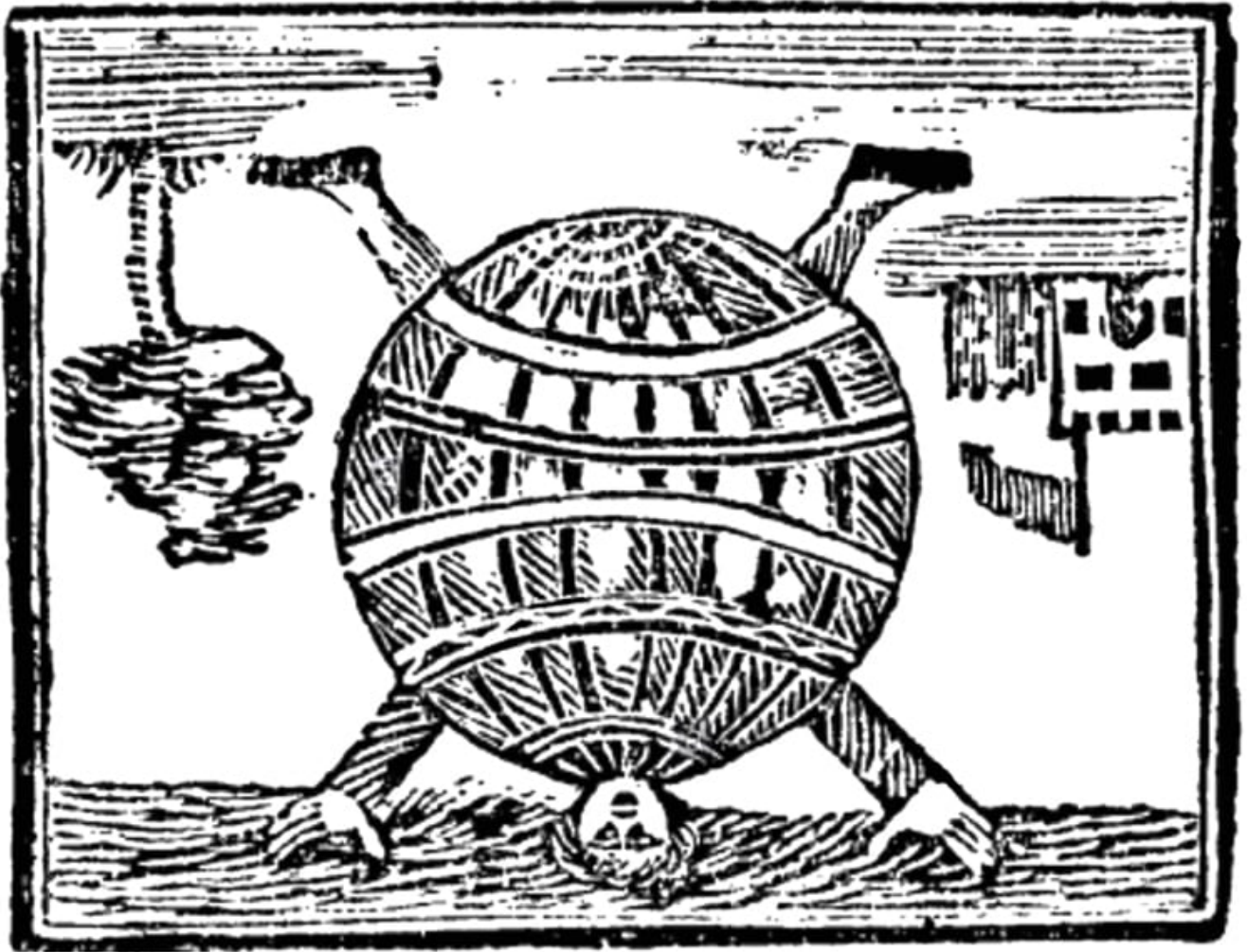


# The World Upside Down

by [Howard S. Schwartz](#) (August 2021)



*The World Turned Upside Down*, mid-1600s

The difference in the intellectual climate in the United States between when I was younger and today is nothing short of stunning.

In the time of my youth, a person who stated an idea with which others disagreed would have been called upon to defend that idea with logic and verifiable information. If the

defense were successful, the game would be over. That would not have meant that everyone in the neighborhood would have come to agree with the idea, but rather that it would have been accepted as a legitimate point of view that could be stated within a discussion to which it was relevant, without the speaker being expelled from the group for asserting it. It had earned a place within, so speak, the universe of discourse.

These days, things are different. A new idea is not tested with the criteria of rationality, but of potential offensiveness. It will be rejected without regard to its truth, but subject only to the criterion that some people, especially people seen as members of a vulnerable group, would feel criticized or in some way castigated or diminished through the idea, or through ideas that it supposedly brings to mind. The idea would then be ruled out of discourse and the speaker ejected from the group and condemned as immoral. And this would be so without regard to its truth and without even requiring that a member of the group presumed to be offended is even present. •

Everybody reading this knows what I am talking about. It hardly even seems necessary to provide examples, although new ones arrive every day. And everyone knows the scope of what is taking place. We all know, if we give the matter any thought at all, that the premises that are under attack guarantee the flow and reliability of information and are central to our society.

It is easy to see that we will all be worse off if these principles are degraded through this process. For example, my friend K, who teaches at a medical school, tells me by email that "I am hearing from academic colleagues in medicine all over the country. They all say they are terrified to even open their mouths in meetings." He is deeply concerned about the effect this will have on the quality of our physicians in the future.

But how did this happen? How could it be that a country, and indeed a civilization, that made itself, and much of the rest of the world, prosperous through its development of science and technology, and which served as a model of freedom for all the world, can have abandoned the basic principles of thought and action that made the progress of reason and freedom possible? How can it be that it has replaced them at the very heart of its definition of itself with simple-minded slogans, most recently *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion*, that belong more to the realm of feelings than of thought?

That is the issue I would like to explore in this essay. The point I want to make is that this increasing dominance of feeling over thought is part of a very deep cultural shift that affects every element of society.

It does so through a reconfiguration of meaning. We therefore must begin with a discussion of the nature of meaning.

### *Meaning*

We make meaning from the inside out and also from the outside in.

From the inside out, we make meaning from our desires, our impulses, our preferences, and, above all, our feelings. As these are all our own, indeed they are part of us, the meaning we make is inevitably self-centered, narcissistic.

Teaching us to make meaning from the inside out is primarily the province of the mother, from whom, early on, we are not separated (Komisar, 2017). Her love for us validates our feelings and our desires. From her, we get the belief that we are unique and important just because we are who we are. This makes it possible to act on our feelings with confidence. It provides for us whatever personal interest we have in doing what we do. Our personal interest represents the fact that it

is we who are doing what we are doing; that my life is *my* life.

What follows from this is the fact that, at our emotional core, the mother, by being at the fulcrum of how we feel about ourselves, creates an unparalleled dependence which renders her the most powerful figure in the psyche. This is by no means limited to childhood but is transmitted into adulthood in various ways that inform our informal relationships with others. Most obvious, for men, is the importance of being "selected" by women, which represents this power at the level of sexuality. From this follows a need for countervailing power so that the sexual connection can be stabilized in the form of families. We will return to this.

Men and women, it is generally said (e.g., Su, Round, and Armstrong, 2009) differ in the kind of activities that engage their interest. Men, it is said, prefer activities involving things, while women prefer those involving people. For my own purposes, I prefer to follow Baron-Cohen (2012), who interprets the male interests as being matters of systemization, not things as such, while he sees women's interest in people as arising from their stronger feelings of empathy. (I was struck by this while watching my wife's grandson playing with his trains. It seemed to me that what interested him was not the trains by themselves, but their function in a complex system he had created which included rails, bridges, a station, passengers, and even a parking lot. Also, see Wittgenstein (1922): "The world is the totality of facts, not of things.")

From the outside in, the meaning we make is based on the general beliefs, the rules, the presumptions and common understandings, the science, ultimately the language, that characterize our culture, and which all represent systematization. Far from being centered around us, these do not refer to us at all, or at least no more than they refer to anyone else; they have no center. But this is necessary

because we live in a world with others with whom we need to communicate. Within limits, words must mean the same for all of us if they are to mean anything for any of us. Again, whatever humans learn as a group must be passed down to children, which implies a generational continuity of the language in which our learning can be expressed.

From psychoanalytic theory, which reflects the traditional understanding, teaching us to make meaning from the outside in is primarily the function of the father. Lacan refers to this as the paternal function. Its product is a way of seeing ourselves that I call "objective self-consciousness," not in the sense that we see ourselves as we really are, whatever that would mean, but that we see ourselves as objects; the way others would see us who are not emotionally connected with us.

We need to make sense in both of these ways. Neither of them can exist without the other. That is why God gave us both a mother and a father. From mother, we have the idea that we are special; important and significant, we are lovable just because we are who we are. From father, we have the idea that we are the same as everyone else. Simply being ourselves is nothing to celebrate; it is only what we do in the world we have in common with others that gives us any significance.

We need both, but there is going to be a tension between them. To be personally meaningful to us, everything we do must make sense to us in terms of our own desires; it must preserve, or at least offer the promise of regaining, our sense of uniqueness and self-importance. At the same time, it must take place in a world structured by a common frame of reference that does not recognize our uniqueness or validate our quintessential self-importance. Even to contemplate doing anything in the world is to make use of the common frame of reference and, hence, of our commonality.

But in acknowledging that there must be a tension, we

must also see that this is a fertile tension. Its movement is from the potential to the actual. It has given rise to everything worthwhile, as well as everything not worthwhile, that humans have ever done.

And so, while we need to make meaning from the inside out and the outside in, we must also learn to work within the tension between them. But how do we do that?

This is not a task only of childhood, but of a whole life, yet it begins in childhood. There it is not the province of either mother or father, but of the relationship between them. The relationship between mother and father is the crucible within which we learn how, and what it means, to get by in the common world while remaining ourselves. It is therefore the template for a society's culture, the basic premises that underly the meaning of behavior. The point I want to make is that, in Western society, these fundamental premises have shifted in disturbing and extremely dangerous ways.

There has been a fundamental shift in the way we make meaning.

*A Shift in the Way Meaning is Made:*

*The Old Way*

I have discussed this shift at great length elsewhere (Schwartz, 2000, 2010, 2016), and will not do so again here, but it is important to lay out the rudiments.

Culture, as we have known it in the West, has been based on the premise of resolving the tension between inside and outside in a way that represents both of them. Freud discusses this in reference to what he calls the *Oedipus Complex*.

As I have said, when we begin our life, a loving

mother is the world to us. We experience her love for us as meaning we are the center of a loving world. Meaning, in this regard, is rooted in our spontaneous impulses, which mother loves, as part of who we are, and validates. This is what we have called making meaning from the inside out.

But, over time, the outside world, strikingly indifferent to our desires and unimpressed by our importance, makes its presence known to us. Within the family, this outside world is represented by the father, who has a relationship with mother that does not revolve around us. At first, we experience this as a violation and try to eject it, but ultimately we recognize that we will have to understand it in its own terms, making meaning from the outside in. I will refer to this traditional psychology, based on making meaning from the inside out and the outside in, as Oedipal psychology.

It involves taking father's relationship with mother as the basis of a promise, a fantasy, which then comes to structure our lives. If we become like him, learning about, and dealing with the world on its own terms, we can regain something like mother's love, as he appears to have it. This return never happens. It remains a fantasy, but the belief that it *could* happen is what gives life a directionality; it gives us the idea that there is something possible in the future that would make it worthwhile to do what we need to do in order to get there; in other words, we gain a sense of purpose in life, of direction, of hope. This fantasy of return to mother's love is what Freud (1914, 1921, 1923) called the *ego ideal*.

In this way, one learns to do the things required by the indifferent world in a way that engages us personally, that melds society's demands with our own sense of individual significance. In terms of work, for example, one can see the ego ideal in the form of taking care of one's family and earning their love, or one can see it in terms of the job itself, as a way that offers the realization of one's

potential, or as a vehicle for advancement, or of fame, or as part of a career, or of a moral project.

In all of these, at the unconscious level, the object, for the father as much as for anyone else, is to become again the center of mother's love. As I have said, her power creates the need for a countervailing power. The premise of our tradition is that he will gain it through his accomplishments within the indifferent world; indeed, that is the basis of his accomplishments. He is creating something that mother values, as a way of balancing what would otherwise be a source of overwhelming dependency (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1986). This interdependence can form the basis of a stable, emotionally close relationship) and a solid foundation for socialization.

Notice, though, that the foundation for all this is the child's idea that the mother appreciates and feels emotionally connected to the father; she loves him. If she does not – or, to put the matter more broadly, if there is no belief, or wish, or fantasy, or observation, or, as is undoubtedly the usual case, no generalized cultural belief that enables us to form this understanding, there is no sense in becoming like father. What makes this much more than an interpersonal problem is that the promise of becoming like father was what energized us to do what the indifferent world required done. Get rid of one, the other is undermined; it disappears in train. Inward meaning and outward meaning having come together in a certain way, they define each other. The loss of one necessarily leads to the loss of the other.

We may put this by saying that the whole Oedipus Complex is being attacked, and, with it, the whole psychology that has created the world that is familiar to us. Another psychology has come to replace it, which I call anti-oedipal.

These two forms of psychology give rise to two quite different, and indeed opposite, experiences of the world and of our understanding of our place in it. I will refer to these



worlds, formed by Oedipal psychology and antioedipal psychology respectively, as the old world and the new world, based on different understandings of the relationship between mother and father or, more broadly, men and women.

In accordance with antioedipal psychology the most striking characteristic of our time is that the mother resents the father, who is now designated as the white, heterosexual, cis-gendered male. She has contempt and hatred for him. Illustrations of this contempt are so common that it almost seems unnecessary to provide one. I run across them every day. Just this afternoon, I ran into a television interview in which the newscaster remarked that the Governor of Georgia had signed into law a new voting bill that was accused of being racist. She substantiated this charge through the observation that he had signed it "in a roomful of white men."

This transformation represents deep changes in the relations between the sexes. It began with certain elements of the feminist movement and is the emotional engine of political correctness and of all its cognates, up to and including what we now call "wokeness" and "critical race theory." They all signify shifts in the way the route to the ego ideal is understood. From becoming like the father, it has come to be seen as a matter of destroying the father. On this basis, the entire substrate of cultural life has been altered.

### *The New World*

What we can see here is that these two forms of psychology give rise to two quite different, and indeed opposite, experiences of the world and the ways in which we understand it. Indeed, we may say that their inhabitants live in contradictory worlds.

I will refer to these worlds, formed by Oedipal psychology and antioedipal psychology respectively, as the old world and the new world. In the new world, the way for the

children to become again the object of mother's love is by joining her in her hatred of the father and the attendant wish to destroy him. Then they can regain her bounty. Father has not earned mother's love, in this configuration, but stolen it. His claims of accomplishment have been all subterfuge and lies. The victims of the theft have been all of us children, but especially the marginalized; in fact, that is the meaning of marginalization. He is to be hated for this theft and the marginalized loved in compensation. Take away, at least for now, the disciplines of mathematics and the physical sciences and that gives you the whole politically correct university curriculum.

For our purposes, what it is particularly important under this transformation is that the father's domain, the indifferent, objective external world, the reason that meaning must be made from the outside in, is denied and seen as a fraud. The father, the white, heterosexual male, makes claims about this world, but they are only instruments of his oppression. His attempts to legitimize his claims are simply valorizations of himself. They are expressions of white supremacy and justifications of his white, male privilege. Society only adopts his ideas because of his power. We may reject the demands that this bogus world makes and take what is due to us, and of which we have been deprived, which, at its root, is mother's love and the place this gives us as the center of a loving world. Meaning need only be made from the inside out. We do not have to conform to the world, rather, it needs to conform to us.

Our task, then, is to destroy the father's power. We must puncture his privilege and put the lie to his ideas of his supremacy. Then the world will revolve around us with love, as it should. In doing this, we must support our allies in this struggle, the marginalized, who are seen as the most grievously oppressed. Indeed, white people, especially males, since their centrality in the world has been a matter of the

love and goodness they stole from the marginalized, are required to encourage them to set the agenda. The depths of their deprivation have made them our rightful leaders; we must follow them.

This turns the world upside down. What was previously valued has become disdained and seen as evidence of corruption. What was previously scorned is now seen as a perfectly legitimate response to an unjust situation. Those elements of ourselves that we have thought of as responsible for our successes are now only seen as exhibitions of our privilege, brought to us by our power. Social justice demands that we repudiate and cast them away. What were sources of pride have become tokens of shame.

### *The World Upside Down*

In the new world I have introduced, the meaning of everything that bears upon the directionality of our lives, that is relevant to the question of what is to be valued and what disvalued, of what we should do or not do, has shifted, typically becoming opposite to what it was.

In this configuration, the father and mother did not have mutually loving consensual sex; it was rape, though mother, in his thrall, did not necessarily understand that. What characterizes our time is that now she does. When she is "woke," she sees rape as the real essence of sex. From this, it is easy to see how the term "rape culture" evolved and why college men are presumed to be guilty when accused of rape following an instance of sex about which the female participant, even long after the fact, had a change of attitude (Kipnis, 2017; MacDonald, 2018).

In the next section, I would like to discuss some of these differences in the domain where they are, perhaps, of the most direct relevance: the practice of work.

In the old world, growing up meant learning that we

began with nothing real, but only the fantasy of an Edenic state in which life was perfect, as only the fusion with an omnipotent and loving mother can be. As we come to understand that this is a fantasy, our central premise becomes that to gain something we must do something within the world of indifference, as the father has. We learn, that if we are to get something from indifferent others, we will have to do something for them that they want done. In a word we learn that the indifferent world, the world beyond our friends and family, is structured by exchange. Our place in this exchange process defines our work. In this world, achievement makes sense.

Antioedipal psychology turns this upside down. Here, the narcissistic fantasy that the world revolves around us is maintained. The understanding that we must make meaning from the outside in is denied. The idea here is that we began with everything and should have it still, so if we do not have something it is because it has been taken away from us. There cannot have been any justification for that; our relationship to the things that we had was inherent; they were part of us. So, our loss must have been, as Proudhon put it, the result of theft. And we can see who stole it from us: obviously, it was those who have it.

Remembering that it was mother's love that is ultimately at issue we see that it was the father who was the thief. The very same activity, work, that gave the father his countervailing power and made him emulable has become the focus of our disdain.

As the father served as the template in Oedipal psychology, so he does here as well. But the template is the opposite, the negation, of what it was there. There is no way of understanding exchange in this way of seeing things. The idea that others may have gotten what they have by earning it, by doing something for others that those others wanted to have done is undefined here. Work is not defined by exchange, then,

but is something forced upon us. It is always oppression.

As I write this, the COVID pandemic is, apparently, coming to an end. People are returning to their jobs. But observers have noted that a fairly large segment of them have expressed distaste for the idea of going back to work. The most common interpretation of this rejection is that, with the surprisingly large number of unfilled job positions with which we also find ourselves, many employees are looking for better jobs than they had. That may be. But another possibility, for at least some, is that during the shutdown they came to the realization that they just did not want to work. It had lost its motivational basis for them. They became "woke" to its essential oppressiveness.

The premise of devaluing the father necessarily means devaluing his work. Hence, work as we know it, is not seen as doing something worthwhile. There can be no such thing as earning rewards. This must undercut the motivation for doing work. The idea of pursuing one's work with any enthusiasm, or care, or creativity, does not arise. The implications this has for a society that depends on people doing their jobs for the satisfaction of other people's needs cannot be overemphasized

At any rate, since the father did not do anything of value, those who failed most profoundly in competition with him for mother's love are seen in this case as having been cheated. They should be valued, which is to say seen to be deserving of mother's love, in proportion to their level of deprivation. (See Crenshaw, 1989)

Similarly, the remarkable achievements that people have wrought over thousands of years are not valued, nor have the products of their work maintained their place as objects from which to learn. This is perhaps the saddest feature of our time. Statues of such great men as Jefferson, Lincoln, and Lord Nelson are torn down, and cheers are heard from the throng. Shakespeare is struck from the curriculum because, as

just another white man, he is seen as occupying space that might otherwise be held by a Writer of Color, to be named later. One sees moves to do away with musical notation as part of the current woke project of decolonization (Emmons, 2021). A writer for National Public Radio (Vidal, 2020) urges us to take up this project of decolonization directly, by going through our bookcases and getting rid of books written by white, male authors.

A few years ago, in the lecture hall of a distinguished medical school, portraits of some of the school's most accomplished former chairs, had been, for years, placed upon the walls. The school's CEO, Dr. Elizabeth Nabel thought that this might make some of the minority and female students feel "I am not represented here," so she ordered them removed. It would make the place more welcoming she thought. (Kowalczyk, 2020)

Now, I am, of course, not in a position to know, but I do wonder whether, in some corner of Dr. Nabel's mind, she imagined that she could respond to such feelings of lack of representation by telling those who felt that way that if they did great work, their pictures would also go on the wall. But instead, she just removed the public recognition of achievement. The walls, I believe, remain empty.

Summing up, we can see that what was previously valued is now seen as the result of white privilege, and hence shameful. For all but white males, poverty and misfortune are not seen, rightly or wrongly, as shameful results of the person's failure, but always as the result of malevolent others, either acting individually or as part of a system, whose victims should be compensated for their suffering and taken care of.

The mother's concern is most powerfully aroused by those who have suffered the most. This can have political consequences. It can turn feeling sorry for oneself, or even a

convincing display of feeling sorry for oneself, into a tactic for enlisting her power toward one's own ends. This generates what has come to be called a culture of victimhood. Ultimately, such a culture is unsustainable. Thus, it is difficult to see how a society whose valued condition is losing would be able to cope with the world. Rather, we would expect to see such a society simply grinding down, kept going only by inertia and habit, increasingly marked by entropy, managed by people who are incapable of doing their jobs, unable to learn from its mistakes and inevitably compounding them.

Within the new world, the only social activity that makes sense is the righteous battle against the father, in the name of his victims. This gives the only viable sense of identity (Schwartz, 2019).

As we have seen, the value of the father is coextensive with the value of his works, so the attempt to destroy the father is equally the attempt to deny the value of and destroy his works.

Now, in the broadest sense, his work has been civilization. What we can see here, then, is civilization organizing itself to first devalue, then to destroy itself.

People are less bothered by this than they should be. We have, in the last several years, seen parts of some of our most beautiful and important cities looted and burned. And this happened to what we must recognize as the applause of most of our cultural institutions. I know of no historical precedent for this. Explanation is necessary for this insouciance. Our theory leads me to suggest that people feel that they are under the protection of mother, who will take care of everything, and therefore nothing should concern them. The problem is that she will not take care of everything. In fact, she cannot take care of *anything*. She is a fantasy; she does not exist.

## *Conclusion*

By way of closing, I would like to go back to a point I touched on earlier. My claim is that the basic principles of our culture have changed from what they traditionally have been. From reason and evidence, we have shifted to thoughts that are not even thoughts, but only slogans, such as diversity, inclusion, and equity.

The fact that these basic principles are only slogans is an important one. It means that they cannot be thought through. They cannot be criticized, they cannot be justified, and they cannot be developed. Unlike our prior principles of reason and evidence, they do not enable us to think about the world, but only to feel about it.

But what are they about? This is a more difficult question than it should be, especially in the case of the central concept among them: diversity. The reason for the difficulty is that the term came to us through a kind of bait-and-switch operation. The importance of diversity is justified, when it is justified at all, as if it meant real differences in points of view. In practice that is the opposite of what it means. The idea that, in the age of political correctness, diversity of points of view is held up as the highest value simply refutes itself. It can only be taken seriously as part of a joke.

The real purpose of diversity is not to increase difference. It is to paper over the "achievement gap" between whites and Asians, on one hand, and some other racial minorities, on the other (Murray, 2021). Everything else is just political camouflage and self-dealing. Everybody knows this and just about everybody, in fear of being called a racist, acts as if they don't and participates in the maintenance of the fiction. There is no consensus on why this gap exists and some of the smartest people in the society have spent their lives, and turned the society upside down, trying



to make it go away; but there it is.

So, if you have ever wondered why the number of these strategies of social justice keeps growing, adding initials as it goes along, that will tell you why. It is because each of them fails and instead of simply recognizing and learning from the failure, which would require moral courage and analytic thought, it is easier to just add another strategy. By this time, most people understand, at some level, that it is all baloney anyway. What is a bit more baloney among friends?

The offensiveness with which PC concerns itself is a lapse of love (Schwartz, 2020). It represents a chink in the all-encompassing love that the children enjoyed when they were undifferentiated from mother (Schwartz, 2016), to which they still feel entitled, and about which they are obsessed. This is why "microaggressions," even when they are seen by others as trivial, are taken so seriously. It is because even the least of them reveals our fantasy of being surrounded by love to be a fantasy. When that happens, the indifference of life is made manifest. The microaggression is telling us that we are not the center of the world. We undertake to destroy the father for bringing that news. Destroy him and mother's love for us: perfect, flawless, and fully capable of destroying all unpleasantness, will come into its full glory.

Obviously, the father is the only one who does not get something out of this arrangement. But that is, as they say, a feature, not a bug. Rather, the psychology of this whole arrangement is built on hating the father. It is a structural element. He is the classic scapegoat. Dumping all badness on him means that the other members can be seen as perfectly good. His moral debt, as represented by every moral lapse ever committed anywhere (remember, "*the father*" is singular) is essentially infinite and irredeemable. His flaws should be compared, not with those of other flawed creatures, but with mother's perfection. None of it would have happened if mother had been running the show. All he can do is to join his voice

to the chorus of denigration and agree to the righteousness of his diminution. This cannot be the basis of a stable, loving relationship. Who could love this loser? He will always stand in danger of being expelled. Or, as they call it these days, cancelled.

But expelling the father as we might, we will not be able to expel the reality that he represents. Fantasy is fantasy and will remain so. The fantasy that the group can realize the ego ideal for all of its members is impossible to maintain. It would mean a fusion of all the siblings, each unique and exactly the same as all the others, under the care of an omnipotent and loving mother. But recall that the basic driver for all the individuals involved is narcissism, becoming again the center of a loving world. This centrality ultimately creates an insurmountable problem. If one feels oneself to be the center, the others must, ultimately, be felt as secondary. And, of course, they will feel the same way. Instead of a stable assemblage of equal members, then, we have a set-up for a Hobbesian war of each against each, trending toward tyranny.

But that's grim.

Let me compensate by leaving you with a song:

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