

Reflections on a Flexible Spirit

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Watch Your Mouth:

Alimentary Tales, Modern and Ancient

From an Anonymous Writer (*The Sun*, Jan. 2004)

When I got to high school, I started feeling depressed. I wasn't suicidal; I was simply awakened to the brutality, indignity, and inequity in the world. I felt as if I were the only one in ninth grade who cared about anything besides lipstick, school lunch, and petty disputes. My friends were sympathetic, but things just didn't affect them the way they did me.

It wasn't until I discovered macrobiotics at the age of 20 that I developed a zeal for living. Finally there was something positive and practical I could do. I spoke passionately about my discovery to friends, family, and even strangers. "It means living a great life," I would exclaim. I believed we could save the world by creating healthy human beings.

I ate organic foods from 50-pound bags. I moved to the country and planted a garden. I dropped out of college to become an apprentice at a macrobiotic healing center. I stopped going to bars, brought my own food to social gatherings, and berated friends for visiting doctors when they could easily cure themselves of whatever ailed them.

By my mid-20s I didn't have any close friends anymore. My two best friends from high school had grown distant, and I'd not been able to make new ones, no matter how many home-made sushi parties I threw. I went to cooking classes and macrobiotic lectures, but I had no one I could call when I wanted to talk about something personal. If this was the "great life" it sure felt lonely.

I'm now 28 and married. My husband and I eat a relaxed macrobiotic diet. We go out to eat frequently and no longer bring our own brown rice when people invite us over for dinner. My social life is on the mend.

Hardest to repair are my friendships with those old high school acquaintances. While I was saving the world one bite at a time, they felt judged. One of them is now a public defender and the other an air-quality expert. They were never unaffected by the injustice of the world; they just had less visible and probably more constructive ways of coping with it.

We live in different states now, and the two of them frequently visit each other on holidays. My wish is that someday they will want to come see me.

From the New Testament letters of Paul

In the years of the early church, the first Christians debated whether it was necessary to observe the kosher dietary laws of the Old Testament, and whether it was a sin to eat meat that had been consecrated to pagan deities. In the following passages, the Apostle Paul responds to these concerns.

From the Epistle to the Roman: Let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded ... that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who *thinks* it unclean.

For the Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.... Let us then pursue that which makes for peace and mutual up-building. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.

From the Epistle to the Corinthians: All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any questions of conscience. For the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.

And so, if an unbeliever invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.... So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Eyes on the Prize

From a Reminiscence by Lorenzo Milam*

On October 30, 1959 I personally delivered an application for a Washington, D.C. FM station to the FCC. I stayed long enough to watch the secretary certify it, then went back to my dingy, \$35 a month office on F Street to wait for the permit to build a station that would address the issues of the day and perhaps save us from global mayhem.

So I waited, and waited and waited some more. Before long, I noticed that permits were being granted to others who had applied at the same time: people who wanted to broadcast mood music or rock, or fundamentalist religious programming....

I went back to the FCC and asked if they had misplaced my application. "No," I was told. "We're working on it. We'll let you know."

Nine months later I was still waiting by the telephone. I asked my lawyer what was going on, but no one at the commission would talk to him either

A year and a half later, my lawyer wrote and said that someone at the FCC wanted to talk to me.... Soon we were sitting in the office of the assistant to the new chairman of the FCC. He explained what had happened to my application. It seems that fear of the “red menace” had swept through the FCC just about the time I came to town. The community station at which I had previously worked—KPFA in Berkeley—which I loved and wished to replicate in Washington, was perceived by the government as a hotbed of troublemakers and revolutionaries. Officials at the FCC, in close collaboration with the FBI, had been trying to get KPFA off the air, and now I was eager to offer the same kind of subversive programming in the government’s backyard. That’s why they had been sitting on my license application.

Well ... it turned out that a station in D.C. was out due to a technicality, but there was a frequency available in Seattle, Washington. It was mine *if* I signed a loyalty oath stating that I was not a member of the Communist Party and had never belonged to an organization that plotted the overthrow of the government of the United States.

To have the station of my dreams, albeit on the other side of the country, I’d have to trash one of the ideals that had brought me this far. In previous years, thousands of principled professionals had been dumped from their jobs for refusing to sign such an oath. They had given up their livelihood on the conviction that the government had no right to ask such a thing of an American citizen.

I was in a quandary, so I called an old college friend and fellow radical whose opinion I respected. He heard me out and said, “Look at it this way, Lorenzo. If you don’t sign, what do you have? You will end up with nothing more than the satisfaction of having stood up to an asinine government that makes stupid demands of its citizens.

“But if you sign the oath, what do you get? You get a radio station. And once you get your station, you can do or say any damn thing you want—especially about the government that forces good people into binds like this.”

After that conversation, the answer was clear. KRAB went on the air in Seattle in 1963. Then we established KBOO in Portland in 1968, and KDNA in St. Louis, KPOO in San Francisco and, in 1977, KPFW in Washington D.C.

*Milam is a progressive activist who was instrumental in founding a number of community-supported radio stations—similar to Madison’s WORT—in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

Reflections

Abraham Lincoln was, indisputably, one of America’s truly outstanding presidents: a unique man chosen to play an exceptional role at an critical moment in our nation’s history. His trenchant observations, contained in notable discourses like the Gettysburg Address, the First and Second Inaugurals, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and the Cooper Union speech, are still quoted and remain compelling today.

Lincoln was not, like George Washington, a commander of armies and he did not, like Franklin Roosevelt, come from an affluent, patrician background. A provincial lawyer of undistinguished lineage, he was routinely underestimated by both friend and foe. Bright, ambitious, articulate, and determined, Lincoln was also easy to mock for his inelegance and awkwardness. For many, he was a hard man to picture in the president’s chair, and his election in 1860 came as something of a surprise.

Many reasons can be cited for Lincoln’s rise to greatness, but flexibility of spirit is what I’ve chosen to focus on today for it informed his basic approach to problem solving, consensus building, and governance. Lincoln entered the White House firmly opposed to slavery and reluctant to wage a war of choice rather than necessity. He did not lack for principles, but he was by no means a purist when it came to formulating policy. To preserve the union and assure its future, he was quite willing to make certain concessions.

For example, in 1831 and at the age of 22, he and a friend rode a flatboat down the Mississippi to New Orleans. During that adventure he witnessed, for the first time, the plight of men and women in bondage. “The sight of Negroes chained and maltreated, whipped and scourged,” he wrote, “ran an iron through me then and there.” On another occasion he wrote that the sight of slaves, shackled together in irons, “was a continual torment to me.”

Nevertheless, Lincoln’s revulsion toward black servitude did not cause him—as it did so many abolitionists—to substitute the *preferable* for the *possible*. He was well aware that the vast majority of Americans, North as well as South, did not believe in racial equality and were not prepared to grant equal rights, equal access, equal opportunity to persons of color. It was one thing to do away with slav-

ery, but quite another to press Americans to live and work in a racially neutral culture.

According to Garry Wills, Lincoln's genius lay in his ability to tweak the conscience of his countrymen without pushing them beyond the limits of their tolerance. This allowed him to forge and maintain a coalition strong and broad enough to prevail against the secessionists. The President undoubtedly hoped that eventually American racial sensibilities would shift, but winning the war came first. He refrained, therefore, from pushing his own private principles too vigorously.

Lincoln also demonstrated notable flexibility in his choice of key advisors. His cabinet included two men—William H. Seward and Salmon Chase—who had competed against him for the presidency in 1860. Both Seward, a Senator from New York, and Chase, governor of Ohio, regarded Lincoln as their inferior, and each believed he would make a better president.

Lincoln was aware of these attitudes, and also knew Salmon and Chase to be men of strong opinion, high ambition, and over-inflated ego. But Lincoln was convinced that to govern wisely, to make the best decisions, he needed the perspective of intelligent people who were not over-awed by the presidential office. The President, David Bromwich writes, "must cherish an impartial curiosity about all shades of opinion ... and he must want to hear bad news."

Abraham Lincoln may not have been this nation's most intelligent president, but he was certainly its most thoughtful and discerning. He acknowledged his own limits, eschewed religious and political dogma, and was willing to seek counsel even from his adversaries. And yet Lincoln also knew that the buck stopped with him and he did not shrink from making difficult decisions.

From Abraham Lincoln we learn that being flexible is not the same as being wishy-washy. Having once been asked what he believed in, the comedian Groucho Marx ticked off a few items before concluding, "Those are my principles. If you don't like them, I have others." That's what we'd call wishy-washy. The flexible person, on the other hand, is firm about his convictions, clear about his priorities. But he is also open to new ideas, fresh evidence, and understands the value of consultation.

If, then, one is interested in cultivating a more flexible spirit, what would that entail? First, a recognition that one must be guided, and one's behavior informed, by more than a single, control-

ling principle. Lincoln believed that slavery was wrong, but if anti-slavery rhetoric and policies had defined his administration, the Civil War might have ended very differently.

In a similar vein, consider that woman who, at the age of 20, adopted a macrobiotic diet. She quickly became a "true believer," an evangelist for the cause, and her rigidity seriously compromised her ability to socialize and hold a "normal" conversation. Her single-minded passion caused her to lose friends and created significant inconvenience.

Eventually she learned to moderate her behavior. Today, the woman reports, she and her husband enjoy a "relaxed" macrobiotic diet that permits them to balance their culinary ideals with their social needs.

For my own part, I've long described myself as a "flexible vegetarian"—which means that for health-related, environmental, and ethical reasons, a vegetarian regime makes good sense to me. But so does the principle of *hospitality*, which requires that we gratefully and graciously accept what's being served and that we give the principle of friendship precedence over our dietary scruples. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans:

For the Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy.... Let us then pursue that which makes for peace and mutual up-building.

In the second place, and as the preceding discussion suggests, flexibility requires us to be sensitive to context. The temptation to apply pat solutions to particular situations should be resisted.

The tendency to universalize is a common one—to think that American-style democracy is superior to every other form of government, that an unfettered free market always produces the best economic outcomes, or that a single set of assumptions can be used to make a correct medical diagnosis.

Jerome Groopman, a physician and frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* on medical issues, offers an example of the latter mistake. Doctors, he writes, often misdiagnose because they "are overly influenced by what is *typically* true and fail to consider possibilities that contradict their mental templates of a disease."

To underscore his point, Groopman cites a Native American patient who came to a reservation doctor complaining of symptoms somewhat consistent with viral pneumonia. The physician examined the woman carefully and ordered X-rays and blood work. Although some of the evidence was

ambiguous, the physician diagnosed pneumonia anyway, because it was a common malady among residents of the reservation.

As it turned out, that Native woman had been taking aspirin to relieve a bad head cold—a fact she had shared with the physician. But she had taken too many and developed aspirin toxicity—a condition that mimics pneumonia and was subsequently recognized by another doctor in the clinic. Groopman concludes that “How doctors *think* can affect their success as much as how much they *know*, or how much *experience* they have.” Bracketing one’s preconceptions and staying sensitive to context is critical to the cure of any condition—social, spiritual, medical, or even economic.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recognizes the importance of flexibility in the fight against Third World poverty. In recent years the Gates Foundation has invested heavily in the micro-credit industry, which exists to provide small amounts of capital to aspiring entrepreneurs in the developing world. It is an idea first implemented in Bangladesh by Muhammed Yunus, who recently received the Nobel Peace Prize for his achievement.

For Gates, an unapologetic capitalist, the ultimate purpose of this project is not to turn a profit but to “reduce inequities around the world.” Accordingly, his Foundation has approached this issue not in the fashion of free-market fundamentalists but as open-minded situationalists. Rajiv Shah, director of the Gates micro-credit project, says, “You need a range of different business models.”

Some will be very commercial, some will be commercial eventually, but not right away.

Others will need some degree of continued subsidy in order to reach specific needy communities in certain parts of the world.

Micro-credit has been notably successful in helping people in the developing world with no assets and no collateral—especially women—to establish, expand, and maintain small businesses. Basic free market principles inform this work, but they are not rigidly adhered to when conditions might warrant a modified approach.

According to Joseph Badaracco of the Harvard Business School this is one of the prime qualities effective leaders possess—an ability to bend the rules without breaking them. The best leaders, he argues, “look for wiggle room,” respecting the patterns and principles by which a system operates, while responding imaginatively to specific situations.

Abiding by the rules, following them to the letter, is easy because the rules tell us pretty precisely where to go and how. Operating outside the rules as a scofflaw isn’t particularly difficult either. Flexibility—looking for and finding extra room to maneuver within the rules—is much more challenging and, according to Badaracco, much more likely to produce successful outcomes.

Finding a way to bend the rules, effective leaders seize the opportunity and use it to ... further their values.... It requires discipline and restraint, as well as creativity.

Or, as Sam Keene has observed, “True freedom lies *beyond* conformity or rebellion.”

Finally, while it is important to “keep our eyes on the prize” and stretch ourselves to achieve our goals, we should also be somewhat modest about our expectations. The more firmly wedded we are to a particular vision, the more invested we become in a specific outcome, the more likely we are to be disappointed. Flexibility means being satisfied with something less than a whole loaf.

Among the virtues assigned to Benjamin Franklin by historian Walter Isaacson was a willingness and ability to compromise. It was one of the keys to that resourceful man’s success in so many areas of life, and it was precisely this trait that served our country well when the Constitution was being created. “Both sides must part with some of their demands,” was a mantra that Franklin repeated many times in his political and business career, and it certainly came in handy in 1789.

It seems that the Constitutional Convention had become deadlocked on the issue of whether the composition of the new Congress should be based on population or whether each state should enjoy equal influence. Franklin himself believed in proportional representation, but with the two camps at loggerheads, he refrained from taking sides. Searching for wiggle room within the general framework of democracy polity, he came up with the idea of a bicameral legislature: one chamber would be apportioned by population while in the other each state was equally represented. “The document that arose from his compromise,” Isaacson concludes,

... could not have been approved if the hall had contained only crusaders who stood on unwavering principle. Compromisers may not make great heroes, but they do make great democracies.

Flexibility, then, is not always about means; it may also affect the way in which we formulate our ends. It shows a willingness to surrender a particular, personal vision for one that is more broadly shared.

Flexibility should not be mistaken for moral laxity and intellectual laziness. Its purpose is not to avoid conflict, not to excuse inconsistency, and not to evade responsibility. A poem by John McCutcheon describes what flexibility is *not*:

A father tucked a little girl into bed last night.
Tell me, said the little girl, what's wrong and what
is right.
I was taught to clean my room, to pick up all my
mess,
To leave it cleaner than before, but now I must
confess
It's so confusing when I find
The garbage grown-ups leave behind....
Well ... that's different, her father told her,
It's different. You'll understand when you grow
older.
It's complicated, yet it's true,
But there are limits to what we can do. It's different.

A father tucked a little girl into bed last night.
Tell me, said the little girl, what's wrong and what
is right.

In school we're taught to settle fights
With words instead of fists.
It takes courage to control; it's stronger to resist.
But what are all these lessons for
When we're so quick to go to war?
That's different, her father told her, it's different.
You'll understand when you get older.
Despite the lessons learned in schools
Grown-ups get to fudge the rules. It's just different.

Flexibility as I've described it today is harder than we might think. It isn't an easy path around the problems we, as adults, must face. Rather, it demands that we hold ourselves accountable while leaving sufficient latitude for ethical deliberation and semi-autonomous action.

Although none of us here today are likely to achieve his heroic stature, like Abraham Lincoln we can resolve to be firm but not inflexible, tough but not stubborn, determined but not dogmatic. I can think of few better ways to bring an extra measure of hope and hospitality to our cantankerous world.