

Winning, Money, and Ego

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Ah, the trifecta of despicable, but all too common human motivations. I'm sure there are many more that could be added to the list, but that trio has been on my mind recently. I am sick to death of seeing those particular predilections everywhere I turn in the media, and I'm writing about them just in case anyone else is similarly fed up.

Winning

Vince Lombardi, the now long-dead but still-famous coach of the NFL's Green Bay Packers, was quoted as saying: "*Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing.*" Lombardi wasn't the first person to say that, and he reportedly objected to the quote, protesting that it was taken out of context and referred only to "the will to win" or "making an effort," but no matter. Now the quote might as well be carved into his head stone as an epitaph. America loves its football coaches (look how much they are paid...), and all the heavy-duty, top-gun coaches are put on pedestals and extolled as "winners."

OK, winning may not be everything, but, for too many ambitious people in this country, it might as well be. This goes far beyond sports. It applies obviously in business, where winning means success by inventing a better mouse trap, selling it like hotcakes, and getting rich, but it is equally a factor in every arena where human beings compete, including religion, science, and academia. To an overwhelming degree, politics in this country is about winning — acquiring and holding onto power. By politics, I mean not only individuals running for office, but the organizations and institutions that support them. Another term for this aggregate group is the *permanent political class*.

The Republicans in particular have given in completely to winning — by any means possible, no matter how sleazy. As a result, they've relinquished even the façade of humanity, as well as most of their conservative principles. If the Republicans could disenfranchise every Democratic voter, they would. If nuking Iran would help them win an election, they'd gleefully authorize the launch codes. Look at how the Republicans have handled the pandemic.

On the other hand, the Democrats have learned to win by *not* winning, which leads me to the second topic:

Money

As one of my friends says, "*Money itself isn't evil. What's evil if the inordinate love of money.*" And that inordinate love of money (I'd say lust for money) lurks inside many an American heart.

What can be said about money, and our obsession with it, that hasn't been said a thousand times before? Not one damned word. Where human greed is concerned, there's nothing new under the sun. You'd think that we've have learned enough about greed by now to outgrow or at least turn away from it at least a little, but apparently not. Greed (often masquerading as "self interest") seems to underpin so much of what human beings do. Not that every single person is motivated by greed. Many people either don't suffer the illness for one reason or another, or they manage to hold it in check. Still, money does indeed make the world go 'round, and almost everyone I know (including me) factors money into their decisions, actions, and life strategies.

But back to the Democrats. Strangely enough, they're not obsessed with winning, but they sure are driven by lust for money. If the Dems really cared about winning, they'd spend a lot more of their time and energy speaking to the most potentially powerful but disenfranchised demographic among the American people — those on the bottom half of the economic wealth ladder, who are typically referred to as "the poor." These Americans comprise the largest block of non-voters in the county and represent the largest untapped resource in electoral politics.

If the Dems wanted to win elections and take over the reins of government once and for all, they would address the very real needs of the poor much more overtly and strenuously, rather than in the casual and throw-away terms they do, which amount to little more than lip service. They would work overtime to encourage the poor to register and vote by offering policies that might actually help them, such as a living wage and universal health care. If the Dems did this, they'd win every election in a landslide, from national and state offices right down to local dog catcher. But they don't.

Why? Because in America poverty is considered a sin and a disease. As a sin, poverty marks one as deficient in all the important ways: intellectually, morally, and ambitiously. In the harsh judgments of social darwinism, if you're poor, it's your own damned fault. Impoverishment means that you're stupid and, even worse, lazy. (In prosperity gospel, it might even mean that God doesn't love you.) As a disease, being poor is akin to being a leper in the 19th century or an Untouchable in India's old caste system. Poverty is disgusting and might be contagious, so we avoid contact with the poor in every way we can.

So, the Democrats ignore the poor and spend almost all their time courting the wealthy and the so-called "middle-class" — the suburban vote — which means those in the financial top 30%. Those groups comprise the donor class. That's

where the money is. The Republicans are more out-front about being solely for the wealthy, but the Democrats aren't that far behind. What the Dems apparently care about most is keeping their coffers full.

Ego

OK, I understand our obsessions with winning and money. I don't like them, but I get why they're so powerful as motivators. What I *don't* understand is people who seem to believe that ego is their friend. Or, even worse, that ego is who they actually are.

The dictionary defines ego as "*a person's sense of self-importance or self-esteem.*" In psychoanalysis, it's "*the part of the mind that mediates between the conscious and the unconscious and is responsible for reality testing and a sense of personal identity.*" Yeah, well, OK.

Then there's *egoism* versus *egotism*. What's the difference? Both egoism and egotism are marked by a preoccupation with oneself, but egotism adds the extra dimension of natural or innate superiority. The egoist is self-absorbed, in effect, self-consumed. The egotist, however, also believes him or herself to be superior to others in whatever ways are deemed important in a given context — skill, talent, beauty, intellect, morality, ambition, creativity, etc. *I'm important and special, and I'm better than you.*

I came of age in the late 1960s. As a child, I didn't fit very well into mainstream culture, and the alternative subculture of my late adolescence gave me the social niche I needed. My compatriots and I had already rejected much of mainstream American values (or so we thought at the time) and were enthralled with experimentation and self-discovery. We dived headfirst into various disciplines (both ancient and modern): meditation, Tai Chi, mind-expanding drugs, natural medicine, organic food, etc. Sure, we were young and foolish, and the Buddhism and New Age Metaphysics that we embraced weren't especially nuanced in our understanding. Much of what I did during those halcyon early years proved ephemeral, such as living in communes and doing drugs.

Other parts proved foundational, however. Astrology is one obvious example. It's continued shaping my life-journey for 50 years. And certain dimensions of spirituality from that time put down deep roots. I own an original first edition of *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass. I haven't looked at it for 40 years, but the book still resonates. That was one of many references that carried the message that ego was a trickster and *not* our friend. Even today, I remember reading, although I can't remember where, that Hindu Yogis were encouraged to strive to develop *siddhis* (powers), but then refrain from using them. That was a revelation.

Basically, my understanding of ego is that it is the illusion that one is the center of the universe. Although ego is not the same to me as arrogance, there is an element of hubris that seems to accompany our attachment to ego. Who we

truly are as individuals is mysterious and resists easy definition, but the ego claims to be the answer. "*I am who you are,*" says the ego.

While I don't think it's possible to transcend the seductions of ego completely or perfectly, the people I've most respected throughout my life have all worked in that direction. They want their egos to be servants, not masters. What surprises me is the number of Americans who seem to move intentionally in the opposite direction, toward the exaltation and glorification of their egos, in effect surrendering to them. Apparently many people are quite comfortable with that, believing it to be natural and correct. I regard it as a sad delusion. To me, it's a kind of arrested childhood, as if we reached the point of selfhood in early development (typically known as the *Terrible Twos* — "*I, Me, Mine*") and somehow got stuck there for the rest of our lives.

Needless to say, Donald Trump is the poster-child for self-aggrandizing ego. But he has tons of company among Americans, some of whom occupy social positions of power and influence. Most of these others are less overt than the Donald, not nearly so bold and in-your-face about revealing the belief in their self-importance. They pose as less egotistical than they are to avoid social censure. But watch what they do and how they live, and we see the unmistakable stamp of egoism/egotism.

In my study of history, I haven't discovered any societies or cultures that solved these problems of motivation, and I don't regard America as worse than most of them in such ways. Civilization has reached a crossroads in the 21st century, however, one that is unlike any other crisis ever faced by humanity. If we are to survive, we have to change.

I'm not sure that's even possible, but maturing past these three motivations — our obsession with winning, our lust for money, and our collective egomania — might be a good place to start.