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Extremism: Loosing the Middle Way

Phil Nuernberger, Ph.D.

Aristotle, the great western materialist philosopher, spoke eloquently about the importance and necessity of the middle way, the way of harmony and balance. In our culture, we have long since lost sight of this middle way. We celebrate extremes – extreme sports, extreme salaries, extreme wealth, extreme military power, extreme ideological positions, extreme religions – the list goes on. It is no wonder that, consequently, we also suffer extremes that are not so celebrated.

We pay attention when extremes become dramatic – the murderous rampage in a school or work place, the collapse of the banking system, the ponzi schemes of Bernard Madoff, extravagant bonuses for already well-compensated executives, just to mention a few of the latest. These kinds of events are always a source of great drama. There is a media blitz, we shake our heads and wonder how could this happen, our politicians and leaders make the appropriate sound bites, and then we move on, waiting for the next bit of drama.

But for as much drama as we wring out of them, these events are only symptoms, the outward signs of a culture that has lost its balance, or as Aristotle would say, the middle way. Drama creates a stir and we reactively rush to quick answers – more police, more prisons, more laws, more government surveillance, more taxpayers money to bail out the gamblers – but, unfortunately, not more insight or understanding. More often than not, our quick-fire solutions only create even greater problems to solve in the not-so-distant future.

Embedded in extremism and reactivity is a fast-food mentality and a pressure for quick solutions that is endemic in our culture. After all, the president should

have solved everything in the first 100 days. And today, it's been shortened to the first two months. We find it in the short-term thinking of our corporate leaders, the slavish attention to Wall Street reactions, and the idiologic, self-centered, power-seeking politics that seem to control both parties of Congress. These are all symptoms of extremism in our culture. And instead of effective solutions and real progress, we end up with just more of the same. The old French proverb of "The more things change, the more things remain the same" seems quite appropriate.

Instead of reasoned analysis, our daily news/entertainment shows provide a drum-beat of things to fear alternated between gossip about the latest Hollywood shenanigans. We race from one opinion to the next, obsessing on one "hot, new thing" only to quickly give it up for the next "hot, new thing." Do you really believe that a half-hour Sunday morning news show with five talking heads and commercials every few minutes can really present a reasoned, analytic discussion of anything?

To be extreme means to have a pronounced or excessive degree of something. Some would argue, and have, that to be extreme in certain things or at certain times is justified. The conservative politician Barry Goldwater, for instance, argued that extremity in the defense of freedom was desirable. This sound bite is appealing, but to be extreme means that we no longer balance the polarities that necessarily must be engaged. The mind becomes a closed book with options no longer desired and no longer perceived. In extremes we lose contact with the

over-all picture. Consequently, we make mistakes of judgment and engage in behaviors that are counter-productive to the very goal we wish to achieve.

It seems that no matter how much we have, or what we attain, we should always strive for more.

There is a maxim of the mind: What you pay attention to grows in the mind. What we pay attention to in our media, in our congress, in our daily life, is what we grow in our culture. Our fascination, even adulation of the extreme, leads only to more extremes. We admire really wealthy people so anything that leads to wealth is acceptable. In more reasoned times, this was called greed. And what is admirable about extreme wealth or power? Is an individual's character based on how much money he or she rakes in every year? The universe is full of unlimited potential – but does that mean that unlimited greed for wealth, power, or fame is desirable or healthy?

It's not only in crass materialism and greed that we have become extreme. We find extremism in the argument that says any gun control is bad, in religious and political dogmas that demand not only belief but control, in the clear-cutting of national forests, and in the decreasing middle class as trickle down economics (the word trickle implies insignificant amounts – notice the word gusher is never used) increase the disparity of the distribution of the country's wealth.

We have lost almost any sense of sufficiency. It seems that no matter how much we have, or what we attain,

we should always strive for more – more money, more intensity, more profits. But the more we have, the more we want. It's never enough. If our business cleared 15% profits, well next year it should be 18%, and then 20%. When we don't have more, we feel that we have failed.

Come on. Isn't it time for some adult reasoning instead of childish rampages and dramatic sound-bites? Why is someone like Rush Limbaugh even given attention by any thinking adult. What really does it matter if some Hollywood couple is on their third divorce? And what, of anything, do grossly overpaid athletes contribute to the public good?

But passion for a cause without quiet, thoughtful reasoning and reflection leads only to extremism and disaster.

Let's pause a minute, relax, and get a little quiet. Let's step away from all the drama and think things through. We are brilliant with creativity, insight and compassion. But these are buried in the on-going, incessant drama that swirls around us like a firestorm. This isn't about passion. Passion for a cause is a great thing. But passion for a cause without quiet, thoughtful reasoning and reflection leads only to extremism and disaster!

Reasoning is not based on *knowing the Truth*, it is a systematic search for *the truth*. The claim of all extremists is that they *know the Truth*, and God help anyone with a contrary idea or opinion. Reasoning takes time and focus. Insight takes stillness and awareness. These are the requirements for a life of balance.

But where do we find balance in the drama of our headlines and in the corporate rush for more profit? If the purpose of business is profit, and the purpose of profit is to enhance the business, where does the human fit in? Humanity becomes just another resource in the headlong rush for greater wealth, power and control.

We value extreme material wealth over everything else. One is not really a successful human being unless he or she has "made it" on the material realm. We idolize wealth so we idolize the great money-makers, such as the so-called Masters of the Universe of the financial industry. We accept without question the pseudo-reasoning of retention bonuses. "Good work is its own reward" is a bromide designed to placate the underpaid, while ambitious senior executives grab 400 to 500 times more than the lowly worker in a corporation.

What does it take to be really successful as a human being? If we sit quietly for a moment or two, we begin to realize that it's not really material wealth or political power, or having every rabid fan know our name. On our death bed, do we ask to be surrounded by dollar bills, titles and trophies? Are we comforted by our position in the business or by the presence of devoted loved ones that we shared our lives with?

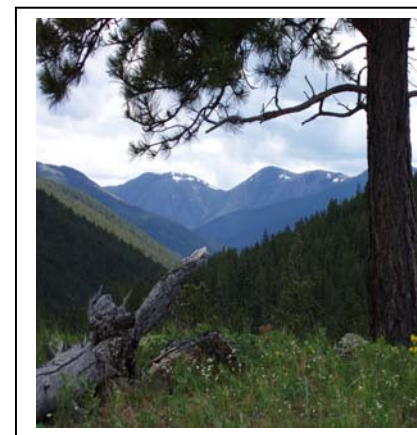
When we don't pause, when we don't take the time to reason deeply, we get caught up in the drama of life where material wealth shines with all the glitter of fool's gold. What we inevitably realize is that health, loving relationships, a joy of expression and a deep satisfaction with creative work provides the real wealth of life. Maybe this is where we should spend our effort, our time and our intent.

There is no calamity greater than lavish desires.

There is no greater guilt than discontentment.

There is no greater disaster than greed.

Lao-tzu



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