ex-CEO of General Electric Jack and his wife Suzie] ... My experience in both the public and private sectors is that people want to be respected, challenged, and given recognition—not just money but public praise, challenging projects, and more authority. They also want peers who don’t pull their weight to be coached or removed.

The rhetoric that the private sector is efficient and dynamic and government is inefficient and stagnant is just that: rhetoric. This year during tax-filing season (when the IRS processed over 145 million returns), we also turned on a dime and sent \$100 billion to more than 100 million hard-working Americans in the form of Economic Stimulus Payments.

While government isn't perfect, it employs many dynamic, motivated people who have decided that money is not the only measure of success.

A Beer with Obama

The vice-presidential candidacy of Sarah Palin has revived the comments which George Bush once generated about a president with whom you could imagine sitting around a table drinking a beer. Sorry, I never could, not because of what he thought, but how he – and Palin – regard people with contrary ideas. I know these people because I went to college with some elite ones and I listen to many of the ordinary ones after tennis. They exude intolerance and narrow-mindedness (“All government is bad.” “Why don’t the Indians quit whining and join the country.”)

On the other hand, if I drank beer (!), I could really imagine myself sitting around a table drinking one with Barack Obama. I would worry out loud about his strong ties to the University of Chicago economics crowd. I would question the value of any direct military intervention designed to change a country’s regime. I would tweak him as to whether his attachment to ethanol has anything to do with being a senator from corn-rich Illinois. I would doubt any health care plan which did not address the for-profit system and multiple payers. If I were really bold, I would challenge him about justice as well as the “right to exist” for Israel. He would parry, disagree, and avoid – since he is a politician and can’t pursue policies at will. He would do it with a laugh and a smile and a clear message that he cared about what you thought whatever he ended up doing.

Some of my readers, tending to the opposite end of the political spectrum from so many on the tennis porch, refuse just as much to give Obama a break, expecting him to pursue goals single-mindedly as if governing was about his way or the highway. Just like the current political regime. I see Obama as having always been thinking about not only running for president but trying to govern as president. The media and the Republicans have pushed him to more specifics. If elected, having been more specific could hurt him the same as it could McCain. But where he has avoided specifics, I think it has not been to be wishy-washy or to flip-flop, but because to govern effectively in a more tolerant and accepting manner, he is going to have to listen and to compromise, even with Democrats.

I love Obama because of the kind of man I think he is. If he wins, I will cut him a lot of slack just for trying to change the tone of American politics and society.

Ronald Woodbury is the writer, publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of *Downside Up*. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous.

Woodbury has B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in history, economics, and international affairs from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called *Downside Up*, in the Lacey, WA, *Leader*. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.

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