

## **Daring to be Different**

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Looking back on the events of the American Revolution, one may easily conclude that the outcome was inevitable. A distant British government could not have maintained control over a large continent and expanding population. A mighty professional army could not have prevented the creation of an independent United States. The rising strength of American nationalism was bound to prevail. These are our contemporary assumptions. To the men who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the outcome did not look so certain. When they concluded the document with a pledge to each other of their lives, their fortunes and sacred honor, they were expressing a real belief that their rebellion might fail, and that they might suffer the fate of traitors. Yet they took the risk and went to war with an ill equipped, under trained army and no navy to match the British armada. George Washington and his army were almost captured early in the conflict as they fled defeat in Manhattan. Subsequent confrontations were more like hit and run attacks rather than full-scale confrontations with certain results that fill the chronicles of warfare in world history. Victory came more by the decision of the British parliament to end the war and with a great deal of important help from the French navy and king's bank account. Yet the Founding Brothers dared to be different by their undaunted persistence in their cause that was defined and defended by a revolutionary ideology of Republicanism. They sensed the historical significance of the universal vision reflected in that ideology. In today's America, it might appear that being different is our national creed. Our freedom to choose and change our religion, occupations, political affiliations, significant relationships, style of dress, cuisine, entertainment, work out routines, etc. is nearly complete. Diversity flourishes, opinions abound. Who's afraid to do whatever we want, when we want? Isn't it an inalienable right to pursue happiness in my own unique way? That no one is going to tell me what to do is our national battle cry. But how much difference is expressed in this colorful diversity? Is it a difference that counts? Is it a difference born of creative imagination unique to a well-developed individuality? Is it a difference founded in moral purpose and social commitments? Is it a difference sustained by courage and flexible experimentation? Is it a difference that defines and guides us in fulfillment of the duties of a citizen? Since an early visitor to the new American nation, Alexis de Tocqueville, shared his observations in *Democracy in America*, a long list of writers have pointed out the contradictory pressures in American society. Proclamations of individual freedoms reflect our ideological beliefs, but conformity of opinions and values dominate our behavior. Democracy de Tocqueville concluded is not a reliable protector of individual freedom. Numerous incidents of persecution and injustice in American history validate de

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Tocqueville's observations. Getting along and going along are conformities rationalized by talk of being a team player. The intensity of modern media has aggravated these contradictory social pressures. While acting as individuals armed with cell phones, iPods and customized credit cards, we may give the appearance of being different while conforming to strong, persuasive cultural messages. Current survey research reveals that the analysis in the 1950s bestseller, *The Lonely Crowd* is not outdated. Even in dissent our opinions may reflect the *Escape From Freedom* observed by Eric Fromm in the 1930s. Whether the source is repetitive, colorful media ads or small town gossip, the social psychology reflected in election results, consumer buying patterns, TV program ratings, internet surges, diet fads or the latest parenting techniques is not a psychology of daring to be different. So what is a real and meaningful kind of difference? Why is the courage to be different important? Since our minds are so prone to see difference in others and to use such perceptions as a basis for negative comparisons of other people's beliefs and values with our own, it requires special mental effort to appreciate different viewpoints. Can we see the truth as well as the limitations in another point of view? Can we go beyond comparing viewpoints to positively enjoy the opportunity to listen to and learn from others? Can we dare to become more absorbed in understanding other people and other cultures than in defending our own beliefs? Can we distinguish between what others say and how they appear? Can we discover what we share in our expanding global village while recognizing the fundamental difference in the values of others? These are tests of a healthy social psychology, which paradoxically free us from the fetters of our prejudices while nurturing the development of a mature and effective individuality. Discomfort with seeing difference in others and their cultural values inhibits our own mental and moral freedom. Violent reactions to other people's beliefs leave us in a state of constricted isolation. Daring to be different in the way we perceive others and their values enhances our own capacities as an individual and thereby gives us the confidence to break through pressures to conform within our own social group. Such perceptual freedom enables us to participate in the emergence of a world culture. Time and energy will not be wasted in defending stale loyalties to old sources of identity such as the tribe or nation-state. With enthusiasm we can dare to become citizens of the world willing to risk the uncertainty of moral action in a complex world of global interdependence. Thus can we participate in the ". . . emergence of men and women of universal culture, capable of continuous growth in non-violence of mind, generosity of heart and harmony of soul." (Aim # 9) That is daring to be different.

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