

Different Strokes, Different Folks



by Lee Duigon

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I'm looking at a face with wide goggling eyes, a decidedly fishy mouth, a big round silver medallion hanging from one ear—shoot, it would look great on a certain kind of merry-go-round.

But it's not a face, not at all. It's a clear plastic trash bag filled with garbage, mostly soda cans. Damn! I could draw that face. I know exactly what it is—so why do I continue to see it as a face?

It's an optical illusion. My eye, with help from my imagination, has played a trick on me. Nothing more to it than that.

Ah! But what if I were to insist the bag of soda cans really *is* a face? And that anyone who doesn't see it is a Hater, and must be dealt with sternly? Maybe I could go a step farther and declare I recognize the face. "Look! It's that Marvel Comics superhero, Fisho! Or it might be Bernie Sanders..."

[NOTE: As an experiment, I asked my wife to stand directly behind my chair and tell me what she sees. She replied at once, "A face! With big round eyes and a fishy mouth." Exactly what I saw. But when I asked my next-door neighbor to take a look, she couldn't see a face at all.]

Same information, for two different sets of eyes—but with

entirely different results.

People see the same things *differently*. And that explains a lot. It's why we have Republicans and Democrats, Hatfields and McCoys: same information, but totally different perceptions. It makes me wonder, as a political scientist, how we govern our country at all. Some see the face, some don't. If it were a more important issue, we might wind up fighting over it.

It certainly explains elections, doesn't it?

If we don't want the fighting to get out of hand, we have to agree to disagree—and that's harder than it looks. Once upon a time it plunged our country into civil war: individual states vs. federal government, and two vastly different takes on states' rights... and slavery. Try to name a war that didn't start over widely different perceptions of the same damned thing.

The one thing everyone has to agree on, in such a situation, is the desirability of peace and civil order. That has to be the commitment shared by all. To a degree, ordinary daily life would not be possible without it. In real life we rely on it every day. Otherwise the police would be a lot busier than they already are.

Can we keep that commitment? God help us: I'm afraid that's what this year's presidential election will decide. We break that commitment at our peril—the party in power deciding, for instance, that the other party's candidate must be packed off to prison.

Playing with fire, that's what it is. Watch out we don't get burned.

I have discussed these and other topics throughout the week on my blog, <http://www.leeduigon.com/> . Click the link and visit, always taking care not to start a civil war. My articles can also be found at www.chalcedon.edu/ .

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