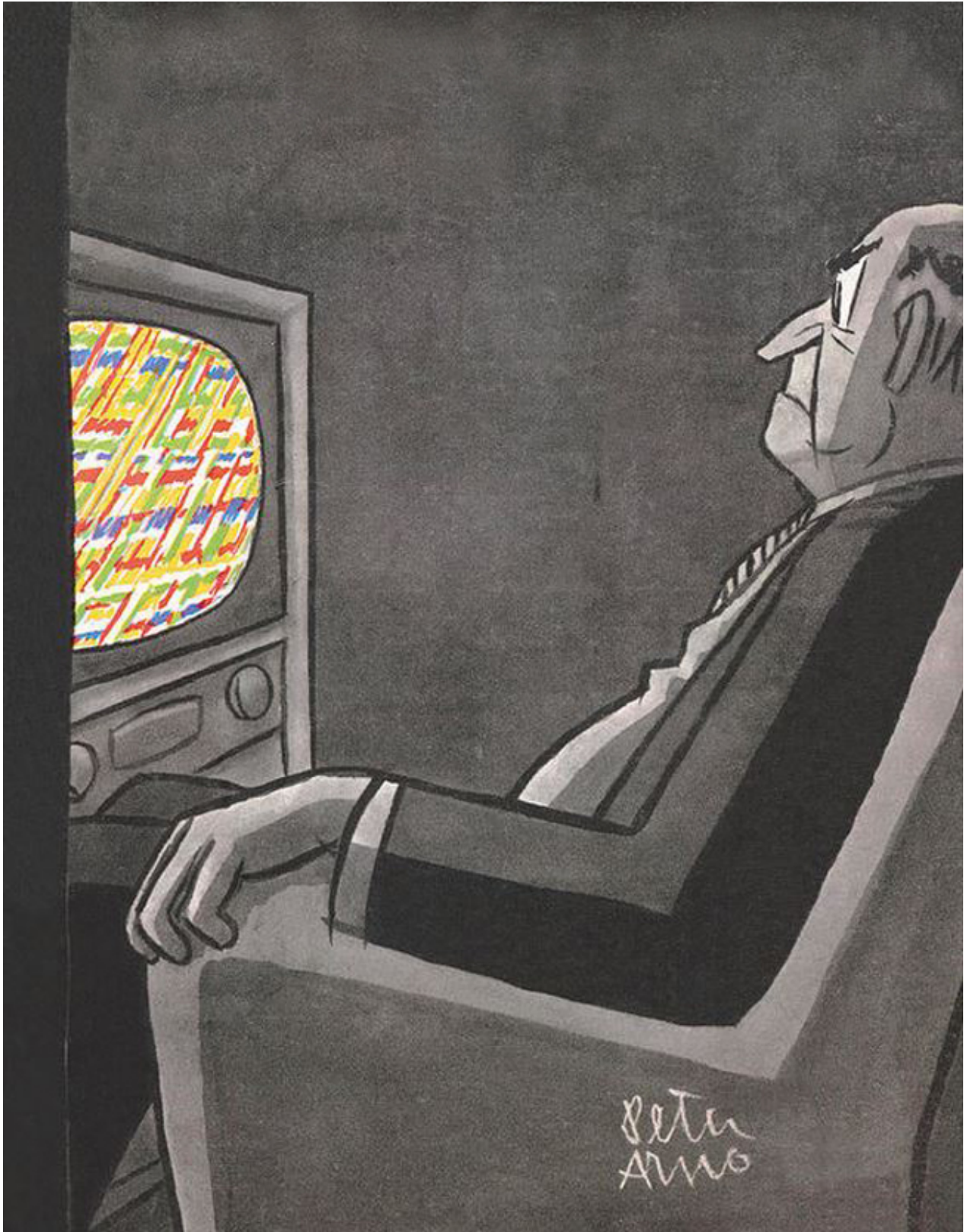


Narrative Nirvana

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (June 2024)



Cover for New Yorker Magazine— Peter Arno, 1955

All psychological pain can be derived from not being able to reconcile the world as it is from what you would have it be. –Anonymous Psychiatrist

Nirvana—a place or state of oblivion to care, pain or external reality (Merriam-Webster).

My long dead parents were 'greatest generation' exemplars. The greatest generation moniker came into being because of what the Great Depression era/ Second World War graduates accomplished, and not as narrative claim for what they intended to do. Merit and accomplishment used to be the means by which narrative was achieved, but not so today.

My dad said about a thousand words in his entire life—that unemotive male, Catholic Irish thing—so when he uttered sparse details about growing up, it entered directly into family mythology. Each morning during his high school years in the 1930s, he got up at 3am and delivered milk by horse and wagon before rounding out his day at school. At the end of each week, he gave the entirety of his meager earnings to his mother, who returned just enough cash for cigarettes. (Parents are so finicky about coughing up cigarette money for their teenagers these days).

When war was declared on September 10, 1939, Dad and his two brothers immediately volunteered for military service. Parenthetically, I recently came across a plaque at St. Patrick's Basilica in Ottawa, and it records that nine McCloskeys volunteered for service during the Second World War from their parish alone. Narrative detail about those serving during the war: all who could, did.

One would assume it was difficult to face the dangers and deprivation of wartime duty. Except, for some, it wasn't.

Scrawny pre-war dad at 120 pounds contrasted smiling navy dad with 160 pounds of muscle in photo after photo. That contrast, if unexpected, is not a mystery. Tough as it must have been serving on convoy ships assigned to protect merchant ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean, life was *relatively* easy. That is, scrawny pre-war dad who slept and ate little, became muscled wartime dad who slept until the indulgent hour of 6am and ate three square meals each and every day. He was 18 years old.

Mom grew up on a farm so impoverished that her entire extended family emigrated to California just after the war. Mom would have gone too, if not for my dad's audacious claim to a buddy that he was going to marry the gal across the dance floor he hadn't yet met. We were never privy to the words used to introduce himself to my mother, but we remain glad dad decided to expend a few words from his self-imposed allocation of 1000, in consideration of our future existence. Our family narrative might have been a tad wanting if not for the actions that followed his words. We needn't have worried, in the 1940s people were good for their word.

And yet, he almost didn't marry the girl from the dance hall because he was more than good for his word. He'd severely broken his back during a storm in the mid Atlantic, had had several difficult surgeries and spent a year in rehab before returning to active duty in the navy. His active duty extended to pain endured for the entirety of his life. Because of pain and complications from his accident, he questioned the engagement, not wanting to limit mom's chance for family and a life. Uncertain dad appealed to Father O'Neill for advice about whether to marry Irene O'Neill, (no known relation, though likely related), who told him to channel the audacious sailor who wooed the gal across the dance floor, and the rest is a history in progress (oxymoron as that may be).

Our brood of nine survived and mostly thrived on one middle level government salary in a small modest house. I don't

remember feeling crowded or lacking throughout my entire childhood, except in myself, as is the Irish way. Good thing, thoughts of grievance and specialness would not have been tolerated. From all the abundance of scarcity that was our existence, gratitude was and is the appropriate emotion for negotiating the vicissitudes of life.

It wasn't just that notions of self were subsumed by family, God and community. Since mom and dad never had a complaint in their lives, self-assertion was synonymous with self-indulgence. The world of my parents may have erred on the side of too little acknowledgement of self, but better a modest late-bloomer than a narcissistic none-starter. Besides, in addition to dad putting up with great pain, both parents put up with us seven great pains with saintly forbearance. After her death, I tried to think of a single time when mom was ever in a bad mood or seemed anxious about, well, anything, and I could not. That alone is worth a Noble Peace Prize, or in a world consumed by narrative, hers was a life worthy of the Noble Prize in Literature. At least that's my story.

The world has changed, the extent of which is on display at university campuses in Europe, Canada, and at the heart of the struggle for civilization, the United States. Unoriginal copycat anti-Israel protests across American campuses are the predictable outcome for young people taught to follow progressive causes without thinking, ironically packaged as leadership, initiative and critical thinking. Teach something pernicious, call it the polar opposite, give it a virtuous spin and the narrative is set in a manner that mere facts cannot undo.

Also predictable in these cultural wars— of which protests are merely a symptom—mob wants and desires can never be sated. Nothing less than the destruction of capitalism, democracy and meritocracy will do, even if many of the protesters remain unaware of the end game. Most protesters want radical change as long as nothing in their lives changes. Equality of outcome

has such an attractive ring to it until one realizes that equitably splitting the spoils of nothing is an unworthy, un-utopian outcome.

Not only is the actual end game a mystery to most protesters, many chanters don't know or pretend not to know which river, which sea, or even what 'From the River to the Sea' could possibly mean. Most disturbing, protesters either don't believe the documented atrocities Hamas committed on October 7th or else justify murder of innocents as the lesser evil. Relativity arguments are antithetical to understanding evil. Not thinking too deeply about the oppressed/oppressor binary adjudication of all peoples is an important protester attribute.

Still, some protesters know what they want and expect to achieve. Some campus protesters are professional agitators brought in to assist the home team with achieving anarchistic victory. Changing Israel's position on the war is not the goal. Changing the American position on Israel would be a nice fringe benefit, but even this is not the holy grail. Wrecking havoc, creating political chaos and distracting the world—the United States is the world for the purposes of realizing this goal—is the end game. So, even if police are finally allowed to assert themselves and protesters are cleared away until next time, the strategy—which the West is losing—is death by a thousand well-placed, even if seemingly chaotic, protest cuts. There are those in Beijing, Moscow and Tehran who applaud and are amused. Who knew that the United States—whose unprecedented victory in war was so overwhelming, they could have ruled the entire world in 1946—would self-immolate in less than 100 years? China's ultimate, stated goal is to achieve world hegemony by 2050, and methinks they may be ahead of schedule. I understand the counter argument—US wealth, defence spending, technological superiority—but no advantage can withstand convulsive self-destruction.

So, it is no surprise that knowing professionals are well

funded and are willing to stay the course until victory is realized. During the Second World War, the West proved it was willing, in Churchill's words, 'to do what is required' but, for those not paying attention, that willingness has dissipated into weak-kneed, vacuous good intentions. We have paved the road to hell with good intentions, with lots of asphalt left over for a passing lane.

My parents brought us up to understand that we were responsible for our own success or failure, which gave us a metaphorical kick in the ass. The parental obligation had clear limits, which far from testing, we embraced with enthusiasm to get on with our own life. Watching the protesters at expensive Ivy League universities, I couldn't help wondering, why are they not concerned about finishing course work or getting to summer jobs to fund next year's education? Why are they not worried about jeopardizing graduation with expulsion? Why aren't these young protesters filled with fear—as current mental health statistics indicate most young people tend to be? Does any image characterize the faux-anarchist, entitled narrative-seeker better than a histrionic protester tearfully demanding drinks and a catered meal so that they can fend off starvation? Those would be the same protesters whose validation and sense of identity is tied to the need to illegally occupy a campus building for a few hours. The siege of Leningrad this is not.

The image of embryonic elitists only makes sense in consideration of their educated belief that they will never suffer the consequences of their actions. Outwardly, they embrace the World Economic Forum motto, 'you will own nothing and you will be happy'; inwardly they see themselves as Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg luxuriating in billions, with enough left over for progressive causes. The owning nothing part of the WEF motto applies to the deplorable working class, once they have been corralled into their happy subservient place.

As details of the horrific October 7th attack became known, I

thought Hamas had made a terrible miscalculation of the world's reaction. Heart of Darkness-like slaughter, the deliberate targeting of vulnerable people and human desecration, had not been so deliberate and crude since the Holocaust. Inexplicably, Hamas wanted known the gruesome details of their mass murder. I thought such blatant hatred will certainly hurt the narrative more than any potential political benefit. I reasoned, even the biased UN will have to concede that Israel is the victim, and not the victimizer. (From 2015 to 2022, there were 140 UN resolutions against Israel, versus 68 for all other countries). *Never again* has meaning. I was wrong. I had to concede that inexplicable becomes explicable once confronted with the fact that Hamas somehow knew they could channel outrage—that necessary precursor to perpetual grievance—to their cause.

Universities have a history of breeding dissent, and much of student maturation is to separate the wheat from the chaff in order to develop their own values and convictions. But the freedom to figure out comes with the responsibility to *figure* rather than *borrow* the thinking of others. If one bypasses this critical fact-finding, value-seeking and ideology-resisting phase, the exercise is virtue-theater or integrity-pretending and not conviction-arriving. How does one believe in something and against something else with little to no understanding? One tends not to revert to a simple binary stance on issues, once embedded into the deep weeds of life's complexities.

In order to preserve the progressive narrative *du jour*, gullible campus protestors have to *ignore* unsettling facts, as follows:

1. *Hamas' constitution ensures Palestinians can never settle, make peace, or allow for a two state solution since that would require an acknowledgment of Israel's*

- right to exist;*
2. *Details of atrocities committed against Israeli citizens on October 7th;*
 3. *Over 100 hostages still held by Hamas in torturous conditions;*
 4. *The political reality that Hamas is an Iranian puppet, without autonomy or ability to function without direction from a puppeteer invested in perpetual war with Israel.*

The October 7th attack does not help Israel's narrative. We have come to a time in history when history, even recent history, does not matter. Present prescribed narrative in the service of future progressive goals matter, must be sustained, such that facts and actual history must be ignored, denied or eliminated.

I don't know what Israel should do to finally defeat Hamas and minimize the negative narrative that has come to circumvent what actually happens. I don't know if they have gone too far or not far enough. I research what I can—making myself study conflicting views on the same subject as defence against narrative loop—but I do not have access to enough information on this complex issue to have an opinion adequately informed for decision making (not that anyone is asking me to). Still, I feared the false narrative that has come to pass, [writing](#) in *New English Review* in November, 2023, "This necessary regard for human life coupled with persistent accusations of disproportionate response for whatever Israel does will plague them in the media, on university campuses, in the U.N. Israel cannot win the propaganda war, but they can carefully strategize what is required rather than overreact and be drawn into whatever toxic game the Hamas/Hezbollah/Iran trifecta has planned."

The Prime Minister of Canada and the President of the United

States among other leaders have adequate access to information, but their views are not formed in a dispassionate manner, and with integrity and truth; that is, what they could know is subverted to what they want known by way of opportunistic, political narrative. It is the ideological way. Their unreasoning reasons for all political decisions have become the ubiquitous way politicians, the media and university protesters conspire for narrative, not according to what is, but rather what they would have it be.

In ways large and small, the 'my truth' narrative and its borrowed, enabling ideological foundation in education, confronts us every day. Though cliché, the thought, "don't believe everything you think," applies. Neither naval gazing 'my truth,' nor the borrowed thinking of progressive ideology leads to truth.

My dad was grateful for a bed that he could luxuriate in and meals that would fill his belly on a ship in the navy in the mid-Atlantic, during the Second World War. Gratitude coupled with commitment to common cause seems formula for a life well lived—a simple formula not easily lived that has become obscured or lost. It is antithetical to modern narrative. Dad's life was well-lived, even if short-lived. Today's progressive determination to achieve Nirvana is coupled with an equal determination to tear down whatever stands in its way, and is fueled by grievance. The generational transition from gratitude to grievance is not subtle, nuanced or inconsequential. Civilizations have fallen for less cause, and will do so again. The trade-off is precisely everything.

University presidents cower, agitators chant, protesters are hungry, and on May 16, 2024, President Xi and President Putin signed and issued, A Joint Statement of Deepening the China-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination of the New Era.

Some in the West wonder,

*What rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

–W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*

Others, bored and distracted, flit with the remote, opting for a more entertaining Netflix narrative.

[Table of Contents](#)

Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes* (Castle Quay Books, June, 2024), and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife.

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