

## Refusing to 'go binary'

(bi-na-ry; *def. something having two parts*) A fellow I know - and with whom I disagree on politics and most things - is always complaining that I ask too many 'binary questions.' He says it's just flat unfair to expect that people like himself (who claim to be politically astute) should be expected to answer questions, categorically, in either the affirmative or the negative.

"Life (he says), is filled with nuances, gray areas that must be plumbed and pondered, before one makes a commitment one way or the other. Discussions shouldn't take on the form of inquisitions or interrogations. We must be allowed the space and time to express those things that underscore our reasons to deny a yes or no response."

To that I have a few choice words - most of which are not complimentary - when it comes to the really simple questions about life. Okay, I'll concede that there are some issues that do require a bit of context and maybe a few qualifiers before we place ourselves on one side of the equation or the other. But the truth is that life presents all of us with a whole host of *either/or* choices and life doesn't wait while we consult the Internet, our lawyers, experts or friends for counsel. Life is impatient and expects a decision, not an excuse for delaying one. It's here and it's now. The same is true of our attitudes towards the pressing political and social issues of the day. If we want to be taken seriously, we need to commit to a belief and let the chips fall where they may.

For instance, when I was a young man, I had the choice to either burn my draft card and show my solidarity with the anti-war movement or keep it in my wallet. There was nothing in between, and there were consequences for each action. I chose to hang on to it. That was a binary choice. Today, if I want to make a statement about supporting the Second Amendment I can display my NRA bumper sticker on my truck or soft pedal my beliefs. Each choice will carry with it certain unavoidable responses from other people. The same is true of choosing capitalism over socialism, activism over *passiveism*, etc. Unfortunately, some people refuse to choose. They want it both ways and will fence-sit or stay in the closet (sorry about the mixed metaphors).

In the 25 years I spent in foreign countries hobnobbing with people of all cultures and racial/ethnic backgrounds I rarely encountered more than handful who were afraid of giving me their opinions. Most were respectful and thoughtful about how they expressed those opinions, but few hesitated in doing so. When I moved back to the U.S. sixteen years ago I was surprised to find that a whole new class of folks had emerged from the depths of our ultra-polarized, two-party, political system. While most of them were from the Left side of the political aisle, there were some Conservatives who felt it necessary to straddle the 'dividing line' and who purposely kept their opinions vague and ambiguous or completely to themselves. The rationale of those on the Left was, "just in case." I took that to mean they wanted to keep their options open. The rationale of those on the Right was different. They hid their opinions out of fear, worried about reprisals from those on the Left!

Call me out-of-step with the times, but this small-town Wisconsin boy sees that reluctance to speak your mind and reveal yourself to others as a pretty cowardly or disingenuous way to run a railroad. Maybe it's a big city thing to hedge your bets or hide your true beliefs or maybe it's just the way some people prefer to live their lives always keeping other people in the dark. I'll admit, I'm stumped and more than a bit irritated at being treated as a simpleton by smooth-talkers who waltz around the critical issues of the day.

In the past, I accepted this from most of my fellow diplomats, politicians and anybody who wanted to remain 'neutral' because of their jobs, but I drew the line when it came to people I needed to trust like my friends. I held them to a higher standard, and I felt that it was natural and permitted to ask them anything that would help me understand what made them tick. So, you can imagine my disappointment when I was met with repeated "well, that depends" when I'd query them on subjects of importance.

Every day, whether we know it or not, we're being asked to choose between 'A' and 'B'. Shall we vote this way or that; should we support this cause or that one; speak up or shut up; come or go; choose civil disobedience or compliance, etc. We are living in binary times that demand commitments from us.

We've had enough of the non-speak of new-speak politicians, and most of us are not going to retreat to the fetal position or cower in the corner while those braver souls who aren't afraid to commit themselves decide our futures for us. It's high time we quit shadow-boxing and made our opponents enter the binary ring of life. We must be ready to go fifteen rounds with those who resist strapping on the gloves. But, we must also face facts - it won't happen until we pressure them to man up, step up on the scale, and *weigh in*.

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