

MUSINGS – April 2006

— By Richard L. Kiniry

From the perspective of progressive people it is easy to hate the present occupant of the White House. And I don't mean Laura. But hate is an unfashionable feeling and it produces more trouble than it's worth. Besides that, we supposedly believe in respecting every person and can you both respect a person and hate him?

Jesus told his followers that they should love their neighbor as themselves. Love is a strong word and you have to wonder if he meant the same thing as we mean by love. Loving family and friends goes with the territory; even when they are at their worst, the love remains. Personally, I have only minor complaints about my neighbors – none of them has done anything that would precipitate hate. I respect their interests, but love isn't part of the deal.

It's interesting that religions seem to specialize in encouraging us to do things that appear contrary to human nature. We are, by nature, self-interested creatures with basic drives and, even with our loved ones, there is an element of possession. Religion tends to expand self-interest. Although many of the religious instructions are simply meant to control our appetites, they also provide arguments for caring about others. Caring does work in our self-interest, but only in a relatively stable community. Community only works if there is a feeling of attachment among the members, and religion as a civilizing institution offers encouragement to care.

But religious groups, including Ethical Humanism, don't stop at the civilizing influence of caring. They make caring a really big deal (as with Jesus and his "love your neighbor" and Felix Adler's "bring out the best in others"). In both cases you are expected to take respect to another level of concern and commitment. You are expected to feel a real attachment to others, including total strangers. It sounds very nice, but other than as a suggestion concerning behavior, I don't notice many people actually trying to live that way. The level of caring suggested in both those adages is over and above a recommendation about good relationships. It describes a style of living that is about changing human nature, or at least playing with it.

Religion, like everything else, is a product of evolution, but it is also an instrument of evolution. We usually identify religion with talk of gods and the after-life, but most basically it's about adding intention or direction to life. Religion is about expanding human nature. It is about putting each person's life at the center of the universal process. As an evolutionary mutation, religion, like art and music, pushes human life to a higher plane. Our lives are supposed to mean something. Human life is no longer just swinging in trees and searching for food, but the creative act of making life better. If there was no mind running evolution before, there certainly were many minds doing it when humans got into the act. In the process, religion stressed our psychological attitude to live. What is called "the spiritual life" is our inner value system. Religion emphasizes that inner life as who we truly are. How you act, and how you relate to others, reflects that inner self. Good religions build on the empathy that is part of human nature and makes it a way of life.

So, coming back to the present occupant of the White House. If we don't hate, why not? Because from our parents, teachers, or the kids in the neighborhood, we have learned to live on that higher plane. With all the damage we may think he has done to our human community, he is still one of us. We care and wish he cared as much. Of course, we may care enough about everyone else to demand his removal from the People's House.

Caring is, I believe, some form of love, but I save love for those I am unconditionally attached to. Whatever you call it, the respect for each person—not as an abstract entity but as an individual with needs, a fellow traveler—is the beginning and the end of good living. <>