

## ATLAS SHRUGGED...I SHUDDERED

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You know, when you pick up a novel to read, you implicitly invite the author – in the telling of his or her story – to weave in some sort of larger point or meaning about this complicated business called life. Good, well-written novels in my experience never “hit you over the head” or unmercifully “bludgeon you” with the author’s insights or intent. In fact, in great novels these larger points about living enter your consciousness quietly, modestly...like a pleasant, polite guest at a dinner party.

But the novel I want to discuss today, *Atlas Shrugged*, a book published in 1957 by controversial author Ayn Rand, totally lacks any of this fictional grace and artistic subtlety. At best, I suppose, you could call *Atlas Shrugged* a “philosophical novel,” and at worst you might label it a strident, and poorly masked, “ideological tract.” No matter what you call it, what is clear is that, from page one, the author’s main purpose is to aggressively broadcast her passionately held and quite radical philosophical beliefs, not to tell a good or captivating story. At one point in the book, her “hero,” a libertarian capitalist by the name of John Galt, delivers a chapter-length, 70-page speech (70 pages for God’s sake!) which is nothing other than a rambling diatribe of Rand’s own philosophy – objectivism. I’m just curious...how many of you in this room right now have read *Atlas Shrugged* at some point in your life?

For reasons I will explain in a moment, right now this massive 1,368-page “cult classic” is on various national Best Seller’s lists...including Amazon.com. Although it was first published more than 50 years ago, *Atlas Shrugged* is selling more copies than it ever has...and in 1991 it was declared – by a Library of Congress survey -- perhaps the second most influential book of all times, coming in second to the Bible! For better or worse, a lot of Americans have read, or are now reading, this book...and – whether I like it or not – it is currently playing a significant role in a crucial national debate over the future of our society and government. So this book cannot be summarily dismissed by me or anyone else.

Now...usually when I base a sermon on a book and its ideas, I am either implicitly (or explicitly) recommending the volume for your reading. But this morning, I am explicitly doing the opposite! I honestly recommend that – unless you are profoundly curious, or just dying to read 1,368 pages of thinly veiled libertarian diatribe – that you spend your precious reading time on other literary or non-fiction works. In my humble opinion, this book and its extreme “philosophical speechifying” simply isn’t worth all the time it takes to crawl through its rather tedious and dated plot line. Besides...I am about to tell you – in as clear and cogent and concise as you could possibly ever hear -- precisely what this book is about from a philosophical and social point of view...and why in my view it doesn’t really warrant a great deal of your attention or consideration.

Let me begin by reading what I think is an excellent summary of what this long book is all about, which I found on Wikipedia.

*The book explores a dystopian United States [and a quick aside here right off the bat...dystopian literature explores “anti-utopian” visions of a degraded society, by often describing repressive and controlled states that come into being under the guise of being progressive or utopian]...the book explores a dystopian United*

*States where leading innovators, ranging from industrialists to artists, refuse [by means of a strike] to be exploited by society. The protagonist, Dagny Taggart, sees society collapse around her, as the government increasingly asserts control over all industry (including Taggart Transcontinental, the once mighty transcontinental railroad for which she serves as the Vice President), while society's most productive citizens, led by the mysterious John Galt, progressively disappear.*

*Galt [in a lengthy 70-page speech he delivers] describes the strike as "stopping the motor of the world" by withdrawing the "minds" that drive society's growth and productivity. In their efforts, these people "of the mind" hope to demonstrate that a world in which the individual is not free to create is doomed, that civilization cannot exist where people are slaves to society and government, and that the destruction of the profit motive [again, for individuals] leads to the collapse of society....With the collapse of the nation and its rapacious government all but certain, Galt emerges to reconstruct a society that will celebrate individual achievement, [unfettered and unregulated capitalism] and enlightened self-interest [which Rand elsewhere calls "rational selfishness."]*

In the story line, then, the individualistic (and I would add "intellectually elite") heroes in *Atlas Shrugged* must constantly fight against the less successful members of society which the author bluntly calls "parasites," "looters" and "moochers" – namely those in the social order who demand or expect the benefits of "the heroes" labor.

So, in a nutshell, *Atlas Shrugged* is a not-terribly-concise or clever (some might call it rambling) 1957 diatribe against big government, social welfare programs, taxation, and the social idea that we Americans are, one to another, "our brother's keepers." At one point in his long monologue, the book's hero John Galt (after praising what he calls "the code of selfishness") rhetorically asks, "What do I owe to my fellow man...[and he answers immediately] nothing!"

Elsewhere, Ayn Rand wrote of "the virtue of selfishness," and "ethical egoism," and her social and governmental philosophy (expressed through John Galt's extreme views) totally rejects the idea of societal altruism or mutuality – totally rejects compassionate community concern or care for the other, most especially the disadvantaged or downtrodden in society, that portion of the population she labels "parasites" who "rob" successful individuals of their personal wealth. Her philosophy is nothing other than pure social Darwinism...a kind of "survival of the fittest" view of society where, again, the successful owe nothing to those who struggle. Indeed, in a 1959 television interview with journalist Mike Wallace (it's on YouTube if you want to watch it – just google Ayn Rand and Mike Wallace), when asked directly if her "I owe nothing to my fellow citizens" philosophy's purpose was not to destroy the whole altruistic underpinning of Judeo-Christian social ethics, namely, the centuries-old religious idea that we are "our brother's keeper." Rand responded that she considered that idea – that we have a moral duty to be concerned about the welfare of others – as "evil"...evil! Well, at least you know where she stood!

Now...these are the 50-year-old, decidedly radical ideas -- of a writer who has been widely dismissed as extreme and unsound by most mainstream social, philosophical, economic and moral thinkers – so why am I devoting an entire Sunday to her thinking? Because over the last couple of years or so – with the rising tide here in America of the Tea Party Movement and other fiercely "small government," "no taxation," "free market capitalism," and "end most government programs" conservatives -- the thinking of Ayn Rand has seen a huge resurgence – again, as

evidenced by the fact that *Atlas Shrugged* is once again being widely read and discussed – including receiving high-and-repeated praise from conservative radio and TV commentators like Glen Beck, Neal Boortz, Michael Savage and Rush Limbaugh. And recently, a new movie version of *Atlas Shrugged*, after languishing some four decades in Hollywood limbo, was released to some 300 theatres all across America on April 15<sup>th</sup> of this year.

The movie has been badly panned by most reviewers, both for its stilted acting and slow pacing, and has closed quickly from most theatres. But this has not stopped the Tea Party Movement and its allies, mostly by way of their websites and FaceBook pages, from praising the movie, urging all Americans to see it and take its ideas to heart. Indeed FreedomWorks – the Tea Party-allied group headed by former House Majority Leader Dick Armey – tried this Spring (largely unsuccessfully, I might add) to pressure the big movie chains to show the film in more American theatres. The President of FreedomWorks was transparent enough to admit to the *National Journal* that this movie, “reflects the ethos of the Tea Party...we’re going to build people who believe in limited government and individual liberty.”

And this thinking is also having a noticeable impact in our nation’s capital, and in the halls of government. House Speaker John Boehner – after seeing the movie at a private screening – praised the film. In another branch of government, conservative Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas has declared that he “tends to be really partial to Ayn Rand”...and Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin – the author of the current Republican budget that is attempting to cut so many federal programs for the poor, the sick, the elderly and disadvantaged – requires his entire staff and all his interns to read the book, and writes, “Ayn Rand more than anyone else did a fantastic job of explaining the morality of capitalism, the morality of individualism...[and] the morality of individuals working toward their own free will...it’s the kind of thinking that is sorely needed right now [in America].” Clearly, the ideas of Ayn Rand have lived on past her death, and continue to be a force in the terribly important American conversation about how we shape our society.

Let me see if I can’t make the parameters of this conversation (or is it becoming a battle????) clear by use of this simple chart...now I feel like a college professor!

The American conversation about how we should structure our economy and social order – and what a critical conversation that is! -- falls, it seems to me, along a broad continuum. At the far, far right of the continuum is the idea of pure, unfettered, laissez-faire capitalism... which is represented by the fiercely individualistic and (as she herself put it) “selfish” thinking of Ayn] Rand, who believed that government should almost completely stay out of the way of wealth-creating individuals who fuel the economy. And at the far, far left of the continuum is the idea of systematically structured socialism...which is represented by the pure collectivist thinking of Karl Marx and other socialists, who believe that government must be in nearly complete control of both the economy and the productivity of all citizens for the just and equal benefit of all.

These extreme polar positions frame the conversation, but “the Great American Debate” about these important issues actually occurs – more or less, thank goodness – between these more moderate goalposts of social and economic philosophy. On the right side of these more moderate goalposts are the Tea Party Movement and other social and economic conservatives, who want to limit government and its regulations, taxes and social programs, while maximizing individual freedom and wealth. On the left side are American progressives and liberals who want to empower and expand government to significantly regulate capitalism and the economy, tax the citizens, and sustain compassionate social programs which benefit the needy, down-

trodden, and vulnerable. The issues which come into play with the advocates on both sides are:

1. Distributive Justice – namely the question of how widely is the wealth of the total society to be distributed to all citizens – through distributive programs (supported by taxation) like national health care, income tax credits, housing subsidies, or food programs?, and
2. Governmental Regulation – namely, how much central control, direction and restriction – with the banks, investment houses, insurance companies, and large corporations – is required to ensure a fair, just and productive society and economy?

Now...these issues along this continuum, to be sure, are very real and persistent and legitimate issues in American life and as you all know if you follow politics, the battle between these contradictory points on the continuum are particularly pitched and passionate right now...with people on both sides throwing mean-spirited labels like “Socialists” and “Communists” (directed at those on the left of the spectrum) and “Greedy Capitalists” and “Heartless Conservatives” (directed at those on the right of the spectrum).

Now...as one hopefully reasonable and moderate and thoughtful and fair-minded American citizen, I am persuaded (unlike Ayn Rand on the right or Karl Marx on the left) that the health, vitality, and decency of our society is dependent on the nation choosing a middle course when it comes to this philosophical and policy continuum. And what scares me the most, in American life right now, is that some on “The Right” – enamored as they are with the fierce individualism and autonomy espoused by *Atlas Shrugged* – seem hell-bent on insisting that active/involved government of any sort...even here in the moderate middle – and the taxes and programs which come with it – are inherently evil and despotic, and will soon destroy the freedom and creativity that has always marked American life. They are suggesting that all right thinking, patriotic Americans philosophically “land” way down on the right (individualistic) side of this continuum. And, to be fair, on the other side of the equation – some on “The Left” – seem unwilling to even consider some of the restraints to governmental taxation, regulation and social support programs being suggested by those on the right. So partisans on both extremes overstate their case, and cling too passionately to their own extreme thinking.

But, in the end, to me as a Unitarian Universalist – as an unashamedly progressive religious person committed to a compassionate and fair society – the fierce and right-wing “Tea Party” rejection of government, taxation and social programs seems like an extreme and imbalanced view that is not supported by either the economic facts on the ground, or – and this is even more important – the spirit of the community-minded, compassionate Judeo-Christian tradition which has always animated and informed our nation.

While this nation is clearly and blessedly not a “Christian Nation” as some religious conservatives insist, it is a democratic republic which was clearly founded on the moral and ethical sensibilities of both Jewish and Christian traditions which early on played such important roles in the shaping of our national collective consciousness. While we as a nation have fought long and hard to maintain a proper separation between church and state (when it comes to

matters of religion and public policy), the American people are nonetheless rooted – when it comes to thinking our shared life one with the other – in the basic morality and ethics clearly expressed in both Jewish and Christian teachings. And what is that basic morality and ethics? Simply put, it is the conviction that a good and just society is one that protects and provides for all its citizens...that it is our duty as human beings and citizens, one to another, to ensure that there is “a compassionate safety net” that will prevent the unnecessary suffering of the most disadvantaged in society. Judeo-Christian ethics are animated by the simple morality of “The Golden Rule” – do unto others as you would have them do unto you – care for others in need as you would have yourself cared for if and when you are in need.

To me, the whole of Judeo-Christian ethics – the whole understanding of what it means to have an acceptable moral social order in any community or nation -- was summed up succinctly by Jesus of Nazareth, in that allegory about the judgment day I read earlier in the service. “Where were you?” Jesus starkly asks humanity, “when I was hungry...when I was thirsty...when I was a stranger...when I was naked, or sick or in prison...where were you?” Ayn Rand and the so called “heroes” of *Atlas Shrugged* would answer, “Just where I should be, off in the private marketplace, using my own wits to generate as much wealth and happiness as I can for myself and my family...disinterested in your or anybody else’s struggle or suffering.”

But for people of faith – and I believe for compassionate and caring citizens committed to the best of America’s social sensibilities – the answer should be, “I was working and contributing to and making sacrifices for a compassionate social order which seeks the good for all citizens...most especially those in distress or despair. I was volunteering, and making charitable contributions, and willingly paying taxes for the common good.”

I passionately believe that our religious tradition – Unitarian Universalism – which has its roots in Christianity, cannot endorse, condone or even tolerate the fiercely individualistic thinking of Rand, or anyone else who insists that we are not – in any way, shape or form – “Our brother’s keeper.” Indeed I cannot imagine any religious tradition true to the history and spirit of the Judeo-Christian tradition – not to mention the other great world religions Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism which have at the core of their ethical codes “The Golden Rule” of reciprocity and care for others in society – supporting this individualistic view of national life. It is undeniably human mutuality, generosity, compassion and care which animates all the world’s great religions, not individualism, capitalism, privatism and greed.

Let me return once again to our own particular faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism, to make this historic Judeo-Christian emphasis upon community and caring perfectly clear. If you look at our Seven Principles (which are printed each and every Sunday in our orders of service) you will note that they are all unmistakably animated by and infused with mutuality and community concern. Look at the content of these Seven Principles...can you accomplish any of these ideals in some sort of “splendid isolation?” No...they all require compassionate engagement and community connection. To be a Unitarian Universalist is to be committed to the idea that we are indeed – ever and always – one another’s “keepers,” citizens of the larger whole who have a powerful responsibility to look-out and care-out for one another.

And thus I return, full circle, to my chart, and the continuum of American social philosophy around which “the Great American Debate” now rages. Clearly neither:

1. Anomic, self-interested individuals acting selfishly, devoting all their energies and attentions to creating personal wealth, and refusing to share a portion of their resources with other, nor;
2. Big and bloated government, pretending to know what’s best for everyone, sapping individual incentive and initiative, are reasonable or proper. Healthy and noble societies always, always achieve a balance...in an in-between place.

What is clear to me – on this 26<sup>th</sup> day of June in the year 2011 – is that this “Great American Debate” along the continuum will continue for the foreseeable future, most certainly through the national elections next year, and no doubt for many years to come. The American people inevitably must and will debate this middle ground, most specifically the wisdom and fairness of specific public policies and programs, specific taxes and their levels, and governmental regulation and control at all levels of American life.

But what I believe with all my heart and soul is that we must never, ever, forsake the compassionate, collective spirit of America...the commitment of our founders to the moral and social idea that we are indeed ever and always “our brother’s keepers”...that we belong to one another as citizens of this great and free land. Surely the radical selfishness and social Darwinism, and societal indifference to suffering and want exalted in Ayn Rand’s book *Atlas Shrugged*, and demanded by so many who wear the Tea Party label on their hearts, have no place...no place...in a good and noble nation....no place in the United States of America.

Amen.