

Corona Chronicle

Week Sixteen

Wednesday, July 1st

When I originally conceived of the idea of keeping this “chronicle” of our journey through this pandemic, I meant it to be a way of communicating with the Temple Beth El community, and therefore I have struggled to faithfully reflect what is going on in our world during this time. I would like, in this week leading up to our nation’s 244th birthday, to explore one of the ills we so frequently hear decried about our in nation today.

We are not the *united* states of America. We are sorely divided – although not exclusively along “state” lines. In every state there are people on opposite extremes of the pole on any “hot button” issue: guns, immigrants, reproductive rights, climate and environmental concerns, health care, policing policies, workers’ rights, pandemic strictures, etc. And of course there are people who fall somewhere in the middle. But those on the extreme ends of the spectrum make the most noise; they are the most passionate, and they are more likely to dehumanize their opposite counterparts.

It is easy to understand this phenomenon: we have all heard of riots breaking out in some European and Latin American countries over soccer matches, resulting in multiple deaths. If fans can feel that passionately about their *sports teams*, it is hardly surprising that people would feel even more passionately about issues related to life and death, to their religious beliefs, or that they would respond vehemently to a perceived threat to their cultural identity. This of course does not *excuse* the dehumanization of the “other” – but it does help us to understand it.

In 1919, in the immediate aftermath of World War I, and at the beginning of the Irish War of Independence, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats penned one of his most famous poems, “The Second Coming.” It seems significant now to note that this poem was written while the one of the most deadly pandemics known to the Western world was still taking its toll (the 1918 flu pandemic). The flu’s greatest toll was on pregnant women, and Yeats’ pregnant wife had just barely escaped death herself and was convalescing

when he wrote the following words, which strike me as capturing the feeling of our own era to an uncanny degree:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

I have cited just the first stanza here (as its words are the ones relevant to our time). I do not totally agree that all those who are full of “conviction” and even “passionate intensity” should be classified as the “worst” of humanity – but there is a tendency for those who want to remain permanently fixed in their intensity to close their minds to nuance, to shades of grey. And often it is true that when you take the time to absorb all the information available on a given issue, you may, inconveniently, see more than one side, thus depriving you of the “conviction” that your opinion is the only possible right one.

This polarization of the American people has led to a fiercely divided Congress and Supreme Court, to battling cable news networks, to a wide ideological gulf between the sources where Americans get their information on current events. Mark and I, when watching the evening news, will occasionally switch to a different channel, to see what “they” are saying, and what items of news they are choosing to focus on. It is striking to see how differently the news is presented on these two different networks.

As I write these words, I realize that I indeed often fit Yeats’ description of one of these “worst” citizens, being full of passionate intensity on matters important to me. And I realize that if we want *change* in the world (as do

so many who have risen up since the death of George Floyd to demand racial justice), we *have* to have this passion. Those who sit with their hands folded because they lack sufficient conviction to raise their voices will not bring about the desired change.

But there must be some guidelines, some guardrails. Violence and looting are not okay. Using hateful language towards those whose opinions or worldview you do not share is not okay. Lying about the facts, making it difficult or impossible for “the other side” to vote, intimidating, threatening, blackmailing, bribing, choosing to utilize “whatever means necessary” to get a “win” for your side – these are definitely not okay.

We Americans, embroiled in culture-wars as we are, seem to have spiraled, like Yeats’ falcon, further and further away from any “center” – so far that it is hard to hear “the falconer” – by which I mean any feeling of there being one America.

But one can reasonably ask: are the ills we are experiencing in this nation a *result of our polarization*; or is the polarization a *result of a panoply of ills*? In other words, if there were plenty of jobs with decent wages, if housing, healthcare, and a college education were within everyone’s reach; if the air were safe to breathe and the water to drink and bathe in in all zip codes; if there were no systemic discrimination against people based on their sex, age, gender, religion, cultural affinity, the color of their skin, and no discrimination towards the handicapped...well, then what would there be to be polarized about?

I suppose what is behind all this is the fear that *there is not enough to go around*. If we all have to pitch in so that college and healthcare and safe neighborhoods are available to *all*, then I might have to take a “hit” financially, losing some of the privileges that I currently enjoy. We are a capitalist society, and the theory is that we should be “free” to keep what we earn, not forced by the government to share it with others. But what this theory overlooks is that we all start out the race at different starting-

lines. Some of us have had the advantage of parents who could afford to send us to college, to help us buy a home or set us up in business, to help us out with debt, or perhaps leave us an inheritance – not to mention make sure, while we were growing up, that we had a good education, good nutrition, good healthcare, etc. Meanwhile, on the other side of town, kids were growing up in dangerous neighborhoods with parents who were always struggling, perhaps in apartments filled with lead paint...you get the picture.

“Life is not fair,” my mother used to tell me, “get over it!” I suspect these words only come frequently off the lips of those for whom the *unfairness* tips *in their favor*. I doubt that people who feel this unfairness working painfully against *them* would be so blithe about it.

If I am right (and you may of course not agree) – then *what to do about it?* Nations like the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, and Cuba have tried to enforce a redistribution of wealth, and to create an “equal” society – but these efforts always seem to end up with people in gulags and “reeducation” camps, or dispatched by firing squads. Obviously we don’t want to follow that route.

There must be some middle ground between unrestricted capitalism and a totalitarian-government-controlled economy (with its concomitant efforts at thought-control). Of course here in the United States we are already somewhere in this “middle ground,” since our economy is not wholly unrestricted, and we do have many benefits that come through taxation – such as public schools, roads, Medicare, Social Security, etc. The question that many of us are arguing about is where to draw the line – and your answer will probably be different depending on how much you think you will gain or lose if the line is drawn in one place or another.

When Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder, wrote the words that formed the ideological first principle for the American idea, that

all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness

– he, wittingly or unwittingly, incriminated himself (and his whole Southern landowning class) as an obstacle to the fulfillment of these “unalienable” rights’ being honored by the nation that he hoped to see born. And that legacy, that fatal flaw in our nation’s DNA, is with us still. Because of this flaw, and its concomitant emphasis on skin color, we Jews (who are mostly seen in America as “white”) have had a much easier time here than people seen as “black” or “red” (i.e. Native Americans). Which is not to say that we, and other groups, have not faced real discrimination, but that it has just not been as severe and systemic as discrimination against blacks and Native Americans.

Well, my mother was right, of course. Life will never be “fair.” But to the degree that we are able, as a united people, to make it *fairer* for all inhabitants of our nation – to that degree we will experience less hatred, less misery, less polarization. Even if I have to give up some comforts or privileges for the sake of such a project, I would consider such an end (a society with less misery and bitterness in it) a huge boon to our standard of living as a whole.

Wishing you all a meaningful Independence Day – may you stay safe and healthy, and I hope to see some of you on “Zoom” when Mark, Lev and I return from our vacation on the Cape in two weeks.



Braga Bridge and Battleship Cove as seen from “Bicentennial Park Trail” this past week.