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Democracy: *A Vision of Something Higher*

— Joseph P. Hester, Claremont, NC, USA



Having a vision of something “higher” is important as vision lies on the vertical periphery of achievement and discovery.

Guided by Jefferson’s words — “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” — the development of a moral democracy in America was undertaken amidst war and colonial disagreement. This was just the beginning as America’s founders embodied democracy within a constitution which included procedures for making future adjustments (laws) as needed. Early on, historians called this the “great experiment.” Many thought it was destined to fail, and it almost did as civil war and failed reconstruction projects engulfed the nation. Given the insurrection attempt at our nation’s Capitol on 1/6/21, many are again talking about the fragility of the democratic process and are skeptical about its future, including what is needed to strengthen its core.

“In that land the great experiment was to be made, by civilized man, of the attempt to construct society upon a new basis; and it was there, for the first time, that theories hitherto unknown, or deemed impracticable, were to exhibit a spectacle for which the world had not been prepared by the history of the past.”

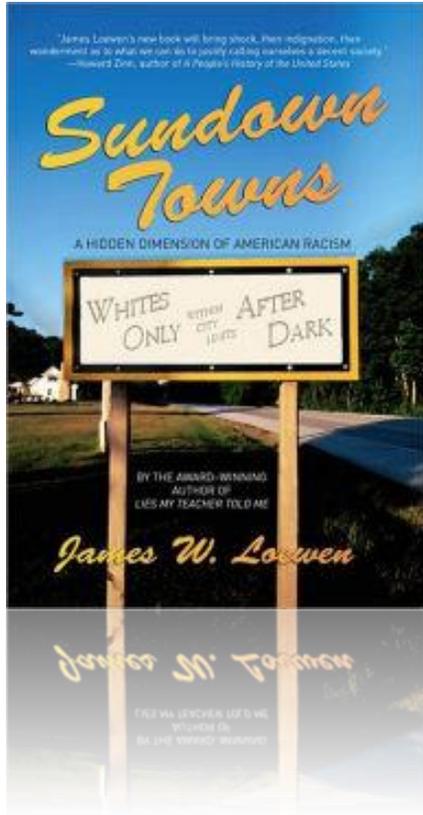
— 1835 translation of Tocqueville’s “Democracy in America” by Henry Reeve and adapted by John Spencer. One should note “great experiment” wasn’t used by Tocqueville at all; he simply wrote “devaient essayer” — “should attempt (to build...)”. “Modern translations usually stick to the French original such as by A. Goldhammer: “Here civilized men would attempt to build society on new foundations ...”

<https://history.stackexchange.com/questions/30440/tocqueville-and-the-phrase-the-great-experiment#:~:text=The%20line%20%22The%20great%20experiment%22%20has%20become%20famous,american%20versions%20do%20not%20have%20it%20as%20well>

Threats to Democracy

The years between 1863 and 1877 saw tremendous gains for Black Americans, including the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. But the period was also turbulent — shaped by political violence aimed at reestablishing white authority. In the years following, Reconstruction in the South reestablished many of the provisions of what was called “Black Codes” aimed at limiting the labor and activities of Blacks. These were also called “Jim Crow laws” and remained firmly in place for almost a century. They were finally abolished with the passage of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*. Consequently, during much of the 20th century, Black

Codes became ingrained in the Southern mindset reinforcing prejudice and distrust among Southern whites against people of color. For example, “sunset towns,” “gray towns,” or “sundowner towns” was a form of racial segregation which excluded non-whites from being on city streets after sundown via a combination of discriminatory local laws, intimidation or violence. The term came from signs posted that “colored people” had to leave town by sundown. The practice was not restricted to the southern states, as at least until the early 1960s, northern states could be nearly as inhospitable to Black travelers as states like Alabama or Georgia. Much has changed and progress has been made, but the events of 1/6/21 and now attempts at voter suppression have exposed left-over prejudices that some politicians – state and national – are leveraging to achieve positions of status and power.



Even with the passage of June 19th as a national holiday celebrating the end of slavery, some states are trying to prohibit teaching about slavery and this day in their public schools while introducing *Critical Race Theory*¹ as a means of adjusting past history.

So, the 20th century reaped the whirlwind of failed attempts at Southern Reconstruction and the 21st century has seen the re-emergence of white nationalism and attempts to politically marginalize people of color through voter suppression as well as controlling what is taught about racial history in the public schools. According to New York University School of Law’s Brennan Center for Justice, as of March 24, 2021, lawmakers in 47 states have introduced more than 360 bills in 2021 with provisions that restrict voting access. As of June 21, 2021, states have already enacted more than 20 such laws that will make it harder for Americans to vote.² Undeniably, the freedom to vote lies at the core of the American democratic process. If this freedom is repressed, so is democracy.

Racism has been a systemic problem in America for many years. We can *theorize* about racism and slavery in America, including their origins, but we cannot deny the fact that

slavery existed and has had lasting effects on both Blacks and whites. Among these effects have been prejudice, discrimination, and antagonism against people of color. Hidden among these attitudes and activities is elevating the “white male” as a superior species. This is a congruent value of white nationalism, further devaluing the status and humanity of women and people of color politically, economically, and morally. The *Voting Rights Act* of the 1920s and the *Civil Rights Acts* of the 1960s did much to loosen the legal chains binding people of color and women to positions of inferiority, but no legal document has been strong enough to remove bias and prejudice from the hearts and minds of many Americans – male or female. And, by the way, none of this can be covered up by a re-writing of American history. It is what it is and to this we must face up.

Many can be blamed for this state of affairs, including our schools, churches, business, and political leaders. Sadly, in our text books, much of our history has been politicized, glossed over, or just omitted. This seems to be a never-ending effort on the part of some. Today, with the Internet, the proliferation of the print media, and conscientious teachers, students can re-

discover America's missteps and course corrections making the study of history both interesting and important for democracy's continuance. Fortunately, as a democratic republic, we have lasted for over 200 years. In itself, this has been miraculous, but the road has been rocky and there have been many bad actors. Surely America has witnessed its share of failed leadership. Consequently, keeping the democratic vision alive as a moral ideal and articulating it in law and practice, and especially accentuating its moral principles, is the responsibility of every generation. It's always easy to walk on the sunny side of the street, but in 2021 we are being called upon to work for democracy in the cracks, crevices, and moral fractures that produced the events of 1/6/21.

An Unchanging Mindset

No doubt we tend to view the world from our own furrowed ruts, seeing what we want to see and hearing what we wish to hear. Many "white" people don't want to hear about the killings of young Black males, discrimination against Hispanics and Asian Americans, and they're tired of listening to the plight of women workers with their lower-than-average wages. A major part of this equation is the attitudes of many white Evangelical Christians who remain unwavering in their belief that "a woman's place is in the home," and "women should obey their husbands." Many also think that America should be a "white" Christian nation and/or was established as such. This attitude lies at the heart of the MAGA movement and is not only revealed in their words, but in their continuous portrayal of "Jesus" as like them, a "white male." Also, there are many in the churches that have helped spread the *false teaching* that Ham, Noah's son, was cursed by Noah to have black skin, and that teaching has been used to justify both slavery and racism toward black people all over the world. Being reared in the South, as a youth, I heard this story many times over. No doubt, the negative value of women and people of color in Judeo-Christian-Islamic faiths has its roots in Biblical teachings.

Overall, it's difficult for those who have little knowledge of history to admit that certain segments of the American populous have been personally, publicly, and economically marginalized. This is partially to blame for the fascination with our former President, neglecting his inconsistencies, womanizing, amoral behaviors, and leading his supporters to vow not to cooperate with the opposing party in an investigation of the events of 1/6/21. Even in June of 2021, when the Coca-Cola Company criticized attempts at voter suppression in Georgia, Surry County officials in North Carolina made an effort to pass a bill that would remove Coke machines from their county buildings. Such petty behaviors demonstrate how prejudice and discrimination have again become a vocal part of American politics.

Our nation seems to be languishing in the aftermath of the 2020 Presidential election as our values have become polarized and ideological, being the filters through which we "see" the world. To break the stalemate of partisan politics (in Congress and in the minds of many Americans), it's important we loosen the chains binding our thinking and promote a vision of something morally higher. This will mean engaging with friend and foe alike, and with moral authenticity, in ideas and procedures that will potentially enhance our collective democratic vision. Why some American politicians are incapable of this is puzzling. As Charles Taylor has written,³

Briefly, we can say that authenticity involves creation and construction as well as discovery, originality, and frequently opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality. But it is also true, as we saw, that it requires openness

to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creation loses the background that can save it from insignificance) and a self-definition in dialogue.

Many of us, entrapped in a static 19th century mindset, hardly notice the roots of prejudice and discrimination lying deeply within our *habits* and illuminating our thinking and daily conversations. This is a mindset that has grown stale, boring, and burdensome, deflecting change and the possibility of positive conversations with others about ethics, values, and the foundations of democracy. Not all Evangelicals are to blame, but there is a dearth of self-examination in our society. It is our inability to reconsider our common values and unleash our inner moral capacities that lock us to the past. This “surface fog” goes much deeper than we realize and tends to separate us from others, even ourselves. Peering through this fog in self-reflection is a difficulty many choose to avoid.

Consequently, as we squint at reality and view our own decision-making as *practicality based on common sense*, we have reduced

“reason” to “being reasonable,” which is another way of defining “rationalization.” So, from a rational point of view, we are caught in an untenable web of attempting to make our decision-making logical when, in fact, it is illogical, based on instinct and habit, prejudice and sentiment.

“In the *Enquiry*, Hume states that ‘All inferences from experience, therefore, are effects of custom, not of reasoning’ (Enquiry, pg.28) and describes the beliefs produced by habit as nothing more than ‘...a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able, either to produce, or to prevent’” (Enquiry, pg.30) “Hume’s Habit”:

<https://philosophermit.wordpress.com/2017/07/12/humes-habit/>

And it appears, when Evangelical Christians joined with this irrational chorus on 1/6/21, they reduced the so-called “Christian ethic of love” to one of detestation and violence.

This goes down much easier, especially when our values are aligned with a group[s] of like-minded individuals. It has given credence to white privilege as both a social and political value – an undisclosed standard of moral and political evaluation – becoming a *habit of expectation* shielding much of what we “see” or “don’t see,” “hear” or “don’t hear”; or perhaps what we wish to see and hear. Many have been seduced by this mindset making any attempt to correct the long history of racial, gender, and ethnic discrimination difficult and almost impossible. This will take a change of life that is transformational, transcending the words we use and the lifestyles we enjoy. This is democracy’s greatest challenge.

“While most Americans agree that the country needs to do more to achieve racial equality, some tactics for achieving this goal are seen as more effective than others.” — Pew Research Center

<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2016/06/27/4-achieving-racial-equality/>

Difficult Lessons

Hopefully, some of us learned something from the political events of 2020-2021, such as:

1. We can’t take democracy for granted. Democracy is a collective moral value that must be tilled and weeded during every season of life.
2. Our values are fragile and their strength lies in being open to shared opinions and a willingness to reassess our most cherished beliefs.
3. Many Americans believe that “rights” – however defined – are whatever they think important and are guaranteed by the Constitution. But there is a difference between

“human rights,” “Constitutional rights,” and “civil liberties.” These differences should be discussed, and not only in the halls of congress, but in our schools.

4. Many Americans are frustrated—they are frustrated by the pandemic that rules life as we once knew it and they are frustrated by life’s circumstances in general. That is, they realize that the so-called “American dream” may be out of reach for them and they are helpless to do much about it. So they criticize those who have achieved “something” in their lives, diminish the value of people of color, berate the educated, and somehow have been convinced that “might makes right.” But this can have a reverberating effect as many who are high achievers and economically successful have grown weary of this theme. Consequently, they are apt to view those who constantly complain as lazy, low achievers, and just wanting more government handouts, which they deem as a form of socialism and contrary to both capitalism and democracy. The negative effects are obvious.

Recent political events have forced us to reconsider who we are and why we are as a democratic nation. Although there is no easy way to figure this all out, we can’t just walk away from our moral obligations to others, either our fellow humans or those yet to be born. To

“The current gridlock in the American federal government is caused by the equal political strength of two competing visions of democracy. The first vision, call it Type A democracy, is based on the ideal of a free self-governing individual who voluntarily contracts with other self-governing individuals to form a self-governing political association. This first vision takes individual freedom and political equality as its main ideals. The second vision of democracy, call it Type B democracy, takes economic and social equality within a nation as its main ideals. It is what emerges when the members of a pre-existing nation overcome a pre-existing hierarchical authoritarian patriarchal order and install a democratic government.”

— Richard B. Parker, “Two Visions of Democracy.”

<https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-319-02312-06>

sacrifice the “moral ideal” of democracy would not only be a disservice to those who have worked and fought to protect it; it would destroy their humanity and our humanity as well. Of course, we can only assume that those who struck a blow at American democracy on January 6, 2021 have some basic understanding of democracy as a moral ideal, although their moral VISION requires a great deal of pruning. This will necessitate openness to the ideas of others and engaging those with differing political visions through civil and

dialogic involvement. I am hopeful, but don’t expect this to happen anytime soon. The quest for political power and influence are great “separators” in our nation.

In all of this new found *tribalism*, we have learned there are many *different visions* of so-called American values, even the American dream. As uncomfortable as this may be, from a democratic point of view, these must be given due consideration. Carl Zimmer⁴ insightfully noted, “Our moral orchestra and that of others uses the same instruments to create its theoretical views but so very often we and others are reading different sheet music.” Reading the “sheet music” of others with compassion and understanding is a first step in this process. It was Plato who reminded us, “If you do not take an interest in the affairs of your government, then you are doomed to live under the rule of fools.”⁵ This we have experienced, perhaps all too often in both local and national politics.

In January 2021 the weak underbelly of American democracy was exposed. The insurrection in our nation’s Capitol set within the context of a failed election, as well as a lackluster response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter Movement has caused many

with grievances — sensing a crack in the magnitude of democratic prowess — to jump in to secure their piece of the American pie. Who can blame them? But what is it they seek? This has yet to be determined and flushed out. Are we, as Heather MacDonald suggests, “creating a nation of narrowed minds, primed for grievance, and ... putting our competitive edge at risk”?⁶ Although MacDonald’s query seems politically charged, requiring further discussion, her thesis draws our attention.

A Vision of Something Higher

Obviously, built into the American psyche and value-set is trying to “move up” the capitalistic ladder of success. American capitalism, itself a source of innovation and democratic progress, challenges us to “reach for the top,” but socially and politically many lag behind —blindsided by slavery past, poverty present, poor educational opportunities, and empty promises. So disillusioned, they cry out for equity. Calling out for help, many are not asking for handouts, only an equal playing field, and an opportunity to be successful. Yet, we cannot deny that government welfare and democratic socialism, as much as it is needed, has created many who would rather live off the success of others than work for it themselves.

So, let’s not get overly optimistic, low wages, a mediocre educational system, tax breaks and off-shore tax shelters for the wealthy, and low expectations for the poor have created a way of thinking which has adjusted itself to an economic system defined by the so-called Bell- Shaped Curve — a few at the top, an equal number at the bottom, and the majority somewhere in the middle struggling to stay there, especially the lower part of this so-called “middle.”

Firmly entrenched in our way of thinking, the Bell Shaped Curve has become a habit of expectation and not only in society but in our schools as well. I’ve often wondered whether the Bell-Shaped Curve is a statistical snap-shot of society or of a classroom of students (perhaps a large segment taking the SAT or ACT tests), or a *hidden prescription* justifying group decision-making and perhaps encouraging group complacency. Surely, the Bell- Shaped Curve has been used by social scientists and educators in a *justificatory* fashion as well as a *descriptive* device.⁷

“The vision of leadership permeates the workplace and is manifested in the actions, beliefs, values, and goals of your organization’s leaders. This vision attracts and affects every employee who is engaged in living this set of actions, beliefs, values, and goals. They want to share your vision.”

—Susan Heathfield, The Balance Careers.

<https://www.thebalancecareers.com/leadership-vision-1918616>

Today, we are presented with a difficult and volatile situation. With the rise of gun violence, especially against people of color, economic inflation, and the high rates of joblessness and low wages among less skilled people, current events are pushing us in some uncomfortable directions. The road to the future is

unclear and not all agree on its direction. Following the death of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, new voices are being heard and various solutions offered, but many believe some are extreme and over the top. Also, there is some evidence that nefarious groups have attached themselves to this movement with other than democratic or moral intentions.⁸ Add to this mixture the economic problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and a former President who keeps stirring the political pot, the years 2021-22 just may become a tipping point for American democracy. Certainly, we live in a time when dialogic civility is sorely needed.

This brings us back to the importance of vision as mentioned above. John Graham comments,

*A vision is a mental picture of the result you want to achieve — a picture so clear and strong it will help make that result real. A vision is not a vague wish or dream or hope. It's a picture of the real results of real efforts. It comes from the future and informs and energizes the present. Visioning is the most powerful tool I've witnessed in over twenty years of helping organizations and individuals get the results they want.*⁹

Graham gives the following reasons why visions are so powerful:

1. A vision inspires action. A powerful vision pulls in ideas, people and other resources. It creates the energy and will to make change happen. It inspires individuals and organizations to commit, to persist and to give their best.
2. A vision is a practical guide for creating plans, setting goals and objectives, making decisions, and coordinating and evaluating the work on any project, large or small.
3. A vision helps keep organizations and groups focused and together, especially with complex projects and in stressful times.

Democracy's Roadmap

The American Dream

Being able to create and communicate a moral vision for a *democratic republic* is important as our vision defines the reasons for our existence and delineates a pathway for strengthening our democratic culture. As Graham says, a vision inspires action, guides the development of goals and objectives, and helps us focus together in stressful times. Lewis Carroll's advice is duly noted, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there."¹⁰

And, it's fair to ask, "Has the American dream disappeared?" This is a question many are asking, but to ask it is to assume a singular mindset; namely, that there is only one definable "American dream." In his 1931 book, "Epic of America,"¹¹ James Truslow Adams noted how the American dream had changed over time and how it was difficult for European aristocracy to understand its value or why it drew so many immigrants to the states. Obviously, we are a diverse people, a nation of immigrants, most with a strong work ethic emphasizing unity and democratic values and others, either purposefully or unwittingly, seeking to destroy or limit democracy by their continuous probing at democracy's weaknesses.

James Truslow Adams went on to say that the American Dream is, "not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of their birth or position."

The American historian also stressed that, despite the growth of the country, the explosion of the rich and successful, and how such families established a sort of social order where those coming from a position of wealth tended to succeed and have greater opportunities, that the belief was that, regardless of this, anyone could find success and happiness. He noted that the American Dream is and has been "... much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class."

<https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/knowledge/other/american-dream/>

And although we are a nation built on diversity, we should not seek to dramatize our differences – there is a great deal of broad agreement among us about what is right and

“We face other grave illnesses in this nation as well – deep, bitter divides in our nation that have been building up for decades and have only now risen to an emotional boiling point that we saw erupt in our nation’s Capitol yesterday.

Violence and taking over the Capitol Building are wrong and are dangerous for our nation. Such actions destabilize the nation and rip apart trust between citizens and those who govern. More than that, such actions are not in alignment with the way of Jesus.”

—A Pastoral letter in response to the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 by Rev. Matthew Best

wrong, good and evil, even about the purposes of democracy. All is not perfect in America and it will never be, but we should avoid becoming “A what about this or a what about that nation” as an excuse to avoid difficult solutions to our problems. Nit-picking the past is not a productive road to improvement. This being said, the search for one’s dreams is not a recipe for dominance over others or violence, even if such is demanded by serious idealists or political demagogues. Rather, it is to admit that life is imperfect and that progress and achievement require diligence and openness to the dreams of others.

Having a vision of something “higher” is important as vision lies on the vertical periphery of achievement and discovery providing a roadmap for the future. Democracy’s pathway lies in the dreams of America’s founders and in the Constitution which they wrote. It also lives in the dreams and hopes of many today. We are a nation of laws and our Constitution provides our laws stability and equity, making living within ethnic and cultural diversity possible. Being grounded in a shared morality supports this vision requiring clarification and adjustments by every generation of Americans.

But we do not live in a perfect world; this we acknowledge. We have settled our differences internally and externally through rational adjustments to our Constitution and by violence, war, and mayhem. Among our leaders, some have lied, manipulated others, and clung to unconstitutional ideologies. There are many who have had the wherewithal to manipulate our financial system to their advantage and the disadvantage of others. This may be a major cause of unrest that goes unmentioned. Consequently, there are hate groups, many frustrated economically, roaming through society seeking to destroy the very values making their lives possible; values that give them the freedom to speak, join in groups, and even hate if that is their mantra. Also, many remain suspicious of a system of government

“As Kant knew, what we do with ourselves *after* we find ourselves is the real work. After we find ourselves, there’s a whole lot of sawing and hammering and sanding and shellacking to be done. As a matter of fact, we’ve got to saw, hammer, sand, and shellack ourselves every darn day. Perfection isn’t the goal. A life well-lived is the goal.”

— Rev. David Breeden, PhD.

<https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/thecrookedtimberofourselves/#:~:text=Kant%20said%2C%20%E2%80%9COut%20of%20the%20crooked%20timber%20ofhammering%20and%20sanding%20and%20shellacking%20to%20be%20done>

and free enterprise which has trapped them in a seemingly no-win economic situation. This encapsulates the incongruent social environment of our time. Hence, understanding the risky nature of democracy and the delicate balance of the capitalism which it embraces – doubt and change and disintegrating corrosion from within and without – renders our dreams and our way of life a precarious adventure itself seeking political stability and moral balance.

Democracy and capitalism have worked in tandem building America, but this has been an uneasy marriage requiring delicate and sensitive political maneuvering called “checks and balances.” Stability (homeostasis¹²) has been made possible by agreed upon Constitutional requirements as well as economic adjustments. These have prevented criminal activities by large corporations and have leveled the playing field for many others, but this has also required sensitive lawmakers who understand that wealth typically concentrates at the top but also that a strong and balanced economy is required to support the democratic vision. Nonetheless, much is left to be done.

With the January 6, 2021 attack on our nation’s Capitol the dubious nature of democracy and its relationship with capitalism came into full view. Ironically, many who are economically marginalized continue to support an administration that has given tax breaks to the top 1%-2%, tax breaks that they, the middle class, will have to pay for in years to come. So, all are not happy or content with either political party in America and we should be so forewarned, as the 1970 Pogo cartoon said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”¹³

Without a doubt we can be our own worst enemy as the freedoms we struggle against are the same freedoms and laws that support our struggle, even our rebellious actions. This sounds paradoxical, and it is—life doesn’t always move in a logical fashion as the avenues of decision-making are fraught with hills, curves, and unmarked directions making dialogical civility a crucial modus operandi in a democratic society. Maybe Immanuel Kant was correct when he concluded, “Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.” Surely, making democracy work is a continuous task about which we should continually pursue. Scot Horton,¹⁴ referencing Isaiah Berlin,¹⁵ writes in *Harper’s Magazine*:

“The key notion of the thesis is actually better reflected in the prior sentence: Kant believes that humans need a master; that the species itself benefits from this model. To balance this, he points to the need for political institutions to check the assertion of excessive powers by those in authority. (Only five years later, James Madison makes the same essential points in Federalist No. 51. “If men were angels,” he writes, “no government would be necessary.”) But Berlin is right about the importance of the image of crooked wood — it shows us that Kant may be an idealist in a sense but he is very skeptical about the perfectibility of individual humans.”

Through conflict and suffering, social and political cohesion have taken place in our society and will again occur. Yet, for some there are no facts and there is no logic that will “make straight” the truth of what took place on January 6, 2021 in our nation’s Capitol. Consequently, taking democracy for granted is a mistake; much is demanded of us.

Maybe we have set our vision and hopes too high; maybe we are being impractical? Could be that our vision of a moral humanity is naive and unrealistic. Perhaps we have not listened carefully to those who differ with us? The mere existence of positive, ethical values and intentions to live under one Constitution make listening and co-operation possible. Prioritizing our values and commitments is an essential task. Maybe all we can do is preserve an uneasy equilibrium that is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair. There are no pat or easy answers; dialogue is the crucible through which democracy’s success must pass.

Wilding in America

Charles Derber¹⁶ may have been correct in assuming that “the wilding” of America has become normalized. Derber feels that in its degraded form, wilding encourages unrestrained

and sociopathic *self-interest*, and, according to Charles Taylor,¹⁷ if our values are *self-referential only* they become personally reductive, subjective, ethically unhinged, and undemocratic. This kind of ethic is potentially narcissistic and generally *individualistic* and *rights* oriented nearly always focusing on personal freedoms such as the “freedom to join,” “to express views,” or “to protest.” It seldom focuses on the conditions of society as a whole revealing a pathological crisis among

“America’s current state of polarization and civic dysfunction is the byproduct of our failure to invest in civic education for many decades. We’ve forgotten how to listen to each other, how to reasonably disagree on issues, and why these civic virtues matter – because in both universities and schools we have neglected these priorities.”

– Paul Carrese, the director of The School of Civic & Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University.

<https://ethics.harvard.edu/Educating-American-Democracy-Roadmap>.

members of the “me” generation.

This being said, self-focused behaviors are what fuels progress and innovation in a capitalistic society. These naturally emerge within a democratic culture and stem from ideas such as equality and nondiscrimination, fair-treatment, personal responsibility, and freedom of speech. We can’t condemn those who seek opportunity and have gained economic prowess. Pursuing what we believe is our “rights” is a part of this equation and, in itself, is not to be condemned or criticized. Yet, we are encouraged to pursue our dreams within the context of local and national laws and with civility and moral sensitivity. Democracy is a socio-political concept wrapped in free enterprise (capitalism) and to pursue it individually (only) will not simply promote isolated views and autocratic solutions to problems, but impede communication across political differences, thus destroying its very nature. As Taylor notes, “... its dialogical setting ... binds us to others.”¹⁸

Moral decency must also return, and not only to our elected officials, but to all of us. This will be a reconciling journey of healing one’s own troubled soul and reaching out and beyond self to families, friends, work associates, and into the community to uplift others, mending past mistakes, and seeking the best kind of life to live, of what it’s good to be not just what we want to do. We are thus challenged to acknowledge and respect differences of opinion and debate these rationally as well as civilly. But, to be over-bearing in our response to others will be a mistake, for as Isaiah Berlin¹⁹ has said, “To force people into the neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes is almost always the road to inhumanity. We can only do what we can; but that we must do, against difficulties.” Certainly, our differences present us with a moral tightrope on which we must carefully walk as we seek moral balance and stability.

Simply put, democracy is a moral concept definitive of ethical behaviors. Kurt Baier²⁰ supports this principle saying that from a moral view we should treat everyone as*equally important centers of craving, impulses, desires, needs, aims, and aspirations; as people with ends of their own, all of which are entitled, prima facie²¹ to be attained.* Following this principle, Baier argues, should *make it possible* for others either to consent or dissent to our wishes, which is crucial to the democratic process. Baier’s view about the *universal nature* of equality and human rights confirms the essence of our humanity as moral. Thus, the principles lying behind such values as fairness and justice—and the importance of human dignity, integrity, nurture, and care—form the core of morality and the essence of democracy.

Democracy's Myths

Yet, meaning is lost if our discussions remain abstract and are divorced from present day realities. In light of the events surrounding the Presidential election of 2020 and the certification of its results, re-establishing the Presidency as an office of respect, responsibility, and authenticity remains a difficult task. Building trust back into politics is something both major parties need to pursue. But, as we know, life is not lived in the black and white. Indeed, today, as before in our history, American values have been polarized and ethics compressed, casting a shadow on democracy's ethical foundations. Seemingly, without rudder or anchor we live in the afterglow of Jefferson transformational words,

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."*²²

In the 19th century, these words would soon be tempered by capitalistic greed and institutionalized slavery resulting in a civil war pushing our racial prejudices even deeper into the fiber of our values. But even a civil war could not wipe clean the prejudices held in the minds of many Americans against people of color. Their unethical treatment and the assumption of "white" privilege and "white supremacy" have, from the beginning, been negative anchors weighing down the moral foundations of American democracy. Today, the assumption of white privilege must not only disappear, but be replaced – not by any kind of ethnic privilege as a means of correcting past mistakes – with an emphasis on equality and fair-treatment. The playing field must be leveled.

In the face of the unknown we need to resist the comforting temptation to retreat behind the walls with our own tribe and instead invite others into community who may see or behave differently. This includes a place for rebels, artists, dreamers, amateurs, elders, youth and indigenous wisdom - those with no official standing or clear path to leadership and so remain voiceless but who may actually hold the missing key to the puzzle we are seeking to solve. —Michael Jones

<https://www.management-issues.com/opinion/7179/from-leadership-to-communityship/>

Truly, the nation we so fondly call "America" was in part a creation of the influence of myth and fact, reason and hope, and fear and anxiety. As these cultural forces were overlapping and bumping into one another, the ideal of American democracy was taking shape. Maybe democracy was always a ruse to confuse the unsuspecting; an unrealistic goal held aloft, but knowingly unattainable. So, listen carefully to what Thomas Jefferson famously said, "If a nation expects to be *ignorant and free*, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."²³ In this he echoed the bad experiences the ancient Athenians had made with their democratic experiment. Perhaps Jefferson's vision was that democracy, to survive, will have to be maintained by system of universal education. Just what "educated"²⁴ means in the 21st century, maybe even before, has yet to be determined, for as we know, many who attacked democracy's principles in January 2021 were supposedly highly educated men and women. We continue to wonder and, with diligence and forbearance, are challenged to cultivate the educative ground from which democracy grows. Education remains the gateway to democratic improvement and economic opportunity, a gateway that must remain open and

fluid, adjusting itself to situations and problems as they arise, seeking truth, and available to all.

“Learning to live together in peace and harmony is a dynamic, holistic and lifelong process through which mutual respect, understanding, caring and sharing, compassion, social responsibility, solidarity, acceptance and tolerance of diversity among individuals and groups (ethnic, social, cultural, religious, national and regional) are internalized and practiced together to solve problems and to work towards a just and free, peaceful and democratic society. This process begins with the development of inner peace in the minds and hearts of individuals engaged in the search for truth, knowledge and understanding of each other’s cultures, and the appreciation of shared common values to achieve a better future. Learning to live together in peace and harmony requires that quality of relationships at all levels is committed to peace, human rights, democracy and social justice in an ecologically sustainable environment.”

— “Learning to Live Together in Peace and Harmony,” UNESCO-APNIEVE. Bangkok: UNESCO PROAP (1998).

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001143/114357eo.pdf>

Finally, as our early national history became more remote, an ever-widening gap of knowledge and information was left to be filled in by old stories, ideologies, and myths designed to augment our most treasured ideals and manipulate our beliefs and actions. Various told, these stories color how we view the world and interpret present day issues. Covertly they fuel our moral and immoral judgments with hyperbolic intentions. We hear them from parents and grandparents, friends and work associates,

ministers, teachers, and politicians. We especially hear them in news commentaries and the unaware are often blindsided by half-truths and misappropriated or politically adjusted “facts.” What is left unspoken or just glossed over in amiable ignorance or prejudiced by undisclosed beliefs is sometimes puzzling and ever so often doesn’t mesh with the contextual realities in which it [they] originated. Remembering these stories, we more often than not ignore their exaggerations and accept them as fact when they coalesce with our beliefs revealing their subjective nature. Knowledge, facts, and our ethical dispositions are socially and non-judiciously created on the backs of the stories we have heard and those that we pass along to the younger generation.²⁵ Again, this reinforces the need for universal and quality educational opportunities for all Americans. It may also mean the wholesale re-education of the present teachers in our schools as well as over-hauling teacher education in our colleges and universities.

As we are aware, our myths, which contain veiled assumptions²⁶ about our genealogical past, including our values and beliefs, cannot be dispelled by facts alone. We have trouble thinking about them rationally because they comprise a great deal of our mental makeup; when thinking *ABOUT* them, we are thinking *WITH* them. They lie quietly within operating in the background of our ideas and beliefs as a hidden moral grammar, axiomatic and logically secure, accentuating the importance of dialogical communication across our differences.²⁷

So, on Memorial Day each year, when celebrating warriors past, and with emotional force – flags flying, Bibles waving, bands playing, children marching, and with a loud and numbing rhetoric – our myths are convincingly acknowledged – *clichés or ordinary life* – helping us gain our bearings in a world of confusing ethical messages. They are active, perhaps covertly shaping our personal and collective identities and compressing our values’ orientation – including what is meant by “ethical democracy” – in an agreeable unawareness. The irony is palpable.

The Lost Art of Communityship

Writing in the Washington Post on January 25, 2021, Brian Klass said,

“Today, with the rise of social media, one can be alone but feel part of a group – and some of those groups are glued together by unhinged beliefs. Bowling alone has been replaced by tweeting together – a cardboard cutout for real social interaction, but one that has a seductive allure to millions of people. Many of the fanatics who stormed the Capitol were neither poor nor social misfits, but rather had found a digital community to augment or replace their offline one.”²⁸

The seductive allure of “belonging” to something greater than ourselves and of “making a difference” in a world that has perhaps treated us indifferently, and to reinvigorate our self-image in order to lift us *from what* David Riesman called “The Lonely Crowd”²⁹ is a powerful psychological and communal force. Riesman theorized that our lives are in large part shaped by “peer groups” of persons whom we resemble in age, social class, or otherwise, and we adjust our values to conform to those of our group. This is an ongoing process making our values unthinkingly habitual and often unstable and irrational. Unfortunately, we are not as free as we believe we are.

Dr. Wendy James says,

“As humans, we have instinctual responses that are exacerbated by group influences. What we might not do as individuals we may do as part of a group. People may lose control of their usual inhibitions, as their mentality becomes that of the group. You have never heard of a peaceful riot. Riots are by definition violent in nature If the group behavior is violent, the larger the group the more magnified the violence. A mob mentality phenomenon has occurred throughout human history, whether witch burning, religious zealotry, political protests or reaction to perceived racial micro aggressions.”³⁰

These social and political forces pull on our sentiments – feelings of alienation, the need for self-identity, the desire to make a difference, and the allure of belonging. Of course, there are inequities in our system of government as egos and ideologies often clash and compromises are negotiated. Somehow, we must figure out why the more destructive of these forces lures some and not others; what is it that makes some want to scream at the world that they have been mistreated by the “system” and not others; why do some – rich or poor – work diligently at their vocation and reach pinnacles of achievement; and what is it that is able to shore up democracy, and not for the wealthy and influential only, but for all of us?

Albert Einstein said it with these words: “A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”
<https://www.purposefairy.com/73654/importance-of-human-connection/>

Value Connections

We may not like the fact, but our value-connections shape us and have shaped us for millions of years. They are a part of our evolutionary history and personal genealogy lying quietly behind much of what we think and say. Scientist Matthew Lieberman says,

“Across many studies of mammals, from the smallest rodents all the way to us humans, the data suggests that we are profoundly shaped by our social environment and that we suffer greatly when our social bonds are threatened or severed. Being socially connected is our brain’s lifelong passion...It’s been baked into our operating system for tens of millions of years.”³¹

Lieberman is talking about “communityship” about which Henry Mintzberg said involves a, “... people’s sense of belonging to and caring for something larger than themselves.”³² Without a doubt, “communityship” hints at “ethical authentic leadership,”³³ at democracy – a vision of something higher.

A difficulty with talking about all of this is that we now realize there are two general forms of “communityship” operative in our nation: one that is thought of as ethical, democratic and grounded in common need and moral considerations, and another that is generally “me-focused” and doesn’t require us to measure the injudiciousness of our actions against anything other than what gives us personal pleasure. This is the self-indulgence of the egocentric masquerading as a lofty moral principle.³⁴

Peering deeper; the same forces that mold the ethical are similar to those molding the unethical. All of these – individualism and collectivism, authoritarianism, and communitarianism – are *sources of the self*³⁵ bringing significance to our lives, albeit variously, and drawing us together in communities of significance. This underscores the necessity for values clarification and, most importantly, values evaluation, as we continue to build our democratic future. Clearly, America today stands at a crossroads and the choice is ours to make: Are we or are we not committed to the collectivity that is us, to democratic principles and their moral foundation? Even if the majority is so committed, differences abound among us and there are many paths open for discussion. To this we need to give our attention. It was Aristotle who sounded the warning:

“That which is common to the greatest number, has the least care bestowed upon it. Everyone thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest; and only when he is himself concerned as an individual. For besides other considerations, everybody is more inclined to neglect the duty which he expects another to fulfill.”³⁶

Mitch Albom put it this way, “The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.”³⁷ This we know, people whose values are restricted to the immediate, with little knowledge of the past, and who maintain a shallow outlook of the future have limited cognitive and moral growth. They live their lives on the periphery of community and give little thought to issues that have moral meaning and purpose. Most of the time it’s about them and what they want; especially what they claim are their Constitutional rights, revealing their inherent narcissism. When they scream and yell that their rights have been violated, one can only wonder if their words bear the impress of rational thinking grounded in congruent knowledge.

Becoming Morally Conscious

We should give serious thought to what we value in ourselves and what we value in others as we are faced with an enormous task of articulating a concept of democracy grounded in the moral soil of human relationships. We are indeed, seekers of community in a divided world.³⁸ The reference to “moral” is not accidental as it is definitive of a democratic culture designating

a particular kind of *conscious content* – socially prescriptive and cognitively descriptive – telling us how we ought to treat one another.

Although variously conceived, ethical and moral rules of behavior have historically brought stability and meaning to collective living. Through parenting, nurture, and continual interaction with others we learn the importance of living morally. We can symbolize this aptitude as our “moral consciousness.”³⁹ It’s a social disposition identifying human interrelatedness and collective responsibility. This is learned and developed by communal awareness – in families, churches, schools, in political debates, and by working with others. Thus, being moral is both natural and developmental but also reflective of cultural diversity. It may be so firmly enculturated as to be thought of as self-evident. Yet, its activation is not a given; someone must step up and provide the moral leadership required.

And so we ask, “How will a good person know when she or he is hurting or humiliating her or his neighbor?” and “How will companies, including scientific, technical, and governmental organizations, know when they are violating rather than promoting essential human values?” Notwithstanding the events of 1/6/21, we can also inquire into the role of religion – Christian or otherwise – in directing our moral consciousness.⁴⁰ What does the religious have to say about the immigrants pouring into our nation, many who are children, seeking relief from oppression and a safe place to live and work? What did we hear from pulpits in the aftermath of the events of 1/6/21? With the pervasiveness of churches in America, notwithstanding their decreased membership and attendance, we wish to hear more from the pulpit than pious platitudes, such as “thoughts and prayers” set in the tomes of religious dogma.

Obviously, to be moral – to adhere to and live by moral principles – reveals an uneven history. We have built moral principles into law and constitution, into faith and church polity, and into our businesses. These efforts are indicators that being moral or ethical *may not be a natural disposition*, but one that is prized and to which we must give our attention. These moral pathways reveal our perception of the importance of living ethically and our commitment to principles of moral behavior. This I understand – psychologically valuing my own freedom and the justice it requires me to extend to others also necessitates that I become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings with whom I interact can be hurt. From a moral perspective, we tasked with creating environments that respect the welfare, dignity, and self-worth of those in our care.

Like all human experience, our moral awareness is not a fixed target, but most certainly changes as our understanding of our physical world and our relationships change. We are daily confronted with understanding those around us – their familial connections, religious affiliations, political views, and deepest values. We most assuredly can assert: *relationships reveal our character* enabling friendship and love, communication, trade, and the making of treaties, and constitutions. Even if this commonality has grown unevenly in different people and cultures it represents our moral consciousness or “moral compass.” Understandably, “life is a web of relationships” defining our moral obligations. Relationship-building is a powerful but fragile phenomenon, constantly changing and easily lost.

This perception entails empathy, generosity, fairness, and reciprocity. All of these, including their polar opposites, figure into our relationship-value-equation. They ground our moral consciousness within a human ferment, always bubbling up within the agitation and commotion around us. Positive moral values set in the context of relationships – religious, political dialogue, community decision-making, etc. – comprise the enabling foundation of a

growing democratic republic. Identifying the moral is a challenge, but I have discovered that we give birth to our essential moral selves in our service to one another. In America this moral consciousness includes the right to life, liberty, and the individual pursuit of a happy and fulfilling life. And although we may point our moral compass toward these goals, our compass doesn't always reveal the hills, swamps, and rough terrain that lie in our path. As what is thought of as "moral" has become more and more politicized, courage will be needed to keep our compass pointed in a positive moral direction, to uplift the horizon of our moral awareness.

Conclusion: Democracy's Edge

Artist Paul Cézanne remarked, "The landscape thinks itself me and I am its consciousness."⁴¹ If the "landscape" is symbolized as "the human landscape" then our consciousness will be a moral consciousness of *unconcealment*. Surely this is a vision of something "higher" lying on the vertical periphery of democracy and its moral postulates. We all have known people who look at the world from the nicely furrowed grooves of their own beliefs and maybe some don't care about others; or perhaps are so dialogically limited that they are unable to listen and grasp meaning outside the province of their own values-set. Many times we hear, but "don't hear," and that's the folly of our times. Consequently, for some, commitment to a personal ideology is easier than a commitment to the moral welfare of others. Relationships can be messy and difficult, whereas an ideology, like belief, is abstract and conceptual; it doesn't argue with us.

Sadly, as we assert individual values only and stake out a path to personal freedoms, rather than the democratic collective we are, we unknowingly sacrifice our independence and are gathering with like-minded individuals, often in volatile groups, who are also asserting their individuality and personal values. In doing this, we are fooling no one but ourselves; that is, our joining these groups and conformity to peer pressure negates our individuality, but this is something that lies outside the ability of some to understand. We honestly believe that there is power in numbers and truth is to be counted and weighed rather than understood and reasoned.

Our sense of what it means to be alive emerges partly from our awareness of our own life and partly from our intuitive ability to recognize others as living beings defining the parameters of our moral sentiments. This sense does not spring from logical deduction or from some moral theory. From infancy onward we use mental shortcuts to discern the lives of others. These are intuitions that are developed and shrouded in words becoming a part of our knowledge, always adjusting to new experiences and developing fresh understandings.

This being said, democracy feeds on positive, moral relationships, relationships that provide cohesion to our families, work, religious experiences, and political ideals. Henry Mintzberg says, "'communityship' involves a people's sense of belonging to and caring for something larger than themselves."⁴² Without a doubt, "communityship" hints at "ethical authentic leadership" as Timothy Snyder remarks,

"America will not survive the big lie just because a liar is separated from power. It will need a thoughtful repluralization of media and a commitment to facts as a public good. The racism structured into every aspect of the coup attempt is a call to heed our own history. Serious attention to the past helps us to see risks but also suggests future possibility. We cannot be a democratic republic if we tell lies about race, big or small. Democracy is neither about minimizing the vote nor ignoring it, neither a matter of gaming nor of

breaking a system, but of accepting the equality of others, heeding their voices and counting their votes."⁴³

Endnotes

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4. See <https://carlzimmer.com/whose-life-would-you-save-481/>. See also Zimmer, Carl (2021). *Life's edge*. New York: Dutton.
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18. Taylor, Charles, *Ibid.*

19. Berlin, Isaiah, *Op. Cit.*
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Supplemental References

Henry Reeve, adapted by John Spencer (1835), made the first translation of Tocqueville’s “Democracy in America.” The line “The great experiment” has become famous for being used by Tocqueville for describing the birth of modern democracy in America. It is supposed to be in the last paragraph of the first chapter of his book “Democracy in America.” However, French versions do not have this line and modern American versions do not have it as well. Tocqueville wrote,

“C’est là que les hommes civilisés devaient essayer de bâtir la société sur des fondements nouveaux, et qu’appliquant pour la première fois des théories jusqu’alors inconnues ou réputées inapplicables, ils allaient donner au monde un spectacle auquel l’histoire du passé ne l’avait pas préparé.” Henry Reeve translated it this way:

“In that land the great experiment was to be made, by civilized man, of the attempt to construct society upon a new basis; and it was there, for the first time, that theories hitherto unknown, or deemed impracticable, were to exhibit a spectacle for which the world had not been prepared by the history of the past.”

James W. Loewen (17 July 2018). *Sundown towns: A hidden dimension of American racism*. *The Washington Post Book World*. He comments:

In this groundbreaking work, sociologist James W. Loewen, author of the classic bestseller *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, brings to light decades of hidden racial exclusion in America. In a provocative, sweeping analysis of American residential patterns, Loewen uncovers the thousands of “sundown towns” – almost exclusively white towns where it was an unspoken rule that blacks weren't welcome – that cropped up throughout the twentieth century, most of them located outside of the South.

Written with Loewen's trademark honesty and thoroughness, *Sundown Towns* won the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award, received starred reviews in *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*, and launched a nationwide online effort to track down and catalog sundown towns across America.

In a new preface, Loewen puts this history in the context of current controversies around white supremacy and the Black Lives Matter movement. He revisits sundown towns and finds the number way down, but with notable exceptions in exclusive all-white suburbs such as Kenilworth, Illinois, which as of 2010 had not a single black household. And, although many former sundown towns are now integrated, they often face "second-generation sundown town issues," such as in Ferguson, Missouri, a former sundown town that is now majority black, but with a majority-white police force.

Hume's Habit (<https://philosophermit.wordpress.com/2017/07/12/humes-habit/>). David Hume labeled his fleeting sensations the “empirical self” compressing what many call “human essences” – mind, feelings, beliefs, values, etc. – and encapsulating, among other things, talk about ethics and morals within the language of scientific verification. Hume's idea of “causation” follows from this; “causation” is unperceived, thus non-empirical. Rather, it is an inference or assumption—a habit of the empirical self. The philosophical pages from Britannica (<http://philosophypages.com/hy/4t.htm>) explain:

“Our beliefs in matters of fact, then, arise from sentiment or feeling rather than from reason. For Hume, imagination and belief differ only in the degree of conviction with which their objects are anticipated. Although this positive answer may seem disappointing, Hume maintained that custom or habit is the great guide of life and the foundation of all natural science.”

Pew Research Center. The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping the world. It conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, media content analysis, and other empirical social science research. The Pew Research Center does not take policy positions. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2016/06/27/4-achieving-racial-equality/>.

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