

Dialogue With My Daughter: Part III

Present v. Future Orientation

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

A few people have contacted me and indicated that while what I write is interesting and useful, it is far too long and uses language that is too technical. They have accordingly encouraged me to try to follow the KISS (keep it simple stupid) principle. Accordingly, I am experimenting with recording some of the conversations I have with my kids and am as a result finding a more accessible presentation style. Some of the same people who asked for easier to read versions of my material have indicated this approach works for them. So, here is another conversation summary. As is the case with all of my pieces of this sort, most of the content of this summary is drawn from actual conversations with my older daughters (ages 17 to 22). However, lots of extraneous material has been excluded and I have taken some creative license to "smooth" things out. The conversation setting is in my car on the way to drop a daughter off at work. The content summarized here represents a small fraction of what we talk about.

Daughter: Did you hear that Friend X is going to ... (long explanation)

Bob: No. Interesting. How old is she again?

D: 22.

B: Did I hear that she was also toying with going on a mission?

D: No. Her Mom talked to her about that, but that is not her thing. Friend Y, however, is thinking about going.

B: That is something I would never recommend. Too many bad thinking habits are engrained during a mission. Once these things are in your head, they are hard to get out. But, I think that the humanitarian stuff Friend Y has been doing is great – much more useful than a mission.

D: (silence)

B: Did I tell about the economics I have been reading lately?

D: No.

B: This is fascinating. One of North America's best economists – a guy at Harvard – wrote a paper recently that showed a connecting between third world countries that are becoming more Christian and economic growth. This is probably a consequence of the "future orientation" that comes along with the protestant Christian worldview. We have talked about that before, haven't we?

D: I think so. But I don't remember how it works.

B: Well, most cultures are much more oriented toward harmony with the present than we are. Think of Buddhism for example, and what Grandma has told us about Nepal. The people there are happy with their situation, because they accept it – they are focussed much more than we are on what is, and much less on what they might achieve in the future if they work at it. So, we might say that we are more "future oriented", whereas they are more "present oriented".

Also, we believe that all men are equal and hence can achieve the same thing. In Nepal, and particularly the Hindu parts of it, the caste system is designed to not only cause people to focus on the present and find harmony with it, but to not attempt to change their life's circumstances too much. All of this promotes social stability, makes people easier to govern, etc. I am confident that this is why this way of approaching life is so common.

The idea in the Western world that all men are equal in many important ways, and that we should look into the future and try to plan and work now to achieve particular future objectives, tends to make people dissatisfied with what they have, no matter how wonderful it is. This makes us less satisfied with our lives in general. Some studies that measure happiness show that people in places like Nepal and Nigeria – among the poorest on the planet – are much happier than people in North America. Does this make sense?

D: Yup.

B: The concepts of future orientation and the equality of man are thought to come from the area near what is Israel today. Some claim that the ancient Hebrews came up with these ideas. I have read others who say that the Zoroastrians, in the same area, had the idea first and the Hebrews copied it. But in any event, it seems clear that it came from that part of the world and has had a tremendous impact on the rest of us. In particular, the idea that time is linear instead of circular is important. I bet you haven't heard of that idea, have you?

D: No.

B: It works more or less like this. You have heard about the idea of reincarnation?

D: Of course.

B: That is an example of a circular notion of time – we don't need to be too concerned about our present circumstance, because we are in this continual cycle of birth and death, and eventually we will be on top if we are not now. And, to get to the top we have to play the role that is ours in the present, so we should reconcile ourselves to that and not rock the boat. This is an idea that would make a society stable. Right?

D: Right.

B: The idea that develops during the course of the Old Testament and other Hebrew writings, is that time is linear. It appears that for a long time the Hebrews did not believe in life after death. But eventually that belief developed. This was part of the linear time idea. That is, there is no continual recycling. After death, you will still be you. In the Hindu and many other belief systems, after death the essence of what is "you" will no longer be there. "You" will still exist, but will have changed into something completely different. Another way of saying the same thing is that after death, you will no longer be conscious of the you that now exists. Linear time relates to the idea that there is no eternal cycling. The essence that is you will continue to exist after death and will be conscious of the you that now exist – it will still be you as you now understand you. And most importantly, it is what you do now that will determine the nature of your experience after death. And, you are not bound to any caste or other necessary state. So, set goals; work to achieve them; and you will create your own future. Can you see how different that idea is from the "be content with your situation – you are part of an eternal cycle" point of view?

D: Yes.

B: And, who is likely to work harder, try to do more, have incentive to be innovative etc. – a guy who is thinking "eternal cycle; go with the flow" or a guy who is thinking "what I do determines how much I will enjoy both later in this life and in the next life; there are no barriers to my progress"?

D: The second guy.

B: That, in a nutshell, is why the guy from Harvard thinks that third world people who accept protestant Christianity tend to become better off economically. It is not so much the Christianity per se that causes this change as the work ethic – the orientation toward working to produce a better future – that comes with it.

Now, here's the funny part. What kind of spirituality is becoming more popular in the developed part of the world – Europe, North America, etc.?

D: Mormonism?

B: Nope. Remember, I told you that Mormon growth rates have slowed dramatically in North America – likely because of the Internet and more information being out there about the real story of Mormonism – and Mormon growth rates have been miniscule in Europe for a long time. Mormonism is still growing reasonable well in the poor parts of the world. And that makes sense in light of what we just talked about, right?

D: That's right.

B: In the developed world, people are tending toward more present oriented philosophies – like Buddhism. That does not mean that they are becoming Buddhist. But, they are doing Buddhist kinds of things. How much do we hear about meditation, yoga etc.?

D: Tons.

B: That is the present oriented philosophy. And, it is being adopted by Christian churches. That is, many Christian churches recognize that their people need this, and so are incorporating it into their worship program. There is a long tradition within certain branches of Christianity respecting this kind of thing, so it is relatively easy to do. It is just a matter of emphasizing something that has not been emphasized for most of the past several centuries within Christianity. And, of course, many people are simply deciding that they don't need any particular religious orientation and making up their own way. This is the New Age thing.

Why do you think this is happening – Christians and others in the Developed World moving toward a more present oriented life style?

D: I have no idea.

B: Who did I say a few minutes ago are the happiest people on earth?

D: Really poor, present oriented people like the ones in Nigeria.

B: Right. And who wants to be happy?

D: Everyone.

B: Think of your grandparents. Where do they stand on the present v. future orientation scale?

D: Very future oriented.

B: How about me?

D: You used to be just like Grandpa and Grandma. Now you are a lot more present oriented.

B: So, if you are pretty well off because your parents and grandparents were really future oriented, but you are not as happy as you want to be, what are you likely to do?

D: If being present oriented makes you feel more happy, you are likely to head in that direction.

B: And who wants to be more happy?

D: Everyone.

B: The continual striving for more that is built into the future orientation applies to happiness too. So, once the basics are taken care of in terms of food, education, house etc., people naturally turn to "self actualization" – how happy they are. A guy named Maslow wrote a lot about this. Maslow's hierarchy of needs ...

D: I remember that stuff.

B: So, why don't the grandpas and grandmas change and become more present oriented?

D: You can't teach an old dog new tricks?

B: More or less. They will change to some extent, but the older you are the less you can change, as a general rule.

So, we have poor people becoming more future oriented because that helps them to pull themselves out of their economic mess. They know that this means adopting a more Western lifestyle. So, when missionaries from a North American church show up teaching lots of Western things, including a future orientation that is basic to some kinds of Christian teaching, how are they likely to be received?

D: I can see why they would be welcome in many places.

B: And, these missionaries often offer free education and other benefits. They do a lot of good in economic terms. This is why Mormons, JW's, 7th Day Adventists etc. are so successful in poor places.

D: I heard that the JW's have been barred from Russia.

B: I heard that too. And, I heard that it was because of how successful they have been and how they did not support some government policies there. They have baptized many times the number of people the Mormons have. The information we are given as Mormons respecting how fast the Church is going is quite misleading. The JW's started something like 60 years after the Mormons did, and have grown much more quickly than the Mormon church has. The 7th Day Adventists started about the same time and have grown at about the same rate. The evangelical Christians started about 100 years ago, and have blown the doors off everyone else. They are up to around 350 million world wide now. But I am getting off topic.

The point I wanted to make was that once future orientation has done its job, people tend to become more present oriented. So, we have the rich and poor parts of the world borrowing helpful ideas from each other. The poor are learning how to create more for themselves by becoming future oriented, and the rich are learning how to enjoy what they have becoming more present oriented.

D: So, this is about balance?

B: Good point. And, think about what this means respecting family size. Remember how we talked about this the other day – the odd fact that the more wealthy and educated women become, the smaller their family size tends to be, and how some scientists think that this will be looked back on as the thing that saved mankind?

D: Yes.

B: If you are a future oriented woman, how will that affect your decision to have more or less kids?

D: Well, I think you might be exaggerating how much women think in these terms. But, if a woman was aware of the issue, and if she was future oriented she would tend to have more kids because as long as there was food to feed them, the more kids she had the more likely there would be someone around to take care of her in her old age. But, you also told me that family sizes in places like Nigeria are very large, and those people are present oriented, so I am not sure this makes sense.

B: Good point. For a woman to make a decision to restrict her family size, she must have more than a present orientation. She must also have wealth, and education. When you combine those with a present orientation, you get quite different behaviour that a present or future orientation on their own will produce. I think the same point can be made across a wide range of issues. Once wealth and education have been created by the future orientation of past and present generations, when we add to that a present orientation a particularly rich and enjoyable culture can be produced.

And for those of us who were raised in a hard-line future oriented culture such as Mormonism, and have benefited from the wealth produced by Western culture in general, moving toward a present orientation feels like slipping into a nice swimming pool on a hot day – it soothes right into the soul. You have seen some of that in me lately, I hope?

D: I have.

B: Have a great day at work!

D: You too.