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# At the Edge of Inside

David Brooks    JUNE 24, 2016

In any organization there are some people who serve at the core. These insiders are in the rooms when the decisions are made. Hillary Clinton, for example, is now at the core of the Democratic Party.

Then there are outsiders. They throw missiles from beyond the walls. They are untouched by internal loyalties and try to take over from without. Donald Trump is a Republican outsider.

But there's also a third position in any organization: those who are at the edge of the inside. These people are within the organization, but they're not subsumed by the group think. They work at the boundaries, bridges and entranceways. Senator Lindsey Graham, for example, is sometimes on the edge of the inside of the G.O.P.

I borrow this concept from Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who lives in Albuquerque. His point is that people who live at the edge of the inside have crucial roles to play. As he writes in his pamphlet "The Eight Core Principles," when you live on the edge of any group, "you are free from its central

seductions, but also free to hear its core message in very new and creative ways.”

A person at the edge of inside can see what’s good about the group and what’s good about rival groups. Rohr writes, “A doorkeeper must love both the inside and the outside of his or her group, and know how to move between these two loves.”

A person at the edge of inside can be the strongest reformer. This person has the loyalty of a faithful insider, but the judgment of the critical outsider. Martin Luther King Jr. had an authentic inner experience of what it meant to be American. This love allowed him to critique America from the values he learned from America. He could be utterly relentless in bringing America back closer to herself precisely because his devotion to American ideals was so fervent.

A person on the edge of the inside knows how to take advantage of the standards and practices of an organization but not be imprisoned by them. Rohr writes, “You have learned the rules well enough to know how to ‘break the rules properly,’ which is not really to break them at all, but to find their true purpose: ‘not to abolish the law but to complete it.’”

When the behavioral economist Richard Thaler uses the lessons of psychology to improve economic modeling, he is operating just inside the edge of his own discipline and making it better.

The person on the edge of inside is involved in constant change. The true insiders are so deep inside they often get confused by trivia and locked into the status quo. The outsider is throwing bombs and dreaming of far-off transformational revolution. But the person at the doorway is seeing constant comings and goings. As Rohr says, she is involved in a process of perpetual transformation, not a belonging system. She is more interested in being a searcher than a settler.

Insiders and outsiders are threatened by those on the other side of the barrier. But a person on the edge of inside neither idolizes the Us nor demonizes the Them. Such a person sees different groups as partners in a reality that is paradoxical, complementary and unfolding.

There are downsides to being at the edge of inside. You never lose yourself in a full commitment. You may be respected and befriended, but you are not loved as completely as the people at the core, the band of brothers. You enjoy neither the purity of the outsider nor that of the true believer.

But the person on the edge of inside can see reality clearly. The insiders and the outsiders tend to think in dualistic ways: us versus them; this or that. But, as Rohr would say, the beginning of wisdom is to fight the natural tendency to be dualistic; it is to fight the natural ego of the group. The person on the edge of inside is more likely to see wholeness of any situation. To see how us and them, which seem superficially opposed, are actually in complementary relationship within some larger process.

Lincoln could see the divisions between North and South, but in his Second Inaugural he transcended these divisions and saw both North and South as actors and partners in a larger human drama.

When people are afraid or defensive, they have no tolerance for the person at the edge of inside. They want purity, rigid loyalty and lock step unity. But now more than ever we need people who have the courage to live on the edge of inside, who love their parties and organizations so much that they can critique them as a brother, operate on them from the inside as a friend and dauntlessly insist that they live up to their truest selves.

Paul Krugman is off today.

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