



So, I'm out power walking in my neighborhood a few mornings ago, trying to shake the gauzy shroud of melancholy I'd been moping around in for days. I could feel this column starting in my head like a stubborn seed pushing up through dry, barren soil. An idea was forming, but I didn't want to let it. It was too amorphous. Too vague. Possibly too controversial. Shaping it up – then toning it down – would be too exhausting. I wasn't going there. No way.

But then I heard it. That crazy bird song. I hear it sometimes in my backyard, and I don't know what kind of bird makes it, but I swear it sounds just like this: "*We need you, we need you, we need you, we need you.*"
y, that's an exact quote. Serious!

"We need you, we need you, we need you, we need you."

Believe me, I know how insane (and insanely presumptuous) it sounds, but at that moment, it was as if the Almighty himself had whispered in my ear: "You can't slink out of this one, lazy bones. You have to write it. They need you." Delusional, right? Probably. Nevertheless, I took it as a sign. (And if you think signs are "for the birds," then this should make a good liner for your parakeet cage...)

See, the idea trying to sprout in my brain that morning had something to do with my aforementioned melancholy. I was pretty sure I knew the source of it (and the reason I was, at that moment, rambling through the greening lushness of Pigeon Point, frantically communing with nature): *I'd been spending too much time on the Internet.*

If you scoff at the notion that we live in a "fallen" world, that human nature is fundamentally "broken" – if you think that's just old-timey religious mumbo jumbo – you haven't spent much time in cyberspace lately. Not that the proof isn't all around us in the Real World, too; but there's

just something about the Virtual World that drives it home – the truth about us humans, that is – in a very stark, undeniable way. All those brazen, disembodied voices... all those opinions, careening and colliding and conflicting...

And I'm not even talking about the verbal trash that's regularly dumped in the comboxes on sites like Huffington Post, Townhall, and other major purveyors of political opinion. I've almost become numb to the obscene nastiness which anonymity 'empowers' some people to belch forth. (Almost.) No, I'm referring to the purveyors, themselves – the professional columnists and bloggers who have turned finger-pointing, nit-picking, personal potshots, and petty one-upmanship into the thriving industry we call "Public Discourse."

So many of the commentators I once loved to read – both from the left *and* the right – expend so much energy, these days, not advancing their own arguments, but playing "pin the tale on the hypocrite," "wacka troll" and "liar liar pants on fire" with their opponents. They're either playing mental ping pong with trivial topics like "Who's More Ridiculous – Truthers or Birthers?" (a recent face-off between Jonathan Chait and Jonah Goldberg) or gleefully throwing fuel on the burning crash site of another politician who's fallen to earth. The former just seems like a sad waste of time and talent. It's the latter that *really* gets to me.

But I guess this is nothing new, is it? I suspect it's always been this way. I just didn't see it before. Or I saw it, but I just didn't care. I was having too much fun participating!

Now, here comes the really hard part of this column – the part where I can't avoid saying things that some of you don't want to hear. But listen, if I can't be honest, there's just no point in writing, so here goes... As you may know, a few years ago I received the gift of faith, and for the first time in my life, began to explore what it means to live in relationship with my creator. And though it didn't happen immediately – and in fact, is still happening – that gift changed me. Rather radically. No, it didn't make me suddenly "good" (i.e. kind and honest, hardworking and temperate, selfless and pure). As a matter of fact, I am now more aware than ever that I am *not* particularly good. Not by nature, anyway. No, what this gift did was to change my *perception*.
The way I see things.

More specifically, I now see *through* things in a way I never did before. And the upshot is that I

just don't enjoy the blood sport of politics anymore. It's not fun like it used to be. Case in point: A Republican friend posted a picture of Arlen Specter on Facebook last week, after his big defeat, and attached this caption:

"Arlen Specter on his drive home last night. Looks like a corpse. Which, politically, he now is. Good riddance to the least principled man in American politics."

The comments that ensued were of the same nature, and the old me would have joined in. I've never been particularly fond of Senator Specter – he has the reputation of being a real jerk and my friend's remark about his principles is probably on the money. But all I could see when I looked at that photo was a sad, wounded old man. My heart ached for him.

My liberal friends were having a big time, too, last week in the wake of Rep. Mark Souder's resignation. Granted, any family values politician who gets busted for making an "abstinence only" video *with his mistress* should expect every iota of scorn that comes his way. Americans hate hypocrites more than anything. And we *love* to call 'em out. After all, they deserve it – those terrible people who say one thing, but do another. Thank God we're nothing like them.

But, of course, we *are* like them. In our secret heart of hearts, we've all been hypocrites to one degree or another. And if you're shaking your head, saying "Not me," then you're a liar *and* a hypocrite. Welcome to the club.

We are all so terribly broken, aren't we? With our perpetual blame games and our silly debates, our petty jealousies and shallow ambitions, our ruminations and machinations and grimy little power grabs. Heck, the only reason we even *need* politics – with all its attendant theories and systems, rules and regulations – is that, when left to our own devices, we're so *completely* incapable of living the way we were created to live, in love and harmony with our fellow creatures.

Bottom line: We're fallen. We just *are*. You don't have to buy into religion to see it; you just have to look around. No matter how hard we try (and most of us *do* try), we all fail, pretty regularly – in ways both great and small, public and private – to live up to our ideals. Shouldn't this be old news by now? Shouldn't we be over the shock? Why is the entertainment value still so high? Granted, a certain amount of public disapproval is necessary when people break the law. (And by "law" I mean not just *actual*

law, but common mores and expectations.) A society needs a way to uphold its standards if they are to remain... standard. Otherwise, anarchy is just around the corner.

But knowing what we know about ourselves as a species – that we often mean well, but are hopelessly imperfect – do we have to take so much *pleasure* in flogging each other when we mess up? What if we forgave with as much fervor as we condemn? What if we were just as passionate about mercy as we are about justice? If we are truly made in God's image – and I believe that we are – this is not just some pipe dream. We actually have the ability to channel divine love – the kind you can't earn and don't deserve – and divine love is far more powerful than law.

Law keeps most people 'in line' most of the time. But love – unconditional and unreserved – changes hearts. And changed hearts translate to changed lives, and enough changed lives... well, use your imagination.

But lest you think I'm advocating some hippy-style, John Lennon-esque vision, let me make myself clear. I'm not asking you to "imagine" a world that's nothing like the one we live in. In our world, there *are* countries... and religion... there *is* hunger and greed... We *do* hold certain principles worth killing and dying for. It may not always be this way, but for the foreseeable future, this is how we are. This is

who

we are. It is

this

world – and its people – upon which we must lavish our love ... not because it's some glorious utopia in-the-making, but because it so clearly is

not.

It's easy, in this day and age, to imagine there's no heaven. But I'm far more inspired by the notion that there *is*, and we're all expatriates, just trying to get back home.

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