EXAMINING THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

By Richard Register

This man is a loose cannon barreling about the deck in stormy times and predictions can easily be way off the mark. As San Francisco Chronicle architecture critic John King wrote departing from his usual mainly esthetics-based criticism of infrastructure design in our region, we are facing “a future where all bets are off.” With zero commitment to the truth—“there’s no drought in California,” after five years of drought, and “climate change is a Chinese hoax designed to confuse Americans”—plus his harsh and crude racist and sexist rants (which he backs off on, then repeats again later), what can be expected beyond the negative unpredictable? If cities in their present form are a major cause for environmental problems, could he begin to see the linkages or understand or care?

Something other than attempts to predict the future and guess in the usual way what might happen next is called for. Utilizing trends, assessing the interests of existing power blocks, analyzing the stunningly wrong predictions of the media, etc., we are up against trying to figure out what Mr. Trump means or doesn’t really mean when he himself doesn’t seem to know what he’s going to say next. What is called for is a look at the problems in the American character and what might improve it—if we can face what we might see there.

As Alcoholics Anonymous points out, if you don’t admit a problem and face it saying you need help you are not going to get cured. We aren’t going to move forward from this election in any positive manner until we face the darker side of American character. “Facing it” might be the only silver lining we are going to get, a shock doctor opportunity to sit still awhile, take a deep breath and think about it. If we don’t get that far, how are we going to improve things? Liberal pundits saying hang tight and keep trying notwithstanding, even though that in itself is a good thing, it’s not sufficient. We need to do a little well-informed soul-searching, amateur psychoanalyzing, even, psychoanalyzing our own collective self as a country.

For that and maybe some deeper insights I turn, as I have a few times in my past, to Walt Anderson’s powerful book A Place of Power: The American Episode in Human Evolution. This 1976 book will seem dated to most people, but what it lacks in regard to up-to-date assessments of policy progress and improved lifestyle habits, it gains in assessing the more long-term trends in national character. That’s been changing rather more slowly than all those details of policies and influences of leaders coming and going.

In A Place of Power we find a people arriving in the North American colonies, then the United States, who were escaping poverty and religious prejudice, but also bringing with them the new nationalism of Europe. The ancestors of Americans were psychologically suspicious of one another when they arrived and determined to set up a new system to protect each individual from the other. That idea of freedom was reacting to a negative in a reasonable way, but had low commitment to any particular place. They carried with them a kind of nostalgia for Europe
and the botany and food animals and were oblivious of the lessons the Native American’s might have provided in their agriculture and wild animal husbandry. There was a tendency for escapism into some unknown land to try again if all failed. Working together to solve problems was limited to the Amish and a few other in-groups, and a little friendly help out on the frontier among familiar neighbors. It was more generally a negative individualistic kind of democracy: “we don’t bother each other,” as compared to a kind of positive democracy: “we like working together, solving things together, and getting to know each other.”

The book quotes Philip Slater, who wrote in *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, “The avoiding tendency lies at the very root of American character. This nation was settled and continuously repopulated by people who were not personally successful in confronting the social conditions obtained in their mother country…. Escaping, evading, and avoiding are responses which lie at the base of much that is peculiarly American.” This attitude has deep grounding in our national psyche: “We have to try something really different, maybe even scrap it all and step into totally new and unknown territory.” That would be like moving westward, ever westward.

I believe we can learn much from attempting to face up to this mindset that lies deep in the American character. Understanding its roots can give us better bearings on how to improve none other than ourselves. We can accept what we have learned and go about making a creative peace with it. After all, the universe is constantly reinventing new stuff and recreating itself in its evolution. Anything less than this is likely to not help us move forward in this very difficult territory we have just entered.