

Identity and Violence
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A long time ago in a galaxy far away, I studied Business Administration at Pepperdine University.¹ Twenty-eight years ago in an Organizational Development class, Dr. Wayne Strom led an exercise in identity which remains vivid in my memory.² “Who are you?” he asked us. By fits and starts, we offered the usual descriptors. “Who else are you?” he said. We offered labels relating to the various roles that we played. “Who else are you?” We offered identities anchored in the past, identities which straggled into the present. “Who else are you?” We offered identities touching on our aspirations. “Who else are you?” We told of our tender selves, the parts we rarely mentioned aloud in a group of strangers. “Who else are you?” and “Who else are you?” By the time the patter of word drop raindrops slowed and then stopped, I felt dazed. We are so much more than meets the eye.

“Who else are you?” came to mind as I read the book *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* by Amartya Sen. Amartya Sen is an Indian economist, philosopher, and a winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998 for his work on famine, human development theory, welfare economics, the underlying mechanisms of poverty, and political liberalism.³ He was born in 1933 in what is now Bangladesh. He was a boy during the Hindu-Muslim riots of the 1940’s in British India. He saw first hand that identity can mean life or death.

Amartya Sen begs us not to adopt a simple identity. He begs us not to attribute a simple identity to others. Relegating people into little boxes (as if one aspect of their identity mattered most) is a dangerous process of “miniaturization.” He says, “The prospects of peace in the contemporary world may well lie in the recognition of the plurality of our affiliations and in the use of

¹ “A long time ago in a galaxy far away” is the phrase shown on the screen at the start of each “Star Wars” movie. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Wars_opening_crawl.

² For information about Dr. Wayne Strom, see http://bschool.pepperdine.edu/programs/faculty/?page_id=54&faculty=Strom,+W.

³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amartya_Sen.

reasoning as common inhabitants of a wide world, rather than making us into inmates rigidly incarcerated in little containers.”⁴

What is the alternative to this incarceration? “The alternative to the divisiveness of one preeminent categorization is not any unreal claim that we are all much the same. That we are not.” he says. “Rather, the main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions around one single hardened line of vehement division that allegedly cannot be resisted.” He continues, “Perhaps the worst impairment comes from the neglect – and denial – of the role of reasoning and choice, which follows from the recognition of our plural identities . . . The illusion of destiny exacts a remarkably heavy price.”⁵ We must *decide* who we are, not *discover* who we are. We must prioritize and actively manage our many identities. We must help others to do the same. We must not be seduced by the illusion of identity-based destiny.

The upcoming presidential election gives us many opportunities to witness the corrosive effects of simplistic identity. Perhaps you saw the “Jump Start” cartoon in the paper last Thursday. A white man and his Black son-in-law are in the grocery store, talking politics. The white man asks the Black man, “Would you be behind Barack Obama if he was white?” “Yes,” answers the Black man, who follows up with a question of his own: “Would you vote for McCain if he was Black?” “Yes,” answers the white man, who follows up with a question of his own: “What if Biden was a woman?” [pause] “Is Biden a Black woman or a white woman?”⁶ ;)

I am troubled by comments concerning politics that I have recently heard around here in casual conversation: “How dumb do the Republicans think we are? As if we would vote for them just because Palin is a woman.” Montclair, California in 2008 is not the Indian subcontinent in the 1940’s. However, in our own small ways, we diminish the potential for peace whenever we

⁴ *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* by Amartya Sen, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2006, p. xvi.

⁵ *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* by Amartya Sen, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2006, p. 16.

⁶ The “Jump Start” comic strip is by Robb Armstrong. This particular comic strip was published in the *Los Angeles Times* on September 18, 2008.

imply that words such as “Republican” or “Democrat” or “man” or “woman” or “Black” or “white” say all that needs to be said about another human being.

Each of us cares and *should* care about politics, just as each of us cares and *should* care about the unstable financial institutions in the news. Lao-Tse says that if there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the heart. Over a period of years, I have heard religious liberals make fun of those who say that they “hate the sin but love the sinner.” As someone who identifies as bisexual, I have in the past taken sentiments such as this personally.

Today, I am more inclined, if I have the chance, to engage the speaker in a conversation about identity. Do you think that I am *nothing but* a sinner? Do you think that *you* are a sinner? I am drawn to those (of whatever personal or political persuasion) whose sense of identity is rich and complex. I shy away from those (of whatever personal or political persuasion) whose sense of identity is sparse and simple. Amartya Sen writes, “Decolonization of the mind demands a firm departure from the temptation of solitary identities and priorities.”⁷ For the love of peace, may we walk away from the temptation of solitary identities and priorities. May it be so!

⁷ *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* by Amartya Sen, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2006, p. 99.