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## Democracy: On the Edge of Uncertainty

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# Democracy

## On the Edge of Uncertainty

— JOSEPH P. HESTER, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR, CLAREMONT, NC, USA

I have considered once again the ancients and the moderns, and those who said that ethics was laid to rest in the graveyard of sociological and psychological babblings of feelings and emotions. I think too about utilitarians — whose philosophy has become the foundation of much of modern life — with its sterile pragmatism, captured and encapsulated by a framework eliminating the nonquantifiable while sneaking in the backdoor of our values offering empty moral platitudes and religious sentiments, e.g., thoughts and prayers. Knowingly, the scientific/statistical adherents of post-industrial society have tried to cleanse from our education, from our public lives and collective existence, any mention of feeling and emotion, of rule and prescription, and of value and ethics. Although ongoing, this cleansing has begun to push aside both heart and soul, the spiritual from our lives, including empathy and compassion, and replace it with an insensitive secular expediency. Sadly, much of “white” Christianity has been drawn into this insolent wicker revealing the superficiality of Christian morality and the biases underlying much of Christian history.

In this environment, the idea of “spiritual” has struggled to be resurrected from its ecclesiastical encapsulation and New Age wanderings. Charles Taylor explains, “In this era, there is an enormous amount of spiritual seeking, and this seeking focuses on sources of very different eras, different traditions.”<sup>1</sup> Here we should pause and not move too quickly giving Taylor’s remark some serious consideration: when it comes to “spiritual,” recognizing our diversity, one size doesn’t fit all. Consequently, saying the spiritual has no useful meaning in our modern world may be a bridge too far, for, as we are aware, “spiritual” is a common idiom embedded in many social, philosophical, and religious ideals and principles and used commonly to describe the inner wanderings of the human “heart.” “Spiritual” is widespread enough to be thought of as a collective moral impulse and ontologically basic to human life, but we should remember that it is conditioned by social forces revealing its impressionable and compliant nature eliminating “spiritual” as an *a priori* first principle in our moral reasoning.

For example, in religious leadership studies, Louis W. Fry<sup>2</sup> identifies the “spiritual” as a religious inclination associated with belief in a “Higher Being.” Fry’s summary, as he says, is an explication of the *intrinsic* concealed within a belief matrix, but this renders any critique of “spiritual” outside the boundaries of HIS faith problematical. Fry’s is a widespread practice and to make clear the spiritual’s more collective value he tries to avoid attaching “spiritual” to any particular religion seeking a more general and robust definition. However, his generalizations fall short as he positions *being spiritual* in the arms of a nondescript *monotheistic* tradition rendering it *the* motivating (causal) force for being moral, showing the way to the moral life. Fry, I think, was close to being right, but his monotheistic leanings have put theoretical/theological barriers around the spiritual negating its exploration outside the parameters of his own faith.

## A Secular Society

No doubt we have become a secular society putting a great deal of faith on the litigations of state and federal courts on issues of value. However, and to this we need to attend, the courts are unable to reconstitute our essential moral consciousness, our spirituality, our moral sentiments. When value is taken out of its human context, generalized and reformulated to fit within acceptable patterns — groups and sub-groups, laws and policies — it loses much of its meaning and its zest. We have become, *not a clog* in a vast industrial-political machine, but an essential working part — regulated, dehumanized, and sanitized from our ethical veracity beset with a mind-numbing conformity.

Every day we struggle to free ourselves from old myths and truths worn thin by cultural clichés, desperately trying to release ourselves from these self-imposed limits. Are we what others say we are or can we set our lives on a new path; march to a different drummer, and *re-orchestrate*

*In 1963, Thomas Kuhn observed that the transition from our significant paradigms or exemplar beliefs (be they scientific, ethical, or religious) is a **complete** Gestalt shift that is inexplicable precisely because it leaves nothing of the old by means of which to explain it. This seems a common predicament as we have inherited the wind of manifold conjectures, inconsistent religious dogmas, and speculative ethical hypotheses all vying for value dominance. Yet, a “complete” paradigm shift is a rare thing, maybe impossible, usually gradual and hardly noticeable as it drags prior assumptions and past habits with it into future discourse and behavior.*

the cultural rhythms often discovered in old habits and practices? But even as we are caught in the vortex of swimming against the tide, kicking and screaming and demanding release, we are found dragging many of the assumptions and practices of the past with us —

paradigm shifts are rarely complete or sanitized despite what Thomas Kuhn said.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, our moral authenticity needs resetting, but old habits are hard to modify or even shed. We want life neat and orderly and find it difficult to disconnect from our envisioned idyllic past with its security and order, regulations, rules and quantifiable efficiency. So with toxic nostalgia we acquiesce, sentenced to a life of drift and doubt.

I write as a moral idealist, but write I must as our ordinary passivity needs to be replaced by positive and reflective intention. The moral self is something to be realized outward into the world, such that it is enlarged and deepened the more collective experience it is able to contain. Ethics, the moral life, is therefore something we grow into rather than something we possess; it resists static and quantifiable efficiency and is conditioned on human relationships the activity of which introduces meaning and variety into our lives. We actively shape our world with our moral behaviors, not diminishing humanity with our ideas, but enriching those in our environs by pushing the meaning of “humanity” further and further away from personal interests, from our egos, and into the current of moral relationships.

Democracy is a moral ideal, itself communal and based on principles of social equality. But democracy, especially in America, has been endangered by autocratic actions instigated by narcissistic behaviors, including violent sub-groups wishing to destroy the very system of government allowing their and our existence. Life is at a crossroads. Richard Roney reflects, “One direction leads to death, destruction, and possibly the extinction of life on earth. The other direction opens new possibilities for the human species, a world where all people have the opportunity to satisfy their basic human needs, where life has meaning and purpose.”<sup>4</sup> In a deeply moral sense Roney is optimistic as he faces *change as possibility* saying,

*We inherit the lifetimes of experimentation and learning of those who went before us. We accumulate knowledge and pass it on to others. We communicate through time and space. We deal with abstract concepts. We think about the past and the future.... We know that we are products of a distant past, a past that stretches beyond the twentieth century, beyond even human history. Each of us is connected to the beginnings of time and space, energy and matter, to the beginnings of life itself. We are the end points of a living process. By examining that process, we have discovered the principles that govern survival.*

Examining these principles, we discover amongst our friends and varying widely in our communities, competing standards and beliefs governing group survival (social, national, and international) often overlapping and impacting each other. And, here in America, although committed to democratic principles, when pressed, many find difficulty expressing their values and understandably are confused not quite grasping the value of ethnic and social diversity in the molding of our lives. Not wishing to offend their love ones or neighbors, many keep quietly to themselves. The past several years of political conflict has definitely convoluted the value and nature of democracy.

*But if civilization is to be coherent and confident it must be known in that civilization what its ideals are...the good at which it might, and, it is to flourish.*

— Walter Lippman, *A Preface to Morals*, 1929

Unapologetically, it's both clarity and moral conviction we seek. So, in these tenuous times, it's not unusual to ask, "How do you interpret the events of 1/6/21?" "What are your convictions about the United States and its present state of affairs?" And, "What is it about democracy that attracts a variety of people worldwide making democracy worth pursuing?" There are many other questions, and opinions vary, some saying democracy is beneficial for achieving personal and collective goals, some claiming democracy is necessary for religious freedom, and others adding that democracies are collectively and morally desirable independent of personal goals.

*More than anything, we are proud that America stands for something, a set of enduring values that have given us a common identity in the midst of incredible diversity — values that have made us one people.*

— Frances Moore Lappe, *Rediscovering America's Values*, 1989

When answering these questions, we can no longer afford to straddle the fence or apologize for pointing out the positive features of democracy. But as we lift up democracy as a moral ideal, we should avoid moral platitudes and take responsibility for our own behavior, for, as we have witnessed, democracy's internal weaknesses have

been exposed, its structures weakened, and its value tilting on the edge of uncertainty. With moral sensitivity, practical reasoning is able to upright the moral ideal that is democracy.

On a personal level, we all, if we're normal, value our lives and hope that others find value in us. But this doesn't always happen for life isn't neat and orderly; it can be and maybe at times it needs to be, but, as we know, it can also be brutish and ragged, unpredictable and confusing. And not all are committed to the collective enterprise that is democracy. Some are self-absorbed pushing a despotism echoing their own beliefs and self-centered motives. Others, in their insecurity, have harnessed their religious and political beliefs to influential personalities finding comfort in numbers. With Evangelical Christianity losing numbers year by year, many evangelicals have hitched their "faith" to the political right searching for stability and confirmation. Recently, this has paid dividends as the Supreme Court, in June 2022, overturned *Roe v. Wade* and the political right is hinting at much more to come. Perhaps the

Supreme Court has become politicized, legislating values rather than interpreting law according to Constitutional standards. But do politicians really care about moral, even religious issues, or are they only motivated by the political power that potential voters can give them? And, although the institutions of democracy are thought of as sacred, and special they are, they (the three branches of government) resist being absolute, remaining contingent on the will of “we the people” using Constitutional means to strengthen their political reach.

Obviously, our lives have been dominated by large political gatherings tempered by accusations and a lack of sensitivity to different views. White Supremacy and racial/ethnic bias are being pushed and, noticeably, in this excitement and with its vociferous rhetoric, we often lose contact with our own moral veracity, the common language of value by which we have learned to live with each other. In this values muddle, if we acquiesce, we open ourselves – not to civil discourse – but to a mind-numbing herd mentality losing our individuality and, more often than not, stumbling into group conformity.

Bruce Thornton warns, “And so we are vulnerable to con-men of various stripes, ‘subtle devisors’ who can manipulate our ignorance and insecurities to peddle their own brands of intellectual snake oil.” In part, says Thornton, this is “caused by accepting without examination a preformed intellectual system or structure of ideas.”<sup>5</sup>

## A Closer Look

Not only in other countries, but in America as well, during the past five or six years competing political values/ideologies vying for dominance have emerged. At the extreme edges of these ideologies are *inclusive democracy* and its contrary *totalitarianism* (or more accurately, in the United States, totalitarian-democracy), but neither in their pure form. The impurity of our ideologies causes uncertainty and sometimes chaos leaving elbow room for both democratic and totalitarian (one-party, dictatorial) variations. Between these two extremes we find lesser known but highly effective competing systems of beliefs such as *socialistic-democracies and republics, including presidential, federal, and socialistic*. These we don’t always notice as the name-calling and accusations coming from some congressional leaders, friends, and the media often mask what is not said or what they don’t want us to hear. Honesty, difficult to procure, is a vital necessity for democracy.

However, involving rule by law, voting and free elections, and negotiations with ostensible democratic voices, democracy is a messy business conditioned by negotiation, arguments, and even stonewalling. Built into its core is the grit of agitation, extricating many voices and opinions and supportive of diversity. Within this give and take our values are always on display revealing our similarities and differences, willingness to cooperate, or stubborn independence.

Noticeably, we need to re-educate ourselves and look more closely at the political philosophies of our representatives – local, state, and national. Although Roney believes we are mostly rational and innovative – I’m not that optimistic – we know there are many irrational players among us. When in positions of influence, they can make life ugly and progress – economic, moral, and social – little more than an upheaval of competing and habitually incomprehensible values; paraphrasing Kant, “Ah, the crooked timber of humanity.”<sup>6</sup>

Value confusion and value polarization have us in their grips as the shade of reasoning appears to have been lowered making room for half-truths and outright lies. And we can’t

neglect our responsibilities: reflective morality, susceptible to ordinary life, consists not only of forming judgments of value, but of setting forth the reasons for one's judgments. A vibrant democracy depends on this. But are most prepared and, even if they are, will they be willing participants?

In itself, this speaks to the commonplace nature of our system of public and private education

*There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there has always been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that 'my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.'*

— Isaac Asimov

and our news media. Weighted down by facts that can be quantified and tested, our schools give little attention to the teaching of logic and critical thinking or to the intrinsic values inherent in democracy and democratic decision-making or the interpretive value of facts expressed. Under the weight of the STEM curriculum the deficiencies in the humanities and social

sciences shows as various social and religious values are being slipped into the school curriculum while others are removed. Books are being banned and various social theories, posing as “educational,” are quietly being put into the curriculum justified by one moral, political theory or another. Our deeply held beliefs drive our ethics and opinions of others as well as our behavior. Democracy's strength lies in listening to and openly discussing the ideas and views of others, even ideas we believe are immoral and/or untraditional. Carefully evaluating our beliefs is important for our beliefs are the foundation of our values.

The media also seems to be divided between the political right and left. Rather than being objective and thorough, the news is often slanted and sometimes contrary views go unrepresented. Furthermore, we are not cleansed from guilt habitually hearing what we want to hear and dismissing, without explanation, contrary opinions. There are many in our society, perhaps a majority identified on all sides of the political-values equation, who seem to be caught in the middle of all this. Politically and morally, they appear to be stalled in a pointless and seemingly never-ending cycle of party loyalty and values confusion. Unwilling to speak out or maybe not knowing what to say, and not wishing to offend their friends, they say or do nothing, assenting to the comfort of habit and tradition and vulnerable to political views on all sides. Nothing could be more dangerous to democracy than this.

## Who Are We Fooling?

According to Harry Triandis, “Self-deception occurs when we use our hopes, needs, desires, ideology, emotions, theory, prejudices, and other psychological processes to “construct” the way we see the world.”<sup>7</sup> This is a reminder that being objective about the world, even ourselves, is difficult, that all “facts” bear the stamp of “interpretation.”<sup>8</sup> Unexamined ideas and facts conceal our assumptions and, importantly, our biases. Consequently, evaluation requires civil discourse and a reconsideration of our own principles as well as those of others.<sup>9</sup> This is the way of democracy, and although imperfect, requires constant and diligent maintenance.

However, often winking and nodding at truth, we are, as it were, deceptive creatures, but, according to Triandis, whom are we fooling? America is perched on a dangerous precipice, often lying to itself, and must decide what it wants to be — either...





- (1) A *totalitarian-democracy (electocracy)*<sup>10</sup> where citizens are able to vote for their governmental officials but cannot participate directly in governmental decision making and where the government does not share any power (sometimes called a “closed society”) or
- (2) An *inclusive democracy* in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation, usually involving periodically held free elections.

In broad strokes and in our time, these two choices have emerged as front-runners; however, for the keenly observant, never in their “pure” form. Dissimilar but shared, revealing America’s paradoxical nature, both have been with us for a long while. Consequently, we must be on guard because with the rise of military aggression in Europe and the Middle East, despotism in China, and with economic dissatisfaction at home, coupled with an in-built micro-aggression against those who differ with our views, some are pushing for a more totalitarian regime as a better solution for governing (controlling) a diverse and divided nation.

## Democracy on the Edge of Uncertainty

From a moral perspective, an inclusive democracy seems to be the ideal governmental system emphasizing freedom of speech and equality, inclusive elections and the like, but we don’t live in an idyllic world; rather we live in a world, says Anne Applebaum,<sup>11</sup> where many have lost faith in “inclusive democracy” and where “power” and “control” seem to be operative norms. In our world anger has become habitual and divisiveness has become routine. Of course, such has been with us since our nation’s founding. Maybe we notice this more because of the proliferation of advanced systems of communication or don’t give it much attention because we are excessively involved in our own social lives and the social media. Our inattention and laissez faire attitude put democracy in danger and our freedoms at risk.

### EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW...

*These words, written above the main entrance to the Supreme Court Building, express the ultimate responsibility of the Supreme Court of the United States. The Court is the highest tribunal in the Nation for all cases and controversies arising under the Constitution or the laws of the United States. As the final arbiter of the law, the Court is charged with ensuring the American people the promise of equal justice under law and, thereby, also functions as guardian and interpreter of the Constitution.*

<https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/constitution.html>

Early in 2021, a *totalitarian-democracy* raised its head with screaming and violence attempting to overthrow the rule of law; e.g., the election process. This began and ended with raucous rhetoric, finger pointing, and violence rather than civil discourse. Now in the middle of 2022, it continues, making unraveling this conundrum a long and painful process requiring all Americans to re-examine their values and adjusting their political beliefs accordingly. Indeed, we seem to be living in the dog days of a paradigm shift which will be

neither automatic nor routine, clear cut or sterile.

Keeping this in mind, Applebaum says,

*We have long known that in closed societies, the arrival of democracy, with its clashing voices and differing opinions, can be complex and frightening for people unaccustomed to public dissent. The noise of argument, the constant hum of disagreement—these can irritate people who prefer to live in a society tied together by a single narrative.<sup>12</sup>*

Careful consideration demonstrates that American democracy has always been a blend of different philosophies teetering on the edge of disintegration. And so, we ask, “Is it the loudest

voices or the most rational to whom we listen?” “Who is it that controls this voice?” “How do we judge what is true or false?” and “What makes this voice appealing to us?” This last question is important for it’s the attitudes and commitments – the will of the people – that is the engine of democracy.

Nothing is more important to the maintenance of democracy than a free and unbiased press, but this has become an unreliable expectation. Perhaps Marshall McLuhan was correct, “The medium is the message.”<sup>13</sup> But when does reining in the press, including the social media, become a limitation on free speech? Our values seem convoluted, and they are, but care must be taken for we are walking on the thin edge of what many believe are their unalienable rights. Subsequently, how do we judge what is and what is not rational, true, and factual, even what is right or wrong? Our values, even the value of reason, seem to be a bamboozled and compromised mess of opinions, theories, and failed ideas. Consequently, all this chatter could simply be a shrewd masquerade covering a politics of conflict and power. Bertrand Russell was convinced of this as he said,

*I shall be concerned to prove that the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics.*<sup>14</sup>

Russell’s could be an unsupported generalization, but if correct, then the question becomes “How do we harness ‘power’ for good rather than evil, for democracy rather than for autocratic manipulation?” The assumption here is that “democracy” is good and to be preferred over despotism because, ideally, it provides respect for individual choices and, as the Constitution says, “promotes the general welfare of the country,”<sup>15</sup> meaning:

- Creating the conditions under which the general population – *We the People* – can prosper and flourish.
- Protecting the environment in which we live.
- Maintaining a stable and balanced economy that offers opportunity for all.
- Taking actions to ensure that the needs and necessities of all *can* be met, though not necessarily by the State directly.
- Ensuring that the People are treated fairly in commerce and employment.

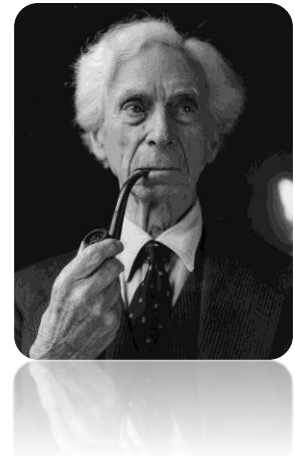
Of course, as we are aware, there are manipulators on all sides pushing their views and harnessing truth to their opinions. How they interpret the events of the day and then go about

*The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. (It is not) “... a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of 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 birth or position.*

— James Truslow Adams, *Defining the American Dream in Epic of America*, 1931.

promoting the general welfare of the country bares the stamp of their motives and ideologies. For this reason, a free and open press is a necessity for a democracy to survive.

From the Proud Boys to WOKE, coming from the Right and Left, America seems to be swirling in a fulcrum of change with subgroups emerging on all sides claiming rational and democratic support for their values. And this is not the first time, but it is *our time* and to this we must attend! The



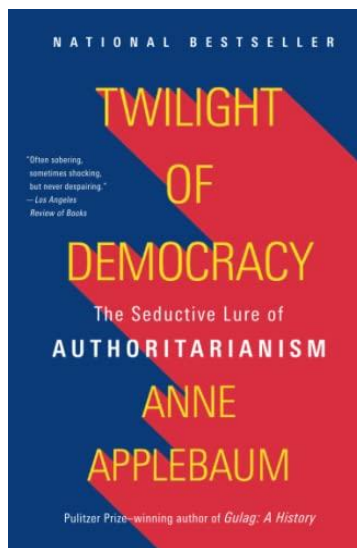


implications of Russell's observation for practical behavior and imagined values have possibly been neglected or shoved under the table. Somewhat agreeing with Russell, we are witnessing values "colored and determined by the drama of force meeting force, of action and counteraction," says Harold Kaplan.<sup>16</sup>

But times are changing as testimonies in the January 6 investigation testify. Some have been awakened to the dangers of despotism and a manipulative and unethical media, but others have not. For many on the political right, autocracy seems preferable as it serves their traditions, their biases, and, for some, their quest for power. And we should remember the words of Thomas Carlyle who was willing to allow power to be the agent of necessity and the arbiter of justice saying, "Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by action."<sup>17</sup>

## The American Dream

In all honesty, most Americans want to believe in democracy, in the American dream. Although imperfect, democracy seems to be the most moral solution to our values diversity providing a pathway for disagreement and for agreement. Isaiah Berlin<sup>18</sup> pointed out that somewhere in the past or the future, in divine revelation, in the minds of individuals, or in the pronouncements of history or science, "there is a final solution." This could be democracy or it may only be a pipedream, a product of a faith-based enculturated imagination or an eschatological hallucination, but it's a dream embedded in the thoughts and beliefs of many Americans driving efforts for improvement and change. Indeed, democracy cannot survive without a vision of the future laced with optimism and a dedication to the principles of truth, freedom, and civility. But, the timber of truth can be bent only so far until its fibers weaken and it cracks under the strain. As Harold Kaplan notes,



*Looking back on the corruption of Marxist metapolitics ... once in power ... the state [the party] has its certification in the political order rather than in struggles. Therefore it can judge the rational, the real, and the necessary for itself on an a priori basis.*<sup>19</sup>

This can be delusional, as we have witnessed, leading to some non-democratic results. Jonathan Sacks comments:

*The market cannot deliver distributive justice. The state cannot deliver dignity and resilience, civility and responsibility.... Remove the moral matrix of civil society and eventually you get populist politics and the death of freedom in the name of freedom. It is the wrong road to take.*<sup>20</sup>

Feasting at the table of uncertainty, we find that there are no simple solutions to our problems. Different opinions abound and many would prefer closing down dialogue and walking away. By excluding opposing opinions, they inadvertently eliminate the need for thinking and civil discourse — a strict diet of "follow the leader" in which many believe they will find security and social stability; "life as it used to be."

Americans want certainty, which is often expressed loudly and with force and, among white Christians especially, many want things as they were or as they thought they were—a dominant white Christian America. But, as we are aware and as Jean-Francois Revel has written, "democracy cannot thrive without a certain diet of truth."<sup>21</sup> But the hyperbole of myth-making

posing as history presents a hazard, a danger for democracy assuming a static and invariable past. This is the world of the MAGA movement, an idealized world, a fantasy world, masquerading as fact about which we are wont to believe; a user-illusion making us victims of our own delusions, a world, in the words of Senator Raphael Warnock from Georgia, “of misaligned values and misplaced priorities.”<sup>22</sup> And for Christians, especially for “White” Christians, don’t be fooled—White Christian Nationalism supported by the radical right has nothing to do with faith or belief in God; rather, it is a political movement (or suggestion) preying on fear, an idealized past that never was, uplifting prejudice to the level of the sacred, and most importantly, designed to get your votes. What absolute nonsense this is.

But, Applebaum warns:

“ . . . in an information sphere without authorities—political, cultural, moral—with no trusted sources, there is no way to distinguish between conspiracy theories and true stories . . . often deliberately misleading narratives now spread in digital wildfires, cascades of falsehood that move too fast for fact checkers to keep up.”<sup>23</sup>

*[Civility] is the call to service, giving our life over to something larger than us, the call to become what we were meant to become — the call to achieve our vital design.*

— Joe Jaworski, *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*

Caught in this confusion, and unfortunately, our moral sense and our belief in inclusive democracy as a moral vision are tip-toeing on the edge of uncertainty and ambiguity. Not since the 1950s and the days of Joe McCarthy and the civil rights revolution of the 1960s have the foundations of democracy and its moral sagacity been more shaken and weakened — *at least in my time*. To pull ourselves out of these “dog days of emotional incontinence,” we should not forget what we owe to past generations; to those who came before us making possible opportunities for our own social and economic lives, for our moral growth, and for human interaction and understanding.

Yet, we discover our moral hope often languishing in the backwaters of power and greed, of you against me, and us against them, of red states and blue states, of racism and inclusion, of gays against straights, and of trying to figure out which descriptive nouns, pronouns, and acronyms are politically correct. The list is endless and the generalities mindless.

Jonathan Sacks says we have lost the power of “We,” our feelings of collective responsibility and civil dialogue; the bonds that join us to one another in relationships of mutual responsibility and trust and this has led to the atrophy of families, marriages, and communities. Agreeing with Sacks or not, noting that *our sociability is our humanity* and life is about positive and caring relationships, I think we can agree, morality represents “our commitment to others, our capacity to form bonds of belonging and care... Morality humanizes the competition for wealth and power...that society is built on a foundation of a shared morality.”<sup>24</sup> Surely, personal well-being depends on what others do, says Steven Pinker, “...like helping us when we are in need and not harming us for no good reason.” ...When you combine self-interest and sociality with impartiality — the interchangeability of perspectives — you get the core of morality.”<sup>25</sup> This is a basic principle we often forget in the heated corridors of disagreement.

## **The Practical Nature of Moral Reasoning**

I might be just blowing smoke as many will neither understand nor care about this theoretical twaddle. Consequently, to re-establish the moral value of democracy *practicality* is required

as much as theoretical understanding. This was recently revealed in an address by President Biden: <sup>26</sup>

*President Biden said, 'Our foremost foreign policy objective remains protecting the security and prosperity of the American people, but we are also a leading champion of human rights and the rule of law. If we abandon our values, we have nothing worth defending. If we abandon our interests, we have no way to defend our values. How this dilemma is addressed will affect us all.'*

*I know that there are many who disagree with my decision to travel to Saudi Arabia, Biden wrote. My views on human rights are clear and long-standing, and fundamental freedoms are always on the agenda when I travel abroad, as they will be during this trip, just as they will be in Israel and the West Bank.*

Listen carefully: is this moral double-talk or is this “morality rolled up in a package of commonsense (pragmatism)?” We know that morals are not absolutes and must be interpreted and applied among life’s changing situations. We also understand that, although we try to live by moral principles, we often have to deal with unsavory and immoral persons, even nations. This is a personal, community, national, and international reality. Level-headedness is required, as some have said, “To go along is to get along,” but for the morally astute, more is required of us than conforming to reasonable expectations.

In order to discuss the President’s words intelligently, what needs clarification are the words “values” and “interests.” If we take “values” to mean “human rights” and “interests” to mean “whatever enhances America politically and economically,” then is this not a case of “the end (whatever are our interests) *justifying* the means (what values we choose to use in any given situation)? But, as the President explained, his was not a justificatory remark, but one based on practical reasoning. The reality is that we don’t live in a vacuum; decisions are made and strategies hammered out – for the greater good – among individuals and nations with various value commitments. Consequently, to be effective, morality must be wrapped in a package of common sense, grounded in experience, and with long-term as well as short-term goals.

In 2005, Bob Clifford<sup>27</sup> observed, “...aggrieved groups around the world have portrayed their problems as human rights issues.” He went on to point out that although the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was widely conceived, “for the most of its history a limited set of civil and political rights have garnered the bulk of international attention and resource.” He noted that in many cases, efforts to develop new rights have met resistance from not only national bodies, but from businesses and powerful economic and religious interest groups. Many believe, Clifford observed, that if we advocate for a human rights proliferation this may cheapen their traditionally provincial values and concerns, even civil and political rights. So, level-headedness is required from the individual and personal to what is perceived as the collective or “greater good.”

As difficult as this is, we are challenged to move beyond the threshold of personal consciousness and personal needs – my rights or your rights, of feelings and beliefs, of selective truth and conspiracy theories, of all that breeds power and authority rather than cooperation and benevolence, or of one that triggers moral superiority or displeasure – to that of a *collective moral conscience*. By collective is implied civil discourse and problem solving, working together to resolve our differences.

There is a practicality to our moral consciousness discovered in our human connections and the need for persons and communities to cooperate and understand and listen and hear the views of others. Morality is a communal affair and conditional, conditioned on the purposeful efforts of people, communities, and nations to unlock their collective energies, expanding them to include others, and applying their knowledge and energy to the betterment of humankind. This is all we can ask, even of our President.

## Conclusion

Surely, the values-bewilderment we are experiencing has caused one existential crisis after another. Maybe we're suffering from emotional exhaustion? With communication truncated, the quiet, murmuring voices of many Americans have provided room for amoral and undemocratic forces pushing democracy to the edge of uncertainty. It is through such acquiescence that self-identifying subgroups, unnoticed by many and unchecked, melt into a "false" majority assuming political power and control.

Not since World War II and its Cold War aftermath has democracy, as a moral theory of governance, been so endangered. One wonders if our capacity for reason and objectivity is but a psychological chimera, without salience or substance, or as Jacob Bronowski noted in 1973, "... an unending adventure at the edge of uncertainty."<sup>28</sup> One continues to wonder if this confusing mess has dislodged the assumption that society and democracy were built on a foundation of a shared morality conceived as common sense. Surely, some have missed this point or have redefined "common sense."

*Transformation is a process, and as life happens there are tons of ups and downs. It's a journey of discovery — there are moments on mountaintops and moments in deep valleys of despair.*  
— Rick Warren

It seems that "things as they were" or "what we think they were," have become *a priori* (theoretical) starting points in our discussions and this, more often than not, is a misaligned adventure idealizing a past that never was and probably never will be. Promoting this illusion, the MAGA movement is but a pretense rendering power from the unpowerful in order to build from the energy of nostalgia a new government, but a government without substance except the vision of an amoral, narcissistic leader leading democracy down a dark and lonely road.<sup>29</sup>

A shift is needed in our moral understanding; a shift away from the individualistic, even the collective and traditional, and a move into a broader understanding of who we are as human beings. After all, morality is about strengthening the bonds between people and helping others; society and democracy are built on this foundation. A shared morality broadens our perspective beyond self while creating the conditions for trust allowing us to get along with each other. This allows focusing attention on the actions of government rather than on vociferous and meaningless rhetoric, moving us another step away from the political forces driving a single ideology, a single narrative, over others.

Could be January 6, 2021 will be as historical as December 7, 1941 replete with democratic values scarred, weakened, and left scattered on the floor of the United States Capitol. As with 1941, the causes and effects of our present crisis are not clear cut and perhaps never will be, but, as Richard Roney said, *change brings with it possibility*.

Consequently, like a Phoenix rising, we have the collective power and responsibility to give birth to a new democracy, rubbing off the rust from the past, remembering the past but not

anchored to it, and laying out in broad terms and in specific ways democracy's moral possibilities. We've done this before and we can do it again. It was President Lincoln, who, caught in the throes of such a "re-definition" conflict, reminded us that we as a nation were "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." This moral principle anchors our moral perspective, is able to soften the scar tissue of recent events, and allows the expansion of businesses and communities, homes and churches. This, we cannot forget.

But great effort will be required for re-ordering reality and giving democracy a new form. This might not be a complete paradigm shift, but it will require a modification of our attitudes and behaviors, even our values. If we can find a *common ground*, an ethical footprint to follow, perhaps we can use this foundation for encouraging reliable ethical behaviors for the betterment of all humanity. This common ground I call "humanity as community." As I wrote in 2019:

*Morally significant, 'humanity as community' expands our view of others, our communal interdependence, and the importance of human decency and service. It encourages a morality without conceptual borders. Unsurprisingly, within nations and communities, there is a wide array of values, prioritized differently, requiring dialogue among their citizens. Lest we hover in an inherent moral exclusivity, these values must be flushed out and their overarching moral identity-markers recognized, prioritized, and brought to the forefront of policy-making where consensus and foundation-building are able to grow moral awareness.<sup>30</sup>*

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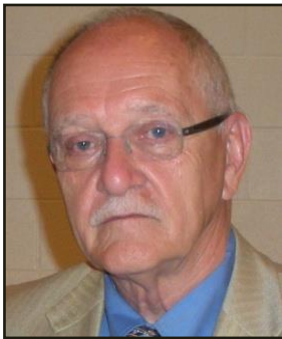


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