

My 2021 New Year's Revolution

At the end of the previous year, I wrote and sent out a little poem speaking to how 2019 had been a rough row to hoe, and raising hints for the better times ahead in 2020. The dubious quality of lyrical content aside, it's obvious that I'm hardly a reliable oracle.

Now, with the passing of another rough year, a part of me is wishing we could skip 2021 altogether and use the time to get a running start at 2022. If the previous year was a difficult row to hoe, this last one has been a bitch in the ditch, and it worries me that tough years might run in threes.

But then, it's already a clearly established fact that when it comes to making predictions about the future my track record is dismal. With that understanding, here comes the straight skinny as I see it, unvarnished by flowery platitudes.

We're all doomed. The world is on fire, literally and figuratively. People living in regions all over the world are drowning in suffering and misery, variously being ravaged by devastating storms, floods, mudslides, massive wildfires, earthquakes, plagues of infectious disease, abject poverty, hunger and thirst, joblessness, homelessness, drug addiction, mental illness, mass incarceration, suicide, violent political upheaval, religio-political terrorism, widespread ethnicism and endemic ethnic genocide, organized predatory thuggery, and war. Burgeoning multitudes of people have left their homelands to join increasing populations of refugees in search of a safer and better life, some now imprisoned in refugee camps where conditions are poor and despair flourishes.

Looming over all of us, regardless of social standing or affiliation, like a dark cloud overshadowing this entire litany of tragedy and disaster, are shifts in the weathersphere so massive and momentous that the narrow conditions that make this planet habitable for our species are collapsing faster than most scientists were predicting just a few years ago. Moreover, we are woefully behind the 8-ball in taking those measures we must take if we are to have any chance at all of slowing, let alone stopping and reversing, this implacably advancing threat to our continued existence.

The debate between industrialist profiteers and the scientific community over whether or not climate change is real has us lagging in our response to the threat, when

we don't have the luxury of time to fool around. At the rate we're going, greed and willful ignorance may spell our extinction as a species. It should not be so hard to arrive at some consensus on the basis of our own senses alone, science notwithstanding. When smoke from monstrous fires in the western states this past year darkened the skies over Europe, that alone should be enough to cinch the case in the minds of intelligent persons. I am left with a lingering cough after two months of breathing that same smoke, so I'm definitely convinced.

And as if we needed any more distraction from the need of rising to meet these challenges, there's an orange guy in the White House who has barricaded himself in the bathroom, refusing to comply with the eviction notice that was, along with his ass, recently handed to him. Enough already!

Have I overlooked anything in this doomsday review? Oh, yeah ... the viral pandemonium. Perhaps I should've led with that considering how it has played such a devastating role in the lives of us all, and how large it has been playing in my personal life.

Prisons notoriously make an ideal environment for the spread of an infectious disease. The prison where I reside has been on varying degrees of CoVid-19 lockdown since last March. The number of coronavirus infections among prisoners and staff has been relatively low compared to some of the other prisons in the state. Inter-facility transfers of prisoners have been halted for the most part, with quarantine protocols in place for transfers deemed necessary, such as in the case of a medical emergency.

The danger of an unknowingly infected prison employee being the source of coronavirus transmission inside the prison is minimized by subjecting staff to temperature checks when they arrive for work, and weekly CoVid-19 testing. The system is fairly reliable but not foolproof. With the spike in community spread after the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, and a significant rise of new cases among prisoners, the authorities took the precaution of putting the facility on full lockdown as of the beginning of December. All I wanted for Christmas was a hot shower. That didn't happen.

Despite the hardships, I'm grateful to all the local decision-makers who have kept me, and most others in here, safe from coronavirus infection during this time.

Am I suffering from pandemic fatigue? You betcha! And I'm probably a little too fixated on the news from outside for my own good. It's like I'm feeling all the pain and confusion people are suffering in the world these days, and I don't exactly know what I'm supposed to do with that.

Unlike the other challenges to survival that our species is facing, this one, the current pandemic, is not manmade. A virus is a lifeform produced by nature. Some of the notions I've heard ascribed to the CoVid-19 pandemic strike me as pretty weird. Bizarre absurdities.

This pandemic is not God's judgement on humanity. It is not a morality play, not karma, nor is it nature's way of culling the human populations with any kind of intelligent plan or intention. A virus, or any other microbe that might make us sick, is neither good nor bad. To nature, the progenitor of all lifeforms on this planet, a parasite is just as valid a form of life as its host. Any species, one supremely intelligent or one as gormless as a slug, must adapt to prevailing conditions or perish, simple as that. And nature is too busy making the next new thing to care about the outcome one way or the other.

But we humans care. We tend to be curious creatures, and some of us observe what nature is doing very closely. Biologists believe that most if not all of the viruses that have plagued us across the millennia (for many of which we carry instructions coded in our DNA to immunize us against their former ability to make us sick) emerged out of bat caves, where there are steamy brews of bat poop and bugs and microorganisms, all squirming around in the muck and experimentally mutating. Mother Nature likes to play with herself in the dark, cooking up new life.

New viral contagions are typically delivered to humans and other mammals by unwitting bats, as it is believed happened to trigger our current pandemic. Just last week I listened to a talk by a biologist who described how he and others in his field are capturing bats to swab their mouths for new viruses, to map the viral DNA for the development of vaccines that might be used to make pre-emptive strikes on future

pandemics. The researchers are also vaccinating bats to prevent them from contracting diseases and transmitting them to human beings and other mammals. What's more, they're getting the bats to inoculate each other. Bats like to lick one another's fur. If a vaccine is applied to the fur of one bat, that bat will then carry the vaccine to all of the other bats in its cohort. Clever, eh? Turns out it's a whole lot easier to inoculate a population of bats than it is to inoculate eight billion people.

This time around, though, we'll be doing it the old-fashioned way. The US is in the midst of a somewhat rocky rollout of the first CoVid-19 vaccines. Certainly, we are at the beginning of the end of this pandemic, but we are far from being out of the woods. Infections are peaking in many parts of the world. Even with multiple vaccines being made available we are looking at some long months before we begin to get the pandemic under control. The majority of the world's population must be inoculated against the virus before a high enough level of immunization is reached to be able to say we've beaten this strain of coronavirus.

We all owe a great debt of gratitude to the out-going administration for the success of the Operation Warp Speed vaccine development program. This truly remarkable achievement is a testament to what is possible when people pool their ideas and come together in a concerted way to realize a goal. It's a pretty safe bet that it wasn't Donald Trump's own strategy (Dr. Trump's idea, remember, was a cleansing injection of bleach), but it happened on his watch, and it was his administration's task force that rallied the pharmaceutical companies to tackle vaccine development. In spite of his almost criminally lackadaisical and disingenuous approach to the handling of the pandemic in this country he deserves the credit for this remarkable success.

Yes, I'm aware that this acknowledgment seems somewhat begrudging. Sorry, it's the best I can manage for now.

No one is to be blamed for a natural catastrophe, of course, but it didn't have to be so bad. Unfortunately for folks in the US, and some other countries, we were hit with the global outbreak of an infectious disease at a time when we had saddled ourselves with nationalist leadership predisposed to protecting its self-interest. When suddenly facing the ravages of a pandemic societies quickly discover that there is little protective value

in meticulously drawn arbitrary borders and their assortments of barricades. Ethnic and religious divisions, gender biases, ideological disagreements, class divisions, and the myriad other contrivances we humans have devised to separate ourselves from one another only serve to disguise the fact of our commonality and get in the way of concerted efforts needed to beat back our common enemy.

Without equivocation, my position is that all of humanity is of common stock. Responsibility for oneself carries with it the need to be responsible for one another. Just try to name a single thing that should be more unifying than a common threat to our existence. The coronavirus itself recognizes our commonality better than many of we humans do. To the virus we are just one big yummy feast, and the perfect playground to propagate its species.

The next time we are confronted by the challenges of a pandemic disease — and I hate to break it to you, there will be many next times — we may be too late in responding to it if we fail to learn some important lessons from the current experience. We may be too slow on the uptake if we have to adjust for being misled by leaders who have convinced us that the enemies to be guarded against are brown border jumpers, foreign religious zealots, asylum seekers, the free press and members of the opposing political party. These constructs of suspicion and fear tend to be the foundation of self-fulfilling prophesy; these mocked-up preoccupations are ultimately revealed to be frivolous when natural phenomena catastrophically assume pre-eminence on a global scale.

In this case prejudice, fear, complacency and petty self-interest conspired to distract us from preparing for what we had long been told by the experts in communicable disease would certainly come. It was a failure that turned out to be debilitating and even fatal for a great many people, a failure to take enough notice of the little things. A tiny invisible enemy was sneaking up on us.

The invader hitched a ride in a bat and was transported into Wuhan by an enterprising trader in exotic wild animals, brought to market for eating by people. Or so it was conjectured during the earliest investigations of the outbreak, which means it's likely closest to the truth of the various theories that have been tendered in the past year.

Oh, the perils of eating bats in the 21st Century!

Now, speaking strictly for myself, although I have a fairly adventurous palette for a westerner, I have a very hard time wrapping my mind around the notion of eating any part of a bat. It gives me the heebie-jeebies just thinking about the sorts of places bats hang out in during the day, the corpses of their fellows littering the floors of their caves along with all the other creepy stuff roiling down there, and triggers my gag reflex when I associate that with eating one of those critters. But that's just me, so no judgements. Sensibilities vary from one culture to another. In parts of Asia in particular, virtually any creature that crawls, flaps, swims, squirms, buzzes, hops, waddles, or what have you, is on the menu. In some of these cultures it is believed that certain animals, or parts of animals, impart curative or enhancing benefits when consumed. Now we know there can be unwelcome consequences to some of these practices.

It is possible, I suspect, that the Chinese government was slow to inform the rest of the world about the outbreak because, perhaps, it would mean losing face to have to admit that some Chinese citizens are inclined to put highly unusual items on their dinner plates. And maybe they believed that they could contain the outbreak before anyone in other nations became the wiser. Reportedly, the wet markets where exotic animals were being sold for food in Wuhan have been shut down by the government, suggesting my surmise may be the right of it.

Blame is one of the most unproductive behaviors a person can engage in, it seems to me. Donald Trump apparently believes otherwise. Like a common schoolyard bully, he makes up derogatory names for people he doesn't like or who threaten or thwart him, and deflects responsibility for his failings by blaming others. Both of these propensities are dominant features in his personality that he has brought into the office of the presidency. He has consistently, without evident shame, employed infantile name-calling and blaming throughout his tenure as the POTUS whenever he is confronted by an obstacle he is ill-equipped to deal with.

And that's what gripes me about the guy: that he occupies the space reserved for a most important leader while lacking any real leadership qualities at a time when leadership is what this country needs most.

In keeping with his immature propensities, Trump wasted no time in shifting all the blame for the pandemic onto the Chinese, calling it “the China plague” during his speeches. He has yet to mention, as far as I know, that Chinese geneticists acted immediately to make the genetic code of the new coronavirus public as soon as they had mapped it. This shaved valuable time off the vaccine development period so that big pharma companies could get vaccines to us rapidly. In a pandemic there is much more to be gained by cooperating than with divisive rhetoric. The virus is a threat to all people of all nations equally, after all.

I knew we were in trouble when, in the early stages of the pandemic spread, Trump appointed his dipped-in-Colgate VP to head the new coronavirus task force team. For a time, President Trump stood to one side, self-consciously rotating to and fro from his hips like a mechanical Santa in a store window while his yes-man and health experts did the talking. This couldn't last for long. Trump commandeered control of the microphone and returned to making vague reassurances to America, playing down the severity of the pandemic, saying he had it all under control, and emphasizing the need to get the economy back on track at all costs. He contradicted the guidance of medical experts on his own task force with his talk of quack remedies and cures, as if wishful thinking could ever be a replacement for real and responsible policy.

It became clear to me then that to Donald J. Trump, even in the face of a dire national threat, the only thing truly important is what's good for Donald J. Trump. How he might look to the supporters of his re-election campaign would henceforth take precedence over any other consideration, including the safety and well-being of the American citizenry.

Absolutely unconscionable to me is that the erstwhile leader of the free world would fail to inform the American people just how infectious the viral outbreak is, and how severe and potentially deadly the CoVid-19 illness could be, as soon as he knew. And when the extreme seriousness of the pandemic became self-evident, he again failed to lead, failed in his responsibility as a president to recommend and exemplify the safeguards that help

to slow the spread of the disease and help to provide personal protections against getting infected. He failed his office by failing the people.

Trump said he didn't like to wear a mask because he thought it made him look weak, and chided others around him for wearing one as a way of badgering them into following his bad example. Well, take it from someone who has lived for more than half a century in a world where guys who want to look tough are in abundance: the need to look tough to others is the refuge of one with weaknesses to hide. Hard looks may seem impressive in a theatrical wrestling ring where bombast and athleticism are combined to make a show of being tough, but hard looks have never won a war in real life. In my experience, giving people hard looks is an invitation to getting a punch in the face.

There was a time in this country, and it was not so long ago, when it was understood that being an American carried with it a certain level of patriotic responsibility, or civic duty. It was considered a small price to pay for the freedoms we enjoy. Seeking to support the well-being of fellow citizens, even when a sacrifice of some sort may be involved, was believed to be about the most patriotic thing one could do.

Nowadays we have American citizens wrapping themselves in American flags and sporting American insignia, as if to say they are more patriotic than those other Americans, while refusing to do a few little simple things that would truly support their country at this time. By modifying their behavior in accordance with the expert guidance they would help to safeguard themselves, their immediate families and cohorts, neighbors and other Americans, as well as severely challenged hospitals from the ravages of coronavirus infection.

The excuse used by elected officials and regular citizens for refusing to go along with the guidance from the medical community is the need to get the US economy back on track at all costs. Many people are stricken by the loss of their livelihoods, so this is understandable, if acutely myopic. If the US health care system collapses as a result of being overwhelmed with coronavirus cases the economic consequences will be orders of magnitude worse than what we're already experiencing. This is because the health care system is intimately connected to many other parts of the economy, through insurance companies, employers, corporate holdings, drug

manufacturers and suppliers, banks, first responders, etc. The collapse of a hospital triggers a domino-effect cascade of financial disruption downstream.

During the second World War the government imposed strict curfews, blackouts, mandated selective service in the military, commandeered private manufacturing for wartime uses, implemented rationing and other austerities. These government orders were a hardship or an inconvenience to the country's citizens, yet few of them complained. Everyone understood it was their duty as patriots to comply with the measures the government deemed necessary to defeat a determined enemy and win the war for the free world.

The current pandemic has already killed more Americans in the past year than were killed in all four years of WWII combined. This evening I heard a news report that decried a record 4000 Americans dying from complications from CoVid-19 in just the past 24 hours. We are at war. Make no mistake about it. The out-going president's cavalier attitude regarding CoVid-19 casualties notwithstanding, we have to be on a wartime footing if we are to succeed in keeping the number of deaths of our citizens to a minimum and avoid the complete collapse of our economy.

Some very brave nurses, doctors, medical technicians and other healthcare professionals have been fighting on behalf of all of us for the better part of a year. Many are exhausted, some are experiencing PTSD or something very much like it, while struggling and failing to stay ahead of the rate of infection. Other frontline workers, too, some of them immigrants, some of them undocumented, have put themselves in jeopardy to keep us safe, and keep us in food and supplies, largely freeing us from the need to be concerned about these necessities so we can hunker down and slow the spread. All they have asked from us in return was just a few simple things: wash our hands, wear a mask, keep a reasonable distance from anyone outside of our personal cohort, and stay at home when possible.

Yet we have a large segment of the US population waving American flags and wearing MAGA apparel who have made the refusal to wear a mask and socially distance a symbolic gesture of loyalty to the Ignoramus In Chief, in defiance of the common good. My God, I wonder where the America my father joined the Marines to fight for in WWII has gone.

Hypocrisy has infected the social integrity of this country like I have not seen before in my lifetime, and may threaten the American way of life even more than the coronavirus pandemic. A sad irony is that many of the people who object most loudly to stay-at-home orders and mask mandates on the basis of their being infringements on their civil rights as Americans see no contradiction when they demand that the government enact a law that would deprive a woman of sovereignty over her own body.

On the day that the result of the recent presidential election was called I authored a brief reflection on the significance of the event and shared it openly. In one part I referred to the current president as a “malignant narcissist” and otherwise cast him in an unflattering light. Most readers who responded agreed with my assessment. There was a little push-back, however, mostly from people who mistakenly assumed from my remarks that I was a fan of his opponent in the race. The fact that “narcissist” is not a word that appears in a dictionary, much less a personal noun in the way that I used it, was not among the objections.

Anyway, I do regret applying the term in the way that I did. No person should be labeled with the name of their illness or disability as if it is who they are, no matter who they are, and even when that’s the way it seems.

Once upon a time when I was a much younger man and quite naive in some respects, I befriended someone who suffered from malignant narcissism, a man by the name of Charlie Manson. Being too inexperienced back in those days to apprehend my own human frailties, much less the complex psychology of a man who had been damaged as much as Manson had, I couldn’t see the danger he posed to everyone in his sphere of influence. I continue to pay a heavy price for the failure of discerning judgement that allowed that man to be any part of my life.

From hard-knocks experience, I developed an acute sensitivity that allows me to detect that particularly toxic form of narcissism whenever I encounter someone who is possessed by the trait. Though only a small minority, such people are a feature of the prison landscape. One is wise to be on guard when in their vicinity.

It seems to me that some people may be born with a defect that exhibits as that form of malignancy, but I think in most cases it manifests when a child’s innate desire

to love and be loved is crushed by one or more adults in the child's early life. Donald Trump's father, who is said to have been a notorious predatory slum lord, no doubt subjected young Donald to brutish treatment, if only love denied.

Based on what I have seen and experienced, malignant narcissism is a kind of immoral self-delusion. Those suffering from it are typically willing to sacrifice without compunction the well-being of anyone and everyone on the altar of what they perceive is the image of themselves in the eyes of others. To one who has not known love and doesn't know what genuine love looks like, the trappings of popularity, adoration, and devoted loyalty will do. Such people are driven only by what they believe best serves the interests of number one, without any detectable suggestion of regret, there being no true self-awareness to raise the specter of moral dilemma. An all-consuming egocentricity of this sort is the sanctuary of one who is incredibly lonely, a loneliness often hidden behind a veneer of bravado or hostility.

Many years ago something like a grub crawled into the space where Donald Trump's heart should have been, and it squirms around in there to this day.

While I don't really want to alarm anyone, it might be of some value to take note that Donald Trump has a whole lot more followers than Charlie ever dreamed about having. And they've got a ton of guns.

A man, a father, a loved and respected member of his community, is being slowly executed by asphyxiation on a street in Minneapolis. His clean white t-shirt has picked up dirt from the asphalt where he lays in the shadow of a police cruiser. The city policeman seems almost nonchalant as he kneels over the man, pressing down hard on his knee to suppress the big man's struggles; he is following his training, after all, employing a procedure prescribed for dealing with an uncooperative individual who meets a certain suspect profile. The officer ignores the pleas for mercy, those of the big man as well as those of some onlookers, including a fellow officer. The man knows he is about to die; he begs for someone nearby to relay a last message of love and regret to his mother. The knee on his throat presses down harder, closing his windpipe, and, after almost nine long minutes, the big man dies. The cell phone video goes black.

Mark me now, I have seen some bad shit in my days on this earth. My life is that kind of puzzle. Even so, not much comes to mind as dreadful and horrifying as witnessing the slaying of George Floyd in that bystander's film on my little prison television.

President Trump's response? Pretty much zilch. If that grub in his chest wriggled at all it was not so as anyone else could tell.

Whatever may be the final determination in the killing of George Floyd, it certainly looked to all the world like the modern equivalent of a lynching. And it followed a long series of killings of people of color that bore the markings of being racially motivated, going back years, decades, centuries. What made the killing of Floyd so profoundly different was the compelling film, and the way the internet made it possible for people all over the world to see it. The cry for justice continues to resound.

After weeks of nearly constant protest marches and demonstrations that brought together people of every age and skin complexion, to raise a cry, in the midst of a global plague, for an end to the abuses of a derelict criminal justice system, Trump finally makes a statement in response to the concerns of the populace. Only obliquely, though, in typical Trumpian fashion, framing a response he believes will promote his image as a tough guy in the minds of voters, while obscuring the glaring social inequities troubling the national conscience with yet another calculated misdirection.

A slumbering giant has awakened and is demanding equity in opportunity and justice under the law, with an end to the violence brought by law enforcement into the communities of people of color. And all President Trump can think to do is puff out his chest and toss insults at the giant. A fool fails to rise to the moment. When what we need is some leadership with a heart, what we get instead is a stunt empty of purpose or meaning.

It is June 1st, 2020. A loud, somewhat raucous but peaceful demonstration is underway in Lafayette Square, near the White House. The POTUS stands at his bully pulpit in the Rose Garden and blathers some inane rhetoric about how he is the law-and-order president, and that he's going to bring the might of US law enforcement down on the heads of rioters and looters who threaten the American way of life. And then, as a demonstration of his intention, with a phalanx of federal police and military personnel

to clear his path of protesters, Trump crashes the BLM protest demonstration in Lafayette Square so he can get a photograph of himself taken with a Bible he has never opened in front of a church he has never entered.

One of the more indelible moments in the video of this spectacle is an extended shot of an elderly white man, one of the protesters, brutally knocked to the ground by the police escort in their rush to clear the path for Trump. He was left lying there, flat on his back on the concrete pavement, his head split open, bleeding out of his ears. I don't recall any mention of that man's name.

The election is done. Not done, however, is all the drama over the result, which is likely to linger for some time. Everyone, if only on a deep level some people are unwilling to acknowledge, knows that the election was fair and the result accurate. Those who believed that Trump was going to be their conquering hero and deliver on his empty promises to bring their old jobs back and keep the darkies out of the country may want to believe that the election was rigged, and the presidency stolen. Honestly, I feel for them all. The political elites in Washington have ignored their plight and their needs for far too long. Nevertheless, the people have spoken. A significant majority, including many republicans, acted to assert that demagoguery in the office of the Presidency is not a good look for the nation. Otherwise, the winner in the election is divided government.

Looks like we're not going to be able to expect a whole lot of help from that quarter. The challenges people in this nation and the world are facing are not insurmountable, but many of them are massive. We need help from the people who are elected into offices to provide that help, yet it seems that when all those political folks get together in Washington all they can do for the most part is bicker over which side has the best political philosophy, and jockey for position in preparation for the next election cycle. It seems that no one is actually doing any real listening, each politician only waiting for their next turn to do the talking. Those of us down here in middle earth have been disappointed so many times!

This nation was founded as a democratic republic. How did we get to the place where it's become republicanism *versus* democracy? Where are "We the people ..." in all this?

The two-party system in its current incarnation is so dysfunctional, so mired in power struggle for its own sake, that it's no longer able to serve the people. All the energy, for the most part, gets spent leapfrogging from one election cycle to the next, with dark money determining outcomes.

But what do I know? I'm just a guy in prison who has never voted in his life (though I would if I could), and who didn't pay much attention to what happens in the political arena, tracking what happened in that world with one ear and sidelong glances, until I saw a guy I knew to be deadly dangerous elected into office as President. That got my attention. Now that I've invested a good deal of time in watching the goings on in Washington much more closely for a while, I can see the real danger that ineffective government poses to the well-being of America. And now that I see it, I find that I am not comfortable being complacent about what is happening in the political world. For what value there may be in sharing what I'm seeing from my low vantage, here you are.

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We're living in a burning house, folks. The writing of my reflections on the past year and my thoughts looking ahead had to be put on pause for a bit, my process having been rudely interrupted by yet another Trump-instigated drama. The events of 2020 are literally bleeding into 2021. The Trump Presidency is like an unwelcome gift that just keeps on giving.

A little over a week ago a friend gave me a heads up, tipping me off that a new wrinkle in the fabric of American society was developing in the nation's capital. Ordinarily I never turn on my television during the day. There's only so much pop

culture a guy can take before something like a bout with depression sets in, so I usually limit my television watching to evenings only. Significant world events are the rare exception.

I turned on the tube and watched as the nightmarish events at the US Capitol Building began to violently unfold, learning only later that Donald Trump was doing precisely the same thing at precisely the same time. Not since the days of MAD and the Vietnam conflict during the Cold War era have I felt less proud to be an American.

When I first tuned in the scene that greeted me was that of a hostile horde of white-complexioned people converging on the central edifice of our American democracy, like a mob of angry villagers hot on the heels of Doktor Frankenstein's monster. Only this was not an old black and white movie; it was an ugly horror show in hi-res living color, and the mob was not carrying torches and pitchforks; they were wearing apparel and carrying banners and flags emblematic of the cult of Trump. Many in the mob were waving signs saying "Stop The Steal" or messages with a similar meaning.

A couple of the rioters were scaling the walls of the Capitol Building freestyle, which seemed especially odd since there were plenty of staircases nearby. And as time went on most of the climbers seemed to get stuck in place, not going up or down but only clinging to the walls like weird ornaments. Stranger still, there was no evidence in sight of police or military personnel for quite some time. It baffled me why it took such a long time for law enforcement to bring the rioting under control and clear the grounds of the would-be revolutionaries.

Way back in the day I used to think of myself as a revolutionary. What I saw on January 6th bore little resemblance to what I imagined the revolution would look like in those long ago days.

The scenes filmed inside the Capitol Building, shot with cell phones, reveal people who have been made mad by years of a steady diet of poisonous rhetoric. Insurgency is too polite a word, and sedition too sensible a word for what was taking place in those hallowed halls. It was a rape of America by some of its own citizens. Rampaging lunatics in an asylum smearing their feces on the walls and decorations to express outrage over the conditions of their confinement. Juvenile delinquents on a

vandalism spree, trashing the local high school, indiscriminately breaking up furniture and ripping papers, stealing a few objects to keep as mementos. These are the impressions one is left with after watching the amateur films that will surely remain a centerpiece of the historical record of this disgraceful episode from here on.

The efforts of the Capitol Police and the Washington Metro Police to hold the line on the mob were impressive. The police personnel who were on site on the Capitol Building grounds when the siege began, though uncharacteristically outnumbered by a factor of many to one, comported themselves with professionalism and valor in the face of hundreds of maddog zealots intent on doing great bodily harm, or worse, to the Vice President and members of Congress. They stood fast and did what was possible to mitigate the situation and protect the lawmakers, all the while taking a lot of vocal and physical abuse. Some were injured, and one cop subsequently died from his injuries.

Doubtless some of the police officers in the line of defense had voted for Trump, and may have struggled with some moral dilemmas during the riot. Most if not all did their jobs regardless. Insurgents with connections to the military and law enforcement notwithstanding, of course. The following day it was reported, with few details, that one of the cops on site during the uprising had taken his own life.

Newscasters frequently cut away to video flash-backs of the speech Trump gave to his supporters just prior the assault on the institution of our republic. Like a typical wily mob boss, Trump did *not* specifically tell his hit squad to storm the Capitol Building. He will claim that all of his remarks were perfectly fine and innocent, that it's not his fault if some of the people in the crowd took some of his statements the wrong way. His lawyers and the most mendacious of Republicans in Congress will use this rationale to defend Trump against accusations of inciting the throng to engage in seditious acts.

Deny deny deny, Trump's fall-back position in every instance when he's been caught in the act of behaving badly. Lie lie lie, like a small boy with chocolate smeared all around his mouth who swears he didn't eat the candy bar.

The truth is obvious: President Trump stood in front of a crowd of people already twitchy with nervous fervor, like a weapon loaded and cocked, primed by months of being fed the bogus narrative of a fraudulent election, and gave a rabble-rousing speech exhorting his followers to go up to the Capitol Building and demand that his VP alter

the count of electoral college votes in his favor. He implored them to disrupt the process of affirming the vote tally concurrently under way, admonishing them that they couldn't succeed if they were weak, saying they needed to "fight like hell" to take their country back from those he claimed had stolen the election from him. Call it what you will, the truth is that Trump deliberately poured gasoline onto a fire he had been stoking since before the votes were even cast.

The President of the United States of America has the duty to uphold the oath of the office, to stand for truth and justice, adhere policy to the Constitution, and protect the country from all threats, foreign or domestic. Trump's speech on January 6th did precisely the opposite. Exhorting a mob already lathered-up to near-hysteria to commit seditious acts is in itself an act of sedition, marginally veiled by a cunning speech-writer to allow the possibility of an arguable way out. Trump's last acts as a sitting President are so disgraceful and repugnant that disgust gets in the way of finding the right words to describe a response.

Trump's own failures as President and his rhetorical terrorism indict him; yet there are Republicans in Congress who will not, much less convict him of high crimes and misdemeanors. Some of the people who have enabled their Commander in Extremis over the past four years bear at least equal culpability for how effective Trump has been in brutalizing the nation by degrading the trust in democracy that holds it together. Dignifying the betrayal of America in pursuit of an agenda that is inconsistent with the needs of the nation is to be as complicit as the titular face of the betrayal. And in consequence, to be subject to reaping the reckoning that such betrayal will inevitably bring.

I wonder how long it will take for the majority of Trump's supporters to wake up to a dawning awareness that they've been duped. It may take awhile because no one likes to admit they've been suckered. Some cracks are already showing, though, as it's evident that the truth has already begun to sink in for some.

During that reprehensible little pep talk he gave to his supporters just prior to the siege on the Capitol Building, Trump made assurances that he would accompany them on their mission, standing with them during that critical confrontation. Of course he lied again. Bravado and bombast are often a cloak for cowardice. Ducking back into the

White House, Trump bunkered down to watch the events unfold on television (anyone who's been paying attention will know it's only real for him when he sees it on the tube). A couple of days later he would betray his followers again, in a televised statement from the White House, telling those who had taken his cause to the Capitol Building on the 6th that they do not represent America. (*ouch!*)

The insurrection, if that's what we're calling it, must surely go down in history as the world's most inept attempted coup. While it was in progress it seemed that there was a kind of interrogatory taking place, a collective introspection of the American conscience, a questioning look at the moral crisis this event represents in the national psyche. The seemingly sleepy response by law enforcement, from the perspective of watching what was going on outside of the Capitol Building, gave us all a long lingering look at what happens to people when the government fails to do some of the most basic things it was created for, and fails to adequately address the real concerns and dire needs of large portions of the country's population.

Setting aside for the moment those malicious hard cases who scooted in under the camouflage of the Trump parade, most of the people who joined the horde storming the Capitol Building that day were not domestic terrorists. By and large they were a mob of confused, justifiably angry people who had been misled by the lies of a blowhard they revered, and who got swept up in the crowd madness. The same dynamic is at work in prison riots, which are not outside of my personal experience. Peer pressure often plays a role in this sort of thing. In a large assemblage of people caught up in the moment and under the influence of anger and fear a kind of crowd fever can take over, and people get involved in things that are not necessarily representative of their normal moral identities. Yeah, a bunch of impressionable dumbasses, that's another way to put it. Consequences from a legal standpoint are likely to vary. The price of involvement for some will not be cheap.

There was a steady stream of Trump supporters appearing on the scene at the Capitol Building for some time. The smarter ones, when they saw what was happening up on the walls and landings, turned around, put their flags and signs over their shoulders, and walked back in the direction they had come from. Others were more

determined to fulfill their fantasies of being in a revolution, and charged ahead. Some of them climbed the walls, some taunted police with insults, some went into the building after some doors and windows were breached so they could take selfies to use for bragging rights on their social media pages. Poor gullible dumbasses! Imprisonment is a high price to pay for such meager returns.

Even from my faraway vantage it seemed to me that the garden variety Trump supporters were being used like cannon fodder in a more sinister scheme than they understood they were participating in. Some very bad actors with some very bad intentions were prime movers in what took place at the Capitol Building: people who believe that Timothy McVeigh was a patriotic hero; people who are being radicalized from the pulpits of some evangelical churches in rural communities; people who believe that fomenting a race war is the only way to push back on what they see as the browning of the country in order to preserve white majority rule; people who are enthralled by visions of an ascendancy of chaos in the world.

I know these types; I can spot them a mile away. They have been stuck inside of propaganda-driven echo chambers for so long they have self-talked themselves into believing in alternate realities built of elaborate fictions. Ask them what the world will look like if they succeed in getting what they want and their faces go blank. A foggy, amorphous aspiration at best; no clear vision of something better on the other side, no real plan, no goal beyond the opportunity to feel the fleeting power of using their guns on people they've been warped into believing are either a threat or inferior, or both.

Trump did not create these groups, nor do many in them consider him to be anything like a leader. It's more a case of mutual exploitation, an alliance of convenience. Self-obsession makes for strange bed fellows.

With the glamour spell broken and Trump revealed as a tin god, now mostly impotent, both his garden variety supporters and the opportunist hard cases who have been exploiting his platform will, each in their own ways, be floundering. The latter have always been lurking in the fringes, and if enough of the country's population can manage to get cleaner information and move toward the common good, those factions will retreat to whence they came. I worry most for the regular folks whose significant needs have largely been ignored by Washington, making them easy marks for the empty

promises of a self-styled savior who claimed he could fix all their problems if only they would vote for him. I worry that in the absence of the demagogue they might just return to their Fox News/Rush Limbaugh echo chambers and get seduced again by fear mongering and conspiracy constructs, leading to another dead end of false hope.

For Trump, you see, was never the real problem. He was a *symptom*, like itchy bumps are a symptom of chicken pox. As far as anyone can tell, the root of the despair he played on to con his way to enough votes to win the presidency in 2016 persists undiminished by anything he did during his four years in the office. The coal and steel and manufacturing jobs he promised to bring back to rural American communities did not come back. The promised infrastructure projects that were supposed to bring so many new jobs did not manifest. It appears the only building project that actually resulted in something being built is a part of a wall on the southern border, and in fact it only replaced some of the border wall that had already been there. This will remain, I suppose, a lasting monument to the xenophobic egoism that gave rise to it.

The world moved on and left a lot of people in America behind, and essentially cast aside, their plight largely overlooked by media agencies. Out of sight, out of mind, they were left to figure things out on their own. So many people living in digital deserts exacerbates the disconnect, limiting access to unfiltered information and education opportunities. A recipe for social disintegration on a major scale.

None of this should come as a surprise to the bigshots in Washington, not if they've been paying attention. The crisis has been in development for decades. It's an old story: With the regularity of evolving progress come new and better technologies that make earlier technologies obsolete. Artificial intelligence and robotics are rapidly making manufacturing more streamlined, economical, and therefore more profitable to manufacturing companies and their financial holders. Added to this is that America's affection for inexpensive imported products has resulted in many domestic companies sending their manufacturing to countries with developing economies, so they could compete in the domestic market.

Steam power was replaced with electricity and the internal combustion engine, opening up tremendous new markets, and the need for the work force to adapt and learn

new skill sets to keep pace. Technological advancement and changing market forces will tend to displace working people from their livelihoods. Where the failure in the free market system occurs is when there are money-grubbing corporations treating displaced workers as expendable casualties of doing business, as if they were not actually people, and the government ‘for the people’ lets them get away with it. Only in the world of organized crime is it said: Nothing personal; it’s only business.

On the one hand, it’s a good thing we have new technologies to take us beyond reliance on industrial age technologies that are largely dependent on fossil fuels. This may help us to avoid the fate of making the planet too hot and stormy for our species to continue living on it.

On the other hand, as the industrial era jobs have dried up during the rise of the digital age, so too did the livelihoods of millions of people who have depended on those jobs to provide for their families, and to give meaning and purpose to their lives. It’s truly a shame that we lack a leadership in Congress that makes a concerted effort to keep the working people from being stranded and left behind, and makes it a priority to keep them whole and contributing to the nation’s vitality as the job market adapts to progress.

This is a systemic failure of good governance in this country. It is a failure to properly evaluate developing trends in industries and markets, to make preparations and take steps to head off catastrophic social collapse within affected communities. Consequently, the underlying conditions that have engendered a massive outbreak of hopelessness in many of the nation’s communities continue to fester unabated. These communities are in dire need of some solutions that get to the root causes of the despair.

While there has been some lip-service and a little bit of action brought to bear on the symptomatic crises – pervasive mental illness, drug addiction and alcoholism, suicides – that have so mortified affected communities, and some grass roots efforts to upgrade skill sets within their work forces, efforts to address the underlying causes of community disintegration have been minimal and patchy at best. This is not the sort of problem that can be solved by throwing food stamps at it.

So that’s how it happened. When local economies collapse and the government

fails to take heed and step up to provide some meaningful support, you suffer, and you blame government. You as a man or woman living in such a marginalized community, having lost options for making a satisfactory living, suffering with feelings of hopelessness and despair, and trying to drown the misery in drink or drugs doesn't really help, and you just keep getting more and more angry about the conditions you're trying to survive in, well, that makes you vulnerable, susceptible to someone prone to shady dealings. Along comes a chubby charlatan selling his own special brew of MAGA snake oil. Step right up, folks, he says, I've got what you need right here, just the thing to ease your pain and cure what ails you. My special potion is the only thing that can fix you, just one vote a bottle. So if you're desperate enough, you might be willing to risk a vote to take the guy up on the remedy he's offering.

Now we've all had the benefit of seeing what happens when things are allowed to get so bad that a snake oil salesman is able to get his little mitts on the reins of government.

Yes, it was heartbreaking to watch the cradle of democracy in this country be debased by an angry mob. People jacked up on MAGA juice, a circus of disgrace, sickening to witness.

And yet, was it all that surprising? Some would argue that it was almost inevitable, that we could have predicted just such an outcome given all that had preceded it in recent years. All the sniping and take-no-prisoners politics in Washington, the inability of Congress to rise above party loyalty to come together, to find some wiggle room for compromise, to act decisively when the need for action is so plainly visible ... I mean, it's just *tiresome*. Congress could not have been more effective in enticing angry citizens to stage an attempted coup if they had actually planned it and sent out engraved invitations.

Again, as someone who has never voted, I claim no party affiliation. Generally speaking, it's been good enough for me if Congress finds some way to work things out and get the job done. I don't need to know all the little details. Unfortunately, Congress is broken. The dysfunction in Washington has forced me to pay more attention to government than I would ordinarily care to pay.

The two party system is not my idea of a good time. I'm sure there are some very fine people on both sides, but put them all together in a room and it's just a basket of deplorables. Robert's Rules of Order keep the bickering between the two sides superficially polite, but in the end it's still just petty bickering, with catch phrase sloganing as a politically correct form of name calling used *ad nauseum* to insult the opposing side and invalidate its position. Jockeying for position in the next election race has taken precedent over serving the public good.

In these incredibly challenging times what we need more than anything else is leadership that has the ability to think and act creatively, to come up with innovative solutions to the problems we face. As an artist, a creative person by nature, I seek to align myself with people who have the ability and inclination to think and act creatively. What success I have had in this life has almost entirely come out of that type of relationship.

The elected representatives we currently have in Washington, both parties combined, can't seem to rub enough brain cells together between them to produce effectively innovative strategies to bring to the process of finding solutions to the kinds of problems we are facing in today's world, where the solutions of yesteryear frequently won't work. We are in great need of some fresh thinking in that very place where ideology so often gets in the way of actual ideas.

As things stand, we have two political parties in perpetual loggerheads around issues of economics, equity, criminal justice, climate change, and other pressing concerns. The persistent log jams invariably arise out of the same tired arguments, often based on principles demonstrably outdated and invalid. Too often, policy is driven by paranoia, the misplaced belief that something of value will be lost if there is capitulation toward a position that veers from the traditional party narrative. There is an irrational presumption that, looking ahead to the next election, it's safer to stick with the party line. Consequently, the machinery of government is rusted, frozen in place. Broken.

Where is the courage to step out of line and do the right thing, when simply doing the right thing is clearly what is called for? What will it take for Washington to bring teamwork to the process of governance, to obtain the best available information and be ready to take bold, swift action to meet challenges that are already at the crisis point?

Oh, yeah, now I remember. A couple of dinosaurs, Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer, are locked in a pissing contest, and we all have to wait for them to finish before we can begin to get anywhere – which is liable to take us beyond the foreseeable future, what with the enlarged prostates and all.

Don't get me wrong: both of the main political parties have valid points of view and precepts in their respective philosophies, and there are aspects of each of those philosophies that I tend to agree with. At this juncture, however, if I were forced to pick a side, Republican or Democrat, my brain would probably short-circuit and fry before I could arrive at a decision.

Frankly, every time I hear Chuck Schumer talk I feel like curling up, pulling the bed covers over my head and going to sleep. Democratic senators have crippled themselves by choosing that man as leader, in my opinion. Pompous, self-righteous, always seeming to be wagging his shaming finger at Republicans. He stands on principle, and dies on that hill almost every time. Principle is a stance, not a strategy. Little wonder that Democrats get outfoxed by Republicans so much of the time, even when they hold both majorities in Congress.

Democrats, by and large, have good intentions. And in this context what this brings to mind is an old saw about a road to somewhere being paved with those things. A philosophy that promotes a level playing field for all of Americans across ethnicity and culture and economic standing (a fairly recent adoption for the democratic platform as a whole, by the way) is admirable, and I believe it is mostly genuine, if somewhat immature. How to go about achieving these goals is where Democrats tend to fall short. Their strategies are typically blunt force, lacking in imagination and effective sales pitch language, and tend to require too much bureaucracy to implement. In consequence, most of the legislation introduced by Democrats crashes and burns against a stone wall of resistance from the other party. I wouldn't know from real experience, but it must be frustrating to be a Democrat. The leadership's tendency to blame failure on obstinacy by the opposing side is just a cop-out. Righteous indignation does not a strategy make.

Sometimes I think that the only reason Democrats succeed in winning some elections is because so many Republicans have made themselves so disagreeable that

most voters can't stomach what they've come to stand for. Like last November when a significant percentage of voters turned out to say "Nope!" to a Trump re-election when not being wildly excited about the Biden/Harris ticket. And again in Georgia's Senatorial run-off election when for many voters the main impetus to vote was to flip the Senate in order to pry McConnell's cold petrified fingers from the tiller of the federal government.

Once the party of Abe Lincoln and Ronnie Reagan, the Republican party of today has lost much of its former dignity. Traditionally, Republicans in government stood as a bulwark of resistance to unfettered government growth and fiscal irresponsibility, a sort of counter-balance to hold the line on attempts by progressive lawmakers to add too much well-meaning but unnecessary or repressive legislation to the books. There's a good reason for this: Every new law or regulation requires an agency of cops to enforce it, adding another layer of bureaucracy to government. Once these policing agencies are created they tend to stay there, hidden from view, drawing paychecks, even after they have long since become obsolete. Republican conservatism brings balancing restraint to the process of governance to help the country to avoid winding up with a government that is too bloated, too costly to function efficiently, too restrictive for commerce to operate freely, and too much of a tax burden on the people.

That is to say, this once was, in short, the traditional role of the party.

Now we have a Republican party dominated by a collection of jokers who surely have Lincoln and Reagan tossing in their graves. Right, white, and tight, and proud of it, for whom working with Democrats in partnership for balanced governance is anathema. The party has been willing to embrace and enjoin an odious Administration in order to obtain endorsement for stacking the courts with the anti-abortion, pro-Christian, anti-egalitarian, pro-corporation judges they wanted. And to get Presidential buy-off on shifting even more of the tax burden onto the working class by giving a whopping tax cut to megabucks tycoons and corporations, who in turn, quid pro quo, supply dark money to fund wickedly conceived schemes to suppress Democratic participation in voting, and to pay for creating the attack ads used to demonize opposition election candidates.

Very few Republicans in Congress have had the courage to stand up and publicly

denounce the Administration for the steady stream of lies, half-truths and disinformation that came out of the White House during the Trump Presidency. Those who did were ostracized by their fellows for breaking with party solidarity, while those who may have agreed with the censure but lacked the courage to express their agreement turned their faces down to the papers in front of them and played dumb. Being in government to represent the people, and failing to speak out in the face of a pack of mistruths from the Executive Branch is dishonorable, and tantamount to being in collaboration with the source of the falsehoods.

In recent years some of the best of the traditional conservatives in Washington have dropped out, resigning from their elective posts in disgust, rather than to compromise their integrity and professional ethics by staying in an office that requires them to violate their principles. They have chosen to forfeit their careers rather than to take part in what amounts to an orchestrated power grab to put all the levers of government solely and exclusively in the hands of an unscrupulous cadre of Republicans, leaving the progressive wing effectively routed from having any real influence in political decision-making.

And it almost worked. Fortuitously, the political coup planned by no-mask MAGA-hat Republicans was foiled by a surprise attack on an exposed flank, and America dodged a bullet. Had that bullet struck its intended mark our democracy might have gone into a death spiral.

Someone who doesn't have a dog in the fight has to be the one to say it: Donald Trump's re-election *was* stolen. Not in the way that he and some of his supporters have claimed, though. The voting was fair and legal, and the tallies were accurate, as confirmed by every election monitor all the way up to the US Supreme Court. Nevertheless, there was a theft of some of the votes Trump had been counting on — and they were not stolen by dead people voting, or jiggered voting machines, or deep state aliens abducting ballots, or any of the other wacky conspiracy stories people like Rudy Giuliani and Steve Q. Bannon would have us believe. No, the diabolical schemes of Trumpist Republicans were thwarted by none other than the viral plague.

This happened in two ways: Faced with the first real crisis of his time in office,

the arrival on our shores of a deadly virus, Trump revealed himself to be thoroughly ill-suited to the job of being President. Anyone with one eye half-open, if one was willing to look at all, could plainly see that he was an incompetent fool who would happily risk the lives of the country's entire population to stay in power. And secondly, in response to the pandemic, mail-in ballot voting was established in many places where that option had not been available, to allow citizens a method they could use to vote in safety. This emboldened many citizens to participate in the election who had previously been disenfranchised or discouraged from voting. Effectively, this did an end run around most of the meticulously planned gerrymandering and other voter suppression schemes employed by many Republican majority state legislatures. Turns out that Trump's fears around mail-in ballot voting were justified. Ironically, things might have turned out better for him if he had told his supporters to use mail-in ballots instead of sowing so much distrust in that method of voting.

The coronavirus pandemic may have inadvertently saved American democracy, for the time being at least, but that nasty plague has wrought too much death and devastation in the lives of families and communities, and too much damage to our economy to think of it in terms of silver linings. Even in the midst of utter catastrophe there might still be little bits of good luck to be found here and there.

The United States of America, the greatest nation in the world. That's the reputation. Lately that reputation has been tarnished, and our dignity as a nation has taken some hits. This seems to speak to a need for all of us to make a discriminating assessment of who we are and who we want to be as a nation. Some of the challenges we've been dealing with might serve as an instrument for such an examination.

The last four years of an Administration with Trump at the helm might be said to be the nation's way of revealing how far we can stray from having a government of the people, for the people, by the people, and how easily we can drift away from the principles and core values that fortify its ability to guard, support and preserve the commonwealth.

The coronavirus pandemic might be said to be nature's way of exposing our

human weaknesses, the chinks in our armor, the disparities and inequities in our social system that make some people more vulnerable than others. It has stripped away some of our assumptions and misconceptions, opening windows on some of our bad habits, delusions and complacency regarding the status quo within our society, and how some within it will put politics ahead of the well-being of people. Seeing ourselves naked, so to speak, with all of our vulnerabilities exposed, can be painful. Experiencing ourselves exposed in this way can also make us stronger, more insightful, more humble, and more appreciative of what is truly precious as we approach coming out on the other side of this pandemic. It's not so much about looking on the brighter side; it's about getting to a better place.

Here, then, is a lens through which to focus in on that place of vulnerability. Ask yourself: Who am I? The pursuit of answering this single question will, I promise you, lead to all of the questions and answers worth knowing.

What each of us brings to community individually will define the shape of the community collectively. It is the willingness to engage with one another in this conversation that will heal a hurting and confused nation.

* * *

There is a dog in the White House. Not just one dog, but *two* dogs! This to my mind signifies a Major step in the right direction.

Under circumstances that looked a lot like martial law, a Presidential Inauguration was somewhat nervously held dignifying a peaceful transfer of power despite a recalcitrant former head of state. With our new POTUS sworn in we can begin to breathe a little easier, even though an American is dying from CoVid-19 every few minutes as the

pandemic continues to rage around the world, and there are still lots of grumblings in the Trump camp.

With some coaxing from people who apparently have a working understanding of child psychology, the orange guy was enticed to leave the White House on the promise of a military ceremony honoring his time in office. I thought, Firing squad? Funny how an embarrassing thought can pop into one's mind unbidden. But, no, the ceremony of pomp and circumstance turned out to be a length of red carpet leading *out* of the White House, and a helicopter ride taking him *out* of Washington.

Most of us would prefer to be done with the guy, I'm guessing, but Nancy Pelosi is not yet done with Trump, who now goes down in the history books as a President twice impeached by the House. She has delivered the Articles Of Impeachment for a trial in the Senate for inciting sedition. I'm on the fence about Trump being tried in the Senate. Does he deserve it? To quote Cody Lee, one of my all-time favorite singing piano players, "Heck yeah!" But it's doubtful that enough Republicans in the Senate have the *cajones* to convict out of fear of political repercussions from Trump supporters down the road. I don't see the point of the time and expense and distraction of a trial when it's likely to result in Trump getting another newspaper headline saying he's been acquitted.

My views on the matter are purely academic, it appears. Madame Speaker is fixated on giving Donald Trump a public spanking. What Nancy doesn't seem to understand is that Donald likes that sort of thing. In his world, being twice impeached by Nancy Pelosi is a merit badge. Malignant narcissism, remember? A darling of the tabloids, Donald Trump doesn't care if the focus on him is good, bad or ugly as long as the spotlight is on him. Turning off the spotlight and leaving it off is about the only thing that would be a real punishment to a guy like him.

During his speech in the 2017 Presidential Inauguration ceremony, the freshly sworn-in President Donald J. Trump told a bewildered nation that he saw America's outlook as bleak and grim, and predicted carnage in its future.

Joseph Biden, in his Inaugural address, promised that he would be a President for all Americans, that he would always tell the American people what he knew to be true, and work to bring unity to a fractured nation.

May it come to be proven that Joe Biden is as true to his words as Donald Trump was to his.

As things stand, the orange guy is out, and dogs are in the White House. This makes me smile. On both counts.

What my part in all this might be is anyone's guess. Having been in prison for such a long time (if I said how long it wouldn't mean much because so few people have points of reference enough to be able to imagine the effects) makes it difficult for me to know how I fit in under the present circumstances. I had to work very hard to preserve my sanity, and to avoid becoming so filled with rage and cynicism that I turned myself into a bitter old man of little value to anyone. My perspective, therefore, is something of a rarity. Through this running commentary it may be that I can bring some value to people who, like me, have been struggling to gain some clarity around where we are in the world today, trying to figure out how to fit their piece into the puzzle, and find a way to move forward that produces something beneficial.

To be sure, I could list decades' worth of grievances as reasons why I resent and despise the US government's justice system. Although the prison populations in this country are predominately comprised of blacks, latinos, and other people of color, once a resident of the system everyone gets the same treatment. No exaggeration: I have seen, and felt, some of the worst the criminal justice system can dish out. And I am only one of millions of people who have been hand-cuffed to draconian prison sentences and shoved inside to feed the insatiable appetite of the prison industrial complex machinery. A national disgrace, that is, the way human beings are chewed up and spit out the other side as broken people, or dead bodies. Nonetheless, God help me, I love this country and everyone who lives in it, the whole crazy mixed-up bunch of us.

The government in this country, at state and federal levels, has a good many shortcomings, more lately than I've ever seen in my lifetime. The people themselves, however; that's a different story. The real assets of this nation are not its abundance of material resources but in the living blood and spirit of its people in all of our diversity. Some of those holding political office don't get this. They want to pick and choose, favoring some over others. This weakens us as a nation.

What our elected officials need to understand, and truly what all of us need to

understand as we move forward, is that the full potential contained in the people, in the body politic, can be realized only when there is equal participation by all the people of every stripe, gender, cultural history, ethnic features, social standing, and economic worth. This is the true power of our nation. Some will say that the power is in the US Constitution. It is an important document, one that describes the organization of principles and definitions to help guide the formation of a working nation, but in the end it is still only ink on parchment. The real power is the people, and in the people, the talents and skills that each of us brings to community and enterprise.

Who among us failed to recognize that “Make America Great Again” was a dog whistle? Its obvious message: that we were all supposed to sign on to take the country back to some fantasy yesteryear when America was better than it is today. The best I can figure it to mean, what with everything that was packaged with the slogan, was a return to something like the era of manifest destiny and the second industrial revolution, with the whitest and richest men among us holding sway over all. I fail to see what’s so great or attractive about that sort of unimaginative world view. Who wants to buy a ticket to ride on a train to Backwards?

On his last day in the office of Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo posted a tweet saying, “Multiculturalism, all the -isms – they’re not who America is.” And I thought, Huh?! What alternate America does that guy live in? And where does he think he got his last name from? Seems to me that Mr. Pompeo would be well-served if he talked this view over with some of my Native brothers and sisters. I’m sure they would be happy to explain a thing or two about who America is with respect to culture.

Until I read Pompeo’s tweet I was unaware that multicultural was an ism. Having been very nearly my entire adult life in a world where my skin complexion puts me in a minority qualifies me to say: It’s better that than racism. We’ve all had just about enough of that fallacy. So much precious time and exhaustive efforts have been squandered in the perpetuation of falsehoods used to deprive American citizens of fair treatment, equity of opportunity and equal justice under the law. It’s wearisome.

Look, I have been a musician for almost my entire life, and over the years I have played in numerous bands, and with some truly great musicians. If there is anything I know for sure it is that talent comes in all colors, sizes and shapes. Throughout my life,

well beyond my work in music, it's been proven to me time and again that talent and skill and imagination are readily found in people of every cultural background. No one gender, culture, ethnicity or age group has a corner on the market when it comes to this sort of thing. To limit who is heard on the basis of how much melanin a person has in his or her skin, or in what part of the world was their ancestral home, or any other similarly contrived and distracting consideration, is literally self-defeating. Applying any arbitrary bias to limit the diversity of human resources brought to the challenges of building community and finding some solutions to our problems risks the possibility of misplacing that one single idea or element that could bring a great achievement, or even our salvation as a species.

How about we come to an agreement to make America America, and have it done. What I would like to see is a forward-looking vision for this nation and, by extension, the world. Give us the *Imagineers*! Now more than ever before we need the creatives to step up and show us visions of what a post-industrial era world might look like, and how all the parts might function together harmoniously.

So here's a full-throated call to the innovators, the artists, the poets, the daydreamers, the mystics, the mythologists, the learned elders, the inventors, the hot-rodding customizers, the ingenious entrepreneurs, the agile-minded economists, the idealists, the pragmatists, the builders, the judicious demolitionists, the conjurers, the green-thumbed gardeners, the curious botanists, the intrepid scientists, the science fictionists, the stalwart explorers, the wordsmiths, the multilingualists, the storytellers, the crafty shop wrights, the organic digitechnologists, the fuzzy logisticians, the fanciful architects, the extraordinary conceptualists, the enthusiasm motivators, and the tactical juxtaposers. All hands on deck!

The canvas is blank; show us what you've got. Let's see some imaginings of a way cooler world.

The disruption in our lives brought by the coronavirus pandemic has prompted a variety of adaptations and some remarkable innovations. Some of them are likely to remain with us after the pandemic is behind us. A good many of them are positive

developments, worth hanging onto. There are some worrying social symptoms as well, like kids in difficult family situations, people with substance dependency issues, and no doubt a lot of people have been eating too much, sleeping too much, playing video games obsessively, and grappling with bouts of depression. There will be some adjustments to make during the recovery period once the contagion has been tamped down.

Over these past many months I've been humbled by some of the ways people have responded to the pandemic. So many people have suffered the loss of friends and kin, and I feel their grief, even as I feel an abundance of gratitude for the bravery and selflessness of those who have risked their own well-being to help the afflicted and protect the rest of us. Often I have been moved to tears by the acts of selflessness that have been on display, and been inspired by the myriad ways artists and regular folks have found or invented to connect with and support one another during a time when staying physically apart is a necessity to keep each other safe. I love seeing how many people have been looking out for their neighbors, or stepping up to support the homeless, or to help families who have run out of food, while observing the restraints imposed by lockdown. My faith in the innate goodness of humanity has been elevated even as my confidence in the leadership of the federal government has been deeply shaken.

Oh, there will be assistance through the Treasury to help the country scrape by until the pandemic is over. Beyond that, there will be a need for the people to be more resourceful than ever. That's as it should be. The founding fathers never intended the federal government to be a Big Daddy Warbucks, except when very significant needs arise. Top-down government is not what we want — that way lies autocracy. That said, a national health care system seems to make a lot more sense now, considering the haphazard response to the coronavirus outbreak in general, and the patchy, uncoordinated process of getting people vaccinated across the country. Beyond that, however, whatever creative ideas and projects the Imagineers come up with will mostly have to rely on bottom-up action plans.

So, now that we've seen the pitiful end of the manifest destiny era, and the old standard for western civilization has died with an embarrassing whimper, what comes next? I

dunno. Your guess is as good as mine. As I said at the beginning of this, I'm out of prophetic pronouncements.

There has been a lot of talk about how we all want to get back to normal. Having been locked in a cell 24/7 for the better part of three months, with only a few brief opportunities to get out for a shower, I can certainly relate to the need to have some normal social interactions with other people. We all miss that. Humans are social creatures, after all. However, speaking strictly for myself, I sincerely hope that the normal we return to after we defeat the virus is one significantly different from the old normal we knew prior to the pandemic. A normal that feels brighter, fresh, outside the box, and more equitable. That would be nice.

I am feeling hopeful but not particularly optimistic. Despite having to sort through some discouraging set-backs, I would not say that I feel pessimistic. My once half-full cup has been drained, and now it's just empty, containing only potential and expectation, open and waiting for whatever may arise in the world from this point.

As I raise my empty cup to you in salute, I wish you health and safety on your journey. May you be fortified by strength and courage as you face the mystery ahead. Be kind to yourself, be kind to others. Be fearless, and be fierce.

Expect the unexpected.

Bobby BeauSoleil

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