

Partisan Politics on a Larger Scale

Dr. Lon Jones, DO

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As a physician, I am endlessly intrigued by the processes of adaptation that has led to our being on this earth; and I am amazed that these processes show up so dramatically in our differing politics. So for those wishing to think a bit deeper than sound-bites, here's my two cent's worth.

Bacteria are the oldest life forms on this planet with evidence of their presence close to four billion years ago. Over the next two billion years they adapted to survive using natural selection, where good mutations provided a survival benefit that was passed down to more offspring than those without the good mutation as the bacteria divided. They formed the atmosphere and learned how to recycle. This is Darwinian evolution; it represents competition between agents.

But there is another side to it described by Lynn Margulis in the process she called symbiosis. In this, the agents are seen to cooperate; bacteria, for example, who knew how to metabolize sugars became the mitochondria that are the engines of all animal cells. Other bacteria that had learned how to use sunlight for energy joined similarly and became the chloroplasts that power the plant kingdom. Life, Margulis and her school argue, did not spread across the globe by competition, but by cooperation and networking.

Going down the road a few billion years we know that survival is important, but we also know that diversity is equally important, and that, while survival insures individual benefits, cooperation is the foundation for social benefits as well as the diversity that is the *sine qua non* of a healthy system. We can also see these two poles, if we look for them, in nearly every aspect of our lives as adaptive organisms.

Applying these ideas to a discussion on political parties is always difficult because we always see what we focus on and what we focus on is not the whole or the underlying principles, but the instant episode. We are mired in our differing tribes groupthink, the pathological situation where we think we are invincible because everyone else we associate with shares the same ideas. This is a task worth the effort because it takes one to a broader place where principles play a greater role. While the election may be over our current crop of politicians provides examples.

On both sides we have candidates who are well educated, religious, with strong family ties, and intelligent. One of them worked in business, close to Wall Street. He seems oriented more to the laissez faire type of market that is focused on profits as the indication of survival. Promoting this kind of survival will raises all boats is the way he sees the system working. He looks for backing to the economists like Milton Friedman, who argued for marketplace freedom. His opponent was a community organizer in his formative years. He sees the value of community symbiosis; that people working together on a shared problem is the best way to save the resource from being torn apart by the self interested. Demonstrating this won Elinor Ostrum, a political scientist, the Nobel Prize in economics.

On a broad basis, the funding for one party comes in large contributions from the relatively few who have been very successful at the profit end of survival, while that of the other comes in much smaller amounts from the more numerous who are not so wealthy but see a possible community.

The plan for progress on the one side is to enable those who create jobs (the wealthy?) to do so easier and with less restraint. In this the emphasis is on making jobs, but just as with the TARP program that saved the financial industry, where the focus was on getting money to those on Main Street that needed it, money seems to have a mind of its own. TARP money stayed in the Wall Street banks, just as trickle down money mostly stays with the wealthy. Money in the bank, or in the pocket, equals survival in this way of thinking.

On the other hand the plan for the communitarians lies more in helping to repair the infrastructure, working to improve the social elements, like health and education, that lead to a better quality of life; and realizing that money in your pocket, or on a national scale a constantly increasing GDP, is not, as Robert Kennedy memorably stated, the best measure of social health. They see more of a role for cooperative enterprise and other yardsticks, like Bhutan's Gross National Happiness.

One side focuses on the dangers of overextending our debt and our economy crashing. We spend too much on entitlements that help the poor in our society and we need to cut that expense. They propose doing this by changing those programs to work on vouchers so that the individual has more of a stake in the service.

At the same time they deny the overwhelming warning from the majority of the world's scientists of the far greater threat *to the planet* that is present in our continuing use of carbon fuels for our necessary energy. Cheap fuels, in their point of view, are critical to allay future debt and preserve our life style. Short term profits equal survival. The other side does more to preserve the safety net, and also gives some service to supporting energy alternatives, even when they wind up non-competitive in a marketplace dominated by cheap carbon fuels and subsidized alternatives from outside. They seem agreeable to a carbon tax that would add an environmental element to the products in the marketplace, help cut our use of fuels, cover some of our debt, and perhaps delay some global warming.

In the area of foreign policy we have one side lamenting America's decline in power and resolving to increase military funding to restore our power. They appear to see military coercive police power as the only real power. On the other side we have a secretary of state acknowledging the need for "smart power," presumably with the meaning given by Joseph Nye (*Soft Power*) as the wise combination of hard (military) power and the soft power implied in getting the other side to want what you want. Neither side has yet come to the realization that this battle is archetypal—it goes far beyond U.S. Military power.

Paul Ewald (*The Evolution of Infectious Disease*) shows that bacteria exposed to hard power, as in something that kills them (like antibiotics), will develop resistance to that threat, but when exposed to soft power, as in making it harder for them to get around (with soap and water, bed nets, condoms, good nasal hygiene, etc.) they will develop more to live with the host without trying to recycle them.

On a different level children respond to criticism and constraint by increasing their *counterwill*, a term described by Gabor Mate in his book *Scattered*; and nation states do the same. The best way to resolve differences and end conflicts is to persuade your opponent that your way would be better for him as well as you. How to do that is the subject of our book, *The Boids and the Bees*. Playing games helps, and psychological games show that people will spend some of their own money in order to bring down a selfishly oriented game player. The use of hard power, in other words, always creates its own enemies. Both sides of our political spectrum need lessons here.

These are a few areas of political interest where the lines are well enough defined for showing the differences. In evolution both survival and symbiosis are needed. It's for us all to decide which pole we are in more need of now, survival or transformation, and let that understanding impact on how we vote.