



A Moment for Something More Soulful Than Politics

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IN THE PRESIDENTIAL primary of 2016, Donald Trump scorned Senator John McCain's heralded heroic captivity during the Vietnam War. "He was a war hero because he was captured," Trump said. "I believe *perhaps* he is a war hero." He then went on: "I like people who weren't captured."¹ The attack stunned the nation. The young naval aviator, Lieutenant Commander John McCain, tortured and permanently disabled, stood up to the whole North Vietnamese system. Offered release, McCain refused to take it until the rest of the squadron would be released, as well. It was four more years before that happened.

In 2017, as the acme of the GOP attempt to repeal President Barack Obama's signature legislation on healthcare without proposing an acceptable replacement, two women senators—Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski—and John McCain voted against such an irresponsible legislative maneuver. The repeal attempt went down to defeat by three heroes who confronted our own system with truth and courage.

On that day, President Trump found himself faced with a clear picture of what heroes really are—both in captivity and beyond. Heroes are those who are free enough internally to face any amount of external pressure for the sake of the greater good.

Heroism is not a rare event. In fact, it is a given.

In every life there is a crossover moment, after which a person will never be the same again. Somewhere, somehow the challenge comes that sets us on a different path: the path of purpose, the path of integrity, the path of transcendence that lifts us—heart, mind, and soul—above the pitiable level of the comfortable and the mundane.

It is the moment at which transcending the mediocre, the conventional, the pedestrian, becomes more impacting, more holy-making than any amount of beige-colored political success.

As a culture, we may have come to that point. As a people, we are at a crossover moment. It is a call to all of us to be our best, our least superficial, our most serious about what it means to be a Christian as well as a citizen.

The system we have, divided from itself—separation of church and state—important as it is in a pluralistic state, must nevertheless be compatible in us or we may never really be One, never be united as a people, ever again.

Mark Twain may have put it best. “The only rational patriotism,” he writes, “is loyalty to the Nation ALL the time, loyalty to the Government when it deserves it.”² Aye, there's the rub.

As Shakespeare's Hamlet wrestles with the demands of conscience in the face of the growing crises of the kingdom, he weighs the effects of two possible approaches. He can confront the situation at the heart of the problem. He can unmask the perfidy that threatens to steal his country away from him. Or, fearful of the consequences of public opposition, he can simply ignore it, minimize it, go to sleep, ignore it... “and by a sleep to say we end the heartache.”³

Who doesn't understand the dilemma? The political world is a stockpile of polar opposites. Which option shall we ourselves choose—

to confront a disorderly system or to simply go along to get along?

We can speak up as our democracy begins to break down before our eyes and bear the public stress that comes with that. Or, in our own case, in this time, we too can “sleep through it.” We can do everything possible to avoid the situation. We can hope that, at least eventually, everything will just die down on its own without our having to do something about it. After all, the cure could indeed be worse than the disease.

Indeed, a Hamlet wails in us all: “Aye, there’s the rub.”

The truth is that we know the depth of our own situation only too well these days. We’re in it, after all. Even to write about it here seems almost surreal. I keep waiting to wake up again in a nice, orderly America: long great; definitely grown; a paragon of professional, presidential civility; and certainly a beacon to many.

Instead, I’m caught in a maelstrom of the unexpected:

- A foreign government has inserted itself into our democracy in an attempt to upset the credibility as well as the integrity of the democratic system itself.
- The popular vote—the majority choice of the voters—does not assure an election.
- The President of the country is also its Tweeter-in-chief and the dominant debaser, “de-meaner,” and prevaricator of the country, as well.
- Meanwhile, presidency and monarchy are being confused while people stand helplessly by as the corpse of civil liberty sinks into a national grave.
- Even as I write, the self-proclaimed sexual-predator President is insulting his own Attorney General in public, just one more person in a long line of personal casualties. Meanwhile, we go on trying to convince our children not to bully anyone and not to give in to it themselves.
- Meanwhile, the Congress of the United States dithers with people’s lives in the hope of scoring political points while universal

healthcare, education, cyber security, climate change, and international affairs take second place to the presidential reality show and local soap operas.

- Furthermore, whatever issues of constitutionality may be created by any of these things, the president apparently thinks that he can solve the problems by pardoning himself.

Worst of all, all this chaos, political instability, and lack of experience was demonstrated in living color in the process called a primary. In that standard political ritual, with over a dozen candidates to choose from, if the voting public itself had heeded the obvious, such a political debacle could have been avoided.

The question is, why didn't they heed the obvious? And, if they did, why did they ignore the implications for the country? After all, "they" is "we"; we did this to ourselves.

Even more important, where in the midst of such polarization and national disunity is even the hope of *oneing*, of integrating the social with what we say are our spiritual selves? Where is the missing link between the spiritual life and civic life? Where is the tie between religion and politics in a time when "God bless America" is a national creed but "America First" has become its god?

Even the ghost of an answer makes serious spiritual demands on us all: To heal such division means that we are obliged to search out and identify our own personal value system. It requires us to admit to ourselves what it is that really drives our individual social decisions, our votes, our political alliances. Is it the need to look powerful? The desire for personal control? The hope to cash in on the quick fixes or profit from the petty skimming? The need to be approved of by the titled class? Do we have the courage to confront the debased with the ideal—even in the face of ridicule and recrimination—or is cowardice our secret spiritual sickness? In that case, our national health can only get worse.

A national cure also surely demands that we begin to see tradition as a call to return to the best of the past, not a burden to be overcome in order to secure the best of the present. It is the sense of a commonly held tradition of the common good—once a strong part of the American past—that we clearly lack in the present. We have searched for months to find some senators, some representatives, even a few

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political leaders who themselves were sufficiently beyond petty party differences to care enough to speak for us all. Instead, such profiles in courage have been rare on the political ground. And so politics has become the problem rather than part of the answer to the national division that plagues us.

Any answer that can possibly heal the national fissure must surely enable us to see conservatism as the anchor of society and, at the same time, to welcome liberalism as the path to the future that is already here.

Most of all, a real answer to such bickering and character assassination will necessitate that we make “Love one another as I have loved you” (see John 13:34) the foundation of national respect, the standard of our national discernment, the bedrock of both our personal relationships and a civilized society.

To make those spiritual concepts a real part of life and so to bring this country together again, at least five issues are paramount:

- First, partisan politics, a relatively new concept in national politics, has to be seen for what it is: a fungus on the democratic system that chokes its growth and smothers its oxygen. Partisan politics—the notion that the herd mentality is more important to democracy than individual conscience and personal responsibility for the civil system—has to end. Otherwise, the very keepers of the kingdom will have sliced and diced the political system into national uselessness.
- Second, we must return to a fundamental American conservative posture. We must remember that the Constitution is more important than the politics or the politicians of the moment. To

manipulate voting blocks, to gerrymander the system, to intimidate a voting population into staying away from the polls for the sake of party dominance is not government. It is treason.

- Third, we must remember that civil discourse is the pillar of democracy. The deterioration of public discussion to the level of street talk—led, in this case, by the president himself—limits thinking and invites name-calling. The inherent value of the issue then disappears in a flame and flash of irrationality and national narcissism. At that point, all objectivity goes to dust and drains a democracy of its essential components: fearlessness and respect for the other.
- Fourth, we must realize that, to be an effective country, we must become as much citizens of the world as we are citizens of this nation. There is no country anymore that can stand alone—not even us, as global economics and the questions of national security so clearly show.
- Fifth, to be *one*, we don't need one party, one program, one set of policies. What could be duller, more stagnant, more destructive of the soulfulness it takes to create and preserve the best of the human enterprise than such a narrow-minded view of planetary life? What we need is one heart for the world at large, a single-minded commitment to this “more perfect union,” and one national soul, large enough to listen to one another for the sake of the planet—for the sake of us all.

SO, WHERE CAN we look for *oneing* in the political arena? Only within the confines of our own hearts. Politics—government—does not exist for itself and, if it does, that is precisely when it becomes at least death-dealing if not entirely evil. Nation-states and empires have all “died the death” in the wake of such power run amuck, of such distortion of human community.

In the end, politics is nothing more than an instrument of social good and human development. It is meant to be the right arm of those whose souls have melted into God. It is to be the living breath of those who say they are religious people and patriotic citizens—a link to personal faith.

This current period of politics, instead, flirts with the notion of being the security of the secure, the enrichment of the rich. In the name of personal responsibility, it disdains those who cannot sustain themselves with dignity in a world in transition from the industrial revolution to the technological revolution.

Instead, it sets out to divorce itself from the very values that made this country great: the democratic system and the Judeo-Christian values it has embodied.

The democratic system, as originally conceived, upholds a vision that links “care for widows and children” with a commitment to provide food stamps and a living wage for families under stress.

It embodies the soul of a nation that considers the right to breathe clean air and drink clean water, to save wetlands and reduce fossil fuels, to be a responsibility of America’s own Environmental Protection Agency.

It includes the love for all of God’s creation that links Jesus’ cure of Jairus’ daughter (see Matthew 9:18–25) and the man born blind (see John 9) with the moral obligation to provide healthcare and social services to all of us, not simply to some.

It embraces the courage of the Samaritan to reach out to the foreigner (see Luke 10:25–37) that made this country open arms toward an immigrant world.

In fact, it is the strength of the link between religion and politics that will determine both the quality of our politics and the authenticity of our religion.

The echo of Martin Luther King, Jr., can be heard again—this time, perhaps, with more of the warning of the prophet than the hope of the spiritually naïve. King wrote, “Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them, is a spiritually moribund religion in need of new blood.”⁴

It is between those two poles—real religion and genuine patriotism—that the Hamlet in all of us is now challenged to *one* our democratic ideals with the best of our religions, the gold standard of our souls.

To phrase Hamlet more directly, it is time for us to wake up. Sleeping through this sad American moment will never enable us to become again who we have so often said we are. ♦

