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What do you believe? Why?

Let's pick four big issues that are often contentious: free trade; the Iraq War; global warming; and gay marriage. Odds are that you've heard someone argue about all of these issues. How did you come to such convictions? Are they mutable? That is, would you consider them open to change? If so, how would you go about change them? Considering the origin and permanence of one's thinking on issues can be a very instructive exercise.

I haven't done a scientific study on this, but I do speculate that our views on any particular issue come down to several things, and among these are: (1) the positions held by one's family; (2) religious affiliations; (3) class upbringing; (4) race and ethnicity; (5) school system; (6) age; and, (7) the media. With these in mind, do you wonder what we do with your current spectrum of views? Consider someone you know who has a different point of view? Assuming you are otherwise reasonable people, how do you explain that they come to such a radically different position?

So, how do we explain these differences? Any honest attempt to answer them will reveal the origins and potential misgivings of a person's point of view. For example, let's say you are firmly believing that increased taxes is a bad idea, no matter what the circumstances. This person might defend this position on the basis that individuals have the right to keep their money. Everyone believes this, we think. How can we have a democracy when people don't even get an education? and as such we collectively (through taxes) must pay to make it possible for everyone. Whose position is correct? Both people have a strong position, one would defend vociferously. But is either/both correct?

I think both are valid positions, though I strongly agree with one and not the other. How can this be so? It all revolves around where these positions generate from. Likely, these individual positions come from different backgrounds, from families that had different trajectories and life histories. One, the person arguing against taxes, was more likely driven by rugged individualism, and the other person was likely focused on community and collective identity. (Obviously, I have simplified the arguments here, as one might object to taxes for many other reasons—for instance, "current taxes are regressive.") And these world views probably were driven in part by education and political and economic opportunities that the families of these people had. Let's say their positions aren't completely driven by historical circumstance. Modern culture has a great impact as well.

What is the most important instrument driving our culture right now? The television, of course. Our homes are filled with televisions and these modern inventions are on quite a lot. On average, there are 2.4 TVs in a typical household and, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, American youth spend 3.9 hours a day watching television (which is almost six times more than they spend reading). At the current rate by age 70, the average person will have spent ~8.5 years of his/her life watching TV. Thus, what gets communicated through television is terribly important in what people think and how issues are framed for the viewers.

What is on television? Why does it exist? The answer: it exists to sell us stuff! We know this because the advertisers pay for all the programming. Therefore, the "shows" are merely entertainment to get us to watch the commercials. And, more and more, commercial products are imbedded in the shows themselves. But only if we were as hopeless as Thorndike. From a political point of view, based on what is shown on television, here are the deep (and false, I believe) messages that we are led to believe: (1) only by improving our external appearance, do the things or money one has, the happier one is; (2) killing people can be acceptable and even moral; (3) war is inevitable and can lead to peace; (4) people of color are more likely to do drugs and commit crimes; and, (5) the U.S. is the best country in the world, period. These messages and they become the norm (when no visible alternative exists).

And since children are watching so much TV, they come to take these "insights" as given. This definitely affects the way they, and their parents, think. We can't understand the way people think about issues today, without fully understanding the role that television has been playing for the formation of this generation. Jhally, a leading scholar on media (see website: www.surgehall.com), convinced me that the new documentary, Advertising and the End of the World, is very relevant to our discussion.

Now back to the original questions. What do you believe and why? And, how do you explain the differences from people come to such different positions? It is something that deserves a much closer look than I have exposed here. I am hoping that this essay will help with this examination. Where might we find such a discussion? Will be in our media? Probably not, at least not the "mainstream" one. Why not? Well, if we look at the high-tech and more sophisticated media outlets have become in their ability to form, promote, and entrench key beliefs in our culture, as Jhally and others have clearly demonstrated. Likely, the only way to turn off these messages is this exactly the decision I came to eight years ago when I got a commentaries plug on my television, it was driving me to do things that were not in keeping with my inner beliefs, and other programs that I had heard other people in the United States in the early part of the 20th Century—and my understanding of race/ class history. It was the best decision I've ever made. Yet, I struggle to maintain an open mind and respect for others that think differently from me. "Life has meaning only if you do not try to improve or defeat it in the hands of the Gods. So let us celebrate the struggle," according to Swami Sivananda. May we all continue to struggle.

THE CALL OF THE HIGHWAY
(from a cell phone)

It's good to hear that the FCC is back in business, thinking about the Internet and wireless telecommunications and not so much about assessing huge fines to broadcasters who are losing money. The new chairman, Julius Genachowski, is a 46-year-old venture capitalist who is more interested in technological advances and bringing high-speed broadband to people, and so the world moves on. Thank you, sir. How a guy so young came to be named Julius is a question another day.

Cell phones are more crucial than cracking down on vulgarity, as I found out last week when mine went missing, a small black object size of a box of Sen-Sen. I didn't panic until I found it in the washing machine I said several vulgar things. It had drowned. I pressed it and "on" and agh and moo — nothing — out of commission for an hour while I was locked down to the cell phone store.

Here's how crucial cell phones are. In Minnesota it's illegal to text-message while driving — trying to type on a tiny keypad at 70 mph is crazy ("On my way. Be there in 20 minutes — OONO ONOO allieeetwoe —") but it's legal to make calls while driving, which in my case means replacing my glasses so I can see down the directory while changing my mind at 70 mph. After my mother while driving, which is exciting for her since she is 94 and remembers when phones were attached to the wall and you talked on them while standing still. "Is that safe?" she says.

No, it's not, but neither is life itself. Animal fats, ultraviolet rays, unknown diseases, trying to get your eyes to carry things aboard an aircraft, Argentinean women trying to lure you down to Buenos Aires — it's a minefield out there.

My hero Harper Lee died in his white convertible on Highway 12 east of St. Paul in the spring of 1961 when he was 20. He was excited to start a new job as a newsman at a radio station and crashed into the rear end of a school bus. He was a tall swanky guy who loved country and radio. He was not dead, I might have become a school Eagle English teacher, but I seem to have adopted his ambition instead. And so it goes. Back then, the Highway meant freedom. We were crazy about cars and wary of the cops who lay in wait for us. I loved to go visit my aunt in Illinois, I drove, one reason being the perfectly straight stretch of Highway 47 from Ogilvie to Isle through the scrub pine forest on which I kept my 56 Ford coupe at 100 mph without a thought for 20 miles. It was a lawless stretch of road, houses few and far between. I considered the hazard of some old man in a pickup truck pulling onto the road and our two lives merging but drove fast anyway, and when I got to Isle, I resumed being a nice Christian boy with good manners.

There is a little legislator inside me that wants to crack down on speeders and cell phone users and there is also a teenager looking for open highway. Not so unusual. We want contradictory things. A person can love Columbus Avenue and also the Chief Joseph Highway over the Beartooth Pass down into Cody, Wyoming. It's a big country. A person can love opera and leave the Met walking on air, and yet k.d. lang singing "Crying" is opera too, and a kid with a beat-up guitar who gets hold of "Key to the Highway" can tear at your heart like nobody's business.

So we should tread lightly, be smart, listen to the opposition. They are speaking to our own contradictions. "He censors have their day and we now ne we on. All that noise that Judge Sotomayor listened to so patiently about the danger of empathy— respect it for what it is, a gentle pushback, and then move her into her new chambers. And then take up health insurance. We have an expensive, inefficient, treacherous, Kafkaesque system that is a drag on business and presys on the vulnerable, but something in us is leery of reform, the opposition clusters like a flock of ravens on the highway shouting "Ne." and we should slow down a little, and then they will fly up in a cloud and we'll go on.

(Garrison Keillor is the author of "77 Love Sonnets," published by Common Good Books. © 2009 by Garrison Keillor. All rights reserved. Distributed by Tribune Media Services, INC.)

(ENOUGH IS ENOUGH
Peter Schwartman

THE OLD SCOUT
Garrison Keillor)