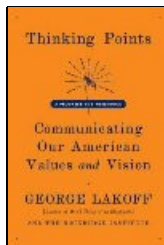


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Book Review

Thinking Points

Communicating Our American Values and Vision

by [George Lakoff](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer
Posted: February 17, 2007

In 2004, George Lakoff published [Don't Think of an Elephant](#). That book argued that Republicans were winning the battle for American minds because they understood that values often count for more than facts. If you frame a debate in terms of your value system, you can get people to support things that are logically not in their own interest.

The basic Republican frame, Lakoff argued, is that of the strict father. The strict father believes that the world is dangerous, there will always be winners and losers, children are born bad, and the key to success is discipline and a black-and-white moral code. The Democratic frame is that of the nurturing parent. The nurturing parent believes that children are basically good and can be made better, and that the shared task of parents is to nurture their children and help them to nurture others.

Lakoff sketched out some of the basic ideas that go with the idea of the nurturing parent, but did not say much about how to convey them. He called for the creation of liberal think tanks — progressive counterparts to the Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute — to work on that task.

In *Thinking Points*, Lakoff joins forces with one liberal think tank, the Rockridge Institute, to present some ideas on the most effective ways to frame and communicate progressive ideas.

One reason Democrats have been less effective than they could be is the idea that they have to appeal to the "center." According to Lakoff, there is no center. "In fact, the so-called center is actually made up of biconceptuals, people who are conservative in some aspects of life and progressive in others."

Many people who think of themselves as conservatives have strongly held convictions that are actually progressive, if looked at in the right way. These people can be considered "partial progressives," and they include the following:

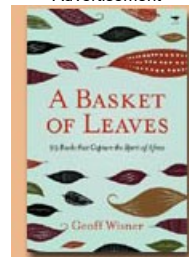
- Lovers of the land, including hunters, fishermen, and evangelicals who believe we should be good stewards of the planet.
- Communitarians, who believe in the importance of local neighborhoods and looking out for each other.
- People of faith, including Christians who remember that the religion is supposed to be about helping the poor, feeding the hungry, and curing the sick.
- Socially conscious employers, who treat their employees, customers, and neighborhood well, and believe they should do more than follow the letter of the law.
- Civil libertarians, who support the Bill of Rights because they want privacy and personal freedom (along with the right to bear guns).

When Democrats try to move toward the center by adopting Republican policies, themes, and language, they come across as false. Authenticity is the key to success to politics, just as Seth Godin says it is the key to success in marketing. The moral is simple, Lakoff says. "Be authentic and stick to what you really believe."

To do this well requires thinking about your language in terms of frames. "Frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality — and sometimes to create what we take to be reality." Lakoff tries to categorize various types of frames: deep frames, surface frames, argument frames, commonplace frames, issue-based frames, and so on. I find these categories confusing and not very helpful, but the basic idea seems sound.

The war on terror, for instance, has been very successful frame for the right. As long as you accept the idea that there is such a thing as a war on terror, you find yourself committed to a scary and endless struggle against something undefinable. If 9/11 had been framed as a major crime rather than an act of war, the response might have been to use diplomacy and good police work to track down those who planned the attack, and the results might have been quite different.

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In the chapter "Morality and the Market," Lakoff neatly eviscerates the conservative "leave it to the market" refrain that is heard on topics ranging from healthcare to global warming.

"Consider what a purely free market — that is, a market without government intervention — would look like," Lakoff writes. "Drug companies could market drugs they haven't fully tested, knowing they cannot be regulated or sued. A mining company's only incentive to secure safety for its workers would be the fear that killing too many workers would decrease the labor supply and drive up labor costs or generate ill will. An oil company's only incentive to strip gasoline of lead would be the potential PR problem from putting lead in our atmosphere."

"On issue after issue," he writes, "the counterpoints to the conservative principle of the free market are the progressive principles of human dignity and the common good. We are interested in a market that serves human values, not humans who serve a market.... No one makes it on his or her own in this country. The more you make, the more you have used the common wealth, and the more responsibility you have to pay to maintain the common wealth."

About the Reviewer

Geoff Wisner is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.



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