

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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The Collapse of Principle

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Unfortunately one of the most consistent themes in human existence is conflict. People unable to get along. Groups at odds with one another. Nations glaring at each from behind cocked guns.

Conflict comes in countless shapes and sizes. Yet, after centuries of conflict, humanity has found only two ways to deal with it.

- One is to settle differences through the use of power.
- The other is to subordinate "getting my way" to a set of principles that transcend self-interest.

Ultimately, every approach to conflict boils down to either an appeal to power or an appeal to principle.

Bigger Than All of Us

For principle to hold sway, however, it must be bigger than all of us. Everyone must agree to it and value it. Indeed, we must value it so highly that we continue to respect it, even when principle works against personal self-interest.

It's that kind of principle – what we might call transcendent principle – that is sorely in jeopardy today. It has been assailed by the swelling tide of ethical, moral, and cultural relativism. If "everything is relative," as some are prone to say, not only are there no absolutes, there are no transcendent principles, either.

Which means that, in a vacuum of principle, there is ultimately nothing to bridle "might makes right" and unrestrained self-interest. Winning becomes everything in business and politics, no matter who or what gets trampled in the process.

In the absence of transcendent principles, civilized political discussion gives way to shrill shouting matches, name-calling, character-assassination, and malicious mistreatment of the other side. The conversation is no longer about principles, but about destroying the opponent and drowning out his voice. The issue is power, not principle.

The Tyranny of Consensus

As transcendent principles lose their grasp, laws and court decisions become a mere extension of the current consensus, which makes for a terrible form of tyranny. If consensus is absolute, there is no challenge to the status quo (other than toppling it by force), since minority viewpoints have no higher principle to appeal to.

To take an example from our own history, the prevailing consensus once condoned slaveholding in America. Voices of freedom were able to challenge that practice by appealing to transcendent principles. Absent those principles their only recourse for change would have been violence.

Moreover, when consensus alone determines "what is right," both "right" and "rights" become fickle things. They have no more permanence than the next change in consensus. "Consensus makes right" can be as arbitrary and despotic as "might makes right."

Principles-Based Professions

As relativism has spread, critical professions (such as accounting and law) have moved from being principles-based to rules-based. This has appealed to practitioners, partially because it's often easier to hide behind a set of rules than to stand by an interpretation of principles that has angered a client.

But in the wake of disasters like Enron, we are discovering that rules-based accounting is inadequate. No one can ever close all the loopholes. Why? Because those who write the rules can never anticipate all the clever devices that self-aggrandizement will invent to get around the rules.

On the national scene many now call for a return to principles-based accounting. But while that sounds like a simple solution on the surface, it may be far more difficult in practice. Principles-based accounting is possible only if there is universal agreement on the governing principles. Which, in today's relativistic climate, is no longer assured.

Emphasizing Principles

In our contemporary culture of lax values, it's hard to imagine a corporation or institution putting too much emphasis on overarching principles. Years ago it might have been plausible to presume that everyone your business hired or who joined your organization shared the same set of principles. Today that's a risky assumption.

Nor is it enough to talk merely of corporate values. We need to emphasize the transcendent principles from which those values derive. People raised in a relativistic society do not necessarily connect lists of values with transcendent principles. They may easily understand corporate values as merely the "current corporate consensus," open to change and revision tomorrow. If so, then corporate values lose much of their normative force.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately because of my direct involvement with bringing character training to the schools and universities of Russia. The Russians are perceptive enough to know that democracy and capitalism cannot prevail without a sense of transcendent values and principles.

I wonder if America is forgetting that truth. And if so, where it will take us.

Resilient Democracy

Even though I've written pointedly in this issue about contemporary threats to democracy, as a historian I'm struck by its resilient strength.

By the time the United States entered the Second World War, democracy was hanging on by its fingernails. Except for the United Kingdom and Switzerland, Europe was entirely under Fascist or Marxist rule. Outside of North America, colonial rule, dictatorships, and military governments prevailed. Fewer than ten true democracies still existed, most of them former bastions of the British Empire.

How different the world looked at the end of the twentieth century. Fascism was a distant memory. Marxism was gone in Russia and Eastern Europe and crumbling elsewhere. Yet, democracy was in ascendancy around the globe.

Five hundred years from now historians are likely to look back on the triumph of democracy as the most amazing feat of the twentieth century. They will marvel at how it beat back the military weight of totalitarianism, as well as an ideological onslaught of Marxism, Facism, and counter-culture revolutionaries. My question now is this: will democracy also withstand an ideological assault from a form of relativism that has no place for transcendent principles?

Historical Footnote

The Greek city states, the first experiment in constitutional democracy, were reluctant to put their constitutions in writing. Their reticence grew out of a specific concern. If constitutions were written down, they feared, court cases would devolve into arguments about definitions of words in the document rather than discussions of the principles behind it. A rather perceptive concern, don't you think?

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