

A QUESTION OF VALUES: An Inquiry Into the Value of Questioning

"Conservatives know that politics is not just about policy and interest groups and issue-by-issue debate. They have learned that politics is about family and morality, about myth and metaphor and emotional identification. They have, over twenty-five years, managed to forge conceptual links in the voters' minds between morality and public policy. They have done this by carefully working out their values, comprehending their myths, and designing a language to fit those values and myths so that they can evoke them with powerful slogans, repeated over and over again, that reinforce those family-morality-policy links, until the connections have come to seem natural to many Americans, including many in the media. As long as liberals ignore the moral, mythic, and emotional dimension of politics, as long as they stick to policy and interest groups and issue-by-issue debate, they will have no hope of understanding the nature of the political transformation that has overtaken this country and they will have no hope of changing it."

George Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, 1996

The terrorists speak insanely of deep things. The antiterrorists had better speak sanely of equally deep things.... who will speak of the sacred and the secular, of the physical world and the spiritual world?...Armies are in motion but are the philosophers and religious leaders, the liberal thinkers, likewise in motion?"

Paul Berman, "The Philosopher of Islamic Terror"
NY Times Magazine April 23, 2003

What Do We Believe?

In the fall of 2004, an issue that had been of concern to a minority of Chicken Little Liberals moved into the foreground of popular discourse: the question of moral values. At *Move-On* phone bank headquarters in Reno, Nevada, a mere week before the election, volunteers read *Don't Think of an Elephant* aloud to one another in tones of awe, stunned by the aptness of Lakoff's prophetic insights. The night of Nov. 2nd told us we heeded his admonishments too little and too late.

The narcissistic trajectory of what Bellah et al called "expressive individualism" and the subsequent absence of a basis for common values became urgent when Middle America elected George Bush on the basis of "moral values." Progressives awakened to the importance of reclaiming and interacting with the public domain in moral terms, but, as

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

Bellah et al point out, without a language to do so. “What moral values? Whose moral values?” Progressives and Cultural Creatives asked, angry and confounded. The braver among us asked, “ What ARE our moral values?” Only a few dared to ask “ On what authority do we say so?”

Fundamentalist Conservatives point to scripture and tradition as immutable moral authority. Consequently, they can be sure they’re right. As the Conservative bumper sticker reads, “God said it, I believe it, and that’s that.” They believe that God’s will is revealed in, and only in, the Bible, taken literally, especially, it would seem, in Leviticus. Being able to claim God on your side is a strong trump card. Most liberally minded people do not claim Biblical law dictated by an authoritarian God as absolute authority. They understand the Bible to be an historical document. They see scripture, if they see it at all, as historically based and contextual. They take the creation story as metaphor. At most, they consider scripture divinely inspired wisdom. Many are, as the Right accuses, secular in their worldview. Those who are grounded in Judeo-Christian sacred story are more likely to reference the story of Exodus, and the Gospels to bolster their perspective.

What, then, is the moral ground of the Progressive movement, and by what authority can we speak? If all we stand on is postmodernism, and rational relativism, how do we prevent the Christian Right from claiming proprietary rights to God, faith, and morality, as they have usurped exclusive ownership of the flag since the days of Viet Nam? How do we wrest the moral banner from the unholy alliance of Armageddonists and corporate interests?

Sunday Dinner: A Civic Ritual of Enlightened Discourse

I wanted to discuss these questions with others of like mind, partly to clarify my own thoughts in community, partly to provide a forum for my friends and associates to do the same, and partly to gain a better understanding of the moral and religious core values I will be speaking into from my pulpit, as a religious leader in the years to come. I was especially interested in those people who consider themselves to be “spiritual, but not religious,” critiqued by Robert Bellah et al.

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

Many of my friends fit this profile. They are good people, thoughtful people, and take their spiritual evolution seriously. Few go to church or synagogue, but they meditate, ritualize, attend dharma talks by spiritual teachers, do yoga, take personal development seminars and shamanic journeys, and in a variety of ways work on their “stuff,” as they call it. I was interested to see how this translated for them into morality, extending into citizenship in the public realm, and to compare their character types with Bellah’s, more than 20 years later.

I decided to initiate a conversation. I have long been disturbed about the degradation of civil discourse in America. I live in Marin County, at the center of the subculture in which, as Bellah et al point out, the language of psychology has supplanted moral language. Where once people gathered and discussed the social issues of the day, today the conversation is more likely to turn on private affairs, from personal spirituality to real estate. Where is the forum in which the friction of ideas rubbing against one another polishes the bedrock of common values? Do we need common values? Do Progressives think so? If so, where do we find them in a post-modern world?

As a ritualist, I was also asking myself, what are the binding rituals of civil society? The town meeting is long gone in most parts of America. Where I live, absentee ballots have mostly replaced the Election Day pilgrimage to the neighborhood polling place --- especially in the 2004 election, where so many people were wary of electronic voting. The Fourth of July parade through the town square is quaint and anachronistic. Fireworks, while fun, are empty of meaning. Thanksgiving dinner has turned into a festival of gluttony. What are the rituals that bind us as a nation and a culture, beyond the annual sales at shopping malls marking our national holidays? The one American civic ritual I could find to revive was the nearly forgotten rite of Sunday dinner.

When I was growing up in the 1950’s and ‘60’s, Sunday dinner was a command performance in families of all classes, races, and economic status. My African American friend who grew up dirt poor in Louisiana remembers it. So does my landed WASP

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

friend from Connecticut. In the afternoon after church, family, friends and sometimes-distant relatives gathered for a celebratory meal. Television was turned off. Over the long dinner, people talked. Ideas and opinions were exchanged. Values were challenged and affirmed. Children sat at the table listening, and occasionally speaking, until they were excused. In this sometimes torturous, oft times exciting, ritual of civil communion, values were disseminated from one generation to the next through the ancient custom of breaking bread together.

I determined to revive this tradition by hosting a series of monthly dinners on the first Sunday of each month, beginning in November 2004, for between eight and twelve people. I would invite as diverse a group of people as possible, within my interest group: self-proclaimed Progressives. I would introduce a question for each gathering, all of which focused on one central question: *What are our values?*

I sent out an email letter two weeks in advance to invite people to the first Sunday dinner, with the following message:

“Progressives have lost or abandoned many of our binding rituals. With the loss of ritual, we have also lost our accompanying, clear sense of what we know to be right and good, and the language to articulate it. Rituals bind us together with one another, affirming our values, acting to transform or affirm what we know. Values are implicit within them.

Sunday dinner is one of those American rituals. I believe it is one worth reviving. Rose Kennedy attributed her children's success, citizenship, and service, in part, to the Kennedy Sunday dinner ritual, at which there was always a discussion of some aspect of public life.

An old friend of mine, an African American activist, who raised three generations of sons in the '60's through the '80's, all successful and drug-free (a time when the statistical odds were against that), also attributed his success, in part, to Sunday dinner. About

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

growing up Black and middle-class in the 1940's and '50's, he said, " Every week, I was reminded of who I was and what was expected of me, at my grandfather's dinner table. I'd better show up, be dressed properly, and have something to say about the news clipping that had been chosen for discussion." In this way, he and the Kennedy children were educated as citizens. Is it any wonder that they were all passionate defenders of liberty?

Sunday dinner was in the late afternoon, time enough to cook after church, and still have the evening free to get ready for the week ahead. The best food was served---a roast, wine, and dessert. It was a celebration and an affirmation of REAL family values---the value of breaking bread and sharing ourselves with folks we hold dear. Special company was often included. Everyone dressed up. It was an occasion.

It is time to revive this custom. Sunday dinner affirms a celebration of our abundance through the ancient tradition of breaking bread together; it also affirms enlightened discourse and the value of sharing ideas. In the foment and friction of rubbing ideas against one another, we polish the jewel of values..."

Those who responded were a mix of single and married adults, some childless and some with children, who were welcomed at most of the dinners. The youngest adult attending was 24, and the oldest was 76. While the majority of guests were Caucasians and Jews (of both Russian and German origin), there were also Asian Americans, a Hispanic American, and one African American family of four. All were college-educated, of the professional class, including engineers, web designers, a corporate recruiter, management consultants, non-profit officers, an events manager, a home healthcare nurse, scientists, marketing executives, public health consultants, therapists and coaches, a city planner, workshop leaders, authors of fiction and non-fiction, a music promoter and producer, a city council member, a winemaker, a real estate developer, a cook, and several entrepreneurs. The guest list varied from dinner to dinner, with some guests attending all the dinners, some only one. Overall, the people attending considered themselves to be politically progressive, and most would refer to themselves as "spiritual." All have some

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

level of concern about political issues and events, and make their voices heard in some way, whether by demonstrating, signing petitions on the Internet, going to activist events, or participating in one or more organizations. All the adults are well informed about current events and, as far as I know, voted for Kerry in the last election.

It is noteworthy that while all the invitees over age fifty were familiar with the tradition, few of the invitees under forty knew about Sunday dinner, or what distinguished it from Saturday or Monday dinner. By the time the younger people were born, Sunday was just another commercial day for household tasks, shopping, and errands. Parents might be expected to work on Sundays, disrupting the family rhythms, whereas a decade earlier, Sunday was sacred. Most everything except churches and a few restaurants were closed, leaving the day free for worship and family gatherings. That was around the time that church attendance in America began to flag.

The ritual memory of this group was so ruptured that it was initially difficult to get people to understand it was important to arrive on time, that it was not a potluck or a buffet, and that I needed some help with preparation. Some people arrived wearing jeans, casually dropping in as late as six o'clock, long after we had sat down to dinner, or leaving before dessert. This was more formal than the usual Bay Area laissez-faire occasions. Over time, however, the regular guests entrained with the custom, and arrived in time for hors d'ouvres at 4:00, dressed in their "Sunday best."

I made the dinners special ritual meals, preparing all organic, seasonal foods, from traditional roasts and homemade gingerbread, to Spanish chicken and rice followed by my homemade goat milk flan. I began each dinner with sparkling wine or sherry, sparkling cider for the children and non-drinkers, and some sort of finger hors d'ouvres. As people arrived I invited them to take a question from the *TableTopics* question box, and ask it of other people as they milled around and introduced themselves. The questions in the box are all interesting and fun, and concern values large and small, with questions like: "If you could do anything you wanted with no consequences, what would

you do? What is your favorite dessert? Is it more important to be successful or happy?”
This was a great icebreaker and leveled the playing field to include the children.

I am fortunate to have a formal dining room in the house where I live, where I can seat a dozen people somewhat closely. After about an hour of milling about and chatting in the kitchen and family room, I would ask people to be seated at the table, which was set with silver and crystal, candles, and a flower arrangement, to denote the importance of the occasion. I would open the meal with a blessing and a few minutes of opening remarks setting the context of the discussion. Finally I would state the question for the evening and what thoughts had brought me to it. People would begin to speak as I served the first course. It was always a remarkable conversation, with people engaging deeply and animatedly with the subject matter for hours, through several courses of food and wine, until the last guests departed at around nine o'clock.

Interviews with Guests: Looking for Moral Ground

For this project I wanted to explore in more depth my friends' values and morality. I began with a dinner conversation, in which I first addressed the two children present, one black and one white girl, ages 5 and 7. “How do you know what's right and wrong?” I asked them. They did not hesitate. Something was wrong, they said, if it hurt people. They knew something was right because when you do it “it feels good inside,” they concurred. Gilligan was on target with relational values, as expressed by these girls.

This presaged a theme in the adults I interviewed later. If I were to characterize the core of moral authority and values expressed by the Progressives I interviewed, I would say that relational values, grounded in a felt sense of connection, facilitated by introspection, would describe the common thread.

I interviewed five of my regular guests in depth, three females in their fifties, one male in his forties, and another male in his seventies. Three were writers, hence highly articulate. I spoke to all of them face-to-face, over a meal, naturally. What follows is a synopsis of the interviews and some preliminary conclusions.

Carol: Existential Moralism Living in the Now

Carol is a tall, redheaded, slim woman in her mid-fifties. She works as a CEO in the field of non-profit management and development, and moonlights as a writer of fiction. She is divorced and has one grown son living in another state, whom she lights up at the mention of.

She was raised Roman Catholic in California's Central Valley by a socialite stepmother and a doctor father. Her father treated the town's elites, and then traveled on his days off to tend field workers and native people on the nearby Indian reservation. As a small child she went on his rounds with him, and saw his work as faith in action. She found fascinating all the different people she visited with her father. She loved the teachings and rituals of her faith. Sneaking off from class to commune with the icons in chapel, she had visions, giving her a powerful personal relationship with the Divine. These experiences formed the basis of what remain her values today. Through her childhood visions she grasped the difference between dogma, as a tool of religion, and spiritual reality. Her reality was "I was already forgiven before I confessed. Everyone is loved and forgiven."

She also saw meanness and hypocrisy in the practice of religion, and got thrown out of her Catholic school for naming it. Nonetheless she believes her religious education was central to informing her strong morals, even though she is no longer a practicing Catholic. Her moral stand hasn't changed much since she was a kid, she says, when she would use her influence as one of the town's elite to stand up for the poor kids on the playground. If someone wasn't included in a game, she'd demand the game be stopped. "I still cause problems on the playground," she laughed. Certainly she still defends justice fiercely.

She took her committedly lusty approach to life from her father: serving and protecting the underdog, traveling fearlessly across all sorts of boundaries, loving widely, living large and enjoying life, eating, drinking laughing and partying with friends in all strata of

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

society. Her father died when she was twelve, beginning a series of traumas in her life with her stepmother and her new stepfather, who didn't share the expansive values of her natural father. Nevertheless they had a strong Republican sense of civic responsibility and citizenship, which she inherited, "beyond duty." She is a member of several voluntary associations.

"I don't think in terms of moral/ immoral," she told me, "but I do hold people accountable. I go by principles and values. Principles are universal. Everyone agrees on them. Values are how you define your principles. Start with the Ten Commandments. Those are principles. Then you have to ask, what is adultery? How do you define murder? You have to define the ones you live by and what they mean for you. But there is no evil. Nothing is bad per se. It's just your values, and you live by them."

That's is an interesting comment coming from a woman who has more than once put herself in harm's way to take a stand. I asked her why, and how she knows she is right when she does so. "I was willing to put myself on the line very young, and I took flack for it. As I result I had to assess, 'Who am I to say, and why?' I thought about it a lot." Carol has an immune deficiency ("I should have died years ago") and has been sick a lot of her life, giving her plenty of time to ruminate over such things. "I read theology, mythology, symbolism, Jung, looking for the unifying principles, then breaking them down into values. I am my own moral authority. I guess you could say I'm an existential moralist living in the now. That's the Zen part."

Carol lives with her arms open wide. She seems to make little difference between public and private morality, although I imagine she has fewer private rules than many. Like many people with serious illness, she doesn't sweat the small stuff. But she is impeccable in her personal habits. She keeps her word and her appointments, returns her phone calls, pays her bills, accepts idiosyncrasies, speaks her mind, shows up on important occasions, and lets people she loves off the hook when they wrong her, never carrying a grudge. She also goes to the ends of the earth to get the perfect gift for occasions.

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

More than anyone I know, she is a proud American citizen and a strong Progressive. She loves the flag and refuses to relinquish it as the exclusive property of one party. She goes to meetings and talks at civic associations, wearing designer suits and four-inch heels, to boldly confront national leaders with whom she disagrees, as her civic duty. She has a stronger sense of right and wrong than most people by far, and lives by it, regardless of the cost or how others see her. Yet she is never judgmental. She is completely against all war, and a strong proponent of non-violence (“That’s absolute for me”), having been in Viet Nam as a teenager, but she knits hats for the troops (“ I know who’s over there-- they’re just kids”). She has profound compassion, a wicked sense of humor, and is tolerant toward all sorts of behaviors except those that waste her time. When I asked her why she had gone out on the streets, putting herself between people and guns during riots in Los Angeles, she shrugged and said simply “ It was the right thing to do.” Although she can’t tell me how she knows that, I have no doubt that she does.

Jess: Relentless Questioner of Self and Authority

Jess, 43, is a divorced writer and information architect. He lives in a rented house with a stunning view of the Oakland Hills, and drives a vintage Jaguar. A single parent who takes his parenting seriously, he worries over what he is teaching his seven-year-old daughter. Highly expressive, energetic, and articulate, he tends toward introspection, sometimes to a point of paralysis. He is angry, caring, and suspicious of authority. We met during the Kerry campaign, while working on a project to get out the single women’s vote. I was impressed with his creativity, dedication, and tireless commitment, working in the background while allowing women to take the spotlight.

He was raised in a secular home, which was not only non-religious, but anti-religious. “Religion was regarded as the largest and most likely sources of lies,” he explained. His parents, who divorced when he was only two and a half, had married outside their religion against the wishes of their families. This was never forgotten or forgiven. Jess describes his family tree as having been chopped up into a woodpile over religion.

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

His family placed a strong value on rationality. “If you couldn’t defend your conviction with reason it didn’t exist. There was no emotional morality.” The only moral values discussed were those pertaining to political events and leaders. “In my family the term was only used in reference to a moral or immoral politician.” Watergate and the illegal bombing of Cambodia helped to shape his worldview. An immoral politician was one who promoted inequality, intolerance and politically expedient lying.

Over tapas I asked him if morality mattered. “It’s everything,” he told me. “It’s core to every judgment I make—perhaps I’m overly fixated. I’m always asking: am I being treated fairly? Is this authority worthy of authority? I ask often to my detriment.

Jess doesn’t consider the church to be an authority worthy of authority. He considers morality and values to be one and the same thing, and is disturbed by the values he sees being passed on through the marketplace. “Consumerism is fundamentally immoral. As long as we’re trying to fulfill on externals, we can’t value the real worth of people,” he explained. He does not see the church as providing a significant moral voice opposing consumerism, or speaking for the real worth of people, and he proposes no institutional alternative to marketplace values. What is his moral authority, I wanted to know. How does he know that consumerism and the War on Iraq are wrong?

He told me he considered the war self-serving at the expense of others, at the grossest level, destabilizing the earth so that a few people can get rich. “Shortsightedness is itself immoral. Moral decisions should factor in the future, preserving the world for people not yet in it,” he observed. “Self-service in general is bad, especially if you’re cagey, so I’m always asking myself if what I’m doing is self-serving. Of course, it is theoretically possible to be in service of all, including oneself, but it’s tricky,” he allowed, “and I’m in perpetual fear of being caught being dishonest or self-serving, so I always am questioning myself.”

Perhaps because of his own self-doubt, he believes that Conservatives sustain their certainty and self-worth by their very lack of self-examination, suppressing anything

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

contradictory, which might interfere with their two-dimensional worldview, as opposed to his complex view of many conflicting forces and pulls.

Questioning is key to Jess's moral discernment process. He makes a good case that introspection is itself a key moral value of Progressives. He makes moral decisions through "relentless self-examination, and then feeling what's right, while looking for faults in my morality. Those who don't question themselves are ever passionate and wrong. Being self-certain is a path straight to hell," he believes. Of course, this has its downside in never being sure of anything, and feeling tormented by decisions at every turn. Choices loom large. His whole world seems to be at stake.

What, then does he teach his daughter? He teaches her fairly basic, new age stuff: to tell the truth, to keep promises, to ask for what she wants, to allow others free choice, and to acknowledge what others give and contribute to her. Even this is a bit of a problem for him, though, given his perspective on authority, which is that authority is itself immoral and that anyone who exerts it is questionable. He is able to justify it only from the perspective of the benefit of the child or the group—servant leadership, with no element of self-service attached.

In the end, it's all relative for Jess. This torments him. Having no firm ground beyond self-examination, which could become self-deception without knowing, what is left? "Persuasion," he sighs. "What is moral is what you can get others to agree to." No wonder he spends his life finding the right words!

Jean: Sense of Connection with Authentic Being

Jean, a tall willowy single brunette, looks much younger than her fifty-one years. Her hard work as a home healthcare nurse, along with good management of her resources, has allowed her to buy a beautiful home in Northern Marin, which she is in the process of decorating. She doesn't consider herself political, but she does have a sense of citizenship. She is funny, considerate, smart, a loyal friend and family member, and a

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

member of the New Age community. She has done a great deal of spiritual and psychological work, and knows herself and her own issues intimately. She exudes gentleness and wisdom.

She was raised in a middle-class suburb of Washington DC, in a large, strongly pious Roman Catholic family, and now refers to herself as a “recovering Catholic. But I’m still run by those underlying morals I learned as a child. And I’m still moralistic about private matters,” she admitted. There were no political discussions in her home growing up.

When I asked her if morality matters, she unequivocally said yes. But then she added that from a spiritual perspective, she sees morality as simply “judgments of how I think life should be. At the spiritual level none of that matters. What matters is how you live your life day-to-day, how you treat others. Hurting other people matters. It’s relative how we define which morals matter.

The morals that matter to Jean seem more closely tied to the private sphere than the other people I talked with. When I asked her how she makes moral decisions, she answered at first “Societal codes. Many are arbitrary, I guess.” Then she added, “In the New Age community, morality is self-sourced. You have to be willing to go to that deep inner place. I have a feeling that if each person were to sit deeply with their self and be honest, they’d find core values of being a human being in a body. We have a body, a temple, to respect. When you go from that inner doorway and truly experience your connection to another, you couldn’t hurt someone.”

Jean sees a universal core of goodness and beingness at the source of all religion and ethics, which can be seen in things like the Ten Commandments, even though she couldn’t name them, and the Golden Rule, to which she adds, “keep your heart open.” That Benevolent Beingness contains everything, including all of us. “The closer we are to the essence of God or Presence, the more we can be sourced by our selves and not by externals.”

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

She considers Bush and Fundamentalists to be sourced by external rules rather than internal wisdom and truth. “ Bush is religious, but I don’t think he’s spiritual, as in being guided by the inner path. He’s caught more in ego than in essence.” Jean has been for the past few years in a serious study of the difference between ego and essence in various personality types, most of all her own, and rigorously engages with the query in her personal interactions. “ Once you’re connected to essence, it becomes less about what *I* think is *the ‘right’ way*. The more I work on myself the more I notice my moralistic judgments of others in time to stop them.”

So, how does she see her moral obligations as a citizen? Once again she responded from the private sphere. She talked about codes we follow to live together, and rules set up for safety...social rules. She tries to live non-violently in word and deed, as “we all have a violent, hurtful side. There are ways of dealing with emotions non-violently.” Her orientation is from the New Age one-on-one perspective, which says that all we can change is ourselves, and those we touch in our daily lives. Yet she did vote against Bush. When I asked her why, she said she, too, was voting for moral values. “ I was voting that I didn’t want our country run by the values running it. They believe they’re Christian. They believe they’re killing people in the cause of freedom. I don’t believe that’s necessary. War is emotion based, not essence based,” she asserted.

Jean touches people in her daily life, whether nursing or negotiating a mortgage. She believes it is important to move beyond entitlement to relationship, seeing each person as a valuable spiritual being with subjective experience, rather than someone who owes us something. Her moral values show up in everything she does, from recycling to the food she chooses and where she shops. “I want to be more awake, with my heart open. I want to break down the disconnect when I deal with strangers on the other end of the phone, to connect with their authentic being. Then we have a relationship and I can only treat them well.”

Leo: Translating Spiritual Teachings into Moral Virtues

Leo, a 76-year-old systems engineer, is a naturalized American citizen and holocaust survivor. Raised as an Orthodox Jew, he left Frankfurt on the Kindertrain at age ten, to live with family outside London. Now aged 76 and in excellent health, he spends half his year living in South America, working with a native university there to develop Rain Forest plant medicines, and training as a shaman with various native teachers. The other half of the year he spends in Berkeley, working in instrumentation and sensing systems for a project on Homeland Security. He is a second year student in a three-year program at the Foundation for Shamanic Studies.

Leo arrived at my house for brunch having had no sleep, following an all night dance party. That did not seem to in any way impair the acuity of his responses. Of the people I interviewed, he had the clearest and the most unusual system of moral discernment. His journey from Nazi Germany to the Brazilian rainforest has been a remarkable one, leaving him with immense humor and moral clarity. This small, impish man exudes *joie de vivre* and intelligence. His eyes twinkle as he speaks, with traces of his German accent still audible.

We began by discussing his decision to become an American citizen when he came to the States in his late 20's. It was a clear moral choice for him, and it remains so. Although he no longer feels completely American, due to his deepening connection to other worlds, both spiritual and geographic, it still means more to him than it does to many citizens. He described his first experience of jury duty, waiting in a room full of people "bitching and complaining" about the inconvenience. "I thought, if you had my experience, you'd be willing to put up with this for its value. I have a different experience, growing up in Nazi Germany, a different sense of America. I still appreciate that. It's still fundamentally there," he explained, tearing up a little.

Leo has always had a rebellious streak. As a child, his first exposure to a moral code was the Orthodox one of his family. As he grew older he came into contact with the old German cultural norms, and then those of the Nazi regime. He rejected them all. He

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

decided that no adult community he could see was competent or effective. “I had to accept their authority externally, because they were in charge, but I wasn’t going to accept it internally. I thought they were all crazy. None of them had a grip on reality. Finally it seemed that only animals and trees were trustworthy.” It is interesting that all these years later he is a physicist and a shaman, trusting in the reality of the unseen.

As a young Jewish man in post WWII England, of course he became involved in the founding of a Jewish homeland through the blossoming kibbutz movement, in which ideals of community and social justice were paramount. Moral issues of the day were debated as Israel was being founded by such groups of young people. While his friends went off to found a kibbutz, which is still thriving today, Leo stayed in England to care for his aging parents. He is not certain how he made that choice between private and public “goods” so long ago, but he feels that his opportunities, which were frozen then, are being actualized now in his work with UNIDAE, in Ecuador. He is involved in creating radical community there, which ruptures business as usual, as Israeli kibbutzim must have done in 1948.

In Leo’s world morality matters, and is not relative. He sees morality as a way to look at the consequences of what we do with our lives. Nor is it synonymous with values. “Values are what you value, what’s important. That doesn’t answer: what should I do? Having values doesn’t give you a way to resolve choices. Morality does. Morality gives you a way to choose.”

Leo makes moral choices through a few different methods, or sets of queries. The first is simply examining what’s pragmatic, or the best outcome. But then, best outcome for what or whom? Next he looks at right and wrong as defined by authority. This doesn’t hold much water for someone who had four different sets of authority by the age of ten, none of which made much sense. The third method he proposed was a philosophical inquiry into ethics, based on “ how do I want the world to treat me? This is different from just looking at outcomes. This involves a hierarchy of values” resembling Kohlberg’s.

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

Leo had the clearest division of public/private morality of anyone I questioned. “ In the personal realm I’m for radical honesty. My life is expendable in that realm, so truth trumps life. But if I were to be put in a position where I was being tortured for some secrets^{*}, say, then I would lie to save lives. Life would trump truth.”

So how does he know? What is the moral authority of this man who has reason to suspect the wisdom of all external authority? Often he talks it out with others sharing similar values, but that is not always available or sufficient. Then he needs to have the debate within himself, in which he goes to some “other level—emotional or sense. On a shamanic journey, I can debate it with my spiritual teachers, who don’t always agree with each other.” In the shamanic world, spiritual teachers have different foundations, he explained. Some advise wisdom and caution. Others, especially the animal spirits, are pragmatic, asking what works for survival? Whose survival, I ask him?

”In my conversations with animals it’s the survival of animal life they’re concerned with--and the survival of the Spirit of Life. That’s a powerful message for me. It’s what sent me to the jungle.” This perked my ears up. Was this 76-year-old European Jewish scientist telling me that, never having set foot on the South American continent, he rearranged his life to follow his spiritual animals to the real Rain Forest? He was. “ I was on a journey, and the usual animals appeared in my inner world as they always did. Then they asked me to come to their world, so I did. They took me to the jungle, where they showed me they were all endangered. It was difficult to deny that message. The moral choice to follow it was very compelling.”

Follow he did. Now when he probes important questions, his various teachers show up in his inner world, providing access to different levels of reality. “They don’t provide a conventional conversation about morality, but different levels of reality so I can make moral choices. The Peruvian shaman gives me other dimensions. My scientist teacher, who is skeptical of all unexamined assumptions, gives me tools for debating them.”

* Given his work, this is not entirely moot.

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

This gave me an insight about the relationship between spiritual reality and earthly reality. Morality exists here, in what the shamans call the “Middle World” between the above and below. It is our job as human beings to take spiritual truths and translate them into moral virtues for living.

Anika: Exquisite Sensitivity to Beingness and Wholeness

Anika, curvy blonde angelic-looking Pagan Priestess and psychologist of fifty-two with sad, laughing eyes earns a good living as an author and teacher on the New Age circuit. She has just returned to her home in Sonoma County from the East Coast, and is en route to either Europe or Costa Rica, where she gives workshops on the Eastern spirituality and Western psychology, about which her knowledge is encyclopedic. When she’s not teaching, she comes to dinner, because she is passionate and brilliant about spirituality, politics, and human evolution. She considers herself deeply religious even though she is not churched, because “there’s no church I’ve found that holds my spirituality.” She is very involved in her community, however, and regularly hosts gatherings for friends of more than twenty years, whom I am pleased to be among.

In her family, issues of right and wrong were not discussed beyond being taught to tell the truth and to be considerate. “I guess the main wrong was being selfish,” she mused. She attended a variety of churches in her childhood years, in Ohio and Southern California, until her family finally settled on Christian Science when she was twelve. There she learned: perfection is the natural state; all problems are illusions and come from errors in thinking; there is a Divine power; there is no punishing God; God is love; and “All is Infinite Mind in its Infinite Manifestations.” It’s easy to see how this would have formed the foundations of her metaphysics. The theology of a Mother/ Father God gave her the basis of her feminist spirituality and worship of the Divine Feminine.

Like so many of her peers, she split with her family and her church over Viet Nam, when she saw the discrepancy between Christian teachings and the support of genocidal mayhem. That was her first awareness of world-related right and wrong. “There was no

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

bridge to the public domain,” she explained. “It was all seen as personal. Most organized religion is about personal, as opposed to public, morality. That’s why Christians can support this war, yet not support abortion. The moral issues of the Right are all personal and body-oriented---all about what an individual does with her own body, all issues that middle American parents would have with a teenager.”

That rupture began her quest, which continues to this day, for her own spiritual evolution and the spiritual evolution of humanity. She took psychedelics, which “opened me up to a larger vista. I saw through the shallowness of consensual reality and the values of the culture. It allowed me to pierce through the maya to other layers of reality.” It was then that she became a thinker and questioner. She studied philosophy and mind, for awhile lived alone in the woods, fasted, and began to discover elements and interpenetrating planes of reality pertaining to chakras.

With all this one might expect Anika to be a moral relativist, but she vehemently eschews radical relativism. She finds clear, obvious distinctions related to good and evil, forcing her to be very clear about where she stands and why. To her, morality is a bodily experience. “Things are real, not abstract,” she said adamantly.” It’s not abstract principles, it’s simple cause and effect---what you put into your body affects your health. That’s real. Karma is a real experience.” For her the basis of discernment is what she calls an “exquisite sensitivity. I feel the Beingness of things. So I’m not capable of reifying people or life. I can’t divorce myself from others’ interior experience. That has real value to me. Other peoples’ pain is painful to me. I see it all as whole.”

Anika, too, is a pragmatist in her moral process. It’s cause and effect, mediated by feeling function. “Jung said the feeling function is the value function,” she reminds me. Negative consequences are what make something wrong, people suffering and dying for unnecessary reasons. Apropos Iraq, she said, “Our motives aren’t pure. It’s causing immense suffering for what? First strike is morally reprehensible, our motives are morally reprehensible—it’s selfish and short-sighted.”

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

She considers collective morality vitally important as a framework upon which we build. “You can’t build a house out of rotten timber or a society without a moral basis. Morality is the perimeters, dimensions, and structure. The moral question we should be asking is: does this create the kind of world we want to live in?”

“Morals are based on values; morals are what you do. I’m responsible first to and for myself, then my family, then my clients, students, public, neighbors... right up to ‘all my relations’ as the Native Americans say.” That means she feels a sense of moral responsibility as a citizen to be as awake as possible and to awaken others, to stay informed, and to take action when possible, like going to the big marches, and writing letters.

What is her moral authority? Once again, I am told, “I am my own moral authority. I haven’t found anything else, a doctrine I can wholly accept over my own sensibilities.” But that moral authority occurs in community and in dialogue with trusted others, as I can attest as her friend of nearly twenty-five years. “Difficult moral decisions require soul-searching in community. I seek counsel with others I respect, people I consider capable of seeing intricacies and depth, consonant with my values.”

In the end, the bottom line for Anika is integrity, in the true sense of preserving the wholeness of life, and being responsible for the effects we cause. “I don’t pee in a pool because I don’t want to swim in pee. Our actions impact the fabric of the whole. We have to respect it to have it remain whole.”

Conclusion: Relational Pragmatism Grounded in Introspection

What can we take from these interviews to help us lay a foundation for Progressive moral politics that bridge to those good working people in red states who don't want moral mayhem and don't see Liberals providing an alternative to it? There was no simple sloganeering answer here, no equivalent of Fundamentalist bumper sticker morality. Yet there was a definite moral sense common to those I interviewed. The commonality had more to do with their process of discernment than with actual rules.

All my subjects said they were their own moral authority, in the end trusting their own conscience to make final determinations. But that does not mean they make their determinations in a vacuum. The people I interviewed having a sense of some "higher power" had an easier time, and were more secure with their answers, believing that there is some core truth, whether or not we can fully know it. They felt it was up to them to discern and interpret these spiritual principles into action in the material world, to the best of their ability. The one secular humanist was at more of a loss, at the mercy of moral relativism.

Nearly everyone cited the Ten Commandments as a starting point, with some belief in their universality. But they went on to say these commandments are open to interpretation. "What is adultery? What is murder?" they asked, feeling it incumbent upon them to provide an answer. It seemed to my subjects that human beings must interpret and know how they are interpreting principles, rather than blindly obey any external authority. They viewed this as a moral obligation.

It might surprise the Conservatives, who accuse Liberals of abdicating personal responsibility, to know that every person I interviewed spoke of feeling profoundly responsible for their moral choices. Because my subjects are cognizant that they are interpreting principles and discerning moral actions, they self examine arduously. By contrast, Fundamentalists, who believe they are following God's teachings without interpretation, may have less need to do so.

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

These people are not, and never will be, content to merely obey. They think, feel, empathize, question themselves, go deep inside, read, and consult with their trusted confidantes, living or imaginal, to make important moral choices. They ask: What is the impact of their actions, and will that achieve the kind of world they want for themselves and their descendents? Far from being morally irresponsible, they feel the weight of moral responsibility heavy upon them, and take it seriously----too seriously to default to a rote answer provided by the past or some external authority. This gives rise to a new sort of American character, combining the individual entrepreneurial virtue of a Ben Franklin with the transcendent introspection of an Emerson, then tested against Dewey's Pragmatism.

This emergent system of moral decision-making creates suspicion between the Conservative culture of obedience and the Liberal culture of introspection, relationship, and pragmatism. For those to whom obedience holds the key to morality, people going inward with a sense of interconnectedness could look relativistic. Without the language to affirm such Progressive underpinnings as real, and grounded in core values that are unshakable, even those who hold such views could think them relativistic. In probing, however, I did not find them to be so.

Based on these interviews, Progressives seem to have a strong moral code. Not one invoked the language of rights or entitlement. Instead their ideals were based in introspection, community, connectedness to others and life itself, and an eye on the effects of our choices, as litmus tests of virtue. There was a strong sense of individual agency and choice making. Their sense of citizenship combines self-efficacy with relatedness. Overall, their worldview was one of empathy and interconnection, rather than one of victim/helper.

I put the values I encountered in talking with these educated, thoughtful Progressives into four categories, emerging from four core beliefs.

1. *GOD'S STILL SPEAKING: Looking Inward.* They do not believe that God was Biblically revealed, and is now silent. Rather, as the UCC states boldly, God is

- still speaking. In this mystical view, access to the Divine resides in the inner voice each of us can hear, if we are willing to listen. This view of God fits an anti-authoritarian, anti-institutional view of sacred dialogue as needing no mediator. Each of us can have a personal relationship with revelation, from an immanent divine core. We trust the reality of the unseen, and a felt sense of things beyond the rational. There is right and wrong, and it is up to each one of us to go inside in order to hear our inner, felt sense of moral truth, by whatever name we call it. This requires spiritual discipline, cultivated through our individual connection with something greater.
2. *ALL MY RELATIONS: Feeling Connection.* Life is one. We are interconnected, from the air we breathe to the spiritual matrix we occupy. Our actions affect one another in real and important ways. We have a moral obligation to consider the subjectivity of the other. Believing ourselves to be separate forms the ground from which evil springs. Our sense of connection is evident in our actions, from the way we speak to a stranger (Do we objectify them as someone who is simply in the our way?) to the places we shop (What is the effect of our choices on the earth or children in Indonesia?). We do not support unjust wars because we feel connected to those people being bombed across the sea. Another's hurt hurts us. Our sense of connection requires us to protest and vote our values. It demands fairness, inclusion, and respect for difference.
 3. *CONSULT IN COMMUNITY: Getting Others' Perspectives.* This is a direct outcome of the postmodern worldview, in which we recognize that none of us can see the complete picture in any given situation. For these Progressives, moral decision-making, while being ultimately a solitary act of conscience, definitely involved consulting with others in their circle. In the absence of formal institutional structures of accountability, these folks cultivate their own communities of memory, and feel accountable to answer to them. For example, one woman was making the difficult decision to leave her husband of nearly twenty years when interviewed. She was weighing her own need to move on, after years of trying to make it work, against her loyalty and genuine caring for him.

The Moral Commonwealth
Final Paper

She deliberated and probed her values during our conversation, as she had with others in her community. We are accountable to communities for our choices.

4. *CONSIDER THE CONSEQUENCES: Looking Outward.* There was a lot of talk about the effect of ones actions as ground for examination of good and evil, although the word “evil” was not used much. It was agreed that actions with hurtful consequences for others are bad, while actions with positive consequences for the world as a whole are probably good. A world that is not fair and just for large numbers of people ultimately is not workable. To highlight this, Jess points to Rumsfeld’s statement, “ We are making enemies faster than we can kill them.” We must consider the effects of our actions in ever widening circles of relationship, from our families to our planet.

It is the use of all three of these methods in combination that allows Progressives to make moral judgments they can feel clear and content with. By following their felt sense of connection with all others, by looking at the consequences of their actions on others—all of whom matter, and finally, by going inside in a prayerful, rigorous, or meditative way, they find clear direction that goes beyond obedience to genuine moral responsibility.

This has placed Progressives in a predicament when called upon to defend our ideals. “God said so” easily trumps “ I say so,” as moral authority. Yet as I queried, I found “I say so”, to have strong roots in beliefs about the nature of reality as it reveals itself to us. In this worldview, we can claim moral ground by claiming a still revelating God, innate and accessible to all of us, calling upon us to enact the work of liberation and relationship. This God reveals Godself to us through nature, through inner exploration, through relationship, through the wisdom of scripture, through our felt sense, and through pressing all of that against the actual consequences and effects of our actions in the world, for which we, as its inhabitants, are ultimately responsible, and to which we, as its stewards, are accountable.