



The Huntsville Times

Let's harmonize our morals

Friday, September 04, 2009

Huntsville Times

Anyone active in a faith community has seen it a zillion times: Two scripture-reading, hard-working, true-praying believers square off across the committee room table over the service times, song books or how the gymnasium will be open, or not, to non-members.

We have difficulty working within our groups, much less across lines of belief, culture and tradition.

And when I observe how that human characteristic is now augmented by technology that makes it easier and easier to ensconce ourselves only in our own kind of music, conversation, room temperature, food, and entertainment, I think it's something of a miracle that we get along as well as we do.

With the approaching Sept. 11 anniversary and the conference here next week, Better Together (Sept. 10 and 11), as well as the Interfaith Mission Service's annual Day of Service & Unity on Sept. 12, we come to a time of year when many of us consider anew how it is that we might get along with others and still be ourselves.

I found some clues in an article a friend recently passed me from Miller-McCune. The magazine translates current research into real-life applications.

I keep rereading an article from the May-June edition: "Morals Authority" by Tom Jacobs.

Jacobs describes how University of Virginia professor Jonathan Haidt is diagramming the ways in which human beings use different criteria to define morality. What makes us roll our eyes at someone else, he says, is failing to see that different groups adjust their values using different moral aspects than we do.

According to Haidt, conservatives typically value group loyalty, respect, and purity, values that point to the importance of something larger than the individual. Liberals tend to value not hurting others and keeping things fair, values that point to the importance of the individual.

All of these values are crucial to making it possible for groups of people to both live in proximity and to develop as individuals. We all agree with the values, but with varying levels of emphasis. It's like the slide bars on a fancy sound system that can be adjusted to allow the bass or treble or mid-range of a recording to be turned up or down, says Will Wilkinson, an essayist at the Cato Institute.

"If you're ... ready to stone adulterers and slaughter infidels, you have purity and in-group pushed up to an 11," Wilkinson says. "PETA members (the radical animal rights group) have turned in-group way down and harm way up."

Like a good sound engineer, the wisest among us surely will come to understand the need for balance or, at least, the need to listen to other moral adjustments.

The best music comes with an appropriate adjustment of balance for the music, not an insistence on declaring there is only one way to hear things - even, astonishingly, when it's my way.

Liberalism and conservatism work best when they modulate each other in a dynamic, creative tension and on-going conversation, Haidt says. Authority must both be upheld and challenged. Groups must hold some concepts and objects sacred but also foster individual creativity.

There are times to regard the shewbread on the altar in reverence - and times to use it to feed hungry people.

It's only when we keep respectfully talking to those who disagree with us that we can evaluate our own position or correct mistakes.

"As individuals, we are very bad at finding the flaws in our own arguments," Haidt says. "We all have a distorted perception of reality."

Check your own moral lens against others' by exploring the questionnaires posted at Haidt's Web site: www.yourmorals.org.

Kay Campbell, Faith & Values editor, may be reached at 532-4320, kay.campbell@htimes.com. Her column runs the first Friday of each month.

©2009 Huntsville

© 2009 al.com All Rights Reserved.