

WHY I'M POLITICALLY & RELIGIOUSLY INDEPENDENT — WITH NO LABELS

Just belonging to people without belonging to ideological camps

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Friends and acquaintances sometimes ask me what groups I “belong” to, or which political and religious labels best describe me. My answer sometimes surprises them:

I really don't have one anymore.

An unexpected gift of retirement has been the freedom to say, “*I don't know,*” “*I disagree,*” and even “*I've changed my mind.*” My fixed income may limit some financial freedoms, and my aging body certainly limits some physical ones, but retirement has given me a wonderful kind of intellectual freedom. I no longer have vocational or organizational affiliations that might pressure me to defend a particular political, religious, or philosophical “brand.”

Most of us understand that pressure. When our livelihood, friendships, reputation, or position within a community depends partly upon belonging to a group, then expressing certain questions, doubts, or disagreements can come with a price. You risk being criticized, ostracized, censored, demoted, or even fired.

Of course, intellectual freedom doesn't mean saying whatever we want without regard for others. Sensitivity, compassion, humility, and basic politeness should always shape *how*, *when*, and *why* we express our opinions.

Complicated Questions Need Humble Dialogue

The older I get, the less interested I am in defending an entire package of beliefs because beliefs often come bundled together under political, religious, or philosophical labels.

Many of our most important societal questions are enormously complicated. Consider *immigration* and the difficult balance between secure borders and compassion for desperate human beings. Consider the significant moral distinctions between early- and late-term *abortion*. Consider the continuing medical and ethical debate over irreversible medical interventions for children struggling with *gender* and other dimensions of identity. Or consider the unnecessary suffering of billions of sentient *animals* within modern industrialized animal agriculture.

My point here is not to *argue* my position to “win” on any of them. My point is that thoughtful and compassionate people should be able to examine difficult questions individually, consider the best evidence available, listen seriously to people who disagree, and reach nuanced conclusions without first asking:

“What am I supposed to believe *because* I belong to *this* group?”

Unfortunately, that kind of humble dialogue seems to be becoming increasingly difficult.

When Beliefs Become Group Identities

There is nothing inherently wrong with belonging to groups. In fact, the human tendency to form groups grows out of something necessary and often beautiful. Families, friendships, faith-places, organizations, neighborhoods, and other communities can provide caring relationships, mutual support, accountability, cooperation, and a sense of belonging.

But something can — and often does go *wrong*.

The same psychosocial dynamics that create healthy group bonds can also begin to suppress individual thought. This becomes especially powerful when political, religious, or other ideological beliefs become part of a group's identity—its “brand”—which members then feel obligated to protect and *defend* from questions, doubts, or criticism.

Social media seems to be accelerating this process dramatically.

I've written elsewhere about what I think lies beneath some of these dynamics:
— our human desire for certainty provides a sense of identity, safety, and security, often more than our desire for truth. None of us is immune to that temptation—including me.

All groups can gradually drift toward increasingly rigid forms of *fundamentalism*. And I mean that in the broadest sense. There can be *conservative* fundamentalism and *liberal* fundamentalism, *religious* fundamentalism and *secular* fundamentalism, *political* fundamentalism and for some even *anti-political* fundamentalism.

The labels change. Yet the underlying human psychology often looks remarkably similar. First, we become the “good” group. Then people who disagree with us become the “bad” group. Eventually, some of those people may come to be viewed not merely as mistaken, but as ignorant, dangerous, immoral, or **even evil**.

At that point, something especially dangerous can happen: the “good” group gradually loses its capacity for honest self-evaluation. Internal self-criticism feels like disloyalty. Questioning accepted beliefs becomes threatening. Evidence that supports the group is welcomed, while contrary evidence is dismissed or explained away.

Meanwhile, criticism is increasingly directed outward toward *them*. At its worst, this creates a vicious cycle of mutual contempt—“good us” against “evil them”—that can escalate from caricature and inflammatory rhetoric toward hatred, dehumanization, and sometimes even physical violence. History gives us far too many examples of where that process can lead. A sub-culture can easily become a “cult-like” culture.

The Freedom to Be Wrong

So today I'd rather remain *independent*. That does **not** mean I imagine myself to be objective, unbiased, or somehow above ordinary human psychology. Actually the opposite. I know that

I'm capable of confirmation bias, rationalization, tribal thinking, and simply being self-deceptively wrong. That realization is one of the reasons I value independence.

I want to remain free to follow the *evidence* wherever it seems to lead. I want to be able to agree with a conservative about one issue, a liberal about another, an atheist about something else, and a Christian, Jew, Buddhist, agnostic, scientist, philosopher, or anyone else about still another.

Most importantly, I want to remain free to say: **"I was wrong. I've changed my mind."**

None of us sees reality from a perfectly objective vantage point. On many of life's deepest questions, absolute *certainly* may simply be *unavailable* to us. Much of life is **gray**, *not black and white*. We make the best evidential inferences or conclusions we can from our limited perspectives, experiences, data, and reasoning—and hopefully remain humble enough to revise those judgments when warranted.

For me, that isn't indecisiveness. It is intellectual humility.

Independent, But Deeply Interdependent

So I no longer feel a need to "belong" to a political, religious, or ideological camp. I'm just independently me. But intellectual independence is not the same thing as relational independence.

None of us is purely independent as lone rangers. We are profoundly and inseparably **interdependent**. We need other people—not merely for survival, but to become healthier, wiser, more compassionate human beings. We need people who love us, challenge us, disagree with us, correct us, forgive us, and help us see things we could never see entirely by ourselves.

I'm extraordinarily grateful for my own community: concentric circles of relationships beginning with my wonderful wife Linda, our six amazing adult children and their fantastic partners, my granddaughter, friends locally and internationally, and even occasional acquaintances whose different perspectives often have a profound impact on my continued learning and growth.

So perhaps this is the best way I can describe where I am today:

I want to belong deeply to people without having to belong to or be tied to any ideological camps, their labels, or their potential extremes.

I want to *listen* without surrendering my freedom to question. I want to *disagree* without turning people into enemies. I want to hold my conclusions with enough conviction to live by them, but enough humility to *reconsider* them.

And when I discover that I've been wrong, I hope I'll always remain free enough—and humble enough—to change my mind.

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