

## American Carnage-The Hardest Part

The hardest part of all this carnage to what many of us believed the United States stood for is yet to come. For those of us who see and feel this carnage in our bone marrow, we face a decision – a critical and extremely difficult choice. Trump, his cronies, half of the voting public have set our country on a dangerous and deadly course. Not only to ourselves and our country but to the world. We no longer live in a world where World Wars can happen, and our species can survive. We have upped the stakes past the point of no return with nuclear weapons. *Homo sapiens* and our planet are on the chopping block if we get this wrong. Those of us that are well acquainted with world history understand the repetitive cycle of wars and violence which results, in the words of the Rolling Stones, the new boss being the same as the old boss. We only need to look at the history of the Bolshevik revolution and the utter human tragedy which resulted from it to see the pattern, the ugly rhyme of history which must always result in desolation and bloodshed. Humans continually bathe in the forgetfulness of history. But there are brief reprieves. In what Christians call the 'Old Testament' there were mostly bad kings. But there were a few good kings like David and Solomon. Perhaps the United States was a moment in which the world took a breath from our basic and violent instincts. For those of us that see a dark and foreboding end to democracy, the rule of law, the value of not believing our every thought or whim but in science and facts based on impartial observation of trained and disciplined observers, we face a tempting fall into history's bloody abyss – anger, violence, hatred, and revenge. This is the easy knee-jerk reaction to what looms before us. But there is a harder path.

In our one lifetime we face difficult choices. But the hardest choice is how we react to injustice, insane violence, hatred, persecution, accusation, and physical harm. Sure, we can fight back, kill or be killed, take a stand for 'righteousness'. But in the end, it is what we do in the face of all this that matters – how we handle injustice and evil. Do we become evil to fight evil? Nietzsche wrote that history belongs to the victor. In the war of all against all the 'heroic' is the one who affirms the tragedy of existence. This is the pinnacle which defines and affirms 'mankind'. But women, children, and minorities suffer silently through the affirmations of 'mankind's' self-pronounced heroism. Here we must learn, must acquire, wisdom. Nietzsche tells us that the belief in the afterworld is really vengeance on this world in a subtle and cowardly fashion. The 'pride of man' is not a vice but a virtue in the face of tragedy. Yet, people suffer. We all die. We all have a decision – not to live or die, to hope for an afterlife or not, but how we live and how we face our end. We will suffer. We will likely reap injustice, accusation, persecution and perhaps even suffering at the hands of our accusers. But there are those who have suffered, been treated for generations as less than human, as human garbage that can teach us something if we incline our ear.

Suffering is not a contest of wills, will-to-power, but a test of endurance, of choosing faith, hope, and love no matter what pain we must endure. Some, as Nietzsche thought, take this as resentment of life. For them, they define life by the heroic affirmation of tragedy which inevitably takes on a certain masculine narrative of history. My contention is that the binary choice of heroic or pitiful, will to power or resentment, kill or be killed is like the binary choices I discussed in my book “Quanta, Alterity, and Love” – they are historic narratives which are undermined by radical alterity – not the afterworld, but the here and now, the midst, the middle way, the anterior to his-story. Levinas refers to this as ‘exteriority’. Einstein articulated it as spooky action at a distance. But the real wisdom lies in how we live it – how we let the other exceed us – our ideas, our misgivings, our histories. Ah, but the French come back with an interesting word for this – the ‘bourgeoisie’.

The bourgeoisies are the wealthy who pity the suffering of others, even sympathize, but only at a distance that affords them. They can afford to stand off from the fray due to their own lot in life. They understand the concept of injustice but in an insidious way allow injustice to continue. This has been the revolutionary’s cry for violence and action against the wealthy and comfortable who must inflict injustice on others to sustain their lifestyle. The bourgeoisie has become an epithet against the wealthy and a battle cry. This is the abyss we as liberals, or Democrats, must face. Inaction is not an option, but the wrong action is an option. Certainly, the French Revolution upended the monarchies but the far right in France is, like Frankenstein, coming back to life. The revolution did not vanquish suffering and perhaps even it alleviated it for a while, just like democracy in our country, which had a good run relatively speaking. But remember blacks and women could not vote for a long period in our country. Blacks were slaves, goods to be bought and sold. The revolutionary’s cries ‘doth protest too much’. My contention is historic narrative creates realities. We live and die and find worth and worthlessness in terms of these narratives. And yet, we all must suffer. This is one of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. Beyond that even, it is a practical consequence of living. It is not a question of who suffers the most but personally, intimately, for each one of us we wake up and go to sleep from birth to death with practical consequences of ‘being alive’. Being and life are inextricably tied to suffering...and then we die, like the Cyclops which must always know the date of their death. For each one of us it is not a matter of *if* we are going to die but how we are to face life, suffering, knowing we are already dying – getting older. When I look around at different folks there are a few of us that stand out as having something worth trying to achieve. In my own life I think of it as - contentment.

Contentment in the face of suffering, injustice, cataclysmic violence does not return evil for evil. Neither does it whimper in the darkness. It finds a way to thrive in the worst conditions. It forgives. It maintains its goodness in the face of injustice. It does not let dog-eat-dog

define it. It suffers long but finds a center in the storm – a center of love, hope, and faith. The life of Jesus, as corrupted as history and even Christians has made it, stand out as an example of this. I can name others, Martin Luther King jr. and nonviolence, Mother Teresa, who in the face of the horror of suffering and the crisis of her Catholic beliefs and doubts rose above that to attend to others, Mahatma Gandhi who lived a contented life of non-violence in the face of horrific colonialism. These are the ones that come to mind. But for me, growing up in Louisiana, the people that impressed me were black women. I saw in many of them something unique and worth immolating not because of their life circumstances but *because* of their life circumstances. They forgave those who persecuting them not because of some creed or philosophy but because they knew bitterness and anger would rob them of something more important – their quality of life. By ‘quality of life’ I do not mean money, power, and prestige – I mean how they made moment to moment decisions to have faith, to have hope, to have love, to forgive. This is a strength which, for me, exceeds the historic narratives we tell ourselves. We all want to envision ourselves as good, as righteous, as champions of truth. But living the practical day-to-day reality in the face of persecution, accusation, and even self-doubt rises above the fray of the myths we tell ourselves. The ability to find contentment in suffering exceeds histories. To not let anger, bitterness, and wrath eat us alive is the hardest path. To affirm life when one is not the victor holds open a way to exteriority. This is not the hope after life but the hope in life – without relevance to how life continually slaps us in the face.

We, as Democrats, must not let this moment change us, destroy us. We may be facing the end of the country we thought we were. Certainly, we need to do all we can but in the process of resisting we must not let anger, bitterness, and revenge rob us of what we valued as the United States. If we lose ourselves, our hope, our faith, our love we simply become what we despise. They mock us as ‘Woke’. They tell us we are evil. They despise us. Our greatest temptation is to return evil for evil. But we must be cognizant of the price we pay for that. No matter what happens we must find a way to forgive, to care, to work – to live for a day we may not be around for, to hope against all hope, to believe against all belief, to endure with grace in the face of suffering. If they take that away from us – they win a losing game. My ventures into the history of philosophy and science inform me in a deeply personal way that we know nothing, we see dimly. There is exteriority which looks at us in the face every moment of our life. It asks us to have faith, hope, and love in spite of everything to the contrary. It asks us to see the other not in terms of our perception of the other, our idea of the other, but in terms of their radical exteriority. In the face of radical exteriority there is only one choice – ethics. Ethics is not to ‘affirm life’ but to affirm exteriority.