

## **Drinking the Kool Aid**

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This isn't a sermon about Jonestown, or cults, at all, really. But let's start there, given the title I chose.

More than thirty years ago, in late autumn 1978, more than nine hundred adults, children and infants died at the Jonestown Peoples Temple in Guyana, having drunk or been fed kool-aid laced with poison. The adults seem mostly to have swallowed the poison knowingly and willingly, and administered it to their children in the same fashion. As the horror of those 900 suicides/homicides faded along with the news cycle, the phrase "drinking the kool-aid" became shorthand for blind faith, gullible acquiescence, and even general, everyday belief in any system or organization or religion.

I have come to despise the phrase.

My issue with the casual, mean-spirited utterance of the phrase is at least two-fold. It's hard to know which is the more significant complaint. There is the obvious one--that to label any behavior other than messianic-driven suicide by poison-laced kool-aid "drinking the kool-aid" makes light of a tragic event and disrespects the memories of those who died. And there is the other obvious complaint--that the phrase is never, to my knowledge, used in a positive sense. It always connotes that the speaker is wiser, more savvy, more discerning and less susceptible to having the wool pulled over her eyes than is the one at whom it is directed. And in turn that the one at whom it is directed is naive, incapable of sound judgment or independent thought that differs from the speaker's.

She's a Democrat; she's keeps drinking the kool-aid of the Obama administration. He's a loyal Republican; he swallowed the Weapons of Mass Destruction kool-aid and keeps on swallowing. She goes to temple. He's an ardent atheist. Each of them drinks the kool-aid of their respective value systems. Pro-choice? Anti-choice? Drinkers of kool-aid. Pentecostal? Catholic? Socialist? kool-aid. Evolution? Creationism? kool-aid.

As much as I dislike "drinking the kool-aid", this sermon is more than an indictment of that particular phrase because I know it is but a symptom of something larger. I don't have that something larger all figured out or wrapped up in a label, but I know it's happening. I see signs of it everywhere:

Almost daily on the op-ed pages, though perhaps that is the role of op-ed pages;  
In a mail order company catalogue offering a wall sign emblazoned with the letters  
DILLIGARA--which in case you don't know (I didn't) stand for "do I look like I give a rat's  
\*\*\*\*);  
on bumper-stickers and t-shirts too numerous to mention with equally in-your-face, I-  
want-everyone-to-know-my-opinion-especially-if-it's-a-strong-and-offensive-one  
messages  
on political ads this campaign season (and campaign seasons past);  
on talk radio, on billboards advertising talk radio, on cable interview shows;  
and dozens of other places.

As Americans we seem to have decided collectively that at the top of the list of values  
we hold common is a refusal to allow any difference of opinion, belief, practice or life-  
style to exist without comment, and furthermore, that such comment must be delivered  
in the most mean-spirited way possible. And yet, while we may agree on the necessity  
for constant mean-spirited indictment of faith in anything other than our right to free  
speech, consequences be damned, we are far from agreement on what faith, belief,  
practice or behavior exactly constitutes "drinking the kool-aid."

Which, for example, were "drinking the kool-aid"? Glenn Beck's supporters at one end  
of the Mall or those gathered to listen to Al Sharpton on the other end?

Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who is usually held up as a celebration of the ideal  
embodied in its most memorable line: a person's a person no matter how small. What  
strikes me about the story this morning, however, is that Horton was right. Common  
wisdom, jungle bullies, popular opinion, and the voice of community mores all insisted  
that Horton had drunk some kool-aid. But he was right. Oh, he was self-actualized, and  
noble, and committed to the inherent worth and dignity of every person (no matter how  
small), but more basic than all that, he was the only one in touch with actually reality.  
There was a tiny world on that clover and there were tiny voice speaking to him.

Outside the pages of Dr. Seuss more often than not we must take life on faith.  
Sometimes history proves to be the only judge of the wisdom of one school of thought  
or course of action and the folly of another. And sometimes there is no definite judge of  
such matters ever. So, it would seem, to rudely dismiss another's faith or practice as  
unthinking obedience, is an exercise not only in futility but also arrogance.

At this point I need to tell you a story. Many years ago, as a young adult, I sat on a bus  
for several hours next to a young woman slightly older than I. We introduced ourselves  
soon after boarding the bus and then each turned to our respective books and didn't

exchange another word. The woman was a white South African. Over and over again I kept saying to myself, “she’s the devil incarnate. she’s a white South African.”

I can scarcely enumerate the number of flaws and prejudices in my thinking. For example, one of my dad’s Scottish cousins emigrated to South Africa decades ago and his children, my unknown second cousins are white South Africans. Nelson Mandela had been elected President the year before and apartheid had been weakening for several years before that. This woman, my seat neighbor, was far too young to have been in power during those many decades of systemic oppression. But the biggest flaw, the harshest indictment of my own prejudices, was that I didn’t know her, this one individual. Other than that she was on a Greyhound-type bus, traveling from Aberdeen Scotland to London England, I knew nothing of her story. Who her parents were. What her economic and educational situation was. Who were her friends and lovers.

And to my undying regret, I didn’t ask, either. Not a single question. It was a long miserable bus ride--delayed by summer road construction, detours, and an extended stop in Glasgow while the police boarded to remove an unruly passenger. Simple conversation could have shortened the hours, And just think what I could have learned, what each of us could have learned, about the other and about ourselves, if I had been brave enough to ask and she had been brave enough to answer.

A part of me was genuinely reluctant to make this woman feel bad or guilty or unashamed by even acknowledging her nationality in that immediate aftermath of apartheid. I didn’t want her to think I was judging her unfairly based solely on her nationality. Yet of course that is exactly what I did, with my internal mantra and my unasked questions.

I tell this story to reassure you that I am preaching from neither a position of great wisdom or great innocence. We’re in this together, and we’ve been in it together for a very long time.

There exists in some historical archive a list of Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour In Company and Conversation transcribed by George Washington as a young teenager. They number 110 and include such pearls as:

Rince not your Mouth in the Presence of Others  
When in Company, put not your Hands to any Part of the Body, not usualy Discovered.  
In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet.

If You Cough, Sneeze, Sigh, or Yawn, do it not Loud but Privately; and Speak not in your Yawning, but put Your handkercheif or Hand before your face and turn aside. Sleep not when others Speak, Sit not when others stand, Speak not when you Should hold your Peace, walk not on when others Stop.

Put not off your Cloths in the presence of Others, nor go out your Chamber half Drest. At Play and at Fire its Good manners to Give Place to the last Commer, and affect not to Speak Louder than Ordinary.

Spit not in the Fire, nor Stoop low before it neither Put your Hands into the Flames to warm them, nor Set your Feet upon the Fire especially if there be meat before it.

Some quaint. Some bizarre. Some we might wish modern society would revive as basic good manners.

The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company that interest me here this morning, however, are of a different vein.

Let your Countenance be pleasant but in Serious Matters Somewhat grave.

The Gestures of the Body must be Suited to the discourse you are upon.

Reproach none for the Infirmities of Nature, nor Delight to Put them that have in mind thereof.

Shew not yourself glad at the Misfortune of another though he were your enemy.

When you see a Crime punished, you may be inwardly Pleased; but always shew Pity to the Suffering Offender.

Do not laugh too loud or too much at any Publick Spectacle.

Superfluous Complements and all Affectation of Ceremonie are to be avoided, yet where due they are not to be Neglected.

So, we can deduce, even in the 18th century American colonists had cause to remind one another and themselves that life in society called for common courtesy and restraint of one's baser instincts. But the problem of judging oneself to superior to another, accusing the other of wearing blinders and then dismissing her because it, is much older than George Washington. As old at least as the first century of the common era when Jesus warned of trying to remove the speck from your neighbor's eye while ignoring the log in your own. But I suspect it is older still. As old as the first group of humans who gathered in community and as old as the first dissenter from popular opinion.

As the editorialist writes, all of us getting along or giving peace a chance might be a tall order at the present moment. But, as I learned on that bus from Aberdeen to London, just keeping our labels and our judgments unspoken is too little to demand of ourselves. Kathleen Parker suggests being considerate; tending your garden; minding your own business; lending a hand; keeping your clothes on and your hands to yourself; honoring

your family and your country; not airing your dirty laundry or vocabulary in public. These are sound suggestions. I'd add another. Simpler and more complex both: get to know someone. The new kid in the class. The proprietor of the ethnic restaurant. The guy on the bus in the turban. How is the turban a symbol of his faith? The woman strolling her baby in her hijab. What is it like to wear a garment that may be precious to her but that inspires confusion and derision in so many casual observers? The blond South African woman in the next seat. How is life in South Africa these days? What sense does she make, if any, of her country's past? The neighbor down the street raking his lawn in the t-shirt with the slogan that turns your stomach. The co-worker with the offensive (to you) bumper-sticker. What is at the root of their anger? Do the slogans help?

Getting to know someone, someone with AIDS, someone of a different faith, someone from a different culture, getting to know someone is the only dependable way banishing prejudice and misconception, fear and arrogance. That's why those in power, those with something to gain from prejudice, misconception, fear and arrogance work so hard to keep people apart with physical and legal barriers. They understand that once strangers, even enemies, get to know one another all sorts of emotional and psychological barrier fall away and great life-enhancing possibilities spring up.

The poet Muriel Rukeyser captures this facet of the human experience beautifully in her poem St. Roach.

For that I never knew you, I only learned to dread you,  
for that I never touched you, they told me you are filth,  
they showed me by every action to despise your kind;  
for that I saw my people making war on you,  
I could not tell you apart, one from another,  
for that in childhood I lived in places clear of you,  
for that all the people I knew met you by  
crushing you, stamping you to death, they poured boiling  
water on you, they flushed you down,  
for that I could not tell one from another  
only that you were dark, fast on your feet, and slender.

Not like me.

For that I did not know your poems  
And that I do not know any of your sayings  
And that I cannot speak or read your language  
And that I do not sing your songs  
And that I do not teach our children

to eat your food  
or know your poems  
or sing your songs

But that we say you are filthing our food

But that we know you not at all.

Yesterday I looked at one of you for the first time.

You were lighter than the others in color, that was  
neither good nor bad.

I was really looking for the first time.

You seemed troubled and witty.

Today I touched one of you for the first time.

You were startled, you ran, you fled away

Fast as a dancer, light, strange and lovely to the touch.

I reach, I touch, I begin to know you.

We've drunk enough kool-aid, all of us. Even when it is not laced with poison it is only colored sugar water--no substance, no nutrition. May we learn instead to know one another, to know the stranger, to know ourselves. Amen.