

Deeper Reflections Spurred by Charlottesville

Prospects for the Future in an Age of Cultural Narcissism, Identity Politics, and Weak Leadership

... quaecumque sunt vera quaecumque pudica quaecumque iusta quaecumque sancta quaecumque amabilia quaecumque bonae famae si qua virtus si qua laus haec cogitate. (Latin Vulgate)

... whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. (New King James Version)

Philippians 4:8

Just after the end of World War I, William Butler Yeats wrote his poem *The Second Coming*, opening with these lines:

TURNING and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. Sounds a lot like today's news headlines. One flash point after another, the latest being the tragic Charlottesville crisis.

Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists staged a protest over the removal of Confederate symbols—and mingled among this crowd, an ill-conceived association, are members of the less strident but equally passionate Sons of Confederate Veterans and historical preservationists. Counter-protesters gather in opposition, most motivated in favor of removal of all symbols and of political policies that celebrate the defense of slavery and perpetuate inequality and to stand their ground against racism—while some in the crowd are the more strident activists, e.g., Antifa, who condone violence and purvey not equality but superiority as a means of reparation for past wrongs. Things get out of hand, fists start flying and clubs and shields too. Suddenly, a car, allegedly driven by Nazi sympathizer James Alex Fields, races down the street where the crowd is gathered, speeding up faster and faster. Some see it and scatter, some just sense what's about to happen, jumping out of the way. The car plows through the mass of humanity. First time protester Heather Heyer is killed and many more are seriously injured. It was terrible.

With prepared remarks, that evening the President takes to his bully pulpit, in his role of pastor-in-chief, declaring there is “no place” for violence like this in the United States and intones that what happened was an “egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence” which

has no place in America. . . . Momentarily there's a sense of appropriate condemnation. But without calling out the Neo-Nazis, KKK and White Supremacists, unscripted and impromptu, the President adds, there was violence "on many sides." Immediately social media as well as the mainstream begin cries against equivocation and outrage against moral equivalency.

His political foes take full advantage and his political allies distance themselves. The media, like piranha in a feeding frenzy, make hay while the sun sets. Two days later the President comes out with a strong unequivocal declaration that "Racism is evil—and those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans." And then, less than a full day later near the end of a scheduled news conference, a journalist taunts about his delay and whether he equates White Supremacists and the KKK with the Counter Protesters. The President, unable to resist the temptation, begins an off-the-cuff Q&A exchange with the press corps, retreating to his plenty-of-blame-to-go-around position and seeming moral equivalency.

Dismayed, his political colleagues, both friends and foes alike, express distance and disdain, as Cable talking heads and tweeters yell in their loudest ALL CAPS voices—the media piranha pool agitates. Just as the 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis that gave birth to Nightline and launched CNN in 1980, for at least a couple of news cycles the 24-hour cable news channels stocks rise.

Things are spinning out of control. The center cannot hold, if there is a center anymore. Is there a falconer to hear anymore, or only falcons? Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Without Equivocation

That said, I do not enter the current debate to parse the facts of the free-for-all. But without equivocation, I do declare with both Presidents Bush: "America must always reject racial bigotry, anti-Semitism, and hatred in all forms." And I repeat the wise saying, even if misattributed to Edmund Burke, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." And that all it takes for the "night" of evil to fall upon us, as Elie Wiesel shows so well in his slim volume by that name, is to be passive in the face of emerging evil. We must reject unequivocally the actions and philosophy of White Nationalism, White Supremacy, the Neo-Nazis, and the KKK.

But is there something more important going on in this flashpoint that may be explored; something more deeply embedded in our cultural moment that we should learn? Yes.

How can we begin to make sense of the Charlottesville flashpoint, or, say, the Black Lives Matter Movement of last year and the associated Dallas and Louisiana shooting tragedies; or, say, the continuing daily Chicago gang-related massacre of young innocent and not so innocent children and teenagers; or the tolerance-based intolerance on today's college campuses, not

least at the University of California at Berkeley, the 1967 flower-children poster child purveyor of *laissez faire* cultural revolution? Yes, we are a divided nation. Yes, there is injustice and prejudice that must be made right. Yes, there is the criminality of turf wars in our contemporary inner cities and blackboard jungles; and yes, this is contributed to by entrenched poverty. And yes, it is natural not to want to provide platforms for those who would want to spew hate and injustice. But these realities are not new, not even in the history of the US. What is different today than in earlier periods, ones that allowed *e pluribus* to become *unum*, and astonishingly to become one again even after the War Between the States that divided so deeply?

I suggest three dimensions of contemporary cultural and political life: Cultural Narcissism; Identity Politics; and Weak Leadership. In one sense these three elements can be subsumed under and traced to the 1960s Cultural Revolution; and in deeper sense, even this revolution traces to the Age of Revolutions that began in Western Europe and the Americas in the eighteenth century, and expanded to Russia and around the world in the twentieth. But gathered within today's fire-ring of revolution, cultural narcissism, identity politics, and weak leadership provide the combustible material to ignite our moment, seemingly into a forest fire.

Cultural Narcissism

Narcissus was startlingly attractive, everyone could see it. And he was proud, not of his attractiveness but of his disregard for those who found him so. This until his Nemesis drew him to a pool in which he saw himself, like a mirror. Not realizing it was he himself reflected in the pool, he was entranced. So much so, he could never stop staring at his own reflection. There he stayed until he died. Narcissism is the pathological fixation of one's appearance, self- and public-perception.

The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* describe the characteristics of Narcissistic Personality Disorder as follows:

- Having an exaggerated sense of self-importance
- Expecting to be recognized as superior even without achievements that warrant it
- Exaggerating your achievements and talents
- Being preoccupied with fantasies about success, power, brilliance, beauty or the perfect mate
- Believing that you are superior and can only be understood by or associate with equally special people
- Requiring constant admiration
- Having a sense of entitlement
- Expecting special favors and unquestioning compliance with your expectations
- Taking advantage of others to get what you want
- Having an inability or unwillingness to recognize the needs and feelings of others
- Being envious of others and believing others envy you
- Behaving in an arrogant or haughty manner

Clarifying this kind of disorder, the Mayo Clinic says “Although some features of narcissistic personality disorder may seem like having confidence, it's not the same. Narcissistic personality disorder crosses the border of healthy confidence into thinking so highly of yourself that you put yourself on a pedestal and value yourself more than you value others.” They further say, the person with narcissistic personality disorder:

Often monopolize[s] conversations. . . . May belittle or look down on people you perceive as inferior. You may feel a sense of entitlement—and when you don't receive special treatment, you may become impatient or angry. You may insist on having "the best" of everything—for instance, the best car, athletic club or medical care.

At the same time, [narcissists] have trouble handling anything that may be perceived as criticism. [The narcissist] may have secret feelings of insecurity, shame, vulnerability and humiliation. To feel better, [the narcissist] may react with rage or contempt and try to belittle the other person to make yourself appear superior. Or . . . feel depressed and moody because you fall short of perfection.

I can hear the wheels turning in the reader’s head about now. “Wow! That describes our President.” Maybe so, but lest we only see faults in others, best we take a look at the log in our own eye. In his 1978 book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in And Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Christopher Lasch makes a compelling case that this is American culture.

In 1978 when Lasch published his book, a cultural malaise was dominant. “Hardly more than a quarter-century after Henry Luce proclaimed ‘the American century,’ American confidence has fallen to a low ebb. Those who recently dreamed of world power now despair of governing the city of New York. Defeat in Vietnam, economic stagnation, and impending exhaustion of natural resources have produced a mood of pessimism in higher circles, which spreads through the rest of society as people lose faith in their leaders.” The theories and resources available to American leaders seemed to have run their course and been depleted.

Liberalism, the political theory of the ascendant bourgeoisie, long ago lost its capacity to explain events in the world of the welfare state and the multinational corporation; nothing has taken its place. Politically bankrupt, liberalism is intellectually bankrupt as well. The sciences it fostered, once confident of their ability to dispel the darkness of the ages, no longer provide satisfactory explanations of the phenomena they profess to elucidate. Neoclassical economic theory cannot explain the coexistence of unemployment and inflation [now, I suggest, rising corporate profits]; sociology retreats from an attempt to outline a general theory of modern society; academic psychology retreats from the challenge of Freud into the measurement of trivia. The natural sciences, having made exaggerated claims for themselves, now hasten to announce that science offers no miracle cures for social problems.

In the humanities, demoralization has reached the point of a general admission that humanistic study has nothing to contribute to an understanding of the modern world. Philosophers no longer explain the nature of things or pretend to tell us how to live. Students of literature treat the text not as something as a representation of the real world but as a reflection of the artist’s inner state of mind. Historians admit to a “sense of the irrelevance of history, . . . and of the bleakness of the

new era we are entering.” Because liberal culture has always depended so heavily on the study of history, the collapse of that culture finds an especially poignant illustration in the collapse of the historical faith, which formerly surrounded the record of public events with an aura of moral dignity, patriotism, and political optimism. Historians in the past assumed that men learned from their previous mistakes. Now that the future appears troubled and uncertain, the past appears “irrelevant” even to those who devote their lives to investigating it. “The age of abundance has ended. . . . The ‘lessons’ taught by the American past are today not merely irrelevant but dangerous. . . . Perhaps my most useful function [declares historian David Donald] would be to disenfranchise [students] from the spell of history, to help them see the irrelevance of the past, . . . [to] remind them to what limited extent humans control their own destiny.”

So, not just a loss of optimism but a kind of despair of hope not only due to the crisis of the moment but a loss of confidence in the ideas and tools available to move forward.

Yet this malaise didn’t just reside in the cultural elites, it spread across the land. And when the culture at large looks to find new leaders, it increasingly cannot find any available worth their salt. Distrust reigns. “What looks to political scientists like voter apathy may represent a healthy skepticism about a political system in which public lying has become endemic and routine.” Yet the bureaucracy continues to grow. The more it grows the more it undermines “earlier traditions of local action.” As the formal political order fails and new participation in it increasingly takes on a break-the-mold character, it would seem that there is a retreat from politics. But it is “not a retreat from politics at all but the beginnings of a general political revolt.” Mass communications, now exaggerated by social media, gives rise to political populism. “The culture of competitive individualism, which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of war of all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of narcissistic preoccupation with the self. Strategies of narcissistic survival now present themselves as emancipation from the repressive conditions of the past, thus giving rise to a ‘cultural revolution’ that reproduces the worst features of the collapsing civilization it claims to criticize. Cultural radicalism has become so fashionable, and so pernicious in the support it unwittingly provides for the status quo, that any criticism of contemporary society that hopes to get beneath the surface has to criticize, at the same time, much of what currently goes under the name of radicalism. . . . The narcissist has no interest in the future because, in part, it has so little interest in the past.”¹

In this world politics becomes spectacle. “The art of crisis management, now acknowledged to be the essence of statecraft, owes its vogue to the merger of politics and spectacle.”²

This is Lasch’s assessment of the American situation in the late nineteen seventies. As it becomes institutionalized and completely embedded within the culture, and is supported by the now fully incubated radical postmodernist tendencies (as now), the social and the political

¹ All citations in the above paragraph are from Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), xiii–xvi.

² *Ibid.*, 78.

become one. One in which the state alone is both the problem and the solution to all things, and one in the way a mirror is self-reflection. In such a world competing interests don't exist, because there is only my interests, my ideas, my solutions. In such a world dialogue, actual conversation and compromise, can no longer occur. Conversation is just confirmation. The reflection of Narcissus only declares how wonderful he is, how right he is. In the culture of narcissism, my expectations are my entitlements and they must be met with unquestioning compliance. There can be no countenance of competing interests, no alternative perspectives in any form, only mine (or my group's). Anything else is deemed illegitimate and unjust, and must be overthrown. Everything is about power, about winning. Anarchy becomes the norm.

With no history there is no past and no future, only the tyranny of present. Without genuine conversation, the true exchange of ideas, there is no possibility of difference, certainly no nuance, indeed no possibility of truth, only perspective. And not a perspective with a reference, say to a vanishing point in the past or to one into a future we cannot yet see. The past and the future don't exist anymore; only me and my interior sentiments. Social and political speech now become either confirmatory self-talk or angry outcries of discontentment.

The Buckley-Vidal debates at the Republican and then later Democratic nomination conventions in 1968 set the tone. These debates were the "presaging of full-contact punditry"³ that has become the point-counterpoint of today's Cable News and Talk Radio. Buckley and Vidal became a ratings juggernaut for the fledging, always behind ABC News, and became the proof-of-concept that conflict creates media sales and Nielsen wins. News and Politics-as-News was on its way to becoming entertainment. A major step was taken to find new ways to, as Postman would put it, amuse ourselves to death. Though Buckley and Vidal never came to blows (they came close), as time went along we took the logical, emotionally charged, next step to swinging clubs at "peaceful protests" and adopting ISIS tactics of driving cars into crowds.

In a culture of narcissism it is only natural to be a radical. Radicalism is good citizenship.

Identity Politics

Add to cultural narcissism another 1970s phenomenon, Identity Politics, and you have a combustible mixture. Identity politics is an explicit political strategy designed to develop new voting constituencies by identifying and appealing to identifiable social groups, such as race, ethnicity, feminism, LGBTQ, Native American/Indian groups, etc., based on the group's grievances of oppression under the umbrella of civil rights claims. "Identity politics as a mode of organizing is intimately connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed; that is, that one's identity as a woman or as a Native American, for example, makes one peculiarly vulnerable to cultural imperialism (including stereotyping, erasure, or appropriation of one's group identity), violence, exploitation, marginalization, or powerlessness (Young 1990)."⁴ The

³ Michael M. Grynbaum, "Buckley vs. Vidal: When Debate Became Bloodsport," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2015.

⁴ Heyes, Cressida, "Identity Politics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/identity-politics/>.

notion of identity in identity politics is broadly based on the notion of “personal identity” as an expression of the “self.” “Identity politics starts from analyses of oppression to recommend, variously, the reclaiming, redescription, or transformation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership. Rather than accepting the negative scripts offered by a dominant culture about one's own inferiority, one transforms one's own sense of self and community, often through consciousness-raising.”⁵ Whatever structures, laws, policies, or practices inhibit or deny one or a social grouping from living “authentically” must be identified and removed under the notion that these inhibitions or denials are an injustice in need of a remedy.

Identity politics rejects the traditional American ontology of identity in liberal political theory (drawn from Rousseau’s and Rawls’s social contract theory) by declaring that the idea of “neutral citizen of liberal theory was in fact [not neutral but rather was] the bearer of an identity coded white, male, bourgeois, able-bodied, and heterosexual.” As such, it is argued, this theory of identity must be rejected. As a political strategy, this theory and practice was born in the wake of the 1960s civil rights era and adapts the civil rights legal and social theory. Oppressed individuals are developed into identifiable social classes which have a grievance of oppression. Political candidates vie to show how they casts their lot with the oppressed minority with the message we are for you, we stand with you against the tide of traditional public opinion, policies, and laws. Following in the footsteps of the 1960s cultural revolution goal of consciousness-raising, this political strategy could cast its message as an extended form of “enlightenment,” and thereby cast anyone against the new consciousness as antiquated, un-modern, against progress, and authoritarian, oppressive, and resistant to change, in the same way Enlightenment philosophers in the eighteenth century branded the Church.

Identity politics as a political strategy was developed by and has been predominately practiced by the progressivist (left leaning) political parties and candidates in America; although in many ways the Trump campaign utilized it in the 2016 presidential campaign. (For the particular relevance of this political concept to the Charlottesville incident, see “The Poison of Identity Politics: The return of white nationalism is part of a deeper ailment,” *The Wall Street Journal*, By The Editorial Board, Aug. 13, 2017 5:58 p.m. ET.) The fundamental objective is to break the body politic down into interest groups and, in some cases, pits one or more group(s) against others; and then under the umbrella of multi-culturalism and diversity to reweave it.

In a political environment in which Identity Politics is the norm, the notion of *e pluribus unum* becomes an afterthought not a forethought, not a premise. It is a project of reconstruction under a theory of tolerance that means acceptance and agreement after breaking the body politic into an ever-expanding array of tribes. But operating within a culture of narcissism, the idea that diversity and tolerance are deemed legitimately practiced only if and as long as the diversity groups confirm my own view of a legitimate tribe; which means

⁵ Ibid.

rejecting all groups seeking to maintain or conserve unprogressive traditional beliefs (or those in which history has a say). Intolerance in these cases is an act of political virtue.

In the case of confederate historical monuments, this means the only way to see them is as symbols of oppression without nuance; they cannot mean anything else, regardless of historical or even artistic significance (because art carries within it historical memory). Coopted, as they have become, by the self-identified white nationalist, neo-Nazi, KKK “identity” tribe, they must be seen only thus. To attempt to parse the meaning otherwise is to establish a moral equivalency between diametrically opposing identities and moral goods and evils.

Weak Leadership

Leadership is hard to define. A boutique industry has grown up around how to be a leader. And there is no question that there are habits one can develop that become traits of good leadership. Consider Stephen Covey’s wildly popular book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. But notice where the focus seems to be in the title—effectiveness. Here the emphasis is on how to get things done. As important as effectiveness is, it doesn’t reveal much about leadership per se. But in the first chapter of Covey’s book we see his first principle, “Begin with the End in Mind.” This changes the tone and indeed the whole direction. Covey starts the section on this habit with a visualization exercise, asking the reader to imagine himself at his own funeral to call attention to the fact that one’s professional life is not all there is. Would you be pleased with what other folks say about you at your funeral? This kind of question broadens the view of success to include not just what we do but also to who we are. In a sense, it takes the long view, not simply the urgent and the expedient—not just who can react the best in a fluid situation. When one begins with the end in mind it creates an ability to react quickly but within a view of the whole—within a context in which he has the end in mind. The important idea embedded within this principle is the notion that there are goods, or a good, by which all actions should be guided so that in the end one’s life will have been spent or invested well.

Considered just from this one perspective, strong leadership means first casting (or upholding) a vision of the good and a good vision and inspiring and urging—by one’s own actions out in front—those who follow to act in concert toward the good vision, held in common (the common good), so that the whole serves an end that matters. In such a view of a first principle of leadership, practical action and moral action are tied together, not separated. Who one *is*, and their own vision of the good, is important to the common good. Integrity between the vision of the good and the actions taken is important, not only to the achievement of one’s own ends but to the ability of the leader to rally follow-ship by those who would follow.

But in today’s world we face two big problems with leadership: we have no common vision of the good, and therefore no vision of the common good; and we live in a time when we’ve convinced ourselves that perception is reality.

In the 1930s John Dewey proposed “that a ‘common faith’ could be built around self-evident ‘goods of human association, or arts, and of knowledge.’”⁶ He said “we need no external criterion and guarantee of their goodness. They are had, they exist as good, and out of them we frame our ideal ends.” Dewey was a pragmatist, and he found no need for a transcendental referent to secure the common good. “Dewey’s liberal heirs in the 1950s spoke much the same way, as though there were such common ‘goods,’ which autonomous persons of goodwill could recognize and around which a healthy society could be built.” This view became the established intellectual orthodoxy for social and political vision and policy. Anyone who disagreed with it would be considered a kind of heretic. And famed journalist and otherwise liberal intellectual, Walter Lippmann, did disagree and was branded a heretic.

His heresy was to say that liberal colleges were trying to build a public consensus based on inherited principles, even after they had dynamited the foundations on which the principles had first been established. The result was that liberal culture, of which he was a part, had no adequate shared criteria for determining the ‘good.’ Lippmann’s proposed solution seemed to his peers better fitted to the eighteenth century than to advanced twentieth-century thought.

“America was undergoing [a transition] at the time—the transition from the moral confidence of the Progressive era to the uncertainties of postwar modernity. . . . On what philosophical basis might America build a unified public culture, given all its diversity. He began his answer in a prophetic mode. . . .” In his book *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, “tilting his opening section ‘The Decline of the West,’ and recounting the essential twentieth-century political problems that he had written about for four decades. From his point of view as a ‘liberal democrat,’ the crucial question of the age was whether ‘both liberty and democracy can be preserved before the one destroys the other.’ The danger was that democratic government would be overwhelmed by mass opinion, which had proved itself incapable of responding rationally to society’s changing needs.” Lippmann had written about this very thing extensively back in the 1920s, and again citing “Hitler’s popular support in his rise to power in the 1930s.” This coupled with the “deeper vogue of moral relativism” made Lippmann deeply suspicious of the pragmatists idea that a self-evident consensus could be established without transcendent moral standards. “In the first half of the twentieth century, there had been a trend to separate the law from reference to any higher moral system. Lippmann believed this was a dangerous innovation. The institution of free societies, he observed, had been founded ‘on the postulate that there was a universal order on which all reasonable men were agreed.’”

In the era of America’s founding, even if the more secular thinkers and traditional Christians may have differed on the exact source and its content, ‘they did agree that there was a valid law which, whether it was the commandment of God or the reason of things, was transcendent.’ . . . ‘The men of the seventeenth and eighteenth century who established these great salutary rules would certainly have denied that a community could do without a general public philosophy.’ But the

⁶ Citations in this section are from George M. Marsden, *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief*, (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 43–46.

idea, so essential to establishing democratic institutions, that there was such a higher moral order had not survived modern pluralism, and ‘with the disappearance of the public philosophy—and of a consensus on the first and last thing—there was opened up a great vacuum in the public mind, yawning to be filled.’

Lippmann was right. Without a public philosophy grounded in a transcendent order enabling a vision of first and last things, a vacuum is created. In it all sorts of ideas clamour to fill it, and disorder and chaos rules. This is our moment. The first order revolution of the disappearance of a well-formed, well-grounded public philosophy was the 1960s cultural revolution. The endless experiments that have occurred in its wake, beginning in the 1970s through today have yielded the chaos of our time. Because we all today are products of this vacuum and experimentation, without a strong sense of the past (history and tradition) our leaders are weak. They are not weak only because they are the products of this history but because this very history of endless experimentation has made us narcissistic and tribal. In such a situation, beginning with the end in mind no longer means anything because there is no beginning and no end, only now. Without a transcendent referent to ground who we are (i.e., that our identity, while in-us, is ultimately sourced beyond us in the source of all being, God) and what our meaning and ends are, there can be no consensus regarding the common good, and thus no common vision, because there is no end, only what I want. This makes it impossible for the culture to pull together under a vision of some common goals, but rather pull apart based on our respective tribal grievances.

In addition to no robust, well-grounded public philosophy, the second weakness in today’s leadership is its undue concern for outward appearances. Certainly the notion of a difference between who one is on the inside and what is seen on the outside is not new. This is captured in the word hypocrite, a theatrical word referring to the masks the players wear. But in the past, to be a different person on inside than what is displayed on the outside was considered a bad thing—a person without integrity (one whose actual self is not integrated with the outward persona). Personality in the lighter sense has come to dominate leadership today, as captured in the vogue of “dress for success” and other similar ideas. Another popular idea along this line is “perception is reality.” In the older Aristotelean way of thinking, the goal of life was to align one’s life and live one’s life according to one’s nature, to one’s *telos*, proper end. In today’s world we don’t think there is a nature to things only things in nature. Thus, what one perceives oneself to be is who they are. Our outward persona is reflected in how we dress, the body language we use, the dialect or cadence of our speech, our play-list, and so on. The persona can and should easily change in such a world. On the other hand, if in such a world one’s self-perception is not embraced by those who perceive who you are, they must be corrected. In such a world, the goal may be to be authentic to oneself, but it is not to align the self to a nature given from some transcendent source beyond the self. I am the author of myself. What Jesus told his followers a long time ago applies: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” If self-perception and the persona one projects is the most important thing, this is where the affections will lie. If how I appear to others is uppermost, I’ll spend more time being

concerned with and shaping how I appear to others, and less time developing deeply embedded virtues which will bear fruit on the outside as true fruit—fruit as a product of the vine beyond my resources alone.

In a culture where self-perception and outward appearances dominate, integral character suffers. In a culture of narcissism, one's appearance as reflected in the pool is everything. In a social order driven by identity politics, how one is perceived is reflected in how well the social order recognizes and ameliorates my grievances. In such a world, our highest leaders will either reflect one or both of these or they will call our attention to the weaknesses in these predilections and lead us to a better place. If they do the latter they will help lead the world to a better place. If the former, they will foment and exacerbate the problems of our moment.

In a culture of narcissism, separated into pragmatically formed politically shaped tribal identities, with weak leadership incapable of providing a robust public philosophy and overwhelmed with self-perceptions rather than good character and integrity, we live in conditions that enable little more than making war against one another.

Together these three dimensions of contemporary cultural and political life interact to support one another. The cultural narcissism dimension acts like a black hole grabbing everything in its orbit and sucking it in to nothingness. Identity politics makes each separate group their own minority circling around itself and seeing everything through its own specific grievances. Weak leadership, seeking to serve and maintain its targeted constituencies, casts its persona to play to its momentary identity base, and everything is about pragmatics and winning at all cost. There is no common vision, no common *good* pulling everyone together and toward and beyond themselves to a common end. It's all about me and mine, and if the grievances are deemed sufficiently embedded into the culture at large and its institutions, it's about reparative justice not simply equality under the law as blind justice. There is no history and no tradition. Everything is new every day, except when we look back nostalgically on occasions.

In such circumstances, the general public at large is ripe to be hijacked by particularly vicious identity groups, as has occurred recently by white supremacists, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and the KKK in the debate over Confederate statues. (The debate over the rationale, meaning, and possible continued relevance of these and all historical statues is quite old.)

Are there prospects for the future in such an age? Yes! First, we must reject and reform ourselves away from narcissism, and not by going to counseling and anger management classes. It is a view of reality problem, and the remedy must include the recognition of transcendent reality. Second, we must reject outright identity politics. This does not mean that true oppression, even true structural oppression should be ignored, it should not. But it does mean that we must reject the establishment of political voting blocs based on grievances. This is not easy but it must begin by rejecting the radical postmodern notion that only people within the same bloc can know and understand a grievance. And, we must develop new and better

leadership. This means a lot of things and it doesn't happen quickly. But it begins by looking for and demanding the right things in our leaders.

Where then should we begin? With new leadership, demanding a renewed vision and a renewed public philosophy. Where does that begin? With a reestablishment of the idea and importance of virtue and the virtues rather than mere values.

In modern ethical theory almost all theories are concerned what to do in what specific circumstance. This cannot get us to where we need to go. We need a return to virtue theory, as Alisdair MacIntyre called us to in his 1981 *After Virtue*. But that alone is not enough. We must recognize that virtue is more than virtues. As Gilbert Meilaender tells us in his 1984 book *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, "What duties we perceive may depend upon what virtues shape our vision of the world."⁷ So in the end, we must reconceive a vision of the good, based on a transcendent referent beyond ourselves, the one who gives us our identity, and from whom alone we are adequately enabled to reconceive the common good. We must recapture a grand vision of America, one that both captures shared common values but also has a public philosophy about where these values derive and to what end they serve.

Finally, we need to become virtuous again. That doesn't mean perfect. That never was and never will be. But it does mean, we need to reconceive what the pursuit of happiness is toward. Even while not all had the same view about reality, and certainly not all were Christians in a formal sense, the founders all knew that the pursuit of selfish self-interest would disintegrate the fragile democratic experiment. The first president knew this and an early visitor did too.

The moral order we live in and the cultural beliefs we adopt shape and form our loves. And they must be formed well in order for the republic to be sustained.

While they did not say it the same way, President George Washington and Alexis de Tocqueville make similar points. Observe here what they each said about the importance of good morality and religion (by which they both meant primarily Christianity) to a healthy American Democratic life.

In his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington said: "Of all the dispositions and habits, which lead to political prosperity, Religion, and Morality are indispensable supports. ... Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure—reason and experience both forbid us to expect, that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

In 1831, at only 25 years old, Alexis de Tocqueville came to America on a mission from the French Crown to visit prisons and penitentiaries. While he did visit some prisons he travelled widely across the young democratic republic of the American Experiment and later wrote of his observations in his 1835 book *Democracy in America*. In it he says, "Religion is considered as the guardian of mores, and mores are regarded as the guarantee of the laws and pledge for the maintenance of freedom

⁷ Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1984), 5.

itself. ... There are many things which the law permits them to do which the religion of the Americans forbids them to do.”

The key message: a democratic republic form of government—where the government is subject to the people—requires a people whose moral order and their loves be properly formed and aligned. The people must be morally good (at least in some sense) beyond the positive laws that tell them they must be. And since the leaders come from among “the people,” they too must be properly shaped and formed. When this happens, the institutions of culture will be too because they will reflect the moral order properly formed.

Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

This practice alone will help us to rediscover the center again, and to hear the falconer again, and will then give positive direction to our passionate intensity and strengthen us to act upon our convictions toward the good, and by our actions and constraints of action to contribute to the common good.

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