

# AS WE LIVE AND WORK

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## WHAT HAPPENED TO WISDOM?

*May our adversaries make us strong.*

*May our victories make us wise.*

*May our actions make us proud.*

Sarah Palin winks. Joe Biden flashes his pearly white teeth. John McCain gives a knowing look at the audience to convey we're all in this together. Barack Obama repeats his message until he is nearly wrestled to the ground by moderator Tom Brokaw at one of the debates. Welcome to the last few days of the campaign for President, where everything that looks spontaneous and authentic is scripted and choreographed.

In a recent issue of Time magazine, Mike Murphy, senior strategist for John McCain's 2000 Presidential campaign, reveals that there are only 20 basic questions asked during a debate. If the moderator veers beyond those 20, the candidate is coached to steer the answer back to the central campaign message. Or “pivot” back to the 20 answers rehearsed by the candidate.

The debates became theatre, similar to the parodies on Saturday Night Live. In fact, they were not debates at all. They were contrived platform performances. Why is this? Because the Presidential campaign is more about personalities, entertainment, sound bytes, and spin than it is about facts, leadership, and authenticity. It matters less what the candidates say, than

how they say it.

As voters, we are seduced by good speakers, good looks, good sound bytes, and by binary thinking that neatly packages each issue in black and white. “Sympathy and subtlety,” notes Tom Murray of the Hastings Center for Bioethics, “are seasonings rarely applied to political red meat” We fall victim to the marketing message that supports each party's brand: e.g., Democrats will raise taxes, Republicans will lower taxes.

Unfortunately, *wisdom* has not been the focus of the Presidential campaign. Instead, we measure what we *think* is wisdom: repetitive statements, contrived distortions, personal attacks, and reams of statistics. Perhaps the candidates believe avalanching people with statistics makes them appear smarter, more in command, and more experienced. Have you noticed how Presidential candidates and corporate executives tend to debate data when they feel cornered? We need leaders who don't debate numbers, but demonstrate *wisdom* born of critical thinking.

Wisdom is a form of cognitive alchemy that connects disparate data, information and knowledge. By doing so it distills the essence of a problem and comes up with imaginative solutions. A wise President or CEO is the kind of leader that exhibits courage, clarity and good judgment, especially in uncertain times. A leader that treats the electorate as mature people, and doesn't pander to simplistic sound bytes. This is not an election for class president. It is an election during unprecedented times, an election that needs to address the future for all of us.

Those with wisdom use time as a working ally- they know when to hold back, push forward, move sideways, or remain in place. They have the ability to understand and learn from the past. Their solutions are based on the big picture, which doesn't necessarily conform to traditional models. Nor does it depend on the number of degrees a person has grafted onto his or her name. Leaders with wisdom have the uncanny ability to cross disciplinary barriers. They possess a “learned ignorance” - of not feeling the need to have all the answers. They cut through formalities, get to the core of the problem and ask challenging questions. And they can deliver bad news in a way that offers realistic hope and pragmatic solutions.

Wisdom and leadership are inextricably tied. Wise leadership serves the public interest and not narrow egotism. It is driven by our visions of

tomorrow, based on what we learned yesterday. It is the convergence of mind, heart and feet. It is the ability to listen to disparate voices and weigh the tradeoffs before acting. And wise leadership is the one true competitive advantage in business and politics.

The last several weeks of ethical, moral and spiritual darkness have put leaders of financial institutions at center stage. Few of the leaders of the fallen institutions have acknowledged their contribution to the turbulence in financial markets. To boot, many of these people have walked away with stunning packages. That's not leadership. That's abandoning a burning ship, leaving the crew to fend for itself and throwing passengers overboard without a life raft.

When watching the last few days of the campaign, when voting in the election, when working on becoming a wise leader of your own constituents, think about the words of President Dwight D. Eisenhower: "You do not lead by hitting people over the head. That's assault, not leadership."

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