

Turn to elders for wisdom about maintaining our social safety net

Future historians will have no trouble seeing when our society's disconnect from its Judeo-Christian moorings became complete.

It was July 1, 2011, when Assembly leader Connie Conway affirmed legislators' desire to maintain a safety net but "don't want it turning into a hammock with cute little drinks with umbrellas."

Of all the things the new California budget means to low-income people, a day at the beach is least among them. Cash assistance to welfare recipients was reduced to more than 70 percent less than the federal "minimum basic need" level. Support for job training and child care was also cut, as were domestic violence intervention and services to those with physical and mental disabilities. And, in case anyone missed the point, the cost of school lunches and college tuition increased.

When this values shift started is harder to say, but it was probably when feelings started becoming confused with facts and knowledge substituted for wisdom.

It's no coincidence that this shift correlates with the emergence of politics and celebrity as our society's primary spokespersons. It also coincides with the disappearance of community elders who - blessed with the benefits of experience and relieved of fame and fortune pursuits - were previously relied upon for keen insights about current realities and future possibilities.

Sacramento remains especially blessed with one such elder widely praised for his humanity, humility and humor by those of varied religious traditions and political affiliations. Working for a dozen years among American Indians in the Arizona desert after his "retirement" as the leader of the Roman Catholic Sacramento Diocese, Bishop Francis Quinn now lives quietly in midtown - but still his views loudly



Robert Tobin has been helping low-income people help themselves - and each other - for nearly four decades.

speak to us.

Imagine if spouses, couples, politicians and the rest of us honored Quinn's recommendation to focus on the 70 percent to 80 percent where there is agreement, avoid condemning judgment or condescending edicts while working from there toward areas where "good people disagree." How much quicker and closer to consensus would we get if all issues were approached from this direction?

It's no coincidence this (values) shift correlates with the emergence of politics and celebrity as our society's primary spokespersons. It also coincides with the disappearance of community elders who ... were previously relied upon for keen insights.

Nearly 90 years of life experience convinces Quinn of the efficacy of inclusiveness in both political and theological realms. A longtime advocate of ecumenicalism, he points out the central theme of every religious denomination is the admonition to treat others as we wish to be treated. What would happen if this simple-but-not-easy challenge was the guiding principle of personal, professional and political behavior?

In any public remarks, Quinn always acknowledges the various names each religion ascribes to its god. As for his personal choice,

Quinn notes that Jesus talked about fear more often than love, frequently admonishing his followers to "fear not" because it undermines trust and thus makes it impossible to love. At a time when there has never been greater need for unity, is there any better explanation of the nation's divisiveness, or any clearer path for alleviating it?

Quinn continues to lead by example by taking personal responsibility for the sins of ignorance and inertia during his tenure that placed vulnerable children in harm's way. What kind of world would we have if name-calling and finger-pointing no longer substituted for public accountability?

In a new book about "how to change things when change is hard," the New York Times best-

seller by Chip and Dan Heath titled "Switch" warns that "what looks like a people problem is often a situation problem." In dealing with poverty and all other such "situations," it further cautions that "what looks like laziness is often exhaustion," and "what looks like

resistance is often a lack of clarity."

Our news media can help alleviate this "lack of clarity" regarding pressing issues of today and tomorrow by adding respected community elders to its list of consulted news sources, assuring our community's fortunes are not defined solely through the narrow view shaped by term limits and election cycles.

Otherwise, we might get the idea that our society's biggest problem is its social safety net becoming a hammock with cute little umbrella drinks.