

Consumer Hedonism and the Formation of Morals
A Talk by Kim Cooper, delivered 8/7/2016
At Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

Reading: by Doug Muder

“The beginning of a productive liberal/conservative dialog is for both sides to acknowledge that we share a nightmare, a Dystopia:

- Where all relationships are transient.
- Where life is cheap.
- Where winning is everything.
- Where no one will sacrifice for the common good.
- Where impulse satisfaction outweighs any consequences.
- Where the innocent are not protected.
- Where the old are cast aside and the next generation is left to raise itself.
- Where profit is the ultimate argument, and money answers all questions.
- Where no one is willing to stand on principle and truth doesn't matter.

“We both see that path and we both don't want to go there. In theory, we could work together to avoid it. But in practice we can't even talk about it in a civil tone. Why? Because we both forget what we've been struggling against, and instead imagine that we've been struggling with each other.”

It appears to me that the source of moral decay we are seeing in America today – the decline of honesty, the increase in violence and exploitation – that the Right blames on the Left and the Left blames on the Right – is really due to neither, but is due to some third group that no one sees because each thinks it's part of its opposite. Slowly, I've been seeing others come up with a similar theory that reassures me I am on the right track. One is a spectacular sermon by Doug Muder, who writes for UU World, my favorite magazine. I was very tempted just to read it to you whole. I will be quoting it extensively –It's called Right and Left Together, and was delivered in the Quincy UU church in November, 2006.

The other main concept I want to address today is that of internal and external consciences.(Are you an inny or an outy?) Though I first ran across this concept in the early 70's in a sociology class, I want today to credit Andrew Bard Schmookler and an essay of his called “Moral Endo Skeletons and Exoskeletons: a Perspective on America's Cultural Divide and Current Crisis”.

There's a quip going around that says "If you think the 60's were good, you are probably a liberal, if you think the sixties were bad, you're probably a conservative." What were the values of the sixties? Peace and Love, Fairness, Community, individual choice, spiritual growth, freedom, and yes, hedonism. The sixties loosened sexual mores and made divorce more acceptable. While the red states are the ones who decry this loosening most loudly, still it is also true that the red states also have the highest divorce rates, highest rates of unwed pregnancy, and the highest rates of domestic violence. Schmookler says "The sleazy TV and movies the traditionalist and Christian Right denounce so energetically also tend to have their highest ratings in the same parts of the country most populated by such people."

Liberals tend to jump to the conclusion that this is just plain old hypocrisy – deliberate dishonesty and posturing in public. But, is it?

These same conservatives look at liberals and assume that they must be living lives of sin and debauchery – because they can't understand how liberals could possibly live well-ordered lives as hard-working and law-abiding citizens, as responsible and dedicated family people if liberals do not believe in their firm moral structures and absolute rules of moral conduct. They think that if you do not have a firm and specific moral structure, you must have none at all.

What is happening here? Why is everyone looking past each other? These misunderstandings come from the two groups having different moral structures.

A student of Schmookler's came up with the terms he uses – she said she didn't need society to give her a lot of rules because she's got her moral beliefs firmly inside of her, a sort of moral endo-skeleton. But American traditionalists -- morality, for them, is a sort of exo-skeleton. They rely on external moral structures like laws, punishments, and active disapproval to keep them within the moral confines in which they believe. So traditionalists have felt the loss of a moral consensus far more than liberals. Liberals have often failed to understand how genuinely threatening a loosening of moral standards can be to an exo-skeleton person who deeply wants to toe the line but needs help doing it.

Meanwhile, those of us with an endo-skeleton structure, who can live moral and orderly lives even if we live in an "anything goes" society, have our own blindneses. In the 60's we simply tore down many of society's moral structures and assumed all would be well. Schmookler says "What many in our counter culture did, I believe, was to look at themselves – in their 'liberated' state --- and imagine that they saw human nature in its pristine state. But in reality, most of the middle-class youth – brought up in the 1940s and 1950's – who comprised the counterculture had already internalized a great many of the disciplines – moral and otherwise—of traditional American culture."

He goes on to say...

"Our endo-skeletons made the social enforcement of norms and standards and morals unnecessary.

"For us, that is. Meanwhile, the rest of society was not identical to us endo-skeletons. And there, the costs of the cultural loosening have been more visible."

It is as though a boat was tipped by the left, but it was the right that got wet."

I was really struck by that metaphor – we liberal boomers blithely “tipped the boat”, but, as young people do, we missed that we were causing other people real pain.

Schmookler doesn't go into it, but we do know what is it that makes our children grow up with either a moral endoskeleton or exoskeleton. In the book *Don't Think of an Elephant*, linguist George Lakoff introduced two types of families, the Strict Father and the Nurturant Parent.

It's the Strict Father, authoritarian, fear-based punishment-and-reward system that produces a moral exoskeleton, because, as psychology tells us, punishment and reward teaches that there is no intrinsic value to correct behavior. On the other hand, remember Dr. Spock? Yes, what he taught us in *Baby and Child-Rearing* is what produces an internal conscience. Reinforcing good behavior, modeling good behavior, explaining good behavior, warm, caring parenting, with clear and consistent expectations. Yes, what Lakoff called the Nurturant parent, produces an individual with an internalized conscience, whereas neither permissive nor authoritarian parenting does.

So, somewhat ironically, it turns out, that both believing that children are basically evil and need fear and punishment to behave, and believing that children are basically good and need nurturant guidance to bring out their innate goodness – both of these are self-fulfilling prophecies.

But Schmookler does call for us to invent a new form of the external moral system, one that is less oppressive, because it is the very oppression that produces the darker tendencies that erupt when the restraints are loosened. He goes on:

“What is needed this time around is not a wanton rejection of the old structures, replacing them with nothing. We endo-skeletons must understand more fully the structures that hold us together. We must understand, that is, that the endo-skeleton is not nothing.

“And, more, we need to understand that the endo-skeleton does not come from nothing. It is the **internalization** of the order the growing creature encounters around him/her.

“And no skeleton at all is a recipe for falling apart.”

With the moral exoskeleton in tatters, Consumer Hedonism has rushed in to fill the gap.

Doug Muder recounts a story, he says a “friend told me about his son, a young man not too far out of high school. The son works an unskilled job, and seems to have no plan for doing more with his life. Now, under other circumstances that lack of career ambition could be downright admirable -- if, say, it meant that he had rejected materialism and was putting his energy into doing good or making art or even just appreciating this beautiful world. But, as his father tells the story, it just reflects a lack of depth, a failure to grasp that something important is going on in life. If the son can keep gas in his car and occasionally buy something for his girl friend – well, what more is there?”

“Assuming that this young man really is the way I've imagined him, what religion does he belong to today? Because whatever it is, I think that's the religion that's winning.

“The superficial approach to life, the belief that you buy some things and satisfy some desires and that's all there is -- who teaches that? This other religion, which is neither liberal nor conservative nor even moderate, is actually in control.”

This religion may not look like what we think of as a religion – after all there is no towering cathedral that calls itself the Church of Consumer Hedonism, (unless you consider the Big Box stores). No temple where people get together to commit themselves to the superficial life and preach the Consumer Hedonism theology or sing Consumer Hedonism hymns, (unless it's the malls). So it's tempting not to think of it as a religion. Muder says Consumer Hedonism looks different from other religions because it is the dominant religion of our society. You can't see it because it's like water to a fish.

Muder says:

“The fundamental questions a religion needs to answer aren't about God and the afterlife, they're about life here and now. What should we be trying to do? Where should we look for fulfillment? What is going to save us from misery? What really matters and why? Some religions may *need* a theory of God or the afterlife to make sense out of their answers, but Consumer Hedonism doesn't. That doesn't mean it's not a religion.

“So what are Consumer Hedonism's answers? Basically this: Only two things are really worth doing in life – satisfying your desires and projecting the right image. If you could do both, you'd be as fulfilled as it is possible to be. So how do you do it? You satisfy your desires by buying things and by manipulating people into giving you what you want. And you cast the right image by aligning yourself with the saints of Consumer Hedonism, the celebrities.

“No Sunday school teaches us how to worship the celebrities, but we all do it. Sometimes we imitate them. We wear their t-shirts and sunglasses. We repeat their famous lines, which we know by heart, as if we learned them from a catechism. Or we worship them from afar. We know their nicknames, their cars, their pets, and the convoluted mythology of who has been married to whom.

“If you fall out of step with the celebrities, no church council has to vote to shun you. It happens automatically. Conversations just pass you by. Everyone else laughs and you're there saying “What? What?”

“Some people hope in the Lord. Some people hope in the Lottery.

“Whatever your hope is, wherever you look for a better life, that's the religion that is real to you, the one you're counting on to save you from misery. And not until you become disillusioned with that religion will you have any deeper spiritual awakening.

“Liberals and conservatives alike reject the emptiness of Consumer Hedonism, and nurture values that transcend desire and image: Values like family and friends and community.

Compassion for the stranger. A just society. Appreciating the wonder of creation. Building a personal relationship with Beauty and with Knowledge and with Understanding. When those values are part of your experience of every moment, when you have trained yourself to experience them as immediately as you experience your physical desires, you're there. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."

...

...

When Right and Left accuse each other of lacking morals, Muder says

"Neither side has to lie to make its case, because Consumer Hedonism has in fact corrupted and subverted people on both sides. That's what it does, and it does it very well. You set out to make the world a better place, and you end up buying things and striking a pose. You try to take The Road Less Traveled, and you wind up at The Road Less Traveled Gift Shop. You try to walk the narrow path, and you wind up buying a t-shirt that says "I Walked the Narrow Path". Whether you set out to the Left or to the Right, the gravity of Consumer Hedonism is always pulling you back.

...

"What if liberals and conservatives could realize how much they have in common? What if we all understood that traditional values and progressive values are allies against the real enemy, which is no values at all?"

So, where does Consumer Hedonism come from? Well, Andy Schmookler says it's a side effect of our affluence, but I'm not so sure that's the whole answer. James Dobson, Right-wing Christian author and leader, complains about the immorality river sweeping away the children and he assigns it to liberals and makes it intentional – but it's neither -- liberal nor intentional.

I think it's a by-product. Unitarian Universalist minister Bill Kennedy said about advertising: the product is us. What TV sells is viewers and the advertisers buy it. Sex and violence is just the delivery system, there to deliver consumers of the advertisers' goods, not spiritual or moral beings. Everything you see on TV and in movies and magazines and much of what's on your computer is all in service of Consumer Hedonism. How can you escape it? How **can** you escape it?

We escape it by cultivating a more spiritual, compassionate state of mind. By modeling that for our children. By working more consciously to resist the pull of Consumer Hedonism and focusing on the deeper aspects of life.

I feel that the big question the Millennials have to answer for all of us is, "Which is more important – people or money?" And they will have to shape our culture according to their answer. A hopeful sign is the tiny house movement, where young people are deliberately choosing to spend their money on experiences instead of things, and they are living more intimately with each other in their tiny spaces. And, hopefully, what we are calling "the sharing

economy”, as well as food co-ops, worker-owned businesses, the farm to table movement , and others I’m sure you can think of..

If you look, there are hopeful signs all around us – of people seeking community, and justice, and compassion

Think about this, and if you want to test yourself, watch where you spend your time and your money – for those are the things that you value.

Here are the URLs of the main references:

<http://www.nonesoblind.org/blog/?p=147> on moral skeletons

http://freeandresponsible.blogspot.com/2006_11_01_archive.html on Consumer
Hedonism

An earlier version:

<http://kimchalister.livejournal.com/7452.html>