

American Vision  
November 7, 2010

If you could set the equivalent of a Richter scale to measure the vibrations and damage of a mid-term election, what number would you give to last Tuesday's shake-up? It may be kind of relative: If you're Russ Feingold you might say it was an 8.2, Harry Reid, wiping the sweat off his brow may contend it was only a 4.5, and Obama wouldn't care what number it was; he just wants to take the blame. Probably your average Unitarian church-going liberal might give it somewhere around a 6. It may have knocked the house down, but our government is still standing. And if we can convince Mike Lee that he is not one of the Founding Fathers, we may feel like we weathered the storm.

It may be too early to assess the damage because, like earthquakes, much damage results from the after-shocks, and we won't feel the effects of the Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup> quake until the new House takes the floor, and a subdued senate begins the business of setting our country's agenda. Last Tuesday we felt the tectonic plates shift beneath the soles of our feet, and now we are forced to wonder whither. A new vision of what America means and represents will unfold in the weeks and months ahead. We've already seen the rough sketch, and the preliminary indications point to a profound change in the moral landscape of our nation.

Rage. Everyone is talking about America's rage, which was responsible for repudiating the progressive agenda. I think conservatives have a lot to teach liberals about rage. Conservatives can fan the flames of rage and turn it into a revolution where civil liberties crumble, the rich become richer, and tax cuts are balanced on the backs of the poor. I'll give you an example of what liberals do with their rage: I received a notice from a Buddhist Retreat Center in California which offered a workshop in which, over six days and five nights, I can learn to turn my rage into compassion. (Isn't that nice?) The cost is \$865. I would pay twice that if they would teach me how to turn my rage into a political revolution.

I don't exactly know when the rage began or where it would go, but I remember thinking that when Tea Partiers started bringing their guns to town hall meetings this did not bode well for the future. Nor did I feel confident about the midterm election when Sean Wilentz in a *New Yorker* article last month, referred to Glenn Beck as the Tea Party movement's "intellectual guide." Beck, lumping progressives, liberals, socialists, and communists into the same anti-American box, explains in his Glenn Beck online University, that the left has stolen our nation's history thereby separating Americans from God and the constitution. According to Beck, the downward spiral unleashed by leftists began with Woodrow Wilson who introduced the graduated federal income tax and secretly despised America. What do you say to that?

Beck proves beyond the shadow of a doubt the idea first introduced by Bertrand Russell long ago, that social progress is inextricably linked to education. There's an intractable bond or connection between intelligence and fairness. And in the America of today, education is disparaged as elitist, and also interchangeable with people who desire a more equitable distribution of resources.

Social progress hit a wall last Tuesday. It's been yoked with big spending - - we can't afford to help the poor...or, more accurately, I don't want to live with less. So the tide that has swept a new breed of politicians into office, focuses on individual liberty, limited government, and economic freedom. Rick Santelli, one of the original architects of the Tea Party Movement, lambasted those who defaulted on their mortgages, calling them "losers." And then he aimed his wrath towards Washington, which was going to "bail out the losers." It is every bit as fascinating as it is incomprehensible, that Santelli mentioned nothing about Bush bailing out the banks. The concern was about bailing out the "losers" who lost their jobs in the recession or got sick with no health care, and their homes were foreclosed.

"If democracy is to survive," said Bertrand Russell, "education is needed for us to understand each other and produce a kind of tolerance that springs from an endeavor to understand those who are different from ourselves...It is perhaps a natural human impulse, he states, to view with horror and disgust all manners and customs different from those which we are used to. Ants and savages put strangers to death."

It is precisely with this disgust stemming from sheer ignorance, that describes how the right views gays, Hispanics, and Muslims. Offering no solutions to lift the nation out of a recession, they turn instead to those who are different from themselves as scapegoats for their problems.

Bertrand Russell may not seem that relevant anymore, although we certainly catch his drift that educated people can feel the pain of others more easily than those whose education is molded by Glenn Beck...and we can appreciate Russell's imagery concerning ants and savages. But these are observations borne out by contemporary research. I turn to a young social psychologist out of the University of Virginia, Jonathan Haidt, who has identified five societal values: fairness (treating others equally); care (protecting others from harm); loyalty (as to one's nation and family), respect (for tradition and authority); and purity (avoiding disgusting things and foods, etc.)

After interviewing the requisite number of self-identified liberals and self-identified conservatives, he came up with the following schema: Americans who identified as liberals values care and fairness higher than loyalty, respect, and purity. Conservatives valued fairness as the lowest value whereas liberals valued purity as the lowest. (Which I guess accounts for more liberals eating disgusting foods like tofu and sushi than do conservatives.)

The recent research on the polarity of values ties directly to all those CNN maps we see denoting red states and blue states with blue states always in close proximity to bodies of water and the red states covering everything else. Haidt hypothesizes that the origin of this division of our nation's values can be traced to geographic factors, with conservatism strongest in closely knit, ethnically homogenous communities in contrast to port cities where the cultural mix is greater, thus requiring more liberalism. "We look with horror upon those who are different," said Bertrand Russell. That seems to be true, but when you live in SF, Portland, Seattle, NY, and Washington, those who are different become the norm of society thus forming the liberal centers of our country. These areas held on to their liberal candidates in the midterm election and I think it was God almighty who intervened in Nevada. (She had to).

The midterm election last Tuesday made vivid the intersection of politics and morality. We are at a crossroad today in deciding as a nation whether or not we are our brother's keeper. We fail to remember that when Jesus said we must love our neighbor as ourselves, he made no exceptions. He didn't say we must love our neighbors unless they are gay or Hispanic or Muslim. Jesus valued care and fairness above anything else...he must have been a liberal. He made it transparently obvious how he felt about authority and authority.

If Jesus were alive today he would offer courses on turning anger into compassion. For what is so intrinsically tied to anger, according to the course description I read is judgment. Our quick judgment of those who are different from us feeds our anger and removes us further from the values of care and compassion. Jesus would not charge \$865 for the course, but instead, would make you surrender all your worldly possessions. If Jesus were in America today, he would undoubtedly live in a port city. He would have no choice.

Morality and politics intersect. If morality is the answer to the question "How ought I live at the individual level," politics addresses the same question at a social level. How ought America live in these difficult economic times and what is the American vision of our responsibility – our moral RESPONSIBILITY to the future of the world?

Government must be held to a high moral standard. Otherwise, why would God even think about blessing America unless we were morally accountable to how we treat those unlike ourselves? God will bless America only if we offer compassion to those who have stumbled and if we don't label them as "losers" and then discard them.

The intersection of politics and morals has caused heartburn for a long time. Aristotle wrote that the proper aim of politics was moral virtue...to make citizens to be good and capable of noble actions. And on the other side there is Machiavelli who insisted it was all about the maintenance of power. He wrote, "A Prince cannot observe all things which are considered good in men, being often obliged in order to maintain his government to act against charity and against humanity. It is necessary that he has a mind capable of turning in whatever direction the winds of fortune and

the variation of affairs require.” Rand Paul has given these words their modern application. He and the new influx of his peers, blatantly ignore the values of care and fairness while touting the virtues of loyalty, respect and purity...bringing America back to the homogenous community where strangers are not welcome.

Rather than address the moral concern of how America ought to live and ought to conduct itself in the world, it’s about individual liberty where persons have the right to tear up the red rock country and destroy the wilderness with all its sacredness. Why, because government can’t tell me what to do.

Rather than address the moral concern of how America ought to live, it’s about limited government that won’t fund social programs to help the poor. Instead we now have a government that will roll back financial regulation so Wall Street won’t be policed and can be economically free, and roll back regulations that will cripple the EPA and allow industry to contaminate our air and water.

The vision of America at this critical point in time fails to glimpse the future. Not one of the conservative senators who won last Tuesday accepts the overwhelming scientific consensus that humans are responsible for global warming. It’s not just a matter of rejecting solutions like putting a price on carbon; it’s a matter of creating an alternative reality in which climate change is either a hoax or a conspiracy.

By denying its existence, they avoid debate. Discrediting climate science carries the gravest moral implications imaginable. The God-fearing right fails to take responsibility as stewards of the creation. If God created the world and the heavens in six days, than according to that time clock, we have about a nano second to mitigate the harm we have inflicted on all that divine work. We have violated a sacred trust. What is so confounding to anyone with a bit of intelligence, is that by failing to support clean technologies, America will be left at such a disadvantage economically because clean technology is the next great global industry. China and the EU are already well positioned; while America is in a state of global warming denial. You tell me what the future will bring. Self-interest has obscured the vision.

We are stuck in a mindset which says it’s all about me. Individual liberty....screw everyone else. Our educational system and health care system rank among the lowest of all western industrialized nations. We refuse to pour money into our schools, we aim to repeal the new laws that would have offered precious relief to our 50 million brothers and sisters with no health care. We will not even offer the support needed to veterans returning mentally battered and physically maimed after two or three tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. “We can’t afford it” sounds the mantra. But let’s offer great tax cuts than ever before.

And this is how morality and politics intersect. Aristotle advocated for politics to help people become better than who they inherently were. America’s vision, at this time in history, suggests just the opposite. We want less government so we can be freer to be as selfish as we want.

So where do we go from here? If you feel rage, I can recommend a Buddhist Retreat Center in California for \$865.

If you feel dismay, I can recommend getting more politically involved, but please leave your guns at home at the next town hall meeting.

If at the intersection of politics and morality we have gone off track, then it becomes imperative to discard any apathy and cynicism, and begin the fight...the fight to turn our country around to where it can find its moral center once again. We have no time to procrastinate. I will bear my testimony that climate change is not a left wing plot. Time is of the essence. If you love this country, if you want a world for future generations to thrive, then we must impose a new vision for this land of ours. It's a vision that turns around the current focus on the self to the care for others. It's a vision that turns around the focus on homogeneity to welcoming the stranger.

It's a vision of America capturing the moral high ground in leading a complex world into the future where cooperation with one another is fundamental, and living with less becomes the norm because we're not entitled to more than our share.

We must strive to become more "intelligent" to see the dismantling of justice before our eyes and the deep pain inflicted on those who are not in the "mainstream."

And may compassion flow then, where all people are not judged as winners or losers, but are loved, cared for, and sustained. Amen.