

Three Ideas to Consider Giving Up

Larry Richards

Abstract: Change language, change thinking.

In the interest of a conference on ideas, I would like to suggest that there are some ideas that we should consider giving up or suspending, or to which we should at least create alternatives so that they become a choice rather than the default idea.

The first idea that I suggest giving up is the idea of hierarchical thinking—in models, in theories, in social structures, etc. The idea of whole systems—systems within systems within systems—has origins in hierarchical thinking. In its place, or at least as an alternative, I would offer dialectical thinking—for every idea, generate incompatible and opposing ideas, so that new ideas are brought forth, and then their incompatible and opposing ideas, and so on and so on.... Dialectical thinking generates processes as opposed to whole systems. I offer this not in the interest of progress or achievement; I offer it in the interest of an ongoing process of conversation and in the joy of learning, creating new alternatives and interacting with others that conversations engender. The societal task, then, is to create the conditions in which conversations flourish and every individual can make their unique contributions, and to avoid the violence that so often accompanies hierarchical structures.

The second idea that I suggest giving up is the idea of purpose. In its place, or at least as an alternative, I would offer the idea of presence. Rather than focusing on success or the achievement of a goal or objective, presence focuses on what I wish to conserve, here and now, as a set of constraints that guide what I do. In the biological domain, for example, I wish to conserve the idea of love; in the social domain, I wish to conserve conversation; in the economic domain, I wish to conserve the satisfaction of all basic human needs; in the political domain, I wish to conserve participation; in the domain of ecology, I wish to conserve integrity—the connectedness of all things; and, so on.

The third idea that I suggest giving up (which I propose is actually essential to our survival and therefore much more than a suggestion) is the idea of belief. In its place, or at least as an alternative, I would offer the idea of passion. I accept descriptions and explanations temporarily so that I can do what I do. What I do is guided by certain desires about which I feel strongly—my passions, but I do not have to believe in anything to do what I do. Beliefs, as calls to an external truth, stifle conversation and the generation of new ideas, and they are just not necessary. In fact, the ideas of hierarchical thinking, purpose and belief create a formidable triumvirate that works to rigidify the status quo and resist change.

Giving up these ideas implies a change of language, and with change of language comes change of thinking. And, a change of thinking is needed now!

About the Author

Larry Richards is an administrator and faculty member at Indiana University East in Richmond, Indiana, USA. From his Facebook information page:

I seek to overturn the assumption, widely held, that the only way the world can "work" is through the control of resources by the few, with the rest toiling (and dying) to support them or going hungry (and worse). That many of the rest (often including me) seem satisfied with their place in the world is not sufficient reason to maintain the status quo or to accept the current human predicament as necessarily inevitable. It is precisely us, the temporarily satisfied, yet outraged, middle-class, who possess the greatest opportunity to stir the pot, to rock the boat, to unsettle the status quo.

I would, therefore, like to raise the ante on the role and responsibilities of the public intellectual in global social change. I see the arts as a (maybe THE) key avenue for raising the ante--not any old art, art with social intentions. This, I claim, requires a new (different than the mainstream) approach to the uniquely human quality we have come to call consciousness. Despite the evidence--a history of unspeakable cruelty by humans to other humans, I retain "faith" that the creative human spirit can and will prevail, and that this can (in fact, must) happen without violence (but not without us and our desires).

Political Views	Dialectician, negative: supports dialogue; fosters incompatible & opposing ideas; creates choice
Religious Views	Romantic, existential: "Let's live as if...[insert your desire]..."; resist cynicism (& fear)