**The Commoditization of Discourse –**

**Sound-Bytes for Sale, Government as Free Market**

Most of us have heard about the “invisible hand” of Adam Smith. It is a force that somehow manages to maximize the collective economic good even while each player – whether an individual or a group - competes in the marketplace for its own self-interest in the buying and selling of commodities. Somehow it is the tug-of-war balance between the many self-interested players that produces optimum results as long as we don’t interfere with the “natural” processes of the market, for example, by excessive government regulation.

We do have our disagreements about which regulations are vital and which are not for a successful market, and this may change with the times. Yet, it does seem clear enough that Smith had a point. For example, we don’t expect market prices to be set by moral argument except perhaps in the direst of cases. To be sure, the effects upon each of us separately of moral arguments may add to the spin and trajectory of our own market activities, thus affecting the market indirectly. But we certainly do not expect such facts about the market as price, quality, and quantity in general to be determined in the same way that we seek to determine other matters in the moral realm; that is, by truth-oriented discourse.

In the meantime, it has been an unsettled matter – and in the past century more decidedly so – where the political realm stands between the market value and truth value. For the longest time, it has seemed to be teetering between the two. The general rule had been that campaigns would be run as advertisement campaigns with little to do with truth, but that later on, the business of governing would go back to being a matter of conscience. Nonetheless, little by little, governing itself became more and more subsidiary to campaigning. To a large extent this process has now been completed, to the point at which discourse has become entirely commoditized, with nothing being said except for its market value, truth no longer being of any consideration. Instead, personhood itself has been branded. The truth ever being spoken would be utterly accidental. It is the cash value of speech that is now king. Say what sells you, what gets you into power, then once power is gained, act to retain it. Speech is all slogan, all sales pitch. Elections are actually won this way.

Once the sale is made and the election won, all this speech is tossed onto the rubbish heap and forgotten. Retention of power requires appealing to a different audience. Whereas the principal audience of the campaigning season are the poor, the audience of power retention are the wealthy. Once the poor have been deceived, the wealthy are to be paid off, coddled and flattered. For it is their money that financed the bill of goods sold to the poor. This is what plutocracy looks like.

None of this is really new, except for the completeness of it accomplished recently. The notion of governing to maintain one’s power goes back at least to Machiavelli as a self-confessed tenet. The notion of competitive, non-truth-oriented political discourse goes back to the sophists against whom Socrates and Plato struggled, Plato contrasted the truth-oriented dialectic of Socrates against the self-interestedly competitive and sometimes polemic rhetoric of the sophists as a study of virtue and vice in the political realm, the former aimed at the discovery of truth, while the latter concerned only with winning arguments, making the sale, gaining votes.

We ourselves typically code switch between the two modes, sometimes even in the course of a single conversation. Rhetoric has its place in many of the games we play, such as in sales, marketing, and advertising, where damage is limited as long as the boundary lines of the games we play are clear. But we have seen these boundary lines weakened by successive waves of political aggression, until the marketers have overrun the boundaries and taken high positions in government, or have become major influencers of government. Large pharmaceutical companies have replaced their medically trained CEOs with marketers whose sales strategies include instigating false movements in health care leading to increased sales of their products, including the patients’ rights dictum that “patients have a right to live a pain-free life”, and that “pain is the fifth vital sign”. A new environment has been created where truth is no longer a value.

The theory behind this marketization of politics was advanced by Economist Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992), who advanced the notion that the “invisible hand” of Adam Smith was just as applicable to government as to the marketplace. Motivated by a simmering background of psychological egoism, according to which by our very makeup, the only genuine or dependable human motivation is self-interest, Hayek claimed that just as we should not interfere with the competition of self-interests in the marketplace, so, too, we should let a similar self-interest calculus determine our political outcomes. Although he understood that this was likely to lead to plutocracy, he considered this as preferable to a public sector allowed to grow in size as the private sector grew. Oddly, like Marx he wrote off the apparently moral foundations of government as what Marx at least called “superstructure”, intending by that a disingenuous rationalization hiding pernicious ulterior self-interest motivations. This was all that government could possibly be. According to this view, moralizing is unnatural, hypocritical, and toxic, whereas open and unabashed self-interest is natural, transparent, and benign. The more that government functions can be privatized, the better; the smaller government became, the better. As Ronald Reagan often groused, “government is the problem!” I don’t expect that Reagan comprehended the nihilist theory behind his slogan, as he himself was quite a bit of a moralizer when it suited him. But at least in name, he stood on the shoulders of Friedrich Hayek.

The end game of this monetization of political discourse is the ongoing cannibalization of our socialness, on two fronts. In the first place, divisions must continually be made, exacerbated, and kept festering in order to groom an audience to be deceived. Secondly, the disassembly of longstanding democratic structures and traditions will not be easy to replace or recreate.

In terms of animal and human psychology, there is simply no credibility in the notion that self-interest is the unique motivator in nature. This is not even true in brute nature, in which social organisms willingly sacrifice their own interests in so many ways for the sake of the larger group. If group survival trumps individual survival in nature, so much more so should it be the case among humans, in whom reason amplifies our socialness toward being universalized. If self-interested were king, humans would have remained a scattered smattering of insular tribes across the face of the globe.

Moreover, our truth orientation can never entirely be eclipsed. It is only in desperate confusion or anger or bitterness or fear that we cling idolatrously to political messiahs who flatter us by telling exactly the lies we long to hear and pretend are true. But the messiahs are just figureheads. It is the plutocrats who rule in this system, systematically financing voter suppression and in various other nefarious ways rigging political outcomes. They know it and we know it. There is no longer any pretense of innocence.

People do eventually wake up when they experience the ruin of the breakdown of democracy, the ruin of autocracy which necessarily are by-products of this political strategy. Alas, we can no longer just wait around for that to happen. We must hasten the waking process ourselves.

Somehow, we must prove to the disconsolate, divided, and deceived that conscientious government is not only possible, but plausible; not only plausible, but a winning proposition. We all need to reach out to our fellow human beings across all demographic and political divides, become friendship activists, and recreate a culture of universal ownership. Where to start? I suggest from the bottom up. From neighborhood councils to city councils, From city councils to state legislatures. From state legislature to Congress. If you recall, that’s how the plutocrats did it, beginning in 2010 after the disastrous Citizens United Supreme Court decision opened the floodgates for dark money to gain hold of the political helm. They started with state legislatures and worked their way up.

Let’s bring truth back to discourse. Let us build community in all that we say and do.