

The Old Stories

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One of today's finest novelists, his name is Mario Vargas Llosa, tells the tale of a people called the Machiguenga. These were fictional people in the Brazilian rainforest, nomads. They called themselves The People Who Walk. They were knit together by their habladores, that is, their storytellers, and they taught them of their past by recounting their traditions at night around the campfires.

The storytellers were the living way that circulated and made the Machiguenga into a society, a people of interconnected and interdependent beings. But things changed. The rainforest gave way to farming, to agriculture. Villages became towns, towns grew into cities, and cities swelled into the metropolis. The People Who Walked could not support themselves any longer as nomads, and they settled down, moving into apartments in the population centers, working as wage laborers.

The storytellers had no more campfires. They traveled from center to center for a while trying to keep the people together. But in time the habladores themselves grew weary. They settled down and they faded away. The Machiguenga, already dispersed from one another, began to blend into their environment, forgetting the differences that had separated them from others in the world around them. Conforming to the ways of the broader peoples, they lost their identity, their specialness, their peculiarity.

They did not any longer know who they were. They had become totally disconnected and totally fragmented. They were no longer a unique people.

Let us leave the magnificence of the Amazon's rainforest for a while and come back to secularist cosmopolitan America, to Israel. And there we find an environment where the hablador, the storyteller, finds very little place indeed. For modern society offers few if any rewards for any person who seeks to connect people together. Sociologists understand that postmodern

society like ours in Israel today, in America, is characterized by what they call cocooning. Israel is a land of cocooned people, each living his own little life, in his own little space, in his own gated community, as it were. They are a safe harbor from the pressures that come with making and maintaining relationships with other people.

You see cocoon people all the time. They are jogging down the street. They are wearing headphones. They are insensible to others' needs. They are isolated from everything and everybody except the type of music with which their spirit happens to resonate. And after the run they return to their homes. They have closed drapes, fenced yards, front and sometimes back. Another safe harbor.

But rather than this isolation, this selfishness, this solipsism of people goes beyond just physical lifestyle because this driving desire that people have for isolation, for running away from relationships, has come to play an important part in the way that we form our beliefs and our opinions. You see, moderns have virtually deified the idea that they must think critically. Critical thinking means in practice thinking as individuals, thinking individually, and the result of critical thinking is to place each individual into his own private little compartment, his own cocoon. Let me quote what one person writes about critical thinking. He says this:

Just as a common sense observation that the sun revolves around the earth is quite false and must be corrected. So we must step back from the moral and social opinions we were taught as children. Nothing that has been given by our parents should be accepted. We must step back from our initial assumptions and see them as being at best merely true for us rather than simply the truth. The widespread effect of critical thinking is to undermine our confidence that any moral or cultural system should properly command our full loyalty. It loosens the bonds of commitment and distances us from the immediacy of truth that we once thought to be unquestionable. The school system, the educational system encourages us and our children to think critically.

Here is how liberal educators have come to view the role of education, public education. They assert that the government has, and again I am

quoting, "An affirmative responsibility to emancipate individuals through thoroughgoing public education from the dead weight of religion, tradition, and parental authority. They envisaged a contest over children's souls between parents and a secular state." And where does this lead? I quote again.

It undermines parental authority, seeing the effort by parents to pass on their way of life as an attempt to bind the children to the past. Educators respond by adopting a progressive thrust for the schools. No longer will schools teach truth. Instead, they will prepare students to decide for themselves what is true. Eventually, this leads to an approach to education that centers around providing a forum in which students are invited to make and to express their own truth.

And it is not a very pretty sight, brethren. Abraham was commended by God for teaching His ways to his son Isaac. Passing God's truth on to our children is commendable and indeed it is commanded, but doing so is not easy in this day and age. All around us, as part of the zeitgeist, as part of the spirit of the age that is around us, we and our children are under pressure to abandon the old truths as a result of critical thinking.

What are the consequences of critical thinking? What are the results of this determined effort to question everything? I have listed four.

And the first one is that critical thinking distances us from the past. How many in God's church have turned from the truth once for all delivered to the saints to what are often internet-based teachings of someone that they never saw before, never heard of before, to get instruction about the calendar, the correct date for Passover, or whatever issue is of the moment. And this happens all the time, and some of these issues are of decided importance. Like for instance, the Passover.

You see, Mr. Armstrong years ago was our storyteller. He was our hablador. He was the person who recounted and properly interpreted the stories of God's Word. And because of his untiring work by the campfire, as it were, we know who we are. We know our spiritual potential to become gods, because God is reproducing Himself, not just to die and become dust as the godless evolutionists assert. And we know who we are nationally, that is, we

know that we are Israelites. Not just random people who migrated across, you know, westward over the millennia from the steppes of Russia and ended up somehow in the new world. You see, that's a fanciful story of secular historians, and of course it is a lie.

Mr. Armstrong, our storyteller, imparted to us a precious unity, an identity. We know who we are, we know what we can become. But Mr. Armstrong has gone away. And many give little credence to his stories now. And they also have gone away. And such is the fruit of our skepticism of our critical thinking.

Secondly, our habit of critical thinking accustoms us to abandon our belief in the absolute, as a value and as a goal, and to come to the wrong conclusion that truth is relative. What is true for me may not be true for others in our ethnically diverse cosmopolitan civilization. We can fall into what I call the tolerance trap. Everything is okay in our world of civilization. You see, that is the teaching of Babel.

Third, critical thinking leads to lethargy. Take it easy, we hear so often. It is not worth the hassle.

Parents do not make the effort to teach or to discipline, to correct their children because when it comes right down to it, what the children believe, what the child believes may be just as right as what the parent believes. It is all relative. By God's grace, we will all come to the good place eventually. God will accept us all as we are.

And fourth, finally, and I think really this is the most important consequence, by abandoning the traditions that make us a united, peculiar people, we ultimately lose contact with one another. We relinquish the beliefs that connect us, that bind us as a unique people. We drift apart, no longer a people. Critical thinking destroys relationships. It alienates us from one another. This has happened in this very room, brethren, in just the past few months. People with whom we had relationships simply disappeared. They were gone.

Critical thinking brings with it a whole galaxy of evils, does it not? Relativism. Cynicism. Lethargy. Isolation. We become loners and it is all part of the defining characteristics of modern Israel.

Please turn to Jeremiah. And here God through Jeremiah speaks of the value of the old, the traditional ways. Jeremiah 6, I am just going to read 16.

Jeremiah 6:16 Thus says the [Eternal]: "Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; that you may find rest for your souls."

Forsaking the old paths of God, leads for 1) nothing but to, as Daniel said, run to and fro, alone, all by ourselves, casting around, trying to find something of substance, something real in the ever-changing vortex of relativism. Jeremiah's words are echoed by the apostles. Now I will not ask you to turn to II Timothy 1:13, but there the apostle says,

II Timothy 1:13 Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.

And just a few pages away in II Thessalonians 2:15, Paul, the same apostle here, admonishes us to

II Thessalonians 2:15 Stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.

God's traditions are great. Do not forsake them.

In the late 1970s, there was a miniseries based on a book by James Michener. It was called *Centennial*. And one of the themes of the story, especially as Michener treats with the Native American culture, was the importance of the past. Of ensuring that a thorough understanding or knowledge of that past was transmitted to the upcoming generation, to the children.

Tradition, you see, was all important, very important to these people. And so the Indians told stories about past acts of bravery which saved the tribe from extinction. There was a story for everything: why birds fly, why a person bears the name that he carries. And in the first episode we learned the story behind the name of one young woman. Her name was Clay Basket.

Clay Basket has some reservations about the value of all these stories. She tires of hearing them. She appears bored when her aging mother and father recount the stories, but the stories are of vital importance to the parents. And after the death of her father, Clay Basket's dying mother admonishes her questioning, unconvinced daughter to, and I quote, "Remember all the stories." She says to remember them and to tell them to her children, and she says that way they will know who they are. And brethren, that is absolutely important.

God has raised up habladores as our storytellers. Mr. Armstrong in the past and the true ministry today. Through these people, God has taught, and He continues to teach us who we are and what we are. And their stories teach us of our peculiar identity. They connect us with one another. They build relationships.

These are the stories, brethren, of the gospel of God, and their author is God. It is vital that we never come to the point that we regard these stories as myths, as mere oddities that we once naively believed. And some have come to look at the truth once delivered through the eyes of a critical thinker and have been led to desert it.

Likewise, it is absolutely imperative that we teach these stories to our children, not just stories about the acts of David and Moses for young children. That is important too, of course. But that we teach them the morals of these stories, what example they hold for human beings, beings who are built in the image of God. The potential to become gods. Furthermore, the stories of the Amazon's Machiguenga or of Clay Basket were man's stories. They were myths. They were legends embellished over the years of their time. They were fantasies and nothing more than fantasies.

Let none of us ever forget, brethren, that the stories we have come to know through Mr. Armstrong are absolutely true, confirmed and verified by the eternal Creator God who cannot lie. The spirit of this age ttempts us to think critically of God's stories in the hopes that we will dump them. Let us never become isolated from one another and from God by rejecting God's stories of salvation.