Opinion
NCR Voices
Voices of Sisters
Social Justice

(Unsplash/Emily Morter)

by Sr. Joan Chittister

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @joanchittister

Join the Conversation

May 23, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

There was a period in my life when I was a slightly used history teacher — first, to sixth graders in civics courses, then to classes of high school seniors in American history. Whatever it did to teenagers, it marked me for life. I follow every commentator, watch every panel program, study every election analysis I can get.

And I loved it.

Except for now.

It seemed so right then. Even the "hanging chads" that would determine our slim election didn't split the country. Even the tension, the struggle that went into the counting of ballots in the election of 1960 only seemed to increase our pride in the American government. Difficult as it was, it simply underscored our commitment to the "peaceful transfer of power."

I attached the Constitution to the local newspapers and made an otherwise 18th-century subject sing the glory of the present. Most of all, I was teaching bright young people who immersed themselves in all the moments of history we were living. It was the '60s and the globe was breaking open everywhere and we were in the core of it: America, the great leader of the free world; the inventor of peace called nuclear weapons; the keeper of human values. And all the world had to do was to follow us.

Then, of course, came assassinations and Vietnam, the struggle for civil rights, and the promise of space travel — each of which stretched the soul to new beginnings and global competition as well as a hint of foreboding futures.

> We need leaders now with personality profiles equal to the human needs before us.
>
> Tweet this

And yet, together, those things — great success and painful losses, as well — were exactly what brought us to this moment, now, with the question of the century dangling before our eyes: What are we really looking for when we hold an election now, when we cast our ballots seeking a fresh start from the things that have

occupied us for decades?

One thing for sure, our decisions must surely come from more than election posters about past, present and unknown futures. If we are really to make the country itself worth voting for, we may need some kind of universal understanding of what we see as important traits in leaders if the challenge of the ages are to be met.

We need leaders now with personality profiles equal to the human needs before us. Otherwise we run the risk of filling political seats with representatives more interested in maintaining their political pensions than in the kind of political vision we need so deeply right now.

It's all about leadership now, we know.

And it's not a new idea. In fact, in 1949, Donald Fiske, a research psychologist at the University of Chicago, spurred by work that had been done in the '30s at Harvard University, introduced what over the years has become a kind of universal personality leadership model. Based on five traits common to human beings and now considered culturally universal, the research enables both individuals and groups to come to terms in light of the work for which they're applying and the personality traits most likely to function effectively in this society at this time.

Even major businesses have begun to use this five-factor model to determine the kinds of personalities they may be considering for staffers in either high or low positions. OCEAN, a common metonymy, describes the five personality traits most commonly considered for the sake of public effectiveness: O for openness, C for conscientiousness, E for extraversion, A for agreeableness and N for neuroticism.

Advertisement

It calls for creativity, responsibility, sociability, cooperativeness and emotional balance.

Now ask yourself this: If such a profile of psychological balance had been the offering in the 2020 presidential election, who would you have elected then? Who will you elect now in 2024?

Even more interesting, perhaps, is the fact that ECW Press has just released a book called Character, the subtitle of which reads: "What contemporary leaders can teach us about building a more just, prosperous, and sustainable future."

Clearly, the issue America has striven for most in its electoral past has been the economy, the money — and those whose greatest concerns are financial, as if money could do it all. Who is spending the most to get elected? Who are the wealthy people voting for and why? And what about the rest of us where money is concerned?

But what we lack, perhaps — what has confused us as we come to this election — is that we have become a people who are finally figuring out that money is not the whole answer. We are, it seems, not asking the right questions. Which means that we will therefore be without the answers we need to save the entire country.

If our questions are whether or not our stocks will continue to go up, instead of how our resources can be used to deal with climate change or food distribution or education systems or immigrant development, for instance, it's the wrong question. If we fail to question whether we need, as a country, to preserve the jobs, clean up the waters, provide the education that is the basis of change as we welcome the new immigrant population we need to pick our fruit, provide our spare parts, and do more than produce weapons. Just the way we did when we needed the railroads and the water lines and the distribution centers and the workers in the late 19th century — we are clearly slow to build this country anew again.

> I taught students that they had nothing to worry about because this country, their country, unlike any others, was based on 'checks and balances.' Really? Then where are those 'checks and balances' now?
>
> Tweet this

Our questions must surely be: What does this country need to do to save the future? For everyone? For all of us? And who is saying so in a Congress where too many prefer the questions of the past to the questions of the day — or, better yet, the old authority systems rather than the new ones?

Will we save democracy? Or will we begin instead to seek for ourselves a private king who does what we want done to maintain the past rather than plan the future?

From where I stand, if I were still teaching those elementary and high school students, I would first apologize to them for what I failed to confirm. I taught them, for instance, that they had nothing to worry about because this country, their country, unlike any others, was based on "checks and balances."

Really? Then where are those "checks and balances" now?

When a president claims total immunity in the face of a population who have barely enough to pay off their mortgages, who will know how to check and balance that?

When officers of the system ignored — actually refused — subpoenas necessary to the integrity of the government systems, who will insist on that mutual responsibility? When Supreme Court judges ignore the laws that define them and still maintain their participation in the court what kind of checks and balances is that?

If what is happening at the highest legal levels of this land is real, something is surely wrong with the questions we are asking of the leaders of this country. We need to ask why there are not enough limitations designed to control climate change without leaving that to the generations that will be destroyed by it. And why no higher taxes for higher earners so that others can live with dignity and honor.

The lack of these questions are only the beginning, are only our fault alone.

Why we vote is our concern, but only if we are doing it to save the country we have allowed to run away with itself by leaving it for the next generation to require its renewal.

But the real wisdom this time comes down in our own generations. "The important thing," Albert Einstein insisted, "is not to stop questioning." And he ought to know.

Or we can choose to live by this one from James Thurber, who reminds us in the tangle of these ages: "It is better to ask some of the questions than to know all the answers."

Choose, for all our sakes.