

Original Message

From: Payton, Robert

Sent: Saturday, September 29, 2001 9:38 AM

Subject: The Great Relearning

The title of this memo is borrowed from Tom Wolfe. It addresses the experience of "starting from zero." It seems to fit our present circumstances. American society, and perhaps the Western world in general, faces a "great relearning" of our sense of the world and our place in it. The Great Relearning began on September 11, of course; as the old song title has it, "things ain't what they used to be." Many seem to believe that "things will never be the same." To say that the events of September 11 were "incomprehensible" or "unbelievable" says more about the state of our world view than it does about the events themselves.

As you might expect, I've spent a good many hours sequestered in the library in Bloomington, trying to find things that will help me understand what is going on, to relearn what I thought I understood about Islam and the Middle East, for example, and to see them, as best I can, from those perspectives. It's quite a stretch for an old, white, middle-class, middle-American, liberal-conservative, Protestant-cum-humanist with a fondness for Cicero. But I can compare myself with Margaret Marcus, born in 1934 in New Rochelle, New York, who passed through a thin version of Judaism to Ethical Culture to Unitarianism and then found herself, and the order and authority she needed, in Islam. Peggy Marcus of New Rochelle became Maryam Majeelah of Pakistan: "For several decades she has been a prolific voice in defense of traditional Islam." Her enemy? The same as Osama bin Laden's: Modernism. Maryam Majeelah is just as opposed to modernizing Muslims as she is to Westerners. Her story is also quite a stretch. The Great Relearning as she makes the case in her books is relearning the history of the world -- a different mythistory than the one most of us have been nurtured on.

If "Robert Payton thought in this manner" and if "Maryam Majeelah thought in that manner," is there any way for us to find each other, to think together? The Great Relearning, at least in my case, will not be a quick fix. It's awkward to re-examine a world view, to test reason against the irrational, to engage in an exploration of other values and other cultures. I suspect that Ms. Majeelah will feel no need to relearn anything; she now has everything figured out. I quote to myself the line I gave to you: "Systems of explanation illuminate up to a point -- then falsify." Ms. Majeelah seems to me to be well past illumination of Western errors and weaknesses and into the falsifying stage. I want to avoid that mistake if I can; I want to open my mind and keep it open.

My grandson just gave back to me a passage from Chinese philosophy that I gave him last year; some of you may recognize it:

"The ancients who wished to illuminate 'illuminating virtue' all under Heaven first governed their states. Wishing to govern their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their personal lives. Wishing to cultivate their personal lives, they first rectified their hearts and minds. Wishing to rectify their hearts and minds, they first authenticated their intentions. Wishing to authenticate their intentions, they first refined their knowledge. The refinement of knowledge is the study of things. For only when things are studied is knowledge refined; only when knowledge is refined are intentions authentic; only when intentions are authentic are hearts and minds rectified; only when hearts and minds are rectified are personal lives regulated; only when families are regulated are states governed; only when states are governed is there peace all under Heaven. Therefore, *from the Son of Heaven to the common people, all without exception must take self-cultivation as the root*"

The title of that? "The Great Learning." That is what I have to relearn. Perhaps the West and the Middle East can turn to the East to find common ground. We can't start from zero but we may be able to come to a better understanding of where we're going and why.

RLP