

The Tolerant True Believer

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Strongly held, clearly defined beliefs shape our identities and provide rules for our communities to live by. They can also make our thinking rigid and blind us to the common ground we share with those whose beliefs differ from ours. To be effective ethical agents, we must move among many different social circles, seeking to understand the beliefs of others without losing sight of our most important values.

Platform question: How can we balance a broad-minded tolerance of others with a firm adherence to our ethical ideals?

This is a very broad, abstract topic, and as I was preparing for today's platform, I was searching for a peg, as the journalists say, to hang this story on. My mind kept on returning to a movie that came out about 20 years ago, and it seemed to be as good a place as any to start. And so, this morning, I'm giving you "Crocodile Dundee: The Boxed Set".

The first disc in the set is a brief synopsis of the 1986 movie (just the first one, we won't bother with the sequel). The second disc is a series of short clips showing some "Great Moments", but mostly Small Crocodile Dundee Moments in History. The third disc is "Crocodile Dundee: The Reality Show". I'll explain that later.

First, the movie synopsis. The movie opens with Sue Charlton, a sophisticated, beautiful newspaper journalist, talking on the phone to her editor, who is also her boyfriend. She is seated in an office with a spectacular view overlooking downtown Sidney, Australia. She is saying that she will be spending a few extra days in Australia following up on an irresistible story lead on a colorful character who lives in the outback and who has miraculously survived an attack by a crocodile. She ends the conversation with a line that is as memorable as it is naive: "I'm a New Yorker. I can handle anything."

Sue arrives at Walkabout Creek, a tiny, isolated village, and she meets Mick "Crocodile" Dundee. She quickly learns that Mick's story, although partly true, has been somewhat exaggerated. Far from being a local legend, Mick Dundee is just one of the locals. Although his escape from the crocodile required quick thinking and well-developed survival skills, any of Mick's mates from the local saloon might have done the same thing. In other words, Mick was a man who was well adapted to his environment.

Sue persuades Mick to take her to the place where the crocodile attack occurred, and she learns that Mick has his own ideas about what a "sheila" is and isn't supposed to attempt. Still believing that her New York survival skills were equal to any challenge, Sue takes off on her own just to

show Mick how wrong he is. She quickly finds out that she is no match for the crocodile who grabs her by the canteen strap, intent on having her for dinner. Mick, who has been following her, saves the day. He admires her independence, but he is not impressed by her apparent lack of what he considers basic knowledge for getting along in the world.

After they return to Walkabout Creek, Sue persuades Mick to return to New York with her. Mick, who has never been more than a good walkabout's distance from home, is somewhat hesitant, but the lure of an adventure (and the lure of the beautiful Sue) convinces him, and he finds himself tentatively setting foot on his first escalator and learning to get around Manhattan. He also discovers a different side to Sue, whose father is the immensely wealthy publisher of her newspaper. Sue moves through the New York social scene with the grace and confidence of someone who has long ago mastered her environment.

Crocodile Dundee is the story of two people who have lived their entire lives in very different, but equally insular, communities. Although Sue and Mick are equally at home in their own environments, both have their awkward moments when they first encounter the other's home turf. They learn to respect each other and they develop an appreciation for the different skills necessary for getting around in each other's worlds.

And because this is a movie, and Sue and Mick are two attractive single people, you have the dramatic closing scene where Sue makes a mad dash to the subway station to try to stop Mick before he leaves. She declares her love for him across the crowded platform, and Mick body-surfs over the top of the cheering crowd to be with his lady love. Roll the credits, bring up the house lights. Admit it. You left that movie feeling good, and it was an entirely different sort of good feeling than the one you got from the other movie where the bad guy got eaten by a dinosaur. This was the kind of warm fuzzy feel that you get from seeing the world as you wish it was. Where all it takes for people to understand and respect each other is just getting acquainted and going to visit each other.

Which brings us to the second disc, Crocodile Dundee Moments in History.

In the movie, Sue and Mick lived their whole lives in very different, but equally insular, communities. Sue, the I-can-handle-anything New Yorker is just as off balance in the Australian outback as Mick is in the elite social circles of New York City.

For most of human history, we have lived in just such insular communities, and that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Any organism that is complex enough to have an immune system knows the difference between "me" and "not me" -- a distinction that is critical to the organism's survival.

Human societies throughout history have defined what constitutes "us" and "not us". Our tribe didn't follow the other tribe's customs, we didn't worship their gods, often we didn't even view them as fully human. If we interacted with them at all, it was usually on the battlefield or to trade

goods. Like an immune system, the tribal identity maintained the integrity of the tribe and ensured its survival.

These days, staying isolated is much more difficult. Not impossible--you can still find places where there's one main game in town, but it's very seldom the only game. There are a lot of advantages to being "one of us". Community values provide a sense of belonging and purpose, a ready-made identity. If there's only one game, you only need to learn one set of rules. Then you can get on with the business of everyday life, secure in the knowledge that your community is there to back you up. You can strive for, and achieve, great things, working within the system. You don't need to convince your neighbors on your aims and goals, they think the same way too.

Even if you're not completely an insider, you can achieve some limited acceptance merely by adapting to the cultural norms that surround you. Jennifer Moses, a Jewish writer living in Baton Rouge, wrote:

"In towns like Baton Rouge, religion is so much a part of public life that most folks can't begin to fathom that there might be something less than healthy in the blend. Of course, the religion in question is always a fairly distinct brand of down-home Protestantism, but what the hell. If you don't like Jesus, that's your business.

"...part of getting along means accommodating local norms, maybe even trampling on the Constitution now and then, because, after all, what's the big deal if the fellows pray before a high school football game? It's not like anyone's making them, and anyway, most of the kids, maybe even all of them, are Christian."

Just as adaptable outsiders learn to get along in a town full of insiders, adaptable insiders have learned to cut the occasional outsider a little slack without damage to their sense of identity. Amish families do business with tourists wearing shorts and T-shirts, even when they post signs in the window requesting modest dress. Salt Lake City provides 13 Starbucks stores and 9 Utah state liquor stores to cater to the needs of the non-Mormons in its midst.

Accommodating a small number of outsiders into an otherwise homogeneous community is one thing, but when several influential groups coexist in the same space, things get more complicated. Values and customs conflict, and each group is so entrenched in its own beliefs that it's impossible to imagine any other way of doing things.

Let's run a few short clips off the "small moments" menu. The first scene is a university classroom, honors poly sci. A professor -- fortyish, doughy acne-scarred face, Beatle haircut, and, no joke, a tweed jacket with suede patches on the elbows -- toys with his pipe as he leads a discussion on Karl Marx. He comes to the part about religion as the opiate of the people, and he elaborates his views about religion's role in preventing people from thinking for themselves. The city kids nod their assent -- they've heard this before. But those of us from smaller towns and less cosmopolitan upbringing are having a hard time accepting this. Did I mention that this

university was in Lubbock, Texas, a town proudly calling itself “the buckle on the Bible Belt”? How could it be that the adults who nurtured and taught us, who ran the businesses, schools, and governments in our towns, were nothing but mindless sheep? Was Martin Luther a sheep? Joan of Arc?

Cut to a scene about 20 years later. We’re in a much larger room, one that used to house an indoor soccer field. Now, it’s the main sanctuary of the Albuquerque Calvary Chapel. Three church services every Sunday, roughly 1000 people at each service. The pastor takes the podium at the center of the stage-lit platform while the professional band plays praise music. Pastor Skip -- again, no joke -- is six feet four, blonde, and blue-eyed, and exactly what you would expect a former California surfer to look like in middle age. He begins to speak: “How do we know that Jesus is the only path to salvation? Because it says so right here in God’s Holy Word.” Nine hundred and ninety-nine heads nod in assent, and an approving murmur comes up from the congregation. I’m sitting next to my sister Linda in the big anonymous middle of this crowd and looking around at the people taking notes and highlighting verses in their Bibles. I wait for Pastor Skip to resolve this bit of circular logic, but he doesn’t seem to see the need. Jesus is the way because the Bible is true, and the Bible is true because Jesus is the way.

Cut to another scene, this one set just last year in a smaller auditorium in a boxy white building on 16th Street NW in Washington DC. The “shock and awe” of the second Bush inauguration is still painfully fresh, and the people assembled for Sunday platform are asking “where did we go wrong?” A handsome, sixtyish man with thick wavy white hair stands at the podium. He’s talking about the rise to power of the evangelicals, and doing a fair impression of a televangelist. The audience knows this routine, and shouts of “Amen!” and “Tell ‘em brother!” punctuate his remarks. I’m right in there, joining in the fun. Somehow, making fun of the far right takes some of the scariness out of the whole situation. But then, I hear a hissing from a few people in the back. It’s not a particularly malicious hissing, more like hissing the villain in a silent movie. But it was enough to take me out of the play-acting. Wait a minute, I thought. These are not cartoon villains. These evangelicals are my family, my classmates, my coworkers. They are real people trying to live a good life and do the right thing in this world, even if I don’t agree with their point of view.

And I thought about all those churches, meeting on a Sunday morning just like we were, as certain that their own way was superior as we were about our way.

Several things can happen when cultures collide.

“**Do it our way or else**” seems to be a popular choice. This works well if you’re a lot bigger and stronger than the other group, but small desperate groups can be quite effective as well (it’s sometimes called terrorism).

If brute force isn’t your style, you can always try **salesmanship**. “We like our way so much that we’re sure that if you knew more about our way, you would see the light and join us.” “Why

would you stay in some dinky little fringe group when you could join the great army of believers marching to victory?”

The beauty of this approach is that it doesn't require you to actually know anything about other cultures, traditions, or points of view. All you have to do is show them the way, and they will see how wrong they have been all these years and come around to your side. Greet you with roses, so to speak.

“Sister, if you only knew how good life could be when you come into the light of wireless broadband Internet connectivity and forsake the darkness of your old dial-up ways! You'll be online *all* the time, not just stopping by now and then when you feel the need to check your e-mail!”

Sooner or later, you're going to run into a tough customer. Someone who's actually very happy with their current way of life. Someone who sees *you* as the other and has no intention of giving up his or her particular “us”. My cousin and his wife decided one year to organize a group of missionaries to travel to Africa and preach the good news to the natives. They spent the year making their plans, getting visas, funding, and immunization shots. Collecting books, toys, and school supplies to bring with them. They had been warned to bring plenty of cash to hand out to the local officials and businessmen whenever they needed something done. I remember them talking about all this, but I can't remember hearing them talk about learning the culture or the needs, or even the language, of the people they were going to visit. They came back early from their trip, out of money and bitterly disappointed. Apparently, they weren't the first group of missionaries ever to visit that particular part of Africa. The villagers knew the routine. They listened politely (through a missionary translator who had been there a while). They tended to the missionaries' needs for transportation, food, and lodging, collecting much of their cash in the process. My cousins described the villagers' attitude as “Thank you very much for the books, toys, and school supplies. We are very glad to have those. But you can take your Jesus back home with you. We won't be needing him.”

Enough rejection can turn you into a cynic. “**You'll never change those people.** Why try?” The next logical step is to sever all ties with “those people” and withdraw to be among your own kind. By the way, if you check the menu on this screen, you'll see an icon that looks like a duffel bag. Remember this, we'll see it again later.

The urge to withdraw is often coupled with a desire to purify the community, to clarify the boundaries between “us” and “them”. With every successive refinement, more people fall outside the boundaries and leave the group. Garrison Keillor tells the story of a fictitious Lutheran church that split so many times that finally, there were only two members left, and they weren't speaking to each other.

Maintaining the integrity of the group against competing outside forces requires holding fast to the belief that your way is better enough to justify the separation. One way to do this is to

demonize “the other guys”. This works well at the battle front during a war or during the heat of a political campaign. Not so well when “the other guys” live next door.

Fostering a constant sense of crisis helps preserve the boundaries and discourages critical thought and careful examination. There’s something intensely romantic about holding the fort with the army of the faithful against the onslaught of the unbelievers.

The results can be tragic -- witness the fiery end to the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas or the mass suicide of the Jim Jones cult in Guyana. That’s not always the case, though. Cloistered communities of Catholic monks and nuns, Amish communities, Hasidic Jews, and other intensely religious groups live and work within the larger society while maintaining their sense of separateness.

Standing firm and keeping up this kind of united front in the face of overwhelming opposition requires a certain steely rigidity. You have to be willing to accept the whole package, without question. It’s a jungle outside our little enclave. Nonbelievers drifting aimlessly in a sea of amorality. Without absolute standards, there aren’t any standards at all.

This absolutism doesn’t fare very well when you look outside your group. Humans are inquisitive creatures, and inevitably some of them will discover that there is more than one way to look at this world. Different is not necessarily bad.

One common response to unreasoning rigidity is to go as far as you can in the other direction. Embrace the school of thought whose motto is, “**It’s all good.**” You can avoid confronting conflict altogether by denying that there ever is any conflict. Every point of view is acknowledged equally, every action has its rationalization, no statement is so beyond the pale that it’s worth standing up and saying, “You’re wrong!”

This can be a sign of a truly amoral take on life. “Anything is OK, as long as it gets me what I want.” However, “it’s all good” is also practiced by people who have a very deep sense of fairness, an empathy for the underdog, a desire to stand up for the oppressed.

Thus it was that my sister and her friends missed a concert that they had looked forward to for many weeks because of political correctness and an unwillingness to offend a person who was more than willing to claim the status of a victim. The concert was sold out well in advance, but my sister and her friends had their tickets in hand when they arrived at the outdoor theater. They found the numbers on the bleacher-style seats that corresponded to the numbers assigned on their tickets. However, there wasn’t enough room for all of them to sit down because one very large overweight woman was taking up the better part of two seats. They called an usher and explained their situation. The fat woman launched into a tirade about how unfair it was that she always had to pay extra, and society always discriminated against fat people.

Not wanting to offend this member of an oppressed minority, the usher told my sister's displaced friend that she could go to the box office and claim a refund. "As long as you get your money back, what's the difference?" The usher could not be persuaded to change his mind, so my sister's entire group left the theater, claimed their refunds, and spent the evening composing a scathing letter to the event manager. They sent a copy to the editor of the local paper as well. The theater management sent a letter of apology and changed their seating policy to more explicitly require one seat, one ticket. No one really came out of this situation happy, except perhaps the fat lady, who had talked her way into getting two seats for the price of one.

Sometimes, "it's all good" requires a kind of enforced ignorance, a denial of the obvious. I once had a friend who had decided to banish all traces of racism from her thoughts and actions. As we were discussing our favorite types of music, I mentioned that I liked some kinds of African music. She was clearly appalled. "You mustn't call it African music, that's discriminatory," she said. That caught me by surprise, and I asked her if she really meant that I wasn't supposed to admit that I could tell the difference between Mozart and King Sunny Ade. She thought for a moment, then said no, that you shouldn't glorify white male European music over the indigenous music of people of color. Apparently, it never occurred to her that I might sometimes prefer King Sunny Ade's music over Mozart's.

"It's all good" can also be a means of broadening your appeal to attract the greatest number of people to your community. Many of the largest churches offer what critics call "religion lite", a message so broad and inoffensive that it's not likely to drive anyone away.

The image of a politician with his finger to the wind is so familiar it's a cliché. "I voted for that bill before I voted against it." Several of my middle-of-the-road friends and family members held their noses and voted for Bush in the last election. They didn't especially like him or his policies, but at least they knew what he stood for.

"It's all good" is very comfortable when times are good, but it offers little in the way of guidance and purpose when a crisis arises. How do you know when someone has "crossed the line" when there are no lines? If you take a stand on an issue, will your community back you up?

I don't know about you, but if someone is mugging me on the street and beating me to a bloody pulp, I don't want the police officer to stand on the sidelines and offer a sociological treatise on kinesthetic expression in inner urban culture.

Sooner or later, someone has to stand up and say, "That's wrong! You have to stop what you're doing!" Or in a different situation, "That's right! We're going to stand up and support that!"

Here at WES, I've been learning **another approach** -- one that acknowledges all sides of an issue, and uses this to construct an informed foundation for strong moral action.

Greg Barton, a WES member who mediates contract negotiations, has spoken about the methods he uses to cut through the bellowing and chest thumping to progress toward a viable, legally binding agreement that both parties are willing to sign. “**First, you listen,**” he says. No matter how well you think you understand the other side’s position, no matter how wrong you think they are, no matter how badly you’re itching to set them straight, first you listen to them.

You might learn something new, you might not. But if you can restrain yourself long enough to let the other person speak their piece first, you’ve broken the stalemate and given the other person a reason to listen to you when it’s your turn to speak.

Darryl Davis, a musician who has spoken several times at WES, takes the same approach. Mr. Davis, an African American man, has spent the last several years visiting Ku Klux Klan rallies and befriending the Klansmen. I didn’t say “attempting to befriend”, I said “befriending”. After his most recent visit to WES, I asked him, “How do you even start a conversation with someone who speaks so hatefully about you?” “First, I listen,” he replied. “I come up to them, one on one, and I ask them why they hate me so much. I get them to see me as a person. I invite them to my home, to share a meal with me and my friends.” Nowhere does Mr. Davis mention storming the barricades, standing up in the crowd and denouncing the Klan’s evil ways, or mounting a letter writing campaign. He approaches the Klan one member at a time and gets them to speak their mind directly to his face.

This isn’t a risk free tactic. Davis has been physically assaulted and injured. He responded by offering to drive the assailant’s wife and kids to the prison where the assailant was serving time for his assault so they could visit him.

When Davis tells his story at WES, he brings along a large duffel bag. Remember a few minutes ago, when I was telling you about the “you’ll never change those people” attitude, and I told you to watch for a duffel bag? During the course of his talk, he opens the bag and takes out a long white robe and pointed hood. A former Klansman gave those to him when he quit the Klan. “I won’t be needing these any more,” the ex-Klansman told Davis, who has talked more than one person out of a robe and hood.

Granted, all this is anecdotal evidence. So here’s a published, peer reviewed study for all you statistics fans. In 2002, journalism professor Susanna Hornig Priest reported her findings as a collaborator in a large-scale multinational study of how people use media sources to inform themselves on scientific issues. Priest’s part of the study dealt with residents of the U.S. Subjects were surveyed on two issues that most people had some familiarity with and that elicited strong opinions -- nuclear power and genetically engineered foods.

Survey subjects were asked whether and how strongly they supported these technologies. Their level of support was then correlated with a series of other factors -- how much did they know about science (and these issues in particular), how much did they *think* they knew, how closely

did they follow the news on these issues. They also provided demographic details such as age, gender, place of residence, religion, and political affiliation.

Priest and her colleagues found no statistically significant correlation between support for biotech food or nuclear power and the factors you might expect to play a role: how educated, well-informed, or religious the subjects were. The strongest correlations were with support (or not) and moral acceptability and with the level of trust for the providers of these technologies.

Priest used the word “myth” to describe the assumption that “as levels of information and awareness rise, so will public support -- regardless of factual knowledge.” She continued, “I don’t think that trust can be sold like soap.” Priest stated that the best way to build trust was to conduct a dialogue and to promote knowledge and awareness for their own sake, and not to advance an agenda or point of view -- assertions that are supported by other such studies.

There’s a lot more on the “Crocodile Dundee Moments in History” disc, but you get the idea. Let’s move on to the third disc, “**Crocodile Dundee: The Reality Show.**” As you look at the menu, you’ll notice that most of this disc is blank. It hasn’t been recorded yet.

You will see an item called “strategies”. Let’s take a look at that now. You’ll see a recap of the tactics on the second disc:

Do it my way or else

Our way is best

You’ll never change them

Withdraw and purify

It’s all good

First, you listen

As you saw with the stories, sometimes these tactics work and sometime they backfire. The strategies are taken from all the stories, tying together their best and most effective aspects. The first strategy is “**Know your values**”. This is where you construct the road map on which everything else is based. Is there anything or anyone that you would lay down your life to protect? Some ideal that is so fundamental to your identity that it’s completely non-negotiable, no matter what? Put that first on your list. Next, line up the ideals and values that you would only compromise if that were the only way to protect your most fundamental ideals. Go on down the line, all the way to the things that you prefer, but that don’t really matter all that much in the grand scheme of things. If you need some help getting started, there’s a pretty good starter kit printed on the front of your program. You’ll need to revisit this list occasionally. Life changes, priorities change (some don’t).

[My values:

Everyone deserves a fair chance at a decent life: a good home, enough to eat, a useful way to make a living, a sense of safety.

Respect people enough to tell them the truth and to listen to what they tell you.

Give people a chance to be their best, to rise above their current situation.]

A pair of civil suits illustrates one hierarchy of values. In the 1983 case EEOC vs. Electronic Data Systems, the court ruled that an Orthodox Jewish man could not be required to shave his beard to comply with the company's dress code. The company routinely allowed other expressions of religion, such as jewelry, and the beard did not interfere with the employee's ability to perform his job.

The next year, in Bhatia vs. Chevron USA, another court ruled that Chevron was not required to go to the extra effort and expense required to accommodate Mr. Bhatia's full beard, also worn for religious reasons. Bhatia, a chemical engineer, occasionally had to perform work that risked his exposure to toxic gases, and he needed to wear a respirator. The standard respirator that Chevron provided for this purpose had a face mask with a gasket that made an airtight seal when it rested firmly against bare skin. Facial hair interfered with this seal and rendered the mask ineffective. Mr. Bhatia had requested a hood-style ventilator, which was more cumbersome and expensive. Many other workers in similar situations shave the sides of their beards, taking the middle ground between religious observance and personal safety.

The courts in both these cases used a strategy of “**unbundling the issue**”. Often, it's easier to make a decision if you look at each aspect of an issue separately. Find out what parts go to your core values, and what parts are just window dressing (or camouflage). For example, several WES members routinely cook and serve meals to the homeless women at the Luther Place shelter. This shelter is located in a Lutheran church building, and it's sponsored by the church. It's not that these WES members are closet Protestants. But their overriding concern is helping their fellow human beings. Core values first.

Savvy marketers are experts at making issues bundles. A naturalistic approach to science says nothing about the existence of a deity, and thus is amoral and materialistic, and thus contributes to the decay of society. Promiscuous women have unwanted pregnancies, thus, anyone who has an unwanted pregnancy has low moral standards, and should be forced to take responsibility for their actions. Pat Robertson says outrageous things and is an evangelical Christian, thus evangelical Christians are outrageous, thus we can never have any interaction with them except to denounce them in the strongest possible terms.

Not all bundles are bad, however. If you've examined the issues and find that they really to interconnect, then **make your own bundle**. For example, you might find a celebrity's behavior in her private life so repulsive that you boycott her movies, no matter how much you enjoy her acting. Maybe your teen spends time in a place where you know a lot of heavy drinking is going on. Even though your teen enjoys the company and doesn't participate in the drinking, you're afraid that peer pressure will overcome his good judgment and you decide to tell your teen that this place is now off limits. Perhaps you decide that in order to support a movement that advocates marriage as a means to strengthening moral values, they must also advocate for the factors that make a healthy functioning household. Perhaps you believe in free markets, but not

at the expense of a living wage for the workers that keep these markets supplied with goods and services.

Now that you've gotten the hang of values and bundles, let's look at the other item on the menu for this disc. This is the item that makes it a reality show -- the list of participants. As you scroll down the list, you notice that your name is there, along with the names of everyone you know. Check the broadcast schedule, and you'll see that this show runs every day, all day long. In fact, there's an episode running right now. And you're in the cast for every episode, no getting voted off the island. You're in this until your own personal series is canceled, and that's not going to happen for a while. Don't worry. You're ready for this. Step up to the camera and enjoy.