

Blindfolded man in a marathon

I can't help feeling like the odd man out, running blindfolded in some kind of personal marathon while listening to people talking about things like *confirmation bias*, *virtue signaling* and *White Privilege*. Terms like: *social justice* and *income equality* are easier for me to grasp because I studied those in high school and am up on the old definitions. But from what I've read lately, those old definitions don't exactly track with what the younger generation feels about the two competing economic systems like capitalism and socialism. More on that, later.

I've always been interested in our great American culture and have been a keen observer of how we portray ourselves in commercials. Moving from commercial to commercial on the TV, I'm always looking for a new or different one and then compare them with the old ones of my youth or early adulthood. I owned an advertising agency in Connecticut back in the eighties, and I specialized in motivating buyers. One of the prerequisites for succeeding in that business was having a pair of well-tuned ears and eyes and an open mind. Pre-conceived notions were not a plus in my business; we used knowledge gleaned from focus groups or opinion analysis to formulate our messages. That approach worked more often than it failed, both at home and abroad (we had several overseas clients).

The industry hasn't changed much over the years, but American culture sure has. Now you can pinpoint your demographic group and target them with the help of social media and the ubiquitous smart phone not to mention one of hundreds of cable TV channels. Time was when we Americans were members of one big *tribe* with several racial and ethnic offshoots of that one big tribe. We were God-loving/fearing, tyranny-hating and community/family-oriented. Our economy was based on our own consumption, and we used nearby resources instead of going abroad for the lion's share of them. We built products that WE wanted and that made OUR lives better. If they did the same for consumers in foreign markets, all well and good, but our first and most important market was our own.

We valued civility and respect for our fellow man and suffered fools, wisely, but not always well. We didn't embrace their crackpot ideas like socialism and communism nor did we follow them out into the streets. (Fighting for racial equality was different; that was an idea that most of us could get behind.) We also valued education. We didn't see it as just a stepping stone to a better job, but as a way to become wiser about the world that preceded us and to understand the one we lived in. We looked up to those in academia and listened when they spoke. We never thought to question their motives; we knew they were there to help us become smarter and to prepare us for the world beyond the walls of ivy.

We were hesitant about calling people names and were equally slow to challenge their patriotism. We avoided shouting matches and preferred our debates to be around the 60 dB conversational level. We didn't interrupt someone when they were speaking. That was rude, and we certainly didn't ridicule them for having a different opinion, either. We were taught that "it takes all kinds to make a world." Advertising was one way our culture communicated with itself. Granted, we used stereotypes, but those stereotype-reliant messages were based on real people in real situations. Gradually, advertising changed when political correctness entered the scene. Messaging turned inclusive. Hardly any commercials today are populated, exclusively, by White actors. Advertisers and their agencies are painfully aware that special interest, ethnic or other groups will scream to high Heaven if one from 'their' group isn't included in TV spots. We are now INCLUSIVE to the point that it is becoming a bit disingenuous. Today's advertising spots are not only targeting specific consumers from different tribes, but they are also showing a mix of people in highly idealized situations that they hope will resonate with prospective consumers. By presenting products used in mixed-race commercials, for example, the message is that THIS is the true America and that we Americans routinely interact with friends from other racial groups or that every public space is inhabited by exactly the same percentage of minorities that make up our general population.

This, of course, is not reality, except in a few rare cases. It is, instead, an engineered reality by the hopeful among us.

Unfortunately, that reality is a long way off. Identity politics and identity politicians are preventing us from becoming a nation that doesn't prejudge each other. Appellations like *White Privilege* are particularly offensive to me, not because I am Caucasian, but because such a concept is inherently racist. Allowing that epithet to be roundly used is akin to bringing back the racial prejudices against Blacks, or to allow the resurgence of bigotry against Jews or Catholics. If we really want social justice, we must be ready to call out and condemn those who would use 'virtue signaling' or indentity politicking to promote their dissatisfaction with social conditions. The same holds true for those who are out touting the benefits of failed systems like socialism as the antidote to America's *wealth inequality*.

I cannot totally blame the younger generation among us for their flirtations with economic or social systems that share the common goal of leveling the playing field of life, but part of the blame is our own for not demanding that university professors give equal time to a discussion on the value of capitalism. We who have lived a few years know that life isn't - and never will be - totally fair. Scientists who have studied the natural world know that every creature is both predator and prey, that we are all flawed in some way and that we cannot be 'managed' into a state of pure equality and equilibrium with everything else. However, there is one thing that will help all of us in our quest to achieve it, and that is the continuation of personal freedom. For me, Ronald Reagan alluded to its value and warned us at the same time when he said, "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction." That kind of confirmation bias is right up my alley.

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