

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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When freedom of expression goes too far. As Americans, historically, our identity is linked to our freedom. *Land of the free, home of the brave*, we say. We take our cherished freedoms seriously.

Still, freedom has its context—the health and safety of the wider world in which we live. When the life-energy and well-being of that context are threatened, bringing potential violence into the public square in the name of freedom of expression, for example, we’ve gone too far. Even freedom has its limits.

Some of the so-called *expressions of freedom* displayed at town hall meetings across the land this past month have crossed the line—the line not only of human civility, but the line, too, of the possible danger they pose for the common good.

Our innate freedom as human beings has its locus in our spirit, that realm in our being where good and evil do battle daily to shape our behavior. *Shall I eat the forbidden fruit, or not, sip of the forbidden alcohol, or not?* These battles in the human spirit, battles of our will, tests of our character, challenge us all.

Our choices of the spirit determine the good or sin that we do. We’re all different, of course—some of us more vulnerable than others to what the Bible calls *the wiles of the devil* (Ephesians 6:11), the devil being the source of evil and malevolence.

How evil works. Let’s take a look at how evil works—these *wiles of the devil*—in the context of the national debate on Health Care reform. A common form of evil in this debate is pandering to the lowest impulses of people—people who are confused and perhaps not well informed.

All they know is that, suddenly, the economy is bad and they either don’t have a job or they’re worried about losing the job they have; and all around them, it seems, things are changing.

And then they turn on a conservative talk radio station and hear some ranting talk show host telling them, in grandiose hyperbole, about the source of all their worry, the cause of all their concern:

It’s the government, they learn, along with some irrational fear of an emerging socialism (which we’ve had in some form for decades with Social Security and Medicare, which have worked fine). Add to this, now, all the fury of Health Care Reform (which we all know we need; upwards of 75% of the American people agree on this). And, still more, the wild, unfounded talk about *death panels* and *government take over*.

These allegations, of course, are distortions, exaggerations, even flat-out lies.

Then one day, some of them decide to attend a town hall meeting in their state on Health Care Reform and they see signs of *swastikas* and photos equating our national leaders with Hitler. And they start thinking, however irrationally, that the government is evil and our national leaders are evil. And if we could just get rid of government and all this new leadership, their lives would be okay again.

This is how evil works. It panders to the lower and more vulnerable impulses of people. It distorts and conflates in ways that evoke horrifically wrong and misguided conclusions. This is *freedom of expression* gone too far, to where it threatens the common good.

Freedom and responsibility. The larger problem with these over-the-top displays of *freedom* is the incitement to violence they foster. If Hitler is evil and our national leaders are like Hitler, then logic supports some sort of action against the national leaders. The annals of history are full of the tragic accounts of people, with twisted minds, committing horrific acts thinking they were serving the public good.

It's precisely this sort of nightmare that unfolds whenever freedom is advanced without an equal emphasis on responsibility. Freedom and responsibility work together in the human spirit. For us to be healthy persons, they need to be in balance, in a workable harmony.

The words we use bear consequences. They carry qualitative meanings, reflecting the deep-seeded values and biases of our respective histories and traditions.

While our expressions of freedom for dissent and protest have their place, still, at some point, they live under the judgment of the common good.