Rudyard Kipling’s poem “If” comes to mind when I think of the US presidential race.

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs . . .
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating,
And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim; . . .
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build ’em up with worn-out tools . . .

What a time we live in. Here are some of the factors leading to discontent. Thomas Edsall writing in the New York Times on March 1, 2016 catalogued the economic malaise of wage earners over the last 50 years. Adjusted for inflation, the average hourly wage increased from $19.16 to only $20.67 between 1964 and 2014. The number of manufacturing jobs dropped by 36% from 1979 to 2015, while population increased 43% from 225 million to 321 million. Ben Leubsdorf writing in the Wall Street Journal on February 26, 2016, reported that in 36 states unemployment rates are still higher than before 2008. David Wessel of the Hutchins Institute reported on the Diane Rehm show on March 1, 2016, that one in seven prime age males (those between ages 25 and 54) are not working. The Economic Innovation Group produced The 2016 Distressed Communities Index, which showed that in the one-fifth of zip codes with the highest stress index, there was a poverty rate of 27%, 23% of adults lacked a high school degree, and 55% of adults were not working. In the one-fifth of zip codes with the least stress, the poverty rate was 6%, 6% lacked a high school degree, and 35% of adults were not working. From 2010 to 2014, the high stress communities saw declining indicators, the low stress showed increasing indicators, and the middle 60% stayed about even with little economic improvement over the five-year period.

Inequality.org reported that between 1983 and 2009, 40% of wealth gains went to the top 1 percent and 82% to the top 5% of Americans, while the bottom 60% lost wealth. In 2010, average CEO pay at an S&P 500 company was $10.8 million, a 27% increase over 2009. The gap between CEO pay and the average worker went from 42 to 1 in 1980 to 325 to 1 in 2010. Twenty-five of the 100 largest US companies paid more to their CEOs than they paid in taxes. The national debt went from $9 billion in 2007 to $18 billion in 2015. In 2014 mandatory spending (largely Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, which alone are on track to exceed
federal revenues in a few years) in the federal budget accounted for 66% of the total and defense 17% leaving only 17% (582 billion) to fund the federal executive departments and independent agencies ranging from energy, education, transportation, environmental protection, health and human services, housing and urban development, justice, agriculture, state department, to homeland security. Attempts to “reign in” discretionary spending in the last five years have succeeded (through sequestration) while federal spending overall has continued to grow. There is currently no place in the federal budget for major new spending on infrastructure or environment.

Abroad the United States appears to have little influence over affairs in the Middle East, China, and Russia. Terrorists are viewed as a threat to safety, but perhaps even more are a sign of a deteriorating world order. Refugees/migrants/asylum-seekers flee, but where? Globally the engine of economic growth is slowing. America’s European allies struggle to maintain the European Union and the common currency.

President Obama, while maintaining his appeal to progressives and holding close to a 50% job approval rating, is viewed, by many, as divisive and ineffectual. His aplomb, courtesy, and intelligence is appealing until seen as diffidence, dismissiveness, and arrogance. His efforts to reach out to provide diplomatic solutions and a sympathetic hearing to other nations and people is meritorious until seen as naive and willing to sacrifice the interests of the United States. Some feel Obama has scorn for their values and ways of life. His attempts to overcome barriers to put in place, through Executive Orders, policies he believes are needed seems to some an exercise of dictatorial powers. The Affordable Health Care Act is for some a symbol of inept and intrusive government intervention.

And Congress has become for almost all Americans a dysfunctional body. Apparently even a large percentage of Republicans are frustrated with the ideological fixations of their party leaders and disdain their inability to get things done. This frustration does not, however, lead these Republicans to become Democrats, whom they (the Republicans) see as increasing their taxes, weakening their country, and further burdening it with obligations to meet for more and more needy people both inside and outside the country.

The process of selecting presidential nominees through partisan primaries is taking place with this as background. It is important to realize that the American primaries concern nominations by the two major political parties, but a plurality of citizens is neither Democrat, nor Republican. According to the Pew Research Center 39% of Americans identify as independent, 32% as Democrats, and 23% as Republicans. They are the swing vote and they are less consistent in their views than members of the parties (and consequently may have contributed to the increasing polarization of the parties). It’s also important to realize that less than 63% of eligible voters turn out for presidential elections.

One has to go through the primary process to become a major party nominee. In presidential elections, states vote on a winner-take-all basis, so no third party candidate has ever won the presidency. (The high water mark was Theodore Roosevelt who in 1912 garnered 27% of the
popular vote and 88 electoral votes.) What is being measured in the primaries is the appeal of candidates to voters in particular parties. Thus one nominee (Republican) is being chosen by 23% of the electorate and the other (Democrat) by 32% of the electorate—though this is less the case in the minority of states with open primaries where either independents may vote in the primary of their choosing or all voters may vote in the primary of their choosing.

The best analysis I have heard of Donald Trump’s success is that he is the one who has best reflected the mood of Republican voters. They are angry. They want a strong man, someone who can cut through the BS and deliver on the Republican promises—limited government, security, low taxes, greater freedom—among other things, freedom from regulation to run their businesses, freedom from interference with their religion, and freedom from so-called political correctness. Trump’s candidacy has exposed the lack of ideological purity of his base of supporters. Apparently even many evangelicals can bear a person who swears in public, is thrice married, supports Planned Parenthood, is crude and abusive in tone, behaves like a teenager, and supports torture. They somehow identify with his self-aggrandizement and recent Christian piety as an affirmation of themselves and their America. Captured by his celebrity, business success, and effrontery, they believe that Trump has the qualities that are needed to lead America at home and abroad.

Whether he has truly ruptured the Republican Party or created a new alignment of angry white populists or caused an ideological shift as great as that occasioned by Goldwater when he laid out the principles of conservatism, as some have argued, cannot be known at this time. A majority of Republicans have voted for candidates other than Trump and some are organizing to stop him even if that means a brokered Republican convention. He is the likely Republican nominee, but this is not certain. Whether he can become President is much less certain. A third party candidacy from the establishment wing of the Republican Party if Trump is nominated cannot be ruled out, even if only in an effort to save the party and even at the cost of victory in this election. Trump is ready to run a third party candidacy if he is denied the nomination.

By comparison, the Democratic nomination process seems calm. Perhaps the lack of drama accounts for the relatively low Democratic primary turnout. Bernie Sanders lifts the hearts and imaginations of a vision of greater economic justice and fairness. Embracing Democratic socialism, he offers an uncompromised vision of how America could be run from the left. Hillary Clinton offers piecemeal progress on a broad range of issues including climate change and clean energy (while not specifically identifying other environmental issues on her webpage). Reviled by many and seen as untrustworthy by even more, Hillary has won respect from many for her resilience, her experience, and her longstanding commitment to issues such as women’s rights and health care.

What’s an ecozoan to do? An ecozoan lives out a vision of a flourishing Earth community and full human development. Building on the new evolutionary story of Earth, bioregionalism and ecological spirituality, ecozoans seek to bring into being ecozoic societies, societies of life. For ecozoans ecological and cultural values take precedence over economic and industrial values. An ecozoan is cognizant of his or her historical moment—we are living in the terminal Cenozoic
era—and of the Great Work of moving on to an emerging Ecozoic era. An ecozoan lives with a tragic awareness and abiding hope, and acts.

The US presidential election will not fully determine the future, but it will have significant consequences. I have sometimes been beguiled by the cleverness of Donald Trump, but I am no longer amused as his candidacy progresses. One must take what he says and how he acts seriously. Republican Senator Ben Sasse wrote a thoughtful letter to Trump supporters on facebook on why he could not support Trump even if he were the Republican nominee. Foreign policy mavens Max Boot and Benn Steil describe the dangerous consequences they believe would follow were Trump’s statements on foreign policy implemented. Ninety-five Republican national security leaders signed an open letter describing the dangers of Trump’s proposed policies. The National Review devoted an entire issue to “Against Trump.” While some of these criticisms would not appeal to progressives, many of them, such as those condemning racism and torture, are shared across party lines and political persuasions. The election of Trump would be a disaster, and here Rudyard Kipling’s poem “If” may be wrong that we should treat disaster and triumph as the same. Hillary Clinton would be better, a view reluctantly shared by many conservatives. While Trump conceivably may not receive the Republican nomination, it is hard to imagine any person other than one of these two becoming President.

So a final word to ecozoans, don’t lose your head when others are losing theirs. Do what you can to influence the election cycle, but no matter who wins, the Great Work will not be over. This is a long term task. Do what you can today but keep your eyes on a distant horizon. The changes that are needed are civilizational in scope. Labor on.