

INTO ASPHYXIATED AIR

Part 1: My Empathy Trek with The Trump Voter

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“I hoped something would be gained by spilling my soul in the calamity’s immediate aftermath, in the roil and torment of the moment... it hasn’t, of course.”

-Jon Krakauer from *Into Thin Air*

In 1996, 630 climbers attempted to reach the summit of Mt. Everest and 155 died. On May 10 of that year alone, 9 died, marking it as the deadliest day in the history of mountaineering. On that day at 1pm, Jon Krakauer, a climber and journalist, stood on the summit, one foot in

China, one in Nepal. He had been hired by *Outsider* magazine to write a story about a growing trend: the development of commercial climbing expeditions, which many in the serious climbing community derisively termed the “monetization” of Everest.

There is no question that the rivalry between such for-profit enterprises opened the door to amateurism, compromised safety procedures, and encouraged greed, hubris and poor judgment, borne of the need to deliver the goods (securing the summit) because the price was so steep: 65 grand back then, mostly ponied up by wealthy Western clients, some with scant climbing experience. On that ill-fated day, five such expeditions were zeroing in on the summit. Bottlenecks were created which exacerbated organizational and communication problems, certainly a key factor in the disaster that developed that day.

Krakauer gazed at the vista below, the Tibetan Plateau, and beyond, where one can discern the curvature of the Earth. He noted some gathering storm clouds below. He barely took it in. He later reported he felt no release at the summit, no feeling of exhilaration or accomplishment. Only exhaustion. He had not slept for 57 hours and was suffering the brain altering effects of oxygen depletion. There were two other expert climbers on the summit when he arrived. Krakauer stared at them blankly. They stared back at him blankly.

Krakauer began his descent almost immediately. Although losing brain cells rapidly, he was cognizant enough to appreciate the need to get ahead of the approaching storm. Quickly coalescing storms are not uncommon in the upper regions of Everest. That one struck, when a number of expeditions were closing in on the summit, was plain bad luck. The ordeal precipitated by the storm took nine lives. A number of those who survived lost various body parts to frostbite. The trauma no doubt shattered the psyches of all on the mountain that day.

Krakauer's survival guilt is palpable. He wrote a harrowing account of the details of that disaster, the best-selling [Into Thin Air](#), which many consider the best adventure story of all time.

He chronicles the race to the top, the excruciating choices faced when the storm hit and the fault lines that ruptured because of the commercialization of Everest. But it's not fundamentally a story of folly, vanity or fate. Krakauer and the other climbers knew the risks. They knew they would face intense pain, exhaustion and terror. Their resolve was formidable. For all the criticism directed at them, these expeditions did provide a path to those men and women who felt compelled to climb Everest because, in Krakauer's words, "it was there." Krakauer may have felt nothing but depletion at the summit, but he and the other climbers were ennobled by their quest.

Into Thin Air helped encourage the current essay. Although this essay chronicles more of a race to the bottom. This essay, like Krakauer's book, also strives for a measure of understanding, catharsis and—because we are *all* responsible for the current unfolding calamity—atonement. On the latter score, like Krakauer acknowledges above, it fails.

The election of Donald J. Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States has been characterized by the political cognoscente (Red or Blue persuasion) as the most stunning political upset in our history. The sixty-three million people that voted for him are still giddy and incredulous at seeing the Molotov cocktail they hurled at-what they considered- the rotted out political system, run by and for elites, blow up its target. Across the divide, the sixty-six million who voted against him are living through the biggest political clusterfuck of their lives. How to understand this cataclysmic, country- torn- asunder event? This essay is a stab at such under-

standing. It is written *to* the Red Tribe of America, but *for* the battered heart of the Blue Tribe. Its goal is to provide succor.

Most of my clients and friends remain stunned by the thunderclap that exploded on 11/Nein (day after the election). Maybe it shouldn't be the case; but, if one measures tears expended, brows gnashed, and curses emitted in Blue Tribe America: 11/Nein surpasses 9/11. Succor would help.

This essay will try to provide it by— counterintuitively—trying to find and express empathy with those who voted for Trump. Empathy you see, received or given, almost always soothes. One of the hoped - for- outcomes of finding and conveying empathy is to help Trump detractors move through the (pick your emotional way station) reeling, apoplectic, ulcerous, mortified, embittered, wrathful, despondent, desolate state to which they have been pithed by the election of this selfish, cruel, bilious, immature, impulsive, self-centered, self-promoting, self-worshipping, lewd, vulgar, proud-as-Palin-ignorant , swaggering buffoon and his sixty three million enablers.

A term that is popping up ever more frequently in the conservative blogosphere is **outrage porn**. Outrage porn refers to commentary from liberal blogs that waxes poetic/aghast at Trump. It is a clever, Orwellian tag. It frames the criticism of Trump as hyperventilated and therefore dubious. And it is an effective term. I don't want to be guilty of succumbing to outrage porn. I want to open up a dialogue with the Red Tribe of America, not exacerbate the divide. Thus, I promise to be vigilant about my adjectives and forswear the easy string of invectives. But there is no getting around genuine obscenity, so I fear that some of the commentary might offend my Red Tribe audience. I ask them to try to hang in there. I will try to keep it to a sliver, to the equivalent of a pep show rather than the whole damn movie.

Succor would be good. But there is also a practical reason for Blue Tribers to seek empathy. Isn't it worthwhile to understand why sixty-three million people vote for Donald Trump, even if only a matter of self-interest? Understanding may lead to collaboration. Collaboration may lead to healing.

Methodology

How to develop such an understanding? Initiating conversations would seem a likely starting point. But of the few hundred people I know well enough to request such a conversation, there are, at most, a dozen who voted for Trump. Small sample size, and also...

When I thought of having a "constructive dialogue" with any of them, I shrunk back. All I could envision was awkwardness (at best) and (more likely) leakage of contempt (more likely on my end). So, I did what any effete, analytic thinking (LAME!) Blue Triber would do. I hit the books.

No shortage there. There's a cottage industry of thoughtful books to help understand the Trump voter. Websites were also culled. Emphasis was placed on sites that presented empirical data and/or were conservative leaning.

So, let the high-minded journey begin. What's not to recommend the pursuit of empathy? Turns out (spoiler alert) the journey careened into a dark travel adventure.

The books listed below are the primary source material for this essay. I would recommend all of them. However, I did rank order them (on overall dimensions of enjoyment and insight) for those interested in further reading:

1. *The Unwinding: An inner History of the New America* by George Packer.

2. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* by Katherine J. Cramer
3. *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* by Charles Murray
4. *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* by John B. Judis
5. *Insane Clown President* by Matt Taibbi
6. *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace
7. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J.D. Vance
8. *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* by Mark Lilla
9. *Listen Liberal* by Thomas Frank
10. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning in the American Right* by Arlie Russell Hochschild

Base Camp - WTF!

“We’ve become so secure in our bubbles, we accept only information, whether it’s true or not, that reflects our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there. Without a willingness to admit new information and that your opponent may be making a good point.... then we’re going to keep talking past each other and make common ground impossible.” —Barack Obama November 18, 2016

Not so fast, Barack. Turns out there’s a debate on not only whether empathy in our current political situation is warranted, but even whether it’s pursuit might be counterproductive, might exacerbate the rupture rather than heal it. No country for empathy, many say, only room for confrontation.

The New York Times, in its editorial pages (see especially Nicolas Kristof and David Brooks) has been a big proponent of empathy (to be clear, not to Trump himself, but to the Trump voter). In a frequently visited article, “Stop Shaming Trump Supporters,” in the Times, Rabbi Michael Lerner urges Blue Tribers not to call Trump voters racist and “to reach out to Trump voters in a spirit of empathy and contrition. Only then can we help the white working class (WWC) understand that they do not live in a meritocracy, that their intuition the system is rigged is correct (but not by those whom they have been taught to blame) and that their pain and rage is legitimate.”

But the pushback on such calls for empathy has been intense and pervasive in Blue America. Here’s what it sounds like, “Let me get this straight. This guy ran a campaign explicitly of racist demagoguery, xenophobia and misogyny. As President he is a de facto role model for my kids, a role model of vulgarity, degradation of women, mockery of disabled people, and disregard for the truth. His Twitter account is a manners manifesto for pettiness and vengeance.

And you want me to extend my understanding, even my compassion to those who put him in power? What the fuck! (WTF!), That is morally grotesque! That is perverse!”

Well, OK. No easy rejoinder to the WTF! position. But isn't this what we are trying to move beyond? Isn't this just another expression of “outrage porn?”

Yes...actually maybe not. German Lopez, a writer at the website VOX, highlights research that suggests that empathy for racist views runs the risk of validating the racist attitudes and weakening norms against racism. The call for Kumbaya *could* have perverse consequences.

And might be futile. Frontline, the documentary series on PBS, recently put out a retrospective analysis of the Obama Presidency they ended up titling the [Divided States of America](#). Obama, Kumbaya personified, came into office on a wave of goodwill and strong approval ratings, determined to heal the divide between Red and Blue America. Instead the opposite ensued: the film documents that, from the outset, there was a populist backlash polluted by furious racial scapegoating and reinforced by Congressional obstructionism.

The battle, not the reconciliation, was on. From day one.

Obama, however, refused to join it. He extended the open hand; but was met with the closed fist. He kept waiting for the fever, as he put it, to break; but it never did.

Reason was eclipsed by birtherism, that most crude and vile calumny, its architect now in the Oval Office. WTF(!). Recent events would seem to underscore the folly of empathy. So, the risks of pursuing empathy include humanizing racism and wasting effort on a misguided mission: outreach to unrepentant Trump voters rather than mobilizing the base.

But there are risks of not pursuing empathy. After all, empathy often wins. Obama, the embodiment of empathy, won twice by comfortable margins. So did Bill Clinton, also an effective communicator of empathy, albeit in a cheesier (“I feel your pain”) style.

Lack of empathy often loses. Hillary lacked this political gift, as she acknowledged in her recurring phrase “You campaign in poetry but govern in prose.” Indeed, her decision to run a campaign based on identity politics and persecution of Trump’s character was no doubt related to her genuine contempt for many Trump supporters (“You know, you could put half of Trump supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right?”). There were many variables related to her loss, and lack of empathy was certainly one of them. Empathy is a noble and ancient virtue, but not always easy to practice. It can embolden the spirit and broaden the horizon but feel like tearing through scar tissue. President Obama, in his farewell address a week after the election, made the plea to Blue America:

For blacks and other minorities it means tying our own struggle for justice to the challenges that a lot of people in the country face—the refugee, the immigrant, the rural poor, the transgender American, *and also* the middle-aged white man who from the outside may seem like he’s got all the advantages, but who’s seen his world upended by economic, cultural and technological change.

Humility and reaching out would appear to be in order. Blue America assumes most of Red America is trapped in a bubble, divorced from reality. The benumbed state Blue American now finds itself in suggests the opposite. Certainly, I was. I cheered him on as Trump shredded the GOP establishment during the primaries, proclaiming to my friends and family “He’s exposing and laying waste to the GOP. I’m telling you. This is a win for us.”

It seemed so obviously a win-win-win-win. Trump mocked the traditional GOP talking points, made fools of his competitors (easy prey to be sure; the most vile collection of clown car

retrogrades our political spectacle has ever produced), revealed the ignorant and white nationalist beating heart of the GOP base (which *just had to be* a shrinking minority of the electorate), and revealed himself to be so unfit to be President that he would provoke a Democratic landslide up and down the ticket. Turns out, I (we) were the ones out of whack with reality. Our comeuppance is richly deserved.

Sixty million people cast votes for Donald Trump. That needs to be understood, if not forgiven. So, with apologies to the raw and heartfelt sensibilities of the WTF(!) contingent, and with humility and self-doubt, I am going to push ahead with the empathy trek.

Pack it up, Blue Tribe. Time to break camp.

Hike to Camp One: The ascent is gradual, the terrain hospitable (can't we all just get along?)

You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it. -Atticus Finch

Outreach Letter to Trump Voter:

Dear Red Triber:

This letter is an attempt to empathize with your concerns and understand the mindset and political choices that flow from those concerns. I know, such an attempt at outreach is presumptuous. Such a Blue Triber thing to do. The effort is likely to come up short. I appreciate your patience.

I have little to recommend me. I could point out that I have spent time in Red America. I lived two years in Iowa City and two years in Richmond, Virginia. But this was for graduate school, so I'm not sure it counts. I mostly hung out with coastal types. I did have friends from the Midwest or South, but they typically grew up in big cities. More noteworthy might be time spent (about a month per year for the past 30 years) in the small (population 1800) town where my

wife grew up in central Texas (which I will henceforth call Texastown to preserve its' anonymity). So, I'm not a total stranger to your denizens.

However, as an aspiring communicator of empathy, I come with a strong product warning label: I now live in a Super - Zip.

Super-Zip is a term coined by Charles Murray, author of [Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010](#). Super-Zips are the top few percent of zip codes that achieve their status by receiving the highest rank on two attributes: education level and income. If you can visualize a color-coded map of the United States and paint the terrain of the Super-Zips, uh, let's say blue; and the rest of the zip codes, uh, let's say red; you get an almost exact replica of the election map (i.e. a sea of red with pinprick clusters of blue along the coast and densely populated cities).

My Super-Zip is just outside Washington, D.C., a particularly desirable locale if you go for the mix of leafy environs, school systems rated well within the top 1% in the country, and easy access to the city. Turns out the largest collection of Super-Zips is in and around Washington, D.C. I am within a 45-minute drive of twelve other Super-Zips, ten of which rank in the top 1% on that index of education level and income, with the other two in the top 2%.

Murray contends that the residents of Super-Zips live in a world apart from much of America, ensconced in a kind of progressive bubble, incapable of seeing beyond their privileged horizon. This assertion is both provocative and ironic to my friends and neighbors since self-awareness, tolerance and humility are central virtues in Super-Zip land. Yet, if you did visit me in Super-Zip land (be sure to pack a healthy dose of antacids and beta-blockers), you would see and

hear things to lend support to Murray's charge. Indeed, the divide is probably wider than you imagined. So different from your world.

But first, it needs to be pointed out, your world is so different from your parent's world.

In Texastown today, there is a small museum that contains photographs of the town and surrounding area dating back to the beginning of the 1900's. To look at a picture of the three block "downtown" area from the 1940's is to enter a different world, a Pleasantville, but with rich colors.

Back then, on a typical Saturday, downtown Texastown would be packed, with not enough parking spaces for all the cars and pickups from surrounding farms and ranches. The crush had something to do with the need to replenish supplies, but mostly was about the communal spirit in town. You see plenty of kids running around, but it's the adults and the engaged looks on their faces that compel your attention.

The stores were different then—a couple of dry goods stores, several grocery stores, a number of beauty parlors, a movie theater, a soda shop, an auto and machinery parts store—but the key difference was the robust activity. The photographs convey the feeling of a country fair, albeit one taking place in the streets. In the background you could see the Methodist and Baptist churches where everyone would gather again on Sunday.

In contrast, today on a typical Saturday, there are usually just a few stragglers visiting the five and dime store, the gun shop or the Subway sandwich shop. The brunt of shopping is done at the Walmart, a half hour drive away. Items not available there can, of course, be secured through Amazon. The price of goods is low, while the price the community has paid is high.

Communal gatherings are limited to the high school football games, five or six evenings a year. The vibrancy of Texastown has dissipated.

You know all too well this hollowing out, this “unwinding” as George Packer put it in the National Book Award winner that depicts the fraying of the middle and lower middle class. There is an abiding sense of loss in communities like Texastown (and Flint, Scranton, and Youngstown). Note the titles of two other trenchant accounts of this decline ([Hillbilly Elegy](#) by J.D. Vance and [Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the Right](#) by Arlie Hochschild).

The essence of the loss is meaningful work. Corporate farming/ranching has vitiated the family farm; globalism and technology have displaced manufacturing. Fifty years ago, the country needed, prized and compensated places like Texastown (and Flint, Scranton, and Youngstown). Now these places have slid from needed to needy. Wounded pride, pessimism and demoralization have been left in their wake. The heart of these towns has been ripped apart.

Statistics underscore the decline:

- During the Clinton and Bush eras, up until the Great Recession, there was enormous wealth generated, but most of it went to the upper 1%. Some scraps went to the upper 10%. The remaining 90% suffered a decline.
- No wage growth in the working class the past 35 years.
- Post- great recession economic recovery has excluded the working class—95% of new jobs have gone to those with some college education.
- Currently half the country can’t pay a \$400 bill without going into debt.
- The white working class (WWC) reports higher levels of pessimism than blacks or Latinos.
- Effectively, 3/4 of the country has not had a raise in earned income the past 40 years.

The impact of the economic decline in the culture of these communities is wrenching. Charles Murray, in his research for [Coming Apart](#), compared white working-class communities with upper middle class communities. He noted a “great divergence” between these communities which resulted in two cultures, *separate and unequal*, sequestered into two different worlds, not by race but by income, opportunity for meaningful work and education level.

Murray identified five key arenas in which the divergence between the WWC (high school diploma, blue-collar or lower-end service jobs) and upper middle class (college degrees, professional or management jobs) become manifest over the past 60 years.

- **Marriage.** In 1960 a high percentage of whites in both groups were married (around 90%). The marriage rate has remained stable for the upper middle class but slid to below 50% for the WWC.
- **Single Parenthood.** This has skyrocketed for the WWC (from 6% in 1970 to 48% in 2008). During the same time frame, it has risen only from 1% to 6% for the upper middle class.
- **Industriousness.** Murray measured the percentage of prime age males who were not working and who described themselves as “out of the labor force” (i.e. not trying to find work). For men with just a high school degree this has quadrupled since 1969 (from 3% to 12%), while it has remained the same for males with a college education (3%).
- **Crime.** Violent crime has sextupled in WWC communities, while remaining flat in upper middle-class communities.

- **Religiosity.** The percentage of people who do not attend a worship service no more than once a year has risen much more sharply in WWC communities compared to upper middle-class communities.

Other markers of despair include increased opioid dependence, psychiatric disability, obesity, more TV watching and higher mortality rates. Anomie is a fancy term that describes a state of profound worthlessness and dislocation that occurs when institutions such as family and work break down. Fancy but on target. As economics supplants culture which supplants mental health, a death spiral sets in. No wonder the kids want to leave and—if they have brains, talent and drive—are encouraged to leave.

My wife and brother-in-law were valedictorians of their respective high school classes. They love Texastown but they were destined to go to college and live somewhere else. In the past, they may have stayed to become the town doctor or accountant or plant manager or businessperson or cop. No longer. Not with the geographical, economic and cultural sorting out that has taken place. They will gravitate to communities that possess the cultural advantage, where they can anticipate (this is the most devastating divergence) a better life for their children. It's an easy choice: death spiral vs. virtuous cycle.

For communities that once thrived with workers with high school degrees, communities with the wind at their back, this is sad...and maddening. Red Triber, I imagine you agree with J.D. Vance, author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, "I view members of the elite with an almost primal scorn. But I have to give it to them. Their children are happier and healthier, their divorce rates lower, their church attendance higher, their lives longer. These people are beating us at our own damned game."

[In Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What I Means for America,](#)

authors Peter Can and Maria Kefalas explain that many parents, teachers and ministers in low income counties encourage children to leave, especially if they have the opportunity to go to college.

No getting around it: America has sorted itself out into two nations, divisible not only along geographical lines, but also economic and cultural ones. If you visited my SuperZip (henceforth to be called Nagaburb*) you would do so as a wounded traveler, a victim of decline due to forces far outside your control. A stranger in your own land. Not fair to ask you to visit a place where you would, no doubt, feel like a stranger in a strange land. But if there is any chance of bridging the empathic divide, acquainting you with our Blue Tribe culture is probably a prerequisite. You will feel disoriented; but I will guide you.

If you had visited this past Fall and we took a stroll thru my neighborhood, the first thing you would notice is the absence of Trump yard signs. Quite a contrast to Texas where, a half hour drive outside of Austin, you could drive for hours and see nothing but Trump signs (hand-made at that). In my neighborhood, I can state with certainty—thanks to daily walks with my dog—there was only one Trump sign within an eight-block radius. In our neighborhood it was as if holy property had been desecrated by that outlier sign. Initially viewed with ridicule, the sign took on a sinister quality when the race tightened in early November.

* *Fictitious name to avoid litigation. NAGA is an acronym (Named After Goofy Actor)*

In the driveways of the houses we pass, you will see nothing but foreign cars: split evenly between European models (Saabs, Volvos, Jettas) and Asian sedans (Lexus, Pilots). There are some SUV's (compact size) and a lot of hybrids. Camrys and Accords are at the bottom of the

scale; Corollas and Civics are one unacceptable step over an invisible but inviolable status line. Any pickup you see (sans shotgun, of course) would be driven by a Latino providing lawn service.

In many driveways you would also see the New York Times wrapped in blue-tinted delivery bags, which are converted into fashionable waste receptacles for the dogs.

Ah...the dogs.

In Texastown, I never once saw a dog on a leash. A few were fenced in, but most ran free. The majority had a (not unappealing) mangy look. Here all the dogs are on leashes. Here the dogs lead the masters, unless they have to be rushed back for their in-home grooming service. Here all the dogs are magazine-cover-level attractive.

How 'bout we take a walk to what we call our "urban zone", about a mile away. I know, it seems weird to walk. There's a lot of walking here in Nagaburb. On my numerous walks in Texastown, I rarely passed someone out for a walk. Never saw someone walking from their home to their "urban zone." Never saw residents obsessively checking their fit bits.

On the way to our commercial district, we will pass by our local high school, which has been the recent beneficiary of a 30-million-dollar renovation effort, houses a nationally renowned cyber-cafe and state of the art media and language labs, and sends 95% of its students to college. The school mascot is a Baron, * portrayed as a sawed-off plutocrat, wearing a top hat and tails and sporting a monocle (kid you not). I understand if those from Cedar Rapids or Brownwood don't simply applaud our good fortune (OK, privilege) of sending our kids to a school that plops them halfway thru the socioeconomic race to the top. I would (defensively) note that our SuperZip tax dollars heavily subsidize inner-city schools in Baltimore and rural

schools in the state and have never heard a complaint from friends or neighbors that their tax dollars were redistributed.

**(Ironically Baron was the pseudonym Trump used for some of his public relations shenanigans, and is the appellation he gave to his youngest son)*

As we enter the urban zone, take note of our food stores (Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, farmers markets, organic food co-ops). I suggest we not go in any to spare you the sticker shock. But for us, you can't put a price tag on the moral purity of the free-range, glutton-free, locally grown, cancer-inhibiting foodstuffs.

Let's just glide by the high-end jewelry and clothing stores (no plus sizes available in these inner ring suburban stores), full-service spa, yoga center, Apple Store, Barnes and Noble (devoid of the three aisles devoted to the Christian Life you see in Texas bookstores), and "cinema," which offers a range of independent and foreign films, but forbids blockbusters.

What I want to show you is restaurant row, a two-block lineup of eateries. No suburban formula restaurants here. Rather an array of foreign establishments that equal half the countries in the UN General Assembly, all with lengthy wine and craft beer offerings. Don't be cowed. Trust me, after a few visits to our exotic restaurant row, it (paradoxically) feels as bogus and artificial as any middle-brow suburban food court.

Enough. Let's head back to the residential area and check out a typical home. Come on in. Take your shoes off, relax. I'm serious. Take your damn shoes off.

The ceiling height of the entrance foyer may induce vertigo. Don't worry, your vertigo will morph into agoraphobia as you enter the vast expanse of the kitchen which, on the prairie, could have slept six. The smells, uh, culinary fragrances can be attributed to a Moosewood Cookbook

recipe or a Blue Apron concoction. Don't ignore the countertops. More thought, income and angst have gone into those countertops than whether the firstborn should attend Colgate or Duke.

Check out the bathroom, whose renovation costs would put three generations of Red Tribers thru community college. Take a load off in the family room. Relax. it's not an arts and crafts museum exhibit, it just looks that way. The large flat screen TV is rarely lit up by any major network; but has become a delivery system for Netflix, Hulu and HBO Go. With the possible exception of that one household with the Trump yard sign, any Fox viewing would be recreational hate watching.

And what about the people that live in these crafted homes? Here's where your picture of the coastal elites may get fuzzy. If you spent time with us, I think you'd find us to be generous, tolerant, hard-working and self-effacing (although, if the county threatened to put a school or sidewalk in the neighborhood, take cover).

Nor are we snooty. I can't recall a conversation where my neighbors put down small town America or the South. We are united (over 96% of us voted for Clinton or a third-party candidate) and fierce in our hatred and disgust of Trump himself, but not the Trump voter.

But no avoiding it, we are different. We are more likely to walk into a four-star restaurant at some exotic international locale before walking into an International House of Pancakes; more likely to be shepherded into a high-end (50k a month) addiction treatment center than find ourselves on a slab in a morgue due to opioid overdose; more likely to set a gilded bar for parenting (e.g. castigate ourselves if we spend less than four figures for SAT prep) than insist our kids get a part-time job on the weekend. So, although we often disavow our privileged position, our choices reflect it.

After this brief tour of Nagaburb, I suspect your view of Blue Tribers as out-of-touch elitists has only been reinforced. But, from my time in Texastown, I know you suffer a more important form of dislocation: stranger in your *own* land. Nagaburb may represent a county you don't recognize, but Texastown, reeling from a 40-year decline, is a place the *country* no longer recognizes.

But what if this decline could be reversed? What if the pivotal role of small-town America in making this country great could be restored? Resuscitate the beating heart of *your* America - the patriotic, hardworking, self-reliant Real America?

Now wouldn't that be just? To wrest control from the educated elites who never paid a price for the Great Recession, who are in the updraft of the global economy, and who you just know look down upon you as narrow-minded, uninformed and bigoted.

To do that you would need a candidate and President who understood you, was on your side, and would take the fight to them on your behalf.

Then along came Donald.

How could you not feel solidarity with this guy? How could you not vote for him? He portrayed himself as a savior who, yes, lived in a golden tower; yes, on the coast and among the elites, **but** he was not one of them. Indeed, he was despised by the political class, the media, and the politically correct university and government suckups. He pledged to come into the forgotten valley of America, where real Americans live, and restore greatness.

Likewise, how could you not detest *her*? How could you ever vote for *her*? She is the personification of the smug, educated elites and the corrupt political class who left you behind and now disparage you.

I get it. I think I do.

Trump had a coherent and compelling story of America. And what was the story he told over and over again - at rallies, debates, political talk shows and at the Republican National Convention?

His story of contemporary America had three acts: where we are (country is a hellhole); who to blame (two targets: educated elites such as Obama, Clinton and the money managers; and the usurpers - immigrants and lawless blacks); and who can save us (Trump and only Trump).

Act 1. Trump relentlessly painted the country as a “disaster,” a “weakling” ready to be taken out:

We are in very sad shape as a country... We have crime all over the country, we have - the borders, the Southern border is a disaster... the other night a 66-year-old woman, a veteran, was raped, sodomized brutally, killed by an illegal immigrant. We gotta stop... we gotta take back our country. We gotta take it back... You look at Chicago, look at Baltimore, look at Ferguson... a lot of these gangs, the most vicious are illegals. They're out of here. The first day I will send those people... those guys are outta here..., all of them, are killing us. They've taken so much of our wealth. They've taken our jobs... they've taken our business, our manufacturing... Our leaders are babies. Our country is falling apart.

Act 2. Pretty obvious where to fix the blame for this disaster:

Of course, I blame Obama for the riots and the lawlessness and attacks on our police. Those are his people. Obama... is the founder of ISIS. Hillary, I guess you'd say is the co-founder. These immigrants are roaming the country... to harm Americans. Our great African American president hasn't exactly had a positive impact on the thugs who are openly destroying our cities. She [Hillary] has tremendous hate in her heart.

Act 3. Pretty obvious who and only who has the balls to fix this mess:

Only I can fix it... We will have so much winning when I'm elected you will get bored with winning. I will be so good with the military your head will spin. I will be the greatest jobs President God ever created. Sorry, losers and haters, but my IQ is one of the highest and you all know it. Please don't feel so stupid or insecure. it's not your fault.

Gotta give it to him. He showed up. He recognized your plight. It's not only what he said, but how he said it. He was a skillful storyteller.

His rallies were improvisational masterpieces. The stagecraft was right out of *Celebrity Apprentice* and *Worldwide Wrestling*. The media and Blue Tribers took him literally and called his rallies hate-fests (pointing to T-shirts like “She’s a cunt, vote for Trump” and “Deplorable Lives Matter!”); whereas you were in on the game and saw his rallies as love-fests. Trump was faithful to the first principle of political campaigns: voters are drawn more to someone who understands them rather than to someone who says they will do things for them.

What a contrast to Clinton, who acknowledged to George Packer, the *New Yorker* writer, that she didn’t have a compelling story of America or her campaign (“it’s a ‘pox on both your houses’,” Clinton said, “so pick the guy giving you an explanation—in my view a trumped-up one—not convincing. Donald Trump came up with a fairly simple, easily understood, and to some extent satisfying story. And I think we Democrats have not provided as clear a message...”).

Indeed, near the end of the campaign, her message devolved into an us (“coalition of the ascending”) vs. you (“basket of deplorable”). And, of course, she assumed there would be many more who would vote for her: an experienced, educated, hard-working, knowledgeable, professional; as against him: a vulgar baboon, who would walk into the Oval Office clueless, smirking and dangerous, juggling live grenades in his small hands.

She assumed wrong.

She failed utterly to connect with voters under the age of fifty. She had detailed, well thought-out policy proposals, but no one knew what she stood for (after the election there were

reports that even focus groups of progressives couldn't associate her with any particular cause or policy).

And she didn't show up. After the election it came out that her political operatives in Wisconsin and Michigan saw what was coming and begged her to visit. She may have been wary of the optics. Again, after the campaign, many in the media acknowledged they may have blunted reporting on the sparseness of her crowds and the lack of enthusiasm at her campaign events, particularly outside of big cities.

The last few days of the campaign underscored the cultural and demographic divide. Clinton campaigned with Springsteen, Bon Jovi, Lady GaGa, Beyoncé and Jay Z. She went to big cities (Philadelphia, Pittsburg) where she finally got Trump-size (or Bernie-size) crowds, buttressed by Obama and Michelle flanking her. Trump, meanwhile, came to you (Selma, Grand Rapids, Manchester) and played up the divide ("We don't need no Beyoncé, no Jay Z").

Trump's narrative of America was not only more memorable and emotionally resonant, but had the virtue of delivering a basic truth, which you know all too well: rural and small town America has been in a decline for the past 40 years, a decline that has been neglected by both the Republican and Democratic establishments.

Whether you call it globalism or neoliberalism, there have been clear-cut winners and losers in the global economy during this era. Enormous wealth has been generated and it has been a blessing to the third world. Moving to a flat world with unfettered markets has benefited impoverished countries, with major inroads in poverty reduction and hunger. Educated professionals are the other big winner. With skill sets to navigate the evolving technologies and infor-

mation explosion, they have prospered. The big losers are the manufacturing class and rural small towns which have seen their wages decline and their jobs go overseas.

Trump made economic decline the centerpiece of his campaign. He blamed the decline on immigrants to be sure, but also the “corrupt” financial and political elites; those architects, proponents and benefactors of NAFTA and TPP. Trump took on Republican orthodoxy and proposed broad stroke solutions: impose tariffs, punish corporations that send jobs overseas, run the immigrants out, preserve key entitlements, and increase government spending that would produce jobs. It wouldn’t be difficult to restore greatness, he avowed. His Republican opponents sputtered he wasn’t a real Republican, a real conservative. And, of course, they were right.

Clear-eyed, you voted for him overwhelmingly. His GOP opponents trotted out the usual red meat cultural issues (e.g., Planned Parenthood, LGBT, hatred of Obama, and one-size-fits-all solution of tax cuts). I suspect you had seen thru this bait-and-switch, funnel- money- to- the- top 1% Republican PR machine for years; but you never had an alternative.* Until now.

The Democrats assumed the white working class would flock to them out of self-interest (i.e., the condescending “what’s the matter with Kansas?”) argument. But you’re not ignorant. You see the Republicans represent the top 1%, but also that the modern Democrats, in representing the top10% also have little to offer to you.*

*** To his credit, Thomas Frank has re-appraised and revised this argument, that Red Tribers are dupes of the GOP, in his most recent book, [Listen Liberal](#).*

Donald Trump not only showed up for you, not only addressed the heart of your concerns, but inspired confidence. Half the country deemed him to be repulsive and ethically unfit, evidenced by the way he lived (pussy grabbing, racial discrimination in his business practices) and the way he talked (“You’re disgusting!” “You know, it doesn’t matter what the media write as long as you’ve got a young and beautiful piece of ass”).

But you understood: he was not cowed by political correctness. Political correctness was for weaklings. Trump would do or say *anything* to get what he wanted. He naturally fit into our postmodern slot of good but flawed antihero. The gangster capitalist. Like Tony Soprano or Walter White, he would do whatever needed to be done for his family (country). Far from repulsive, that trait was attractive; he was strong.

He would bust anyone's lip (John McCain, the Pope, Mika Brzezinski). He flaunted all the rules and got away with it. When the mainstream media or political class tried to send him to a neutral corner, he just picked them up and threw 'em out of the ring. During the second debate—which had a town hall format that allowed for more physical movement—there was a palpable sense that Trump, at any moment, like some Worldwide Wrestling villain, was going to bum rush her.

Another confidence builder? He was beholden to no one:

- Not the Republican establishment. The debates devolved into the oratorical equivalent of Pussy-grabbing spectacles. By the time of the GOP convention, he had executed a hostile takeover of the party.
- Not Wall Street, big donors or K Street lobbyists. He was too rich to need their money. He financed his own campaign, although the media coverage enabled him to spend a fraction of what his opponents expended.
- Not the media gatekeepers. At his rallies, he would point to the media pinned in the gated off section and evoke a blood lust. “These are very bad people...the worst.”

He also played the anti-intellectualism card brilliantly. He seemed proud of his ignorance and went out of his way to note he didn't read books. He elevated practical intelligence over analytic intelligence (“I love the poorly educated”). Book learning, expertise, power points and policy analysis were for losers. (“Where the hell has it gotten us?”) He trumpeted reports that he spoke at a fourth-grade level. Give some credit to George W, Bush for this maneuver. Recent dis-

closure from an insider in his administration acknowledge the deliberateness of his cowboy act and, specifically, his malapropisms, which were catnip for media and blue tribe mockery, but reliably boosted his poll numbers. Anti-intellectualism is as American as TV binge watching. Mockery of educated professionals is a long-standing tradition in the heartland.

He overcame the elite media's mission to destroy him. 99% of newspaper editorials either sided with Hillary or took a 'pox on both houses' stance. (The wall-to-wall coverage of Trump drove Blue Tribers crazy. Like what? The media wasn't going to cover the biggest story on the planet. The coverage in Europe, it should be pointed out, was as extensive). The subtext of almost all the coverage was. How could this buffoon...". Don't think we Blue Tribers would have complained about coverage if her nine-point lead in the poll of polls, three weeks from election day, had expanded rather than dissipated.

He was playing chess ("truthiness"), while the fact-obsessed, smarty-pants Blue Tribe was stuck on a checkerboard (the truth). Credit W. again since this strategy took shape during his administration. Karl Rove had disdained the "reality-based" community as "clueless," and crowed that the Bush administration was playing a metagame based on tribal politics, faith, and the power of narrative.

In 2016 the Colbert Report was effectively replaced by the campaign, with Trump as the Executive Producer. Truth gave way to truthiness. Granted, all the Republican candidates tried to sing the truthiness tune, albeit in different melodies: snarling (Christie), smarmy (Cruz), soporific (Carson) or robotic (Rubio). But they were in a (tedious) Bush league compared to Trump. He had the Reality TV chops to dominate the stage and screen. And he had conviction. His whole

career was based on the understanding that truth is vanquished by narrative as long as it comes in more exciting packaging.

Trump not only set the terms of the truthiness conversation (how *many* immigrants do we need to run out of the country to make us safe; how *grievously* has the country declined under Obama), but don't forget, he had a basic truth on his side: elite establishment politicians (Sanders excluded) were associated with a rigged system that had produced the Iraq fiasco and the Great Recession. These same politicians either allowed (Democrats) or fought for (Republicans) the elites to escape while ordinary Americans got screwed (yes, there was significant recovery under Obama, but most of it went to the top 10%).

And finally—not to be underestimated—he made the whole damn thing fun; a rollicking house-of-mirrors, circus campaign of frivolity. He has defined politics so far down that rabble-rousing (“get ‘em the hell out of here”), mockery of expertise (“politicians can’t manage, all the can do is talk”), and outrageous charges (Cruz’s father in on the JFK assassination) have become the new, titillating norm.

The fact that our Blue Tribe blood pressure spiked while you laughed all the way to the voting booth only made it more delicious. You knew not to take him literally. You were in on the spectacle. You cheered him on when he took on the well-known (Worldwide Wrestling Federation) role of villain who would take down the clueless and sanctimonious good guy/gal. He was the gutsy and rebellious rake who would give the teacher the middle finger as soon as she turned her back.

If his campaign had been submitted as a screenplay two years ago, it would have been rejected as too ludicrous, too fanciful. Not for Donald. He injected production values and plot

twists that were top shelf. He knew you would *embrace* comparisons of his campaign with House of Cards and, now (with an assist from Sean Spicer), VEEP.

So, I get it. I think I do.

You were fed up. Fed up with the decline. Fed up with the political class responsible for it. Fed up with the “coalition of the ascending.” Fed up with not being recognized. Really fed up with the Clintons.

He recognized you and scorned us. And he/you prevailed.

I understand your vote was not cast out of ignorance. You were not hoodwinked. You knew damn well he was more entertainer than policymaker, his campaign more spectacle than substance. But you pulled the lever. You were understandably fed up. Most fundamentally you agreed with Michael Moore, perhaps not of your political persuasion, but on your side and avatar of the heartland, who had it early and had it right when he said

“He is the human Molotov Cocktail they’ve been waiting for. The human hand grenade they can legally throw at the system which stole their lives from them. On November 8, the dispossessed will walk into the voting booth, be handed a ballot, close the curtain and take that lever and put a big fucking X in the box by the name of the man who has threatened to up and overturn the system that has ruined their lives: Donald J. Trump. Trump’s election is going to be the biggest ‘fuck you’ ever recorded in human history and it will feel good.”

OK, so maybe there was a bit of Schadenfreude in your vote. But let’s not end on a sour note. We’ve come a long way. Let’s set up camp and try to savor this rarefied air of shared understanding. I hope the trek so far has not been exhausting or discouraging. I know you have had to acclimate to some unusual conditions. I hope, at least, you have felt welcomed. Your effort and forbearance are not taken for granted.

As for me, I've 'bout exhausted the limits of my understanding. If I empathize and reach out any further, I'm likely to pop a rotator cuff, which, at 13,000 feet, reduces me to collateral damage.

I've given it (empathy) my best shot; yet, alas, I have come up short. I feel I have benefited from seeking out the numerous and valid reasons for the cataclysm of 2016, but still can't truly grasp how we got to the point of putting this malign huckster in charge.

If we are to continue the trek, I am going to need guidance. Fortunately, I have found a couple of expert guides, pros who know the terrain better than anyone. We will be in good hands. And they are two of the nicest people you'd ever want to meet.

Hike to Camp 2: The air gets thinner, the terrain unwelcoming (it's the resentment, stupid)

Two of the nicest, I swear. YouTube them or go to their websites and you'll see what I mean about Katherine J. Cramer, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and author of [The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker](#); and Arlie Russell Hochschild, professor of sociology at the University of California-Berkeley, and the Author of [Strangers In Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning On The American Right](#).

Both of these books were nominated for National Book of the Year Award and was heralded as excellent source material for understanding the Trump voter. Drs. Cramer and Hochschild were the principal investigators on extensive (5 year) and intensive (thousands of interview hours) studies whose aim was to understand the "partisan divide" and "deep story" of

rural and small town voters who, over the past decade, marched forcefully in a conservative rather than liberal direction, often as enthusiastic members of the Tea Party.

I call them principal investigators because that's the university term of art. These were really one-woman efforts. Their methodology would be called ethnographic (another term of art) which basically means conducting lengthy, probing interviews where the goal was to identify, understand and elaborate on the critical beliefs and *feelings* that helped explain people's voting preferences.

Their efforts were fueled by a spirit of empathy. Their goal was to get people to open up, often about feelings regarding their fellow citizens that were difficult and perhaps not "socially acceptable." To accomplish that goal, they would need to develop close, warm relationships that elicited openness.

That took time and intestinal resilience. For Cramer that meant hanging out repeatedly in dairy barns, diners and gas stations across 27 rural and small-town counties in the state of Wisconsin. For Hochschild that meant ingesting a motherlode of cookies, Popeye's chicken and sweet tea in Louisiana bayou country, which no doubt shocked her Berkeley- sensitized GI tract. It also helped that they were nice.

Initially, there were a few bumps in the road (e.g., Wisconsin resident to Cramer, "How come my tax dollars go to paying a woman to drive around this beautiful state of ours in a yuppie car, talking to nice folks and get free pie and coffee." Hochschild observed it took about a year in Bayou county to elicit comments like "Ok, I guess you're sort of normal").

But the countless hours, dogged good cheer and empathic skills of these social scientists enabled them to get to the heart of the current fierce partisan divide. One sample from the upper

Midwest and the other from the deep south, but the findings are remarkably similar and... disturbing. Catherine Kramer grew up in small town Wisconsin and eventually worked her way up to professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. She loves her state. She is grateful to have grown up in a culture in which people are “notoriously nice, seriously nice.”

That culture she grew up in has now been fractured.

Contemporary Wisconsin is a reflection of the nation in that it is split evenly between progressives and conservatives. For most of the past 50 years, the balance of power has tipped to progressives (e.g. William Proxmire, Russel Feingold). More recently it has tipped conservative as evidenced by the election of Scott Walker—by a slim margin—to the governorship in 2010. His popularity was engendered by his signature position to put an end to collective bargaining rights for public employees and invoke cutbacks on their pension and health benefits. Walker introduced the bill shortly after taking power and a bitter debate ensued. Democratic legislators actually fled the state to prevent a quorum and block the bill. Mass protests enveloped Madison. Nevertheless, the bill passed. A recall effort was launched against Walker who, again by a slim majority, prevailed over a progressive candidate.

This is the context in which Cramer undertook her research. Of course, she found the political divide in Wisconsin had become a chasm over the past ten years. No surprise there. But it was the personal nature of the chasm, identified in her findings, that was revelatory (“The divides are not just about politics but who we are as people”) ...and distressing.

You can feel the heartbreak in her core observation that contemporary politics is most accurately viewed thru the lens of resentment. The resentment was not over issues, or ideas, or pol-

itics in general, but between citizens. During the Walker recall effort in particular, boundaries broke down.

People stole yard signs from each other. They stopped talking to one another. They spit on each other. In one case, they even tried to run each other over, even if married to one another... This is shocking. Unfortunately, it is not unusual in Wisconsin anymore. It has gotten downright nasty around here. People in casual conversation are treating each other as enemies.

It should be noted that the resentment ran largely, although not entirely, in one direction: from rural/small town to urban; from high school educated to college and beyond educated; from private sector to public sector; from white working class to black/immigrant underclass. It's one thing to identify resentment; it's another to grasp its essence. Cramer has gotten us close.

The concise conclusion, albeit in academic jargon that Cramer offers to explain the resentment of rural Wisconsinites. "They are the victims of a distributive injustice." What does Cramer mean by "victims of distributive injustice"? She has identified three components:

1. They feel dispossessed. They do not have decision-making power. That power rests with government elites in Madison and financial elites in Milwaukee.
2. They are not getting their fair share of resources. Resources are distributed disproportionately to the "lazy tax eaters," who are people below them (the impoverished) and above them (educated elites, especially in the public sector).
3. They are looked down upon by big city dwellers. They believe they are viewed as ignorant and bigoted.

The deep story of rural Wisconsinites is they are getting the short end of the stick. "We work hard, as hard as our parents did, yet our lives are more difficult, and we damn sure work harder than people in the cities with their desk jobs and smart phones. Our work is more important. It represents the Real America. And yet the politicians and elites make decisions that bene-

fit themselves and “tax eaters” (city dwellers). We are not getting our fair share and, on top of everything else, they sneer at us.”

What Cramer discovered was that resentment is not the consequence of the political divide, but at the heart of it. This animosity runs deep and really is an issue of personal identity. We don’t see contemporary difficulties in terms of broad economic, technological or global forces. Rather, we blame others.

Cramer emerged from her five-year journey shaken, “I went into this project with a love of Wisconsin; I came out of it with a deep concern for the nature of democracy in the state and in the United States in general.”

Arlie Hockschild conducted her study in Bayou country, west of New Orleans, in a particularly blighted patch of the state that has been so beset by environmental disaster that it had earned the nickname “cancer alley”. It is an area marked by economic decline and corporate pilage (Texas Brine, a drilling and mining behemoth, was the main culprit in the area Hockschild studied), with devastating health and environmental consequences. Hockschild—either through stories from her interview subjects or direct observation—noted the devastation: birds falling from the sky, turtles eye’s going opaque, goats and chickens keeling over after drinking from the Bayou, sick and dying pets, drinking water turned brown, entire houses swallowed by sinkholes, teeth eroded by sulfuric acid, and nine year-olds diagnosed with cancer.

Hockschild ventured into this hell-scape to conduct her interviews. Her sample size was small, only 40 people. Her goal was depth, not breadth. She wanted to understand the “deep story” of these people and how it might explain their political sensibilities.

Almost all the individuals were poor and poorly educated. More than a few were battling significant medical problems. This is a group you'd think might be receptive to a progressive message of environmental regulation and expanded social services. You'd think. But it was a deeply conservative group, the majority proud members of the Tea Party.

Hockschild's explicit goal for her study was to understand what she called the "great paradox" of the political leanings of this group. That is, why would people who have been victimized by corporate pollution and so in need of federal support vote overwhelmingly for candidates of the Republican Party who support environmental de-regulation and cutbacks in social services?

That was her explicit goal, but she also had an implicit agenda that was more ambitious: to come to this small, godforsaken part of the world and...heal it. She would do this by "climbing the empathy wall" that divided Red from Blue and understand the conservative "deep story." Such understanding, she hoped, would breach the divide and, just possibly, spark collaboration. As a well-meaning Blue-Triber, this primarily meant humanizing Red-Tribers to all the liberals who secretly agree with Hillary Clinton that half the Trump supporters are deplorable. She also hoped that her respectful conversations with Red-Tribers might break down the stereotype that all liberals are elitist, who castigate them and consider them stupid and bigoted.

Trained as a social scientist, Hockschild aspired to a therapeutic mission. She wanted more than to just generate another "What's the Matter with Kansas?" screed. She wanted to "restore a carpet of civility," nudge the conversation forward, and reach out across the schism. God bless her. However, my report card on her generous effort is decidedly mixed:

- empathy expressed to the Right: A-

- empathy elicited from the Right: C-
- understanding the ‘great paradox’: B
- solving the “great paradox”: D-

Hockschild had no difficulty conducting respectful conversations with the rural poor of the Bayou. There is not a hint of patronization in her observations and appraisals. She forged a connection of warmth and civility. She had affection for these dispossessed citizens, whom she found to be “admirable,” “hospitable,” “nice,” and “gritty.”

However, did this conveyance of respect and understanding move the conversation, even slightly, to more common political ground? I’m afraid, if anything, the “gift” of empathy Hockschild provided exposed if not exacerbated the rupture. Similar to what Cramer found in Wisconsin, her interviews evoked expressions of persecution and resentment at a, really, jihadist level of intensity. Hockschild’s subjects reciprocated warmth to *her* but railed against the liberal culture she represented and scorned any hint that government might help with their plight.

In response to this outpouring of bitterness, Hockschild doubled down on empathy. She was determined to get to the heart of their experience. She didn’t want to just assess their views but understand how they came to them. After her first set of interviews, Hockschild conjured up a parable that she hoped might capture the specific nature and intensity of their resentment and bitterness.

Her distillation goes like this:

You are in the middle of a long line stretching toward the horizon where the American Dream awaits. Most of you are white, older, male, Christian, lacking college degrees. Most of you are Tea Partiers. You are trudging up a hill, weary but with resolve. Ahead, at the crest of the hill lies security, dignity and success. In the line behind you are people of color, women, immigrants and refugees. As pensions are reduced, layoffs absorbed and health costs rise, the line slows and stalls. Then, incredibly, you see people cutting in line in front of you. Many of these line-cutters are black - beneficiaries of affirmative action

or welfare. Many are career-driven women pushing into jobs they never had before. Then, you see immigrants: Mexicans, Somalis, the Syrian refugees. You start to feel angry, but you are asked to feel sorry for all of them. You do not have a good heart, you are told, unless feel compassion for the line-cutters. Then another indignity. You see Barak Hussein Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton waving the line-cutters forward. What the hell? They are line cutters themselves. How did a fatherless Muslim get Harvard paid for? How much of her soul did she sell for a run at the presidency? They're taking money out of your pocket to help the line-cutters. The effing government has become their conduit for redistributing your money to the undeserving. It's not your government anymore; it's theirs.

To a person, the subjects in her study felt that her parable was their story ("I live your analogy," "you read my mind"). Many greeted her story with a sense of rapture, a look she saw on many of their faces a few years later at a Trump rally in Baton Rouge. We all have deep stories, Hockschild says, that we tell ourselves to capture who we are; our values, our hopes, our disappointments and fears. These deep stories are more powerful than our material predicaments, deeper than any set of political issues.

This deep story may explain the "great paradox." People were not voting *against* their economic needs so much as *for* their emotional needs. The American Dream parable above provided a unifying emotional logic that accounts for their political choices. Donald Trump's narrative of what ails America tapped into this deep story. As Hockschild said, "The scene was set for Trump's rise, like kindling before a match is lit."

Hockschild issued a caveat about her parable: "Deep stories don't need to be completely accurate, but they have to *feel* true." Sadly, this caveat turns out not to just be a bug, but a virus that crashes the empathy mission. Because so much of what *felt true* was based on misinformation, ignorance or prejudice (e.g., of her subjects, large majorities believe Obama is a Muslim, that hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees are flooding across the border, that Hillary really

does deserve to be in jail, that one out of four people, rather than one in seventy-five-work for the federal government). When Hockschild presented “alternative” (i.e. realistic facts) however gently and respectfully, there was blowback (“I’ll be goddamned if some moralizing northerner from some regulated, clean blue state is going to preach to us”). Trump’s margins in Bayou country were historic. The people Hockschild developed affection for and came to be friends with were—as political animals—**irredeemable**.

Cramer and Hockschild demonstrated that constituents in Thibodaux, Louisiana or Janesville, Wisconsin were not drawn to Trump (or Scott Walker) because they were ignorant or hoodwinked. No, it was (drumroll, please) the *empathy*. Trump—would you believe it—was more faithful to Atticus Finch’s admonition than any Democrat. Okay, he didn’t illuminate every aspect of their predicament and, okay he didn’t exactly challenge them; but he did nail the most evocative qualities of their current plight: their resentment, persecution and pride, as embedded in their deep stories.

As the over-the-top enemy of their enemy, Trump was the flame to their moth. As one Bayou resident put it, “He sounded as angry as we felt.”

He called out the “tax-eaters,” the “lawless blacks,” the immigrant rapists, the lying media and the smug cosmopolitans of the big cities. He extolled the virtues of the Red Tribe, the Real Americans who feel (but don’t want to acknowledge) victimized, who are patriots that just want to put their country first; as opposed to the treasonous cosmopolitans who don’t.

Alas, it appears that we Blue Tribers are at the end of the empathy trail. Even when shepherded by such high practitioners of the art as Cramer and Hockschild, we are still stunned because we assumed reason and revulsion against Trump would allow continued ascent. Our trail

ends in madness. We've been cul-de-saced by a reassertion of tribal loyalty (all the GOP base, all the Evangelicals stand by him) plus just enough disaffected white working-class voters to flip the electoral middle finger. The end of the empathy trail -shepherded by Trump- is rapture and 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Now, in retrospect, we castigate ourselves. *We should have known*. We took our foot off the pedal as we watched his rolling carnival of a campaign careen through the primaries. Many of us were slack jawed, but also giddy as we watched Trump annihilate the GOP establishment Giddy because his cartoonish nature, manifest unfitness for the job and flashes of cruelty portended a November wipeout. In our eyes (and Hillary's to be sure) he had become his own attack ad. His foul demagoguery would repulse more voters that it would attract. We dismissed his raucous and well attended rallies as white trash gatherings that turned off most of the country.

Going into the conventions we had two worries: that the Republican party elders and #Never Trumpers would execute a coup; or that Trump, the actor, would pivot, execute a "tell" where he would at least make a show of sobriety and win over some independents.

It was a show alright.

The first night of the RNC Convention in Cleveland was devoted to weaponizing grief. One widow after one mother after another stood up and held Hillary Clinton personally responsible for the loss of loved ones because of her stewardship as Secretary of State. They came across as hyperbolic rather than heartfelt, a channeling of raw primitive feeling, punctuated by blood lust roars of "lock her up" from the party faithful. Somewhere Goebbels was blushing.

Night two focused on racial fear. America was depicted as a dystopian wreck, overtaken by people of color, most, of course, Muslims. Dropping crime rates, the actual threat of terrorism, facts on the ground? Meant nothing.

Then came Trump's Darth Vader acceptance speech. Michael Moore, Bill Maher and Andrew Sullivan fretted over its nativist appeal to half of America. But the major media panned it as a mendacious and mindless appeal to tribalism, unbecoming of a candidate for President of the United States.

His poll numbers ticked up,

What a contrast with the Democratic Convention that convened a week later in Philadelphia. That convention was upbeat, noted for well-crafted, passionately delivered speeches* that celebrated America's DNA and depicted a country on the rise, ascending from great to greater.

**Hillary was the exception: most found her speech pedestrian and her delivery forced.*

It was "Is this a great country or what?" vs. "Trust me, this is a hellhole." Framed this way, Blue Tribers felt confident. Optimism and sunniness, historians of campaigns assured us, always prevails. The Democratic convention was compared to Reagan's 1984 "Morning in America" convention that preceded his blowout win. The most popular placard at the Democratic convention was "Love Trumps Hate." The GOP looked to be imploding. The White House and Senate looked to be in hand.

But the polls did not shift significantly. Trump's vitriolic campaign did not crater. *We should have known.* The frame that emerged by the end of the summer was both darker and more absurd: it would be a WWF-like death match between red resentment and blue apoplexy.

Cramer and Hockschild documented the breadth and depth of the resentment. But they did not have an explanation of it, much less a solution for it. Both were flummoxed. Cramer expressed despair over her findings, while Hockschild (in my opinion) engaged in magical thinking that empathy and kindness would serve as a counterweight.

John Judis, in his recent [The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics](#) *does* offer a theory of the resentment case based on a historical appreciation of populist movements. He observes that resentment fits comfortably in the tradition of populist movements which are always anger-based and flourish in times of income disparity and corruption.

If Oz was the great neoliberal mecca of globalized markets, open borders and diminishing tax obligations that would generate so much wealth that *everyone* would benefit, then the Great Recession pulled the curtain back to reveal there were winners *and* losers, that many in the middle and lower-middle classes had been pushed aside by the post-industrial economy. It also revealed the wizardry behind the esoteric financial instruments and maneuvers that contributed significantly to the accretion of wealth to the elites.

There was abundant kindling for a populist cataclysm.

Judis defines populism based on his analysis of populist movements dating back to the 19th century. Populism, he notes, is not an ideology, but rather a movement, an uprising. It is the coming together of ordinary people (almost always from the middle and lower-middle class), a “noble assemblage” that is mobilized by their opposition to financial and/or government elites they view as self-serving, undemocratic and corrupt.

Judis points out that populism is not inherently tied to left wing or right-wing politics. However, in the current predicament, right wing populism (think, Trump, the Brexit movement) has an electoral advantage because it offers a more diverse set of villains, more targets of resentment. Judis describes the anger underpinning left wing populism as “dyadic,” meaning that it is only directed upward to the financial elites and their government apologists. Right wing populism is “triadic”: the anger is directed upward and downward. Upward to the financial elites and, more importantly, to the educated upper middle class that has benefited from the post-industrial economy. Also, downward to the “benefactors” that the elites have coddled: the Lexus-driving welfare recipients, the lawless immigrants, the line-cutters of Hockschild’s parable.

Do the math. More targets and more familiar targets for resentment are going to deliver more votes. The right-wing narrative, largely because of the immigration crisis, is privileged (electorally) over the left-wing narrative.

The resentment runs wide and deep. It’s in the DNA of large swaths of the South, Far West and rural America. Let me give two examples that capture the depth of the feeling. In the 2004 Presidential race, when campaigning, W. would often start his stump speech with “You may have heard I am running against the Senator from...”—this is where it gets ugly. He would draw out the pronunciation of Massachusetts for what seemed like minutes; his tone was mock contempt; he had his not so friendly smile on his face that said “can you believe this effete snob has the presumption, the sense of entitlement to run against a good olé’ boy like me, and stick it to good people like you.” In the crowd there would be a rumble of boos at the mention of Massachusetts, replaced with whoops and hollers of “no way.”

Here's the point: this rhetorical drawling of blood was little remarked on, often treated as authentic banter from our down-home President. Outside of urban America, he was applauded for the put-downs. Can you even imagine Kerry pronouncing Mississippi or Texas in such a contemptuous manner and how that would have been received, even in big cities, even by the mainstream media?

A more recent example involves the special election in the Georgia 6th district where Karen Handel defeated Jon Ossoff. Pundits and experts agree that one of the key variables in Handel's victory was to link Jon Ossoff with Nancy Pelosi. The GOP commercial that played in the last few days of the campaign consisted of a number of people expressing their support and warmth for Ossoff. In the background was no mistaking the city of San Francisco with the iconic Golden Gate Bridge, cable cars, and so on. The people expressing support for Ossoff were out of central casting for San Francisco residents with their long, unkempt hair, free flowing garb, absence of makeup, etc. But otherwise the San Francisco "residents" were not portrayed in an unflattering light. No need. The notion that coastal elites would warm to Ossoff was quite sufficient to incite the tribal motivations in Georgia's 6th district.

This "they think they're better than us, but we know the truth is the opposite" stretches far back I suspect. I mentioned earlier I lived in Iowa and Richmond in the 1970's. I remember encountering—not infrequently—putdowns of New York City. The locals seemed a bit ...obsessed with the place, and not in a good way. There were stories in the paper about New Yorkers who had seen the light and moved West or South to God's country; cracks by TV anchors on the Sodom and Gomorrah goings on in Manhattan; references to rudeness or expressions of superiority by some Yankee and so on.

Mostly I just chuckled at the phenomenon. I kept looking around for these brash New Yorkers condescending to the locals and just didn't see any. As far as I could tell, *I* wasn't behaving disrespectfully. Why this preoccupation? This assumption of condescension?

Yeah, I chuckled at the cultural imprinting, but maybe I underestimated it. I think, for much of my adult life, if someone had asked me “do you measure up with someone from the Heartland on some yardstick of moral strength and decency?” My gut level answer would be “no.”

My tacit assumption, I realized, was along the lines of, I'm just an educated city slicker gazing up at a gritty cowboy. Blue Tribers are smart, but smart ass (e.g., Billy Crystal) whereas Red Tribers are plainspoken and trustworthy (e.g., Gary Cooper).

Of course, once I make this implicit assumption about moral worth explicit, I wholeheartedly reject it. After all, Paul Ryan Mike Pence and the Bushes have been seen as paragons of virtue in the heartland, so...(And for the record, if my kid needed to be rescued from a burning house and I could pick the state of the next possible passerby rescuer, I would go with New York.)

Clinical Interlude

In the therapeutic realm, resentment is viewed, as almost all painful emotional states, as a target for intervention. It is also considered a *destructive state* with its own particular path to resolution.

The destructive nature of resentment is best understood when we compare it with anger. Anger is also a painful state, but not necessarily destructive. While the expression of anger can

be either constructive or destructive, the feeling itself often has adaptive value. Anger usually has a clear-cut trigger, which is an offense against oneself, a loved one or sympathetic other. Anger helps to provide energy and focus to protect boundaries, identify unfair treatment, and prevent violation of norms. Anger, especially if it is expressed constructively and in proportion to the offense, often leads to resolution or an ability to accept what happened and move on.

Resentment, in contrast, is not seen as adaptive. It has a blinding quality and keeps people stuck. Expression of resentment rarely leads directly to resolution. Resentment is mostly about deflecting self-blame and the search to blame others. Thus, the classic resentment dance “I drink because she nags me” vs. “I nag because he drinks.” Resentment is so often a disguise to oneself and minimizes the degree to which one’s own decisions and conduct have been responsible for their plight.

Resentment is considered to be a “secondary” or defensive state. Resentment often does not have a clear-cut trigger, is frequently related to past events and often has to do with one’s relationship with oneself (e.g. a threat to status, a desire to avoid self-blame) rather than violations from others.

People tend to get stuck in resentment, mostly because there is a payoff in the deflection of blame—a kind of sour pleasure or bitter happiness (to be a victim in an unjust world is not a failure). If you go to clips of Trump rallies, notice all the smiles even when, especially when, he is railing about Real Americans getting the short end of the stick.

The therapeutic task with resentment is not to just encourage expression, but to explore/confront the ego protecting aspect of the feeling and help the individual face their (usually) more painful and difficult realities (e.g., “I don’t drink simply because she nags me.” “my nagging is

not helpful and may contribute to his drinking”). That’s the *clinical* dish on resentment. But if we substitute the rhetoric of character for the rhetoric of therapeutics, we might characterize resentment as “shrinking from responsibility,” or, more bluntly, “weak.”

As a rule, resentment elicits resentment (see the case of the nagging wife and alcoholic husband). Not only are the resentful stuck with the feeling but the stickiness affixes itself to the object of resentment, whether it’s a loved one or a more abstract entity (e.g., “coastal elites”).

But rules are not inviolate. I don’t think Blue Tribers are caught up in the resentment dynamic. Similar to my experience in Red Land, here in the belly of the Blue Land beast, I just don’t hear or see much resentment. Perhaps because we have it so good. And perhaps our exasperation and apoplexy are beginning to curdle to something more sour, as we absorb the recklessness and cruelty of Trump/Republicans rule and witness the inflexible loyalty of his base. But so far, resentment is not the animating force in Blue America.

Blue Tribers do, however, bring a powerful aphrodisiac to the polarization dance: disdain. We hate to acknowledge it since tolerance and egalitarianism are central virtues here. But, even if kept out of sight and earshot, it’s there. Maybe only a portion of my friends view Trump supporters as insensitive or cruel, but all of my friends view them as ignorant. We are knowledgeable, informed and realistic. They, to be sure, are not.

A Clinical Note on Disdain

Disdain, like resentment, is typically considered a destructive emotion, an ego-boosting maneuver in which the individual projects himself onto an elevated plane in order to ward off more vulnerable feelings of inadequacy and personal struggle. The therapeutic challenge is to confront

the defensive maneuver with enough tact to help the individual approach this more vulnerable and warded-off territory where truth and growth reside. But, occasionally, disdain is not a defensive maneuver. Occasionally, it is a direct expression of condemnation, an expression that a cherished value (e.g., tell the truth, do no harm) has been violated. In this permutation, disdain is not an ego boosting maneuver, but- and here again we have to shift from the rhetoric of therapeutics to the rhetoric of character—rather a righteous judgment, or more bluntly, “strength.”

But there is a way through this Red/Blue schism, this wrathful vs righteous impasse. All it would take —say progressive, independents, mainstream media types—is for the Red Tribe wrathful to get to the “last straw,” “see the light,” and “turn the corner” on the President. Once that happens, Blue Tribe disdain will evaporate, and collaboration will ensue. Could happen, should happen any day, we imagine, now that Red Tribers have witnessed the first six months of his presidency. Witnessed:

- His impressive political campaigning skills translate into no political governing skills
- His capacity to negotiate on America’s behalf is severely constrained by is stunning ignorance of policy
- His Obama derangement syndrome, as in the charge his phones were tapped by that foreign-born Muslim
- His endorsement of conspiracy theories
- His invitation of criminal investigations through his oafish attempts to obstruct justice
- His blasé attitude toward Russia’s interference in our elections
- His modeling of vindictiveness and pettiness
- His attacks on the free press and the First Amendment
- His embrace of foreign authoritarian thugs and alienation of long-standing Allies
- His transparent maneuvers to increase family wealth through the Office of the Presidency

- His embrace of policies that shift more wealth to plutocrats and further impoverish rural, white working class and poor Americans
- His “embrace” of such policies by caving into the GOP establishment he ran against in the primaries, the caving in due to laziness and superficial understanding of the issues, rather than any political cunning,
- His obsession with women and blood

The above is just a short list to make the obvious point: the “last straw” scenario isn’t happening. Isn’t going to happen. Republican voters are rallying to him, not fleeing from him. There will never be a last straw. Hell, in GOP land they are in thrall of this gilded straw that stirs the entertaining political circus drink.

Is there any plausible way forward? Off in the distance you can see the blazoned tents and flapping flags marking Camp 2. Can’t get there soon enough, because something virulent is breaking out on the southeast ridge of Everest.

At 19,000 feet, climbers at Everest come upon the Khumbu Glacier. It’s a massive glacier that extends over humps and dips in the underlying strata, creating wide crevasses. A large part of the glacier, called the Khumbu Icefall, projects out from Mount Everest over a sphincter - clenching chasm.

Compared to other parts of the mountain, climbers here must contend with the turbulence of the glacier, which is in a continual and violent state of flux. As the glacier slowly but inexorably moves down the mountain, it routinely throws off jagged ice splinters. Less frequently, but recurrently, huge chunks of ice, called seracs, some the size of office buildings, break off and pitch into the chasm or rumble down the mountain. Within the icefall, which must be negotiated

in order to reach the summit, there are crystalline blue stalagmites that produce a phantasmic allure, but also alarm since they are perilously balanced and easily dislodged.

Crossing the icefall is the most terrifying part of the Everest quest. The icefall emits loud, cracking noises, a signal of the ice dislodging and breaking up underfoot. The cacophony infuses the trespass with the madness of a game of Russian Roulette. And maybe a warning sign to this particular expedition: take caution if you try to cross the fault line of the bitter and brutal Red/Blue divide. Mostly a test of nerves and resolve, successful passage of the icefall also requires expertise with ice axes, crampons and harnesses. Also requires teamwork, togetherness and trust.

At this point in the journey, I admit my resolve has been tested and found wanting. A fantasy emerges: Blue Tribers conspire to make certain they alternate with Red Tribers in forming a lifeline—each climber connected to the next by tether—often employed to cross the icefall. Upon an agreed upon signal—“Get ‘em out of here!” comes to mind—Blue Tribers unsnap their safety tethers and give a little nudge. The abyss beneath the icefall, it should be noted, starts out aqua blue, then melts into midnight blue before turning pitch black.

Of course, even in fantasy, things don’t always go according to script. There could be a glitch. Like the Red Tribers—out of desperation, rage or simple justice—grab onto the ankles of the Blue Tribers and hold on, for dear mutually-assured destruction, until everyone just slips, slides away.

And, you know, that would be fine. Really. Just clear the mountain of all of us, or at least all of us over 60. This never-ending civil war forged between those who were for vs. those against the Vietnam War, then extended to the fiber of our identities, has raged on for 50 years.

Enough. What was I thinking with this empathy trek? About as much chance of the two sides laying down arms as leaping that chasm beneath this icefall.

I really thought we had moves beyond it with Obama. Mostly because of his age (he wasn't a Baby Boomer and thus didn't embody the civil war). Also because of the color of his skin and, most of all, his grace. He governed as the moderate of moderates; and never got snared by the ugliness and anger he constantly encountered. It seemed like we had really moved to higher ground.

But no. The death match persists. Apparently, the pendulum had to swing back one more time. One more iteration of red pride vs. blue smugness in the heartland, red ruthlessness vs. blue pseudo-collaboration in the political arena; one last stand of fundamentalism vs. modernity.

Apparently Red Tribers needed full control of all the reins of government in order to be exposed fully. For the past eight years they had the luxury of just railing against Obama and the left. Nothing but obstructionism. They demonized Democrats and assured everyone they knew how to move the country forward. They asserted the solutions were simple (repeal and replace) and could be implemented on "day one."

The health care debacle and inability to pass substantial legislation has exposed them. Not so much as incompetent as radical. They had nothing but a far-right agenda and an inability to develop a coherent governing agenda. Their agenda was nothing more than right wing talk radio screeds. Don't be fooled by Trump's burlesque and incompetency at governing. It's the policy, or rather lack of it (e.g., tax cuts for the rich, return to the cruel status quo on health care).

This exposure, this calling of their bluff is not a trivial development. The vacuity and venality of the GOP has repulsed everyone outside of Fox-land (60% of the country). There's now

clarity: the resentful, righteous and blood-red 40% will never change. The opposition is mobilized, and the battle lines are sharper, sharper than if Hillary had been elected. The storm clouds gathering auger something fresh and cleansing. The civil war of my generation is, mercifully, on the verge of exhaustion and collapse.

So, I'm not angry. Or despairing. Weary perhaps. For decades the Red/Blue struggle was spirited and honorable. Each side, at the core, was well-intended. But time (and a particularly venal group of politicians) has abraded the struggle into its current foul and toxic state. The best we can do is bequeath as little as possible of our stale passions to those younger- less blinkered, burdened and bitter than us- and just slip, slide away.

Staggering to the Summit...Only Sherpas Allowed

(to be continued)

INTO ASPHYXIATED AIR

Part 2: Hike to Camp Three From Conflagration to Conflation (only Sherpas allowed)

Vincent Greenwood, Ph.D., *Executive Director*

Previously, from the Trump Essay: Last we left our intrepid explorers, their empathy trek—always aspirational—had in fact splintered into a donnybrook.

On a perch adjacent to Base Camp 3, 21,300 feet up the mountain, a group of Sherpas gaze at the mayhem below. Behind them, tents billow and a large fire, set for cooking and warmth, crackles. A roar of wind, constant if somewhat muffled, cascades from the summit, serving as a background dirge.

The Sherpas were dressed in woolen, long-sleeved robes with pouches in front; although a young one, a Sherpa in training who had taken the place of his sick father, wore a western style parka. The Sherpas had been expecting the Red/Blue expedition that afternoon. Their job was to feed them, make them comfortable for 24 hours while they acclimated to the thin air, and then shepherd them on the final push to the summit. But now...

The features on most of the Sherpas' faces were impassive. A few had that scrunched-up-biting-lip-deep-in-thought expression. It was the young one who broke the meditative silence to ask: What in the Himalayan is going on down there?

He naturally would have expected a thoughtful response. Proud representatives of an ancient nomadic tribe, sequestered in the mountains, freed from the neural buzz of modern society, Sherpas were infused with the capacity for ancient wisdom and dispassionate understanding. However, no response was forthcoming. Beneath their calm demeanor, the Sherpas were rats-scurrying-in-a-maze flummoxed.

Flummoxed, but not withholding; rather they just couldn't grasp what was unfolding beneath them. And it wasn't as if they hadn't seen a great deal of turmoil and human frailty. Over the years, they had seen it all from ministering to their Western clients: terror, dissension, heedlessness, megalomania. They accepted and respected the perversity of human nature, at times unable to prevent it from leading to needless deaths.

But this was different. The Sherpas apprehended that something new had been let loose below, something virulent yet surreal.

Realizing no answer was forthcoming, the young one returned his gaze to the bedlam below and tried to simulate the impassive features of his elders. However, after a few minutes he could not restrain himself and observed: The red ones are more fierce.

Indeed, when the wind abated you could hear the residue of the Red Tribe whooping and screeching, reminding the young one of hyenas he had heard as a child on a family pilgrimage to the lower mountains of northwest India.

No doubt about his perception. At this particular moment the red ones appeared to be the predators. Many of the blue ones walked around aimlessly (like so many cold-cocked Al Frankens) and had a dispirited air to them. On the fringes of the battle, some of the blue ones seemed to be turning on one another. Well, no wonder the red tribe had the upper hand. Nothing is more uplifting than righteous anger, nothing more energizing when that anger has clear-cut targets. Whereas moral apoplexy, over time, erodes one's spirits. The experienced Sherpas understood *that* at least.

But what confounded them was the air of spectacle to the action below. Many of the combatants had their cell phones out and appeared to be recording the melee while simultaneously participating in it. More than a few were taking selfies. Some of the tribes were huddled together, segregated into red and blue squads gesticulating and arguing in a manner that conveyed the high spirits of inebriated sports fanatics. If forced to put it into words, the Sherpas might have said they felt like they were watching a scene of blood lust, not blood lust itself. And that the purported combatants were somehow self-conscious directors, actors and consumers of the scene.

Thus, the Sherpas were bewildered and transfixed. They longed for the counsel of the wisest among them, the elder Sherpa they called The Storyteller. But he had vamoosed from camp two days earlier, ostensibly to check for snowfalls that might block the trail, but really to mount another solo assault on the summit. The Storyteller never disclosed details of these high wire acts. He had always—so far—returned. He never used an oxygen canister, a choice that was not permitted for any foreign climbers. He was not out to prove anything, but simply desired the altered consciousness the close brush with mortality the world's thinnest air provided.

The Sherpas incomprehension mirrors our own. Ever since the baboon descended down the escalator (*Of course*, descended. From the beginning, Trump embraced the anti-Christ role, even choosing Sympathy for The Devil—"Pleased to meet you, hope you guessed my name...but what's troubling you is the nature of my game"—as his opening song for many of his rallies) into the atrium of Trump Tower on June 16, 2015, we have entered an alternate reality, the dimensions of which resemble a Rod Serling production. It's hard to accept this alternate reality. It's hard to capture the defining features of the new reality since one of the norms shattered has been rational discourse and its reliance on the tools of reason and at least some respect for pursuing some version of the truth, rather than deliberately peddling flamboyant falsehoods. Gaslighting has subverted coherence.

So, hell, why not bring Rod Serling (head Sherpa of The Twilight Zone) into the conversation? He has as good a chance at discernment as any rational actor on the current scene. Go ahead; picture him off to the side of the huddled Sherpas, in his sharp suit, oblivious to the cold, gazing down with his brow furrowed. His clipped, authoritative speech at least *sounds* like he has some insight:

Witness this gutting of the American Pastoral, at 21,000 feet on this Godforsaken, but could just as well be rural Wisconsin or the Louisiana bayou or the Upper West Side. Weep if you must, but the fervor below obscures the reality that these self-certain, righteous adversaries are hopelessly lost, pawns to a deeper reality that can only be glimpsed in a dimension that lies beyond...

In March of 1960, during the second season of the Twilight Zone, an episode titled "Monsters Are Due on Maple Street" was much discussed and over time, became an object of study from middle schools to university film departments. The show was well-crafted to be sure,

but its popularity was attributed to its message: an allegory of how American society could devour itself over its inability to deal rationally with the Other (at that time the Other was the Red Menace of Communism, rather than Muslims, immigrants and people of color).

The setting of the show is Maple Street, a picture-perfect suburb in Anywhere, America. It is early evening (6:43 to be exact) in the late summer. Many of the neighbors are outside, tending to their lawns, keeping a watchful eye on the children playing, or just visiting with one another. The show opens with—what residents take to be a meteor—that flashes across the sky, quite close, too close for serenity. Within minutes a power failure ensues electricity peters out, phones stop working, even cars won't start. At first the residents band together to figure out what caused the breakdown and how to fix it.

But then Tommy, who looks to be about ten, and has a reputation for bookishness, particularly in the sci-fi genre, says he knows what caused the blackout: human-looking aliens have infiltrated Maple Street and have commenced their takeover of America.

Initially, the residents nervously laugh off his theory, but the mood quickly turns from jocular to suspicious. Likely suspects emerge: Mr. Broadbent, who has been noticed by residents looking up at the stars on more than one late evening; another resident who is accused of working on a secret communication system (“it’s just a ham radio for Chris sake!”); another whose car suddenly starts up with no one in it.

As dusk falls, the residents, now a roiling mob, notice a man at the head of the block, covered in shadows. Charlie, perhaps the most skittish of the residents, secures his hunting rifle and guns the man down. Turns out to be Pete, a neighbor who was returning to Maple Street after checking out whether a bordering neighborhood was having similar problems. Suspi-

cion falls on Charlie (who shot the person that may have discovered the “truth” about the aliens); then Tommy (who “must” be an alien since he knew the aliens would invade), then others. The mayhem escalates: rocks to be used as weapons are picked up, torches are lit, guns are removed from their cases.

At this point on the show, the camera pans back and up to a hill where there *are* (!) two aliens standing next to a spacecraft as they watch the human conflagration below, now punctuated by gunfire. One alien explain to the other that this is their (the aliens) modus operandi for taking over the planet: that on this particular planet, with this particular life form, all you need to do is inject some unexplained hardship, throw them into darkness and then watch the fear, suspiciousness, and self-destruction play out.

Rod Serling then materializes on screen for the show’s epilogue. And, somewhat out of character, he makes the explicit political point (his actual words):

The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices—to be found only in the minds of men for the record, prejudices can kill and suspicion can destroy, and a thoughtless, frightened search for a scapegoat a fallout all its own—for the children, and the children yet unborn and the pity of it is that these things cannot be confined to the Twilight Zone.

No, apparently not confined to the Twilight one. Serling was warning us how a well-disposed neighborhood could tip into an unruly mob. Why so easy? Serling (and others) point to our fallibility, our nature is perverse, and we are always in a battle between emotion and reason, restraint and impulse, complicated truths and dogma. We are always near the tipping point.

In the political arena this takes the form of rational discourse vs. the exploitation of fears, prejudices and impulses. The political arena can be a space for difficult discussions and choices,

or a plaything for charlatans and clever demagogues. Serling was referencing the latter in what was described in a famous essay at the time by Richard Hofstadter “Paranoid Style in American Politics,” an apt descriptor for the heated exaggeration, scapegoating and conspiratorial fantasies of the McCarthy period; but also applies to our current folly (e.g., the birther movement; Ted Cruz’s father’s involvement in the Kennedy assassination; the claim that Obama would send special force troops to take over Texas and use local Walmarts as internment camps—to which the Texas Republican governor said, “Patriotic Americans have a reason to be concerned”).

The political implications of this (American as apple pie) paranoid style of politics? George Orwell’s dark vision of 1984: an authoritarian state in which the assault on truth has been consummated and propaganda BIGSPEAK prevails.

Some Sherpas might nod with appreciation at this interpretation; but others would chew down on their phlegm stronger and scrunch up their faces further. The grimness and oppression of the Orwellian world doesn’t seem to capture the spectacle below, the steep degradation of political discourse, the sheer idiocy of it, and that the two tribes below appear to be as much titillated as oppressed by the battle.

Even if Orwell’s critique of our fragile human nature and thus our susceptibility to a Big Brother state doesn’t quite hold, still he got it right when he said, “To see what is in front of one’s nose needs a constant struggle.” Hmm...be nice to have a smart guy focused on that struggle.

At that moment, the elder Sherpa, the Storyteller, emerges from what climbers call the Death Zone and stumbles onto the perch next to the Geneva Spur, an anvil shaped black rock.

With his arrival, the wind ceases its howl and the Sherpa's consternation abates. The talisman has returned.

The projection of wisdom by The Storyteller, it should be pointed out, was undercut by his goofy, self-effacing smile, a sweat-stained red bandana wrapped untidily around his forehead and, oh yeah, a noose hanging loosely around his neck. He was carrying a book the size of an industrial strength microwave oven, the spine broken, with torn-out coffee stained pages, spaghetti scribblings in their margins, spilling out of its corpus. He looked down at the spectacle below with the others, shook his head ruefully and muttered "it's all a jest."

As January turned into February in 2016, the first signs of panic within the GOP establishment emerged; Donald Trump was just in the early stage of hijacking the GOP nomination. More noteworthy was the degree to which he had captured the 24/7 news cycle. GOP debates and his mob scene campaign rallies were generating unheard of ratings for a primary candidate. He was everywhere. The **conflation** of news and entertainment was accelerating.

On February 1, 2016, in a different universe, the twentieth anniversary of the novel [Infinite Jest](#), the seminal work by David Foster Wallace, was observed. Both scholars and fans of [Infinite Jest](#) claim the novel should serve as a parable, but that is too modest: it's really a luminous warning shot of our current political crisis. The novel, written in the early to mid 90's, takes place in the near future which places it roughly in our just recent past.*

**It is difficult to pinpoint the exact year since years are no longer present in alpha numeric form in the world Wallace depicts. Time (along with everything else) is subsidized and sold off to the highest corporate bidder so they can advertise their product. Much of the novel takes place in the Year of the Depends Adult Undergarment Wear, which close readers of the novel estimate to be 2010. Other years include the Year of the Whopper, Year of the Whisper-Quiet Maytag Dishwasher and Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad. Thus, in the Wallaceian world, 2016 could have been Year of the Orange Crush (ha, ha).*

Acclimations over the 20th anniversary of the novel focused on its transcendent, electric prescience. But it is more than that. Friend and fellow water George Saunders put it well at Wallace's funeral (Wallace hung himself in 2008):

Infinite Jest was an epic take on all America. His form was mimetic of the culture: manic, obsessive, funny, oversized...

These descriptors are apt. But the humor, antics and over-the-top scenes don't obscure the moral seriousness of the effort.

Infinite Jest is not easy. It is a dense and complicated story with multiple plot lines and without a simple and graspable narrative flow to the 1000 pages, plus 350 pages of footnotes. It demands monumental focus and constant re-fueling.

The book certainly reflects the complexity and expanse of Wallace's mind. It does not fit neatly into any genre and has been described as "meta-fiction on steroids," "mock dystopian" and "hysterical realism." But the demands on the reader may have been intentional. Wallace depicted a country in which our (failed) pursuit of happiness has created an ADD culture that resists sustained focus and thought and reduces everything to entertainment, particularly the passive experience of being glued to some form of a flashing screen. As you read *Infinite Jest*, you may often laugh through your tears as Wallace describes "what it's like to be a fucking human being" (his words), but you will not find it simply entertaining. It demands more.

I emphasize the difficulty not to warn you off. Just the opposite. If you make it to the other side of the novel, you will likely feel grateful, maybe even changed—somehow both more humble and smarter. It is an epic undertaking that Wallace devotees claim can help us think, write and, God forbid, live differently.

And more equipped to pass any empathy exam. Wallace fully inhabits the consciousness of his characters, high and low (mostly low), (e.g., a student who won his tennis matches by threatening to blow a hole in his skull with a Glock 17 9mm if he should lose); a recovering heroin addict who accidentally steals a woman's artificial heart; a lawyer with dwarfism who is obsessed with tattoos; one drug halfway house resident who has lost both his hands and feet after being mugged; and another who hides in a closet, being coaxed out squirrel-like throughout much of the novel.

Wallace details their experience to tell us we are all desperate, we are all broken, and we are all overwhelmed by our addictions. He does so without any ironic detachment or judgment to also tell us we are all important, even if kind of fucked. One (out of hundreds that could be used) example: where a recovering cocaine addict would kill cats by suffocating them in a Hefty bag.

after the bag stopped assuming shapes (he) would...get up and untie the twist-tie and look inside the bag and go: "There!" The "There!" turned out to be crucial for the sense of brisance and closure and resolving issues of impotent rage and powerless fear that like accrued in (him) all day being trapped in the northeastern portion of a squalid halfway house all day fearing for his life [he] felt (p. 541).

But, what marvels about the novel is its prescience. Remember, Wallace wrote *Infinite Jest* in the early to mid-nineties. The extent to which his eerie predictions come true is...well, eerie. He anticipated much of our current technology as evidenced by some of his fictional contraptions:

- Telemeters (i.e., devices which merge phones, computer and TV). Basically, smart phones
- Inter-lace (i.e., a company that sells streaming services and entertainment cartridges). Basically, Netflix
- Videophone. Basically Skype

- Digitally enhanced avatars. Basically, a synthesis of selfies and apps for Instagram filters

And, oh yeah, the POTUS in *Infinite Jest* is a bombastic, narcissistic populist, drunk on his own celebrity, who rides a wave of xenophobia and black swans his way into the White House. Donald Trump let David Foster Wallace introduce you to your progenitor, President Johny Gentle.

Johny Gentle started out as a B-level crooner, mainstay in Vegas lounge acts; but graduated to become a toupee-wearing promotor and entertainment bigwig. Gentle isn't evil. He is portrayed more as a buffoon, albeit one who has a gift for manipulating social undercurrents. He is a germaphobe (so is Trump) who campaigned in a surgical mask and ran on a platform to "make American clean again." He was the first U.S. President to swing his microphone around by the cord during his Inauguration speech; first one to use the word 'shit' in a public pronouncement. On day one of his term he replaced the torch on the Statue of Liberty with a wrought-iron Whopper. He was a nationalist who showed some mettle by strong-arming Mexico and Canada to accept our toxic waste (much of which is delivered by catapult).

How did such a lounge act lizard ascend to the Presidency? Wallace outlines the electoral dynamic:

[Gentle] had his white gloved finger on the pulse of an increasingly asthmatic and sun-screen slathered and pissed-off American electorate...and swept to quadrennial victory in an angry voter spasm...as the DEMS and GOPs stood on either side watching dumbly, like doubles partners who think the others surely got it, the two established mainstream parties split open along tired philosophical lines....while [Gentle] asked us to simply sit back and enjoy the show (p. 300).

While the 20th anniversary of *Infinite Jest* provided an opportunity to drop one's jaw over Wallace's foreshadowing of our current technological fix and the putrefaction of POTUS, it should also, and more importantly, confer confidence in the central message of the novel: that our (mostly failed) pursuit of happiness is painful, and thus we strive to escape that pain. Entertainment is the go-to escape/addiction, delivered via technology-mediated, electronic-pulsing, ever-recurring dopamine hits, delivered by iPhones or TVs. Drugs are also prevalent but run a distant second as an addictive solution. In the USA of *Infinite Jest*, we would rather amuse ourselves to death than face our problems.

To wit, one of the major plot lines in *Infinite Jest* revolves around a movie of the same name (which is also called "The Entertainment") that is so enslaving that it immediately and inevitably hypnotizes its viewers into watching it over and over while wasting away in front of their screens. To watch *Infinite Jest* was a death sentence akin to the cocaine addicted but also food-deprived rats who would hit the lever for a cocaine pellet rather than the lever for food. There is a "hilarious" scene in the novel where the government, worried the film might fall into the hands of terrorists, tries to measure the degree of addiction to the movie by offering the choice of continued viewing vs mutilation of toes, fingers, sexual organs; extinction of bank accounts, pets, loved ones, whatever. Of course, like with the cocaine-addled rats, the addictive response prevailed.

In one scene in the book, there are two spies, one from Canada who speaks mangled Frenchified English and one from America dressed in ill-fitting drag; and who are trying to coax from one another the whereabouts of a missing cartridge of the film. The scene is played as slap-

stick, but the Canadian spy makes the serious point about the attenuated state of will in the US of A:

This is what has happened when a people choose nothing over themselves to love, each one. A U.S.A. that would die — and let its children die, each one — for the so-called perfect Entertainment, this film. Who would die for this chance? to be fed this death of pleasure with spoons...can such a U.S.A. hope to survive for a much longer time? To survive as a nation of peoples. To much less exercise dominion over other nations of other people? If these are other peoples who still know what it is to choose? who will die for something larger?

If *Infinite Jest* (the movie) a.k.a. “The Entertainment” is the soul-sapping death sentence of *Infinite Jest* (the book); then I suppose that makes Donald Trump—the current day “The Entertainment”—the soul-sapping death sentence of America.

For my generation and my parents’ generation there were two novels that framed the debate over the kind of dystopian future to which we were susceptible: [1984](#) by George Orwell and [Brave New World](#) by Aldous Huxley. Each writer emphasized the loss of freedom as the essential threat. Each writer judged the risk of this threat to be high. But each writer perceived a different source of the threat.

As noted earlier, Orwell warned against the rise of an authoritarian state. His concern echoes the rather pessimistic vision laid out by Hobbes in [The Leviathan](#). Hobbes emphasized our basic nature of being greedy and aggressive which, if not checked, would lead to a state of “every man against every man.” Although driven to such a state by our nature, this is in conflict with the deeper drive of self-preservation. His solution was an authoritarian state, the Leviathan, where we (willingly) sacrifice certain freedoms for protection, for our instinct to survive.

Huxley, in stark contrast, did not believe our autonomy would be undermined by our aggression and consequent fear of that aggression, but by our desires. He warned of a future in which our desires would be sated, primarily by technology and drugs. For comfort we would “happily” sacrifice our freedom and capacity to think. For Huxley, the problem was not that our nature would lead us to struggle too much, but not enough.

The contrast between the two dystopias is delineated by Neil Postman in his influential book [Amusing Ourselves to Death](#) (1985):

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egotism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance, Orwell feared we would become a captive culture Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies. As Huxley remarked in [Brave New World Revisited](#), the civil libertarians and rationalists, who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny, “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.” In *1984* people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World* they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we fear will ruin us, Huxley feared that our desire will ruin us.

Infinite Jest, with its cautionary tale that we are at risk of becoming nothing but entertainment receptacles, aligns itself with Huxley’s trepidation.

One example: on August 6, 2015, 24 million viewed the GOP’s first presidential debate. In the past, viewership for the first presidential primary debates was between 2-3 million. Not likely that ten times as many viewers turned in because they were galvanized by the candidates’ positions on NAFTA. No, they tuned in for the opening audacious act of The Donald running for President.

Donald Trump, to be sure, does not hide his mimetic intent, as noted in a New York Times report: “Right before taking office, Mr. Trump told top aides to think of each presidential day as an episode in a television show in which he vanquishes rivals.” And that is precisely how he has conducted himself. Democracy may have been shredded over the past year, but the ratings have been boffo.

Entertainment has morphed from a dimension in our lives—sequestered to the evenings and weekend—to a craving. That craving has an insidious quality which leaves us susceptible to wanting it everywhere, all the time. Entertainment has seeped outside the confines of the entertainment industry. Trump has been a gifted steward of that transgression.

And an effective fix. We need him as much as we deplore him. Jack Nicholson as Colonel Nathan Jessup in [A Few Good Men](#) articulates the ugly truth of our dependence (substitutions mine):

Son, we live in a world that has [screens], and those [screens] have to be manned by men with [chutzpah]. Who’s gonna do it? You? I have a greater responsibility than you could possibly fathom...and my existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible to you, [meets your needs]. You don’t want that truth because deep down in places you don’t talk about at parties, you want me on that [screen]...I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to one who rises and sleeps under the blanket of the [fix] that I provide, and then questions the manner in which I provide it. I would rather you just said, ‘thank you’ and went on your way...

Jessup speaks truth to power: we have come to gluttonize Trump like Netflix on a Friday night. (And yes, I get the irony of using a movie quote to make a point about the insidiousness of contemporary entertainment.)

That Trump has transmogrified the culture like no other is indisputable. An exaggeration? Who else in American history has dominated print, screens and conversation like him?

Teddy Roosevelt? Babe Ruth? Marilyn Monroe? JFK? Behemoths all in their own right, but never ascended the heights Trump has. It evinces shame to acknowledge this, but it's true.

How?

Credit must be given. In his handling of the New York media in the 80's and 90's, he was a reality TV star before there even was reality TV. He then honed his skills through his involvement with Worldwide Wrestling Federation and Celebrity Apprentice. He understands the fundamental modus operandi of Reality TV: *to be riveting*.

To meet that goal, he utilized the ratings-tested tropes of low-brow entertainment, such as:

- **Simple plot lines, with an emphasis on good vs. evil.**
 - Low art sells because it is digestible and 100% pleasurable; high art, with its emphasis on complexity, empathy and suffering, not so much. In the former the payoff is immediate; in the latter, well down the road, if at all (e.g., “Why can't we use nuclear weapons?” “Our leaders are so incompetent”)
- **Evocative, easy to digest, and crude dialogue.**
 - This is the ‘he talks like I do’ refrain. Studies show Trump speaks at a fourth-grade level (e.g. “shithole countries.” “If I were running “The View,” I’d fire Rosie O’Donnell. I mean I’d look at her in that fat ugly face of hers. I’d say “Rosie, you’re fired!”)
- **Paint a vivid setting.**
 - See the hellscape of America he described in his Inaugural and convention acceptance speeches. “Our inner cities are a disaster. You get shot walking to the store.”
- **Protagonist as anti-hero**
 - The “villains” are more popular in WWF; the ruthless one often prevails in The Apprentice, the “bad boy” has the edge in The Bachelor)

- **Project authenticity**
 - Don't equate his brazen lying with lack of authenticity (e.g., his peddling false claims about the size of the Inaugural crowd reveals—rather than obscures—his insecurity and willingness to give the middle finger to over half the country.)
- **Assert superior intelligence**
 - “I'm like really smart, a very stable genius.”)
- **Rapidly interchange and exaggerate facial expressions.**
 - Compare Trump to any other politician on this dimension: it's like watching a high- energy cartoon vs. a staid PBS show.
- **Liberal use of dramatic twists and cliffhangers**
 - “You'll find out soon...”

The above tropes help explain *how* Trump has been effective, but they don't explain...

Why?

Why was a fear-mongering mountebank spewing vile more effective in the political arena than an experienced, articulate professional advocating policy? Why was he able to shift the paradigm from political discourse to political theatre? To answer these questions, we have to turn from Trump to his audience; from the field of political science to the embryonic field of political psychology.

If the political arena has transmogrified into a bizarre entertainment arena; and if *riveting* is the most instrumental trait in that arena; then political psychology informs us that the most effective way to achieve that state is via the *activation of emotion*, particularly the states of fear and anger that fuel our flight or fight response.

Evolution has left us with brains that prioritize these primal responses. Our brain's fundamental responsibility is to help us to survive. While it is true, we may not need the flight or

fight response as much as our ancestors did, we cannot simply exorcise it. It is hard-wired. It gets triggered easily, frequently and rapidly; and when it does, it hijacks our higher cortical functions that are associated with reason, reflection and self-control.

The reason the above tropes are effective is because they are particularly good vessels for mainlining fear and anger, for delivering the goods to the lower brain stem and thereby capturing our attention. In a nonfiction piece he wrote about talk radio called *The Host*, Wallace notes, “It is of course much less difficult to arouse genuine anger, indignation and outrage in people than it is real joy, satisfaction, fellow feeling, etc. The latter are fragile and complex, and what excites them varies a great deal from person to person, whereas anger et. al. is more primal, universal and easy to stimulate.”

Studies in this new field have validated another express train to the fast-twitch neurons of the amygdala: tribalism. Early survival was dependent upon loyalty to the tribe and its leaders. Our brains are designed to bind us to tribes. Once bound there is a predisposition to allow everything in our group and nothing in rival groups. As a predictor of voter behavior, tribalism has been sorely underestimated; policy, ideology and reason sorely overestimated.

These predispositions were on full display at the GOP convention where there wasn't even a hint of substance or professional political acumen. It was all red meat theatre: the world painted as a forlorn and dangerous place; America in a state of rampant crime careening toward catastrophe; political opponents demonized (“lock her up!”). Fear and anger spewed out undistilled; tribal feelings jacked to the rafters.

Riveting has now become our baseline. Every week without fail there are deranged tweets, surreal lies, provocative white nationalist rhetoric, and norm-shattering attacks on the free press and our law enforcement institutions.

The scorecard on riveting? On the Blue ledger there is reason, debate and policy; on the Red ledger there is transgression, vulgarity, cruelty, racism, misogyny and, hell, even pedophilia. Which hijacks your attention? What are you going to click on? (“Did you see what he just did?! Called Mexicans racists and murderers; embraced a child molester; bragged about the size of his nuclear button; called Africa a shithole; paid off his hooker”). If the playing field is attention, and the contestants are the amygdala and our higher cortical functions, home field advantage goes to our lower brain stem.

Some argue that Trump is playing the postmodern entertainment schtick brilliantly; others argue he is simply a liar and wannabe thug. But both can be true. Sure, he doesn’t seem that bright and the notion that he’s some kind of master puppeteer seems far-fetched: he lurches from one ignoble impulse to the next.

However, he does seem to have an acute feral instinct for branding and throwing out ratings bait. He may (unwittingly) be the perfect instrument for the dissection of the dark underbelly of our ADD entertainment culture. He is certainly able to understand and exploit an important phenomenon: the **half-grin** experience of Reality TV.

The experience of watching Reality TV is a uniquely modern one, in which the blurring of the line between reality and fantasy has a riveting effect. When one watches—*participates* is more like it—*The Celebrity Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, *World Wide Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)*, *The Real Housewives of* ... whatever, there is a tacit understanding with the audience

(3/4 of them anyway) that what they are watching is real, but also scripted. It's one thing to witness a story on screen in which a woman hisses "Why, you bitch!" and then slaps another. It's an altogether different experience to witness the same scene in your neighborhood restaurant. Reality TV affords some of the excitement of the latter.

The result (again for 3/4) is a knowing half-grin that allows you to both be swept up in the drama of the scene and also enjoy the fun of it. And anyone who pointed out that it wasn't really real, well they would be a spoilsport, an effete egghead, no doubt a Blue Triber or mainstream media type.

Who would have guessed that the YouTube clip of Donald Trump in 2007, dressed in an elegant suit, rolling on the beer-puddled concrete floor outside the ring of a well-publicized WrestleMania event, struggling to get his hands around the throat of Vince McMahon*, owner of WWE, would be a coming attraction of the Trump Presidency? What a show! The crowd, buoyed by the suspension of disbelief, roared its approval.

** One of Trump's first acts was to appoint McMahon's wife, Linda, as Director of the Small Business Administration, thus doubling the number of members in the administration from the WWE Hall of Fame: her and The Donald.*

Roar just as they do at his campaign/Presidential rallies, which are a display of narcissistic preening, Mussolini-like gestures, and scatological rhetoric. Burlesque and authenticity fused. A gay dance between the cult leader and his minions. Riffs as expertly executed as Richard Pryor's.

There is no debate that Trump ran his campaign like a Reality TV show. But few thought he would prevail. Fewer still thought he wouldn't pivot to Presidential after elected.

Well, now we're all just part of the show.

What are the consequences of this Entertainment takeover?

One, we live in a **post-truth** world. The concept of truth has been deeply politicized. We are inured to lying. The New York Times documented 2,141 demonstrable lies by Trump the past year. And what? Not a murmur from his base. The rest of us? Burnt out on moral outrage.

But it is not just fatigue that underpins this post-truth administration. Lying is a feature, not a bug. Just like the WWE, *fake* is at the heart of the infrastructure of the White House. Fake is what generates *riveting* and *fun* (“Did you hear what he just said!”). The Trump White House is to the Obama White House as professional wrestling is to college wrestling. It’s no longer “It can happen here.” It has happened: The WWEffing of our shared reality.

Two, we live in a **post-shame** world. If we stipulate that entertainment is the dominant sensibility in our postmodern culture, and if ratings are the marker of effectiveness in that arena, and if *riveting* is the fail-safe driver of those ratings, and if Reality TV is the current delivery system of choice, and if the tropes du jour are salacious, hyperbolic, primal, cruel and norm-shattering, well then...let Wallace spell it out as he did in an interview in 2004: “The inhibition of shame on the part of both the contestants and on the part of the people who put together the show—at some point people have figured out that even if viewers are sneering or talking about in what poor taste stuff is, they’re still watching, and that the key is to get people to watch, and that’s what’s remunerative. Once we’ve lost that shame hobble, only time will tell how far we’ll go.”

Indeed. Part of what’s riveting, part of the fascination, is: how far can we sink? The video of Trump rolling on the concrete floor, pretending to choke the life out of Vince McMahon,

turns out to be a trailer for the current attraction and provides the outlines of an answer: pretty damn far (and still sinking).

Politics throughout our lives, even with all its flaws and bullshit, strove to be a noble enterprise. That has now been destroyed and turned into an entertainment spectacle, especially for those who have felt left behind and condescended to.

In 1996 on the book tour for *Infinite Jest*, during an interview on Wisconsin Public Radio, Wallace noted, “The book is meant to seem kind of surreal and outlandish at first, and then in a sort of creepy way to seem not all that implausible.” Bingo.

Can't say we weren't warned.

Code Red/Blue: To the Summit/Death Zone
(to be continued)

