

Individuals: Each a Majority of One

RONALD REAGAN ONCE DECLARED THAT YOU CAN TELL A LOT ABOUT a man by the way he eats jelly beans. The “Reagan Jelly Bean Consumption Test” may not be the most critically diagnostic of behavioral tests to reveal something about a person’s character, but it represents a beginning. The test may, for example, reveal hidden traits of avarice, covert leanings toward hoarding, color blindness, perhaps an indifference toward dental hygiene, even a subversive streak of generosity.

Human character, and the attributes that make each of us distinguishable from the crowd, is an impossibly complex field of inquiry. And therefore the Reagan Test, while not very sophisticated, nonetheless gets us started. Will Rogers judged people by seeing their reaction to his offer of chewing tobacco, currently a rarely employed test of character. Some sociologists believe that much of a person’s character may be divulged by asking, “When confronting a new problem, what is the very first step that you would undertake?” These social scientists would then divide the many responses into two major categories: Those responses that point to the recruitment of oneself as their best source: “the Lone Wolf Response”; and, in the second category, those responses that would first enlist the advice and counsel of others; in essence, convening a gathering to address the problem: “the Committee Response.”

Thus, by this wretchedly simple criterion, we can assign humanity to but one of two crude categories: Those who believe that great things in life are best accomplished by individuals acting as solitary, inward-seeking vanguard agents, depending primarily upon their own accumulated experience and inner capabilities (The Lone Wolves); and the contrary belief, that only through the constructive cooperation of the many may humanity achieve its highest purposes in life (The Committee Seekers.).

The Lone Wolves disparage committees stating that their sole purpose is to entice creative ideas from the open marketplace; and then, through collective action, choke them to death. The Lone Wolves also denounce the tendency of committees to confront societal problems by reducing the aggregate of humanity into something they call the masses. And then, by calling them ‘the masses’ they may then deride them as people with no faces, no individuality, no idiosyncratic thought.



The effective functioning of a society of humans has always depended upon a relentless yet healthy tension between those two opposing social forces: the need for people to work together, coordinating their creative skills while subordinating their sense of individuality for the greater good of the community. And in creative opposition to this, the equally paramount need to protect our nascent sense of individuality, nurturing it and defending it from the efficiency experts of society who daily pray at the altar of ergonomics.

If one extreme is reached, we end up witnessing a society with but one faith, one political doctrine, one language and probably one beloved leader-for-life. And the other extreme? Total, permissive anarchism with not even the most rudimentary of communal regulations, a chaotic society that would offend even the most troglodyte libertarian. And, in all of this, the Lone Wolf folk are labeled as eccentrics, potential heretics, bohemians who tend to sulk, anti-social deviants who avoid mass rallies and will argue with anyone, even the Good Fairy. While the committee-loving crowd are seen as excessively gregarious, lovers of parties, life members of the Klu Klux Klan, and inclined to compromise on all issues even the content of the Ten Commandments.

Where in this distressing dichotomy stands the earnest individual seeking what is best for himself, his family and his community? His personal views overlap those of the Lone Wolf persuasion as well as the views of the Committee-loving crowd. He proclaims, first, that he is a freely thinking individual rather than an adherent; and he recalls that the word ‘individual’ is derived from a Latin word describing a human who cannot be divided into many factions, one who is ultimately indivisible; and thus he realizes ruefully that no one philosophy can possibly define him.

This person, this “individual”, vividly recalls that individuality is at the very core of both the arts, the creative sciences and social innovation; and that the collectivist states fear most the specter of individuality arising amidst its citizens. Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), in a memorable 1956 speech, declared: “Comrades! We must abolish the cult of the individual decisively, once and for all.” And, an opposing, but less amplified, voice: “The enduring merit of any nation, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it.” (John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).

– STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD

Stanley M. Aronson, MD is dean of medicine emeritus, Brown University.

Disclosure of Financial Interests

The author and his spouse/significant other have no financial interests to disclose.

CORRESPONDENCE

e-mail: SMAMD@cox.net