Commentary: All of us have a natural tendency to become rigid

By Richard Cherwitz - Special to the American-Statesman

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Nick Wagner Adam Hettler marches with a sign reading “Peace” during a political rally in downtown Austin in November.
Political scientists and those who study political communication have long observed that one of the oddities of human behavior is that people often vote and behave in ways that contradict their own interests. One of the most recent and vivid examples of this is the proclivity of a large percentage of evangelicals to support a president whose words and deeds violate some of the most basic ethical tenets of Christianity.

My purpose in writing is not to condemn this; others already have drawn attention to the fact that ethical principles are essential to Christianity. Rather, I wish to illustrate how all of us have a natural tendency to become rigid, allowing our narrower personal gains to outweigh what we know is right and wrong. I find myself regularly confronted with this dilemma when it comes to politics.

I did not vote for Donald Trump and tenaciously critique him in op-eds and letters to the editor. However, every time I do, I am faced with the selfish realization that during Trump’s tenure in office, my 401K has grown. Whether that is directly due to his policies or simply correlated with his occupancy in the White House is not the issue — and perhaps cannot be proven.

What is noteworthy is that I often feel guilty for even wondering about or entertaining the thought that it might be more in my interest to refrain from criticizing Trump, being content that as I approach retirement, my financial future is solid. I suspect and hope my concern for ethics and morality ultimately will prevail. But, I would be lying if I said this isn’t a constant struggle.

What my confession reveals is that in politics and life, we all experience what scholars in communication and psychology call “cognitive dissonance”— the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioral decisions and attitude change. The question is: How do we reduce dissonance?

Sometimes, the answer is abandoning one of the incongruous beliefs. More often, the response is to prioritize which of our beliefs is more important. The latter, of course, can be an arduous process — the outcome of which others may not accept or understand.

From the standpoint of persuasion, it is a challenge to know how to convince someone that they should alter how they prioritize their beliefs. Put differently, how do we capitalize on another’s dissonance as a tool for persuasion?

Friends frequently remind me that, while monetary gain is a desirable and important goal, the “cost” of realizing that goal may not be worth the price of abandoning my moral and ethical convictions. In short, the issue for me becomes determining just how essential those ethical principles are to my identity as a human being.

And that is precisely the issue we must ask others — including evangelicals — to tackle and retackle. Rather than simply attacking them for being hypocrites — which is easy to do, will alienate them, and will have little chance of persuading — our responsibility is to recognize that, like us, they are fallible human beings capable of making erroneous judgments.

The best recourse, therefore, is to enable them to resolve their dissonance by finding common ground. For example, we might help them see how their ethical beliefs are more than ordinary beliefs
— how those beliefs ultimately define their Christian identity and mission as practitioners of religious commitment.

To be clear, my argument is not partisan. It is not a prescription for any specific belief. It is a recommendation for how we must respect others and move beyond the current hyperpolarization, all of which is necessary for the possibility of persuasion. This will not be easy. But, without persuasion, which requires all to recognize that we might be in error, what chance do we have as a society to thrive?

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