

Is Compassion Un-American?

by **Ron Dudum**

The polarization of our nation should be obvious to everyone. Just look at the health-care “debate” in Congress, on television, and in conversations between friends and family members. Wild statements, broad generalizations, and self-righteous disdain provide comedians like Stephen Colbert a platform to laugh at us. But should we be laughing, or should we be very concerned? Will our divided nation *accept* health-care reform that attempts to improve the status quo?

In this essay, I will identify selected mega-trends from our political and economic environment that demonstrate how our current divisiveness is no laughing matter. In fact, our current divisions are not new, but rather are the consequence of our modern paradigm of self—our future is unavoidable chaos, as one would expect from the Second Law of Thermodynamics.

Political Intolerance

In the past, our political parties included both moderates and extremists, which allowed the moderates from both parties to find pragmatic solutions through compromise. Today, it is difficult for a moderate to get elected in either major political party (I know that from personal experience), and pragmatic compromises are considered evidence of weakness and surrender.

There is a disturbing tribal character to today’s partisan loyalty, which is

needed to be a “team player.” Today’s Republican party is particularly disciplined and reminiscent of ancient Sparta where there was no individual identity, only loyalty or banishment. Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist Ron Suskind, describes this phenomena in an NPR interview that comes down to the choice of, do you want to be principled or be unemployed?¹ Democratic partisans are afforded a slightly larger tent only because the party needs to accommodate its remaining coalitions. In either case, the subordination of individuality required to be a team player is shockingly un-American.

In the health-care debate, the teams include President Obama and the Democratic majority who are committed to improving the well-being of most citizens, health-care providers that benefit financially from the status quo, and political opponents who benefit from an embarrassing Democratic defeat. Economic opponents of health-care reform and political opponents of the administration have no incentive to cooperate and no obligation to endure sacrifices for the common good. In fact, their obstinate behavior may scuttle health-care reform altogether. Tragically, any compassionate appeal for the common good that requires individual sacrifice can be accused of being socialistic.

¹ Quoted here from an interview with Robert Siegel, “*Why do Officials Seldom Resign on Principle*” *All Things Considered* transcript, August 21, 2009, available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112118261&sc=emaf>.

Economic Self-Interest

The invisible hand of self-interested greed has brought world economies to the brink of financial ruin. Unemployment is up. Uncertainty is rampant. The stock market seems to have bottomed out, but a real recovery appears to be years away. There has been a fundamental shift in our economy. After the Great Depression of the 1930s, families learned to make do with less. During the past ten years, to the contrary, Americans were encouraged to spend, and then to spend some more. Now that the economy has collapsed, Americans are relearning the lessons of frugality. But our ties to each other are much weaker than those of prior generations. Self-preservation, so we think, demands that we put self-interest first. But, “if the only principle that unites Americans is our common interest in self-interest, there is precious little fabric left in our American quilt.”²

Ironically, the environment for chaos springs from placing partisan well-being ahead of our collective national well-being. The opponents of health-care reform have put their tribal interests ahead of personal interests of their own loyal soldiers. The fact is most Americans will confront a health crisis at some point in their lives that will potentially devastate their families. The idea that tribal greed and partisanship will use the very people who would benefit from reform to undermine the effort would be laughable if it wasn't so cynically frightening.

² *Three Paradigms of Reality: From Homer to Einstein*. Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, 2009

Conclusion

Our national identity celebrates individual self-reliance and yet the combined efforts of greed and tribal loyalty use our individualism against us to undermine health-care reform. Charges of socialism whenever compassion is expressed about the well-being of our neighbors provides the unfortunate evidence that compassion is un-American. The scientific truth of entropy is manifest in the breakdown of our concern for others.

To fully appreciate where we are headed, I wrote, *Three Paradigms of Reality: From Homer to Einstein*³ which begins with an historical analysis of both the ancient Greek and early Christian paradigms. Those two paradigms of reality offered alternative strategies for cooperation that are absent in our modern paradigm of self. Our modern paradigm encourages competition and self-righteous rhetoric, which do not inspire pragmatic compromise. The fear of change will conquer the hope of reform. Therefore, the lack of a transcendent cooperative narrative makes chaos inescapable.

By understanding these two paradigms in the context of the modern paradigm of self, readers learn to recognize them in other people and themselves, and ultimately to understand the motives, beliefs, and struggles of their neighbors and themselves. *Three Paradigms of Reality* will challenge thoughtful readers, will be dismissed by those who are blinded by arrogance and hubris, and will be ignored

³ *Three Paradigms*

by the masses—to their own peril. This book is filled with insights about the motivations of those who seek to create change and those who seek to protect the status quo.