Formula vs. Craft: The Root of America’s Problem

It is often noted that American society is vacuous, and that our culture is poisoning the whole world, with the possible exception of Bhutan. This is all true, of course. Often people cite pornography and advertising as being the root problem. Sometimes they cite Hollywood. But as Nietzsche notes in Twilight of The Idols, people often confuse the effect with the cause.

Very few people today know how to fly fish. Certainly, fly fishing never enters many people’s minds. Very few people are genuine Jazz musicians. Very few are poets. We have almost no audience. These activities, these arts, involve *craft.* Craft involves a long apprenticeship in which one learns how to create beauty (or vibrant ugliness). Once the artist has learned the craft, he makes the art his own. He creates something new and unique, something to enrich the souls of those who wish to partake and drink deeply of the art.

*Formula,* on the other hand, is something quite different. Formula merely involves following rules to get a set result. Repairing a computer requires a formula to perform and complete, as does working on an assembly line. Humanities professors used to be able to teach what they wanted within reason, but increasingly their occupations are becoming formulaic. They are told what to emphasize and how to emphasize it. Mostly this has been done by slow process.

Everywhere we go craft is being stripped out of the minds of people and being replaced by formula. The result is a Republican Party who sees a demonic jackass as a savior and a puritanical Democratic Party that wants to use political correctness to de-platform speakers they don’t like and limit freedom of speech by shaming opponents into submission. This total lack of common sense is due to formulaic thinking, which sees nothing but its own interest.

The world hasn’t always been like this. During the Renaissance artists like Michelangelo were sponsored not by a state bureaucracy, but by individuals and by the church. During Shakespeare’s day there were people known as patrons who didn’t have to work within the tentacles of labyrinthian university systems to fund poets and playwrights whose work they enjoyed. Those days are long gone. The odd thing is that no one questions the vanishing.

I have often said that the inculcation of poetry allows readers and writers to notice things they wouldn’t otherwise notice. I can’t be sure whether that’s right. But maybe it could keep us from destroying our neighbors with single-minded greed and blind self-concern. Privilege, as it’s discussed, is a problem *for us*. Is privilege a problem in India? Does anyone care? Police brutality is a problem *for us*. Does it exist in Indonesia? Does anyone care?

When the state is expected to solve all problems, when that is the formula for success, individuals give up agency. But as we see with the riots in France, the state can’t solve the Climate Change Crisis. Formula thinking leads to stagnation when people are faced with nuanced problems that require novel solutions. Novel solutions require craft thinking. But craft is mostly the domain of the Humanities, which have been stifled by political correctness.

If you can’t see anything but the task in front of you—if completing that task is just like repairing a transmission rather than trimming a Bonsai tree—you will be trained and inculcated into seeing no new solutions. Children should be *really* taught music in schools—not just the appreciation, but how to play it. They should be taught to read slowly, instead of devouring books. They should be taught to read a variety of books, but also how to read key books and the classics.

Intelligence is more than IQ. Intelligence is perspective. Once, when I was 24-years-old I took a Sociology of Law class at the University of Alabama. On the first day of class the professor went on and on about how superior the Japanese school system was than the American school system. This was an old tenured professor. He knew his sociological data.

I went home that day and thought about the problem. Then the thought occurred to me--plenty of Japanese students come to the United States from Japan to attend American schools. If our schools are really inferior why would they pay three times as much to go to school here *and* learn a second language? What's the logic in that?

I told the professor some of this during the next meeting of class. He just smiled and said, "Not so much after 9/11." This was in 2004. See—he had the data on paper, and I'm sure his IQ was higher than mine, but he lacked perspective. Doubtless, if I were to talk to more people from other cultures they would be able to open my eyes to new realities as well, because they would have been inculcated differently than me.

This is why I propose that perspective be considered a type of intelligence. It is why diversity really is a strength--because different races and cultures have vastly different ways of viewing the world. However, if everyone in the world is following the American model of formulaic thinking—that is, thinking without craft, we are doomed to get formulaic answers wherever we turn. Two heads are better than one, but that is exponentially diminished by formulaic thinking.

To all this I would add that while there are definite rules for how to keep the Dharma, each Buddhist monk and nun has his or her own practice, which means there are as many ways of attaining nirvana as there are monks and nuns. This isn’t intelligence?

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