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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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04.03.2023

Politics In the Catastrophe, the Elder's Calling



Photo by Viktor Hesse

“Are you from town, sir? Are you from town? Because I don't care about your opinion. I care about the residents.”

– Trent Conaway, mayor of East Palestine, at town meeting called after toxic spill on 2/3/23

More than ever....political alignment (i.e., left vs. right) seems to be the one remaining marker that is inescapable and eternal, even natural and inevitable, defining the core of our identity.

– Patrick J. Deneen, Why Liberalism Failed

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Catastrophe is the job description for an elder. Be a catastrophe for this age.
– Stephen Jenkinson, *Come of Age*

The mayor of East Palestine, Ohio, expressed the situation well, when he responded at a public meeting to a man who offered an opinion about the railway's irresponsibility after the Feb 3 train derailment and toxic spill there, "Are you from town, sir?" That is, he spoke to the vulnerability of human beings in a particular place, visited by a particular disaster, the immediacy of the tragedy that is theirs personally. I felt this acutely last fall when Uticans being directly affected by the invasion of a Stewart's Shops gas station and convenience store into their neighborhood were forced to listen to the Stewart's rep and their lawyer, and then to planning board members as they stated their reasons for voting for Stewart's. With their uniform consensus on the benignity of the Stewart's plan, ignoring the valid questions for which they had no answers, several of us could not help shouting out at various points, do you live here? (And, not said: and if you don't, don't talk to us, you condescending corporate puppet bastards just doing your job!)

Uticans ought to be particularly alarmed hearing the news from East Palestine. Citizens who opposed the building of the massive 600 million-dollar "downtown hospital" here (due to open next fall, and meant to replace 3 existing hospitals all located further uptown) pointed out the folly of building a regional hospital in proximity to the railroad lines that frequently carry tar-sands oil tankers. If a toxic spill and/or explosion like the one in Ohio occurred here, how long would it take to evacuate hundreds of patients, some on life support? Not to mention, what about people needing emergency care? Where do they go? With all the outrage of the citizens after a catastrophe that, though preventable, also involved chemicals essential to the American way of life, will anything pierce the spell of banality under which liberal reality keeps chugging along, never straying far from their preference for the way things are over the way they might be?

Politics-as-usual offers no hope. The political energy now is on the far right; the passionless Liberal strategy is limited to "winning elections" and so far changes in administrations from one party to the other make no change in relation to the catastrophes that are ongoing. How long before the traumatized citizens not already MAGA-ized go for a leader who'll stand up for the little guy and happens to be wearing an invisible swastika? There can be no unitive power at the liberal end of the spectrum without liberals taking the "next step," which is not a matter of electing the right person, of program or policy, nor of the liberal shibboleth of "education" meant to level the playing field. Here in Utica, a small once-liberal arts college is now the scene of protests by faculty after they'd been

notified of severe curriculum cuts. On the cutting board are philosophy, sociology, anthropology, chemistry, geoscience, international studies and Spanish as well as several others, all under-enrolled. Not cut are the programs that essentially are job training. The stunned faculty behave as if they did not see this “betrayal” coming; perhaps they didn’t. In the liberal world we withhold our protest, don’t put out the weathervane to see which way the wind is blowing, until the reaper’s scythe cuts so close we can feel the breeze, and it’s too late!

Just further evidence that liberal arts education – once believed to be democracy’s best hope – is on the ropes; no longer defended except at elite colleges where it will add luster to the resumes of future CEO’s and hedge fund managers. Given that even though political alignment “defines the core of our identity,” so many see our 2-party opposition as a fiction, might we now ask: is it time to try a different kind of education, one aimed not first at educating citizens (a failure) but at the making of humans, i.e., relearning whatever it is that makes us human? Who, for instance, aims anymore for an education in becoming wise, in cultivating individual genius that’s responsible for our rightly prized humanities/liberal arts tradition in the first place!

Wisdom, however, to obtain which requires no expensive college degree, is a dangerous democratizer; wise elders (were we to have them) observing society from the perspective rooted in the local, in place and over time, will make connections between things affecting local life here and now to the larger political context. (i.e., corporate chain takeover, toxic spills, degraded health and education systems, and including our behaviors: liturgical consumerism, screen addiction and social anomie.) On the local level, here where I live, the capacity to see such connections barely exists. It comes out, but in bits and pieces, broken up like a bad cellphone connection. For many people the capacity to make the connections that conscience and compassion ask of us is in shreds; we dare not look up all the way to the “top,” to the ones benefiting from the bad connection. We have lost the ground for bravery.

That wisdom is in disfavor, the way to it hidden under the spell of progress, better and more, is both why things are haywire and why we cannot look up – instead of at each other! – for its cause.

Thus, the “direction” for the liberal who still “cares about evil and social injustice” is neither right nor left, not about making myself a better person, not about “good vs bad,” but inward and downward. It is, transgressively, the direction I can take only “for myself.” That alarm bells – or just uneasiness – are set off in me the moment I turn toward morally

questionable inwardness, tearing my eyes off their usual outward focus or my mind off its inward stewing, worrying, obsessing, etc. tells me something! That I do not cross that border into self-reflection as if I had the right – just maybe – to follow wanting, to feel justified and whole, as if my life were meant and is not some sort of mistake, tells me something! But more often it doesn't; the case against self-initiation in liberal reality is open and shut.

But why now, the politically conscious person might ask, when conditions are sufficient to cause anxiety and depression all by themselves, when traumas are continuously visited upon people from mass shootings, massive fires and floods, toxic spills, pandemics and micro-plastics in the air we breathe, etc. why, of all times, would we pull away now from the big screen of the world and look within? Why now, with war in Ukraine, suffering in Turkey and Syria, would someone be so impossibly selfish as to take this inward, reflective, questing direction to find out the cause of my persistent unhappiness, let alone to “follow my bliss”?

Well, one thing people will find that might surprise them, who “drop down” either in pursuit of self knowledge or in mental crisis, is something that actually belongs to them they did not know about. Becoming connected with one's own spiritual dimension is not to be underrated; this real wonder belonging to innate humanness hints of a deeper identity than political alignment. Surely, if we are called to defend humanity from extinction, I should know personally, not just from your say-so, what makes it worth defending! However, liberal reality being all a person in it knows, simply discovering that I can directly connect with the creative spirit, marvelous as this is, will not alone place me on the ground for bravery. I need to see my liberal alignment is actually my consent to an encompassing ideology.

For each person confined in liberal reality and its alignments who suspects there may be a (more just, peaceful) reality possible beyond the one I'm familiar with, being so confined, limited to those shadows on the wall in Plato's cave, that other reality stays unreal. Since nobody takes me there, nobody talks about it, I'll stick with the familiar, the cave and its shadows. Assuming I'm white and middle class, liberal reality persuades me life is better now than it ever was in the past. Instinctively I sense I do not want to rock the boat for I cannot risk what I have, however little or large that is, for an unknown. This is the complacency leftward radicals are always accusing bourgeois Americans of, and which puzzles us who are constantly doing good and are not one bit complacent!

Liberal complacency, this captivity of the mind, we cannot see, for it is rooted soul-deep, or I should say deep as the soul would be if one believed in its reality. What one assumes in the complacency of the captive mind is there is no place to stand outside liberal reality. This is how liberals end up in the base bargaining mentality of “lesser evilism.” The bargain thus made is if I give my consent to liberal reality, accept its terms and vote for Joe Biden, in return I get good retirement benefits and a somewhat colorless life relieved by good food and travel. And then I get old and die. Because of the ignorance in which the soul is buried in liberal reality, the other end of the bargain, what I lose, isn’t precisely known, so, in a way, so what?

And, so, the bad faith bargaining of lesser evilism is challenged only if/when I take that journey of inwardness to the point at which I know my true complete “whole” self; the awareness that my particular life was not the throw of the dice but in some deeply felt sense meant, is my place to stand outside liberal reality. Then I at once will know that standpoint – my individuality and my otherness – is utterly proscribed in liberal reality. When I see this, when I understand my indigenous self is the real enemy to liberal reality and will not be tolerated in it, then I never can be at home in it. And I will of necessity seek my way out of the cave to make my life in accord with conscience.

The standpoint of the “whole”self, re-found and re-claimed in inwardness, is “religious.” It stands in the experiences and the archetypal knowledge that, for example, moves a prophet to speak and act with agency such that he/she starts (intentionally or not) a religion. The religious perspective being adamantly rejected in secular liberalism means, then, liberal reality excludes me – my individuality and my otherness. One must shun a reality in which you’re supposed to be content if you waste your one life serving a job/career that, though it pays the bills, provides benefits, and gives you some social cred, is meaningless servitude. One should reject a reality that does not give a hoot if you ever experience the human joy of belonging, of knowing you were meant in this life, let alone care about defending you and your family against billionaire corporations that figure the risk of toxic spills in your town is worth it!

That affirmation that one belongs, that one was meant, is both the ticket out of liberal reality and it is deeply personal. As personal knowing, it continues in the direction the enlightenment launched, the fullest possible expression of individual freedom which if it means anything must be freedom from liberal ideology as much as from kings, tyrants and fascist dictators. Failing to take the step that will fulfill the promise of liberalism – the

personal step, inward and downward – freedom remains free-market freedom, for the benefit of the few, to hell with everybody else. It never can achieve the interdependent, mutually sustaining freedom of the commons nor the personal joy of knowing one’s meaning and purpose.

As for religion, though I’m a member of no church at the moment I’m not yet willing to discard the tradition. Traditional social commitments lived out in marriages, families, local communities, in place and in churches, are archetypal; to imagine they can be relativized by our thinking them so, is pure hubris. Abandoning them to liberalism’s “loose connections” – besides handing their defense over to religious extremists who will defend only the authoritarian version – doesn’t erase their power to shape identity. Rather, it erases the possibility that social forms will be experienced as the gods that must be contended with – the catastrophe necessary for full human becoming. Without the catastrophe that takes one to soul depth, what is realized are not “whole” human beings ready to do battle on behalf of their otherness, but “volunteer slaves” for the roles/identities offered in and defined according to neoliberal reality.

No doubt influenced by just having watched the 1941 movie *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, about Satan’s (memorably portrayed by Walter Huston) tempting of an economically beset New Hampshire farmer named Jabez Stone, I must declare this liberal illusion that social forms (archetypes) can be discarded amounts to a clearance sale for the Devil! Souls for sale cheap! Under liberal ideology, Sunday church attendance, the taking of marriage vows, or even achieving those oases of real local community that do exist here and there, are no longer adequate to provide social beings capable of meeting the catastrophe of global corporate capitalism. With no belief in the reality of evil, such as pious Ma Stone had, today’s souls don’t stand a chance.

These social commitments need not to be abandoned, but to be refilled with human beings who, individually, are prepared to grow downward in wisdom, to jump off the train of faster and faster, better and better, and defend the soul from the banal liberal complacency that surely works in Old Scratch’s behalf.

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CounterPunch 03.03.2023