

Puritans in High-Top Sneakers

By Richard A. Shweder

CHICAGO

Liberalism is sometimes identified with the spirit of "open-mindedness," yet the idea of an "open mind" is notoriously difficult to define.

Consider, for example, Kurt Vonnegut's description of his education in open-mindedness four decades ago at the greatest of all American universities. This is what he recounts in his novel "Slaughterhouse-Five": "I went to the University of Chicago for a while after the Second World War. I was a student in the department of anthropology. They taught me that nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting."

Mr. Vonnegut goes on to say he never wrote a book with a villain in it because that is what they taught him at college. They taught him whatever is, is O.K. It is precisely open-mindedness of that sort that led our former colleague Allan Bloom to recommend closing the American mind.

Although provocation is a virtue at the University of Chicago, Allan Bloom's book "The Closing of the American Mind" drove most of his reviewers, and even some of his colleagues, wild. The incitement in the book was not so much his ridicule of "Woodstock" (which he likened to Nazi rallies at Nuremberg) or of rock music (which he viewed as obscene).

The real instigation was his complaint that the basic distinction between good and evil, between culture and barbarism, had gone out of fashion on U.S. campuses. Students, he claimed, have become so open-minded they don't make moral judgments and feel embarrassed when others do. They have become so tolerant they have lost their sense of taste. They are so enamored of the idea that beauty, goodness and truth are in the eyes of the beholder that they have become blind to things of genuine worth. They ascribe no greater value to the dialogues of Socrates than to those of Beavis and Butt-Head.

Now I am not particularly a fan of Mr. Bloom's thesis, which Rolling Stone, in a witty review of his book, called "fundamentalism for highbrows." I am far more concerned about the Puritanism on campuses than the relativism. But every other community has its sacred principles, so why shouldn't we? Think of "fundamentalism for highbrows" as something like the 10 commandments for saving the soul of liberal education. What should those commandments teach?

A Puritan is someone who exaggerates a virtue until it becomes a vice. Puritans come clad in strait laces rather than in the untied sneakers that are the footwear of the liberal soul on our campuses. There are Puritans of the left and of the right. There are as many kinds of Puritans as there are kinds of virtues, because any virtue can be overdrawn.

Imagine a world governed by some perfectly enforced virtue. Whenever I try this exercise I reason myself into a horror show.

Justice, for example, is a virtue. Many people spend their lives feeling indignant about injustice. A few even succeed at bettering the world. Perhaps if you are lucky your generation

will develop a sense of itself as the 90's generation because of the role you play during your college years in standing up for what is just.

My generation has that sense of itself. Many of us who were students in the 1960's feel proud of the role we played in opposing the war in Vietnam and marching on Washington for civil rights. One of us kept marching right into the White House.

But a world of perfect justice would be a nightmare. Every error, indiscretion or dark desire would show up on your "permanent record card." Actions and outcomes would be exactly correlated. You would reap what you sowed and only what you sowed. Forgiveness and redemption would be impossible. There would be no such thing as luck.

You could never start over in a new town. To enforce perfect justice, someone would have to be watching all the time. It would be a world run by accountants and prosecutors. Too great an emphasis on "accountability" can be stifling to the human spirit and dangerous to the life of the free university. Let us hope the lesson of the Lani Guinier case is not to keep your scholarly mouth shut so that one day you can make it in Washington.

Protecting people from harm is also a virtue. It is deeply offensive to the human spirit when the vulnerable are exploited by those who should be caring for them. Yet even here, Puritan alchemy is capable of turning a

virtue into a vice. A world comprehended only in terms of harm would be a disaster.

If you exaggerate the idea that you should be protected from harm, you have a recipe for creating a society of thin-skinned complainers. For every parody or personal slight (you "snake," you "pig," you "animal"), every act of criticism, there would be

How to survive college with your mind open.

an accusation of harassment or abuse. Hate groups and anti-defamation leagues would quickly organize and keep each other in business. Eventually the members of such a society would learn to keep their mouths closed, their eyes covered and their doors shut, for fear of the consequences. Then people would surely complain that the people they detest will have nothing to do with them.

Even provocation can become a vice if it is the only virtue in a Puritan town. There is no dignity in provocation if its only aim is to celebrate your freedom to humiliate others or con-

vict them of inferiority. Provocation is an act of love, not hate. It serves the pursuits of truth and justice, and it protects from harm those who use it wisely. But like anything else of value it must be handled with care.

Of course, these days it has become very hard to know what it means to be politically correct. Is it correct to be in favor of government regulation or against it? Is it correct to celebrate the differences between men and women or to deny that there are any? A few years ago the left-wing Government of Angola employed Cuban troops to defend U.S. oil refineries against a Maoist revolutionary supported by the Reagan Administration. It is hard to be politically correct when the world starts to look like "Monty Python's Flying Circus."

Yet let me not be evasive. Curiosity about variety, diversity and difference is a mark of a liberal open mind. So is the celebration of difference. So is the criticism of difference.

If P.C. refers to the tenet that nobody is "ridiculous or bad or disgusting," it is an exaggeration of the virtue of tolerance, which makes it a form of Puritanism, which is not a good thing. If it refers to the idea that the only reason some people are not as accomplished as others is that they have been victimized, then P.C. diminishes some pleasures of the brain. But of course, you won't find any of that at the University of Chicago. □

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