

FOUNDATIONAL THINGS: VALUES AND THE SUBSTRATA OF POLITICS

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A quick glance might suggest this essay is about politics. These days, it's almost impossible to escape both the term and the subject, but the concern here has to do with much weightier things. Yes, the context is politics, recent and current, and it is granted that those policies, deliberations, and decisions of a political nature have huge effects upon any and all in our nation. However, such things always emerge, not out of thin air, but out of understandings and commitments concerning what is not only possible, but desirable. And that gets one into the whole other realm of presuppositions. Some of them are conscious, out there in broad daylight, but most may reside in the mental and emotional basement, where they are seldom recognized, to say nothing of analyzed and articulated, and those deeper values are that which support everything else.

Flying into New York City, one is struck by how the skyline rises and falls and rises again, like an immense wave. That has everything to do with bedrock. The shorter buildings exist in areas where a completely solid base could not be found; instead, they were accommodated to a base of somewhat loosely packed glacial debris or "till." The tallest ones, the magnificent skyscrapers, are able to reach up and up, because, at bottom, and before anything else, their foundations were set on a base of stable, unmovable granite. Their great soaring heights are possible only because, in their great depths, they are supported by solid rock strata that are among the hardest and oldest on the planet.

With that image in mind, one could characterize the main theme of this essay as our *understandings*. In this vein, the discussion has to do with the ideals that *underly* almost any and all of our individual and social endeavors. It is the *deeper* ground, the *substrata* providing a *foundation* for all else, this in the form of the principles that uphold, support, uplift, and lend credence. More simply, at issue is not only what we *can* do, but what we *ought* to do. It is evident that this focus on what is Right is all too often overlooked or deliberately ignored. Thus, here we are in the realm of values: what we see as "the good, the true, and the beautiful," and those are, ultimately, questions of a philosophical nature. What should we regard as having the most importance, the most substance? What is most worthy of our devotion and able to serve as our moral guidance and support? In the process, we will consider what things are truly lasting --as opposed to the insubstantial, which are such things as are destined to either slowly dissolve away or even to collapse in single disastrous instant.

One of Christ's parables in the Sermon on the Mount is about this very thing. In Matthew's Gospel, chapter 7 (NIV), he said, "Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against this house, and it fell with a great crash."

The parable is not about some building code violation; it's about choices made concerning lifelong and life-altering commitments: foundational things. Amid all the divisions and difficulties of life, with its "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," what is there that will carry us through? The decisive claim of Christ is that his teachings --and, as his disciples would later learn, his own risen self-- will endure and support us, even to eternity.

Among other things, our thoughts will involve the concept of truth, but not the kind that is dependent upon data points or statistics; rather, bedrock truth in the sense of what has the most integrity and what is, even, the most real. Simple declarative sentences cannot encompass Truth with a capital T. "What is truth?" asked Pilate, and crucified it. Those foundational type elements are again considered, primarily, in the realm of the humanities, which is my vocational arena --mine, as well as that of thousands of others who routinely teach and preach ethics, religion, history, philosophy, art, and literature. Those realms receive less and less attention in our educational institutions. How many university courses listed in the catalogs have to do with the practical and pragmatic business of making a living? Most of them, and no one doubts that many are needed. But how few in the catalogs have to do with deeper things, like the crucial business of making, not just a living, but a life. No one ever signed up for life, but by the single unalterable fact of having been born, it's a subject in which absolutely everyone is automatically enrolled ...and couldn't we all use a little more help?

The young Robert M. Persig taught English only briefly at Montana State University in Bozeman. Over the next number of years, he must have felt moved to provide at least a bit of such help by writing his novel, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Chronicling a father and son in their motorcycle travels and, along the way, their thoughtful ruminations concerning Quality, it was published in 1974. The book touched a subcutaneous nerve in the culture and quickly became a surprise bestseller; sales now total more than five million copies. In it, he wrote, "'What's new?' is an interesting and broadening and eternal question, but one which, if pursued exclusively, results only in an endless parade of trivia and fashion, the silt of tomorrow. I would like, instead, to be concerned with the question 'What is best?' a question which cuts deeply rather than broadly, a question whose answers tend to move the silt downstream."

In a strongly polarized country, that sort of thing is not easy to do, but all of us need to make the attempt. For those deeper issues, the subject of science will receive some attention, but not a great deal. That is an area in which I have a good deal of interest. However, "Science says" does not apply, at least not directly, to most of the moral and spiritual dilemmas confronting our nation and the world and ourselves as individuals, because those are just that: moral and spiritual. (LBJ, President Lyndon Johnson, decades before he was President, managed, in just six words, to contort both sorts of truth at once, this when he was a young man being interviewed for a job as a school teacher. He reportedly was asked whether the earth was round or flat and, desperate for work during the Great Depression, replied, "I can teach it either way.") We can be confident that most readers of this essay would agree that more people in this scientific age really do need a healthy acquaintance with science. It's also true that more scientists could benefit from a broad education in the humanities, which is an excuse to quote myself in *Lens to*

the Natural Word: Reflections on Dinosaurs, Galaxies, and God: “No one is more than a part-time scientist, but everyone is a full-time human being.”

W. Somerset Maugham, in his novel, *The Moon and Sixpence*, wrote, “I forget who it was that recommended people, for their soul’s good, to each day do two things they disliked. It was a wise man, and it is a precept that I have followed scrupulously: every day I have got up and I have gone to bed.” -- A person a bit after my own heart, with my kind of clock. Right now, I’m adding another item that I would rather avoid: writing with some reference to the current political scene. Politics should simply be the art of the possible, with different people living together. That’s not what it is, right now. Michel de Montaigne, who published in France in 1580, wrote, “If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial. ...I speak the truth, not my fill of it, but as much as I dare speak it; and I dare to do so a little more as I grow old.” Same here.

Someone else said –no doubt having in mind defending certain contemporary scoundrels-- “God loved Hitler, too.” To that, I give strong assent, for it is in keeping with what Christians believe about the nature of God. But my assent is *not* given to what usually follows that sort of statement, which is a weaseling, a subterfuge, an excusing of dastardly deeds. The statement cannot stand all by itself, nor can it be used to justify immoral behavior of anyone else. So, in order to not be misunderstood, we do need to make a qualification, and we do have clues from Scripture to the mind of God. “God *is* love,” as the Bible says, but *love* is not God. If God *is* love, as Scripture says, then even God’s judgment is an act of love (people trying to raise kids have some clue). In addition, we are also shown something of God’s will in the Ten Commandments, “those wise restraints that make us free,” as Saint Augustine called them, and they help us in guiding our own behavior, as well as that of others, too. They are basic. They are not true because they are in the Bible; they are in the Bible because they are true.

The Republican party has always sought to define itself as the party of Law and Order, looking at social behavior *via* that mantra. Now, it feverishly supports one who often regards himself as being above the law: Donald Trump, aka, the playboy, self-identified business tycoon and entertainer, well known for egregious behavior and minimal morals, who also morphed, somehow, into being the President of the United States of America. In addition to the chaos and cursing that dominated The White House in his time there, it remains to be seen what there has been of criminality. Subpoenas were blocked, and many of us have deep suspicions. However, the question of what is illegal is not the main issue; in fact, any possible crimes may be the least of it. For, as Johnathan Swift wrote, “Laws are like cobwebs, which catch small flies, but let wasps and hornets break through.” The larger questions are those of ethics and of values, i. e. questions of conscience. And, at least for me, that means, ultimately, questions of religious belief.

Over the course of decades, I have had a certain amount of respect for what I have understood to have been Conservative principles and positions, even when I disagreed. I think Aristotle was onto something, way back then, with his idea of the golden mean or “moderation in all things.” However, not everyone who claims to be in the middle actually is; self-identified political

moderation isn't always what it seems. The sliding scale has shifted far to the Right, and that which was once radical is now mainstream. Extremism seems now to be, not just acceptable to most on that side of the aisle but, even, popular. In *Othello*, Shakespeare lamented concerning those who are carried away by strong drink, "O, that men should put an enemy into their minds to steal away their brains! That we should with joy, pleasance, revel and applause, transform ourselves into beasts!" More should take heed concerning booze, but also concerning applause, which can carry us away to "far-out" ideologies, even while we are claiming to be centrist and just plain patriotic. The alcoholic seldom thinks he drinks too much.

Now, some conservatives are speaking out about that, and in something of the Shakespearean fashion: "Republicans have fed the monster so long that even when it turns on them, when the barbarians are literally at the gate ...when they were the targets and they were prey, they still will not turn on it. That's how dangerous is the social threat we are facing." Those are the words of Republican consultant, Michael Madrid.

In this, Trump's accomplice is an entire television network, Fox News, often seeming to exist for the sole purpose of peddling skewed, distorted, self-serving distortions of reality, and wherein the underlying motto must be the corrosive one that says, "The Ends Justify the Means," no matter how tawdry or corrupt those are. When did telling blatant lies become acceptable in this country, which once had a proudly-told story that our first President, George Washington, when a boy, "could not tell a lie," big or little, about a cherry tree or anything else? Yes, our forebearers knew the ax tale might have been just that, an exaggeration, or even a myth, but its point was noble, and children understood. The point was to honor that for which a nation should aim: truthfulness, honesty, integrity. Trump's publicity arm, aka Fox News, i. e. Disinformation Central, told and tells extremely tall tales with radically different objectives, foremost the election of President Donald J. Trump. And, as we have seen, lies often work.

Blitzed by "the news," the response of millions is that of the compartmentalization of the mind. It is the attempt to believe, at one and the very same time, contradictory things. Normally, most of us want to keep politics somewhat separate from religion and other "non-profit" values, and, fairly often, that works, at least somewhat. But these are not normal times. (A man went to see a psychiatrist, nearly deranged by the bizarre feeling in his mind, that there were two of himself. The doctor's response: "Say that again and, this time, don't both speak at once!") Now, the problem of people trying to believe two or more things that should be mutually exclusive has grown in magnitude and is having huge consequences, all for want of a very short course in logic.

This comes about also partly because of the extreme ignorance of this "very stable genius," as Trump calls himself, he who also "knows more than the generals." He ran his family business, accountable to no one else. But it now is obvious that he is not qualified for and would fail at *any* other job, including that of the literary dogcatcher in the two-dog town or the actual McDonald's waiter. (He would soon be throwing toddler tantrums, bullying and lashing out at the rest of the crew, hitting on the women, lying about incidents with the customers, and pocketing change, all while claiming that *he* was really the one who invented the Big Mac or,

even, ketchup. And that he has been doing a Perfect Job. You know how it would go.) So, there's ignorance, but combined with arrogance.

We know there are a few, but most of us find it incomprehensible how, for any reason, any scientists could have supported a President who does not value science. Trump elevates his own "gut feelings" over scientific fact. We also know where that got us, in that some hundreds of thousands of pandemic deaths could have been prevented, simply by taking the outbreak seriously early on and the wearing of masks. How to put a price on that failure of leadership? There is such a thing as negligent homicide, is there not? There should be a price to suggesting that the virus will just go away, all by itself, or to promoting popping "Hydroxy" pills, already shown to have no effect, or to suggesting that scientists spend crucial time to check out a preposterous treatment involving putting bleach inside the body. Trump actively denigrates science on all sorts of things: what works against a pandemic, how hurricanes move, environmental concerns, climate change --he even thinks wind turbines cause cancer-- and has bizarre intuitions about a whole host of other crucial issues. He finds his own "facts," seemingly with not the slightest awareness of the consequences.

Truth, scientific and other, relates to consistency. But, for Trump, there are all sorts of individual mental items in completely separate bins, their only common denominator being what those things can do for personal gain, if pulled out and used in the moment, even if they don't "jive" with others that were pulled out yesterday. It's about the moment and about appearances. Beneath the bleached hair and painted skin, "down-under," in the mental and emotional substratum ...is what? Any substance at all? Anything resembling truth? The fact-free conspiracy theories that he actively embraces and promotes *do* rattle the brains of anyone who is scientifically literate, for the hallmark of science is that facts must have the quality of being compatible with other facts. I know a number of scientists and I read a great many more. I don't know of *any* who voted for Trump. Can we begin to imagine Francis Collins, (who led the several thousand scientists pursuing the Human Genome Project), or the Harvard and Smithsonian astronomer Owen Gingerich, casting that vote? Or would Richard Feynman or Einstein, if they could be halted long enough from spinning in their proverbial graves?

Trump is giving every indication of wanting to "run" again, which is why we need to think about all this, as much as we dislike it. Voting to entrust the vast power of the Presidency to one who meets, almost completely, the qualities of a sociopath/psychopathic or malignant narcissist personality is self-destructive behavior for a country. There may be any number of politicians who are sociopathic (it is well established that politics and leadership positions attract that sort), but there's one thing you *don't* do with anyone having the characteristics of that pathology, i. e. to give him/her immense, world-shaking power symbolized by the nuclear weapon codes. Mental health professionals numbering some 77,000 signed a statement that amounted to the waving of a bright red sauropod- dinosaur-sized-flag of alarm about how Trump's mind works. Albeit a "softer" form of science than, say chemistry, the psychology making such assessments is a science, too, and we must take those findings very seriously.

The Fifth Risk by Michael Lewis documents shocking incompetency and willful ignorance in the Trump administration, including the fact that the new people in the Energy Department in 2017 did not know, even *basically*, the nature of its mission (the biggest part being nuclear energy and safely managing weapons material, enough for 30,000 weapons). The new head appointee received, from the outgoing administration, a big booklet, developed over decades, i. e. science --and it was as if they dropped it in the waste basket. They wanted no help --to hell with what others knew or had done. It was as if those now in charge were, so to speak, singing Frank Sinatra's old song, "I Did it *My Way*" --but for questions of physics. In addition, the biologists known to me are all alternating between alarm and depression over the state of environmental damage inflicted by the last four years, some of it never to be undone. (In addition, of course, is that immoral promotion of The Big Lie, i. e. that Trump can't even admit to the reality of existing *in that tense*. Truth matters. William Faulkner observed, "The past is not dead --it's not even past." But this *past*-President *must* be, past. So, say the facts; so, says Truth.)

My affirmation, again, is that the main issues are not political; they are not policy positions. They are issues of an office-holder's character, for that propagates all the rest. To what extent is a person an agent of Truth? Such issues were once visibly prominent in public life; they were discussed and debated, and they must be again. My own opinions are just a tiny footnote to those of countless others who have the strongest credentials and expertise in their respective fields of law, political science, military preparedness, history, biology, theology, psychology, and ethics. Among them, there exists the highest imaginable consensus having to do with Trump -- that he represents the most polar opposite to the democratic and patriotic values that have sustained our country since its founding, to say nothing of to our religious ideals. That's never happened before. I can't live in a compartment or silo small enough to shut out all that.

Most evangelicals/fundamentalists, however, support Trump, something that has resulted in a kind of mass devaluation of religion, if not a revulsion to it. This is true, not just concerning the scientifically well-informed, but is also true of multitudes of people in other disciplines or vocations, as well as of much of the younger generation. Sad, but the consequences are totally understandable. (Someone has said, that "the evangelicals have spent generations obsessing about the Anti-Christ; then, when he shows up, they elected him President." A satire, yes, but one with much more than a grain of truth.) Trump cultivates their vote by claiming to be against abortion. Really? I would suggest it is very likely that the only abortions that ever troubled him are the ones for which he had to pay.

Yes, the Seven Deadly Sins threaten all of us, but why would I --or anyone-- support an individual who *glorifies* them? That's a different universe from the Christian Faith I know. We share placing a high value on ethical or moral education for our families. But is that compatible with elevating a personality to prominence who is on tape being interviewed with one of his wives and with his few-weeks-old baby girl on his lap, who said, *about that babe*, "We don't know yet how big her breasts will be, but..." as he made the cupping motion at his chest -- sexualizing a newborn-infant, even! (Anyone can watch the clip, if, that is, they want to be depressed, nauseated, and profoundly disturbed. Normal sex; it's a good thing, we Christians

affirm it as one of the gifts of God in creation. But Trump is not normal, he who also gleefully bragged about sexual assault and couldn't wait to learn the bra size of his newborn.)

So, when Trump says "*Nobody* has more respect for women than I do," are we to believe that, just because he *says* so? Or that he is a Christian, just because he *claims* to be? --contrary to all evidence? And that, as he said, "*Nobody* loves the Bible more than I do."??? Or, how about, "I am the *least racist person you have ever seen*," (he stated twice, slowly, for emphasis). Consider Charlottesville: Are we to accept the late-coming rationale that he really was not at all on the side of the white supremacists, but that he was simply incapable of clearly articulating that position? Is it that he could not even make himself more clearly, definitely understood? Could he not say what he means and mean what he says, not even that he was against the torch-bearing Neo Nazis hate-mongers shouting "Jews will not replace us!"? If not, perhaps such incapacity, demonstrated countless times, is, by itself, a sign that he was and is unfit for office --and dangerous. The reason the Office of the Presidency is so honored is for the assumption that the office holder is to represent the very best of the nation's aspirations; it has been understood that the Office is to rub off on the one who holds it. The premise suffers greatly when an extremely *dishonorable* person was elected. Character matters, as we say.

At his rallies, Trump is something of a preacher, up there on a stage, microphone and all. (Of course, all of us, minus any pulpit and sound system, reveal ourselves. I recall the words in a devotional piece that rightly cautioned Christians, "Your life may be the only sermon your neighbor ever hears.") Trump is a teacher, too, of the younger generation, in the sense that we all are. It happens not only by words, but by actions, winks, and innuendos. In Rogers and Hammerstein's 1949 musical, *South Pacific*, one of the great songs is about just that:

You've got to be taught
To hate and fear
You've got to be taught
From year to Year
It's got to be drummed
in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught
To be Afraid
Of people whose eyes
are oddly made
And people whose skin
Is a different shade
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught
Before it's too late
Before you are 6 or 7 or 8
To hate all the people
your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught

In matters of character, or lack thereof, children are indeed taught early on, when such can easily be engrained. Later, teaching goes on by tapping into those earlier assimilations with coded messages and adding more direct speech. For grownups in the orbit of Trump, it seems that outright lies are the preferred items to be presented for adult consumption. As has been the case with for every recent President, Trump has had the largest stage and the most powerful microphone in the world to convey what he wishes. It's the content and the underlying assumptions of what he has wished that is the problem.

In addition, the world of media has vast numbers of others also teaching, or pushing, or propagandizing all sorts of unrighteous, unsavory, and vile things, including the hate and violence that lights up the internet on our computer screens every day. Consider the "nut job,"—not a clinical term, I know-- Alex Jones of *Infowars*, the radical purveyor of lies and conspiracy theories. Trump gushed to him, "I love your work. I will always trust you!" This, after Jones, into his cameras, claimed that the murder of 20 children and 7 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School was staged, a hoax put on by the Democrats. Trump invited him to come to The White House. Plato observed that what is honored in a country will be cultivated there. Sentiments normally reserved for authentically good qualities and fine accomplishments have now been perverted. So, Rush Limbaugh, in *recognition* of his forty years of hyper-lying and promoting fear and hate, whom many see as a true demagogue of the airways, was given The Presidential Medal of Freedom. Honor, again, for the *dishonorable*.

James Billington, who served for twenty-eight years as the 13th Librarian of Congress, once said that what American democracy requires is "a plurality of authentic convictions," something we do not have now. After his NBA career with the NY Knicks, Bill Bradley was elected a United States Senator. In his book, *Time Present, Time Past: A Memoir*, he writes: "Politics built on a shallow foundation cannot handle sincere convictions. How can a people that wages war on nature reflect God? How can a society with grating poverty amidst great wealth remain just? What is it that guides one through life? What is it that one yearns and strives for? Politics shrinks from even acknowledging these basic questions. It is easier to just give a response based on a poll than one that flows from the heart."

We have all noticed how Trump has such an unseemly, a prideful, preoccupation with respect, mostly that he is not shown enough of it. It should be Total, More for him than for anyone else! But what does he know of anything like genuine respect, for self or others? For him, it's a one-way street. "With all due respect:" those were the routinely uttered words of the HBO mob boss, Tony Soprano, shortly before he bashed in peoples' heads or shot them. Using good

words do not make either a subject or an object good. “We love you. You’re very special,” Trump said to the people who assaulted the Capitol. Love? From that one? For that? The threat Trump poses to Peace and peace of mind is both new, as well as new in its degree (in America, that is. Other nations have “seen this movie before”). Jon Meacham, Douglas Brinkley, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Tim Naftali, and *all* the other living presidential historians are unanimous in seeing Trump as an unprecedented threat to our democracy. Timothy Snyder, the Yale historian, has a little booklet, called, *On Tyranny*, dealing with the Constitution, a very pointed assessment. He has studied totalitarianism in Russia, Europe, and trends here in the US, outlining his conclusions in his 2018 volume, *Toward Unfreedom*, which I recommend. Before the November election, Snyder, usually a sober guy, to say the least, had a needful, alarm-raising article published in Commonweal (a Catholic source). The title: *Not a Normal Election: The Ethical Meaning of a Vote for Donald Trump*. In it, he says, “To vote for Trump is to vote for a future in which voting does not matter.”

Some would jump to the conclusion that my next related thought is a deflection. There is the ten-foot-pole-type cliché to the effect that “*nobody’s* Hitler.” Thus, many say *es ist verboten* to make comparisons there. Usually, yes. But now, not really. For, *at comparable points* in their search for power, there are many similarities, indeed, between the two. William Shirer lived in Berlin during the 30s and through much of WWII. He was the author of the massive, 1,100 page- volume, *The Rise and Fall of The Third Reich*. Anyone who has read it, as I have, will see all sorts of similarities: the constant campaigning, even when already in power, relying heavily on lies; the enraptured huge crowds. (Trump’s crowds were big, but it must bother him, that those of Hitler at Nuremburg were bigger.) The transformation of news outlets into mere instruments of propaganda, while demonizing the free press as Fake News. Stoking hate and blaming others for nearly every problem; demanding what seems to be absolute loyalty to *him*, not to the nation. (Thus, when Hitler was given a power that was Absolute, everyone pledged loyalty, again, not to the nation, but to *him*. Thereafter, everything Der Fuhrer did was absolutely *legal*, including the death camps.) “I’m the only one that matters,” said Hitler. --Or was it Trump? Fact check: It was Trump, who also said, “Only I can fix it.” Recall that, for the 2020 election and for the first time, the Republican Party didn’t even bother to come up with a platform. Instead, it was whatever Trump would decide he wanted.

Fascists have always known how to manipulate the masses. The method hinges on apparent appreciation of them and their *sitz im leben*, but is actually the opposite. Andy Griffith played in the *Mayberry* and *Matlock* TV shows, and lots more, but his first movie was *A Face in the Crowd* (black & white, 1957), surprisingly good. His persona was Larry ‘Lonesome’ Rhodes, a principle-free pretender who presented himself on the newly invented television screen as just another good ole’ boy, a reflection of his viewers. Winning their trust with endless corny cliches, winks and nods to the effect that he was one of them, crudities and all, he vouched for his sponsor’s products, such as fake vitamins: they skyrocketed. Then, he then turned to promoting equally phony patriots running for office. That also worked; “Lonesome” made millions and became intoxicated with the power he held. Then came the crash, as his show’s ratings slid from the top to the near-bottom, matching his emotions, as he fell into utter despair. It happened when someone kept the camera rolling, instead of switching to

commercials. It revealed the star confiding to the TV crew how much he despised his cheering audience: that they were all apes, sheep, dumb as posts, etc. (There are reports of similar off-camera statements made by Trump about his own fans –and about the “losers and suckers” in the military, this by the so-called Commander in Chief. Truth has a way of coming out; but we would wish sooner, instead of later, after so much damage has been done.)

Hitler had the same contempt for his rabid followers in his native land. His mind was revealed in his book, *Mein Kampf*, or “My Struggle,” even before he attained power: “I learned ...to gain an insight into the unbelievably primitive opinions and arguments of the people.” E. B. White followed Hitler’s rise to power, read the book and reacted to it in a 1940 essay for *The New Yorker* titled simply “Freedom,” and therein laid bare the fascist dictator’s mentality: “To him, the ordinary man is a primitive, capable only of being used and led. He speaks continually of people as sheep, halfwits, and impudent fools –the same people from whom he asks the utmost in loyalty, and to whom he promises the ultimate in prizes.” The natural question in our time is: What does Trump really think of the cheering crowds that “flock” to his rallies? Are they really “very special” to him? I leave that for you to ponder, but factor in the words of H. L. Menken, a journalist of a few generations ago: “A demagogue is one who preaches doctrines he knows to be untrue to men he considers to be idiots.” You do not lie to those you respect, but Trump appears to respect no one, his followers included.

You can’t know about the neo-Nazi “America First” movement right here in the USA during the 1930’s and not see the connection to our immediate past. You, the reader, may know of this; most people do not. The hero of the first solo Atlantic flight, Charles Lindbergh --even he got swept up in it and became a vocal advocate for Hitler’s Germany. (When Pearl Harbor happened, then, he finally wanted to join up and asked for an Air Force commission, and it was *denied*.) “A Night in the Garden” is an old film segment taken in New York City’s Madison Square Garden in 1939. It shows a roaring crowd of some 20,000, saluting 50-foot-tall paintings of George Washington --flanked by swastikas! That opening scene is chilling. A speaker derides all the “fake news” in the newspapers: “Imagine that?” <https://anightatthegarden.com/> Thus, “America First” was a widespread white supremacist slogan in the 30s, and Donald Trump chose it for his campaign theme. Recall that the phrase dominated his dark 2017 inauguration speech. The immediate reaction of former President George W. Bush was, “That was some weird s%#! It was. However, it was much more. At first, not many noticed the connection, but white supremacists, such as the neo-Nazis, saw it, and saw it instantly. After Trump won election in 2016, their leaders are shown in video, saying “Heil Trump, hale our glorious leader!” A case of “it takes one to know one.” Such things should have scared the so-called hell out of all of us, not just those of similar experience to my wife, whose father was on Okinawa in the very worst of it, and to me, whose uncle drove General George Patton’s Jeep all across the moving war front into Germany and, finally, into Berlin.

That is because, give such psychopathic aggressors an inch, and they consistently take a mile. It has happened many times before, and mostly to people who said, “It can’t happen here.” For, Trump doesn’t let anyone be simply *for* him, just partially, or in some aspect. It’s all or nothing, or be attacked, demonized, and labeled with Treason. Right now, he’s all about punishing

anyone in Congress who did not vote *totally* his way on virtually *everything*. Is that mentality a Republican value? Early on, America sought to prevent having leaders who would be kings or those who would resemble, too much, a Roman Emperor. (In our too narrowly educated times, lots of people may say, “Who? What? What’s a Roman Emperor?” Not everyone needs to read Will Durant’s eleven-volume, six- thousand-page-series, *The Story of Civilization*, or Carl Sandburg’s four volumes, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, or the eighteen-volume anthology of primary sources, *The Annals of America*. But a little history wouldn’t hurt.)

In a sense, all of this goes back to compartmentalizing. There are situations, wherein we can be middle of the road, one foot on one side and the other on another. And, there are situations where it’s fine to vote or to support and give no outward clue as to where our loyalties might lie. To me, this is not one of them. I am led to think that the situation we’re discussing might have more in common with that in ancient Israel, as described in II Kings 18, wherein the prophet Elijah says, “How long will you go limping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, if Baal, then follow him.” Or, one thinks of the golden calf at Mount Sinai. No two things are ever alike, and some things are always nebulous, but others are pretty clear. We don’t simply retell the biblical stories with no real connection to the modern world; we also apply them to choices today. “Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide, in the strife of Truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side.” So, the poem, also, a hymn. In answer to questions about the foremost commandment, and to our all too compartmented selves, Christ said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” Foundational things. First things First.

In another essay, I said, “When the offensive does not offend, and the abrasive does not leave a sore, and the rotten does not stink,” then, the deepest boundaries have been transgressed. In relation to Trump, the pattern has become almost routine and predictable. No matter how high or low people begin in their association with him, Trump will drag them lower, and then even lower still. He loves gold, and thinks he has the Midas touch, but he hasn’t read the myth to know the ending, that it makes a hard sandwich. His own touch is not one of gold, but of mold. There is a kind of death to everything good that he contacts; a kind of death to everyone else that he has touched, stained, soiled, besmirched, dirtied, desecrated, fouled, fooled, used, ensnared, manipulated, conned –and corrupted.

Like it or not, we are called to choose, and it involves those things that are deeper than what we usually term the political. Again, it’s about the substrata of Values. It involves Ethics, Character, Heart & Soul and, I think, the choices have never been more starkly arrayed. President Harry Truman was getting conflicting advice about economic policy: “On one hand, there’s this; on the other hand, that.” He said, “Somebody get me a one-armed economist!” Yes, it’s often that way on strictly political issues: complexity and many-sided ambiguity “all the time.” But when the issue concerns the more basic benchmarks to which we hold, and of who and what more nearly embodies the values and behaviors that we want to pass on to the next generation, that’s a different story. For, there are foundational things. Whether we will turn to those for support has consequences for whether we are going to be good ancestors. How to regard what is happening to our American culture right now and how we can impact the future

represents one of the most significant issues in my entire ethical, moral, or spiritual life and, I'm guessing, the same is true for you.

No doubt, we are all, to some degree, split-personalities; but it makes a big difference whether, and to what extent, we desire wholeness, so we can put our efforts toward it. A philosopher of ancient China, Mencius, said, "He who tends to his greater self becomes a great person; he who attends to his smaller self becomes a small person." A first and foremost allegiance aligns all others and points our inmost self in the right direction.

A novel by the Swedish author, Olav Hartmann, *Holy Masquerade*, is about the struggles of the divided self. In it, the main character writes in her diary, "I want a single center for all circles. I want one and the same thing in what I do and say and think and dream, one single thing in the inner and the outer, the physical and the spiritual." The Christian Faith is that very sort of totally desegregated belief system, else I don't know it and would not want to be part of it. There are separate departments in the universities; unique and different skills are taught in the Physics Dept and the Spanish Dept, other tools and techniques in the various trade schools. But faith and hope and love and right dealing are not confined to isolated corners of the mind. Instead, they are, themselves, the supportive bedrock. As people of faith, our fundamental values are all about what matters most, and those values are connected to everything we do, including how we vote. For us Americans, that has very seldom been more the case than now.

Of course, ultimately, each of us will do as we see fit. Each must do, not only her/his own dying, but individual living, as well. One evening, as I sought both for a break from writing and, perhaps subconsciously, for some inspiration for an ending to this piece, I read another of those insightful, self-reflection type of essays by Montaigne from nearly four and a half centuries ago. There, tucked in the middle, one of his conclusions became mine:

To found the reward for virtuous actions on the approval of others is to choose too uncertain and shaky a foundation. Especially in an age as corrupt and ignorant as this, the good opinion of the people is a dishonor. Whom can you trust to see what is praiseworthy? God keep me from being a worthy person according to the descriptions that I see people every day giving of themselves in their own honor. "What had been vices are now moral acts." (Seneca) ...I have my own laws and court to judge me, and I go to them more than anywhere else. ...There is no one but yourself who knows whether you are cowardly or cruel, or loyal and devout. Others do not see you; they guess at you by certain conjectures; they see not so much your nature as your art. Therefore, do not cling to their judgment; cling to your own.

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