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“The Bark of a Pine”

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“Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”

Karl Marx said that, and I am probably one of only a handful of politicians in the entire country who can quote Karl Marx without fear of getting tossed out on his ear. It’s a risk, I know, but what the heck. I want to get on the Change Bandwagon, too. As you know, our current political discourse is all about change, and quotations from any of our national candidates regarding change – how to effect change, why change is important, why the other guy isn’t offering the right kind of change – are abundant. I could have selected any of them to help frame my comments today.

But I chose Marx for two reasons. First of all, he’s dead, so he’s non-partisan, and that’s what I’m hoping my remarks will be. Non-partisan, that is, not

dead. The second reason is that the statement from Marx is the only one that I've come across that addresses the critical element of interpretation within the context of working for change.

It's clear to me that the upcoming presidential election, and maybe every election at all levels of government, is nothing more and nothing less than a Rorschach Test. For all the talk of change, for all the promises and proposals, for all the scandals and rumors and flat out lies, the candidates themselves have ceased to be real human beings and issues are irrelevant. They are like the ink blots in the Rorschach Test. They are what they are, shapes awaiting our interpretation. We will believe what one says, and disbelieve the other, regardless of facts, regardless of history, regardless of anything concrete or tangible. It seems to me that feelings determine our votes. Issues that will profoundly affect our future will be decided, and the most powerful office on the planet will be awarded, on the basis of what might charitably be called a whim.

On Election Day, unfortunately, our collective interpretation will say more about our character as a nation than it will about the character of the candidates themselves.

Now, nothing has really changed on that score for probably 50 years. For much of our lifetimes elections have been decided largely on the most superficial elements: a gaffe here, a clever put-down there, an untimely show of emotion with microphones hot and cameras rolling. As President Bush might say, these have been "the deciders." But is that, necessarily, a bad thing? Well, it depends. If your candidate wins, then obviously the majority of your fellow Americans share your discerning intellect and thoughtful vision for the future. If your candidate loses, then we're all a nation of idiots.

We don't seem to have political issues anymore. We have identity issues. We don't seem to vote on the basis of who we want to become in the future, we vote on the basis of who we think we are today.

And, it seems to me, that Americans, by and large, think of ourselves as patriots.

But are we? Are we really patriotic? Sure we chant "USA, USA" and "We're Number One" at our political rallies and sporting events, which, by the way, are increasingly indistinguishable. Of course we fly our flags and slap our "Support the Troops" bumper stickers on our SUVs. Naturally we place our hands over our hearts when we hear the National Anthem and become misty eyed at the sight of the Statue of Liberty, despite the fact that it was a gift from France. We do all these things as if by instinct, as if those patriotic responses are programmed on our DNA. We can't help it. We can't help it any more than a salmon can help swimming upstream. It's what we do. It's who we are.

But is that really patriotism? Such actions represent the trappings of patriotism, to be sure. But are we really Number One? Are we really as great as we seem to think we are?

It depends, I suppose.

There's no doubt that we have the most powerful military on the planet. We should. We certainly put enough of our national treasure in to it. Our national military budget is greater than the defense budgets of every other nation combined. So in that regard we definitely are Number One. But does a patriotic nation allow the honorable men and women who wear the uniform to be killed and maimed for highly dubious purposes? Does a patriotic nation allow a mere 1 percent of the population, mostly the poorest among us, to bear the full weight of

an unjust, unnecessary, unending war while electing, and re-electing, politicians who basically promise only more war and big tax cuts for the wealthy?

Based on my interpretation of the patriotism ink blot, I'd say the answer has been yes, for at least the past several years anyway.

Military issues may inflame the most passion when patriotism is discussed, but it's certainly not the only facet of our national character worth discussing.

What about health insurance? Does a patriotic nation allow roughly 45 million of its citizens to live with no health insurance at all? And for those of us who do have health insurance, you might be interested to know that a recent World Health Organization survey that examined cost, quality and access of health care systems around the world, ranked the American system 37th. That's 37th. We lost to Costa Rica, but the good news is we beat Slovenia. Does a patriotic nation stand for that?

Apparently.

And what about poverty, child hunger, illiteracy, unemployment, homelessness? Does a patriotic nation allow its wealthiest corporations to move jobs overseas when our own people are so clearly in dire need?

Guess so.

I recently came across a study by a fellow named Adrian White, a psychology professor at the University of Leicester, near Birmingham, England. In this study, Professor White sought to quantify the highly subjective concept of happiness by examining such national characteristics as health care, education, national wealth, employment opportunities, vacation time, crime rates, etc. He determined that Denmark, yes that Denmark, the home of Hamlet, where everybody died ignoble deaths, is the happiest country on earth. Danes are happy,

Professor White concluded, largely because health care is universal, higher education is free – in some cases, students are actually paid to attend universities – employment is plentiful and employees are commonly granted six weeks of paid vacation a year.

Apparently there's nothing rotten in the state of Denmark, or at least very little.

The United States, where happiness is practically a Constitutional right – you know, that whole “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” thing – ranked 23rd.

“We're 23rd! We're 23rd!” isn't very catchy, is it?

Now, of course, a lot of these studies are highly subjective, and we all know that Mark Twain's mistrust of statistics was well founded, so I am in no way suggesting that what I've just related should be taken as incontrovertible fact. But I do think that these things are indicative of something disturbing about the American character. I find it disturbing that our sense of patriotism appears to be limited only to reverence for the symbols of patriotism. It's disturbing to me that the person who most vigorously waves the flag is interpreted as being more patriotic than the person who works to make sure that the flag is made in America, by an American worker in a safe environment, who earns a decent wage, can comfortably own a house and raise a family, has access to health care and education and can afford to take a vacation once in a while.

In other words, contemporary American patriotism, it seems to me, is not so much about having a happy, well-adjusted, smooth-functioning society.

American patriotism is . . . well . . . about appearing patriotic.

If we were truly honest about our current interpretation of patriotism, our slogans and bumper stickers would read as follows: “Support the Troops, Just

Don't Raise My Taxes" or "Support the War, Just Don't Draft My Kid" or "Benefits Yes - Sacrifice No" or how about this: "All The Bad Stuff That's Happening In This Country Is Fine By Me As Long As It's Happening To Other People's Children."

OK, that last one needs some editing, but I think you get my point. Does anybody believe that this country would have gone to war in Iraq if we had a draft? Does anybody believe that if middle and upper-class children were dying because of war, poverty, lack of health care, etc., etc. that things wouldn't change, and change in a hurry? Does anybody else believe it's high time we changed our mile-wide, half-an-inch-deep interpretation of patriotism?

A couple of years ago a movie came out that really zeroed in on what's most important, or at least what I consider most important in my work. The movie, set in the not-too-distant future, explored what happens to societies when all hope for the future is lost.

I'm not going to give anything away, but I would like to quickly recap the movie's premise: Humans inexplicably stop being able to have children. Scientists can't figure out why the species has suddenly become infertile, but the implication is clear and unavoidable: Humanity is finished. Human beings will be extinct in less than 100 years. Unless something changes.

The result of this knowledge is that, in the movie, societies all around the globe are rapidly plunging into despair and chaos.

What was so powerful, and disturbing, to me was that the images of chaos and despair depicted in the movie had the ring of truth. Why do we adults work and maintain our social, cultural and governmental systems? Partly to secure our own comfort, and that of our families, to be sure. But we also do it so that future

generations can inherit what we've built. If there aren't anymore future generations, then what's the point?

I came away from that movie with one overriding thought: If civilization will collapse without children, then why are we so unwilling to do more for them?

I am truly puzzled by our apparent lack of concern for our future generations. Forget the imagery of a movie. Let's look at the horror show awaiting our children today:

We have a national debt so huge that even Stephen Hawking probably can't figure it out. Nine Trillion. Five Trillion. Whatever. It's huge. Yet we're not paying it. We're leaving it for our children.

We have a national infrastructure that is quite literally falling apart, yet we don't seem to have the political will to fix it. Instead, we're leaving it for our children.

Our stature in the world has suffered to such an extent that we may not be the indispensable nation anymore. For many countries, friend and foe alike, we are well on the way to becoming a rogue nation, if we're not there already. Maybe our children will fix that, too, while their fixing the roads and bridges, and schools, and everything else we've neglected.

We face serious global problems. We have an energy crisis, a global warming crisis, a food shortage crisis, an entire world in crisis. Yet we can't seem to agree that these problems are even real, much less do anything about them. So, I guess we'll leave all that for our children, too.

And right here at home, here in supposedly liberal Massachusetts, we're staring down the barrel of Question One, a proposal to eliminate the state income tax, thereby gouging out 40 percent of the state budget. Look folks, government is

imperfect – human endeavors usually are – but it’s not even close to being 40 percent imperfect. We’ve had an income tax in this state for about 100 years. That income tax helps finance education, health care, job training, safe roads, environmental protection, programs for the elderly, social services, all the things that fall under the categories of Compassion and Quality of Life. Compassion and Quality of Life, in other words – Civilization. If this blatantly cynical attack on government is approved, then we will have turned our backs on our children, on our fellow citizens, on our common future.

Proposals like Question One aren’t just asking us if we want to continue paying income taxes. They are asking us if we want to continue to build community. And if we say No, no we don’t want to build community anymore, then our children won’t have communities, and neither will their children, and then before you know it, the whole idea of community is forgotten.

This is what we’re leaving for our children – debt, debt and decisions, decisions of the highest magnitude, decisions that will determine the fate of the entire planet, decisions that will be infinitely more complicated because of our political, intellectual and moral paralysis. Civilization is in the balance and we are leaving all the decisions up to our children, yet we haven’t shown them how to make decisions. All we’ve shown them is how to avoid responsibility.

Avoiding responsibility – this is the example we’ve set, and this, apparently, is what our sense of patriotism is telling us is OK to do.

It’s time to interpret patriotism in an entirely new way. It’s time to change the way we show our love for country and community.

I have this idea for a story. It's nothing as shocking or disturbing, or, frankly, as exciting, as the movie I mentioned, so you'll never experience it anywhere but here.

Try not to imagine that deep-voiced, movie trailer guy while I'm telling this. One day, the Statue of Liberty, one of our most enduring symbols, begins to fade. It's actually dematerializing, like a ghost, until after a time, it's gone, completely gone. Lady Liberty has vanished.

Well, you can imagine the consternation this causes. Although no one was hurt during this vanishing act – this is a G-rated story – many voices cry out: This is an act of war! It's an attack on our freedom! It's the French, they must have somehow taken it back! Shock quickly gives way to anger, which, inevitably, leads to calls for retribution. You know how it goes. We've seen this part of the story before.

But there's no violence in my story. No, in my story a group of artists in Amherst – now, when I speak in Northampton, it'll be Northampton artists; I am a politician, after all – they see this as an opportunity to re-interpret the Statue of Liberty. They see this as an opportunity to change things. So they set to work on another statue, another monument to replace the one that has mysteriously disappeared.

When they unveil it, the nation is flabbergasted to see that the new statue is not a replica of the previous statue, or a monument to shopping, or commerce or anything like that. No, this statue is a depiction of an adult lifting a child to a greater height. The monument is called "The Statue of Obligation," and it bears the following inscription:

“In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation . . . even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine.”

That, of course, is the Great Law of the Iroquois. That statement formed one of the foundations of the Iroquois Confederacy, the union of six Native American nations, who, some 800 years ago, created what is now the oldest participatory democracy on earth. The framers of our own Constitution saw the wisdom, the strength, and the foresight embodied by this confederacy and used it as a guide. In my mind, that one phrase serves, not only as the basis of democracy, but as the definition of true patriotism – thoughtful, dedicated, and self-sacrificing.

Well, immediately upon the unveiling of this Statue of Obligation, the Statue of Liberty begins to re-materialize. It’s not solid, not by a long shot, but it’s there again, back where it was, visible, but insubstantial, like a light mist.

As the years pass, each time we Americans do something that lives up to the Statue of Obligation, the Statue of Liberty becomes a little clearer, a little more substantial.

Each time we stop an unnecessary war . . .

Each time we prevent a war . . .

Each time we provide health care . . .

Each time we provide education . . .

Each time we provide jobs . . .

Each time we confront poverty and homelessness and hunger and inequality . . .

Each time we sacrifice a little today for the sake of our children’s tomorrows . . .

Each time we do something that threatens to nudge Denmark to Number Two . . .

. . . Lady Liberty shines a bit clearer in the eyes of Americans . . . and maybe, if we're lucky, even in the eyes of the world . . .

I don't really have an ending for my story. In fact, now that I think about it, I don't want it to end. I think I'll leave it so that Americans are constantly working, working for the future, working for the seventh generation, building up some calluses on our tender skin. I think I'll leave it so that when Americans rest, we do so only to regain our strength for the work still left to do, never because we think the job is finished.

And as for the Statue of Liberty? Well . . . I think I'll leave it so that she never actually becomes a statue again. Almost, but not quite. No, in my story Liberty will always stay well within sight, but always just out of reach, something more than a mirage, but less than an oasis.

That's the funny thing about liberty. It won't last unless we, we the self-sacrificing and dedicated and thoughtful patriots that I hope we are, live up to the obligations liberty demands.

And the funny thing about obligations is that they are never entirely fulfilled.