

Arlington Club Toastmaster Speech

Observations from the Pandemic and the Nature of Things

May 28, 2020

I would like to share three musings from the great indoors.

All three are about nature – things that have inspired deeper thinking about human nature, the nature of administrative agencies and the nature of costumes.

The first and longest story is about human nature and pandemic tribalism.

And starts in the beginning.

Biologically, we are programmed to distrust and dislike outsiders –

In fact, for most of our human existence, the tribe to whom we belonged claimed the right to steal from, injure and kill anyone in an out-group for real and imagined transgressions.

We simply, as a matter of our nature, affiliate with relatively small groups of no more than about 150 people with whom we share values, to whom we

look for protection, friendship, and an alliance against common enemies.

Overcoming those tribal instincts has been hard work and requires strong and trusted institutions to connect us to one another and to foster cooperation.

Historically, we relied upon government to harness cooperation and connect us; to take over the tribe's otherwise roles of protecting us from harm, making sure we were fed and our children educated, enabling a shift in focus from exclusively the safety and well-being of our tribe to one that shares the benefits of a fair and just social contract, the terms of which we collectively accept.

However, the very government institutions charged with bringing us together have, for a long time instead, steadily eroded our bonds and, in doing so, have lost our confidence and respect.

You may remember former Congressman Jim Weaver, who famously wrote a not so tongue-in-cheek book: **"Two Kinds: The Genetic Origin of Conservatives and Liberals,"** in which he chalked

the widening divide up to the inferior biology of the **former** compared to the **latter**.

We have devolved into red states and blue states - blue state politicians exploiting the expanding tribal divide, unfairly blaming the employer class for all society's ills; versus red state politicians who protect the employer class, demonizing those who would blame it. And both are unwilling, and perhaps unable, to develop purple leadership values that blame no tribe, but lead away from tribal precipices.

So, we entered a global pandemic, with social voids that tribalism was eager to fill.

Thus, before there was a stay at home order, but sometime after the WHO's mid-March global pandemic declaration and about the time toilet paper became a thing of the retail past, Oregon's seaside tribes began evicting and threatening outsiders; those unwelcome once-guests, who were tolerated only for so long as intolerance had no palatable disguise

The City of Manzanita ordered visitors to leave on crude notices posted on the doors and windows of known vacation rentals "on behalf of *our* citizens,

business owners and *our* community who depend on the few resources *we have*, we request civil corporation” – yes corporation.

Manzanita featured a homemade “closed” sign, suspended over the former “welcome to manzanita” logo, turning the venerated welcome, to a warning.

The Warrenton Mayor quipped “We have to take care of *our own* first and foremost. I can’t take care of *everybody else*. Recreating people, this is not a time to recreate *except for in your town.*”

Regular coastal citizens made cardboard messages and stood upon public beaches and roadways chanting and waiving “Go Home”.

Shortly thereafter the coastal tribes’ declared class warfare against “absentee owners” who dared to spend the pandemic in their second homes, those rich villains with sometimes out-of-state license plates, but surely at least from detested Portland, who shopped at “our” stores, and indeed breathed “our” air.

And not long after, the full-timer tribes of Sunriver joined suit, and so on.

The visceral pandemic behavior of Oregon's tribes, is remarkably antagonistic and its lack of proportionality to the threat, is thought provoking.

Is someone who has been staying in a vacation rental a few days or weeks, really THAT dangerous? After all, social distancing, cleaning products, and generally staying inside – whether its one's second or primary home --is how we avoid COVID transmittal.

And while irresponsible humans, asymptomatic or otherwise, are perfectly capable of transmission, irresponsible people belong to **outgroups** as well as **in groups**.

The depth of the ire and rapturous exclusion of outsiders defies explanation solely in COVID-19 terms.

So, among its other insults, COVID-19 seemingly extended a politically plausible invitation to the tribes to express long simmering animosity to outsiders, betraying a sadly fragile psychological scaffolding, supporting good manners and rationality.

Thus, in March 2019, we found ourselves in a tribal tinder box of human groups, operating under the mantle of rationally - claiming merely to be responding to viral threats from out groups of tourists, visitors, and second home owners - but which in truth looked to be tribally inspired, irrational expressions of a deep-seated dislike of outsiders.

In this, is a warning. COVID-19 left intact our basic institutions – police, fire, medical. But when a disaster strikes like the Cascadian subduction, those institutions will be ineffectual for a time. Without them, one worries that our human nature will incent the tribes to dangerously unite against common enemies, whomever they are perceived to be.

So, looking forward I wish that in addition to agencies conducting emergency preparedness exercises, that they work harder, much harder, to earn our respect, all of our respect, and for Oregonians to make a serious effort to update that fair and just social contract.

Second, is an observation about the nature of administrative agencies.

As you are no doubt aware, in response to the unprecedented losses of businesses and jobs amid the global pandemic, Congress adopted the Paycheck Protection Program or the PPP designed to infuse about 8 weeks of payroll cash into businesses that did not lay anyone off.

The PPP is an extraordinary purple-state program designed to help struggling employers and employees alike.

Significant legislative history suggested that if PPP cash were used by struggling businesses, as Congress intended, that its infusion would not be taxed.

The idea being that recipient businesses were in rough enough shape, and that all of the PPP cash should be available to them as Congress intended, not to be paid away in taxes.

However, doing what the IRS is paid to do, it issued a ruling that PPP revenues were income to the recipient businesses and would be taxed.

That did not really surprise anyone – we expect the IRS to maximize taxable revenues, and its ruling did just that.

However, what *was* surprising is what happened after that IRS ruling was issued.

Because making the PPP taxable income was not intended by Congress, it sprang into uncommonly functional action, drafting legislation reflecting its desire that the PPP should not be taxed.

And the remarkable thing is that the major lobbying force against that legislation, was the IRS. It was not content to be overridden.

Now this is not about whether I believe the PPP should or should not be taxed, or even that the PPP program is a good idea.

But it is notable indeed that an unelected administrative agency, with no constitutional significance in our separate powers system, without hesitation or shame, spends taxpayer dollars to lobby against legislation promoted by elected congressional representatives.

We do well to be aware, that the nature of administrative agencies has ominously shifted from carrying out the will of the governed – their role we learned about in grammar school -- to claiming the right to spend the governed’s money to influence, and even work against, the decisions of the elected legislative branch.

The **third** and final pandemic observation, is the nature of costumes.

Instacart is a service by which the pandemic bound get groceries, brought by people willing to venture out to get them.

We have subscribed to that service and, so, have met a variety of “shoppers.”

The costume of an Instacart shopper is sweat pants and a tee shirt.

Their accessories are the most varied part of the ensemble – some travel to our home in brand new BMWs, and Tesla’s, others have far less flashy rides.

But the Instacart shopper costume varies little from the apparent uniform of sweat pants and tee shirt.

Yet, one Instacart shopper rejected the uniform and in so doing, stood out.

That was Mr. Robert James. Robert James pulled up to the front of our home, in a modest, but clean vehicle. He looked as if he were going to the office. His costume featured slacks and a smart looking tweed sport coat.

He knocked on our door, stood the obligatory 6-ft. away and, when we opened the door, he introduced himself as Robert James, our Instacart shopper.

He brought our groceries to the threshold and graciously drove away.

In the pandemic while many of us have given up the costumes of civilized society, Robert James reminds us that the costume in which we wrap ourselves defines us to the outside world.

And among the dozens of Instacart shoppers I have now met, the only memorable one is Robert James.

Robert James is an inspiration – not only to the value of cleaning up my own pandemic costume act, but also to the realization that, in all things - be it Instacart or anything else - there are great people

among us who can teach us valuable lessons, if we are only willing to notice them.

Thank you.