

Patho-Adolescent vs. Mature Politics: Moving Beyond Red and Blue States

Having spent many years fashioning an ecocentric model of the human life span - the model introduced in *Nature and the Human Soul* - I often find myself looking at world events from the perspective of an ecocentric developmental psychologist. Two of my common questions are "How does psychological immaturity contribute to our fundamental problems in the world today?" and "How would things look, in contrast, in a mature society?"

Take contemporary American politics, for instance.

Politics in America (and in fact in most of the world now) is adolescent, which is to say primarily focused on safety, security, socioeconomic wellbeing, and entertainment. There's nothing wrong with any of these values. The problem is that they are as deep and as wide as the adolescent viewpoint gets.

A *healthy* adolescent politics would actually not be so bad. In this country, the situation is far worse. I believe our political scene mostly exhibits a pathological form of adolescence, a way of life marked by aggressive competitiveness, lack of cooperation, violence, greed, corruption, consumerism, social injustice, environmental carelessness and blindness (ecological illiteracy), fundamentalisms and other literalisms, and us-vs.-them forms of nationalism, regionalism, racism, genderism, and classism. Few people even blink when political events are publicly framed with the metaphors of war ("the battle for the nomination") or aggression ("Obama failed to score a knock-out punch in yesterday's primaries").

The patho-adolescent powers-that-be and their media representatives have framed political debates in terms of red vs. blue states (an us-vs.-them) and many healthier people - who haven't had the time to think about this more deeply - have accepted the framework. It might very well be, however, that red and blue are both patho-adolescent *states of consciousness*, with Republican and Democrat simply being two branches of the Business Party or the Business-as-Usual Party.

I'll briefly outline here my suspicions that the vast majority of American politics, both red and blue, is patho-adolescent, and my conviction that we are

in urgent need of a more mature politics and, even more importantly, a more effective approach to cultural change, a realm a good deal larger than politics.

First, what do I mean by "a more mature politics"? In action, not just rhetoric, and never double-speak, morally sound political leadership focuses on social justice, environmental protection and conservation, cooperation, economic fairness, true democracy, and healthy communities. And that's merely the healthy *adolescent* dimension. A truly mature politics prioritizes values such as *global* social justice and peace, with full knowledge of the radical socio-economic changes this necessitates for those of us in the economically privileged "developed" world; protecting the lives and habitats of *all* species; cultural transformation; parenting, educational, and spiritual practices that promote full human development and every person's visionary potential; and a mature understanding and realization of human and planetary destiny.

Patho-adolescent politics, in contrast, focuses on a very different set of concerns, those that define the egocentric archetype of the Impersonator and its four versions of Conformist, Rebel, Victim, and Prince/Princess. These patho-adolescent archetypes contrast with the healthy early-adolescent archetype of the Thespian. (Before reading further, it might help to review pages 213 - 226 of *Nature and the Human Soul*, where the archetype of the Impersonator is introduced.)

Very briefly: Thespians of any age (teens through 90's), by experimenting with a variety of roles and styles, are in the process of deepening their social authenticity and honing their socioeconomic success - without diminishing anyone else's. Impersonators, in contrast, have little or no idea who they really are or how to find out: they're mostly going through the motions and sometimes intentionally inauthentic for the purpose of social acceptance and, in some cases, socio-economic aggrandizement.

Conformists acquire a pseudo identity by mimicking the styles and behaviors of the mainstream. Rebels achieve pseudo identity by adopting styles and behaviors that mock, negate, counter, or deconstruct the mainstream and, ironically, by conforming to the styles and behaviors of other Rebels. Victims - whether or not they are *actually* victimized, which they often are - are people who cultivate a downtrodden social appearance in order to attract Rescuers (a type of Conformist). Princes and Princesses are angry

people who feel entitled to social and material rewards, and sometimes get them in spades.

People in all four of these Impersonator roles have had much difficulty with the nature-oriented developmental task of middle childhood (namely, discovering the enchantment of the natural world - both outer nature and our own human nature of emotions, imagination, and body) and/or the nature-oriented task of early adolescence (creating an authentic personality - one consciously grounded in genuine interests, values, styles, traits, emotions, and attitudes). Instead of coming to feel truly at home in this world, and in place of achieving authenticity, they learned mere social and economic survival. (Survival, of course, being better than the alternative - death, prison, homelessness, or a locked psychiatric ward; it's never too late for Impersonators to mature.) Experiencing difficulty with developmental tasks is almost never the fault of children and teenagers, and is not solely the fault of older people. It is, rather, the all-too-common effect on individuals of a patho-adolescent society. This is why cultural transformation in this century is urgent and essential.

In my listening - with the filter of a developmental ecopsychologist - to the public conversations on both mainstream and alternative media, I've come to believe that approximately two-thirds of the American electorate are Impersonators, 20% are Thespians (people in a healthy version of psychological adolescence), and the remainder are in more mature developmental stages. This is why I believe that American politics is, at this time, largely patho-adolescent politics. To appeal to the majority of the electorate, most politicians, regardless of their own stage of development, speak in patho-adolescent language and images.

Republican policies and values, for example, tend to appeal to voters who are Conformists and Princes/Princesses. Conformists - by far the largest group of Impersonators - are generally fearful people who crave security (economic, social, medical, and/or religious) even though they usually have plenty already. Consequently, they tend toward conservatism of all sorts. Princes/ses are generally angry people who feel entitled to money, power, security, lower taxes, unlimited resources, endless economic expansion, etc. If they actually *have* lots of money and power, then they are likely to be in the Prince/ss sub-roles of the Tyrant or Robber Baron, which, of course, are a very small

minority of the Princes/ses, most of whom are merely middle-class but are committed to the position that they deserve more stuff. They appreciate the Republican policies that promise them more wealth and fewer taxes.

Democratic policies and values, in contrast, appeal much more to voters who are Victims and Rebels. Victims are generally fearful people, like Conformists, but who feel disenfranchised from the patho-adolescent American dream (and often in fact are) and support politicians who vow to Rescue them and lead them into the promised land. They naturally resonate to Populist rhetoric. Rebels are generally angry people, like Princes/ses, but who, like Victims, feel alienated from mainstream America and who will passionately support politicians who promise to bring about change - even when neither the politician nor his/her supporters have thought much about exactly what kind of change or whether there's a coherent plan to bring it about; for Rebels, the mere rhetoric of change is intoxicating.

Thespian (psychologically healthy adolescents of any age) genuinely and often fervently want peace, social justice, thriving communities, non-corrupt politics, and a healthy environment. If forced to choose between most contemporary Republican and Democratic politicians, they'll almost always vote Democratic, even if they'd vastly prefer a candidate with more mature and progressive policies and values.

So, the base of Republican support consists mostly of Conformists and Princes/ses, while the Democratic base is mostly Victims, Rebels, and Thespians.

Consequently, the election-season strategy employed by most contemporary American politicians looks like this: To gather additional or swing votes, Republican candidates do their best to convert Victims into either Princes/ses or Conformists. Democratic candidates attempt to convert Conformists into either Victims or Rebels. (Republican candidates know they are not likely to appeal to Rebels, anymore than Democratic candidates are going to appeal to upperclass Princes/ses.)

Republican contenders, in other words and with just a couple examples here, attempt to convince lowerclass and lower-middleclass Victims - and increasingly many middleclass Victims - that Republican trickle-down policies will enhance economic wellbeing for everyone (at long last making us all Princes/ses), or that people of *all* classes will be OK if everyone just

Conforms - continues shopping and keeps sending off their children to die in the endless fight against "Evil Empires" and "Terrorists." It's quite stunning how well Republicans have done with this ploy over the last 30 years or so. This is a commentary not merely on the cleverness of Republican strategists, but also on the vulnerability and psychological immaturity of a large percentage of the American electorate.

Democratic candidates, conversely, attempt to "wake up" the Conformists to get them to see that they have been deceived and cheated by the Republicans (and thus are really Victims) and/or that they ought to be fighting mad at the Republican-made messes and consequently vote for change of any sort (and thus be Rebels).

Most Impersonators are not going to move from one sub-archetype to another; they are the stable bases of the Republican and Democratic parties in their current manifestations. Political rhetoric, consequently, has targeted the less politically stable Impersonators who *might* switch party allegiance, as well as the Independent voters. While the Impersonators among the Independents could go either way, the Independent Thespians will almost always vote Democratic.

Although I believe the above three paragraphs accurately describe the way it has been, we can and must support wiser, more mature politicians who are capable of catalyzing substantial political and cultural shifts by evoking the deeper values shared by most people and by shifting the public conversation to themes that support healthy behavioral change - without having to wait for an increase in the median level of psychological maturity. The most talented, mature politicians are and will be those who can effectively tell new, larger stories about the challenges, obligations, and joys of being alive and human in today's fragile world in the midst of radical and unprecedented change.

The more psychologically-mature folks (Wanderers, Apprentices, Artisans, Masters, and Sages - please see *Nature and the Human Soul* for descriptions) when forced to choose between the current slate of Republicans and Democrats will, like the Thespians, typically vote Democratic ("the lesser of two evils") or for a truly progressive third-party candidate (namely, one with more mature values and policies as outlined above). But the big difference between these voters and the Thespian voters is that the former know deep in their bones that electing at least marginally healthy political leaders is only

one small (but important) part of the cultural change that we must bring about in this century. Wanderers, etc., understand that the real, deep, lasting changes can be realized only by each mature person doing what only they can do: imagining and then manifesting the creative cultural forms that are the necessary building blocks of a new, sustainable, and sustaining society. Mature politicians are a significant if not necessary support, but they can only do so much. A mature society becomes such only because there are enough mature individuals on the cutting edge of cultural evolution, doing their true, engaged work in the world, work that is as fulfilling for them individually as it is a shining gift of service to the entire web of life. A whole government of mature politicians could never be nearly enough to remake society. Mature people know without a doubt that *they themselves* must be the change they want.

Lastly, to try my hand at a common question on the minds of many of us: Among the current candidates with any chance to become the next US president, is Obama the best we could do? In my humble opinion, probably, based simply on my intuition about his psychological maturity compared with that of the others. But exactly how mature is he? I don't know. Because he is smart, he knows (in my terms, not his) that to win he has to appeal to an electorate that is approximately two-thirds Impersonators, and another 20% Thespians. If he spoke primarily to people who are Wanderers and beyond, he'd surely lose. This could be why some of his positions and actions seem so alarming to many of us (such as accepting huge donations from the defense industry; asserting that, if elected, he would significantly *increase* the size of the US military; and his ties to considerably-less-than-green energy industries). On the other hand, he might turn out to be yet another Impersonator politician. We'll only know what he's really made of if and when he's elected. And psychological maturity is, of course, not the only issue. There are, for example, the questions of electability and also a potential president's capacity for effectiveness in the current world context of violent patho-adolescence and a crumbling socio-economic-environmental system.

Meanwhile, both before and after the next election, each of us has our (real) work to do, namely our individual and unique contributions to cultural transformation, which collectively is a realm vastly larger and more

diversified than politics, and embracing a rainbow spectrum far beyond red and blue.