

Respect: The Uncharted Political Territory

All or none thinking will eventually prove far more destructive to our species and the planet we inhabit than other dangers we so faithfully track on the front pages of our newspapers.

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, threats of terrorist attack, even the depletion of the ozone layer are nothing compared to our lazy, simple-minded tendency to view the world in black and white terms. Are you a good guy or a bad guy? In other words, do you think like me or are you different from me? Different? Okay, that makes you a bad guy.

Democrats, liberals, leftists, peaceniks, 60's leftovers, whatever you want to call them (us) can be as much a part of the problem as Rush Limbaugh's fans. The problem is one I face everyday in my psychotherapy practice: dysfunctional communication resulting from the inability or unwillingness to make room for more than one legitimate point of view and an overwhelming tendency to avoid communicating in the more complex gray areas. I tell couples that come to me for counseling that the first step to solving communication problems is to stop wasting time debating whose perception is "right." I tell them, "Your desire to solve problems together must be greater than your individual desire to be right."

This kind of dysfunctional communication is largely a function of a lack of respect between people. Disrespect may be a matter of conscious judgments held against others, but is usually more insidious than that. Most of us confuse "respect" with "agreement."

Respect is about understanding and accepting that we are all separate individuals with our own unique perspectives. Respect is about accepting that we may be able to influence each other's perspective, but we cannot control what anyone else feels or thinks. Respect is about getting out of all-or-none, black-and-white, me-good-and-you-bad thinking, and becoming open-minded enough to recognize the legitimacy of other perspectives --- whether or not we agree with them. Ultimately respect is about one simple concept: recognizing that we are not God.

We cannot afford to wait for the change to begin with our elected representatives. After all, those we have elected are representing us quite well in their black and white, all or none rhetoric. Only when we dare to change will we see a similar change on the political scene. When we value open-mindedness and respectful communication more than we value two-dimensional simple mindedness that makes us feel good in the short run, then we will see the politicians change.

When we each do our part, respecting that change always begins with ourselves, we might just live to see a day when politicians are different. I want to hear politicians being human (the good side of human), acknowledging that they don't have all the answers and that the decisions they make today have the potential to be mistakes. I want to hear politicians tell us that they are always open to learn, and that they know that there is no end --- save death --- to the process of learning. I want to hear politicians being more interested in defining and solving problems than in being sure their team wins the next election. Call me crazy, but I want to hear a republican say to a democrat and a democrat say to a republican, "That's a good point; I had not thought of it that way."

No matter what problems and dangers we face, as individuals, as a nation or as a world, there will be no genuine resolution unless we decide together that our top priority must be learning to respect each other. Without that one simple (but not easy) decision, we can all look forward to game after game of "King of the Mountain" in our futile attempts to be God's favorite team.



Thom Rutledge is the author of *Embracing Fear & Finding the Courage to Live Your Life* (HarperSanFrancisco). He has been featured on NBC's Today Show, CNN's Anderson Cooper 360, Fox News, and Australia's Channel 10. For more information about Thom's books, e-books, articles, seminars and availability as a keynote speaker, visit www.ThomRutledge.com.