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Ideals and Principles

In the extreme—these can be harmful

by Ken Embley, CPPA

Flash—"Congress’ standoff jeopardizes 74,000 jobs"—a headline in the USA Today, Thursday August 4, 2011. Why?—congressional representatives have strong ideals and principles to defend.

Last month I wrote, “Decisions, decisions, decisions…, ever feel like you are sometimes caught between a rock and a hard place?” Then I asked “consider Homer’s Odyssey and Scylla and Charybdis, the source of the ‘rock and a hard place’ saying.” To be “caught” is to be faced with a decision between equally undesirable alternatives where there is no real positive outcome of the situation—but—a decision [and an outcome] is inevitable.”

Now consider our debt deal crisis and all the wrangling we witnessed over the past few months. Most of our esteemed congressional representatives are claiming the high ground and justifying their actions based on their personal ideals and principles. Each—in their own imagination—leading the charge for what is right. And by doing so, they avoid the need to make difficult “rock and a hard place” decisions.

Why? Because these representatives are not between anything. In their minds they are simply right. This is an ideal situation for principled representatives because if they lose, they become the victim, a martyr for the cause and if they win, hero status is bestowed upon them by likeminded followers. Both conditions are perfect for the fraught of a fall campaign.

In my opinion, it is not difficult to stick to ideals and principles. Rather, what is difficult is to be like Homer’s Odysseus who gathered the courage it takes to recognize that his situation placed him between the rock and the hard place. His situation forced him to consider the ideals and principles of others. Here he was faced the difficult challenge of working with others who did not agree with him. Here he was challenged to consider new threats and opportunities. Here, he had to discover what works best for the whole.

At the close of the Constitutional Convention, it is said that a woman asked Benjamin Franklin what type of government the Constitution was bringing into existence. Franklin replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.”

Consider—repealed “Jim Crow” laws, if you can keep it; the right to choose or right of life, if you can keep it; the right for a couple to marry in the state of New York, if you can keep it; the right to work in Wisconsin, if you can keep it! When dealing with these types of issues, our ideals and principles can be harmful because they can and sometimes do trample on the ideals and principles of others—a two way proposition.

My hope is that we can muster our abilities to temper our own ideals and principles, and then generate the courage it takes to place ourselves between life’s rocks and hard spots. It is here, among the rocks and hard spots of life where we can find the opportunities to make the best possible decisions.

To be honest Mr. Franklin, I am beginning to wonder if we have the collective courage to—as you said—“keep it.”