

**Rules, Tools, and Fools:
Those Who are Aware, Repair the World**

by Maury Seldin *

"Be all you can be," is the slogan that led the U.S. military renaissance of the last quarter century. The appeal to recruits was predicated on their own development rather than responding to a societal need.

The 9/11 disaster called forth a communal response demonstrating self sacrifice for fellow Americans. That response will forever stand as a credit to our nation.

What are these rules that we, as Americans, live by? And how do we resolve the apparent contradiction of self-interest and communal interest?

Alex Tocqueville gave us a clue in the 19th century when he identified the American perspective of the relationship between self-interest and communal interest. That clue was, as quoted in the article, "The Age In Which We Live" published in Supplement to the ASI News of Spring 1999 "...[the legislators] thought that it would be well to infuse political life into each portion of the territory in order to multiply to an infinite extent opportunities of acting in concert for all the members of the community and to make them constantly feel their mutual dependence. The plan was a wise one." [Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835 as edited by Bradley, Phillips Democracy in America, New York, Vintage Classics, 1945, p. 103] In short, Americans used local institutions to get participation based on recognition of mutual dependence.

Robert Bellah and his co-authors gave us a clue as to our habits of the heart associated with our civil religion in their book, Habits of the Heart. These are based on values rooted in our Judeo-Christian heritage, not the least of which are truth and justice. They wrote, "there was a common set of religious and moral understandings rooted in a conception of divine order under a Christian, or at least a deist, God. The basic moral norms that were seen as deriving from that divine order were liberty, justice, and charity, understood in a context of theological and moral discourse which led to a concept of personal virtue as the essential basis of a good society." [Robert N. Bellah, 1975] The quote is from the preface. As quoted in the ASI News article.

But, the clue most relevant to this essay is by from Leo Tolstoy in his The Death of Ivan Ilyich. Ivan Ilyich was a magistrate who administered justice. As a judge, it was his job, and he did it with all fairness. But, he did not pursue justice as a mission in life, nor, according to my reading of the story, did he pursue any mission in his life other than fitting in to his society with the accompanying accoutrements appropriate to his vision of status.

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According to my reading, Ivan Ilyich questions his choices as he is dying. He questions whether the life he lived was the "real thing." A key quote is "Perhaps I did not live as I should have, but how could that be when I did everything one is supposed to do?" It is true that he lived by the rules of his society that governed the relationship of the individual to society. But, it appears that his value system left him without a societal purpose. As a magistrate, he did his job with justice, but it was his job, not his mission in life. It appears that he had no mission in life, and that the only personal relationship that was really close was perhaps revealed only at the end with the concern, understanding and pity his young son, a boy named Vasya, felt for him.

In a sense, people pursuing their own enlightened self-interest are tools of society. And, that works reasonably well when compared to alternative systems, as long as one abides by the rules. Greed, as it appears in the sales tax case against the former chairman of Tyco, is a problem. Furthermore, in other cases, market achieved wealth that is used to corrupt the political system is a serious problem for the operation of society. But, it is a lesser evil to society than the alternative system, as described by Bernard Lewis in his book, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact & Middle Eastern Response*, in which political power is seized and the markets are corrupted.

There are many ways to corrupt markets, and some are legal. Consider the New York Time story of July 28, 2002, in which Lynnley Browning writes, "Venture capitalists are offering the companies they bankroll increasingly hard knuckled deals that lead little wealth for a start-up's managers or original backers. The moves are leading some entrepreneurs to, desperate for money, to decry today's investors as bullies." Consider what that may do to innovation.

Our democratic system, built on the ideals of a free society, has its flaws. Efforts to improve the systems operations are an ongoing mission of many, and a widely held responsibility. Those who undermine the system may be thought of as fools. Fools in the sense that they use the freedoms they enjoy to destroy the system that enables them to have their freedoms.

The system enables individuals to do well, and playing by the rules supports the system. We use a system of law to restrain those who corrupt the rules and that would lead to a destruction of the justice of our society. And lately, there has been a great show of disdain in our society, including the very public arrests of some executives, as for example that of the former chief executive of Adelphia Communications.

Our mechanisms operate better at the national and local levels than do the mechanisms of the international body politic. That is so because not all participants in the international scene respect the rights of free societies. There are those who would destroy us and our way of life. Thus, there are severe limits to the trust we can reasonably place in an international structure to do justice.

Under these circumstances, we can rely on world organizations only within severe limits, but we seek coalitions. Although, ultimately we must be prepared to do what we must, even if alone, to defend ourselves.

As Americans, we see a purpose in life that includes the preservation of a free society. We respect the rights of other nations to pursue their own values, and rely on a plurality concept to preserve a delicate balance when our way of life is not threatened.

In this consensus vision we rely on rule of law and value systems in which individuals may pursue their own personal visions, if they have them. They may focus their lives as they wish, if they choose to focus. Some have little apparent focus to their lives, but that is their choice.

Many Americans, however, have a mission to work towards repairing the system. It gives a purpose in life and a focus for efforts. The scale need not be at the national or even local governmental level. The scale may be at the community level and in organizational structures not related to mandatory membership. Voluntary associations are critical vehicles for societal progress, with or without governmental involvement.

An effort to repair the system, at whatever scale, is sufficient for a purpose in life. Ivan Ilyich did not have it.

A mission to make things better does not have to be at communal scale in order to be a purpose in life. The family scale is a noble enough for a full life for some people. It is enough for the "real thing." Indeed, it is the focus of a substantial portion of our population, and has worked well in our society. Furthermore, the erosion of the family as an institution in our society has had unintended and unwanted consequences.

One of my professional colleagues takes the position that he has all the analytical tools for his professional endeavors, and like Ivan Ilyich, lives by the rules, especially in academia for rank and tenure. But he shows no sign of mission to improve the quality of real estate decision making. Nor does it seem that he seeks out relevance as a guide to his efforts in the selection of research. He does publishable research without apparent concern for relevance. By contrast, there are those who find a life's purpose in their professional work with attitudes and choices intended to make a difference. For them, it is not just a job or a ladder climbing vision.

Then, there are those who choose to make a difference through their communal work as volunteers. The joy of a one-on-one help may be as great as the joy of helping a multitude. Helping one person is helping the world. It is the real thing.

And for others, the real thing is the family. The nurture of the next generation and the others that are impacted may be a magnification, a leverage, similar to that of a teacher who inspires other teachers to inspire. These are certainly among the ways of making a difference, and none are mutually exclusive.

Those who are aware work to repair the world. They find meaning in life, and by giving the most, they get the most. It is the real thing, and if Ivan Ilyich missed the real thing, perhaps it was because he did not know that it existed until, on his death bed, he by happenstance placed his hand on his son's head. And his son kissed his hand.