From the Standards Blog

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#27 *Social Standards, School Violence and Taboos: In respect of Red Lake*

Perhaps the most pervasive type of standard to be found throughout human existence is the kind intended to regulate social actions. Indeed, as demonstrated by the many formal behaviors observed in chimpanzees and other primates, social standards predate even the evolution of hominids.

There must be something, therefore, that is particularly useful in such a persistent type of standard. What might that be, and what might sophisticated, freethinking inhabitants of the modern networked world learn from such quaint tools?

Simply stated, social behavior standards fall into two types: things you know that you should do, and things you know you should not do. In each case, these directions and proscriptions help societies avoid conflict, foster collaboration, and establish hierarchies. Collectively, they allow each member of a group to understand his or her obligations to the rest of the community, and hence allow us to manage to live in contact with each other with a minimum of friction and a maximum of cooperation.

While closely related to morals, behavioral standards are less theoretical and to the point. They are the Ten Commandments, and not the principals that lie behind them. Behavioral standards are therefore easier to understand and to obey (what's not to get in "Thou Shalt Not Kill?")

Social standards are remarkably economical in another way as well: they are literally learned at our parents' knees. We may not even remember how or when we learned them, but we know what is expected of us for the rest of our lives (whether we actually conform to such standards, of course, is something else – especially when no one is looking).

Social standards, as a result, can be uniquely useful and essential to society, and perhaps more so now than ever as the world becomes a more crowded and contentious place.

Today, however, social standards are perhaps the least appreciated of all types of commonalities. Indeed, they are often denigrated as anachronistic and claustrophobic – as being inimical to freedom and a drag upon the joys of self-expression. All of which, of course, may be true, especially in small towns and other settings where everyone knows what everyone else is (and isn't) doing.

Given how liberated and educated we all are today, does this mean that it is time for social standards to be consigned to the ash heap of history?

Well, perhaps they deserve a bit more consideration before we turn our backs upon them for good.

Consider this:

For thousands of years, many societies have employed the concept of the "taboo" - a prohibition placed upon an act that is deemed to be so evil as to be unthinkable. To violate a taboo is to knowingly offend the gods, and to literally expel oneself from society. In early cultures, the result of such an expulsion could be expected to lead to starvation or violent death. In consequence, taboos have often supplied the front line of defense to protect the societies that employ them from the most threatening types of behavior.

The concept of the unthinkable is as clever as it is powerful, because (acts of rage aside) one must contemplate an act before one can commit it. If society can successfully instill the idea that a given act is truly "unthinkable," then those who might otherwise be disposed to performing the same act will recoil from even considering the forbidden behavior. Problem solved.

The taboo can therefore be a very useful societal tool indeed. But in the United States (especially) today, we have decided not only to abandon the concept of the taboo, but also to aggressively destroy any vestiges of its power that might have survived in our collective unconsciousness. And all to serve the higher values of profit and entertainment.

I find it very strange that modern western society has chosen to embrace the fictionalized performance of the most horrific acts of violence as entertainment, first in television and cinema, and now in video games. Why is it that we find watching (and watching, and watching and watching) abhorrent behavior to be so worthwhile?

Strangely, we seem never to have considered the possibility that watching the fictionally unthinkable might eventually make actually doing the unthinkable more thinkable for some people.

One of the latest examples of behavior that American society professes to find "unthinkable" is school violence. An almost universal cry of "Why?" greets each new instance of carnage, whether by an adult, or by a child (as at Columbine ten years ago this month, and at the Red Lake Indian Reservation only a few weeks ago). Each time such an event bursts once again into the headlines, we throw up our hands and profess an inability to plumb the depths of such "inconceivable" behavior.

But what justification, after all, have we to regard violent behavior by adolescents as unthinkable? In fact, our society barrages children with a flood of images -- some fictional, and some in the news, that make drawing, aiming and firing a gun at another human being very conceivable indeed. Most tellingly, we even regard adolescent Laser Tag and paintball parties as being nothing other than good, clean American fun. Why not dress children up in faux flak jackets, hand them realistic looking weapons, and invite them to stalk and "kill" their peers?

Why not indeed? Perhaps because we have not only thrown out the concept of the taboo, but even encouraged adolescents to "try out" what it feels like to waste someone who may have bullied them. The trigger gets pulled, the "bullet" hits, and the shooter "wins", with no immediate consequences.

What are we thinking (if indeed we are thinking at all)?

We all know that suicide is disturbingly prevalent among adolescents. Hence, we know that many children can face with equanimity the taking of an action that represents the ultimate act of violence to the perpetrator himself. If this act of detachment or rationalization - the taking of one's own life - is so thinkable to an adolescent, why are we surprised if the same child instead chooses to resolve differences by doing what they did or saw on Saturday at the paint ball party - and this time using Dad's gun?

Society needs to express moral indignation in a consistent and clear fashion. If we truly profess to believe that certain behaviors are inconceivable, then society should not demonstrate ambivalence on the subject. Moreover, we should recognize (and even respect) the inexperience and confusion of adolescents, and not impose a burden of discernment upon them that some, demonstrably, are not able to bear. Each of us owes it to our own children to give all children every tool at society's disposal to demarcate clear boundaries between what is right and what is wrong.

Perhaps, then, taboos do have a place in modern society. We have truly and gratuitously abandoned this useful tool when we give adolescents the opportunity to rehearse unthinkable behavior with "play" stations and video screens, or with paint ball gun in hand, and schoolmates in their sights.

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