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How Do You Make a Society Wise?

By Barry Jason Mauer

UCF Forum columnist

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A wise society looks after the well-being of its citizenry. In order for there to be a wise society, though, many or most of its citizenry also must be wise since they create the society. But the society must educate its citizens to be wise.

It's a chicken-egg problem: Which comes first, the wise society or the wise citizenry?

Florida's society often was unwise in the past because of its entrenched racism. Arguably, it is still unwise because it has not learned from its history; many of Florida's citizens today know little or nothing about its racist history. An ignorant society is not a wise one.

A wise citizenry is one that takes an active, informed role in looking at its past in order to reason about its future. It cannot properly reason unless it articulates its values, asks if its behavior is congruent with those values, and calculates the costs of its behaviors, changing them if necessary.

In other words, a wise citizenry is one that comes to know itself, warts and all.

Another recent UCF Forum piece, "[I Question Whether We Have Learned 'Citizenship' in Our Generation](#)" by political scientist Terri Fine, contrasts the historical reality of racist violence, bigotry, and intolerance in Florida with the state's "reputation for racial moderation." That reputation seems to have been earned because Florida's Gov. Leroy Collins (unlike other Southern governors) did not pledge massive resistance to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision integrating the schools. Fine writes: "During that time, the Legislature passed a number of bills designed to fight integration. In addition, after Collins, Floridians elected governors who campaigned

against integration, civil rights and busing, and made little effort to promote racial equality in the three elections that followed.”

Our society developed institutions such as school and therapy so that individual people can attain wisdom and, as intended, these institutions do help many people to learn about themselves. But there is yet an even more important unanswered question, given that our species now has the power to make itself extinct: Can a collective—the society itself—attain self-knowledge?

To practice citizenship means to try to attain self-knowledge at the level of the collective, whether of one’s city, state, nation, or planet. For a society to know itself, it has to know its blind spots as well as its strengths. Blind spots prevent us from seeing those areas that we don’t want to look at: the hard stuff, the miserably abject parts of our society’s “personality.” Of course, we must be sure to account for our strengths, too.

Before we can investigate our society’s faults, we have to know its blind spots.

Every society, like every person, has blind spots. Every society has parts of its history it doesn’t want to see or accept and it covers them up with denial. Just look at present day Turkey; the government denies that the nation committed genocide against the Armenians in 1915 despite the mountains of evidence that it did. The Japanese enshrined its most notorious war criminals from World War II at its Yasukuni Shrine, which was founded in 1869 to honor its war dead.

The United States, likewise, has thousands of monuments to the Confederacy, most of them erected during the era of Jim Crow, enshrining the worst criminals of our history while simultaneously denying their crimes. Many people still treat the confederate flag as a symbol of “pride.” In a recent [CNN poll](#), 75 percent of Southern whites described the confederate flag as a symbol of pride, not of racism. (This poll was taken *after* a 21-year-old white man murdered nine black people in a Charleston church in June and a photo of him posing with a confederate flag was published in the media.

This 75 percent of Southern whites deny their history, which is abundantly evident in the “[Cornerstone Speech](#),” given by the Confederacy’s vice president, Alexander H. Stephens, in Savannah, Ga., on March 21, 1861:

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea [of “the assumption of the equality of races”]; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth

that the Negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition.

Our society will never be wise until it can see past its blind spots and get to know itself.

And if our society can see past its blind spots into the racism embedded in its history, it may also learn to see past its blind spots about its imperialist history, its sexist history, its exploitation of labor, and its environmental destruction—before it's too late.

If our society cannot become wise, it will continue to threaten its own citizens, people around the world, and even the environment that keeps us all alive.

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