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A Commitment to Athenian Values

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(An article based on ideas of Neil Postman, from his book "Conscientious Objections." The first section, in blue, of this article is largely the words of or paraphrased ideas from Dr. Postman.)

Neil Postman talks of our ancestors; not our biological ones, but of two groups of people who lived many years ago. The first group lived in a city they called Athens. They were noted for considerable accomplishment such as the alphabet, literacy, political democracy, philosophy, logic, and rhetoric. They came very close to inventing what we call science. They composed great epic poems, wonderful songs, and created plays still used today.

The Athenians started what we call today the Olympics. None of their values stood higher than that in all things we should strive for excellence. They believed in reason and in beauty. They believed in moderation. It's hardly possible to speak on any subject today without repeating what some Athenian said on the matter 2,500 years ago.

The second group lived in Western Europe about 1,700 years ago. We call them the Visigoths. They were great horsemen. This may be the most positive thing one could say about them. The Visigoths were marauders, ruthless and brutal. Their language was coarse, what little art they had, grotesque. They overran the Roman Empire, destroying all in their path. They burned books, desecrated buildings and smashed works of art. From them we have no poetry, no theater, no logic, no science, no humane politics. They ushered in the Dark Ages and it took a very long time to recover.

An Athenian is an idea. A Visigoth is an idea. We choose either to live a set of values based on the Athenian or based on the Visigoth.

An Athenian cherishes language, holds knowledge in esteem. An Athenian reasons, experiments, questions, is moderate in temperament and in his dealings with others. An Athenian admires beauty, exalts life, and finds joy in learning and accomplishment of all kinds. Manners and courtesy are vital. Violence is an act against the very social order.

To a Visigoth, one word is as good as another. A Visigoth's language is satisfied with the cliché. A Visigoth centers his life around himself. Good manners are stupid. History is yesterday's newspaper. Popularity is all that counts for there is no other measure of excellence.

My comments on these concepts

Most of us rush to claim allegiance to the Athenian way, for there is little to be

said favorably for the Visigoth. The very analogy, however, sets us up for placing people into categories, them vs. us. The problem is that the Visigoth and the Athenian live side by side in each of us. We all struggle with self interest (our tax bills, for example) and the public good. We struggle with a personal schedule rooted in self-interest as opposed to involvement in public service. We're caught in the web of the popularity scam, serving up only "what people will like."

Communication media and entertainment provide some prime examples of a total sellout to popularity (Visigothian). TV shows of police work, the more violent the better, "The Jerry Springer Show," "professional" wrestling, the tabloids at the checkout stand, all illustrate the tasteless, the banal, the violent, the Visigoth.

Over and over, despite the banal, we can find examples of giving, of serving, of courtesy, and of holding others in high esteem. I heard a great example lately at a Rotary Club meeting at which a Rotary team told of their work in rural Mexico helping in the construction of a public building serving hundreds in an area of poverty. Other examples abound.

And the very nature of the business in which we choral people work draws us to an Athenian view. We fight a battle on the fine line of appearing snobbish and yet holding to the highest of standards. Oh, there is a battle! I don't know what it would take to make the Athenian within us and our society overcome the Visigoth. I can only hope that each of us continue to renew our commitment to those high values which place honor and beauty, truth, service, moderation and love of learning at the top of those forces which guide our actions.