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A DANGEROUS PROFESSOR LOSES A FRIENDSHIP: WEALTH, CLASS, COLOR, IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY AND STYLE

by
Michael Vocino

I read somewhere that there was (are) a group of South Seas Islanders who live without a concept of time. There is no future; there is no past. Everything, for them, is now. Only the present exists. Gide writes, as have scientists, that there are species of animals where affection--sexual affection-- is expressed only between animals of the same gender. One of the species I can recall is the giraffe. When you see two giraffes with their long necks entwined, it is usually two males in an expression of love. Giraffes, like the Greeks of Sparta, only had sexual relations with their female counterparts for the procreation of the species. Sexual and affectional love is reserved for the same gender.

In New England we experience many snowstorms in winter and sometimes in Spring. We have a number of names for the different types of snow that fall in our region. What we experience of snow is nothing in comparison to what the peoples in and around the Artic Circle experience. In such regions, the people have innumerable names for snow so that they can communicate precisely what is happening weather-wise. Their environment has forced them to create a vocabulary that has a multitude of descriptive words for snow. Where we might have ten to describe light snow, or sleet, for example, they will have ten times the descriptors for snowy weather conditions. Their lives and their work depend on being able to describe what the weather is like specifically and with nuanced accuracy.

Most philosophers tell us that how we exist is constructed either by our nature or by the societal forces extant in those locations of space and time within which we find ourselves situated.

How we think, how we act, and how we interact are usually constructions of where we live and by whom we are raised. Governments, economics, race, gender, sexualities, churches, family, media, grammar schools, universities, and friends are just a few examples of those forces that mold us into who we are. These guardians and teachers of the prevalent and dominant ideology convey to us our morals, our ethics, our gender roles; they tell us what is acceptable and what is not. They instruct us as to what is “normal” or what is “good.” The rewards for being “normal” and “good” are great and the penalties for being other than “normal” or “good” are equally severe.

What I am trying to say, and probably not very well, is that there is no “truth.” There is no transcendental or universal verity. Even in mathematics, we believe, two plus two equals four. Before the concept of modern mathematics, however, there was no concept of addition and no one knew two plus two equals four. Indeed, if we are taught to interpret what we see and how we see it, when two entities are “added” to two other entities, they may actually equal something else because just the act of bringing the four items together perhaps creates another item and that--in effect--creates five.

This may not sound so strange if we consider the impact on art and art history of perspective. Pryor to the Renaissance, there was no concept of perspective and everything we saw was lacking the now accepted as “normal” three dimensional creations. We couldn’t create what the eye saw. We didn’t know how the eye worked, how the eye translates reality. We couldn’t impress on paper what the eye actually told

us. Images were flat and unconvincing. We began to realize this early on and eventually made the breakthrough to the concept of perspective which is now an accepted “truth.”

For those who induced changes in the function of the brain and even the eye through ingested chemicals knew that there is actually another dimension to reality. In fact, this “reality” has produced some of our most prized cultural artifacts such as the paintings of Dali or the poems of Rimbaud, DeQuincy, Ginsberg or novels such as Henry Miller’s *The Tropic of Cancer*.

In medicine, for years, “bleeding” to cure common ailments was considered *de rigueur*. In fact, it was considered common sense. We now know that science in this instance was wrong. Two plus two did not equal four. In fact, modern medicine did not “see” in a variety of cases. Science continues to be wrong in many instances. The use of thalidomide and the horrible deformities it produced is an example of how science, considered beyond reproach, was wrong. How many athletes have died recently using over-the-counter drugs to enhance performance or to lose weight only to find they produced damaging coronary effects even though scientists said the drugs were safe?

If we only “see” what we are taught and told to see and if we only act the way we are taught to act and don’t accept the differences that actually exist in our natures and in our environments, then those that exhibit “the other” behavior, a variant of “normal”, are considered “lacking” or in error.

Consider where “truth,” “truth” created by man, as all truth is, lead science under the National Socialist regime in Germany of the 1930s and 1940s. Nazi “truth” lead to a holocaust that saw the brutal murder of millions of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, political dissidents as well as many other “others.”

The African holocaust under the American system of slavery, justified as a “truth” by Biblical verse, saw the enslavement, brutal kidnapping and transportation, subhuman living and working conditions, annihilation of African cultural and moral values, and the devastating death of the ancestors of most of today’s African-Americans. The economic and social system known as slavery was a political/social/economic “truth” for centuries of our history. We now, hopefully, know that such a system was morally, politically, socially and economically “wrong.”

Religious “truth” found in the ideologies of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, most Protestant denominations and Islam caused innumerable pogroms/holocausts for the Jews, “other” Christians, “other” Muslims, the Armenians, Africans in the Belgian Congo, Rwanda, Nigeria, just to name a few. Who can forget the murder of millions of innocents in the infamous Inquisitions of Europe? Who can forget the mass graves of thousands of Muslims found in the former Yugoslavia recently? The list of how religious and political “truth” has murdered millions can go on and on.

Today, in the U.S., there is a battle over other “truths.” These political, moral and religious battles focus on class, race, women, and the rights of homosexuals. The string of inequities that exist because of class, race and gender is huge and long. All have a body of literature to fill academic libraries with the information generated by such inequities. We all know of the divides created by class between the rich and poor. Everyday, we can witness people sleeping in doorways, and families living in automobiles because they are poor and can’t find work or assistance to help them improve their condition.

Who can deny that there are two America's based on race? One is profoundly more unlivable than the other. One of the America's continues to brutalize its inhabitants based on the color of their skin. Who can forget the famous phrase of "the feminization of poverty" that describes how women who attempt to raise families on their own are becoming poorer and poorer and usually exist without adequate healthcare? Who does not know that women continue to earn less than men? People of color and women continue to be victims of a government of, by and seemingly for the white male.

It is not only a government of the white male, however, it is also a government of the white heterosexual male. As we approach the Presidential elections of 2004, the most important political question is whether or not gays should be permitted to marry. The rights of gays in American is central to any discussion of political theory or praxis in the U.S. today. It is precisely because of this question that I have probably lost the one person I trusted most in this world. Because of differences on how to teach others about the inequities that gays face, I no longer interact with one of the most intellectually stimulating, sincere and gentle people I have known.

The world is cut and divided on parameters of wealth, class, color, identity, ideology and style. In the world of teaching, such parameters also exist. Although the boundaries are artificial and arbitrary, they are rigid and, unfortunately for some, never to be crossed. I tried to bring my friend across the wall of the ubiquitous and dishonestly-structured homogeneous thought on sexuality in the U.S. He saw it as a negative challenge to his beliefs. In my search for the most effective way to bring theory and praxis together on the issue of gay rights, I clashed with the norm and although very

effective as a pedagogical methodology, my style created an explosion that cracked something very important to me.

I used pedestrian, vulgar language to describe sexuality in the classroom to analyze theoretical texts such as those produced by Machiavelli. It is not only the language of the streets that I employed, it is the language of the current American student class. Such language gets immediate and lasting attention. It makes Machiavelli accessible for the first and probably last time most of these students will ever encounter Machiavellian thought in written form. My methodology is a critically important way to deconstruct the more formal, “proper” language used in the traditional classroom. Such formal language is, in my opinion, used to hide or disguise the realities behind the homogeneity and cruelty underlying the dominant political “discussions” on why gays should or should not have certain rights.

Language reinforces all the divides that exist in the American culture. Language and what is seen as acceptable and what is seen as not also divided a friendship. Is language and how it is used more important than a years-long and profound friendship? Evidently my friend, who is fully aware of the Marxian analysis of “being determines consciousness; consciousness does not determine being” must think that although not gay his perspective on how to teach on this important theoretical issue is as clear as my own. Maybe it is. But, maybe, just maybe it is not. I only know that years of using deceptive, academic speech on the gay issue has not produced progressive results. It is time to try something different, even if that difference is alarming to my friends, my colleagues or even my students. If such tactics were used in the case of race, (Jesse Jackson recently noted as comparable the battle for the rights of people of color and gays reversing an

earlier position), maybe the denial of marriage rights for inter-racial couples wouldn't have to wait until the 1970s for acceptance in Virginia.

My friend had the power to deny me access to a specific classroom, but no one, not even someone as important to me as him, can deny me access to students. No one will deny me the chance to change minds on the issue of what rights I should have or not have. No one. The welfare of my students demands that I continue to try.

One, several or all of the divides at the base of American society such as those of wealth, class, color, identity, ideology and style have ended a friendship I've cherished above all others. I will never recover from that loss.

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