What a Lost Five-Dollar Bill Taught Me

National healing begins when core convictions remain firm while practical disagreements leave room for compromise.

By McKay Winder

DIALOGUE

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I never expected a five-dollar bill to prompt an existential crisis.

As I found Honest Abe half-buried among the fallen leaves, I wondered: do I leave it here to be raked up with the crunched leaves, turn it into a non-existent lost and found, or take it and pay it forward?

Grappling with this dilemma raised a larger question: How do we assign value?

Walking in the dark on a late autumn day, I left the heft of the fiver in my pocket. Its weight brought back a memory of teaching friends in inner-city America as a missionary.

While I was visiting with a local church leader in his home, he taught the value of the Restored gospel with a dramatic flair. He pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, ripped it in half, and tossed it into the air, drifting in slow motion to the ground in two. The teenage children were stunned, their eyes bulging as they couldn't comprehend the sum of money being ripped like paper.

That moment stayed with me, not because of the theatrics, but because it taught me that values are subject to our experiences. To that leader, twenty dollars held symbolic value. To a family in humble circumstances, it was materially weighty. For me, its value was somewhere in between.

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How could we each interpret the same substance to have such different worth?

Every day, Americans clash over what must be valued, and how strongly we prioritize it: education, religious freedom, family roles, economic opportunity, national identity, public safety. Some issues demand our permanent attention; others are negotiable. Matters that are permanent to one person may be flexible for another.

The problem is not that we disagree on the relative value of issues. The danger is our assumption that our ranking of values is the only reasonable or just one, and those who rank them differently must be immoral, uninformed, or evil.

This assumption we all make is tearing our country apart.

I find it helpful to distinguish between two categories of values:

1. Core values—those central to who we are. Faith, family, and the freedom of conscience. Values that we cannot trade away or redefine. These embody eternal truths, and moral commitments.
2. Relative values—those that necessitate balancing and compromise. Public policy, education curricula, economic tradeoffs, and development.

Reasonable people can, and do, evaluate both of these categories differently based on their unique culture, experience, and philosophy.

When we are unwilling to compromise on our relative values, or when we insist that others compromise their core values, political conflict can become unnecessarily divisive.

When this occurs, compromise becomes impossible, and contempt is unavoidable. Healing is found as we "draw attention away from the biases of partisan politics," as the Dignity Index suggests.

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In my opinion, it's the misunderstanding of these categories that makes public debate feel so rigid and divided. Our neighbors or relatives become our enemies, and communication ceases. That is why President Dallin H. Oaks, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, suggested that going forward, "We need to work for a better way — a way to resolve differences without compromising core values .. [and] to live together in peace and mutual respect." This is not only a spiritual ideal, but the blueprint for a healthy civic society.

Distinguishing between our core and relative values changes how we manage disagreement. It doesn't mean wavering our convictions, but understanding that others may assign values differently for reasons unknown to us.

The path to national healing begins with something as small yet profound as "[living] in a way that's in harmony with our core values."

Accepting this invites us to approach the public square in humility: What is the value of this issue for my fellow Americans? What are its costs? Is it symbolic for others, and just pragmatic for me?

Answering these questions—the questions of value—is at the heart of enjoying a pluralistic society. This allows for relationships with those across the political spectrum.

As Bruce C. Hafen, a former general authority of The Church of Jesus Christ, explained, "value-generating and value-maintaining associations … teach and foster the greatest fullness of life."

Holding that five-dollar bill, I realized that value itself is a moral obligation. Our everyday actions show how we assign value in our treatment of individuals with differing priorities. To strengthen our communities, we can stand for core values and collaborate on relative ones. We can "[find] a way to disagree that moves us toward solutions rather than deepening divides."

So, the next time you pick up a fiver or think of Honest Abe, reflect on your hierarchy of values. Which are core values? Which are negotiable? How can you offer others the same dignity you demand for yourself?

About the author

McKay Winder

McKay Winder is a Wheatley Scholar at Brigham Young University, where he studies political science with an emphasis in legal studies.