Why Cultures Survive, Natural Rights and Liberty

Well, I think there’s lots to be thankful for living in America and I’ll try to explain it in this very brief historical- developmental piece. Let’s start with defining culture as a shared system of symbolic knowledge where behavior is patterned from speech (language) and where predictable behavior patterns are established to nurture cultural stability (a fancy way of saying getting along with each other), in the form of cultural codes for social life, role expectations and social norms all for the purpose of creating predictability and survivability of the culture. Culture emerges because a people want to survive and live together on cooperative terms.

How about we call culture a social glue for now. The goal of social organization and cooperative behavior is to reduce the incidence of unpredictability in behavior of a culture and its people. We can discuss it also in terms of reducing uncertainty in behavior of a people which reduces chaos/anomie (social disorganization). Culture also creates social expectations among a group of people. Rules, social norms and values surface to increase conformity and unity. Culture is as a social bond that creates consistency in thought and action.

Cultures also evolve—meaning they develop new and more efficient functional methods of survival. It’s an end product of civilizations that have survived for thousands of years. I need to remind you that human beings are the only species that communicate using higher order abstraction and a symbolic language. Remember, cultures survive because most members behave predictably which serves to create a safe environment for people to pursue comfortable living. The use of language or speech communication results in thought, religion, art, science, government and social institutions. For a culture to survive it needs to transmit cultural elements such as social organization, art, play, economic organizations, religion, science, technology,

language and social control.

So, what are the fundamental assumptions of the American culture? Self-governance is one of the assumptions posited early on by the colonists. The colonists were suspicious of the theocracies, monarchies or other forms of rule that threatened the rights of individuals and their liberty. What is liberty? Liberty is freedom from despotic rule. We enjoy religious freedom; meaning we can find G-d in our way and we have political freedom, physical freedom and freedom of speech. Ever wonder why some cultures don’t survive? It’s probably because members of the culture could not transmit culture bound values—they weren’t open to

exploring and interacting with other cultures to examine how other social systems function and bring vitality to their members or they were conquered by other cultures.

Historically our culture’s roots began with the colonist’s focus on liberty. The early colonists agreed that self- governance was a cultural value that resulted in the writing of the constitution and Declaration of

Independence. The Civil War reflected a pivotal period in our history and culture because it represented a war about individual rights. Essentially, our country was divided around the issue of slavery and natural rights.

What is the one core value of American culture? It is natural right and the shared belief that everyone belongs. On the flip side, the pursuit of happiness through self-reliance and the belief that one should pursue his/her own destiny can lead one to be emotionally detached from his/her social institutions. A few authors label this phenomenon as a culture of narcissism or preoccupation with the private self which interferes with our desires to deepen our involvement in the lives of others. The other concern and natural outcome related to our culture’s emphasis on individual rights and achievement is the belief in rugged individualism where one makes it on his/her own.

Do we have a national identity? We must realize that our national identity shifts from time to time depending on changes in the political climate and social conditions. During WWII America was strongly united against the forces of fascism and Nazism. Our national identity was strong and unswerving. Today our national identity can be perceived as fragmented by partisan politics about the war, the differing views about the causes of our social ills and other controversial social problems.