

Suddenly we have a new holyword, holophrase, codeword for **the glue of self and society**. Well, not exactly new, but now the convergence word for discourse in a number of fields--sports, education, politics. I'm attentive to, and hopeful about, this emergence....

Linguistically....A pluralistic society, a pluralistic world, needs a common way of talking about both the common and the uncommon, "in common." A mutual linguistic universe of discourse, an Esperanto for everyday and special days, a lingua franca for every soul in every society in every situation. The lexicon of this common tongue is short, too short; "values" is on the list.

Ethically....You don't think and talk about your health till you lose it: an ethical society doesn't talk about ethics. "Ethics," our fancy word for the way folks behave and why it isn't better, has (I'll say for the purposes of this Thinksheet) a 3-V spread: vision, viewpoint, & values. History's fastest human, Ben Johnson, got his Olympic gold removed yesterday: anabolic-steroid cheating. "He's got a values problem" said a member of the International Olympics Committee.

Educationally....Four of our 50 states now have public-schools "values ed," and I predict the number will exceed 20 by year-end. It used to be called "character ed," as in Ernest Ligon's half-century of The Character Education Project. So why not continue to call it character? Because that good ol' word is redolent of the moral, now heard as the moralistic, and of the sacred, now heard as the sectarian. "Values" sounds objective, dispassionate, noncontroversial, even scientific, at least "natural" (based on the belief in the possibility of a naturalistic ethics, an antibiblical-hellenic-Enlightenment belief-system or, in the current jargon, faith-system). In several periodicals I've seen, already, statistics on improved behavior in schools with values ed.

Politically....A recent Chicago Trib MacNelly cartoon has "Duke" saying "AM NOT, AM NOT, AM NOT" and "George" responding "ARE TO, ARE TO, ARE TO." And in last Sunday's first debate, the hottest Dukakis got was in insisting that Bush has, too, been attacking his patriotism. America's civil-religion buttons are hot and dangerous. Are the Constitution's strict-constructionists, being more scribal, more patriotic? If the Pledge of Allegiance is as important as Bush says it is, how come (asks the Duke) he as Senate president has never opened a session with it? And which song should be our National Anthem?...The Pledge & the present National Anthem (adopted as recently as 1931, when I was still in highschool) are hallowed, as are all rituals, by much usage. Of the three generations who will be voting in November, most in the first two were exposed to the Pledge & the Star-Spangled banner regularly in public school & parochial school. Antitheism, for a time (before Eisenhower restored it), knocked "under God" out of the Pledge, & its repesence is a motif in present antipathy to making it normative in our schools, the attackers disingenuously equating the normative with the coercive. Bush's attack on Dukakis, here, carries enormous weight....This letter (6 days ago, CCT) brought much response, all positive for my argument. "Unsingable": an octave + 1/5th, in G major with an F sharp. Worse: militaristic. One response: "You convinced me, but my heart is still for the Star-Spangled banner, and I'll stick with my heart." Is democracy feasible?

Reasons to change national anthem

How sad that Mabel Sheridan (letter, Sept. 18) failed to think beyond the first two lines of Katharine Lee Bates' "America the Beautiful," now widely proposed as our national anthem, to replace the martial and unsingable "bombs bursting in air." She accuses the former of being "boastful" and asks, "Shall we sing about possessions or ideals?"

I suggest she consider that "The Star Spangled Banner" also pushes our possessing, in this case the possession of military power to maintain freedom. The present national anthem is our best song for keeping the Pentagon budget high and maintaining the myths of Fortress America and of the American Empire. This mentality has bogged us down in a series of tragedies, as in Vietnam.

Instead of bragging about our possessions, "America" centers on thankfulness to God for our ideals. They are, in order of their appearance: brotherhood, freedom, self-control, liberty in law, liberation, country above self, mercy above life itself, nobleness, maintaining the vision of a society "undimmed by human tears."

Ms. Sheridan's motive was generous and commendable, but her letter is flawed by a self-contradiction: trying to be fair to other peoples by unwittingly being unfair to a song that should be our national anthem.

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