

BothAnd

Erin McKean is a lexicographer and the author of a column in the December *New York Times Magazine* about how the internet is going to change the way we define words. A simple definition is too compressed and misleading, in her view; she wants us to know “who uses it, when it was used, what words appear alongside it...what kinds of texts it appears in”—then we’ll have a more organic sense of the actual contexts surrounding the word (“Redefining Definition,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 6, 2009). More information is a specialty of the internet way of thinking, and this is a noble project I’m sure, but there’s a voice inside of me saying, “Oh, c’mon. Don’t give me all that chapter and verse, *just tell me what the word means.*”

I like my words nailed down. I like to think I can understand what you mean when you use a word and what everyone else means, and I like to think it’s the same meaning. I want to live in a world where words always mean the same thing and I know what it is: a predictable world, a

safe world where everything is clear and everybody understands everybody else.

And, of course, I don't live in that world. None of us lives in that world because language is a human invention that is plastic and flexible and mutable and changing every minute, and people are forever coloring outside the lines and using words in ways that don't take into account whatever I meant when I used that word last. The meaning keeps changing. It's as slippery as jello, and it can't be nailed down. Human communication is finally a mystery and a miracle. It's a wonder we understand each other at all.

Abigail Adams, who was First Lady of the United States from 1797 to 1801 during the administration of her husband, John, wrote, "I've always felt that a person's intelligence is directly reflected by the number of conflicting points of view he can entertain simultaneously on the same topic."

It's not our natural inclination. Human beings like to simplify and categorize. We like to nail down our definitions and think in terms of either/or. Limiting the range of choices makes things easier. Why think through all the possibilities

when you can focus on just a few? Sometimes this is sensible and efficient. Faced with too many choices, it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

But either/or thinking closes off possibilities and can distort the truth. It can be intentionally used as a strategy to artificially limit the range of choices in an argument or to force a conclusion by presenting only two choices when actually there are three or more (Hagin, <http://ksuweb.kennesaw.edu/~shagin/logfal-pbc-eitheror.htm>).

Either you're pro-choice or you're pro-life—right?
Professor

Stephen Hagin of Kennesaw University offers this analysis:

Who is not technically pro-“life”? We are all still here on this planet—living, eating, socializing, etc.—living life. We like life; we fully support it. On the other hand, we are all Americans whose speech is protected by the First Amendment that grants us freedom of intellectual choice ...aren't we all technically pro-“choice” too?...

Politicians have wrapped this issue up into a messy ball of catch phrases. They assume a person must have a definitive stand on the abortion issue across the board—either for it or against it...We can play these word games for hours, but these terms...obscure the realities. Wouldn't some anti-abortion advocates be in favor of aborting a fetus in order to save the life of the mother? So are they

pro-“life” or [pro] “choice” if they sacrifice one of them instead of both?...

The pro choice/life debate has been “dumbed down” to these two equivocated, loaded, slanted and distorted terms that only get people mad. Life, death, and abortion are much too complicated to be understood on a bumper sticker (*ibid*).

With all due respect, Professor Hagin, tell it to the US Senate as they insist on limiting abortion access to those who can afford to buy private health insurance. Once again the poor will be sent to the back alleys because our nation’s leaders cast this life-and-death issue in words of a single syllable: pro-life, pro-choice.

The political discourse in this country seems to be conducted almost entirely in Black and White terms, and either/or thinking is hardly limited to politics. You’re right or you’re wrong, you’re nice or you’re smart, a believer or a nonbeliever, either you love it or you hate it—right? Looking at the world through binary categories is so common we take it for granted and don’t even notice them a lot of the time or unpack them to see how much truth they contain.

Austin Cline is an atheist thinker who maintains the atheist site at www.about.com. Writing about our inclination to see the world in dichotomies, he begins by acknowledging the necessity of categorical thinking:

Human beings have a strong need to categorize everything; this is not a fault but rather an asset. Without our ability to take isolated instances, gather them together in groups, and then make generalizations, we wouldn't have math, language, or even the ability for coherent thought. Without the ability to generalize from the specific to the abstract, you wouldn't be able to [hear] and understand this right now. Nevertheless, as much of a vital asset as it is, it can still be taken too far...

[Putting] everything into one or two completely undifferentiated categories [is]...commonly referred to as Black and White Thinking—because of the tendency of the two categories to be black and white, good and evil, right and wrong...this can be considered a type of False Dichotomy...[where] we are given only two choices in an argument and required to pick one, when in reality there are multiple options which have not been given due

consideration(<http://atheism.about.com/od/logicalflawsinreasoning/a/blackwhite.htm>).

I'll leave "right or wrong" for a little later on in the sermon because that's a hard one, so let's take love and hate. The opposite of love is hate, right? Robert Frost wrote

a tidy little poem called “Fire and Ice” that expresses this dichotomy:

Some say the world will end in fire.
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
is also great
And would suffice.

(For our purposes here, I submit that *love* and *desire* mean the same thing even though they are different words.

Remember that language is flexible and meaning depends on the context.) So Frost creates a dichotomy between love and hate, fire and ice, as if they were opposites and the only two possibilities.

Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, has a different answer to the question about the opposite of love. He wrote, “The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference./ The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference./ The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference./ And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.” Wiesel’s perspective is startling and

provocative, and still he casts it as a series of dichotomies. In this Black and White Thinking, the ultimate evil is indifference.

From Jesus of Nazareth we can take yet another perspective. According to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, “As you know, we once were told, ‘You are to love your neighbor’ and ‘You are to hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies...(God) causes the sun to rise on both the bad and the good, and sends rain on both the just and the unjust. Tell me, if you love those who love you, why should you be commended for that?” (Matthew 5: 43, 44, 46 SV).

In the commentary on this passage in their annotated gospels, the Jesus Seminar write, “The admonition ‘love your enemies’ is somewhere close to the heart of the teachings of Jesus ...The injunction to love enemies is a memorable aphorism because it cuts against the social grain and constitutes a paradox: those who love their enemies have no enemies” (*The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* 147). Like irony and ambivalence, paradox creates a space beyond categorical thinking where the limits of human

language and understanding are acknowledged, a place where multiple meanings can be exploited and explored.

Austin Cline, again: "...in debates on topics like politics, religion, philosophy, and ethics...Black and White Thinking is like an infection, reducing the terms of discussion unnecessarily, eliminating an entire range of possible ideas and often demonizing others by implicitly categorizing them in the "Black" - the evil that we are supposed to avoid" (*ibid*).

This demonizing of the ones with whom we disagree has become almost the only language spoken in our contemporary public discourse. Indeed our national discussion of public policy seems to be pitched at a hysterical level most of the time. David Brooks, the conservative *New York Times* columnist, wrote in his column on New Year's Day about the nation's "overwrought reactions to the underwear bomber" (A29).

During the middle third of the 20th century, Americans had impressive faith in their own institutions. It was not because these institutions always worked well [they didn't but...] there was a realistic sense that human institutions

are necessarily flawed. History is not knowable or controllable.

People should be grateful for whatever assistance government can provide and had better do what they can to be responsible for their own fates.

That mature attitude seems to have largely vanished. Now we seem to expect perfection from governments and then throw temper tantrums when it is not achieved. We seem to be in the position of young adolescents—who believe mommy and daddy can take care of everything, and then grow angry and cynical when it becomes clear they can't...

Many people seem to be in the middle of a religious crisis of faith. All the gods they believe in—technology, technocracy, centralized government control—have failed them in [the attempted bombing of the Northwest Airlines flight on Christmas Day].

In a mature nation, President Obama could go on TV and say, “Listen, we’re doing the best we can, but some terrorists are bound to get through.”...

We shouldn’t imagine that these centralized institutions are going to work perfectly or even well most of the time. It would be nice if we reacted to their inevitable failures not with rapid denunciation and cynicism, but with a little resiliency, an awareness that human systems fail and bad things happen and we don’t have to lose our heads every time they do (*ibid*).

Each of us could supply a dozen other examples of current policy issues in which the “sides” are framed as irreconcilable dichotomies and “discussed” in hysterical terms: health care reform, immigration reform, end-of-life

care, marriage equality, monetary market reform, the war on terrorism, the war in Afghanistan...

Religious issues are also often seen through a polarizing lens where everything is either black or white. Here some of the dichotomies are old familiar chestnuts: faith and reason, religion and science, spirituality and social justice. Philip Appleman's wonderful poem, read earlier in the service, depends for its punch line on the deep-seated conviction that "believers" don't think, for example ("O Karma, Dharma, pudding and pie").

As a believer who thinks, I am almost struck dumb by these assumptions. Almost...

Karen Armstrong's latest book, *The Case for God*, begins, "We are talking far too much about God these days, and what we say is often facile. In our democratic society, we think that the concept of God *should* be easy and that religion ought to be readily accessible to anybody" (ix). To me religion and God are deep and mysterious matters, studied by millions of people all over the world in thousands of different faith traditions since time began. The claim that

people of faith are irrational or stupid or maybe just not as smart as some Unitarians I know is hard to address in serious terms.

The so-called contradiction or conflict between science and religion has never been apparent to me. Only the most fundamentalist believers of many faiths question the truth of science, and when we mistake them for all people of faith we are engaging in the crudest Black and White Thinking.

In my experience, religious faith and social justice are inextricably bound in a feedback loop. Our Unitarian Universalist faith requires us to do what we can to create justice in the world. And this is the stance of the major religions of the world.

Consider those who say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious."

I don't understand this statement. I don't know what it means.

You remember, I'm the woman who wants words nailed down. For me *spirituality* has always been part of my life

within organized religion. I understand that this is not true for many people, but I literally don't get it.

According to a recent parody I read in a wicked little book called *The Savvy Consumer's Guide to Choosing a Religion*, "Spiritual But Not Religious" is a non-religious religion and defined as "those who hold spiritual beliefs but disparage the scriptedness and hypocrisy of organized religion....[A]dherents frequently subscribe to aspects of Eastern philosophies and believe consciousness connects all life." According to this source, "Spiritual But Not Religious" is one of the most popular religious designations in online dating (133).

I want to disparage these believers and to create a hierarchy in which people who are committed to faith communities have better religion than those who practice like dilettantes some cafeteria spirituality outside of any established tradition. These are real prejudices and serious limitations. I'm not proud of them, and I am quite sure that I am wrong to think this way. But there it is.

What about morality and ethics? My heart goes to the absolute. No war. Never war. War is always the wrong answer. No peace without justice. Marriage is for one woman and one man—no way. So right and wrong for me are easily cast in either/or terms, and I have to work to be curious about the possibilities that exist in exploring the “other side.”

For one thing, it feels like disloyalty to me. If I truly believe that marriage is a civil right that must be available to all people, then why would I want to understand another viewpoint? Wouldn't that be betraying my conviction? Well, no. It would be a way to understanding, a way to the truth that is larger than my understanding.

When you come right down to it, insisting on our own way of looking at things and casting the world in Black and White terms is a kind of arrogance based in fear. Fear and ignorance make us reach for certainty and believe in our small binary categories.

We can free ourselves from this fear and become more wise and move closer to the truth when we acknowledge our

human limitations. We don't know very much—and that's the reality. Embracing it can help us to become smarter and kinder, more inclusive and more humble. It can also help us become more effective in our efforts to change the world.

What shall we do with this gift of Time, this year?

Let us become believers who can think.

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