



Shades of Gray

The search for truth

I grew up in a black-and-white world. In some cases, literally. Movies, newspapers, magazines, TV, books were all, in my memories, black and white. Newsreels in particular convinced me as a small child that while there was color all around me, the rest of the world was definitely black and white.

But in a more profound way, life was organized and circumscribed by black and white notions, ideas, rules, values, and thinking in general. Things were good or bad, pious or evil, right or wrong. There were few shades of gray. More importantly, our ideas were local, regional, provincial. Our experience with life was local and insular. Things were intended to be as they always had been. It was an orderly life, but intellectually repressive. Education was decidedly vocational. We were a manufacturing society, and even those of us who went to college did so to learn skills.

It was a simpler life, especially looking backwards it seems so. The 20th Century world wars so dominated our thoughts and discourse that we were oblivious to changes all around us, and especially of “change” itself as an engine of societal evolution. With every change something is gained and something lost. Resistance being the handmaiden of progress, conservatism says, “slow down folks, not all change is good, take it slow.” Reactionaries eschew change, long for return to the simple life, the black and white world. John Denver sings, “Country roads, take me home, to the place I belong”, an anthem for the resistance.

I was ripped from the insular world of my upbringing by military service and exposed to people with ideas, experience, and expectations born of other regions and sub-cultures of the country. I was exposed to Mexico and poverty and cultural diversity that over time would challenge the values of my black and white world. Yet I returned to the womb and went to college to become an engineer, still the product of my industrial culture.

The details of my college education are not important to my theme. Suffice to say that I was exposed to a broad range of ideas and concerns that helped me put my life experience in perspective. The most important thing I learned is that most everything in life can be defined in shades of gray, that truth can be relative. Age and decades more of experience have only reinforced that notion for me and I have always been comfortable with the truth of it.

Gene Ziegler, Chandler Arizona, October 2019