

Beyond Moral Outrage

By Rick Longinotti

Our political speech is filled with moral outrage. On any day when you pick up the editorial page of the newspaper you can find an outpouring of language that expresses anger at injustice, incompetence, and moral depravity.

I began to question the usefulness of this language when I was a college student in 1972. I wrote my sister a letter of moral indignation, "How could you vote to re-elect Richard Nixon?" Then I went on to list what I considered his crimes. Barbara wrote back to me, "How could you be so self-righteous?" This exchange created a mistrust in our relationship that I felt for quite a while.

Our moral indignation doesn't build bridges with people who don't share our political views. Rather, they get the message that we think they are either morally defective, or intellectually defective. If we are to build bridges of understanding we need to examine our habit of making what Marshall Rosenberg calls, "moralistic judgments".

Examining Moralistic Judgments

Judgments are necessary. We need to make judgments all the time about which actions serve us and which don't. For example, citizens of this nation need to make a judgment about whether the war in Iraq is really serving to bring about peace and security. The judgment becomes moralistic when we carry an attitude of condemnation towards the people with whom we disagree. We think they are *wrong, bad, defective, etc.*

We carry that attitude because of our cultural training. We have been taught "right from wrong" by means of negative reinforcement. As children doing things that adults didn't like, we experienced reactions ranging from mild disapproval to strong condemnation. Sometimes punishments accompanied these reactions. Punishment reflects a belief that inflicting suffering on another person is a good way to get them to change their behavior. This belief is ancient, and it is reflected in our language. *Chastize* and *castigate* come from the Latin, *castigare*, which means both to punish and to purify. The ancient Romans apparently believed in the same model of

teaching moral purity through inflicting suffering.

The angry disapproval that adults direct towards children is meant to produce a shame reaction. Parenting educator, Jane Nelson, points out, "When we want our kids to do good, we try to make them feel bad." Rosenberg sometimes role-plays an angry parent trying to get a child to repent by demanding, "Say you're sorry!" Rosenberg explains that the submissive, "I'm sorry", that the parent hopes to hear is a sign that the child *has learned the error of his ways and will now do better*. Rosenberg notes how we hang onto this belief in the efficacy of shaming others, even when we have evidence to the contrary. My letter to my sister about how wrong it was to vote for Richard Nixon reflected my unexamined belief that if I used the language of moralistic judgments, she would see the error of her ways---maybe even say, "I'm sorry".

Our Natural Generosity

Our cultural tradition also has a thread running through it that is an alternative to moralistic judgments, to shaming others through moral indignation, and to punishments. Rosenberg embraces this alternative. The first principle of this alternative view is that people don't need to be taught right from wrong through negative reinforcements. People have a natural generosity, a natural desire to contribute to the well being of others. When we speak to others, we don't want to open our mouths until we are conscious of that nature in them.

Self-empathy to Transform Moralistic Judgments

We may need considerable self-empathy in order to arrive at this consciousness. That consists in three steps. The first is examining our angry thinking. Rosenberg calls this "watching the jackal show" (the jackal representing judgmental thinking). We watch the show without condemning ourselves for having such angry thoughts---a refreshing alternative to self-castigation. We simply notice that we are in the middle of a storm of righteous indignation.

Secondly, we look for our feelings underneath our anger, and for our needs in the situation. What was inspiring me to write to my sister in 1972 was a deep sadness about the suffering going on in Vietnam. Added to that was the pain that my sister, whom I loved, did not agree with me about the American

participation in that war. It was painful to consider that the people I loved were complicit in voting for the war and paying taxes for war. I wanted understanding for how I saw things. I wanted to find some effective way to add my efforts to ending the suffering of Vietnam. Talking to family and friends around me seemed like something I could do.

The third stage in our inner process is to empathize with the other person. What are they feeling and what do they need? My sister also needed a peaceful world in which to raise her children, the youngest of which was born in 1972. Her preference of strategies to meet that common need of ours was different. Her set of beliefs led her to think that Nixon was to be preferred to the candidate, George McGovern, who was calling for a pull-out of US troops.

With my own feelings and needs in focus, and having empathy for my sister's needs, we might have had a conversation. In the absence of my disapproval of her, she might have been able to empathize with my deep misgivings about the war. I might have been able to hear other needs of hers. We could have had a conversation. Instead, for many years I felt uneasy discussing politics with her.

Having done the inner work, we enter the conversation with the other person, sometimes expressing our needs, sometimes empathizing with theirs. When we are satisfied that they understand our needs and we understand theirs, together we can look for strategies to meet those needs. We can even address the other person's beliefs that we don't agree with. We might invite them to consider how other beliefs might better serve us. Or we might look for a mutually acceptable way to evaluate strategies. Thinking and conversation that is not clouded by shame can actually be productive!