

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

There are times in everyone's experience, I suspect, when an unanticipated confluence of circumstances proves to be a pivot point in one's life. The path that brought me to the topic of my essay this evening began as a result of just such a coincidental confluence almost 40 years ago, and it is at that point at which I would like to begin.

In 1972 I received a three-year grant of just under \$900,000 to implement a behavior management program at the Indiana Boys School. The program provided incentives for constructive behaviors by awarding points, contingent upon their occurrence. These points could be used to purchase items from a menu of reinforcers. The system seemed to work fairly well when it was properly implemented, with one notable exception. That exception had to do with an effort to motivate the students to watch the national news coverage each evening and answer five fairly basic questions over that evening's half-hour news segment. Although they appeared to be trying, most of the boys had great difficulty in getting more than one or two answers correct. I had no explanation for this, but when I spoke with some of the college students who were helping to monitor the behavior, they told me that the problem was that the students couldn't comprehend what was being said. I found that difficult to believe, so on the following evening, I sat next to one of the students with the idea of watching for any words he might not understand.

Now I should note at this point that when I received my baccalaureate degree from IU in 1961, I traveled to Germany for a month or so to visit my father's family. I had studied German at the university for two and a half years and found that I was reasonably fluent under most circumstances. There was one notable exception, however: That was my difficulty in comprehending the television news reports. Although the newscasters

spoke impeccably, I could rarely understand any of the news stories. The problem was twofold: They spoke rapidly and used a large vocabulary. It was not simply a problem of not comprehending the words being used. Generally speaking, I could translate what was being said. The problem was that I was, in fact, *translating*, and in the time it took to think of what some of the more esoteric words meant, the reporter was on to the next story.

As it turned out, the night on which I sat down with one of the IBS students to watch the evening news the lead story was the death of President Lyndon Johnson. As the newscaster launched into the story, I said to my companion, "You know who President Johnson is, right?" He said, "No." I was incredulous! We were not dealing with a complex vocabulary or ancient history. Nevertheless, LBJ *had* left office four years earlier when my young charge was only 11 or 12. So I said, "Well, you know who President Nixon is, don't you?" Again, the answer was "No." I ignored the rest of the news story, determined to find out how it was possible this kid didn't know who President Johnson or President Nixon were. And do you want to know why? As an African-American from one of the ghettos of Lake County, he figured that "President" was just another one of the strange names that middle class whites gave to their kids. It was at that point that I began to dimly understand that the young man sitting next to me was living in a foreign nation – just as I had been 12 years earlier. The difference between us was that in my case both my relatives and I were very aware of my situation. In the case of my companion that evening, the situation was a little more complicated. He was clearly from another class and race than I, but I (and his Department of Corrections hosts) took it as a given that we shared certain fundamental knowledge and basic perceptions of our country or society. In

hindsight, I would have to say that that was a rather naïve assumption.

In the early 1950s, I went to a movie in which a small Midwestern town was being overtaken by Martians, whose space ship had crashed in the countryside. As I recall, the Martians would take over the body of a person in the community and it was practically impossible to discern that the local citizen had been commandeered. The only giveaway was a very small red light implanted at the base of the skull right along the hairline. I was only 13 or 14, and I don't mind telling you, that movie scared the crap out of me! So what's the point? The point is that the kid sitting next to me was an alien, and I never suspected it. I never noticed that little red light. He was part of an alien nation living in our midst. Or perhaps my kind and I were the aliens inhabiting his world. The point here really boils down to the fact that my kind and I had an agenda and so did he and his. And clearly neither of us understood that the other was from a different planet – from an alien nation. Neither of us understood that we had fundamentally different perspectives of life.

Consider for a moment the perspective of the establishment, 'Earthlings,' if you will, regarding the status of underclass 'Martians' incarcerated at Boys School. They are considered juvenile delinquents. In the most literal sense, they are outlaws since the actions for which they were convicted are by definition unlawful. But if we were to construe them as members of an alien nation which perceived itself, consciously or otherwise, as not included in establishment society, their behavior might be said to be *a-lawful* rather than *unlawful*. Most of us at Boys School were busy trying to change the behavior of the youthful offenders. We really made no serious attempt to modify perspectives – although we nominally paid lip service to it. The students at Boys School, on the other hand, were busy trying to convince us that their perspectives had changed – whatever it took to win

an early release.

Another experience I had there is illustrative. One late afternoon on a warm spring day, the students from Cottage 14 were out on a ball field enjoying some supervised recreation. I watched for a little while, but had work to do back in the cottage; so I started to walk back. About halfway between the ball field and the cottage, I encountered one of the students sitting under a tree. He was looking at a letter he was holding and chuckling to himself. I stopped for a moment and asked him what he found so amusing. He looked up at me, still smiling, and said that he had just gotten a letter from the judge who sentenced him to Boys School. Normally one wouldn't expect that to be a source of mirth for kids like the one sitting before me. But it seems that a week or two earlier he had written the judge to *thank* him for sending him to Boys School – claiming that as a result he had come to find Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior. The judge, apparently, was deeply moved and this amused the kid to no end. He laughed again and said, “That man is the second biggest fool I’ve ever met in my life!” I desperately wanted to ask him who the biggest fool was, but I thought the better of it since he was looking right at me. I bade him a good day and went on about my business.

Readers of David Halberstam's The Best and the Brightest may recall a story he tells of a party he attended with Theodore White. White was asked by a mutual acquaintance what the essential ingredient was that made it possible to write best-selling books of the type White had written. According to Halberstam, White's response was, “A book that burns in your belly – something that has to be written before you can go on to anything else.” Halberstam cites this comment approvingly, informing his readers that it describes his own feeling in writing The Best and the Brightest.

This experience of being impelled to write something because of a fire in one's belly is a metaphorical way by which writers describe their feelings. It is described somewhat differently by psychologists, and I would like to take a moment examine one of these perspectives since I believe it will have greater heuristic value in our effort to address an issue which is the focus of this essay. In 1957, Leon Festinger published A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance in which he argued that when an individual is confronted with a disparity between two cherished beliefs or opinions or a disparity between an opinion and an empirical fact, a state of cognitive dissonance arises which strongly motivates the individual to reduce it. This is typically done through rationalization – inventing grounds for altering one of the beliefs or opinions in order to maintain the other, *or* seeking reasons to deny or discredit a discomforting fact. For those not familiar with this theory, several examples may help: In Aesop's fable of the sour grapes, the fox finds himself unable to reach grapes which initially looked appealing to him. Rather than admitting that he was powerless to achieve a desired objective, he decided that the unattainable objective was in fact not desirable. Festinger's theory predicts that organizations such as the Marine Corps or the service academies with fairly intense hazing of their recruits will generate significantly stronger bonds of loyalty than organizations in which hazing does not exist since in the former case the best way to justify enduring such an ordeal is to conclude that the merits of the organization are very high.

Although Festinger's theory is generally considered to fall within the realm of social psychology, the phenomena associated with dissonance may be integrated with some of the basic concepts of cognitive psychology. Thus, from the perspective of Jean Piaget, a pioneer in the study of cognitive psychology, human beings organize their perceptions of

the world into *schemata*, a concept which may be defined as cognitive structures serving as guides for action, for interpreting information, or as a framework for solving problems. Piaget believed that information that was in line with an existing schema was *assimilated*. It was integrated within the person's cognitive system and reinforced that system. If the person encountered information that did not fit within the existing schema, *accommodation*, or modification of the existing cognitive system, was called for. Though Piaget and other cognitive psychologists did not incorporate Festinger's dissonance thesis into their own work, it clearly is quite compatible and may be one way to account for the motivation to accommodate ideas or events that do not fit within an existing schematic framework. The process of accommodation may frequently be laborious and stressful, particularly if it involves schemata with deep emotional roots and/or of critical significance to a wide range of other beliefs and ideas. This is why most of us will seek to rationalize dissonance-producing ideas or observations.

For whatever reason, I haven't been able to rationalize or explain away my January, 1973 encounter with that young man from a Lake County ghetto who had never heard of the presidency of our county. In all honesty, the full implication of his ignorance and indifference didn't really hit me back then. By itself, that one event was little more than a tremor that rattled the windows of the cognitive edifice which served as the structure by and from which I construed American society. As it turned out, it was a tremor that presaged a cognitive quake that essentially shattered the schemata I used to interpret my social environment and its institutions.

Aside from accommodations required by the discovery that there were Martians in our midst, a second jolt arose from my encounter with the personnel, policies, and general

culture of the Department of Corrections as these were manifested at Boys School. Time does not permit hanging out all of the dirty laundry, but there was a toxic combination of corruption, cronyism, cynicism, insufficient resources, and just plain incompetence among enough people there to make an effective program next to impossible. The majority of the counselors had given up hope that they might accomplish something. The main problem was that there were too many students assigned to a living unit. Counselors had approximately five minutes a week with each student. That is not exactly a formula for success. On top of that, most of a counselor's week was spent typing up reports – the mindless, meaningless fodder which feeds the insatiable appetite of large bureaucracies.

As for the uneducated foot soldiers who comprised the correctional officers charged with running the day-to-day operations at Boys School, most were decent enough men. There were some, however, who were very sadistic and/or racists. They were, so far as I could tell, a relatively small minority. But they were tolerated and protected by their peers and the administration. The code of silence which one finds within the ranks of many police departments was firmly in place at Indiana Boys School.

The most egregious case of problematic behavior, however, involved the business manager. There was a hiring freeze in place when our grant was awarded. His stance was that since there would be extra paperwork required of his office, he should be entitled to \$50,000 a year for additional office staff. When his demand was rebuffed, he responded by seeing to it that paperwork necessary for program implementation was either put on the back burner or “lost”.

The most pervasive problem with the staff at the Boys School, however, was cynicism. Ours was just another program in a long and never-ending series – the soup de jour, as it

were. It was here today and would without doubt be gone tomorrow. Consequently many, if not most, saw little reason for changing their modus operandi. This, of course, has all the makings of a self-fulfilling prediction.

I had discovered early in the first year of the grant that the reason our program was solicited in the first place was that the Department of Corrections had lost a lawsuit in federal court brought by two students from IBS claiming that spanking was cruel and unusual punishment. By the second year, it slowly dawned on me that our program was simply a cosmetic to make the DOC look good to the authorities and that the institutional resistance to a pervasive change in its culture obliterated hopes of accomplishing anything of value. Consequently, I notified the feds that we were wasting the public's money and turned back \$600,000.

I was only 34 at that time, and my middle class perspective certainly had not prepared me for my encounters with the prisoners or the personnel of Boys School. Had I simply returned to the comfortable confines of academia, I probably would have salvaged the schemata by which I interpreted life in this country. But I was convinced that if one simply intervened earlier in the lives of children growing up in our ghettos, a difference could be made. As it happened, within two and a half miles of our campus a low income, high crime area existed. The Barrington neighborhood was located just west of the Beech Grove grain terminal. There were four public housing projects in the area, and crime and drug use were rampant. In fact, Barrington had the highest crime rate in the city.

There was a small, storefront daycare operation located directly next to the worst of the housing projects. That project, Stonekey, looked like a war zone. And it probably was.

Windows were blown out of many of the apartments and shards of glass littered the parking area. The living units no longer occupied had been stripped of their copper tubing and anything else that could be sold. One morning the body of a woman, clothed only in her underwear was found hanging from the fence that surrounded the area.

The Open Door Preschool was run by a Reverend J.C. Calhoun, who claimed to have marched with Martin Luther King Jr. I was in no position to contradict him, although I had my doubts. Calhoun was engaging, but had a bit of the hustler in him. More than anything, he appeared to be a walking, talking incarnation of Reverend Leroy, pastor of the Church of What's Happening Now, who appeared on the Flip Wilson Show.

The daycare center had an enrollment of about 25-30 children. The only two adults staffing the place, as I recall, were Reverend Calhoun and a woman, Mrs. Allen, who lived in the Brokenburr housing complex about one half mile away. It was my custom to stop by most days after my last class at the university to offer whatever assistance was needed. One early afternoon, about two months after I began, I noticed that Mrs. Allen seemed very distraught as I entered the facility. When I mentioned this to Reverend Calhoun, he told me that earlier in the day the police, suspecting her husband to be the person who had been holding up liquor stores and gas stations in the area, had come to her townhouse in Brokenburr with the hope of surprising him there. As it turned out, the man was at home and still asleep upstairs. Awakened by the pounding on the door and the shouts from the police, he jumped out of bed, pulled on his pants and shoes, and made a dash out the back door just as the police were forcing their way in through the front door. His wife was screaming and their children were just tumbling out of their beds as the police ran through the townhouse shouting for him to halt. Following police protocol, the

officers fired their weapons into the air as a warning. As they were still in the apartment, the bullets went through the downstairs ceiling and up through the bedroom where the children were still located. The suspect fled across a field behind the housing complex, followed by the police, who in turn were trailed by the man's wife and his children. One of the police took aim and shot him in the leg. He went down and, while on his knees, he raised his hands and said, "Please don't shoot!" Mrs. Allen's account was essentially the same as that reported in The Indianapolis Star the next morning. The only discrepancy was that there was no mention of his attempted surrender. The paper merely stated that the man was killed while fleeing from the police.

I don't know if Mrs. Allen's account of her husband's death was true. All I know is that if it wasn't, she gave an Academy award performance with her tearful version. To read about alleged acts of police brutality is one thing. That may serve as an abstract or semantic source of cognitive dissonance. But when you sit, face-to-face, with a person who has lost a loved one to police violence, the dissonance is, what I would term experiential or visceral. For me, that is much more difficult to reduce via some form of rationalization. Whatever the truth may be, the reaction and suffering of the person leaves a searing and indelible impression.

Well, if that episode was the darkest moment of the time I spent working in Barrington, there were brighter moments as well. For one thing, Reverend Calhoun was able to get a large new facility built which had classrooms, office space, and a kitchen to accommodate 120 preschoolers. 'How did he do it', you ask. That, naturally, was my question as well. And with Reverend Calhoun, one could never be absolutely certain of every detail. But the gist of the story is that a man who attended his church service one Sunday

morning heard Calhoun preach about the need for a pre-school in the community and the importance of dedicating one's life to God. As the man greeted Reverend Calhoun at the end of the service, he told the preacher that the sermon was great, but that he was never going to set foot in the church again. When Calhoun asked him why, he said that to become a member of that church he would have to change his way of living, and he had no intention of doing that. (He apparently was a big time gambler.) He did tell Calhoun he would build him a facility to serve the children of the community. And he did.

I don't think Reverend Calhoun ever fully understood where the money came from. He seemed to think it was from gambling. The man, whose first name was Alonzo, was never very explicit on the matter. My own suspicion was that since he had his own construction company, he was able to get a minority small business loan. However he did it, the building was completed in about a year's time and we soon had an enrollment of 120 pre-school children, all funded through Title XX funds.

One of the first problems I was asked to deal with in the new building was assisting the teachers in controlling their students' behavior. There was a fairly high student/ teacher ratio and these kids were a rather lively bunch to begin with, but there was one little guy who was an all-star in the sport of class disruption. His name was Galen. Although Galen was very likable, he couldn't seem to sit still. So one of my first assignments was to make a recommendation on how to minimize his disruptiveness. Consequently, I showed up one morning to observe him in action. On that particular day, all of the children were in a large room that had ten or twelve tables – each of which accommodated eight. Every child was given a paper with a leaf outlined on it and was told to use their crayons to color the leaf. Galen immediately set to work and did a very nice job,

finishing well ahead of anyone else at his table. With time on his hands, he began offering helpful advice to his tablemates. This unsolicited advice was not greeted with particular gratitude. And so Galen left his table and began to wander up and down the room offering helpful hints to those at other tables. Needless to say, the game was on and the teachers were going crazy. His problem, as it turned out, was that he was too advanced for his cohort. Of course, he wasn't labeled as bright or gifted, but as a troublemaker – albeit a somewhat likable one.

Interested in the children's perception of whether events in their lives were significantly controlled by their own behavior, I gave a questionnaire designed to measure it. Practically all the children tended to perceive the events around them as largely beyond their control. There was one notable exception, however. And that was Galen. He turned out to have a high internal locus of control. He saw the world as something that he could significantly affect. His response to one of the test items I remember to this day. The last question was, "If you had a pet turtle, and it ran away, would that be because you were mean to the turtle or because there was a hole in its cage?" Galen said that if the turtle had run away it was probably because he was mean to it. I put the paper down and said, "Galen, do you know what a turtle is?" He looked at me and said with a sheepish smile, "Nope, but if I had one and it ran away, it was probably my fault." He then paused pensively and said, "There was a rat in my room last night, but it ran away all by itself." Here was a little 5-year-old who was charming, gifted, and inclined to take responsibility for events in his life. Yet he was labeled as a troublemaker at school and was growing up with rats in his bedroom. What do you think his chances were of making it to Boys School?

Over time, I became familiar with the domestic circumstances of most children living in the appalling poverty found in public housing projects or in Section 8 (rent subsidized) housing. The most pervasive problems affecting the children are the ignorance, indifference, stress, and chaotic conditions at home – plus the violence inside the home and outside in the community. While that is the more or less typical situation, there are numerous cases in which the abuse or neglect is much more egregious. I, personally, know children living in public housing who were abandoned by their mothers for days at a time. One second grader, Durrell, lived with his fourth grade sister in Clear Stream Gardens while their mother lived with her boyfriend in another part of town. She would look in about twice a week. Apparently, she thought this was O.K., since her sister, whose children were left in the same straits in Clear Stream, would look in on two other days. Adding to his problems, there were three fifth graders who would rough Durrell up most afternoons on his way home. This is one Home Alone story that you're not likely to see in movie theaters anytime soon.

One last set of stories illustrates another aspect of Martian-Earthling relations, if you will. The administration of a program with 120 children is considerably more challenging than one with only 30. Meeting the Title XX guidelines, recruiting families, hiring teachers, and managing a budget for a program as large as the one we now had was well beyond the scope of Reverend Calhoun's interests. In all honesty, it was probably beyond his capacity as well. (He was more interested in dreams than in details.) Fortunately for him – and less fortunately for some of us – there was a woman, Mrs. Potts, in his small congregation of 23 who was bright and trained in bookkeeping. Calhoun held her in high

esteem because she and her husband were the only married members of his flock – and they both sang in the choir. It probably didn't hurt that she was young and attractive also.

For all of her assets, Mrs. Potts had one major liability: She was interested in no one but herself. This was most graphically revealed on the Monday of Thanksgiving week when she led a mutiny of the staff against Reverend Calhoun. Why? Well, no checks were written the past Friday, the normal payday. Nor were any available that Monday when I arrived. Of course, Mrs. Potts knew the checks were in the pipeline since she sent in the invoice each month, but she and the staff were in full revolt. That afternoon Reverend Calhoun was waiting for me when I walked in. He was visibly shaken and told me Mrs. Potts and the teachers were in the next room, vowing not to come to work the next day unless they were paid on the spot. He wanted to know what we should do. I asked him what the payroll was. "\$1,400," was the reply. "And how much do we have in the bank?" "\$300." That seemed like a no-brainer to me, and I told him so. This, clearly, was not the answer Reverend Calhoun wanted to hear. He paced around his office for about 30 seconds and then sat down at his desk. Pulling out his checkbook, he looked up at me. "We've got to have faith," he said. "We've just got to trust in the Lord." He began writing the checks. I didn't wait around for him to distribute them. Excusing myself, I headed straight back to the campus. It was not yet 4:00 p.m., and my hope was to catch Sue Ann Gilroy, our Coordinator of Community Affairs before she left for the evening. Sue Ann was aware of my involvement in Barrington, and I knew she had worked with John Walls while both were on Dick Lugar's mayoral staff. Walls was at that time a vice president of Merchants National – the bank with which Calhoun had his account. Thank-

fully, Sue Ann was in. I explained the situation and suggested that Merchants cover the checks since the money was coming. She said that she would see what she could do.

As things turned out, I didn't get back to the preschool until the Monday following our break. I didn't really know what to expect, but when I entered the building it appeared to be business as usual. I found Reverend Calhoun in his office. As I entered, he looked up at me and beamed. "I told you that all we needed to do was to trust in the Lord. God has worked a miracle!" What could I say to that? I just smiled and said, "The Lord works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform."

While the story of Reverend Calhoun's Thanksgiving miracle may strike some of us as mildly amusing, it illustrates differences between the ways the citizens of two alien nations construe events. For Calhoun, religion provided a rationalization for avoiding an unpleasant task that involved facing fiscal reality. For me and those of my kind, intervening to allow his checks to be honored was a form of secular piety. We were helping the poor and disadvantaged (at no real cost to ourselves). Everybody ended up feeling good about themselves. Sadly, the relations between our two worlds didn't always end so happily.

About the time the Open Door Preschool moved into its new facility and applied for greatly expanded funding for its program, Reverend Calhoun received support from leaders in the city's business community. How this began, I can't recall; (Sue Ann may have been involved) but a board of directors for Calhoun's non-profit was put in place. The director of public relations for Eli Lilly & Co. was on it. So was one of the attorneys who served on Tony Kiritsis' defense team. I was on it – as were others from the establishment. It became clear early on that Mrs. Potts was a loose cannon and that, given the size of the budget and responsibilities, a better qualified person needed to be in charge.

Needless to say, Mrs. Potts didn't share that opinion. And since the board could recruit no one who had her influence among the parents or with Reverend Calhoun, he resisted and finally came out and flatly refused to be guided by the board's decision. This put the board in an awkward situation, but they finally voted to remove Reverend Calhoun as the executive director. It was at this point that Calhoun informed them that they weren't the legally constituted board of his non-profit. As it turned out, his wife and a few trusted friends were listed as the duly elected board when the 501 (c) 3 papers were filed, and there had been no election to replace them. Those of us on the shadow board were advised that if we remained involved, knowing what we then knew about the way the federal funds were being handled, we might be held legally liable. Everyone jumped ship, problems with the federal authorities escalated, and payments were suspended. Naturally, Alonzo stopped receiving payment on the construction loan he was carrying. And on Palm Sunday, 1976, a fire broke out in the building following the Sunday services. Arson was said to be the cause, although no arrests were ever made. I was told that Alonzo carried insurance on the building. Whether he collected, I don't know, but school was literally and figuratively out. The building stood vacant for years until it was purchased, I am told, at a tax sale.

Well, there you have an account of where some of the kindling for the fire in my belly came from. The experiences I have had over the past four decades have dramatically exceeded the capacity of the socio-political schemata I once employed and have created a massive amount of dissonance for me that I have struggled to reduce through an on-going process of accommodation. Speaking plainly, I have tried to come to terms with all of the experiences that have been completely out of the realm of the comfortable existence

I led prior to 1972.

There is any number of issues that one might address under these circumstances. Perhaps the first question to ask is, 'If there really are two alien nations populating our country, where do all the Martians come from?' Well, for starters, we need to recognize that this notion of alien nations is a conceit which has value if and only if it leads to productive policies and programs to alleviate the problems it purports to explain – and that remains to be seen. Secondly, the Martian-Earthling divide is not based on race. If anything, it is based on class – but on a concept of class which differs from the common sociological usage in which class typically is defined in terms of education and income. Rather, I understand class in this context in terms of values, virtues, and Weltanschauung. Whatever may be said about differences between our two hypothetical nations in terms of their values and characteristic virtues, members of the establishment and those of the underclass have very different perspectives of life and its prospects. The alien nation notion rests primarily on the conviction that members of America's underclass are united in their belief that the chances of their ever becoming members of the establishment – of the middle class, if you will – are negligible. Most critically, I would argue that this conviction arises from a very consistent message transmitted by the agents of the middle class institutions with whom members of the underclass are most commonly in contact: the teachers, the police, and the welfare case workers. As we've already made mention of examples of interactions with agents of the criminal justice system, allow me to give a quick glimpse of our education system. Every school child in America is taught a very simple and somewhat sinister syllogism. The syllogism runs something like this:

Major Premise: Anyone who doesn't get a good education really has no future in today's

world. [Rich or poor, suburbs or inner city, the message is the same.]

Minor Premise: [This is spelled out on a personalized basis when the students receive their grades. Kids whose moms didn't finish high school will probably not do as well as those with two college educated parents at home.]

Conclusion: Children draw their own conclusions, but they're no dummies. They learn whether they do or do not have a future in established American society. And if you do not have a tomorrow, you're probably going to live for today.

So much for a quick look at factors leading to the creation of an alien nation. We shall save a more comprehensive analysis for another occasion.

The single most challenging issue for me in all of this is trying to comprehend the causes of poverty in our country. Where do those ghettos come from? Poverty in America is profound, pervasive, and persistent – and the question is why? Generally speaking, if you were to ask the proverbial man on the street that question, you would in all likelihood receive an answer that would fall into one of two categories: The poor are poor because they are lazy, drug-addicted, and/or uneducated. Or poverty exists because of systemic factors. (Wall Street bankers, hedge fund managers, and the GOP are popular villains among this faction of respondents – most of whom, I suspect, read Paul Krugman and watch Rachel Maddow.)

Quite honestly, I have trouble with either type of answer. Both share two characteristics that strike me as dissatisfying: They tend to be simplistic and they each place the blame on circumstances for which they, themselves, have no responsibility. Having decried simplistic answers, I realize that I run the danger of being hoisted by my own petard in the account which follows, but here goes:

It is a cause of perpetual amusement among my family that I constantly seem to find an occasion to introduce an Aristotelian perspective to almost any topic of conversation. This evening, alas, is no exception. Anyone who has taken a basic course in macroeconomics probably recalls the three factors that determine economic production – land, labor, and capital. Sadly, Aristotle’s treatise on economics and the global economy is out of print, but I still have a dog-eared copy from my grad school days and in perusing it in preparation for this evening’s reading, I noted that he lists land, labor, and capital as the material factors of economic production. From Aristotle’s perspective, there are formal factors as well, and these are the belief systems or mythologies which define and rationalize the values that shape our priorities in the production, distribution, and consumption of economic goods and services. More on that in a moment, but for the sake of completeness, we should note that the efficient factors of economic production are the individuals or agents who unite the formal with the material causes. The purpose (teleological factor) of economic production will vary as a function of the belief systems in play. Certainly, if capitalism constitutes one of our belief systems, then Wall Street bankers, hedge fund managers, and even Dick Cheney, may comprise a segment of the efficient cause of the American economy. Note that the extent of poverty in any given socio-economic system is a function of the formal, material, and efficient factors at work in that system. African countries with rich mineral assets may have wide swathes of poverty if tribalism or corruption distort the decisions of the efficient causal agents who play instrumental roles in their economies. And in the United States, which has long been purported to have the most powerful economy in the world, our material factors of economic production are not sufficient to account for our position. Our belief systems play a critical role as well.

There are at least four major mythologies that both shape and rationalize the values and perspectives of most Americans. And if we are to understand how there can be so much poverty in a country with so many resources, we need to examine the ways in which each of these belief systems influences our economic priorities. A quick definition: a mythology is a system of thought by which we interpret our experience and guide our behavior. Thus, Christianity is a mythology that has its origin in the realm of organized religion. Science is also a faith-based belief system that rationalizes certain values, explains the world around us, and guides vast areas of our behavior. The same may be said for the faith many of us place in capitalism and the hidden hand at work in a free market. Finally there is an American mythology – a belief in certain stories about the shaping of American history and social institutions. In each of these four areas, there are many shadings of belief. Clearly my understanding of ‘America’ on that January night in 1973 differed dramatically from that of the young man sitting next to me. The values and perspectives fostered by the belief systems in each of the four areas are neither mutually exclusive nor totally compatible. But they do jointly determine our priorities in the production, distribution, and consumption of economic goods and services. And in so doing, they provide the formal determinants of poverty in our country.

When I began my graduate studies in psychology, many of the friends in my cohort had a much more liberal political take on life than I. In the early ‘60s, the most conservative member of our department was a liberal Democrat. One of our faculty was a founding member of SDS. So it should come as no surprise if I tell you that soon I was coming home and explaining the evils of capitalism to the shock and consternation of my parents. My father emigrated to this country when he was 15. He wound up owning a number of

apartment houses. It would be an understatement to say that he took my assaults on the evils of capitalism personally. One day, after one of our heated debates on the issue, a truce was called to allow each of us to lick our wounds. My father retreated to his den and I remained in the kitchen with my mother. She never took part in our arguments, but on this particular day she asked me if I knew that my father had not raised the rent at one of his properties for 15 years. Of course, I didn't know that and I asked her why. "Because all of the tenants are on a fixed income," was the response. "Oh." That effectively ended my campaign to convert my parents to Marxism. The reason I tell that story is because my dad was single-minded in his pursuit of wealth. His first thought upon waking was how to make another buck. And if he could go to bed at night, having made it and not spent it, he slept well. He certainly believed in capitalism and the free market, but he had a simple religious faith that would not allow him to take a widow's last mite. Nor would he take any shortcuts on his tax returns. He felt very grateful to his adopted country for the opportunities it provided him. So a synthesis of the mythologies gave him guidance in the conduct of his business affairs.

To take a macroscopic illustration of the role belief systems have with respect to prosperity and poverty, consider the changes in the fortunes of the average Chinese citizen before and after the programs initiated by Deng Xiaoping. Clearly, there are significant economic consequences which hinge upon the economic mythology to which one subscribes.

Time does not permit us to further explore the operational particulars of these formal factors. We could easily spend another evening discussing the ways in which American

religion promotes and preserves poverty in our society. Ditto for science and secular humanism, capitalism (or communism), and the myth of 'America'.

In the minutes remaining, I would like to examine the relationship between cognitive dissonance, dissonance reduction, and the process of accommodation as it applies to the question of poverty's persistence in our society. My argument runs as follows: (A) The belief systems which shape and rationalize our values and priorities are critical determinants of poverty in America. (B) If we seek significant, long-term change in systemic poverty in our country, the schemata which are the cornerstones of these belief systems must be subject to change. (C) The cognitive dissonance essential in producing accommodation is not likely to occur so long as we continue to use defenses to reduce or prevent any dissonance arising from recognition of our responsibility for the problems.

Rationalization and piety are significant defenses, but the way we construe a problem or frame an issue is critical in whether we experience any sense of personal responsibility for that problem and, hence, experience the dissonance necessary to make changes in the belief systems which guide our behavior. One of the clearest illustrations of how the way we construe a social problem may serve to direct attention away from those who share responsibility for it is the example of substance abuse in America. There is consensus among experts that chronic substance abuse rises primarily from efforts to self-medicate – to deal, in other words, with the emotional anguish resulting from abuse, guilt, hopelessness, despair, etc, arising from life in American society. If policy makers were to acknowledge that the fundamental basis of substance abuse in our country is driven by self-medication needs, they would be left on the horns of a dilemma: (A) There are aspects of our society which lead significant numbers of people to suffer from a deep and

persistent anguish and/or (B) We are not providing adequate treatment for the psychological wounds resulting from the hazards in our socio-economic system. Either alternative implies a failure in social policy and, hence, responsibility of those who make it. So how have policy makers construed the problem? By focusing on supply-side factors, namely the production and distribution of the product. What is needed in this scenario is a War on Drugs. This way of construing the problem leads to efforts to eradicate opium and cocoa crops abroad and to step up enforcement and imprisonment at home. These efforts are costly and ineffective, but they do minimize dissonance for politicians and the electorate in this country.

Is the same conclusion true re the War on Poverty? We'll save that for another time. It's a fairly complex question, and we can't do it justice tonight. Certainly, anytime we construe a social issue in terms of a war, we can be fairly certain that we will not be cast as the enemy. We are always the heroes. Let's examine, instead, the way in which Victorians looked at the problem of poverty. And to that end, I propose to briefly consider the perspectives of two pre-eminent Victorians, Charles Dickens and Karl Marx, living in London and Paris, respectively, between 1843 and 1848. Given the copious writings of each and the research they have engendered, discussing Lyndon Johnson and his War on Poverty might seem less demanding. But we shall limit our discussion to areas of overlap from their early writings and seek to better understand our own situation from what may be learned from theirs.

Charles Dickens, the second of eight children, was born to John and Elizabeth Dickens on February 7, 1812. His father held a modest but respectable position as a naval pay clerk in the office of the Admiralty, but his improvidence led to a term in debtors prison

and the abrupt end of a happy childhood for the 11 year old Charles, who was forced to help pay down the debt by pasting labels on bottles of boot polish at Warren's Blacking Factory in London. This abrupt change from a life of relative privilege and promise in a middle class world to one headed toward apparent oblivion among the uneducated, uncouth youth working with him was devastating to the young Charles and left its indelible mark on him for the rest of his life.

His wanderings through the back streets of London, begun at this time, together with his intimate knowledge of the urban underclass, provided him with material evident in his earliest published works. Notable among these are Sketches by Boz (1836) and Oliver Twist (1838). Our focus these evening is on A Christmas Carol, published in December of 1843. It was then and remains to this day one of Dickens best known and best loved works. And it provides a fairly representative idea of how Dickens construed poverty and the poor. As the story is certainly familiar to all of you, allow me to cut to the proverbial chase. First, poverty in the Cratchit family is the result of economic oppression by a wealthy man who measures riches strictly in financial terms and who has no use for sentimentality. It is, as he so emphatically tells us, 'Humbug!' If avarice and heartlessness are the causes of oppression and poverty, what is the cure? The answer, as we know, is the 'Spirit of Christmas'. This is not simply a remedy for the people like the Cratchits who suffer from the greed and heartlessness of men like Scrooge, but for Scrooge, himself, and those like him. For to go through one's life without feelings of tenderness, compassion, and mercy is to miss the positive sentiments which are the basis for morality and, indeed, to miss what it means to be more fully human. Thus, Scrooge is as much a victim of his own greed and surliness as are the Cratchits. What I find interesting about

this story is its contrasting perspective as to the cause of poverty with a popular conception in our own society. Both place the locus of causation within the individual, but in Dickens' view, it is not the sloth and vice of the poor, themselves, but the greed and heartlessness of those who have economic leverage. What accounts for the difference?

One possible explanation is the 'base' to which one is appealing. If one's election prospects hinge on the support of born-again evangelicals and/or of campaign donors who are free-market fundamentalists, one's interests are best served by claiming that poverty is the result of the sinful condition of the poor – for which the remedy is a spiritual rebirth and free market competition religious organizations will provide in the provision of services. If, like Dickens on the other hand, a significant portion of one's reading public (and, ergo, a significant source of one's income), is made up of the working, white collar poor of nineteenth century London, it is probably better to assure them that their impoverished state is not the result of sloth or vice, but of the heartlessness and avarice of their employers (think, here, of Scrooge and Enron). The fundamental point is that in either case the cure for poverty is a change of heart. The question is simply, 'Whose heart?'

Erik Erikson, in Young Man Luther, made an interesting argument that the so-called 'great man' in any historical epoch is someone whose way of dealing with a source of personal stress addresses a problem shared by many others in the society. As applied to the Victorians, Dickens, with his blacking factory trauma – the fear of falling as it were – creatively confronts a fear which is shared by those who were marginal members of the white-collar class in England during the Industrial Revolution. The brutalizing effect of the mine or the factory floor left those who were forced to work there little more than

animals. Dickens' contemporaries, the Cratchit clones, if you will, were as desperate as he to avoid that fate. Dickens' fiction, in effect, offered a tune to whistle while walking past that particular graveyard. And a popular tune it was.

Is there a comparable crisis amongst marginal members of the American middle class today? Are those bemoaning the loss of family values and a traditional religious perspective actually contemporary cousins of the Cratchits? And is Sarah Palin the evangelical who will lead them in hymns as they try marching past what may prove to be the burial grounds of their traditional values? That is something you must answer for yourself. [If one considers for a moment the notion that some Americans believe themselves to be more essentially defined by their values, virtues, and Weltanschauung than by their educational status and income, one may understand the appeal of Palin and have another way of answering Thomas Frank's question in What's the Matter with Kansas?]

Interestingly, as Dickens was sending A Christmas Carol to press in London in December of 1843, Marx was in Paris writing an article for the Deutscher-franzosische Jahrbuch. "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Theory of Right: Introduction" was not published until early in 1844, but in the essay, Marx offers his famous aphorism on religion as an 'opiate of the people'. We will consider Marx's way of construing poverty, its causes and cures, in a moment, but first let us look a little more carefully at what Marx says about religion and then see if we can discern what he meant with his opiate metaphor, before finally examining A Christmas Carol in light of Marx's comments.

The passage in which the aphorism appears reads as follows:

Man has found in the imaginary reality of heaven where he looked for a superman only the reflection of his own self. ... (M)an makes religion, religion does not make man. (M)an is not an abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, society. This state, this society, produces religion's inverted attitude to the world, because they are an inverted world themselves. Thus, the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle against the world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people. [David McLellan, Karl Marx: Selected Writings]

What is Marx saying? The answer here may become a little clearer if we understand Marx, like Nietzsche, to be a precursor of existential thinking. Marx, unlike Dickens, believed that the circumstances of one's existence – one's class and relationship to one's work for instance – determined one's essence (who one really is) and not the other way around.

I would like to focus on the final two sentences of the quotation: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people." An opiate has two properties of relevance to our discussion of poverty and economic oppression: it is an anesthetic and it is an hallucinogen. From Marx's perspective, then, religion might be considered both a symptom of false consciousness and a way of dealing with an oppressive environment. Whether he intended the opiate metaphor to be understood in both ways is not clear.

Does A Christmas Carol serve to perpetuate a false consciousness, to convey an inverted attitude? Well, although much may be made of the Spirit of Christmas, Dickens was in no orthodox sense a Christian. His perspective is humanistic and is reflected in the words of Scrooge's nephew, who notes early on,

I have always thought of Christmas time...as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of...when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.

That being said, the portrayal of life in A Christmas Carol has families living in poverty, cheerful and chipper, and those who oppress them given to miraculous (and timely) changes of heart. Visions of heavenly paradise awaiting the faithful hardly seem any more fanciful than that. So, is Dickens the tool of a capitalistic cabal bent on clouding the

consciousness of the Cratchit class and other “of the people below them”? Only folks akin to a few radical Trotskyites I knew in graduate school would agree to so simplistic an assertion. But for Dickens, as we have noted, class status was of utmost importance. His conception of English society embraced class distinctions. He simply believed that any problems arising in such a society could be dealt with if we but retained a kind, forgiving and charitable heart.

As is clear from The Communist Manifesto, written in 1848 at the behest of the Communist League before Marx moved to London permanently, the cause of economic oppression stems from the division of labor and an ensuing class system in which control of the means of production is in the hands of a few. Both Dickens and Marx attribute poverty to economic oppression, but whereas Dickens finds the seeds of oppression in the atrophied emotional development of the Scrooges of the world, Marx insists that the conditions of class, the state, and society existentially shape the states of mind that Dickens finds so essential. Scrooge’s avarice and heartlessness, in other words, are the result of the system in which he lives.

I have suggested that Dickens played to his ‘base’ as surely as contemporary politicians do. He frames or construes the social problems of his time in ways which are largely congruent with the schemata and expectations of his audience. I believe a case can be made that Marx does much the same thing. Although having a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin guaranteed a certain status in German society, regardless of income, the fact that he was a Jew by birth, living in a time and place with pronounced anti-Semitic prejudice, meant that he was unlikely to ever gain an academic position. Just as Dickens began his career as a journalist, so too did Marx. The difference in this case is

that Marx wrote for an audience consisting largely of German artisans and craftsmen – the very people whose livelihood, on one hand, was being threatened by the nascent industrial revolution just getting underway at that time on the continent and, on the other, by the low standard of living in their native country. Combined with the monarchical political traditions still in place in Europe and the powerful legacy of Hegel, whose work had enormous influence on the young Marx, it is small wonder that he developed a concept of alienated, commodified labor and bourgeois oppression of the working class seen in the Manifesto.

On the basis of the passage we just quoted, Marx would hardly seem to face charges of offering a religious vision to his followers. But if you have ever read much of his writing, you are likely to conclude that he was one of those people of whom it could be said, “He may have been wrong, but he was never in doubt.” Certainly the invisible hand of Smith’s market place has nothing on the invisible hand of dialectical materialism – although to give Marx some credit here, he did seem to struggle to square his theory with the fact that the revolutionary activity on the continent in 1848 occurred, contrary to his prediction, in countries where capitalism was no where near as developed as in England. Nevertheless, there are many of his followers who appear to have an unfalsifiable faith in the inevitable overthrow of capitalism. That, to me, is a hallmark of someone with a religious faith.

Well, the point of this last segment of the essay was to illustrate ways by which we tend to minimize the likelihood of cognitive dissonance by framing the problem in ways such that we share little or no responsibility for it, i.e., in ways which will not require us to make any accommodations which would require a change in the status quo. And I have

just offered reasons for thinking why contemporaries as different in background and outlook as Dickens and Marx may be suspected of framing the issue of poverty in their time in ways by which to minimize dissonance among their audiences – essentially attributing social problems to others than themselves or those like themselves.

So what are we to conclude? If every approach or perspective is subject to the biases, prejudices, and self-interest of the person construing a social issue, aren't we left with the post-modern relativism that bedevils our age? I don't think this must necessarily be the case. To begin with, to the extent we are aware of the various defenses by which we seek to minimize dissonance, the less likely they are to be effective.

Bacon's observation in his New Organum to the effect that we tend to find as credible evidence and arguments that support our preconceived ideas, but find countervailing evidence and opinions much less persuasive bears testament to our capacity to rationalize. Will simply bringing this to everyone's attention curtail the tendency? Well, it didn't seem to do so among Bacon's sixteenth century contemporaries, and the last time I checked, it certainly hasn't had much effect on politicians and political pundits in our own times. All of which goes to show, I guess, that our capacity for critical thinking has its limits when it involves examining issues which have significance for our own deeply cherished belief systems.

Whereas it may be unrealistic to assume that awareness of dissonance-reducing defenses will inevitably result in self-awareness, one may hope that in a free society in which there is the possibility for a competition in the marketplace of ideas, reason and reasonability may ultimately hold sway over dogma and rationalization. For if they do not and we are not able to maintain an open mind, freedom of speech will be as useful as vocal

chords in the land of the deaf.

Alfred Adler argued that humans are motivated by ideals or goals that cannot be definitively proven to be true. The belief that all men are created equal, for instance, may be a fictional ideal. It nevertheless exerts a powerful and constructive influence in western democracies. Our belief in a capacity to be rational, open-minded, and able to make schematic accommodations if necessary may be understood in terms of such a fictional ideal.. A belief in reason and reasonability was a critical component in the flowering of Greek culture in its golden age. It is also the cornerstone of the Enlightenment and modernity. For to believe that our capacity to reason is good for little more than rationalization and avoiding inconvenient truths, suggests that we are consigned to a life of nihilism and/or moral relativism – and in the case of our topic this evening to the conclusion that the poor will always be with us.