

## CULTIVATED CAPACITIES

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Owen McCaffrey’s play *Agreement* is set in Northern Ireland during the last few frenzied days of negotiating the so-called Good Friday agreement of 1998. After years of sectarian violence and devastating bloodshed, the agreement brokered peace between Catholics who wanted Northern Ireland to be reunited with the Republic of Ireland and Protestants who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of Great Britain. The play runs through next Sunday at the Irish Arts Center here in Manhattan.

In the opening scene, US Senator George Mitchell, who convened the talks on behalf of the Clinton administration, voices the through line of the play: “Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.” The other six cast members, who represent various factions in Northern Island as well as the British and Irish governments, then stake out their individual points of view. One exchange between Gerry Adams, head of the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, and David Trimble, head of the pro-British Ulster Unionist Party, highlights the chasm between the two opposing sides.

Adams refers to the region in question as “the north of Ireland.”

Trimble retorts, “Northern Ireland.”

Adams: “The north of Ireland.”

Trimble: “Northern Ireland.”

John Hume, an Irish nationalist and pacifist, admits: “We are in the European Union.”

Trimble agrees: “This land belongs to people — this is our land — it belongs to us, and we are British.”

Adams: “This is the island of Ireland — it belongs to the Irish.”

Hume: “We live in a shared space.”

To which Senator Mitchell responds, again addressing the audience: “And there you have it, folks. That’s what this is all about.”

Ten days ago, David Leonhardt’s essay leading off “The Morning” update in the New York Times referred to a typology developed by the economist Arnold Kling. “My politically interested friends,” Kling writes in his book *The Three Languages of Politics*, “tend to sort themselves into three tribal coalitions — progressive, conservative, and libertarian.” Each asserts moral superiority over the other two. “They cannot all be correct,” Kling observes, “and when they think in [tribal] terms, it is unlikely that they will sit down and work out solutions to shared problems.”

Progressives, Kling says, view the world as a struggle between oppressors and the oppressed. A progressive would say, “My heroes are people who have stood up for the

underprivileged. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to the oppression of women, minorities, and the poor.”

Conservatives, according to Kling, see the world as a struggle between civilization and barbarism, or between order and chaos. A conservative would say, “My heroes are people who have stood up for Western values. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to the assault on the moral virtues and traditions that are the foundation for our civilization.”

Libertarians, Kling says, view the world as a struggle between individual liberty and the institutions that would constrain or coerce it — especially governments and religion. A libertarian would say, “My heroes are people who have stood up for individual rights. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to government taking away people’s ability to make their own choices.”

Kling adds, “If you stick to your own axis, then every event appears to confirm your point of view while making others’ views seem less reasonable.”

The truth is that we as human beings have a built-in proclivity to stick to our own axis — to look for evidence that confirms our individual points of view. As the late novelist David Foster Wallace said in his commencement address at Kenyon College that became the book *This Is Water*, there is no experience I have had that I was not the absolute center of.

Wallace illustrates his point by describing his impatience at the end of a long day while standing in line at the grocery store. He’s hungry, tired, and desperate to get home. In this situation, he says, he tends to focus on his own needs and view the other people in line as obstacles. This happens, he explains, when “I’m operating on the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the center of the world and that my immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world’s priorities.”

There is another option according to Wallace: “I can choose to force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket’s checkout line is probably just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people actually have much harder, more tedious or painful lives than I do.” Maybe the man yelling into his cellphone has a son in prison. Maybe the woman blocking the aisle to the ice cream freezer has just been laid off. Maybe the impossibly slow checkout clerk has just been dumped by her boyfriend.

As human beings, Wallace goes on to say, we can choose what we pay attention to and how we construct meaning. These choices involve “attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them.”

A dozen years ago, I visited Israel/Palestine with an interfaith group of clergy from New York City. We spent time with Natan Sharansky, the Russian mathematician and chess champion who became a human rights activist after the Soviets refused his application to emigrate to Israel. In 1986, Sharansky walked across the bridge from East to West Berlin after nine years in a Siberian prison.

In our meeting, Sharansky told us that the most profound realization of his life came to him in prison, and all his experience since has substantiated this insight. People want two things, he said: they want to be free, and they want to belong. These are the two human passions: freedom and longing. The discovery of where you belong — your tribe, in Kling’s terms — gives you the strength to fight both for your own freedom and the freedom of others. Sharansky insisted that belonging comes first: until you know who you are and where you belong, you can never be free.

This is a counter-intuitive claim. Most of the time, we think of freedom in terms of absence: no obligations, no constraints, and no commitments. Nonetheless, I believe Sharansky is correct. Until you find where you belong, you can never be free.

This principle applies everywhere in life. It applies to music: you aren’t free to perform Mahler’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Symphony unless you’re a member of an orchestra. It applies to sports: you aren’t free to play in the NBA playoffs unless you belong to one of the teams. It also applies to politics: the collection of shared intentions and actions we call government is the prerequisite of our freedom, not the obstacle to it. Discovering where you belong is the first step toward being set free.

The relationship between belonging and freedom in the individual realm parallels the relationship between order and liberty in the political realm — whether the liberty in question is freedom from coercion or freedom from oppression. The means by which we guarantee our freedom as individuals — political freedom, economic freedom, and religious freedom, as well as freedom of personal conduct and conscience — is through the institutions that maintain the kind structured environments in which we can exercise our freedom.

The problem, of course, is that any structured environment that constrains chaos, coercion, and oppression necessarily limits freedom. My freedom to live my life as I choose must necessarily be constrained by the freedom of everyone else to do the same. This dynamic creates an ongoing and intractable tension between belonging and freedom, and also between order and liberty. This tension can become oppressive when those who determine the principles of belonging, or the laws that maintain order, privilege their own freedom and liberty at the expense of others. Which is when the troubles develop — and sometimes wars and even revolutions.

In the end, the only lasting solution to chaos, coercion, and oppression isn’t people on the battleground shooting at each other but people in a room talking to each other. However, as the University of Chicago legal scholar Martha Nussbaum points out in her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, our educational systems are not preparing citizens for this daunting task.

She writes, “Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize

tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance."

By "useful machines," I take Nussbaum to be referring not only to the gizmos and gadgets that supposedly make our lives more comfortable and efficient, but also individuals who are trained mainly to play a role in producing such machines. What we are forgetting, she says, is the soul — "what it is for thought to open out of the soul and connect person to world in a rich, subtle, and complicated manner; about what it is to approach another person as a soul, rather than as a mere useful instrument or an obstacle to one's own plans; about what it is to talk as someone who has a soul to someone else whom one sees as similarly deep and complex."

Nussbaum concludes, "I argue that cultivated capacities for critical thinking and reflection are crucial in keeping democracies alive and wide awake. The ability to think well about a wide range of cultures, groups, and nations in the context of a grasp of the global economy and of the history of many national and group interactions is crucial in order to enable democracies to deal responsibly with the problems we currently face as members of an interdependent world. And the ability to imagine the experience of another — a capacity almost all human beings possess in some form — needs to be enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains."

The ability to imagine the experience of others lies at the heart of our mission as a religious community. To the extent that religious institutions and religious individuals retreat into spiritual narcissism and thus view the world from only one perspective, we betray both our spiritual duty and our civic obligation. No one perspective fully embodies the truth. From every point of the political compass, you and I are being urged to take one side or the other — this side against that side. The difficult truth is that the world not only looks different from different perspectives, but it really is different. To unilaterally privilege my perspective just because it happens to be mine is the most elemental of human shortcomings — and the most pernicious. It takes attention, awareness, discipline, and effort to overcome our mirror vision.

But it can be done. After three days of round-the-clock negotiations to end the violence in Northern Ireland — negotiations which often appeared to have reached an impasse — the parties finally come to agreement. Senator George Mitchell ends McCaffrey's play *Agreement* with a soliloquy to the audience.

He says: "This agreement proves that democracy works, and in its wake we can say to the men of violence — to those who disdain democracy, whose tools are bombs and bullets — your way is not the right way. You will never solve the problems of Northern Ireland by violence, you will only make them worse. It doesn't take courage to shoot a police officer in the back of the head or to murder an unarmed taxi driver. What takes courage is to compete in the arena of democracy where the tools are persuasion, fairness, and common decency. You should help to build a society instead of tearing it apart. This agreement points the way."