

Adjacent Opportunities: The Failure of Simple Answers

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John Stewart recently ran a series of clips on the Daily Show about pressing social issues plaguing the US: the BP oil disaster, the continuing Health Care debate, and Immigration reform. In each segment, the problem was presented and then there was a cut to a response from President Obama saying, “The oil spill is a complicated issue” “Health Care is complicated issue,” “Immigration is a complicated issue.” John Stewart was decrying this perspective because he saw it as evidence that things weren’t getting done fast enough or simply enough to satisfy the problem. Make it simple, he implored.

Unfortunately, it’s not simple. As Mike Simmons, the founding vice-president of education at the Santa Fe Institute used to proclaim, “like it or not, the world is complex.” In our ever expanding network of communication streams, in our reaching out with those streams to the broadest possible audiences, we have sacrificed our ability to abide the complex. In doing so, we have diluted our messages and with them our capability to address difficult solutions, because the answers we seek are supposed to be simple enough so the most simple among us can understand it. What this approach produces are increasingly complex failures.

The economic meltdown perpetrated by the financial industry and the simple answers governmental responders and regulators alike required that seeded “greed gone wild” produced a monumental collapse. The complexity of the financial schemes was hidden by our willingness to seek simple answers and not delve into the complexity because it seemed/seems so daunting and arcane.

What happens when you press someone who is not used to thinking beyond his or her television remote choices? You often get exasperated anger, because any idea that they can’t answer simply is viewed as an affront to their intelligence and they respond emotion-

ally as if personally attacked. Politicians reduce and reduce ideas to the point of utter simplicity as a means of scaring the living bejesus out of anyone who is unable to understand the complexity of an issue, and see what has emerged from the chain of events, let alone look for what might emerge if other interactions are instituted that could create a more complex solution.

The issue is that the complexity we encounter is often masked by a veneer of simplicity. Take a trip on a plane from New York to Los Angeles, for example. You make a reservation, print out a boarding pass and get on the plane, stow your bag and sit back for six hours until you arrive and get off the plane. Simple, right? Unfortunately, not so much. The complexity has dropped away from our perception—the people involved in the logistics of reservations and reservation software and reservation control and security lists, and special needs and airport transfers and beverage preparation and food distribution and jet plane technology support and airport jetway support and check-in issues and travel classes and priority seating arrangements, and airport security, and we haven’t even touched on the complexity of the aircraft itself and its complication of parts and pieces and charges, with which humans must continually interface to make sure they are operating properly, and the string of air traffic control sites and jet lanes and monitoring that takes place to get that plane from sea to shining sea. But I don’t want or need to see all that complexity. Just let me get on the plane and get as comfortable as possible with as little stress as possible so I can get where I want to go.

The failures we experience when we employ the “keep it simple” philosophy are ultimately failures of our laziness in thinking, and they are not relegated to any one area we might encounter. This is not to imply that deep thinking is the only answer for every issue, either. I’m sure we’ve all been to enough aca-

demic conferences where the minutia of minutia was debated ad nauseum to no apparent relevance. And as my step-father pointed out to me in our discussion of these ideas, the artist David Hockney said, “Surface is an illusion, but so is depth”. Of course, Hockney was talking about painting in which *everything* is an illusion. The failure of simple answers starts with our obsessive search for the easiest, quickest, ‘shoot from the hip/fire then aim’ choices and decisions. Contemplation and consideration is a waste of time. And time, after all, is money. Here are two very different examples.

Bob Pratt, the president of Volunteers of America (Los Angeles) for the last three dozen years, and one of the most inquisitive and brilliant minds still operating in the charitable world, today (he is a regular reader of *E:CO*—which says something about his leanings), has also not been immune to the trap of what appears as a simple solution. One of the most complex issues facing the neediest in our midst is the idea of micro-enterprise and micro-finance. Now there are few who know me who don’t know I am an ardent and fervent supporter of these micro-excursions into the world of business creation. When Mohammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank emerged on our doorstep with the seemingly obvious idea of loaning small sums of money to poor people to help them start businesses—micro-finance—its *seeming* simplicity caught Pratt and VOALA’s attention. At its inception in the United States, there was such untested enthusiasm for micro-finance that Pratt, infected with the virus, gave his go ahead to a program that ultimately created 30 businesses. Unfortunately, VOALA accepted the assumptions that what worked in Bangladesh would translate to North Hollywood without challenging any of the premises. When issues arose after various rounds of funding and repayments were being regularly missed, Pratt closed the program down. It wasn’t a condemnation of micro-finance, but of his belief in what he thought was a simple answer that simply wasn’t.

As he explained it, “Our brain is a linear processor living in a non-linear world (no wonder everything important is unknown and unknowable!). It yearns for simple questions

with simple answers. Whenever it settles for simplicity, the law of unintended consequences is triggered, which invariably guarantees unpleasant results.” It should be noted, that though no data existed, Pratt was fairly certain that the majority of the 30 businesses launched were probably still in business. The program itself failed (repayment) because what appeared to be a simple solution required a level of complex interaction which hadn’t been considered.

The failure of simple answers within the social action realms is well documented. It doesn’t take much to dispel that in the philanthropic giving and charity arena the simple answer of throwing money at a problem has ultimately failed to solve any of the seemingly intransigent issues that money supports—and in some cases it may even have kept them from getting better. But simple answers don’t only fail within our social programs. It takes place at every level of decision making. Take tax solutions. When Californians passed Proposition 13 in the late 1970s, it was a simple solution to ease property tax burdens. The consequence of which, however, is that California’s school system, that benefited from those tax revenues, began a precipitous plummet from its rising pre-eminence, triggered by the proposition’s passage. It had ranked 7th nationally in its educated workforce in the 70s, only to become a shamble of mediocrity, crashing to its current status of 50th in the number of students who complete high school. The simple solution may have solved the immediate tax issue and made housing more affordable, but the long term outcome is that the thoughtful education of our young people that propelled California’s growth and prosperity was undermined by the simple solution of Prop 13 which then fueled a whole raft of other simple “fixes” to solve the short-fall. When this was combined with increased population, immigration and a host of other new factors, the consequences far exceeded the immediate and simple benefit. Today, California finds itself in a perpetual state of collapse and decline ever since Prop 13 was approved by the voters.

How do we avoid the desire for simple answers? As one rather astute and brave pundit noted, “We have to stop listening to the village

idiots” (the Glen Becks and Ralph Reeds) especially when it comes to addressing the complex issues the world faces. We have proudly created a global community, thinking that local answers should be universal and solve global problems. Watch a 24-hour cycle of news and you can see how well we’re doing with that kind of thinking. Why do we suffer under globalization? Because we thought it would be a simple solution to sustaining local economies and we did it without truly understanding the complexity underlying such an effort. We cannot solve complex issues by diluting difficult answers in order to gain the support of a simple-minded electorate who’s poll numbers provide approval for these choices. I am not advocating paternalism or a philosopher king, but rather a recognition and awareness that when we fear the complex and search for the simplest answer, we activate a set of unintended consequences which will invariably guarantee the failure of the solution.

How’s that workin’ for ya, Palinoids?