

Lumper or Splitter?

There seems in each of us to be a primary tendency either toward relating, combining, joining, affiliating – or – toward isolating, dividing, separating, partitioning. Which is the more prevalent tendency in your life? Are you more likely to see and seek out commonalities with others, or more likely to notice and point out differences? A colleague of ours, in noting the common human inclination for choosing one style in preference to the other, said we could just as well label ourselves either “lumpers” or “splitters.”

In recent years, we’ve begun to wonder if the culture at large could also be labeled this way. Are we a lumping culture, or a splitting culture? In times past, the prevailing cultural emphasis in the United States seemed to be on lumping, not splitting. Civic organizations such as service clubs, women’s clubs, and lodges, which emphasized joining together to create community and foster widely-held, mutually beneficial goals and interests, all flourished. Many of these “lumping” organizations are now on the decline, as special interest groups that focus on a far narrower range of interests and goals are instead on the rise. Special interest groups, while addressing significant concerns of smaller groups, do not serve to unite communities or the culture at large. Rather, they serve as “splitters.”

As the mindset of Americans is moving steadily away from “lumping” and toward “splitting,” its effects can also be seen in how we spend our free time. Before World War II, homes in our country were nearly always constructed with generous front porches for sitting, observing, gathering, and talking with family and neighbors in the community. But after World War II the focus of leisure time moved from the more public and communal forum available on the front porch, to the more private and secluded setting of the back yard. Still later, as television saw a tremendous rise in popularity, the family’s leisure time became more isolated yet, focused as it was around passively watching the TV set in the family room. And today, computers have tended to split us even further. Computer usage is virtually always a solitary enterprise.

Interestingly, the religious interest in either joining with others or isolating from others also undergoes seasons of change. Movements in the early to mid part of the last century resulted in several Christian denominations merging. It was a time of enthusiastic hope that we Christians could learn to overcome our differences and fulfill Jesus’ hope that we might all become one. Fifty years later, the dream for universal Christian unity seems farther away than ever.

And although unity may never have been the goal in inter-faith dialogue, many Christians have historically sought to bridge divides with those of other faiths. Today those talks are often strained and stalled. We are all more likely, it seems, to credit what divides us, than what unites us.

How much togetherness and compromise do you support? How much privacy and separateness do you seek? How each of us answers those questions will influence how we all see the world and how we shape it for years to come. Are you a lumper or a splitter?