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Imagine living in a 'Peaceful World'

Morna Murray | Jan. 3, 2013 NCR Today

The title to this piece is from John Mellencamp's "Peaceful World [1]," a song he wrote and recorded more than a decade ago. It became something of a song of comfort after the 9/11 attacks, when it was performed at the Concert for New York City [2].

The title is deceptively *nice*. It's actually a somewhat radical song with a refrain that repeats, "It's what you do, not what you say. If you're not part of the future then get out of the way." This refrain is on my mind as I read about all the Monday morning quarterbacking after the so-called fiscal cliff deal [3]. Prior to the deal, there was enormous angst, hang-wringing, criticism and rhetoric for months about going over the fiscal cliff, what it would mean, what even the threat of it would mean, for our economy. Once we averted the cliff by a few seconds, all the critics started in on how bad the vehicle was that didn't go over the dreaded cliff.

Well. I'm no fan of the way things get done these days in Congress. I'm no fan of the ultra-conservative members of the House that, though perhaps losing power, still seem to have some sway over at least the timing of what happens in the House. But having worked in the Senate, having seen firsthand members who hate the gamesmanship just as much as we all do, I'm not exactly sure what can be done to fix it. I'm not giving up on it; far from it. But I like John Mellencamp. I'm imagining him saying, "If you don't have something to add to the discussion or solution, get out of the way."

A couple of my readers like to tell me I am naïve and "Manichean" (I had to look that one up). Then I discovered Manichean is a combination of some great spiritual philosophies that contend with the eternal struggle between light and darkness, though calling someone Manichean is supposedly disparaging, as if they are simplistic. I take none of this personally. I truly appreciate the education. And frankly, I think anyone who doesn't see a continuing struggle between light and darkness, good and evil -- call it whatever you want -- in this world is naïve. This is a slight aside I will come back to, I promise.

So now we have this process that drove everyone crazy in getting a deal before crashing over the cliff, which really wouldn't have been [4] so good for our economy, seeing as how about 90 percent of us would pay almost $3,500 more in taxes. Now we have a deal, a lot of people are yelling about how bad it is. A lot of others are saying it is a great New Year's present. I think it's one of the safest bets that if we didn't have a deal, people would be screaming about that, too.

Back to Mellencamp. Can all these people just get out of the way? Are they part of the future? Call me simplistic. Please. But if they have something constructive to add, jump in. If they just want to hear themselves talk, why do we listen? Have we become a nation of cynics, complainers and whiners?

I like to think that commentators E.J. Dionne and Howard Fineman are in the Mellencamp camp with me on "Peaceful World." (That is not to say they are, of course, but if so, feel free to email me, PR people!) Dionne wrote a column [5] Wednesday that calls the deal "not-so-bad," pointing out that the top income rate is back up to 39.6 percent. Who thought that would happen? The estate tax is higher, not dead like we thought it would be for a long time. Refundable tax credits for low-income individuals and families and children are saved. This is

what we liberals call progress (now that 'liberal' is no longer a bad word). Progress. Progress is good. Sometimes it is slow, achingly slow, but it is still good. Sen. Ted Kennedy spent 30 years on health care reform. Now we have a ways to go on the deficit and spending cuts and further tax fixes, but we have hope. And we have progress. That may sound Manichean, but so be it.

A few days ago, Fineman wrote a powerful piece [6] about his visit to New Zealand, "View From Abroad: Undone by Political Gridlock, Gun Violence." He talks about the bewilderment from abroad over a system that "elects a guy but doesn't let him lead." He mentions a British couple who "couldn't believe I could tolerate living in a country with at least as many guns as people (not to mention some 2 million inmates)." One sentence almost knocked me over: "Maybe I had to get this far away to see Washington for what it is these days: the world capital of small-minded, cowardly, selfish thinking."

Disagree if you want, but I have yet to read something from Dionne and Fineman that does not contribute in some way to the future. They speak common-sense truth. They and others like them call out what is wrong but offer assessments of what can be better. They offer ideas for *progress*.

Whether your job is at home, in front of a computer, in a classroom, in a manufacturing plant, on TV, or wherever, we all need more progress and less empty criticism for its own sake. What if everyone who wasn't part of the future "just got out of the way"? Wouldn't that be amazing? OK, I'm really being Manichean now. Or even simplistic. But I can think of some other really simplistic statements (not that I'm comparing myself to the purported speaker of these words, please note that): "Heal the sick." "Feed the hungry." "Clothe the naked." "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as them."

Simple statements. Maybe things are simpler than we make them. Maybe it's so much easier to make them almost impossible so we don't have to do the hard work of fixing them. In any case, I'm with my man, John Mellencamp. If you're not part of the future, then get out of the way.

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