

MARK BALDRIDGE

Truth lies between right, wrong

I'd like to say something positive this week — in praise of ambiguity.

We live in a world that has grown increasingly ambiguous. Old values, old understandings are crumbling — to be replaced not by new truths but by uncertainty.

Everyone is affected by this shift from the meaningful to the ambiguous as it takes place in all fields of human endeavor.

The secure world of knowledge is crumbling about our ears, or so it seems.

This is true in politics, in education, in society and in science.

I don't claim to understand it all, but just listen to the code words of modern science: uncertainty, relativity, chaos.

But maybe there's a clue here.

The sciences' chaos theory, for example, represents an advance, not a decline, in our understanding of the universe.

In other words, ambiguity and uncertainty are helpful tools of understanding: At the very simplest level, it's crucial to know what kinds of things aren't knowable.

In the more popularly accessible fields of politics and culture, the same thing is true. We know more now, knowing what things are uncertain.

Maybe all this is sounding a little abstract. Let's get down to cases.

Politically our world is quickly transforming into the "Global Village" Marshall McLuhan failed to warn us about — though anyone from a small town would've known the big disadvantage of village life: You end up having to live with these people you disagree with, even the ones you hate.

Village life fosters animosity and blood feuds because everyone is forced together shoulder to shoulder. There's no place to get away from your neighbor.

A court verdict in Los Angeles fosters racial tensions in Detroit.

War in Bosnia creates turmoil in



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the United States.

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Strongly held beliefs that are contrary or even mutually exclusive to someone else's values are a source of infinite friction.

Thus, the main tenet of political correctness: There are certain expressions of belief that are unacceptable if we are all going to get along.

To avoid the possibility of such expressions, politics is reduced to a matter of taste — like whether or not one likes licorice.

Unfortunately that's not a very possible scenario. Human beings have strong feelings. They like to express them.

What's more likely is that the people with the most power will adjust the situation to their own advantage — either by physically wiping out their opponents or making it extremely difficult for them to express their opinions.

This can be done in a number of ways and by any number of methods.

Public opinion, manipulation of the media, the weight of position and wealth will all be brought to bear by all sides.

In the end, as always, the effectiveness of methods of combat will be demonstrated, not the validity of any argument.

A third path — and, I think, the way out of this morass — is the path of ambiguity.

The ambiguous path is more difficult but ends more peacefully and

may be closer to the truth.

Becoming aware of the ambiguous nature of one's political reasoning — its dogmatic roots in an assumptive base that can't be proved, or even questioned very closely, — and all political beliefs are rooted in similar soil — can be frightening.

I'd rather pick up a scimitar and lob off the head of my enemy than have him question my highly prized and arbitrary assumptions.

Keep in mind that we're talking about assumptions like "the intrinsic value of human life," not idiotic notions that only other people hold.

But if I adopt ambiguity — if I embrace the knowledge that I make my political decisions based on intuition, feeling, on instincts themselves ambiguous and indecipherable — I can still treasure those beliefs while allowing a little more leeway for those of others.

Because I understand the nature of reality is ambiguous at heart — and always has been — I cease to be afraid of ambiguity.

Until now we have reasoned in absolutes of right and wrong, true and false. And that was excellent while it lasted.

Only that kind of thinking could have gotten us to the point where we can recognize the flaw at the center of it.

We have advanced to the point that nothing is certain, and we can at last begin to truly understand.

Baldridge is a master's English major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

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