

Protest and the Measure of All Things

By

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As we continue envisioning what our world might look like if everything we do, including all our institutions and rules, were for the sole purpose of human welfare and individual growth and fulfillment, let us consider the topic of protest, or, more precisely, the ways in which we disagree with others and engage in adversarial relationships and demonstrations. To begin, in the spirit of the humanistic ethic we're considering, it seems we should rid ourselves of all our enemies, not by killing them, or imprisoning them, or otherwise oppressing them, but by loving them. For a humanistic ethic requires us to love all people, including our enemies.

Though Jesus, who is supposed to be the exemplar of western faith and society said this same thing two millennia ago, the instruction to love our enemies still sounds as naïve as it does impossible. Sigmund Freud thought Jesus' instruction just to love our neighbors as we love ourselves was extreme. "Why should we do this?" He asked, "What good is it to us? Above all, how can we do such a thing? How could it possibly be done?"¹ Not only did universal love seem impossible to him, and, therefore, a symptom of neurosis and an inflated desire to feel good about ourselves, he felt doing so would make the love we hold for those closest to us meaningless. But beyond this, he said, "there is a second commandment that seems to me even more incomprehensible, and arouses even stronger opposition in me. It is: 'Love thine enemies.'"²

Unlike a lot of people, I like Freud and agree with much of what he has to say, but not on this point. I think, as is common, he considers love an emotion, when it's really a kind of behavior, a way of responding to the others and of being in the world. It might surprise you to learn that most experts don't list love as a primary, or even as a secondary emotion. There's anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise, but not love. This is so, as Fromm says, because, "Love is an activity,"³ not a feeling. Though some may believe the strength of their love is proven by the intensity with which they feel it for only a few, or just one person, Fromm says, genuine love "is characterized by its lack of exclusiveness."⁴ "If I can say to somebody else, 'I love you,'" he said, "I must be able to say, 'I love in you everybody, I love through you the world, I love in you also myself.'"⁵

This may be a challenging understanding of love for some, but it is this and only this understanding that makes it possible for us to love our enemies. For even if our feelings

¹ Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, NY, 1930, 1994, p. 38.

² Ibid., p. 39.

³ Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Bantam Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, p. 18.

⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

⁵ Ibid.

toward them are negative, filling us with anger, hate, and disgust, we can still love them by treating them as love requires us to treat all people, with care, respect, and responsibility. If love is but an emotion as Freud thought, then it is possible for us to love only a handful of people at best during our lives. By leaving love off the list of emotions, on the other hand, considering it a way of life instead of a feeling, it becomes possible to love people we will never even know, people far away, in Russia, Iran, Sub-Sahara Africa, South Asia, and Palestine, as we work to establish and enforce universal human rights; as well as the people of the future, born long after we're gone, as we strive to keep their planet habitable and to institute global systems of justice for all.

So, not only is it possible to love our enemies, even if we feel animosity for them, even if we don't like them, it is not possible for us to love anyone if we do not also love our enemies. If it's "an activity... characterized by its lack of exclusiveness," and, "If," as Fromm says, "I truly love one person, I love all persons, I love the world, I love life,"⁶ then it's not necessary to offer any instruction beyond the command, "love." It is not necessary to add, "your neighbors," or even, "your enemies," for love already implies both. It implies the whole world.

Yet, in American society, rooted in English Monarchy and Feudalism, similar to many countries around the world, it's considered treasonous, as is written in the U.S. Constitution, to extend "aid and comfort" to our enemies. Ostensibly this peculiar phrase refers to assisting them in their efforts to harm or attack our country, or, in the old days, those declared enemies of the Monarchy. But it's vague enough that simply offering food, or shelter, and even hiding those whom the authorities have deemed our enemies can be a capital offense. This was the same principle that made it a crime to hide Jews in Nazi Germany, and to help runaway slaves in antebellum America. I'm not suggesting any of us should enable anyone to harm others, or step aside so they can, which would be a betrayal of our duty to life, treasonous or not. I'm saying only that we have a moral obligation, if morality means loving others, to comfort the afflicted, including those who have been deemed our enemies; though ours, like most, seems to be a society that hates its enemies and discourages and criminalizes loving them.

Yet, by this same definition of love, not only is it impossible to love without loving our enemies, it is not possible to love anyone if we don't. If love is exclusive, it is not love. We cannot love only one person without recognizing in them all persons. We cannot love only our children without seeing through them the preciousness of all children. We cannot love only the people of our country without a love for all humanity. If we cannot also love our enemies, then ours is condemned to being a loveless society, marked by exclusivity, inequality, and neglect, the very opposites of love.

So, on the one hand, it's easy to love our enemies, because love is an activity, not an emotion. It requires only a code of behavior, of treating them with respect, compassion, and responsibility. On the other hand, it can be extremely difficult because it may require us to

⁶ Ibid.

behave contrary to our feelings of hate, anger, and disgust, feelings that drive some to harm those they despise. It may also be difficult because there is good evidence suggesting, at least some of us, have a psychological need for enemies. While providing comfort to our enemies may be frowned upon, many of us take great comfort from our enemies.

According to a paper entitled, *Deriving Solace from a Nemesis*, by a team of researchers at the University of Kansas, led by psychology professor, Mark Landau, perceiving enemies is a common strategy for coping with the stresses of uncertainty and meaninglessness. The article says, “70% of Americans report having had, at some point in their lives, a powerful enemy who seeks to sabotage their goals and inflict harm (Holt, 1989).”⁷ More remarkable than a vast majority of us believing we have enemies, is the paper’s argument that having enemies paradoxically gives us the feeling of comfort in an uncertain world. “The more people can feel confident that their cultural worldview prescribes legitimate routes to attain value, and that their immediate social environment has a predictable structure, the more they can view their life as meaningful,”⁸ Landau says.

To accomplish this, to help us feel both right and righteous about our worldview and the sense of control and meaning it gives us, it is helpful to draw a line between us and an enemy threatening to take it all away. For the sense of having enemies reduces large, complex problems down to a single, manageable cause, namely, the perceived enemy. The study points out, for instance, according to a 2006 Gallup poll, Americans believed “capturing or killing Osama Bin Laden” was a greater priority than developing better relations in the Middle East, establishing democracy in Iraq, solving the conflict in Israel, or dealing with State sponsored terrorism. “Although apprehending Bin Laden may certainly be one part of a solution to terrorism,” Landau says, “an overly narrow preoccupation with Bin Laden (or anyone else) as the all-encompassing embodiment of evil may result in inadequate attention paid to the more complex and nuanced aspects of the situation.”⁹

Despite the tendency to ignore more pressing issues, blaming an enemy, real or imagined, becomes a source of comfort, precisely because it helps us avoid the real issues, plus making our problems seem manageable by blaming them on an individual or specific group of people—Muslims, Immigrants, Gays, Liberals, and so on. “To keep this threatening awareness at bay,” Landau explains, “people ‘narrow down’ the multifarious sources of potential misfortune to a focal individual or group that can be understood and perhaps controlled.” We see this, for example, whenever religious fundamentalists blame natural disasters on gays and lesbians, just as Pat Robertson blamed them for the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Having an enemy, especially one with magical powers

⁷ Landau, Mark J., “Deriving Solace from a Nemesis: Having Scapegoats and Enemies Buffers the Threat of Meaninglessness,” [from *Meaning, Mortality, and Choice: The Social Psychology of Existential Concerns*, Chapter: 10, Publisher: APA, pp.183-202] University of Kansas, June 2012, p. 2.

⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

to summon disaster by their sheer existence, means we don't question the value of our worldview or responsibility to tackle the real causes of such events.

As maddening and these kinds of irrational claims are, it's understandable how comforting it might be to blame such calamities on a manageable, visible enemy who can actually be confronted and controlled. "Quite frankly," Landay says, "people need their enemies to feel safe in the world. Having constructed a focal enemy figure responsible for chaotic hazard, people may even ignore legitimate problems; that is, if people can point to President Barack Obama or Al Qaeda as the source of all evil in the world, they may feel less motivated to uncover and combat the actual causes of their misfortune."¹⁰

Having enemies can also help us feel more confident about our own beliefs. The study finds, "The more people can feel confident that their cultural worldview prescribes legitimate routes to attain value, and that their immediate social environment has a predictable structure, the more they can view their life as meaningful."¹¹ Citing the work of psychologist Ernest Becker on fetishism, the tendency to imbue power into manageable, tangible objects, including, it would seem, objectified enemies, Landau writes that, "to build up a world of known and expected consequences is to create meaning."¹² Reducing meaning to a few simple rules thought reliable in all situations—Ten Commandments, Five Pillars, an Eightfold Path, Twelve Steps, Seven Principles, or what have you—though an initial attempt to cope with uncertainty, also ascribes meaning to the world. Hence, those with different ways and rules can seem threatening to the false sense of certainty and reassurance our overly simplistic rules and worldviews delude us with. "Focusing attention on the scapegoat as the primary causal agent behind hazard or misfortune," Landau says, "affords the reassuring (yet often erroneous) sense that negative outcomes do not 'just happen'—rather, they are due to the actions or mere existence of an individual or group that can be pointed at, monitored, and even destroyed."¹³

As much as I'd like to say this flawed thinking is typical only of those I may disagree with, I'm afraid tilting at windmills is a ubiquitous coping mechanism. It is, for example, irrational to deny Global Warming, or to blame the disasters it's manifesting on specific individuals or groups in order to justify maintenance of the status quo, of one's current worldview, rather than dealing with the feelings of uncertainty and impotence facing this enormous problem requires. Yet, Landau's research shows that even those who acknowledge Global Warming is happening and want to do something about it feel better when they can identify and blame it on an enemy. Participants in the study who were initially told the causes of global warming are unknown, reported feeling more in control when they were subsequently given the opportunity to blame it on oil companies. "perceiving a viable scapegoat," the study also

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹² Ibid., p. 3f.

¹³ Ibid., p. 7.

found, “ decreased feelings of personal guilt...”¹⁴ So, wherever we are on the political spectrum, the perception of enemies and scapegoats can provide us with a false sense of security regarding our own worldviews, make us feel better about ourselves, causing us to miss the bigger picture, and preventing us from making practical changes.

This is why, though I initially wrestled with the title of this sermon, whether to call it Dissent and the Measure of all Things, Enemies and the Measure of All Things, or just, Love and the Measure of All Things, I settled on, Protest and the Measure of All Things because this is the way many of us most often engage with our perceived enemies. As an old dragon slayer myself, or, should I say, one who has long felt empowered and better about myself by tilting my lance toward windmills, I have grown to temper how I engage in such actions. When I was younger I mostly focused on pointing out the wrongness and injustice of those I opposed, which made me feel good about myself, and, as Landau’s study suggests, more in control of the issue, though, usually, accomplishing little to effect real change.

This does not mean I don’t engage in such demonstrations, though my attitude and motivations today are much different than they once were. This is so because I no longer protest an enemy. I seek purely to bring attention to the matter at hand, and to be in solidarity with others, while maintaining loving behavior toward those with whom I disagree, or whom disagree with me. This, it is worth mentioning again, doesn’t mean I foster inhuman or pious feelings of affection for those whose opinions and behaviors I’m protesting. It doesn’t mean I’m not angry with them, or that my righteous indignation hasn’t moved me to action. It only means that I have not taken up arms against them, that I have not joined the angry mob carrying pitchforks and torches into the streets. “Having flung aside the sword,” Gandhi once said, “there is nothing except the cup of love which I can offer those who oppose me.”¹⁵

“The most fundamental kind of love, which underlies all types of love,” Erich Fromm says, includes, *“the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further [that person’s] life.”* This means, when disagreeing with others, even when insisting my adversaries must change their unjust ways, even when my anger, my righteous indignation, moves me to action against them, I must care for them by taking responsibility for their wellbeing. It means I must behave nonviolently toward them, assuring they are not injured or attacked, in body or spirit, by my actions or the actions of those I’m with. “It is no nonviolence if we merely love those that love us,” Gandhi said, “It is nonviolence only when we love those that hate us.”¹⁶

The word, *respect*, Fromm reminds us, shares the same root as words like *spectacle* and *spectator*, and means, “to see.” Loving our enemies, our adversaries, our scapegoats in some

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁵ Gandhi, M.K., *All Men are Brothers*, The Continuum Publishing Corporation, New York, NY, 1982, p. 84.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.78.

cases, means to see them as whole persons, to remember their must be more to them than the issue at hand, that they are complex people who may be wrong and unjust in some things, but intelligent and loving in others, and that, for the sheer reason of being fellow human beings, deserve our respect, deserve, that is, to be seen for all that they are. This is why Fromm also says love includes “knowledge” of a person, because we must strive to understand them and where they’re coming from, to hear their side, even if we continue to disagree. Finally, this notion of love requires us to want our adversaries to grow, to achieve their full potential, and to do our best not to erect, but to tear down, any obstructions in the way.

So, nowadays, when engaging in public witness, I strive to demonstrate my own values, rather than protesting those of others. I seek to demonstrate a better way in the wake of hate and ignorance. I disagree that it’s okay to silence or drown out the speech of my adversaries, a tactic deployed alike by rightwing pundits on Fox News and progressive protestors on our streets and college campuses. Nor do I show up at gatherings meant to protest the presence of disagreeable persons in my community. To me, banishing one from my community, saying they don’t belong, that they have no right to be seen or heard, is to protest their very existence, their right to live and be, which violates the law of love in every way.

Loving our enemies also gives us the assurance that our efforts will not be in vain, that they will not merely reflect an unconscious effort to scapegoat and feel in control, because, rather than blaming them, we must look at the complexities of the problems facing us and engage in practical efforts to make meaningful change. As I have said before, it does little good, and may even cause more harm than good, if all we do is take down *symbols* of racism and injustice without, more importantly, finally tearing down the *systems* of racism and injustice that persist in our nation. Likewise, it does little good to lie down in front of oil trains, throwing our bodies in front of the evil enemy, if we aren’t doing the hard work of changing the laws, regulations, and behaviors necessary to protect our planet and combat global warming.

Jesus, Gandhi, Erich Fromm, and others like them understood that love is not an emotion but an activity, and that it’s, therefore, possible to love our enemies and, thus, rid ourselves of the debilitating notion of having enemies to begin with. They understood it is possible to harbor ill feelings toward others, while still caring for and respecting them, and taking responsibility for their wellbeing; that it’s possible to demonstrate better ways of being without seeking to harm or punish those who disagree or get in our way. As sappy, naïve, or impossible as some may still think it sounds, a humanistic ethic, like the sages of old, requires us to love our enemies.