

The answer to the question, “Why do otherwise intelligent people choose to believe this stuff?!” regarding Tea Party propaganda.

Dear friends and patriots,

As many reading this letter are already aware, I’ve been looking to answer this question for several weeks now. Sometimes, as is the case here, I know how I want to answer a question or frame a letter, and yet finding the way to write it best is elusive. It would be easy to just call it writer’s block, but often if I just let it stew for awhile the words suddenly fall into place, and other times an event will happen that perfectly captures the sentiment I’m looking for. The latter happened to me this morning. This letter, by the way, is specifically written to people who would happily call themselves liberals, although I’m guessing conservatives will appreciate it more, which in both cases is the opposite of letters I’ve tended to write recently.

My wife and I live with our children in Clintonville, which is a proudly liberal area of Columbus, Ohio. More on the overly-broad term “liberal” in a few paragraphs, but suffice it to say we have more than a few vegans, a larger than typical proportion of same-sex couples, mostly women, a popular vegetarian farm market and a Unitarian church. I would assume that better than two-thirds of us voted for Obama. We also have an alternative elementary school here which has a lottery only enrollment policy. The education style is less rigid than your typical public school and very participatory on the part of the students. My understanding is that only one in nine or so get in, supposedly based entirely on the luck of the draw, and the students consequently are from all over the city. Meaningful to us is the fact that the parents who send their kids here, going through the lottery system, have to really care about their children’s education. We felt very fortunate when our son received one of the open spots.

So this morning I dropped my son off, and coming back through the parking lot there was a woman dropping off her two daughters. She had a somewhat downtrodden, haggardly appearance, her clothing, her hair, her face, the whole package, a hard expression that held just a hint of embarrassment, and there was a lit cigarette hanging out of her mouth. The seatcovers on her small, long-driven, poor-person’s car had pictures that appeared to be serpent heads, or devils. I was not offended in the least, but she did draw my attention, if only for the fact that she looked so out of place. What did offend me was the two women who passed by and glanced at her in the ten-or-so seconds she was in my view. You could say the two women who expressed their disapproval with stares were well to do. That doesn’t mean to suggest that they were wealthy, but they looked well taken care of in a liberal, suburban woman kind of way, and if you’d seen the contrast between all of them with your own eyes, you probably wouldn’t fault me for drawing the conclusion that the lives of the two staring were a hell of a lot easier than the poor one. I’d go further and suggest that the lives they would return to later that evening were a lot easier and more carefree than the home and the life that the poor woman goes home to every night. In fairness, one of the two was merely staring disdainfully, but the other practically sneered at her, and it hurt me to see it.

It reminded me of a story from the Bible. In the story related by Jesus wealthy people at the temple are tossing their coins in the offering and delighting in the jingling sound, verifying to the

crowd how much they've given. Among them a poor widow, in quiet shame, throws in two pennies and then moves on. Jesus tells his followers that her gift is the greater, because while they have given of their abundance, she has given all that she has. While the circumstances with the poor woman today weren't precisely the same, it got me thinking how, while the woman was unkept and dirty, her two daughters were clean, their hair was done well, and they were appropriately dressed. While many similar mothers would simply let their children get on the bus and go to whatever neighborhood school they were assigned, this woman was getting up and taking her girls, pretty girls, to a school that she had sought for them because she cared about their education. These two children were her two pennies, and the two well to do women were sneering and glaring at her for smoking in a school parking lot, as if this should be among the biggest of her concerns. It's really kind of heartbreaking if you think about it. And while the poor "white trash" woman was unusual, the women staring at her disdainfully were merely typical. They were simply acting as women like them have been programmed to act. And this is not written so much to defend the woman's right to smoke in a school parking lot as to point out that the other women had no business, no right, to be glaring at her in this manner. There was absolutely no love in it, and this level of hostility in the U.S.A. is the norm, not only accepted but openly encouraged.

The purpose of this letter is to address the question, "Why do otherwise intelligent people believe this stuff?," and since the answer is very much a question of perception, I have a simplified example of what people perceive. While these are loaded terms, we have a picture in our minds of conservative guy and liberal guy, and sometimes an overly simplified example provides the best illustration. On one hand we have a guy driving a big SUV, or an oversized pickup truck, and he hammers down the highway, and when he gets behind another driver he gets to within two or three feet of the car in front of him to intimidate the other guy to get out of the way. Most people who have experienced this might be able to instantly envision the scenario, and the knee-jerk reaction is, "I hate that guy." Conversely, you have another guy who drives a small, economically responsible car, in the fast lane going 55 miles per hour in a 65 mile per hour speed zone, and he refuses to get over. When you manage to pass him on the inside lane and look over, he gives you this bland "you should be driving slower" look. Most drivers have experienced this as well, and the first-blush reaction is the same: I hate that guy. While only a small fraction of drivers fit either of these two descriptions, it is easy for people of average sensibilities to discern which is "hard-core conservative guy" and which is "ultra-liberal guy", and it demonstrates well enough how the extreme opposite of an A-hole is typically a different kind of A-hole.

I have some related stories more personal to my life starring "ultra-liberal guy". About six years ago we were watching some close friends of ours' dog, and, unbeknownst to me, it escaped from our front porch on my way to work. Upon arriving home from work I discovered it was gone, and I was absolutely panicked. Maybe an hour later I'm riding my bike around the neighborhood putting up fliers, and, while trying to hold fliers and a staple gun while putting a flier on a telephone pole, my bike slipped out from under me and I ended up on the sidewalk. It was only slightly painful, but genuinely irritating, and gathering myself I see a guy about four driveways up who gestures to me and says something. So I ride my bike over, genuinely inquisitive, and politely ask, "excuse me?" And as he points to his head he says in his sickly-whiney liberal, I-know-better-than-you tone, "Wear a helmet." Now many of you think I'm over reacting, but there are others reading this who understand the hopeless feeling of being a

somewhat-physical guy and desiring to smash someone like that in the face for not minding his own business and attempting to boss me around and then having to simply turn around and walk away filled with anger. And there was no love in his suggestion/command. It was simply, “do as I tell you,” or “obey our laws.” My apology for asking you to take my word on events, but it was simply hostility. It is still hard for me to write or talk about that without getting a little fired up.

About a month ago an ultra-liberal guy who lives up the street from us said they were having a public meeting to discuss putting speed bumps on the main road leading into our neighborhood, apparently his idea. My immediate comment, using a voice of genuine concern, was, “so have there been accidents there?” His response was, “no, but people come flying through there all the time.” Flying through there, those were his words. Interesting to me because I drive through there four to ten times per day, and walk or jog in that area often, and I can’t specifically remember noticing a person going over 30 (in a 25 mph zone). Most cops won’t even write tickets for that. A couple of streets over there are maybe six speed bumps on a half mile stretch, and I avoid that street, not because you can’t go 30, but because you can’t go 20. You hit one of those speed bumps going 12 and your car scrapes the street, so you have to crawl down the street at about 10 mph. The next how many dozen streets north don’t have speed bumps, but you have to avoid that one because someone wanted traffic off their street. Liberal hostility. And now if this guy in my neighborhood gets his way, every one of us will risk tearing up the bottoms of our cars going 20 mph because he perceives anything over the speed limit as “flying.”

In 2004 we had our first child. There were clearly designated smoking areas outside of the hospital, but that apparently was no longer good enough as there were signs up in those areas that said no smoking near the entrance to the hospital. Still, it was not a big deal, and I was fine with moving to the outer sidewalk. We had our second child four years later, and in that relatively short period of time the hospital had installed loudspeakers at every entrance to bark out, at roughly one-minute intervals, that smoking is not permitted on hospital grounds, including the parking areas. Understand that being at a hospital is not a simple matter of choice any more than is taking your kids to school. There is no love in this effort to control people’s behavior to such a degree. This is not about doing unto your neighbor as you would have him do unto you. This is hostility. This is social conditioning in its purest form. People who choose to smoke are a captive audience in this case, and this particular hospital is at a busy intersection where a person would have to walk about a half mile to safely have a cigarette.

I can come up with a myriad of similar examples. The guy who yells at another guy in a park for not having his dog on a leash when that dog isn’t the least bit dangerous and no one is being harmed. The jackasses who have yelled at me for not having a helmet on my kid riding his bike, with training wheels, on a paved trail with no mechanized vehicles. Zero tolerance policies in schools where 6 and 8-year old children are expelled for miming a gun and saying, “bang bang.” Zero tolerance policies where children are expelled from school for having aspirin. Seat belt laws. Car seat laws that become more and more strict as the years go by. Teachers can’t paddle children, even when they need it, but they’ll expel children from school over things that are completely harmless. Liberal hostility. Public schools, struggling financially, are told that they can’t require their students to be taught in English and have to go to the expense, and separation of kids by race, to teach children in other languages. I’m all for people being able to speak their

own languages, and necessary services being provided in multiple languages, but what public good can come of this? This one does not qualify as hostility, but it's certainly liberal driven and I have yet to have someone explain to me how the positives outweigh the negatives on this one. Maybe someone will educate me.

In order to qualify as a form of slavery, or genuine class warfare, the mass dumbing down of sensibilities (although in this case it's ratcheting up sensitivity and the dumbing down of tolerance), there has to be someone making a profit at the expense of the freedom of others. In this case there is, and it's the insurance industry. Banks go under. Finance companies go under. People lose jobs, the economy tanks, and the insurance companies just make more money. Health care is a mess, and the costs just continue to multiply. The government has an opportunity to provide a cheap public option and enact legislation to get costs under control. So what is the solution to this mess? Let's require everyone to buy the product of one of the players most responsible for the problem.

Car seat laws. They only last year made car seat laws stricter, again. I heard a commercial just yesterday with the sweet voices of children instructing me that 75% of car seats are being used improperly. 75%!! And yet they just came out with new specifications that required millions of Americans to buy new car seats, and apparently 75% of us aren't using them properly. So if we get into a car accident and our child is seriously injured, the insurance company now has a new legal justification not to pay the claim. That doesn't necessarily mean that they won't pay the claim, it's a complicated calculation, but it is one more factor in the insurance companies' defense of nonpayment, and the multiple millions in insurance company profits that it will generate is impossible to predict. Now there's a happy/angry/utterly incensed, liberal face on this picture standing beside parents who have lost children in car accidents who weren't properly buckled into their seats, and those standing along beside them are wagging their fingers and demonstrating how much more they know than you. But it wasn't a parents group that paid the lobbying dollars to lawmakers to only recently make the law of the land more strict than it already was. Some of the money came from car seat manufacturers to be sure, but the vast majority of it came from the insurance lobby, which will make a great profit on their investment. And who is the biggest recipient of the insurance company lobby? Democrats, although both parties receive millions. So it shouldn't be a big surprise that the attempts to really reform health care, fought tooth and nail by the Republicans and the Tea Party in particular, ended in a big mess with no affordable public option, which the insurance companies paid plenty to fight against, and the ultimate solution is that we have to purchase the insurance companies' product.

In fairness to people who have lost children in accidents not buckled into car seats, it is hard for me or any person who hasn't experienced it to know the pain of losing a child, but this is not a valid justification to require all people to conform to a standard of behavior and to pay fines and risk having insurance claims denied if we don't. And this example fails to consider the face to face time lost between parents and children. When I was a child my father worked night shift, and there were times when we rarely had opportunities to just sit and talk. The best of those opportunities came riding in the car. When we would drive down to Georgia once or twice a year my mom would get in the back seat and sleep, my dad would drive all night and I would keep him company. My dad (a truck driver) really enjoyed car games, such as read the signs where we took turns reading the road signs (I was six on that trip), and if the law then was what

it was now, I'd have been robbed of that, as my own six-year-old son now has been, and apparently I won't get to have a conversation with him sitting beside me in the car until he's nine or ten. I treasured those car rides. How do you measure the value of literally billions of hours of face time conversations between parents and children in terms of lives saved? If you don't believe me, try the following experiment. Have your significant other ride in the back seat just for a year, or you ride in back while he or she drives, and see how your conversation is affected. And it has gone past making your child wear a seat belt (which we as children didn't have to do and probably should have) to the potentially few six, seven, eight and nine year olds who will be killed by an airbag deployment. As far as I'm concerned the choice should be mine, but insurance companies, and their profits, have decided it for me, and legislators and, yes, liberals, have put those companies' right to profit over our right to decide. (I just checked it, and Wiki-answers indicates that a child must be 12 to ride in the front seat!!! Even I'm surprised.) Like analyses would prove similarly valid regarding smoking laws, seat belt laws, requiring random mail-in verification on car insurance, and other similar aspects of our social lives. Angry people speak, insurance companies pay, legislators act, and insurance companies profit multiple times what they paid. That's a big part of how insurance companies afford to advertise continuously. I saw not three months ago a guy crying who's son died doing crazy skateboard tricks without a helmet. So now when I ride on the bike trail (no motorized vehicles) and let my son ride without a helmet, I have about one liberal jackass per trip who yells at me, unprovoked, "Put a helmet on that kid!!" Does anyone think this level of discourse is good for our society? And so far not one of the actual bike trail police has said a word to me about it.

And a final aspect of this to be discussed here is the level of dialogue to which we're now asked to conform. You may have seen or read that Bill O'Reilly was on "The View" and they were discussing the so-called Ground Zero Mosque. When Bill O'Reilly said, "Muslims killed us on 9-11," Whoopi Goldberg and Joy Behar stormed off the set in anger. I have to say that I have always found Whoopi Goldberg to be very likeable, wise-seeming, and I don't agree with Bill O'Reilly on most issues. If anything, Bill O'Reilly shows flashes of journalistic integrity compared to many of his ilk, like saying he thinks a public option for insurance might be a good thing, but he always goes back to the company line in the end, which kind of makes him worse because he knows better. And I am a firm believer that those building this community center should have the right to do it without undue interference from the public. But Bill O'Reilly certainly should have the right to voice a reasonable position concerning the Mosque, and the others suggesting he doesn't have the right to say, "Muslims killed us on 9-11" is exactly the kind of liberal intolerance I'm writing about. His comment was certainly loaded with additional meaning that may not be fair to Muslims in general, but this is not a fair situation. The Muslim terrorists that attacked America on 9-11 didn't just happen to be Muslim. Their perception of their faith was a core part of their actions. It certainly didn't justify America retaliating against another country that in no way attacked us because they were Muslim (particularly when certain among us had vast profits to gain from doing so), but his statement was not untrue and should be a part of the dialogue. It is incumbent upon us who are more reasonable to say why his position is wrong, or misleading, but in a free country he should have the right to make a simple statement that is true. But the reaction from the women on the show is exactly the kind of intolerance that this letter is addressing.

I had a similar experience in 1996 at the Democratic National Convention. I was simply there as an errand doer for my employer at the time (I voted for Bob Dole), but I met and hung out with a couple of girls who were extreme liberals. Unfortunately I made a comment about someone being a redneck, and one of the girls got extremely angry and they stormed off. Given that my mother has commented to me that our family is a bunch of rednecks multiple times, it was cold water in the face for me when they were so incensed. There are certainly things people shouldn't say, and maybe that was one of them, but there are limits to how far we should push people in telling them what we can say, what we can think, how we can treat our bodies, how we should raise our children, etc. Certainly there should be limits that society can and should impose on individuals. We can't, for instance, allow parents to burn their children with lit cigarettes as a form of punishment, but we have already gone too far in the other direction, for the profits of a few that already have too big a hand in controlling our government, and this level of intolerance, this hostility, needs to be reigned in a little bit, maybe more than a little.

One final story. Back in September I took my son camping and met friends at a small, rural campground near where I was born and raised. There was a volleyball game going on some distance away from us, and I joked to my friends that apparently the net wasn't enough for the participants to know which team they were on. They were playing shirts versus skins in cloudy, 60-degree weather, and we all had a big laugh about that. I'm certainly not going to say they were rednecks, because that clearly, as I have learned, would be too insensitive. It is probably an exaggeration, but it is possible that every adult there was smoking, and up late partying and playing music. Everyone seemed to be having a good time, and no one got hurt. As I was taking in the scene, it occurred to me that here was a great recruiting ground for the Tea Party.

So that brings me back to the initial question: "Why do otherwise intelligent people choose to believe this stuff?!" regarding neo-conservative or Tea Party propaganda. The simplest answer is that people just want to be left the hell alone, and they feel that the government has gone too far in telling them how they should live their lives. I feel their pain, and I understand their angst, and it well explains why so many who are struggling, who are in need of jobs and simply want to provide for their families, are willing to jump on board when wealthy companies tell them that the government is socialist when it chooses to allow the tax cuts on the wealthiest 2% to expire. When companies say that the environmental impact of fossil fuel burning is negligible, and that liberals are just pushing a social agenda on them, they want to believe it. Why shouldn't they? When they can see, or at least feel, the impact of similar and simpler social agendas, why wouldn't they believe those who are telling them they are victims of liberal, or "socialist", government agendas that are more complicated?

I received a few weeks ago an email forward decrying the "massive tax increases" coming in January. I have endeavored to explain, multiple times in various letters, that allowing the tax cuts to expire on the wealthiest 2% is a reasonable way to start paying down the deficit, a deficit that strengthens China and other countries. The tax cuts were scheduled to expire now when they were enacted back in 2001, when we still had great prosperity and had not gotten involved in two unnecessary wars, and the current

government administration has fought to keep the tax cuts on the other 98% in place while letting the top 2% expire, raising the top tax rate from 35 to 39.6%. Republicans in Congress, along with some Democrats, voted against that. They are taking a serious gamble, like a fireman setting a house on fire in hopes of looking like a hero when called to the rescue. In the last 70 years, the top marginal tax rate has been higher virtually our entire lifetimes, 60 or 80% or more for long periods of time, with the main exception being the last ten years. All this talk of socialism is entirely misplaced on this issue. Taxing the wealthy is how it has been throughout the great years of our society. In fact, when the top marginal tax rate was considerably higher, it was considered unpatriotic to fight the higher tax brackets since the revenues were used to promote the public good, at least to some extent. But the wealthy deceivers, motivated by greed and power, are trying to trick the common people into believing that things are the opposite of what they are, and why wouldn't they try? If people are willing to buy into nonsense, why should we be surprised that the rich want to keep as much money that they've made from the public good as they can? And for some reason the Democrats are too stupid or too disorganized (or too interested in partaking in the greed on behalf of their wealthy donors) to properly explain to the average American what's going on. Hopefully people who believe themselves to be conservatives will take this simple explanation to heart. As in the first paragraph, this analysis on taxation I've written many times has been intended for conservatives. Appealing to the reason and better nature of the people fighting for the wrong things and against the right things is the way to attain positive change in a democracy.

Continuing briefly with this theme, apparently the upcoming midterm election primarily concerns this issue and the cap and trade law, according to the Ohio election ads that have been running continuously. But it's touched on the bank bailout as well. Not being an economist, I can't help but wonder if the bank bailout wasn't a good thing. And the stimulus. Bailing out the auto industry certainly seems to have been for the best. But the opponents of these government efforts, who tended to support the people who got us into the jam in the first place, talk as though they were orchestrated by the devil himself, and the people who want the government out of their lives and to be left alone are all too happy to believe it.

And that's the answer to the question posed. Sure it's easy to assume that these beliefs are just a function of racism. Your average white American has seen his relative state of power go down while others have risen. Ignoring the fact that the Tea Party has been funded and fueled by mostly white Americans who profit handsomely from obstructionism, why wouldn't a racist jump on board with the people who claim that government interference is the cause of all your problems, and that the answer is to fight government regulation on all fronts? But the fact remains that the average white American is acting on this impetus to their own detriment. The average Tea Party member is not a racist, any more than your average liberal wants to control the way we all think and believe. We live in an extreme time, and we are being manipulated by extremists. So I wrote this answer to people who would call themselves liberals to get them to take a hard look at their beliefs and how they are perceived and to see how this

perception they create, or allow to be created by like-minded individuals who are extremists, is no solution but rather a very significant part of the problem.

This letter is much more rife with generalizations than my typical efforts. Of course many conservatives are pro-helmet laws, etc., just as many liberals are pro Second Amendment. The sphere of politics is complicated. But there are consistent patterns and perceptions. When a conservative candidate says of his opponent, "X wants to take away your right to own guns," why wouldn't people who choose to own guns believe it? It is not as though the people at the forefront of trying to limit the rights of others have shown restraint. A pro-Bush, pro-Iraq War friend of mine, three or four years ago said, "It doesn't matter that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. They just said that because people are too stupid to understand why we're there." On the personal social issues detailed throughout this letter, you get the same sense from liberals. "Those people are too stupid to know what's good for them." So-called conservatives have to understand that it's their responsibility to educate themselves on the truth of the issues that are at the forefront now, but liberals have to acknowledge their own responsibility for the state of things. Are any of the serious and potentially world changing, society destroying problems affected by people choosing to smoke cigarettes, etc.? If the answer is no, and it is, then why do we continue beating on this issue? The answer is that you're being manipulated by people with a profit motive, which is more or less the same motivation as the "otherwise intelligent people choose to believe this stuff?!" regarding Tea Party propaganda.

So it is.

Bob Young.