

What's Missing?

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Published in the *Benicia Herald* on Sunday, July 29, 2007

Something seems to be missing from our sense of who we are as Americans. When I watched *Sicko*, I found it missing when Michael Moore asked us to think about who we are and how we can allow so many in our country to suffer from lack of healthcare.

I found it missing when I read C. W. Nevius's recent [column](#) in *The San Francisco Chronicle* on the homeless in Golden Gate Park. "Forget the coyotes," Nevius writes. "Do you really think your biggest concern is getting bitten by a wild animal? Frankly, if you are in Golden Gate Park, a far greater danger is that you, or your child, or your pet, will step on a dirty hypodermic needle."

While this may be true, what isn't true is Nevius's conclusion that the homeless problem is really a property problem. "Inevitably when we write a story like this," Nevius continues, "there are complaints that we are unsympathetic to the homeless. But this isn't a homeless issue. This is about a jewel of a public park, more than 1,000 acres of some of the most beautiful terrain in any city anywhere." I find it missing, in other words, when we value beautiful terrain over distressed people.

I found it missing when I mused [last week](#) on the war in Iraq, on our increasingly free-enterprise approach to education, and on the lingering detrimental effects our industrial developments have had and continue to have on our environment.

I even find it missing from our Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights, which is an especially grave problem because these documents are the foundation of our



A Paul Chinn photo from the Nevius article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*

democracy, its initial conditions, you might say, that started us along the path we find ourselves on today.

And the thing I find missing from these documents and many of the solutions that have been proposed to solve our nation's problems -- more family values, more environmentalism, more patriotism, more hard work, more time with our families, more competition, more religion, more profit, more affordable housing, more man-woman marriages, more same-sex rights, more equality, more ten commandments posted more places combined with fewer taxes, fewer tax cheats, fewer immigrants, fewer borders, fewer slackers, fewer corporate franchises, and fewer outsiders, to name just a few -- the thing I find missing from all these is a clear and shared understanding of the ethical tools required for us to successfully address our most complex problems.

Lacking this shared ethical toolkit does not mean, however, that ethics don't play a huge role in our lives or that Americans are unethical. This couldn't be further from the truth. You and most everyone you know are ethical. You treat your families, friends and neighbors ethically. You serve your communities and country by paying taxes, at a minimum, by staying involved in local and national affairs, and by including people, regardless of their race, religion or national origin, in your lives, thoughts and sympathies.

The ethics that we live by as a nation, however, are expressed as a litany of moral prescriptions that are short enough to fit on a bumper but so blunt that they turn every complex issue into a nail in need of hammering.

We believe, for example, that we are endowed with the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but one person's heaven is another's hell. So when we try to live by the golden rule, treating others as we would have them treat us, we get into a shouting match with the guy who's convinced that we should love his loud music as much as he does.

While a tear forms each time we hear John F. Kennedy admonish us to ask not what our country can do for us, but what we can do for our country, we draw the line at universal

conscription, thinking that the other guy's kids should fight our wars. And while we're on the topic of our country, we believe in our hearts that the best April 15 we could ever have would be one on which we would pay zero taxes even though the guy in the park has no home, our cars need roads, and our kids need quality schools.

At least we agree that we should honor our fathers and mothers, though increasingly many of us can't find one or the other or have too many. And we know we shouldn't murder, lie, steal, commit adultery or covet stuff like our neighbor's spouse. But if an alleged terrorist should die in detention without representation, without seeing the evidence against him, it's not so bad. If Scooter Libby lies to a grand jury, he should go free. If we can get something for nothing, we're smart, not thieves.

With adultery there's no disagreement. We know it's a bad thing, except in the case of politicians and celebrities. As long as they apologize and their spouses stand by them, we should cut them some slack. As for coveting, it's generally a bad idea except when it comes to property taxes. I mean, really, did you know that your neighbor who's been in his house forever may be paying next to nothing on account of Prop 13? Just between you and me, I'd give anything to get his tax bill instead of mine.

As I hope you can see, these pithy homilies tend to stop discussion, branding us with moral barcodes sorted at debate checkout. And while they are a shared language that we associate with ethics, that we associate with the American ethos, they more often than not muddle our understanding of our most difficult problems. And when we are muddled, our children are muddled, too, which frequently leads to rebellion since adolescents have a keen nose for confusion and hypocrisy.

I see this in many of the students taking my English 1 class at Solano College. They're there to improve their writing, which to them usually means spelling, grammar, sentence construction and essay structure, but many of them don't see the point. Either they've been so beaten down by their lack of success that they have nothing to say, or they've learned to be successful by subscribing so wholeheartedly to our homily culture, which provides them with quick answers to our most complex questions, that they're convinced there's nothing new to be said.

What's missing from these students' writing experiences is the same thing that's missing from our national debate on important issues: the understanding of and ability to use ethical tools in the critical examination of moral dilemmas.

Next week I'll cover in detail what I mean by this.

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