**Taking the Plunge**

America has a new President-elect. The planet is awash with all manner of opinion and outpourings of emotion. If there is any consensus – and even this is debatable – this is a pivotal moment in the 21st century, if not in a longer period of human history.

Timing is everything. Within 48 hours of the election, news came through that Leonard Cohen had passed away in Los Angeles. When I went around the corner to our local deli to buy my Saturday paper I happened to mention that a great man had left us. “Who was it,” said the proprietor as he took my money. “Leonard Cohen,” I replied. “Never heard of him,” he said.

I tucked the paper under my arm and returned home musing about the nature of assumptions. Cohen’s death was on radio and television and in the newspapers. Tributes poured in from around the world. Many of my Facebook friends were sharing links to YouTube clips and old interviews. Everyone seemed to be affected. As with the best of artists, Cohen’s work crossed borders and opened hearts and minds.

But my deli man had never heard of him. I’d thought everyone over 50 in my home town – and plenty under 50 – knew of Cohen. Wrong. Another assumption consigned to the dustbin.

I am thinking about this now because I am thinking about how we communicate with each other. Many of us can mount an argument and hold an opinion. We live in countries where we are free to speak out, albeit with increasing constraints. We are comfortable in the company of those who share our views; less so with others.

During my working life as a mediator I was constantly exposed to extreme levels of intransigence. In standing up for what they believe to be their rights, people hold on to rigid positions. Often to their own detriment they refuse to entertain other options or show much desire to think creatively outside their normal frames of reference.

Predictably, such attitudes usually result in frustration, blame and recrimination. This broad psychology is seen to apply on many levels, including the body politic.

Yet people assume solutions can be found if only we were more rational, more loving, more tolerant, better informed, and prepared to cooperate rather than truck out endless obstacles.

On a political level we want our elected government to govern decisively and implement promises.

If only it was that easy. *If only.*

In the marketplace of the disaffected, slogans prevail and strike home. Politicians put hand to heart and try to soothe. Good luck! ‘Governing for everybody’ has a hollow ring. Nobody believes it. In Aussie-speak, such a fluttering doesn’t pass the pub test. It doesn’t even come close.

Naturally enough, there is immense speculation how a Trump presidency will play out. Badly bitten by their inability to forecast anything other than a Clinton victory, many commentators and pundits are now hedging their bets. Others, gun-shy (or honest), declare they haven’t a clue.

If there is consensus about anything it is that the Western democratic model, if not exposed as a busted flush, at the very least contains a sizeable fracture which may or may not be capable of remedial work.

At the heart of things, according to ‘integralist’, Robb Smith, is ‘The Great Divide’. The Western world has split into two disparate camps – globalists and tribalists. The relentless economic-expansionist-consumerist agenda of the first has resulted in the disillusionment and disenfranchising of the second. Economic statistics bear out that despite huge advances in technology and the liberalisation of trade in the last thirty or so years, wealth has become more and more concentrated in the hands of a few at the expense of the many.

In places like the rust belt states of America, those who have seen their incomes remain static or shrink, their purchasing power decrease, and their jobs evaporate, the shining promise of globalisation has brought hardship and despair. These people, the tribalists, have woken up to the fact they don’t have to buy this promise any longer. They can have an impact through the ballot box and that is precisely what they have done – and will continue to do in other countries in coming years.

*How can they be so ungrateful?*

For those of us who by any reasonable measure can be said to have prospered and lead relatively comfortable, sheltered lives, this is a question we may mouth silently to ourselves but never air publicly. After all, aren’t these people in some way responsible for their own misfortune – failing to adapt, unprepared to use their initiative, stuck in their small-town ways – and even if they are not, isn’t this just the collateral damage of economic progress?

Though we may not think let alone articulate such dark judgements, those of us who consider we have received some tangible benefits from this brave new technological world may still feel helpless as to what we can personally do about things. After all, the world’s a complex place and it’s hard enough to get an individual foothold let alone think seriously about the rest of humanity. And if we do, the chances are we may wind up with compassion-fatigue or be numbed by the ceaseless images of misery that transit our television screens.

Even if we don’t identify with the so-called elites, we can become paralysed by the actions and attitudes of those in our society who on some primordial level might repulse us. Building bridges or reaching out in any meaningful way can seem way too hard.

Rather than lead with the language of inclusion and an appeal to our higher values, our leaders, in the heat of electoral battle, tend to go low. A grimy discourse of accusation and innuendo. A public theatre where barbs are traded and point-scoring is king. That’s politics, folks. A modern colosseum where any noble intentions are soon buried in the compost heap of one-upmanship. Relentless partisanship trumps noble intentions every time, as political noviates soon find out

And we, the public, shake our heads and wonder why it is ever thus.

There’s a cute photo doing the rounds. It features a much younger Hillary and Bill. They look quintessentially 1960s –fresh-faced, cheerful, optimistic. He asks her: ‘Do you think one, or even both of us, might be President one day?’ She says: ‘Yeah right. When Bob Dylan wins the Nobel Prize for Literature’.

 Unfortunately for Hillary, Bob did get the chocolate while she faltered at the last hurdle. Like Mary Antoinette, the first woman almost-to-be President of the USA will be remembered for a certain phrase. Rather than instruct the peasants to eat cake, poor Hillary simply lumped them into a hand-basket of deplorables. Not cool. At least no guillotine awaits her. Just regret.

Whatever the case, this rather significant misstep can be turned on its head. Rather than remain an unexamined psychic phenomenon, Hillary’s attitude – one that is secretly shared by many others – can be used as a beacon of instructive self-honesty. Far from the usual fine (if empty) words of mainstream political oratory, this evocative slur exemplifies how much work is needed before the first pylon on any bridge of reconciliation is sunk. Forget cake. There is a lot of humble pie upon which to chew.

In ‘The Morning After’ Smith writes:

For a tribalist, the fury of unredressed grievances at a tone-deaf establishment that’s seen the middle class struggle is a totalizing force in their political life: no moral principles, no economic argument, no social empathy can sway them from declaring that “anything goes” in a war on the agenda of the globalists as long as tribalists feel unseen, unheard and continue to lose economic, political and cultural ground in their home lands. This is a fundamental value and need, and the safety, security and identity which consumes it is prior to any later-stage values that might arise once it’s satisfied.

For the globalist, on the other hand, the sanctity of liberal principles — the rule of law, equal protection under the law, the peaceful transfer of power, equal rights for the marginalized — these are the inviolable sacreds for which no political compromise can be entertained. But they are significant values, arising only after basic security and safety has been met. (For evidence in another part of the world, consider the struggle of liberal democracy to take root in the Middle East.)

Smith says it’s easy to disregard the fears and anger of others if we ourselves do not feel threatened by the pace of change. His plea is that we engage in practical and enduring ways with those who may not share our values. We, the fortunate, need to get out of our ‘echo chambers’ despite the discomfort this might cause.

Is this plea itself utopian?

As a former mediator I appreciate the challenges inherent in trying to build effective and lasting bridges between people whose views seem diametrically opposed. Most people in conflict feel they have very good reasons for the positions they adopt (and often cling onto for dear life). Holding the space for these people to open gradually to the possibility of other perspectives and perhaps outcomes with which everybody could live, is a delicate art.

On a political level, this art needs to become *writ large*. Not only in America but in countries across the globe, we have become accustomed to gridlock, where political posturing becomes a means in itself and despite the protestations of elected folk of all political persuasions, national and community interest is submerged. And, to mangle a metaphor, from that impasse flow the twin streams of frustration and recrimination.

As other commentators indicate, leadership is a key. In the absence of clear, courageous leadership, even the best of policies tend to fall by the wayside. Self-interest will rule. And with multiple, accumulating challenges to the very survival of the species that inhabit Planet Earth – humans included - it’s surely high time that we, the lucky ones, moved beyond pure self-interest.

Where to start? Leadership! My American friends will be choking on their muesli. Like many of us in other places, they soared high when Obama triumphed eight years ago. A black man crossed the Rubicon and ascended to the highest office in the land. He was ‘our kind of guy’ and his inspiring oratory touched us deeply.

Of Hillary we became less certain. But when we looked at the alternative, it was a no-brainer. Hillary might show up with tired and torn baggage and fail to inspire in the manner of her predecessor but she looked eminently capable of leading a nation. Trump, on the evidence of his adult lifetime, does not. At least this is what I imagine my American friends are thinking and in many cases fuming about.

Ah, leadership. Assuming the United States of America – and on some level the rest of the world – is stuck with The Donald for at least the next four years, what can we ordinary folk do about it?

For a start it strikes me as a waste of time and energy (not to mention counterproductive) to join throngs of angry marchers chanting slogans or to sign petitions seeking to have the election result overturned on the grounds the majority of people (as opposed to the electoral colleges) voted for Hillary. ‘Not my President’? Not my *choice* would be more accurate, if less emotionally gratifying. As for the 46.9% of the population who failed to vote – well, for them neither candidate would get a gig. Dummy spitting, like most forms of bodily expulsion, grants instant relief - but Bernie wasn’t on the ticket.

Should the country go through further convulsions and the election result be overturned, a Clinton presidency, in all likelihood, would usher in chaos. The tribalists, to use Smith’s term, would be up in arms – perhaps literally. Already sorely aggrieved, can you imagine what would happen if their Man lost the opportunity to Make America Great Again?

No, for those of us further back from the furnace, time and energy would be better spent figuring out ways to heal our own wounds and help repair or establish connections with those sections of society that are seemingly alien to us.

There is no simple recipe as to how that might be done.

Each Thursday I go walking with three friends. Collectively, we call ourselves the four amigos. There is an element of bravado about that description, combined with a whiff of nostalgia. For in truth, if age and gender and skin tone were the only criteria with which to judge us, we could be called a quartet of OWMs (‘Old White Men’). So be it. We are good mates and voice our opinions vigorously (and sometimes even listen to one another). But of course we are individuals. One of us spends a lot of time working with people. Another, more recently retired, enjoys his workshop. A third is at home in the outback, while I have become persistent scribbler. Our personalities are different (thank God!) Sometimes our interests converge; in other cases they do not. I mention this only to emphasise that although we are good friends and share similar backgrounds, we do not take each other for granted as we wrestle with questions about how we might best live out our remaining years and contribute to a world that has given us so much.

It is relatively easy to hang out with people who broadly share your values. Should you have similar interests, this can be doubly enriching. Yet the rubber really hits the road when you encounter situations with your friends or your partner or your family or your workmates where there is profound disagreement as to the way ahead. To further complicate matters, most of us are conditioned to deal with conflict in a handful of ways: we run away, we get aggressive, or we are rendered immobile. Yes, the standard psychological reactions of flight, fight, or freeze – and more nuanced variations depending on the circumstances.

These reactions are particularly pertinent in the current context. They are not only the reactions of individuals. Societies or social groupings tend to function in this way when things get really tough. As with life in general, these reactions usually do not proceed in a neat, linear process. They skip about and often overlap. On an individual level we may do our best to avoid an argument with a partner or a colleague - then something is said or done which tips us over the edge and we lash out. In the next breath, we might be apologetic and attempt to restore the status quo – or ‘move forward’, as is said these days by all and sundry. If our adversary in that moment is able to ‘hear’ our attempt to retrieve the situation, our relationship can be back on track. But if they are still stunned by our aggression or too hurt to respond affirmatively, instant repair work will not be possible.

The point I’m trying to make is that interpersonal conflict between individuals is already complex. When individuals are aggregated into a society or a section of society, then conflicts assume a greater level of complexity, magnified by the uniqueness of each organism within that grouping.

This seems to be stating the obvious. But our aversion to complexity also forms part of the mix. We have the paradox, accentuated since the Enlightenment, that individualisation has become more and more possible and indeed encouraged while at the same time there is an enduring *cri de coeur* for strong leadership and direction. We want to be able to make our way but at the same time we realise we do not operate in a vacuum. It is a big, bad world out there and somebody needs to take control.

Much has been written recently about the global elites and those left behind on the other side of the Great Divide. Many people – young folk in particular – don’t fit into either camp. Some of them we could call the Purists. Those who value consensus, diversity, equality, fairness. They feel alienated from materialism and are deeply concerned for the environment. They are doves in a world of hawks.

For the young and freshly educated, ideals loom large. The pain of a fragmented society is acute. And many young people first experience this pain within their own families and communities long before they lift their eyes to the wider world. Such suffering translates into a conviction that things should be better. Their elders don’t seem to have managed very well. None of the political recipes on offer appear to work. Things need to change.

Young people, by and large, see no merit in conflict. They hold out hope we should be able to get on with each other. War is abhorred. Diversity is respected. There is only one Earth and we need to care for it.

How many generations experience these symptoms? Certainly some of us who come from the benighted baby boomers have run this idealistic gauntlet. (I say ‘some’ because most of my generation simply eased into an affluent adulthood without any obvious signs of angst or self-reflection.)

But the young are easily disillusioned. They might feel a healthy sense of personal power but soon recognise their impotence. Their elders show no signs of having the capacity to right the ship. In fact there is every indication things will get worse.

When they don’t get their way – most recently exemplified by the non-selection of Bernie Sanders -optimism can turn to anger or despair. At the extreme end, the violence they abhor becomes the violence they initiate. One moment a cooing, caring dove; the next, a swooping, shrieking hawk.

In this evolutionary deflowering, most young people either grow up or grow cynical. Their self-talk may be along the lines of ‘if I can’t beat these bastards and I may as well look out for myself and join the fun’. Or there is always the option to drop out and seek a simple life, hidden from the perceived rat race.

Young folk, like everyone else, need to learn how to embrace complexity. This is a lifelong learning. I am always surprised how little this need is articulated in the media. True, it is mentioned in serious commentary but it is a message that must be explored and refined continually.

*You dream*, I can hear one of my close friends saying. We now live in the world of Twitter and Facebook and a myriad of instant opinions. Who now has any time or inclination to grapple with analyses that might be more than 140 characters in length?

My friend could even go as far as to suggest I am pissing into a gale, as I perch in my eyrie, staring at a monitor and watching these words appear on the screen. (A tribute to whiz-bang voice recognition technology.) Words, words, and more words. I would more useful to Gaia simply weeding my garden. He may be right. Most of us know we live in a bloody complex and difficult world and we may not want to hear somebody banging on about it *ad nauseam*.

But I will continue to bang on for a while. If nothing else, it helps to clear my own head and I only hope it doesn’t saturate the brain cells of you, dear reader. (And salutations to those who have sailed this far with me, blown by a light breeze across a 3000-word ocean.)

If my active mind is any indication, the horizon is not yet in sight. Thoughts arise and disappear. Some will be captured, momentarily like a stray butterfly and then released. Others will be held, pondered upon and developed. Thought processes are a metaphor for our daily lives. In the course of the 24-hour cycle, we may seem to move to a regular beat, doing the things we did the day before, holding the same concerns, repeating old patterns. If we look carefully, it won’t all be total repetition. It’s a fresh river, moment to moment. Ever-changing thoughts, actions, insights, interests – even if some shifts are minuscule or comparatively unimportant – they will be there if we look.

How is this relevant? I’m not sure but it seems to speak both to the transient nature of time and the opportunities with which we are presented. When I cast a glance over my shoulder I see forks in my road. Choices, or the appearance of choices. People who have influenced me. Ideas that captured my imagination. Art that has moved me. An ever-unfolding, multilayered rhapsody we call ‘life’. In my case, a very lucky life.

All of this is relevant to the perspectives I am offering here. Much earlier, I mentioned that Robb Smith is self-described as an ‘integralist’. As I was dictating this description I was wondering if I knew (or simply assumed I knew) what he meant. At the turn of the century I was a voracious consumer of the works of Ken Wilber, becoming familiar with integral ideas in the way Wilber conceptualised them. His work resonated with me, and still does to a large extent. So when I read ‘The Morning After’ and then ‘The Great Divide’ I was pretty sure I understood where Smith was coming from. But I am equally aware that those of you who are now soaking up or skimming over my words may not be conversant with Wilber or people like Clare Graves who pioneered the model that became Spiral Dynamics. There will be others, of course, who will have a much more complete understanding than I do.

It is not my purpose to go into these ideas here (and those of you who are interested can explore the various authors at your leisure). But I am mentioning this aspect of my intellectual development to illustrate how theoretical models can enforce and enhance our understanding as well as expanding or altering our world views. Contrary to certain contemporary spiritual approaches, I am a great fan of intellectual endeavour. The poor old ‘mind’ has been given a bad rap in some quarters and rightly so. Rationality and rationality alone, at least in my experience, eventually arrives at a dead-end. For most of us it is the ruler rather than the servant. But welcoming the mind into the tent has been an essential part of my own journey and I feel much the richer for it.

Which takes me back to the world of theory. Most people would look askance if you suggested to them their lives were lived according to theory. ‘Bullshit,’ I can hear the call. ‘I don’t base what I do upon anybody’s theory about how I should live my life.’

Really? If I could gently suggest that, to use one of these infuriating post-modern expressions, we ‘deconstruct’ my friend’s indignation, what would we find? Well, we might find a belief or a set of beliefs – a cornucopia of which my protesting friend is largely unaware. A simple example: *it is better to work than not to work*. This is not a mere statement of the obvious. It forms part of a value-based worldview to which most people (not all!) subscribe. Normally, we don’t pay attention to such a fundamental ‘tru-ism’, let alone reflect upon how true it is for us at any particular moment.

And if that example does not exactly resonate with you, try this one. *I should not commit adultery*. You may not be an avid reader of the Bible but you will still pick this as one of the Ten Commandments. What are these Commandments? Instructions, guidelines, a set of edicts laid down for Christians? Put another way, they are part of a theoretical worldview as to how one should live one’s life. Like all worldviews, they are not universally shared by the six billion or so people spread throughout the globe.

(More’s the pity, I can hear some of you say.)

Which leads me to the relationship between theory and practice. (Or how the Devil stalks God.)

Still peering over my shoulder I see countless examples where my actions have not reflected my understanding and insight. This is not always easy to admit; the ‘ruthless self-honesty’ spelt out by various spiritual teachers has been held at bay or employed sporadically. I don’t think I’m an orphan in this respect. Many of us can become increasingly self-aware and/or undergo transformatory experiences, and in our ordinary life continue to be driven by past habits and conditioning.

We may have seen this in ourselves and we may have seen it in others.

We may have excused this in ourselves – and we may have excused this in others, especially if we revered them in one way or another.

This is particularly poignant for those of us who have found ourselves on some kind of spiritual path. Blissful or ecstatic experience can become an end in itself. Resumption of so-called ‘ordinary life’ can lead to aversion and avoidance, as Jack Kornfield portrays so eloquently in *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry.*

Even if we are not touched by or indeed reject the kind of spiritual unfolding to which I allude, we might still identify with a gap – occasional or regular – between what we appreciate theoretically to be good and true and what we actually do in practice. We are tested, as it seems we are meant to be.

Dear, beautiful, wise Leonard Cohen understood this deeply. How many celebrities do you know took themselves off to a monastery in the middle of their career, spent six years arising at two-thirty in the morning, and lived their waking hours in contemplation and self-examination? Cohen instinctively knew the trappings of the external world were not enough. He also came to understand and appreciate the power of silence and the communion that comes through a shared silence. I rejoiced when I saw him on film at the monastery at Mount Baldy, in service to a Japanese Zen master and yet acutely alert to the inherent pitfalls in placing all of one’s spiritual eggs in the basket of a guru.

I am far from the only one to juxtapose the election of Donald Trump with the death of Leonard Cohen. For the latter, his spiritual evolution appears to have incorporated both heightened creativity and a deep peace. I don’t think it’s any accident the two go together. In fact, I would guess that when Cohen went back to touring a decade ago he touched more people than ever before, and reached out to them – I would say ‘communed’ with them – on a level that would not have been possible in his early years.

Donald Trump, as far as we can tell, is no poet. In the betting arena, you could get long odds on him having any significant transformation in this lifetime. And then again………Assumptions, assumptions.

What transpires with any of our political figureheads, I maintain, is a sideshow to the main event. With no disrespect to Harry Truman, the buck stops with each of us. Unless we come to terms with our human contradictions, our behaviours will be compromised. And although ‘coming to terms’ includes understanding and acceptance, it also includes operating from what has been termed an inner knowing rather than mere reason.

As one teacher said to me: *Find that best part in yourself and let your actions stem from there*.

Only then, as far as I can gaze into the crystal ball of our collective futures, will we be able to engage with one another in more productive ways. Surface communications will make ground for a kind of communion, where we are not fazed by whatever form of human we encounter. On the contrary, our empathy will become real rather than fake. Our embrace will be genuine but not without shared guidelines of mutual respect, even in the face of profound disagreement and ideological differences. Neither, in this transition, will we become doormats upon which the boots of aggression may land. We will resist such attempts.

I don’t know if we’re up to it. Do you? Does anybody?

But I do know there is opportunity. An invitation, if you like. To each of us this will takes varying shapes and forms. We may sing. Play music. Paint or write. We may teach. Attend our garden. We may work for ourselves or within an organisation. We may walk on the beach, alone or with friends. We may play sport. We may go on retreat.

On a day-to-day basis our activities might be similar or quite different. But they will be underpinned by a richness that defies description. The do-ing will emanate from the be-ing. An unwavering compass needle effortlessly fixed upon commonality of spirit and shared concern.

An invitation, like no other invitation. The springboard is in front of us. And we don’t need to know how to dive.

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*From the Eyrie*

*November 2016*