

The Psychodynamics of Cynicism

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At the risk of sounding New-Agey or flaky, I pose the following questions: why is it that babies and toddlers can look us straight in the eye, yet adults can't look each other straight in the eye? and, what makes me feel that I had to preface these questions with a disclaimer about sounding "New Agey" and "flaky"?

There are lots of rational answers to these questions that you don't have to be a psychoanalyst to provide. But I think that there is an answer that goes deeper into our psyches, and it has to do with the psychodynamics of cynicism. In my view, we have to work through the psychological meanings of our collective cynicism in order to build a social movement. In fact, I think that cynicism is the biggest single psychological obstacle to the politics of meaning.

What is cynicism, exactly? We talk about it a lot in these pages, but what is its essence? Cynicism, it seems to me, is our attempt to avoid a painful feeling of vulnerability to rejection and to shame. So, in regard to my first question about babies and children, I'd say this: From open-eyed contact to the averted gaze, the course of normal development in our culture involves the gradual acquisition of a shame-based cynicism.

Children learn that the eyes are openings to the self, as well as means of connecting to other selves. And they learn that openness and connection mean vulnerability. They come to experience the possibility that they can reveal themselves, their longings and needs, to the other and be rejected or, worse at times, ignored. And when a child is expressing something authentic and the environment fails to mirror that child, at best, or rejects him or her at worst, the result is a private sense of humiliation and self-blame. The child thinks: something is wrong with me, something that makes me repulsive or insignificant. Children always assume responsibility for their own disappointment and rejection. So, they close their eyes, narrow their gaze, avert their desire for authentic connection, and develop the subtle but hard shell of "cynical realism" as they grow up.

I qualified my opening question with the preemptive comment about sounding New Agey and flaky because I didn't want to appear naively idealistic. After all, the kind of innocence that we accept in babies is surely rather foolish in adults, and appearing foolish would be quite shameful. I wanted to establish an alliance with the reader - in which we have a mutual understanding that I'm a "savvy psychoanalyst," fully aware of how ridiculous childlike vulnerability would be in the real, adult world.

Some of my reasons for this embarrassment about sounding too naïve or idealistic stem from my personal experience. For instance, nothing took my father by surprise and, as far as I could see as his son, nothing seemed to shake him up or disrupt his "knowing" view of the world, even if that view tended to be pessimistic and rather cynical. But my father was also not unique. To many of us in this culture, there is nothing more foolish than naïve idealism, nothing more shameful than to believe in something and to be disappointed, nothing more humiliating than to need something and to be rebuffed.

This kind of personal story gets played out so often in our society that it has resonance wherever we look. I guess this is why I have problems with Wolf Blitzer and Bill Schneider, commentators on CNN. These "in-the-know, savvy men, take moments of potential meaning - like a State of the Union address, reports of Serbian atrocities, the O.J. trial, the 1994 elections, and tell us what it all "really" means. And what it always "really" means is that nothing is as it seems: that our visceral and intuitive sensibilities are naïve and unreliable, and everything that we see and experience is the product of cynical manipulation.

Idealism and ethics can seem embarrassing in public life. As Marianne Williamson put it, 'It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.'

I can't stand this attitude. I saw it in my family, I see it in myself. I can almost sympathize with the fact that there is nothing Bill Schneider or Sam Donaldson or David Brinkley would dread more than to be moved by the beauty or tragedy of something that they're covering. Their identities are organized around an unconscious pre-occupation with *never* appearing naively emotional or foolishly "taken in" by the positive or negative emotional meanings of anything that they cover. They are moved by the same psychodynamics of cynicism as I am when I make a self-deprecating joke about sounding flaky, or when a child learns to narrow his or her gaze.

So it's not my father or yours. And it's not just TV's talking heads or a candidate's spin-doctors. It's in all of us. It's personal and social. It's highly private and very public.

I have a friend who dreads the end of his Shabbat service because the rabbi always says to turn to the person next to you and say, "*Shabbat Shalom*." My friend has the terrible anxiety that the person next to him won't want to reciprocate, that he or she will not respond when he puts his hand out. It's never happened, of course, and my friend knows it's irrational. But we can all imagine the embarrassment of putting a hand out in friendship and having it ignored.

These small and intimate moments of shame are real or potential dangers in much of everyday life, private as well as public. For example, a patient of mine was talking about her anxiety about climaxing; she fantasized that she was too visible when she was excited, that she would lose control of her excitement, and that unless her partner was at least as excited, she would feel ashamed, as if she were "on display."

I would argue that this dynamic is related to George Will's cynical determination never to be carried away with a passion for anything, or excitement about any "cause." His version of climaxing in public is for any social or political event to arouse his emotions too much. And weren't the "hit" pieces about Hillary Clinton - mocking her as "Saint Hillary," an adolescent moralist, under the sway of her "guru" Michael Lerner - really expressions of embarrassment about this woman talking about such feelings and ideals *in public*?

The personal and the political. The one draws from the other. From the family to the culture and back again. I learned to feel ashamed of naïve expressions of love or dependence in my family. I developed a tendency to be sarcastic, self-effacing, and cynical as a defense. Similarly, as a citizen, I have had my hopes repeatedly stimulated and dashed and so have developed a cynical defense in the civic realm as well. The Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Jr., the anti-war movement, the Left, Clinton - all elicited hope in me that was in some way unfulfilled. As a citizen, I'm lied to, manipulated, exposed to constant double-talk and cynical demagoguery. Cynicism comes naturally to me as a citizen as well as a child in the Bader family.

But whether it's personal or political, cynicism is the best solution that one can come up with to protect oneself from humiliation. Cynicism reflects a natural adaptation to conditions of danger. Whether the danger is to be encouraged by Bill Clinton, only to have to listen to him compromise on welfare and health care, or to be personally rejected by a loved one, cynicism is an attempt to make sense of the world in order to make the best of it and protect yourself from the ever-present dangers of relaxing your guard.

It's important to understand cynicism and to appreciate how it functions as the best personal solution to a social reality experienced as dangerous. It's rational within the constraints that we perceive around us. I mean constraints such as the *reality* that we *are*, in fact, being manipulated and exploited and betrayed all of the time by corporations and politicians. Similarly, it's rational to respond to repeated rejections or neglect within a family by lowering one's expectations and by complying with one's mistreatment. I come unconsciously to *agree* with the way I'm treated by my parents because they have an awesome authority to define reality and morality for me. Love and caring, awe and admiration, idealism and dependence - all can come to feel potentially embarrassing if displayed too directly or publicly, in a family or in our lives as citizens.

So we can see that idealism and ethics can seem embarrassing in public life. And there is nothing more embarrassing than the politics of meaning. Nothing. You can hear the sneers of the cynical and hard-bitten insiders when Michael Lerner talks about spiritual sensitivity or Peter Gabel talks about connection. Their contempt - I should say, *our* contempt, because I believe that this is an incipient reaction in most of us - is a powerful reflex, a reflex triggered, I believe, by an unconscious process.

Here's how I think it works: Words like caring, kindness, meaning, community, sensitivity, connection, love, and even God - when introduced into a political discourse - threaten to remind us of what we long for but have had to give up or suppress. They stir up an appetite, you might say, for these kinds of relationships and experiences. But along with the appetites goes the danger of being foolish and humiliated if we acknowledge and insist on our right to have them. This danger has roots in our childhoods and in our everyday social experience. So we do what psychoanalysis has described so well - we identify with the aggressor and treat our own appetites as if they were once treated by others, and still are treated by others 0 namely, we reject and devalue them. We attack our own longings as forbidden and dangerous. First we do it to ourselves and then to others. We adopt the voice of the cynical Other: the parent, the media image, the corporation, the politician. Then we're safe; we don't have to be vulnerable to humiliation. We're on the inside, now, adult insiders and not pathetic and naïve children. Then we do it to others. We treat the idealist as a fool, dismiss the language of love as naïve, and mock the politics of meaning as a kind of touchy-feely navel-gazing. We feel safer, restored. Everything is really pretty corrupt. Goodness is a pipe dream. What a relief! What a lonely and depressing relief.

For the politics of meaning to get across and be heard, we have to talk about and challenge cynicism all of the time. We have to appreciate how shameful it is to let oneself express hope and compassion and to expect it from others. We have to defend our right to insist on these values in the face of the inevitable resistance and embarrassment that this evokes in ourselves and others. For, as Marianne Williamson put it, "It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us."

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