

HARD EDGES SOFTENED HERE?

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This sermon arises from my concern about what has been happening to our democracy in the 21st century, especially how our Congress finds itself in a stalemate as each political party focuses on espousing certain values rather than joining together to deal with pressing problems of the nation. Everyone seems to have hard political edges. And thus my sermon title, “Hard Edges Softened Here?” The question mark reflects my uncertainty as to whether humans have the will and courage to take the steps to live harmoniously together. As things stand, legislative stalemate exists with no side willing to acknowledge wisdom in the other side and with legislators despising each other personally and avoiding contact with each other.

With the help of the insights of Jonathan Haidt, Cal Thomas and Bob Beckel, and Earl and Merle Black, I want this morning to take us inside of this stalemate, suggest its negative consequences, and offer a possible way out. So let me tell you the story of an imaginary kingdom called Labovonia, its national congress called the Labovichka, its congressmen and women called Labovichkans. So you don't get bogged down with these strange names, I'm going to use the English terms for Congress and representatives. I hope the Labovonians in the audience will forgive me for taking this liberty.

Labovonia nestles between Organia and Talos. For two hundred years Labovonia has had a republican form of government. Representatives are elected to six-year terms representing small areas called dachenkas. The political system has two parties whose names, as translated into English, are respectively the Blue Party and the Red Party. The Blue Party dominates on the fringes of the country, and the Red in the southern and southwestern regions. The two parties hold contrastive views on everything, but neither holds a clear majority in the Congress. Until fairly recently, they refused to cooperate with each other, making the Congress an almost useless institution. No business could get done, even though Labovonia faced a number of significant issues that could be satisfactorily addressed by a central government: the Labovonian economy, rising cost of health services, and Labovonia's increasingly bad air from the unregulated exhaust fumes of vehicles and factories. Labovonian industry was shutting down. Owners were moving factories to Organia and Talos where workers were paid less. They were also automating their manufacturing processes.

Being deadlocked, the Congress could not deal with any of this. Both parties wanted different solutions to these problems. They saw their positions as based on values they considered dearer to

them than whether or not problems were addressed and solved. Their stance was influenced by those they represented. The Reds felt that their lifestyle was purer and more wholesome than lifestyles in regions dominated by the Blues. Many Reds belonged to the same religious institution and claimed to base their value system on divine commandments. When issues came before the Congress, therefore, the representatives of the Red-dominated sections were more interested in pleasing their constituents than they were in dealing with problems. They wanted again and again to assure the people back home that they were standing up for their principles.

On their side, Blue Party representatives were equally intransigent. They simply could not accept that Red Party representatives failed to see the wisdom and reasonableness of Blue Party positions. They looked down their noses at the part of the country where the Red Party was dominant and at the religious fervor of people in that part of the country.

The Blue Party refused to acknowledge that they too held to their values with as great a tenacity as any Red Party representative. Blue Party people prided themselves on their empiricism and—to be perfectly honest—mistakenly felt that their positions and proposals were not driven by ideology but only by facts. Like their Red Party counterparts, they refused to fraternize with opposition members. Woe to the Blue Party representative seen having coffee with a Red Party person or even just chatting as they walked down the hallway of their national meeting-place! No more committee chairmanships for them!

Consequently, the Congressional deadlock.. Whichever party enjoyed a slight majority at any given moment would propose legislation that the other party would find anathema. The opposing party would then threaten to make all activity come to a halt by what they called “fliberty-gibbet.” To fliberty-gibbet, representatives would dominate the floor discussion by endlessly talking about irrelevancies—like reading from a Labovonian dictionary for 15 hours straight. When the fliberty-gibbet threat was raised, usually the party proposing the legislation would simply not bring it before the gathered assembly. Once the fliberty-gibbet started, no vote could happen, the thinking went, so why do something that would advertise how useless the Congress had become.

And so year after year dragged on and nothing was done. The economic situation of the majority of people in both Blue- and Red-dominated areas continued to worsen, with more and more people finding it difficult to obtain the basic necessities of life or to afford health care. The air quality became so bad that everyone’s eyes burned continually; every day the sky was covered in smog; lung conditions became worse and worse.

Then, one day, a remarkable thing happened on the floor of the Congress meeting room: When, at the beginning of the day’s session, Mr. Vrobel, a Red Party member, approached the speaker’s lectern to address the Congress, he asked Mrs. Doruchowska, a Blue Party member, to join him there.

“I have something important to say to you all, and I have asked Mrs. Doruchowska to be at my side as I address you,” he said.

For the previous decade, nothing of the kind had ever occurred. The representatives looked at each other with astonishment. What could be going on? Were they having an affair? Was he going to confess to adultery?

What the assembled members did not know was this: the night before, Mr. Vrobel had called Mrs. Doruchowska on the telephone and had outlined for her the speech he was going to give the next day. He had asked her cooperation to stand side-by-side with him on behalf of all Labovonia. She had agreed.

When they were together at the lectern, Mr. Vrobel spoke: “My fellow representatives, my fellow citizens of Labovonia, my colleagues in this great enterprise of self-governance, I come before you this morning . . . with a heavy heart.”

Here, Mr. Vrobel stopped speaking. The representatives could see how hard he was clutching the lectern and how near he was to tears. Mrs. Doruchowska looked at him with concern.

He cleared his throat, looked off to one side, took a deep, trembling breath, and after a moment or two continued.

“Yesterday afternoon. . . .” He paused and cleared his throat again. “Yesterday afternoon, my son . . . my son died of a lung disease brought on by breathing the air over our nation.”

Vrobel’s voice had dropped to a whisper. No one in the chamber made a sound. “Johnny was only fourteen. He had been suffering with lung disease for the last six years. During that time he was in and out of the hospital, staying for weeks and even months. Unlike many of our citizens, my wife and I actually could afford medical treatment from the best lung doctors in the land. Our son had all the treatments known. And still . . . he perished. He’s gone.

“His death came after I had had another heartbreaking experience earlier in the week, one involving Mr. Roman Stark, a constituent. At Mr. Stark’s request, I had gone to visit his home. There I found him and his family all suffering from lung disease and malnutrition. My friends of both political parties, they were simply walking skeletons because they did not have enough money to feed themselves. They told me that they had had nothing to eat for days. Mr. Stark and his wife had lost their jobs when their company abandoned the plant in our town and built a new, highly automated plant in Organia. They had survived for a while by getting food from a local food bank and supplementing that with an occasional meal at a Kitchen for the Poor. But, overwhelmed by the demand they were experiencing; the food bank had simply run out of food. For the same reason, the Kitchen for the Poor had at last closed. The Starks did not know where to turn next.

“Both Mr. and Mrs. Stark had worked for the same company for a combined total of 50 years, he for 30 and she for 20. They had little education and no other job skills besides the ones that had served them so well before the plant closed. When they had appealed for help to their local government, they were told that they needed to stop malingering and go out and find work. They had tried and tried to do just that, using every contact they had, trying to present themselves convincingly to potential employers. But for every job opening, there were hundreds of applicants. Against these odds, they weren’t able to convince employers to hire them. Their age was against them as well as their modest education. And so they received no job offers. Most of their former fellow employees were in similar straits, some even being evicted from their homes and having to sleep with their children on city park benches.

“I was heartbroken for Mr. Stark and his loved ones. And when I thought about coming back to the Congress where I have served for thirty years and presenting their plight as an example of what our people are facing, my heart sank. What have we done to meet this kind of desperate economic need or to lead our nation toward cleaner air?”

Here he paused, looking at each representative.

“I can no longer take silence on my part and inaction on ours as acceptable.

“Part of my ideology as a Red Party representative is to say that government has no role in such matters, that things will take care of themselves and that people need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. It is hard for me to question this ideology. Yet, my son’s death and the heartbreaking plight of the Stark family have brought home to me the plain suffering that Labovonians are enduring. When I see that this session of the Congress is almost deliberately going nowhere, that we are wasting our time proposing things that Blue Party legislators find anathema as though to prove for the millionth time how intransigent and misguided they are, I find I am sick about the wasted opportunity. Is there no way we can work together, I ask myself, to lead the nation toward solutions of problems that cause so much pain and suffering? Must we simply come here to the Congress week after week for no better result than to feel self-righteous and to assure people back home that we are pure and unyielding in adhering to our shared ideology, while their health deteriorates and many of them, who are perfectly good people and perfectly loyal Red Party voters, are destitute?”

“That is why I called Mrs. Doruchowska last night and asked her to join me at the lectern as I made this speech. In doing so, I want to symbolize my determination to find ways to join forces and actually accomplish beneficial change in our society. Here are several principles, which can help us find common ground and serve the common good:

“First, I propose that we change our attitude toward each other. We need to be together, to have chats and dinner together, to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries together—to be real people toward

each other and get to know each other, to learn to accept each other as people of integrity and serious intention and grant each other the respect we each are due.

“Second, instead of focusing on espousing our values and eradicating others’ values, I propose we wake up and realize that we need each other. In every society five basic ethical values are needed. My party has emphasized three: Loyalty to the group, respect for authority and hierarchy, and purity of moral behavior. The Blues have stressed the other two: fair treatment and justice for individuals.

“Now you Blues, if you pushed your agenda too far, society would fall apart without a common core to keep life orderly. And we Reds, if we pushed our agenda too far, would end up in regimenting life around the values of the group in power while ignoring the rights of individuals. We need each other to balance things out. So rather than trying to eradicate each other’s value sets, let’s acknowledge their respective importance in achieving a healthy society. The tension between the two is crucial to this end. We should not allow either to eliminate the other.

“Three, I propose that we start today and agree to discuss—yes, I said, discuss, NOT flibbertygibbet; discuss with give and take and listening empathetically to each other’s viewpoints—that we agree to discuss what we JOINTLY see as problems affecting the common good of our country. There’s no point in trying to move ahead until we know what we JOINTLY see as the problems in need of addressing and the goals we JOINTLY want to achieve in regard to those problems.

“Four, whatever solutions are proposed, they must include more than a passing reference to the basic stances of each party. For example. And don’t shout me down now if I say something new that you find disturbing. For example. If we decide that our air quality IS a problem—with my son dead at 14 from lung disease, you know where I stand on this issue—we Red Party types will want any solution to include voluntary efforts on the part of industry and consumers. You folks on the other side of the aisle will want government to have a hand in mandating behavior changes. Is it going to be easy to find a solution that incorporates both approaches? No. Easy it will not be. But without a commitment to appealing to both sides, we’ll just sit here achieving nothing while people die of lung disease because of the foul air we’re breathing and because we’re behaving like such bumps on the log.

“And that brings me to my last proposal—get new ideas from neutral sources. Retired representatives to the Congress would be one group we can call on—they have political skills, and I’ve noticed that once they are no longer in the Congress they tend to become less rigid in their espousal of party lines and more willing to look at facts dispassionately. And then there are the many, many experts in a whole host of fields who have been working on the conditions our people face and who may be able to think outside of the box.”

By the time he finished speaking, Vrobel was simply shaking from the tension of the moment and the passion he had been feeling. The hall was silent. It was one of those fragile moments when magic can happen if the right words are spoken and the right gestures made. Mrs. Doruchowska, the Blue Party representative standing beside him, turned to Vrobel, took a handkerchief out of her purse, and wiped his forehead. The two stood facing each other with tears in their eyes. Then they hugged each other.

One at a time, then two, then ten, then fifty, Blue Party and Red Party representatives stood up out of respect and began to applaud and finally to roar their appreciation for the courage they had seen displayed on the floor of the Congress. They had been longing for someone to show them the way out of their impasse. And here was a way that they could seize on and make-work for them and their people.

This was the beginning of the next phase of Labovonia's story. Months of hard thought and discussion followed. Mistakes were made. Old habits rose again and again to threaten to take the Congress back to their stalemate. But through all these trials and setbacks, the stories they heard that day and the courage and tenderness that were displayed served as continual motivations. They began seeing each other outside of official meetings, getting to know each other as people with the same kind of personal issues and pressures that real people face whatever their values. And as a result, they began to treat each other with appropriate dignity and respect and began to accept each other as fellow human beings. They struggled on beyond their party allegiances to find common ground where justice, fairness, and compassion were the hallmarks of their efforts. And as time went on, they felt a greater sense of contentment with their work as politicians.

Now this is an idealized story, with an easy, Hollywood-style ending. Probably we would cast Jimmie Stewart as Vrobel, or maybe Gary Cooper. But notice these things about it, things that apply to our lives within any community, large or small. Many of the goals and principles that Vrobel recommended and that helped the Labovonian Congress out of its stalemate are the goals and principles of our religious way. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another; commitment to the democratic process; the mind-set that we are part of an interdependent web of life; the goal of peace, liberty, and justice for all—these basic commitments lead to healthy, harmonious communities. Sure, you can achieve a kind of harmony through oppression and favoring a ruling elite above others. But as we have seen throughout human history, eventually the longing for dignity and respect for each other as fellow human beings coupled with the longing for fairness and compassion—these longings burst through and fight oppression.

My fellow Americans, my fellow Unitarian Universalist Americans, these are the ideals . . . that . . . work, ideals that can be found in the theology and ethic of many religious ways. As the ones for

whom these ideals form the center of our faith, we have the obligation to live by them in all our days and ways and to promote them as enthusiastically and determinedly as we possibly can. The hymn text I read a while ago, “In Christ There is No East or West,” points to one way to bring all nations and peoples together—have everyone adhere to the same theology. Given the variety and diversity of the worlds billions, that plan is naïve. Our way—finding within disparate religions common ground, respecting differences and the people who have these differences—offers a greater chance of success in achieving a world of peace, liberty, and justice for all. So it is our job to represent these values to the world—to live by them, to help others live by them, and to advocate for them. May we so do. And to that I say, Amen.