

**Monday, November 1, 2004: Larry Desautels, *English Teacher***

In my brief stay on this planet, I've had the fortune of having spent considerable time overseas—too much time I was reminded, when I tried to give blood last Tuesday, but that is a story for another time—primarily in Western Europe. While on trips, short and extended, I've met more than a few people who wanted to talk about the United States. One Algerian now living in Lisbon, ironically who had spent much of his adult life on the U.S. intelligence payroll, told me he liked Americans, but he didn't like the United States.

"You mean you don't like the country?" I responded innocently.

"That's right, the country."

"Like N.Y. City?"

"No, I Like N.Y."

"The Grand Canyon? Surely you can't dislike the Grand Canyon?"

"No, that is a very spectacular place."

"Buffalo?"

"I've never been to Buffalo. What I don't like is your national character."

For some reason I don't remember the rest of the conversation, but I've thought much on the subject since, and decided to use this morning's captive audience to deliver my rendition of "The American Two-Step: Observations on Our National Character."

The American character is one of sweet schizophrenia. We step . . . and occasionally stagger . . . between a rampant idealism and a covetous materialism, and when leaning toward the latter, we often appear like junk merchants of greed who really believe that what we're selling is universal balm for all that ails.

Maybe so.

There's no doubt that we are a nation of stuff, one that cycles without recycling, uses without reusing. But we cast off more than just tired furniture and clothing; we cast off philosophies and beliefs, those near-absolutes that give an individual and a nation form and shape. Even when we slide back toward the Ideal in our American Two-Step, we place our feet on a dance floor that seems to move beneath our feet.

William James labeled us "Pragmatics" in the 19th Century, no surprise considering we came of age in the time of Darwin's universal mutability—things must change or they lose effectiveness, even to extinction. Part of our national spirit likely grew as much from this acceptance of change as it did from our notion of possibility just beyond the next ridge—that vague awareness that fresh experience lay along the track of the sun. In a fundamental way, opportunity to change and belief in change arrived at the same time, in

the same place. We didn't have to cast off hundreds, or even thousands of years of institutions, or philosophies, to embrace what might be called "The Pragmatic Impulse," which is the heart of the Modern. This country became a destination for people from all over the world precisely because of the opportunity to redefine and redirect.

I remember listening to an Oxford professor explain the "Oxford system." Students as young as eight or ten begin a process of dedication and focus and discipline that may lead them to one of the many colleges at Oxford. Someone suggested that Oxford didn't seem a good place for late bloomers. The professor replied, "England isn't a good place for late bloomers . . . which explains why we lose so much brilliance to places like United States and Canada, countries patient and permissive."

America allows for youthful wandering and misdirection, so we open our house to the wanderers and dreamers—a nation welcoming masses of immigrants with attention deficit disorder, as it were. (I've even heard it said that the American West was settled by the likes of the hyper little schoolboy who couldn't accept even the least restrictive discipline of 19th Century United States. They couldn't sit still and fell to directing their attention everywhere but on the tasks at hand. Sounds-- like my freshman class!

Now we find ourselves at odds with much of the world. But why? One obvious reason is that we have so much when many have so little, a disparity also evident within our country's borders, where poverty and hunger and despair exist at a tragic level, and it just doesn't seem right. Of course within many of those countries that look at us as hedonists, as gluttons, there are those living as princes, even as deities, but in America, it must seem, most live better than comfortably; therefore America has more to share. The result is that we become the target of criticism, and anger, and hate often by those who ignore their own harsh rulers that offer them little to ease their burdens. We are a symbol, and symbols are easier to fight than cold steel, immediate and intense, in the hands of cruel and uncompromising authority. Frankly, I'm disturbed when we begin to act with cruel and uncompromising authority, imposing a rigid vision on those who share neither our experience nor our dreams. But that, too is a subject for another time.

Because we came of age during a time of great change, and because we were young and had little to cast off before adapting to possibility, we now appear everywhere in the modern world. Our colas compete in canoes in Brazil; our cowboys fight mock gunfights in forty languages; our fleets make port on seven continents. We are an accessible symbol, visible and varied. Those who want to do us harm have easy access.

It isn't, however, just about the most fundamental needs for food and shelter. America stands for something quite alien to that found in many parts of the world. We believe that change is more than a possibility—it's a cultural imperative. As I said, we gained our identity in the 19th Century, an identity that has kept us ever youthful, though somewhat naïve. Old absolutes were being probed and questioned. And change is good, even exciting for the ever youthful. It's no wonder that tribes and super-tribes, cults and nations, that are steeped in traditions—cultural and religious—find us a disturbing presence in an increasingly shrinking world.

I remember a 60's folk song by the Kingston Trio in which the vocals move along something like this: "Italians hate Yugoslavs, South Africans hate the Dutch;/And I don't like anybody very much!" There's more to it, of course, but the point is that our world brims with cultures and countries and religions and radicals that simply dislike with great intensity. The song ends with "And I know for certain that some lovely day,/Someone will set the spark off and we will all be blown away!" For decades I've thought the song dated, because of the ease in nuclear tensions between the superpowers, but . . . now I'm not quite so sure.

Americans—not all of course, for we have a few groups that can fear and hate with the most proficient of the world's sinners—Americans generally believe that there are many rooms in our mansion. And though there may be walls between us at times, and the rooms vary in size and furnishings, we can share the moral and ethical plumbing necessary to keep us unburdened. Americans generally want to go through our days and lives with industry and integrity—and of course with two cars, state-of-the-art electronics, closets full of clothes, walking-jogging-running-standing shoes in multiple colors (we do have our weaknesses). And we really do believe in one fundamental principle: flexibility is better than rigidity. Not exactly a faith-based religion. In fact, such a thing can prevent a country from ever holding onto anything for very long, for change is not only inevitable—it is desirable.

So why do so many hate us? I think presently we appear arrogant, even cruel and uncompromising to a world that otherwise has viewed even our most troublesome foreign follies, like Vietnam, as good intentions gone bad. After all, we have often stood for what's right and just. But beyond our present foreign policies, that even many at home find troublesome, there is something that outsiders dislike, like my acquaintance in Lisbon.

Perhaps it's that we don't hold still long enough to be understood, and ignorance of a culture often breeds fear, and its offspring, hate. I like to think of our country working and laughing and brawling and singing, while outside, in the fen, like in *BEOWULF*, a confused Grendel lurks, strangely drawn by that very same thing he loathes. Had he arrived at the door with a platter of food, or a bottle of wine, he might have been welcomed and allowed to melt into the revelers. But we'll never know, for he came baring fangs, with a thirst for blood. I'm sure the partiers at Heorot were as confused then, as we are now, when terror arrived at their door.

When someone steps before the camera and pleads, "Can't we just all get along?" screams and shouts from around the world, and some even from within this country, yell him down with a resounding "No!" Yet most in this country really do believe we can all get along, which puts us at odds with a world that has grown ossified in its acceptance of strife and conflict and tension as not only necessary, but cleansing, too. And cleansing in a religious way—something most in America don't understand, can't understand.

The western humorist Artemus Ward wrote, “My pollertics, like my religion, [are] of an exceedin’ accommodatin’ character.” Is not this our nature, America’s nature? Perhaps not those very rigid among us, but certainly America, and most Americans, are exceedingly accommodating. We really don’t understand intense religious conflict, intense ethnic conflict, intense class conflict—intense conflict of any kind, really. These tensions exist here, certainly, but only between and among those who lack tolerance, those unaccommodating—dare I say “un-American”—throwbacks to an older, static world.

Their character is not the American character.

We now find ourselves rubbing elbows with more rigid cultures that don’t want to share the crowded subways cars of life with those of a different ilk. Kind of reminds me of segregated buses, and the violence imposed by the rigid thinkers upon those who just wanted to get along, upon those who just wanted to ride through life unmolested, dreaming their dreams. There will always be conflict between our character and the rigid who see progress as godless humanism, who fear change, or who see it as just another example of a fall to decadence.

As I’ve asked before in other venues, “Oh where is that poison to kill just those who believe that their way is the only way?”

America might be flawed, but because we embrace change, because we are a nation born into and stamped by the belief that change is necessary and appealing, there is hope. There is always hope. Progress, incredible and incremental—mostly the latter—can improve the flawed. Are we too materialistic, even hedonistic. Sure, probably. But what should carry us through each day is an idealism that seems to believe that barriers can fall and become bridges, that we can, at the very least, all get along.

That is the golden rule in ALL religions; that should be the golden rule of all our lives.

When we shrug our shoulders as a nation, when things aren’t going our way, it isn’t the ‘continental shrug,’ that fatalist concession of “that’s life.” Our shrug is more like, “OK, that didn’t work—what else can we try?” Then we wipe our brow, grin possibility, and lean back into the task.

So go forth, each on your own path, and grin possibility and lean into your task.

Thank you.