

Treating Weenies

8 Aug, 2011

If the Anthony Weiner circus accomplished anything at all, it was the added boost it gave to the continuing decline of American culture. Public attention to anything meaningful was, for a gaudy fifteen minutes of infamy, snuffed out beneath the onslaught. Representative Weiner is entitled to a private life, perverse or not. But absolutely no one can really, seriously care about his puerile sexting or pitiful beefcake poses.

But the most dismaying aspect of the entire fiasco was the leave-of-absence Weiner took to obtain "treatment." This relatively recent cultural phenomenon – the rich and famous seeking "treatment" following the public disclosure of embarrassing or disturbing behavior – cheapens our work as psychologists. Worse, it is reminiscent of Soviet-style psychiatry. Let me explain.

During the Soviet era, certain psychiatric institutions, such as the Serbsky Institute in Moscow, were specifically set up for the "treatment" of individuals who stood against the political system. Psychiatrists could incarcerate people for their political beliefs alone. One such disturbance was known as "sluggish vilotekushchaia schizophrenia." It was characterized by otherwise normal-appearing people who could break into "cases" of "nervous exhaustion brought on by a search for justice" or "reformist delusions." The assumption was that you had to be insane to find fault with communism.

Our own society, too, has been rife with such abuse of treatment – treatment offered up for ideological rather than psychological reasons. Any number of celebrities, politicians, and other public figures are corralled into "treatment programs" when none of their problems qualify as mental disorders. A perfect example of this is Mel Gibson.

Like some Soviet dissident sent to the nut-house for wearing American jeans, Gibson was shipped off to a rehab facility in Malibu. Why? Among other things, to "cure" what the Jewish Anti-Defamation League condemned as his proclivity to utter "vicious words," a reference to Gibson's anti-Semitic outburst during his DUI arrest. Yes, Mr. Gibson needed to have his mouth – and his soul – washed out with soap. But his vicious words do not emanate from any form of madness requiring treatment. They are, pure and simple, the expression of an ideology, in this case anti-Semitism. Neither man – neither the hip Soviet dissident nor the un-hip Gibson – would find in "treatment" a "cure" for the ideological "mental disorder" their respective societies tagged them with.

To be fair, Weiner might clinically present with a touch of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, or maybe he has symptoms of what the DSMV will be referring to as a Hypersexual Disorder. But doesn't this frantic search for formal labels reveal a kind of self-imposed poverty? Has our vocabulary become so strapped by labels and categories that we can no longer articulate, or even appreciate, the concept of accountable personhood? Have we totally abandoned the humanist vision of woman and man, creatures of consciousness and conscience?

When the Roman empire was descending into much the same kind of debauchery we now see in America (think Reality TV), Stoic philosophers such as Seneca preached for "the good, the true and the beautiful"

and "the right life" against such moral decline. Seneca wrote, "Most powerful is he who has himself in his own power." Some thirty years earlier, Aristotle wrote that ethical virtue "is a habit disposed toward action by deliberate choice... and defined by reason as a prudent man would define it." Congressman Weiner is not ill. He acted "by deliberate choice," at odds with "the right life" as even a less-than-prudent man would define it.

I believe that Weiner, simply put, has quite the problem with his weiner. Why does he have to be declared insane? Why can't he just be a moron? Does every human error of judgment have to be reduced to a disease? Weiner is a man of flawed character. He does not need treatment. He needs a long walk in the woods, a long talk with a best friend, a long look in the mirror – but not the one in the congressional gym, on our dime. He needs to reflect on his poor judgment, his arrogance, his stupidity – the stuff of human frailty, not human insanity. For him and us, it's time for simple common sense about the simple common flaws in human character.