

The Presidential Campaign and America's Public Emptiness

Once upon a time, Ralph Waldo Emerson called sensibly upon Americans to embrace "plain living and high thinking." Conspicuously, this earlier call for an enhanced personal and social equilibrium has been cast aside. Today, there is no longer any pretense of a serious intellectual life in these United States. Rather, our schools are generally loathed by their inmates, as much as our prisons.

Why should it be any different? From every student's first day in grade school, the core message is clear: This isn't going to be about anything pleasant or fascinating or ennobling. It is just about the statutory fulfillment of a hideous institutional obligation to "get ahead."

In the end, even our presidential elections are shaped by such early societal distortions. This country's cumulative political ambitions remain closely tied to embarrassing simplifications, cliches and abundantly empty witticisms. In this most revealingly barren sphere of personal ambition, even the most blatant buffoon can become electable, at least so long as he or she has somehow managed to accumulate great wealth. This is so because, in our prevailing national ethos of relentlessly competitive achievement, money, however acquired, is taken as prima facie evidence of "being smart."

For America, it is incontestable: Billionaires can't be fools.

Emerson, of course, would have winced. Our earliest presidents were actually people of genuine accomplishment and original thought. We remember them not for any success in the profit-oriented marketplace of mundane things to be bought, but rather in the mind-centered marketplace of great ideas.

Where, exactly, have we gone wrong?

There is an answer. It begins, as does every social order, with a look at the individual, with the microcosm. Inevitably, our American electorate, the macrocosm, can never rise any higher than the combined capacities of its myriad members.

Ultimately, every so-called democracy represents the sum total of its constituent souls, those who would seek some sort or other of "redemption." In our deeply fractionated American republic, we the people – more and more desperate for a chance to "fit in," and "get respect" – now inhabit a vast wasteland of incessant tasks, engineered consumption and an endlessly dreary profanity. Already bored to death by the insufferable banalities of everyday life, and beaten down by the increasingly grinding struggle to "stay positive," we Americans grasp anxiously for almost any available lifeline of intoxication or distraction.

What must we cheerlessly endure, amid this breathless rhythm of circus-like conformance and self-imposed limitation? More than anything else, we the people have learned to embrace a deeply corrupted and directionless national society, one that actually offers very little in the way of any meaningful personal goals or fulfillment.

As a people, we continue to think against history, viscerally, even as virtually no one ever takes the trouble to first learn something about it. Ironically, even the most affluent Americans now inhabit the loneliest of crowds, essentially living out their lives at suffocating airports, pushed forward by the alleged reward of still more frequent flier miles. Small wonder, too, that so many millions cling desperately to their smartphones and related toys. Filled with a deepening and ultimate horror of ever having to be left alone with themselves, these virtually connected millions are observably frantic to claim membership in the amorphous, but more and more protective, public mass.

"I belong, therefore I am." This is not what philosopher René

Descartes had in mind when, in the 17th century, he had insightfully urged greater thought and doubt. This is also, inherently, a very sad credo. Unhesitatingly, it screams the plainly pathetic cry that social acceptance is effectively equivalent to one's own literal physical survival, and that even the most ostentatiously pretended pleasures of inclusion are desperately worth pursuing.

Should there be any doubts about this credo, one need only consult the latest suicide statistics for these United States. To reduce these revealing numbers will require more than silly and sterile promises to "make America great again." They will require a citizenry that wants much more than to simply scream nonsense in chorus.

A push-button metaphysics of "apps" reigns supreme in America. This immense attraction of infantile social networking stems in part from our society's expansively machine-like existence. Within this icy robotic universe, every hint of human passion must be directed along a ritualistically uniform pathway. And woe to the American who would dare stray from this pitifully vicarious pathway.

To be sure, as we may still argue correctly, human beings are the creators of their machines; not their servants. Yet, there exists today an implicit and simultaneously grotesque reciprocity between creator and creation, an elaborate and potentially lethal pantomime between the users and the used.

Our adrenalized American society is now making a machine out of man and woman. Arguably, in an unforgivable inversion of Genesis, it even seems plausible that we may have been created in the image of the machine. Mustn't we then ask, as sometimes sober thinkers and doubters, "What sort of redemption is this?"

For the moment, at least, we Americans remain grinning but hapless captives in a deliriously noisy and suffocating crowd.

Proudly disclaiming any interior life, we proceed very tentatively, and in almost every existential sphere, at the very lowest possible public level. Expressed in more palpable terms, our air, rail and land travel has become insufferable. Our universities, once regarded as a last remaining beacon of intellectual life, are generally bereft of anything that might even hint at serious learning. As a university professor for almost 50 years, I can attest that this intellectual decline is both unassailable and palpable.

The traditionally revered Western canon of literature and art has been replaced by emphases on sports, quantitative institutional "rankings" and abysmally voyeuristic reality shows. Apart from their pervasive drunkenness, and typically tasteless entertainments, our once-sacred spaces of higher education" have mainly become a pipeline to increasingly nonsensical and deeply unsatisfying jobs.

That's why the students are there, to be allowed to enter this corrosive pipeline to nowhere.

For most of our young people, learning has become a stunningly inconvenient but mandated commodity, nothing more. At the same time, as everyone already understands, commodities exist for only one purpose. The commodities are there, like the newly minted college graduates themselves, merely to be bought and sold.

Though faced with genuine threats of war, illness, impoverishment and terror, millions of Americans still choose to amuse themselves to death with various forms of morbid excitement, inedible or tangibly injurious foods, and the inane repetitions of a candidly illiterate political discourse. Not a day goes by that we don't notice some premonitory sign of impending catastrophe. Still, our anesthetized country continues to impose upon its exhausted and manipulated people a shamelessly open devaluation of genuine thought, and a continuously breakneck pace of

unrelieved work.

Small wonder that "No Vacancy" signs now hang securely outside our psychiatric hospitals, our childcare centers, and, above all, at our prisons.

Soon, even if we should somehow manage to avoid nuclear war and nuclear terrorism, the swaying of the American ship will become so violent that even the hardiest lamps will be overturned. Then, the phantoms of great ships of state, once laden with silver and gold, may no longer lie forgotten. Perhaps instead, we will finally understand that the circumstances that once sent the compositions of Homer, Maimonides, Goethe, Milton, Shakespeare, Freud and Kafka to join the disintegrating works of forgotten poets were neither unique nor transient.

In an 1897 essay titled "On Being Human," Woodrow Wilson had inquired coyly about the authenticity of America. "Is it even open to us to choose to be genuine?" he asked. This future president had answered "yes," but only if we first refused to stoop to join the injurious and synthetic "herds" of mass society. Otherwise, Wilson had already understood, our entire society would be left bloodless, a skeleton, dead also with that rusty corrosion of broken machinery, more hideous even than the inevitable decompositions of an individual person.

In all societies, as Emerson had recognized, the scrupulous care of each individual soul is most important. Meaningfully, there can be a "better" American soul, but not until we first acknowledge a prior obligation to shun the eventually unsustainable seductions of herd culture, mechanized thinking and flagrantly crude commerce. By accepting such a necessary acknowledgment, this country could then disavow its manifestly baneful presidential politics of vain hopes and public emptiness.

First published in