

WE THE PEOPLE – AN ELECTION JOURNAL

By Sheri Ritchlin

After the 2016 election, I found myself going back over my own writings at the time of previous elections. My interest was always in who “we the people” really are and how we are striving (so imperfectly) toward a “more perfect union.”

DECEMBER 2000: Two Consciences

At millennium’s end, the hotly disputed Election of 2000 raised speculation about why the electorate was so closely divided in its voting. Either the majority of Americans had become centrist and fallen out evenly on either side of the divide, or they were so far apart in their views as to be hopelessly split. This is not a schism of science and art (as in C.P. Snow’s [“Two Cultures”](#)) or even of science and spirituality. It may be a more subtle and interesting division that is playing a functional role in the health of the whole.

What if, as a species, we have been endowed with Two Consciences that process and protect human experience in a similar manner to the bicameral mind? In simple terms, a Right Conscience and a Left Conscience, each acting to restrain or to complement the other? In this model, the one I’ll call the Left Conscience exists to protect the planet itself and assures that its nurturing of life persists unthreatened. This conscience is directed especially toward the non-verbal elements of a society that have no voice of their own: the land, the creatures, the poor, the disenfranchised, the outcasts. Its hallmark is tolerance and its impulse is maternal and feminine.

The one I call the Right Conscience is dedicated to preserving human society, culture and civilization. It exists to protect the rights of individuals, to establish and preserve values, to set forth standards of rigor that will lead to excellence and to the prosperity of the whole. It governs the making of laws, the establishing of order, the preservation of historic treasures, and the honoring of the past. Its hallmark is protection of civilized values and it is by nature paternal and masculine (In the Jungian sense).

The Right Conscience is shaped largely by history and religious tradition. In the western world, it receives its imperative from the God of Abraham, whether Christian, Jew or Muslim. In its highest expression it is capable of transcendence and sacrifice, martyrdom and miracles. The Left Conscience may or may not be rooted in the same religious tradition but at its core is an immanent spirituality that is primordial and adaptable in the way that a mother must adapt to diverse situations to nurture her young and be led down unpredictable byways by their growing up. As the gate through which life comes, her connection with nature is her root, as the culture and its laws form the root of the “fathers.” It is not surprising to see the Left Conscience flourish on the west coast where people have converged from so many diverse backgrounds, leaving their native cultures behind. But the natural law of the Left Conscience is no less demanding than the Right, and casual expressions of spirituality do not honor it any more than pursuit of the letter of the Law at the expense of its spirit honors the religious tradition of its counterpart.

The pitfalls of one-sidedness now become obvious: On the one hand, indifference can be mistaken for tolerance, becoming indiscriminate rather than non-discriminatory. On the other, power can be mistaken for strength, and the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness can be used as a license for material gain at the expense of the ecological system that has bestowed the gift of life. The twentieth century was a battleground in which the two consciences met again and again as bitter foes.

From Fascism to Communism, from Patriarchy to Feminism, the two consciences raged against each other, sometimes in distorted and dysfunctional forms. The Consciences took on shape and personality made robust yet simple-minded and predictable by the media, advertisers and the entertainment industry: One wore Birkenstocks and ate organics, the other drove BMWs and drank lattes-to-go. It makes sense that in times of great change, as we have seen in the last two centuries, each conscience is stirred into action to perform what it sees as its essential role. How do these meet and collaborate in a single human, or nation, or planet?

SUMMER 2005 - The War of the Worldviews

Coming within days of each other in the summer of 2005, several highly publicized events rippled through the global body electric and highlighted the clash that is going on within the collective human psyche. They arose among distinctly different groups, yet they overlap in a way that demonstrates how deeply the underground structures are being shaken. In this context, the red state/blue state divide during the last election suggests something larger than a political phenomenon: deeply conflicted and confusing worldviews—not among the politicians and pundits, but among the citizenry of planet Earth.

June 29, 2005: The release on this date of yet another version of the H.G. Wells classic, *The War of the Worlds*, provides us with the framing metaphor. Mass hysteria followed the broadcast of the 1938 radio version of *The War of the Worlds* narrated, very convincingly, by Orson Wells. The event was a harbinger of the power of the media and virtual realities to impact millions of people in the decades to come, much as Gutenberg's first widespread use of the printing press (the Gutenberg Bible) did in the fifteenth century. The plot summary that accompanies the movie trailer tells us that it is the story of Ray Ferrier, a working class man living in New Jersey. "He's estranged from his family, his life isn't in order, and he's too caught up in himself. But the unthinkable and ultimately, the unexpected happens to him in an extraordinary sense. His small town life is shaken violently by the arrival of destructive intruders: aliens which have come en masse to destroy Earth."

The theme of an alien invasion that disrupts the fabric of everyday life and threatens the destruction of the structures of a civilization (the root meaning of de-struct) takes on new meaning after September 11. But it is also present thematically in the blue and red political divisions of the 2004 election, replaying the drama of the 2000 election. On the one side is a free and secure way of life that has been fought for and developed since 1776, and on the other what is seen by the first side as an alien invasion that threatens to destroy the very structures that those efforts have created. Illegal aliens and alien lifestyles threaten to tear apart not only the nation but a family structure rooted in fundamental religious values. Fundamental is the dicey word here, because it is so conveniently co-opted to fuel extreme expressions of fundamentalism as a backlash against social change.

July 2, 2005: On July 3, the other side takes the stage at ten Live 8 rock concerts sponsored around the world to draw attention to the plight of the poor in Africa and “make poverty history.” While hundreds of thousands pour in to hear live concerts in London, Paris, Tokyo, Rome, Moscow and five other cities, it is the power of technology that beams them to an estimated two billion viewers worldwide. Hollywood’s Will Smith opens the program in Philadelphia, repeating the sentiment of his fictional US president in *Independence Day* that “This is not a Declaration of Independence but a Declaration of *Interdependence*.” Here is the keynote of the new world view ushered in by the Age of Technology with its global travel, global economics, and the increasing global consciousness. In tandem with this, if often ideologically opposed, is the theme of interdependence which is the foundation of ecology, systems thinking, process philosophy and the burgeoning of holistic approaches to major areas of contemporary life.

SUMMER 2010 – We The People...

We are learning a great deal about the United States, and also about our democratic process. We surprised ourselves in 2008 by electing the first African-American president. We surprised ourselves again in 2010 by electing Tea Party Candidates and sending a very principled but green freshman class to Congress. All of these candidates ran on a promise of “changing the way things are done in Washington.” Now all of them *are* in Washington and Washington has never seemed so broken.

For all of the apparent dysfunction, I think that there are some positive signs in all of this. In both the election of the first African-American President and the rise of the Tea Party, new voices are being heard—from slave descendants and poor black ghetto mothers, to out of work auto workers and prosperous middle class hockey moms. If the debate sounds contentious, deafeningly so, it may be because there are so many more and various voices in the chorus of We the People as we enter the 21st century. Our democracy has new challenges.

Politically speaking, things could be a lot worse. That seems hard to believe until you look at the countries where people are rising up against corrupt leaders who have ruled oppressively out of self-interest and greed. If there is an excess of zeal and principle on both sides in Washington, whether for saving Medicare and MediCal and other entitlements or putting an end to government overspending and balancing the budget, our politicians are dealing with our real issues, and the collision of interests reflects where our own history has brought us. That so many people are trying to parse this out—angrily or reasonably—is a good thing. What are we learning here? It may take us years to find out. The 2012 Election will be our next big exam. Are there other ways to surprise ourselves that we haven’t discovered yet?

NOVEMBER 9, 2016 – “We never saw this coming”

The answer to the last question is *yes*. A “new way to surprise ourselves” is the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Shock is a more accurate word. At last [count](#) 65,534,951 Hillary voters woke up this morning stunned by the news that Donald Trump had won the Electoral College vote. Even some in the Trump campaign were surprised. I am reminded that eight years ago, millions of people stood in the places where our hearts are today, shocked by the election of Barack Obama. Right now, 62,858,281 Trump voters are rejoicing as Democrats did then. They are not all ignorant or filled with hate.

There is always a loser in this process and we are taught by that in a way that we wouldn't be if it didn't tear our hearts and give rise to our fears. But we must remember that Trump is not Duterte or Erdogan or Kim Jun Un. Our process is intact. It is healthy, if bruised. We didn't have a military coup d'état.

The most repeated phrase among pundits and the media was "We never saw it coming." But as I look back on those previous journal entries, the seeds are there. 49% of the popular vote to Trump, 51% to Hillary. The country is more divided than ever and the most urgent thing is to discover who "we the people" really are, 230 years after the first People sought a more perfect union.

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America." That is, in essence, the prologue to our democracy, according to We the People almost exactly 230 years ago this year. Clever, clever People!

C.G. Jung described the psyche as a self-adjusting system. I think the body is too. And likewise the collective body of a nation. We *are* an organism; a nation of people. There was a quiet wound that we progressives didn't detect or acknowledge in our own bright certainties. And I would say this is a cautionary tale for would-be philosophers, psychologists, cosmologists [speaking to my Philosophy, Cosmology and Consciousness department at CIIS in San Francisco]. The larger world is not the rarefied Bay Area that gives opportunity and fertility for visionaries and tomorrow-shapers. Not that we should give up our vision or our projects but that we should remain humble and remember that we are just the eye or the hand, the knee or ankle, of something much larger, more diverse, which we are as a whole. We live at the pleasure, or the mercy, of that whole.

We should never assume that every person around us—our neighbors, our friends, even family—shares our choices and perspectives. That would be our arrogance. A collective egoism. We mustn't glorify We and vilify They or think of ourselves as loving when we love only those who agree with us. That only breeds self-righteousness. Exactly what we complain about in Them. Anger, death and loss open us up and bring us together in a deeper way. (I am thinking of the deaths of Kennedy and King and 9/11). They scrape away the veneer of our well-shaped ideas and challenge our certainties. But real change, and even real love, can only come from that plowed and harrowed, that hallowed place. And as for spirituality? I have always believed that it begins in and flourishes in the dark hard places, those Saturnian times that test and focus us.

Is the task of "We the People" to make sure that our vision for the country is always the one that prevails? If so, the messy system of democracy is not for us. If it is to form a more perfect union, then that requires an expanded, deepened form of what each human being is; to know ourselves more insightfully, not only as We the People, but also as I the Person. Donald Trump, as many have observed, carries a huge shadow for all of us. By erupting out of the populace, Trump forces us to deal much more directly with our differences and unfinished business (like the miasma we have walked ourselves into with social media and virtual reality and the rise of "fake news").

The shift from the Center for Ecozoic Studies to Ecozoic Societies takes on significant and relevant new meaning. "Studies" are undertaken largely in the realm of concepts and can be much more satisfying, as we trim and focus them, than the ever-challenging project of how we live together and flourish together with diverse ideas that can never be resolved into a smooth, coherent summary. There is an enormous

self-reflection going on in this country following Trump's victory. Certainties have been banished and we are forced to look at everything anew. Above all, a genuine national conversation is underway in cities, on campuses, and around the kitchen table with our families.

It seems to me that the greatest change that has taken place in those 230 years is that We the People of the United States are now We the People of planet Earth. The United States is not alone in dealing with deep divisions. Elections and referendums are going on around the globe that reflect similar symptoms of our great transition—what Joanna Macy calls “the Great Turning.” This morning I read this headline—“Italy's president: ‘Stay calm, democracy is solid’”—after a referendum vote (like Brexit) resulted in President Matteo Renzi stepping down. “President Sergio Mattarella says the high turnout—68.5 percent—in Sunday's referendum ‘is testimony to a solid democracy, of a passionate country, capable of active participation.’”

I appreciate that Herman Greene has called us into this dynamic process to have our own conversation. It can only result in a deeper and better level of engagement, which offers greater hope for Thomas Berry's [vision](#) of an Ecozoic future for our planet. So, as I often like to do, I will give Thomas the last word:

We need to live together not in a world of aggression and counter-aggression, not in a world of mutual exploitation but in a universe that is the deeper self of each of us. As we recover from the sorrows inflicted upon us by the recent destruction of the Trade Towers, as we ease the antagonisms that surround us, we need to go further into that deeper identity that we have with each other in the Great Self. Somewhere, somehow, mercy and justice must kiss in the all-embracing numinous presence wherein peace descends upon us all in the dawn of a new day.