

Downside UP

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Lost: Our Generosity of Spirit

Ed and Arlene. They are a composite of real people you and I know in St. Augustine, Florida; Reading, Massachusetts; or Pendleton, Oregon. Ordinarily, they seem very nice people. But on certain subjects, they are all anger. The doctors don't care about making them better. The lawyers are trying to cheat them. Politicians are just crooks.

Even in little-old Pendleton, Arlene is nuts about local public officials whom she sees as overpaid lazy bureaucrats out to keep her from doing whatever she wants to do with her property, in the pockets of local businesses, and only interested in helping rich people. Ed is still convinced that President Obama is a Muslim born in Kenya, Democrats are destroying our freedoms, and Martin Luther King, Jr., is a fraud whose commemoration is nothing but political correctness.

Holly and Dave. Their focus is on the big stuff, national and international. They seem just as mad at Obama and the Democrats as Ed and Arlene are, just from the opposite political direction. Obama is a wimp, has betrayed his most loyal supporters, is a lap dog of the rich and powerful. I have the emails.

For both Dave and Holly, Obama has chickened out on government-run health care. He has compromised pathetically on global warming. Worst for Dave, Obama has broken his promises on reforming the Patriot Act and failed to release or give a fair trial to Guantanamo prisoners. Worst for Holly, he has pulled another Lyndon Johnson, bogging the country down in a land war in Asia at the expense of human needs at home.

Then there is Mary and Carlos. When she goes down to the local planning office, she is thinking about the long day employees have answering complaints from the public. She figures that most of them will do their best to help her but knows they have rules to follow and those rules inevitably reflect the many different interests and opinions of society. She is patient and respectful and gets the same back from the staff.

Carlos, a fourth generation American, has made himself something of an expert on state and national politics and knows how difficult it is to get anything done in such a diverse society. He understands not only all the compromises that went into making the Constitution but also the resulting "checks and balances" created purposefully by the Founders to make it hard for even a majority party to make change.

He understands the tradition of rugged individualism and hostility to government rooted in the original English settlements and the American Revolution. He understands the mighty struggle of the first two-thirds of the 20th century to reconceive government not only to keep order and protect us from foreign powers

but also to protect us from the ravages of giant industrial corporations and out-of-control financial pyramids.

Carlos and Mary have a generosity of spirit too often missing in our society today. Both grieve over but understand why the Republicans have had to adopt extremist intransigent, even dishonest, positions to hold their political ground against a Democratic Party willing to compromise any issue to gain its own ground. They know that with moderation is how Obama and the Democrats won the 2008 election. They realize politics might be even worse if Obama and hard core Democrats took as hard a line as the Republicans, but with compromise often comes even more complex, ineffective, and costly legislation.

This story is tragedy. The best dreams of human society's greatest experiment in democracy gone awry. Yet the tragedy is not about politics; it is about human values. Confucius, Jeremiah, Jesus, Massasoit, Baha'u'llah, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela: so many of human society's greatest leaders, at home and abroad, for all else they taught, have most consistently taught us to respect all human beings as like us, creatures of the same God.

And we do not hear. We do not listen to each other. We see the speck in our neighbor's eye but not the stick in our own. Our empathy has drained away. We do not love our enemies; we do not even try to understand how they see the world.

Ronald Woodbury is the writer, publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of *Downside Up*. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of his wife, one of his daughters, 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, Florida, and has recently moved to Pendleton, OR. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist/writer, and six grandchildren.

You may also find *Downside Up* issues from June, 2008 to the present at <http://www.downsideup2.blogspot.com/>