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Practicing Civility

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The Old School
Fellowship Education



Just what is "going on"?

by Glen Birbeck

Is it the less real world on the other side of the screen? Something called the "news" though it is hardly new. The cries of the town crier writ fleetingly, though large. The cries of the media. Makes us want to cry so we look away. But it isn't new. Is it current? I guess it must be happening right now, whatever "now" is.

Are plagues new? Nope. Is political dissent, polarization and upheaval new. According to all history, no...emphatically no. The "good book" is full of war, rumor of war, and begets. I'm old so I look back at the war and the begets. Too old to do other than remember. Shivering at the front in the cold war or warmly begetting. A lifelong habit of keeping up on the news, "staying current," being the well informed citizen, doesn't serve me now. That habit has been perverted by commercial and political interests to serve their ends. Must have always been so...I just got used to the post WW2 version, antiquated now. Everyone in the USA pulling in the same direction. To victory and freedom and a world of peace and plenty. The habit persists. Pavlov's dog no longer gets the treat but still salivates at the sound of the media's bell. The firehouse horse heading to the nacker's still responds to the fire alarm.

I still respond to headlines. Am I as numb as that poor nag? He ran his race. He helped put out fires. He is done. He shouldn't any longer stiffen at the sound of the alarm but he does. I do too. I see a headline like, "President says he may not relinquish office if he loses". A five alarm fire? Yes, I would say so...but what should my response be? I know what my best response would be and I've been acting on it. Self preservation. Going off grid. Learning to grow the food I need. Becoming more self reliant.

Do I care if the world "seems" to be going off the rails? Or does that "news" ill serve me by its distraction. The news is usually not "actionable". It produces angst and adrenaline but nothing for planning. Look away from the train wreck! Whether intended or not it is pure distraction. The news is a hindrance - no longer a help. Your neighbor at the back fence has the "news". It's about this season's vegetables and their family and that dog that wanders into the yard. Who's dog is that anyway?

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Hosted by Courier-Gazette reporter Steve Betts.

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Call in during the show with questions to 593-0013, or send questions by email in advance to steinberger@gwi.net

Twenty-first Century Political Economics

What has changed? Communications media. The last few decades have seen mind-boggling changes in the way we communicate with each other, both one-to-one, and few to many.

The few-to-many possibilities have been greatly enlarged. We are very vulnerable to manipulation. Indeed, manipulating us is a huge and respected sector of our economy, pursued with many billions of dollars.

How can we be smarter than they are? They go to Harvard and get paid big bucks. Seems a long shot, but we are smarter. There is (or can be) intelligence in numbers. Many heads are better than few, if we collaborate.

But how can we collaborate, how can we even know each other, let alone work together? What sort of structure could it be, how would people be motivated to participate?

Our means cannot be through some sort of corporate entity, like a political party, a cooperative, a non-profit or the like. Such institutions are by nature hierarchical and so prone to the same tendency for the few to control the many.

A movement toward greater democracy, and the participation of the great majority of people in a productive economy in which they share a just portion of the reward. such a movement must exist in a non-corporate, non-hierarchical plane. It must exist in a manner which is resistant to manipulation by the few. Least manipulable is one-on-one, face to face connection.

Fellow humans, connecting face-to-face, one-on-one and in small groups, should not be a burden! What could be better? Well, maybe watching television or flying the internet on your computer screen. This is the choice we are facing. Tell me true: which history would you rather leave future generations? Shall we, the people, become spectators and dependents in a culture and economy in which we have no respect and no capital.

We must demand that respect and that capital, our fair share in our prosperous nation that has been built on the effort of our forebears. This land is our land. And it is ours, to govern and to profit from, guaranteed in our Constitution, respected for over two centuries, our for the voting.

All of this is so obvious, but we do not see it for the blinding spectacle of the mass media, media that was never before so centralized, never before so competent at manipulating us.

And it is not just the media. It is the robots that we are increasingly pushed to deal with. The Pharaohs had their clerks, our modern oligarchs have robots - much cheaper! Their robots are staring us down at the supermarket check-out. For now we have a choice, we can choose a human, but even than, beep-beep-beep, "remove your card now."

It is well to make light of it - good humor keeps the spirit up - but at the same time we would be wise, I think, to defend ourselves. And things are at a point where we need an offense too.

Fighting back can be fun, though. And indeed it has to be fun, or people will not want to do it.

I say "fighting," but a fight need not be violent, or injurious to anyone. A fun kind of fight is one which is not about winning, but about seeking the truth, seeking fairness, seeking win-win solutions to problems that we, as a society, need to solve.

"How is that a fight?" I hear you say, "that is collaboration." But competition and collaboration are entirely compatible. In fact they cannot exist without each other. The more of each, the more of both. This is true, however, only when there really is widespread, open competition. which is not the case in our increasingly oligarchic "democracy."

The collaboration/competition creative cycle is, among many things, about the potential compatibility and symbiosis of both "socialist" ideals of government that supports the interests of society as a whole, and free enterprise ideals. If our government and economy are to evolve in ways that serve the "common welfare," as our Constitution directs, political and economic freedom are essential.

These are unifying principles with great potential to help us toward a more effective democracy, but to achieve success we must actively resist being divided by the machinations of the oligarchs. An egalitarian movement, an anti-oligarchic movement, if it is to succeed, must stay clear of the oligarchic power, or risk being controlled by it and consumed by it. The key, again, is face-to-face communications.

Within such a movement, because it is not hierarchical, the competition/collaboration symbiosis can flourish.

If you are doubtful of the possibilities, remember that our success as a species (and we are a wildly successful species that has come to dominate our planet) is based on our social nature. We are able to join forces physically, intellectually, and spiritually. When we do it well we are able to share in the great rewards of our human progress and make ourselves comfortable on this earth.

The pandemic is teaching us something about the trap we have been caught in. Writing about the huge new spike in cases in his country, a Spanish journalist has written: "Our politicians have little incentive to strive for excellence, because they know that Spaniards' loyalty to their parties rivals their loyalty to their favorite soccer teams. Ideology and partisanship carry more weight at the polls than the candidates' preparation, honesty and experience, sending them the message that their success doesn't depend on their management or the results they obtain."

Instead of taking responsibility and making a serious effort, the scheme is to sow division and blame the other side. When politicians follow this strategy, they get more votes when the public gets hurt.

Ouch!

CAN THE
PLAQUE
SAVE
AMERICA?

by Joe Steinberger

The Either/Or Choice

By Judy Pasqualge, Rockland

COVID-19. Six months ago I decided to play it safe by limiting exposure to public gatherings and wearing a mask - due to both self-interest and an intention to provide some ease to others who fear catching the virus.

One derisive, unmasked woman on Rockland Main Street didn't guess my intent. Hopefully she and her family will avoid the virus, especially during the long fall and winter ahead. And especially given the number of people who don't social distance, or who exhale a lot of breath while exercising without a mask - some may still think that the virus does not spread outdoors, or does not linger in the air, or that wearing a mask means no distance is required. Maybe they will change if Rockland becomes like Sanford.

Many people cross the street or make way for me on the sidewalk. Some even flash a thumbs up. Such actions are no small thing in these times.

When it comes to COVID-19, the state administration and both parties seem to prioritize re-election or election (evident by expensive mail and TV ads) over education on the virus. What a lost opportunity, and a factor in the loss of some public confidence, and in the slow acceptance of wearing masks. The refusal to provide information on the location of the 240+ out-of-staters who have tested positive is very unfortunate: if this were known, people might be more cautious. If the idea is to hope for the best while minimizing public panic, then this is an underestimation of the public.

Black Lives Matter and the Police. Into this mix jumped the widespread protests over killings by police. Being white, I've had an inside view of anti-minority prejudice - in addition to anti-foreigner prejudice, and the continued 2nd class, at best, treatment of women (both by US citizens of all ethnic groups). And for sure this is mirrored in other countries.

Thus, I'll come out 100% in support of Black Lives Matter, but could not sign the petition here, as the word 'defund' was not defined. Nationally, this lack of definition has served to provide a fertile base for others' fears, very negative projections and demonization, impacting focus on the needed systemic change; one dominant interpretation of 'defund' seems to be 'budget cut.'

At whatever level of organization, and whether public or private or nonprofit, it is well to review budgets, because they can be unthinkingly set according to past practices. In changing times this may lead to limited scope for, even voicing of, alternatives. Clearly, there may be budget items that should not be funded at all, and some that need more funds.

One item to defund is police training by foreign security forces and by domestic, private for-profit mercenary groups. Both political parties seem to condone the resulting militarization of the police. What we see playing out in the US does provide a good view of the treatment of people around the world, including in countries that are close US allies.

A few months ago, the Rockland Police Department was professional in its handling of events surrounding the death of George Floyd. However, it may have been disconcerting to some people to see photos in a local paper of the recent support-the-police demo (and against 'defunding' - whatever that means to them), in which a police member holds a thin-blue-line flag.

According to Wikipedia, the concept of forces acting as a line against chaos stems from the British 'red line' during the mid-19th century Crimean War. The term has been in use by police in the US since at least the 1920s, and from the 1970s one implication is that there is a police code of silence that is used to cover up police misconduct.

It is, of course, unclear which meaning was intended at the recent Rockland demo, but it is hoped that the police and their supporters do not follow an 'us vs. them' line, or seek to engage in or condone illegal activity. And hopefully there is no overlap with people who exercise their right to open carry weapons with an intent to cause fear or silence speech.

For myself, I insist on the right to support the BLM movement and many aspects of the local police department, and to voice it.

What worries me most, though, looking at the months ahead, is that people may be afraid to, for example, wear a mask, or support the police, or demonstrate, or speak up, or write to their local papers, or to contact their representatives, or to say critical things about their own 'side.' If this happens, then for sure someone else will determine the either/or choice.

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The Buzz is composed and printed by the Fellows of The Old School at the WRFR studios, 20 Gay Street, Rockland. Email: wrfr93.3@gmail.com

WEEK TWENTY-EIGHT

COVID-19 RANDOM NOTES WHILE SHELTERING IN PLACE

by Phyllis Merriam

Broken Wing arrived by herself today to perch on the bird feeder pole, looking in our kitchen window to signal she wants food. She looks so much larger on the perch and is skilled at balancing. I gave her some cheddar cheese popcorn. It's amazing how much she can get in her beak. Then her crow brood arrived to finish the treat.

COVID COOKING LESSON: Yesterday evening I thought I'd try a new recipe for Chicken Piccata. It seemed simple enough. Some easy prep, then just put it together. Nothing could possibly go wrong. No problem. First I pounded the large, boneless chicken breast to feed two. In spite of the noise that scares our cat, and the cutting board inches its way across the counter, that step goes O.K. Dredge chicken in the flour. Forget to season chicken first. No problem. Season chicken in the pan. Then finely chop peeled shallots. The shallot skins keep sticking to my fingers and my eyes burn a lot. But the task goes all right, sort of. Next, drain jarred capers. I can't unscrew the cap and I'm no weakling. So, my husband gives it a go and gets the top off but the jar is so filled with liquid, it spills on the floor. No problem. Capers have to be drained, so one recipe step done quickly. Just wipe up liquid with paper towels. The paper towels stick to my shoes, leaving a pungent perfume. No problem. Just remove shoes, wipe them down to dry. While doing this recipe step, I am walking in the caper juice in my socks. No problem. Socks are washable. Just toss in washer. Then clean half the kitchen floor from caper footprints. No problem except now it's getting late. No problem. We don't go anywhere anyway. Next, thinly slice half a lemon and squeeze juice from other half. Juicing goes well. Slicing not so much. Remember it's easier to slice half a lemon before juicing the other half. Slicing results in uneven, sloping slices from the collapsing lemon half. Oh, well. Next step is to sauté chicken breast. Discover I forgot to clean the iron skillet from yesterday's dinner. No problem. After wrestling the heavy pan clean, I can't get the top off the olive oil container. My conversation with the container alerts my husband. He wanders into the kitchen to see what's up. He easily removes the top and thinks I need to calm down. The chicken was sautéed to perfection in butter and olive oil and set aside for next steps. Sauté shallots with the lemon slices until caramelized. This step takes a lot longer than recipe's "2 to 3 minutes." Then add chicken stock to "reduce by half." This step is taking too long. Heavy-duty frustration is beginning to creep into my brain as I notice its almost 9:30 pm. No problem. That's the hour Europeans are sitting down to dinner. We're from European stock, so that must count. My husband comes into the kitchen to see how things are going. I reassure him we're close to eating dinner. No problem. We sit down to eat when I notice the sauce is on the meager side and too sour. I glance up from my plate to see I forgot to add the lemon juice still sitting by the stove. My husband, my wingman, always full of kindness, says, "No problem" it's the best chicken he's ever eaten. I mumble my gratitude and think I need to learn Italian for "Piccata."

