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Bad Righteous Anger

In a previous note, I wrote about the feeling of cosmic compassion. Here I write about one feeling that is opposite to that feeling. The two feelings seem to go together.

I have always been moralistic. I did not always know it. It is a cliché in American literature that the most outwardly religious people are often severely and badly moralistic, often as a cover for their own sins: "The Scarlet Letter" and "Moby Dick". Everybody who feels moral propriety thinks his-her indignation is not harsh and it is tempered with compassion. Most of us are wrong.

I did not see that I was subject to moral outrage, rage, and the use of morality as a tool to condemn people until fairly late in my life. I explain below why it surfaced. Then, I realized that it had always been a part of me.

Sometimes moral indignation is good. Sometimes it helps you see problems that you would otherwise gloss over in compliance with political ideology such as automatic liberalism or religious ideology such as loving thugs as if they were good neighbors.

Most people who feel moral anger hide it from themselves. The hiding-it-from-yourself provides a source of frustration that can be channeled into even more moral anger.

The stereotyped character for moral anger and self-delusion is the right wing religious prude but the pattern is not all confined to that type. In fact, that type is one of the smallest groups and is mostly known because it is so obvious.

Middle class people, who are really comfortable only with other middle class people, usually suffer from hidden moral indignation. They like the poor in theory, contribute to charities, and vote for programs that help the poor by giving to them or by making them face reality. They might volunteer to work in a food bank, shelter, or soup kitchen during the holidays. But in fact they dislike the poor and cannot see them as really human. The poor lack something essential.

I saw a lot of supposed liberals and supposedly radical lefties whose real "shtick" was moral outrage directed at anybody who displeased them. Most of the Lefties and Feminists I have met are like this, as well as many middle class Blacks who listen to "thug music" and glamorize thugs but fear real thugs. The attitude is not confined to the hypocritical churchy right wing.

We should not blame ourselves much for having moral indignation and for hiding it. We should beware both too much compassion and too much outrage, and try to find the correct middle path.

This insight goes against middle class liberal ideology: poor people and non-White people indulge a lot of irrational moral outrage and happily use moral outrage as a tool against almost everybody else. It is not true that poverty leads people to universal compassion, a la Woody Guthrie.

I do not dispute here which socio-economic class, race, or religious group is most prone to wrong moral indignation. The fact that other people, and other groups, do this is not an excuse for us to do it. We don't have to be perfect but we can't indulge.

I saw glimpses of this attitude in me when I first went to college in Southern California outside LA, and I hitch-hiked into LA. I had seen Black slums and White Trash enclaves in Portland, OR but never to the extent that I saw in LA. It was not just liquor stores, trash, dead buildings, and bottles all around; it was the behavior of people. I saw people who were selfish in a bad way and who acted out for the sake of acting out and for spite. This kind of selfish hurts the people around them, themselves, their children, and the country.

The liberal ideology says people are driven to selfishness by poverty; but that is only an excuse. Poverty can drive us in that direction but it does not have to take us all the way there. I have known poor people who were much better people than that.

I have since seen similar behavior in many cities in the US: San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, New York, Detroit, Atlanta, Columbus, GA, Montgomery, AL, Birmingham, AL, and New Orleans. I have seen it among leaders of Blacks, Whites, Democrats, and Republicans. It is disgusting.

I saw it again when I first went to Thailand. The Thai version is softer, less political, and has less to do with acting out than the American version. It is just selfishness, looking to yourself first without regard for neighbors or country. Thai pride themselves on what they call "graeng jai" or "consideration for the heart [of other people]"; and on taking into consideration neighbors; but they often don't do this. The attitude is getting worse with modern life, modern trash such as bottles, cans, and bags, and modern amplified sound. The attitude is not getting worse because Westerners imported it. The situation is sad.

I got big doses of secret moral indignation coupled with secret selfishness among academics, in Harvard, Michigan, Ohio, Songkhla (Thailand), and Auburn, Alabama. The details are better left unwritten.

I got a big dose of it from living in the American South, especially living in an apartment complex that "went Black". I got a big dose from trying to teach Tai Chi at a local community center where Blacks teach very loud Zumba classes. I got a big dose from working with some particularly selfish Blacks, who do not represent Black people in general, but do represent a large minority of Black People who spoil it for all Blacks and for everyone.

I got to viscerally hate attitude, trash, loudness, dog shit, barking dogs, pit bulls made vicious, bottles and cans, bad driving, bad parking, the people in one apartment using four parking spaces where they should use one, abandoned cars, drunks, tattoos, drugs, friends and family taking over the playground or the pool, dirty looks, barely concealed hatred, children that scream while playing, and children out of control. I got to hate Black, White, and Hispanic leaders that were in it mostly for self-promotion and had never given ten seconds thought to the real problems of their people and how to help their people. I got to hate academics that milked the system for grants and student stooges.

Sometimes I really wanted to kill people. If I did not fear the police, I think I would have killed people. I would not have felt much guilt about it.

I do not hate hypocrisy as such much. I am used to hypocrisy and mostly it amuses me. Politicians on TV are more a nuisance than an object of hate.

I hate wasting humanity. I hate wasting the gift of precious beautiful life. I hate making yourself indecent. I hate allowing yourself to be made indecent. I hate not having dignity. I hate not fighting back. I hate selfishness. I hate imposing indecency, indignity, and hardship on other people. I hate enabling. I hate not being a human when you should be a human.

The attitude of constant moral anger spoiled my character and disposition. I was angry all the time. My attitude made Nit sad. It interfered with my clear thinking. It hurt my stomach. I was like the Robert De Niro character in "Taxi Driver".

One insight both contributed to the attitude and helped me get over it. Bad behavior hurts the country as a whole. It is bad citizenship. I hated selfish people for how much they annoyed me, how much they hurt the country, and for not being good citizens. Yet my attitude in response also was bad citizenship. It clouded my judgment. It made me like them, maybe not exactly, but close enough, and bad enough. If I want to dislike them, I have to be better than them. To be better than them, I had to really be better than them. I had to be a good citizen where they were bad citizens. To do that, I had to see as clearly as I could. To see as clearly as I could, I had to tone down the hate. I could see clearly that the hate in them made them bad citizens, and so I should be able to see that the hate in me makes me a bad citizen. I cannot get over all my disgust and condemnation, but I have to channel it better than I had been doing.

Besides the bigger issue of citizenship, there is the smaller issue of my own physical and mental health. My anger was hurting me and Nit. I had to stop for my own sake. I will not speculate on which motive was decisive.

An important step in letting go of full-blown hate is seeing that you don't have to stop judging. You don't have to revert to a stereotypical liberal position that excuses and enables everything. Those people really are wrong, bad, and screwed up. Those people really are wrong, bad, and screwed up.

You don't have to hide that truth from yourself. You don't have to make excuses. You can accept the fact that they are screwed up as truth, and deal with that truth. You don't have to become a fake-conservative crypto-racist class warrior for the rich either. Use your senses, use your common sense, and make up your own mind about what is really going on. Of course, in modern America, if you say Blacks or poor people are wrong, bad, and screwed up, people immediately condemn you as a racist and a tool of the White rich supremacist class; but you have to rest content knowing that your accusers are wrong and you are right.

You don't have to give up reasonable compassion when you give up hatred, and you don't have to fall into overwhelming compassion when you give up hatred. You don't have to get over all hatred to feel deep compassion, but getting over intense hatred does help you to better compassion.

To save yourself from hatred, it helps to get away from what you hate. If I had had to live in a worse situation than what Nit and I fell into, I am not sure I could have stopped hating.

I know that living in a bad situation is the excuse that liberals offer for Blacks and the poor. I could not offer it as an excuse for myself or people around me. Having been there, I see that it is not acceptable as an excuse for bad behavior even among the poor. We can find ways to get over hatred and bad behavior even if we can't change the neighborhood. We can find alternatives for ourselves and our children. We can be half-way decent and do good things even in crappy American neighborhoods.

I am glad that I got to see my natural proclivity for moralistic hyper-indignation and hatred, that it got some play, but that it did not destroy me. It is good to see that side of me, accept it, and manage it. I know I will always be tempted to slide over into indignation and hatred but I know what to look for now. I don't enjoy indignation and hatred much but I am less afraid of it and so can enjoy it a little bit.

The next few words are effectively an appendix.

Often people feel hatred and indignation toward others because they hate themselves, feel like failures, are hypocrites, feel guilty about contradicting their own moral code so as to succeed, or feel guilty about doing things to other people so as to succeed. It is classic projection. Instead of seeing their own fault, they project faults, hatred, and indignation onto others. The faults, hatred, and indignation that they see in others allow them to indulge in bad acts and bad attitudes. Indulging makes them hate other people more, and so on. This pattern is true of liberals and conservatives.

Think of classic "liberal guilt". White liberals are secretly disgusted by non-Whites and poor people. Black middle class people are secretly disgusted by working class Blacks and poor Blacks. Instead of dealing with their own issues, and trying to see people of other ethnic groups and poor people as they really are, liberals Romanticize people of other ethnic groups and poor people, and liberals feel guilt. The poor, and people of other ethnic groups, use the guilt to make liberals give them things and to enable them. That makes liberals even angrier and more disgusted and guiltier; but also makes them blinder and more inclined to give; and so on. Of course, liberals use the wages of the working class to

give to the poor; liberals don't often enough give their own incomes – and that makes them feel guiltier, more disgusted, etc.

Think of classic right wing hyper-moralistic indignation. Criticizing it is like shooting fish in a barrel but sometimes even that is fun. Right wingers know damn good and well they don't deserve the comfy lives they lead. They know they are not that much smarter or better educated than people who are worse off than they are. They know often enough their profession amounts to a racket. Even if they are good citizens by the standards of their group, they know that is not much. Even if they do help guide the country and the economy, even if they use their wealth to help guide the economy, they know that does not entitle them to what they have. So, like liberals, they feel guilty. The rest follows easily.

Think of the moral indignation of the poor and of non-White ethnic groups. For reasons that I don't have to go into, poor people and non-White people feel like failures. Even when they succeed against odds and succeed by any reasonable standards of their group or of society as a whole, they still tend to feel like failures. They cannot calibrate standards of success and failure against the situation but have internalized the standards of the middle class, affluent class, and Whites in those classes. Failure makes people feel guilty. From guilt, the rest follows.

One lesson that I learned from my own descent into anger, indignation, and hatred was the big roles that guilt and a feeling of failure play. When you feel bad about yourself, you feel bad toward other people whether they deserve it or not. You can't think straight.

A companion lesson was how much supposedly successful people still feel like failures and how much they fear failure. Even apparently successful middle class, professional, and wealthy people fear failure and think of themselves as on the verge of failure. They feel guilt to go along with the fear of failure. A lot of their behavior is motivated by fear of failure and by guilt. I don't here go into the reasons why the fear failure and feel guilt.

Seeing this helped me to understand class relations, race relations, and gender relations in capitalism and America. People crave security, both financial and moral. People really want to feel secure. People want security for their families and themselves. They will do a lot to feel secure. They are willing to become clients of the state. They allow others to become clients of the state if they can become even better clients of the state as when rich White people allow poor non-White people personal welfare if the rich White people can have corporate welfare. The craving for security does drive a lot of economic activity and so does a fair amount of good in that way. It helps drive good capitalism. But the craving for security also does much economic, political, social, and personal damage. The harm outweighs the good. I wish we could find a system in which people can have a basic level of security and then are strongly motivated to succeed on top of that. We think we have such a system but we don't.