

Cal Poly Thursday

Thank you! Corwell, Amy
PATRICIA Ponce
(Pon-say)

Thank you.

Prof PREFACE
PROGRAM
VOLUNTEERS

I know that some of you had the duty of leading student discussion groups about my book, and I suspect you found that some got very involved in the book and others were not too excited at all to have read it or to discuss it.

That fact may be a reflection of a great divide in our culture. Not that my book is any litmus test, but that some people see the world quite differently than others.

It is not a liberal versus conservative divide, though that divide is also an effect of a deeper divide, and it is not an unhealthy divide. But it offers a challenge to educators, I think.

I recently had the pleasure, for the fourth year, of addressing the incoming freshmen at the college nearest my home, Franklin Pierce. I too ^K the occasion to address this divide.

The point of my remarks was that you have to work very hard in life, and in college, to keep an open mind. A nation of open-minded people is a nation that can govern itself and remain free and good. But it is not easy.

I told the students that, if they would come hiking with me on my side of old Mt. Monadnock, we might see several interesting things. If it rains, for example, we will see how the rain puddles up and flows to the east, for that is my side of the mountain. You could make a general observation that rainwater, when it hits the ground, flows east. And you would be right. And if you lived on this mountain, in this very place, for years and years, you would be quite certain that rain, when it hits the ground, flows to the east. And you would be right. And you would know that the sun shines on the mountain all morning and that the mountain is shady in the afternoon.

Those are the facts of the rain and the sun and the mountain. And you would have it right.

Well, let's say you have built a little cabin there, and that you are a good Democrat. And let us suppose that you have a good friend, a good Republican, who lives on the other side of the mountain. You have cell phones, of course, and you have long arguments each time you talk. Your friend has the strange belief that rainwater flows to the west and that the mountain is shady all morning and sunny all afternoon. You can't understand him *at all* on these issues.

There are enough facts in the world to conclusively prove any assertion. The Good Lord has given us all the facts we need to prove anything we like, perhaps so that our hearts may have some room to make choices. And when we take up a permanent position on one side of the mountain, as we are likely to do as we grow

older, we tend to only see half the facts and we form our beliefs around them. Older we indeed grow, forgetting our hikes around to the other side. Older we grow, forgetting our friends on the other side, and talking only with our neighbors who share our view to the east, and reading our east view newspaper and listening to east view radio and television news.

How can someone remain a man or woman of the world, instead of a little ant on a hillside? How can you be a man or woman with an enlightened mind, instead of a narrow-minded person of narrow beliefs? Taking more hikes might help--it seems to help for me. In matters of politics, you can take that hike by meeting people of every circumstance and belief, and listening carefully to them. You can also try to put yourselves in their mental position, and see if you can express their beliefs even better than they can do for themselves—you will change and improve your own beliefs when

you do so. Like a lawyer or a member of a debate squad who must variously argue both sides of a proposition, we must mentally put ourselves in the thinking patterns of other people if we are to remain free to think for ourselves, which is the beginning of wisdom.

And in the process you will see that people are not much different in their thinking. They differ far more regarding the means to the ends, than the ends themselves. For example, most people would not like their town to have some of its citizens sleeping outdoors because they cannot afford housing. There is not a part of the community arguing for homelessness. We are much together in our civic values. Almost all of us agree that people need to join together in some fashion to help those who truly need our help. The argument comes over whether we should have this campfire of community over here, or over there. Should government be our campfire

of community, or should churches and other private gatherings be the place where we gather to serve each other's needs? While those battles do rage, it is good to rise above them sometimes to see that we all want the same outcomes, and it looks very much like the spirit of brotherhood. Even my good friends the Libertarians want everybody to be happy. They just happen to believe it is no help to people to interfere as a group.

All these different ways of looking at things, and yet a common urge toward the common pursuit of happiness. And in fact we work it out. That is what democracy is for—a handy device for working things out so that no one gets too upset and the problem gets taken care of.

It is important, if this handy device is to work properly, for all of us to agree that, in civic matters, we leave our more personal beliefs aside. If I applied the force of law to all my

religious beliefs, there would be, I'm afraid, some serious resentment and losses of freedoms in the community. So we lay aside the rules with which we govern ourselves and our families, and we enter the civic realm with the notion that we shall do what seems to work best to create a civilized outcome.

I am saying that the pursuit of "what works" is the better path than applying our personal ideologies and religions to our common negotiations in the setting of community. I do not want laws based on your notion, even though you certainly have video evidence to prove it, that rainwater flows westward and should always do so. Let us just decide that all the homes in our town need water, and we will let the water flow in the directions it must, even though we can't understand those who want to build pipes on the obviously wrong side of the reservoir.

There are many important issues, from abortion and gun control, to national security and health care, where a good dose of “what works” would be more useful than applying our religious beliefs.

Remarkably, when we do the thing that seems to work, we usually also serve our inner commandments, and are surprised to learn that we did so.

For example, the Europeans have about one-eighth the teenage pregnancies and abortions that we do in the United States. They reduce this problem by applying not laws and religious certitudes, but programs that work. So if you follow what works, you tend to reduce the evils that you oppose and you tend to elevate the things you cherish, and you do so in cooperation with people who came at the problem with many other beliefs, but shared your position that it would be a good thing to have less of this and more of that. When we drop our sanctimonious posturing and focus on what

seems to work, we find that we do serve our highest beliefs, even though we thought we were setting them aside. So. I happen to be more pro-choice and some of you happen to be more pro-life. Let's look at how other societies, not too different from our own, have actually reduced abortions to one-eighth the frequency of ours, and let's agree to try those things. It is more useful than arguing from ideological sides of the mountain, and it works. It ends the problem we both wanted to do something about.

And gun control has a similar, if I might say, trajectory: if you lay aside the near religious beliefs that polarize this issue, we can actually save lives and our freedoms, too. But when people get stuck on their side of the mountain, they start saying fairly ridiculous things. The right to bear arms is in the Constitution, so that means we cannot infringe upon that right. Good thinking. The Constitution does not define arms, so that must mean all arms. So we all

have the right to own atomic bombs. It is written. Well, of course not. What is our common intention? It is to have some degree of public safety to accompany our Constitutional rights. If we look to practical approaches and drop the eastside, westside ideologies, we can save thousands of lives and preserve our freedoms, too.

So I am for the politics of what works. Don't tell me what you believe, tell me what you want to happen, and let's see what seems to work.

Keeping open minds is the key, though it isn't easy.

Your students will have to work hard if they want an open enough mind to be a useful citizen in a vibrant democracy. Can we argue the other guy's position better than they? Can we rise above the mountain and see that the rain goes in every direction and

that multiple truths are not only possible, but the norm?

As people get older they become blinded to half the truth and they embrace the half they have come to know more locally. Try as we might to be open-minded, we are all blind in different areas, and a good democracy is the blind leading the blind in ways that somehow come out fairly well. We help see the truth for each other, and, in our arguments and campaigns and lawsuits and protests, we knock a little vision into each other.

But it is also beautiful when we can just, sometimes for only a second, see it all, and understand that our differences are minor compared to our shared civic values.

In the news and opinion we consume, we owe it to ourselves to cross-out most of the exclamation points and turn them into question marks—to doubt the certainty of

one side of the story, and to never let the facts get in the way of love and humanity and civilized behavior, for, as I said, there are enough facts to prove anything, so go with love.

There is a new little book out that some of you may have already read: It is called "Don't Think of an Elephant," and it is by George Lakoff and is a summary of his important, larger works. In it, he claims that the model of the strict father family and the model of the nurturing family are in conflict in our society, and that these very different world views shape our politics.

He explains that facts just bounce off us, if they do not fit in the frame of reference we use. So it is very frustrating for those of us who oppose Mr. Bush when our Republican friends just don't seem to get it. And they are frustrated when we don't seem to get it. We are both limited by frameworks that

restrict how we receive and accept information.

Another way to divide the ways of thinking is by those who seem to be authority-dependent and those who seem to be authority-averse. You might see that division represented in, say, engineering students versus liberal arts majors, and that division may have been a factor in which students could relate to my authority-averse little book.

I think we have a duty in educating our young people in helping them to open their minds. If we can consciously examine our frames of reference, we stand a chance of bridging the divide that is becoming, I believe, the greatest danger to our democracy since its birth so many generations ago.

A great university should be all about breaking those frames apart, so that we can

all be more human and so that we can all be wiser.

Thank you very much for the great honor of meeting with you.