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Our Presidential Election – A Fresh Perspective

Barry Johnson

(I received this letter from Barry last election and find it very relevant for this election. – editor)

How do we make this a safer planet for our children and our grandchildren? This is an important question on the minds of each of us with the privilege to vote in our upcoming presidential election. I suggest that the answer to this question is not just in problem solving. Part of the answer is in managing underlying "unsolvable" problems. These are sometimes called dilemmas, paradoxes, or polarities. This fresh perspective will help you consider which candidate is the best choice for addressing key "unsolvable" problems.

What I mean by unsolvable problems are those issues in which you have two different views that are in tension with each other. Both viewpoints are right and both need each other. For example, in the simple process of breathing, we must both inhale AND exhale; in our daily lives we need both activity AND rest; when buying holiday presents for our children we want both the freedom to buy each child what he or she wants AND we try to treat all our children equally in terms of value and number of presents. In each of these cases we will get in trouble if we see either one option OR the other as the "solution." These problems are unsolvable in the sense

that neither option alone is an effective, sustainable solution.

For example, in our holiday purchases for our children, if we focus on the freedom and uniqueness of each child to the neglect of equality between our children we will create a situation of inequality and resentment. I call this the "Joseph Syndrome." In a family of 12 brothers, give one son a special coat and you can get him sold into slavery by his own brothers. To avoid the Joseph Syndrome, we make sure in our present buying that our children see themselves as being treated equally. The answer is not to just focus on equality to the neglect of the unique needs and interest of each child. So we do both. We manage the tension between freedom AND equality; between the uniqueness of each child AND the connectedness of all the children in the family.

In order to effectively address these issues we must supplement our either/or thinking with both/and thinking. In business, this has been called tapping the "Genius of the 'AND.'" How do we both reduce cost AND improve quality? How do we take care of both the organization's needs AND the needs of the customer? Leaders must both

provide clarity and direction AND be flexible in responding to new circumstances. The research is clear, those leaders and those organizations that apply both/and thinking to these unsolvable problems out-perform those who try to address these issues from an either/or mindset.

As a nation, one of the fundamental underlying issues we are facing is the unsolvable problem of both maintaining our freedom, uniqueness, independence AND maintaining our equality and connectedness with other nations in the world community. When this issue is addressed as if it were an either/or problem to solve, it will create problems for our country and for the world community. This is very easy to do with all the best intentions in the world. If we just focus on our freedom and uniqueness as a nation to the neglect of our equality and connectedness with other nations in the family of nations, the Joseph Syndrome will kick in and we will find ourselves isolated and resented. If we just focus on our equality and connectedness with other countries, our freedom and uniqueness will be lost in bland sameness and excess conformity.

One of the many things I love about our country is how we cherish freedom, independence, and our unique place in the world. We take great pride in our entrepreneurial initiative, creativity, and "can do" attitude. We take responsibility for self-protection, "Don't tread on me." We are understandably proud of our self reliance. We also hold on passionately to our right to act unilaterally to protect ourselves from internal or external threat. These are strong values which have helped to make this country great.

With this strong set of values, we have an equally strong fear of anything that might threaten those values. We stand up together whenever there is a threat to our freedom, a challenge to our independence or a diminishing of our unique place in the world. We don't want big government, well meaning or not, to undermine our entrepreneurial initiative. We resist becoming a "welfare state" sapped of individual initiative and responsibility. And we certainly are not going to let the final decisions about what is best for our country be decided by other nations individually or collectively. Hard earned freedoms are what we will die to preserve.

And, there is more. How do we hold on to our rich, freedom loving heritage AND be respected as equal members of the world community? How do we join in a process of empowering the world community without losing our power as an independent nation? How do we increase our ability to act multilaterally AND maintain our right and ability to act unilaterally? These are fundamental questions that relate to the safety of our children and our grand children.

All of the questions in the last paragraph require both/and thinking. If we address them from an either/or mindset alone, it will make the world less safe for our children and grand children in the United States AND in the world community.

We can tap the Genius of the AND by supplementing either/or thinking with both/and thinking, Not only is it possible to pursue both our freedom as an independent nation AND our equal membership in the world community, it is essential. We must maintain our strength as an independent country AND we must enhance the strength of the community of nations.

Our next president must be able to think and act in terms of both the

interests of our beloved country and the interests of our community of nations. In order to do this he must supplement his essential either/or thinking with equally essential both/and thinking. If he can do this, it will make the world a safer place for all children and grandchildren.

I encourage you as an undecided voter to use this as a fresh perspective in deciding your vote. Which candidate is more likely to be able to supplement his either/or thinking with both/and thinking. The president who can do both will make us safer. You cast the vote.

Barry Johnson is an international business consultant and author of *Polarity Management, Identifying and Managing Unsolvables Problems.*

"Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

A foolish faith in authority is the worst enemy of truth.

Albert Einstein

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