

Danville News Column
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“Our Cherished Beliefs”
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The older I get, the less I know.

Whatever happened to those days when all controversial issues were black and white? Right and wrong so clear cut? Good guys versus bad guys? When the world was divided between good and evil? It was easier when I attended seminary and had all the right opinions.

Isn't it great when others know what's right for everyone else? God bless the certain who deign to walk among us. Our newest fundamentalists can be found not just on the far right but as dogmatically among those on the far left who remain convinced they know what is good for us and insist on passing rules and regulations to make sure we toe the correct line. These modern fundamentalists, I read, have descended with a new list of 'Thou Shalts' and 'Thou Shalt Nots.'

When I wandered around San Francisco the other year, that was when city government passed the law banning Happy Meals because the toy inside the box supposedly promoted evil eating habits. Here they are banning Happy Meals, meanwhile when I walked through the Castro and Mission every other store was a sex shop.

Love hypocrisy wherever it rears itself. We can grow tired of those wingnuts shouting from both extremes.

Maybe it's okay not to have to have an authoritative opinion on every issue. The older I get, the more I shrug.

Fortunately, I've slowly learnt (quoting James Madison) how the bigger fools equate “differences of opinion with differences of principle.” That you may disagree with someone doesn't mean that they, because they disagree with you, are either wrong, evil, or lack integrity.

Recently I read in the Christian Century Magazine about Christopher Hitchens, dead from throat cancer. Hitchens gained renown as the pope of atheism. One day he was contracted to review a book written by a writer who absolutely trashed one of his books. Time for revenge! But he read this book written by his nemesis and found it brilliant. He knew he had to say so. Despite personal feelings, he had an obligation to the truth.

Hmm. Maybe Hitchens did believe in something divine.

When a boy, I loved dinosaurs. Dinosaur books. Dinosaur toys. Dinosaur pajamas. (I had rocketship jamies too). I use to take my dinosaurs to first grade in my lunch bag to

play with them. Triceratops goring Brontosaurus. Tyrannosaurus attacking Stegosaurus, Stego's tail swinging those fearsome spikes. Grrr. Roar.

Except.

What might make for childish play or King Kong movie melodrama fails good history.

Stegosaurus and T-Rex never fought each other. The Jurassic dinosaur Stegosaurus already had been extinct for approximately 80 million years before the appearance of the Cretaceous dinosaur Tyrannosaurus.

They never met. Similar to those movies or book illustrations showing humans and dinosaurs hanging around together. History isn't the Flintstones.

These balloons of certainty get popped a lot.

Why does growing up so often mean having to discard cherished presumptions?

Facts are stubborn things, to now quote John Adams. Truth is even stubborn. When I was writing my Civil War novel – a story based on the spiritual growth of a young scholar Nathaniel who thought he had all the right answers and all this business of God packed up in a tidy little pious package – I was forced to rewrite several scenes. It seems back in the Civil War they didn't use the word 'infection.' They had no idea about infection. Thought it was the vapors or blood poisoning.

How many other examples can we come up with us having to discard cherished beliefs?

In medicine? They really did once argue how tobacco was healthy for your lungs.

In exegesis? Sure, Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, right?

In politics? All T-Party people are ignorant NASCAR red necks and all Occupy Wall Street people are unwashed socialists.

In life? Sure, life is fair and you get what you deserve.

Growing up can be a real bummer. The best of us refuse to close doors or limit possibilities or crush potential. The best move from conformity to transformation. The best let go of what they are convinced to be true to encounter truth, letting go of dogmatism to discover personal faith, letting go regurgitated opinion to become wise.

Funny (and disturbing) to discover how my Jesus never viewed anyone as evil.

But, I wonder, is it really discarding our beliefs? Or is it putting them down like a box at our feet so we can step up and reach higher?