

TOWARD A MORE HUMAN DIALOGUE

By Simon Spire

A year after Donald Trump's arrival in the White House, what's clear is that our familiar instruments of cultural progress are no longer sufficient for the evolutionary juncture at which we find ourselves. We are accustomed to relying on the tools of evidence and rational argument; the establishment of laws and norms that guide our society; the social change spearheaded by activism and protests. Needless to say, these forces have been indispensable in building a better nation, and we owe much today to their efficacy. What the tenor of the cultural discourse over the past year demonstrates, however, is that something deeper—something that resides beyond the reach of the more obvious tools for change—is calling for our attention. Acknowledging and learning to respond to these veiled layers of the national psyche presents an opportunity for embracing a more integrated perspective on human development. It may also represent an essential step in our ability to cultivate a cultural setting that is capable of embracing anything resembling an ecozoic culture.

Over the course of Trump's first year as president, we have witnessed a variety of responses from his many detractors and critics. One theme that is often heard from the more philosophically inclined frames Trump's appearance on the country's center stage as an expression of the nation's collective shadow, perhaps heralding a necessary—if distressing and dangerous—reckoning with the less savory aspects of our culture, our systems of power, and our history. In this portrayal of our current era, Trump is cast as fulfilling the role of drawing our collective attention to what has been operating destructively in the shadows of our country's awareness by way of amplifying these dynamics in such a way that they could not possibly be missed.

This may be a useful metaphor for understanding the charged outpourings we have witnessed this past year. If it is the case, however, that what we are witnessing are the outpourings of the nation's shadow, I would suggest what we are seeing now is only the tip of the iceberg—and that our tendency to fail to recognize this likelihood is the source of much larger problems. Were we willing to engage with one another in a courageously transparent and honest way, we may discover a new space of generative dialogue that fosters fuller psychological development and wellbeing for our people and that opens the way for a higher synthesis of our diverse views than we are currently seeing.

What is required, I believe, is the ability to see beneath the destructive and divisive expressions of opinion we so often witness and to inhabit our full humanity enough to acknowledge the humanity of those whose views could easily infuriate us. It is all too easy, in the face of a challenge, to reactively allow ourselves to be pushed into some reductive identification with a particular position. We then contract our full capacity in order to defend this position, and in so doing, we reduce the full human being appearing as the challenger to his or her own position. When each attempts to prevail over the other's position with reasoning, evidence, or clashes of values, we lock ourselves into a win-lose paradigm in which we are engaging on only the most superficial levels. In essence, we end up fighting a series of proxy wars without ever engaging in

Commented [S1]: I changed this from my original "is" to "are," to agree with the plural "outpourings" (I hope I've got that right).

the hidden dynamics that are at the heart of the matter. This pattern is common in personal disputes, culture wars, and politics; it's more comfortable to stay with the familiar fight. Delving into the unknown depths can be intimidating, vulnerable, and unpredictable.

If we are to have a chance of progressing to a culture that prioritizes human development and the flourishing of life—an ecozoic culture—we will collectively need to move toward adopting a more human approach. The national discourse of the past year has confirmed this as a necessity by demonstrating that facts, evidence, laws, and modernist or post-modernist perspectives on rights are no longer addressing the bigger picture. There's something deeper at play, and as with any shadow material, it won't rest until it is acknowledged and engaged—and, ideally, given the room to unfold and transform into a more integrated and aligned expression of its current raw energy.

What is most important during these chaotic times is not simply attempting to silence voices of aggression, bigotry, and divisiveness by shouting them into submission or attempting to defeat them by invoking the standards of reason and decency that we believe should be taken for granted. As with any wounded element of the psyche, repression only leads to more festering and further destruction. What is required is the willingness to see deeper than the surface expression. Rather than being overwhelmed by the aggressive posturing of the other's expression, one must be able to also listen to the scared, injured, isolated, or undeveloped dynamics beneath the expression as well as how we ourselves feel threatened. Typically, the individual displaying the belligerent behavior is completely unaware of these underlying factors. By creating a space for exploring and acknowledging the complexity of the elements involved, the possibility for healing and for constructive development opens up. Incorporating such awareness into our cultural and political conversations should be a priority for those who desire real cultural evolution. Helping young people with such self-reflective skills—which I believe are rightly viewed as core capacities for fully functional human adults—should also be a priority in facilitating their developmental journeys if we seek to truly serve their wellbeing and that of their future society.

An example of such a perspective in practice can be found in David Camppt's creation of the White Ally Toolkit. Camppt, whose work as a speaker and author encompasses civic engagement, racial equity, and conflict resolution, draws on research and experience to encourage those seeking to address racism to take an approach of finding initial common ground with "racism skeptics," rather than leading with "truth-telling." The former invites reflection on the many layers of structure composing one's worldview; the latter triggers the racism skeptics' defenses and further entrenches the worldview giving rise to their beliefs. When I attended a seminar held by Camppt last year, he highlighted the futility of deploying strong, pointed arguments that may feel satisfying but are precisely the wrong tactic when trying to address socially destructive worldviews. Instead, he recommended genuinely listening to the other side. Better understanding another's view, while also signaling that the individual is heard and therefore valued, can shift the dynamic markedly. Instead of then arguing with the perspectives shared, Camppt suggests shifting the focus to personal experiences that may help illustrate how one's own perspectives on race were formed. This opens up the possibility for self-examination by

the other participant in the conversation. By beginning to explore personal experiences and the origins of our beliefs, a new dynamic enters the exchange, and the possibilities for change and for deeper understanding of one another are greatly enhanced.

Such principles are helpful for any basic differences in worldview. In the face of some of the displays of antisocial, myopic, or destructive sentiments being expressed in the past year, I have been listening for the clues to what is driving the disturbing surface expression. Is there anger at a ruthless economic system that injects constant anxiety and instability into families and communities? Is there a fear of insignificance? Resentment at feeling unseen by a culture that dictates the rules of behavior? Anger at feeling marginalized or dismissed? Frustration with a perception of hovering at the bottom rung of society? Are there cases in which what we see is an expression of an isolated developmental context, or of a cultural environment that stunts one's natural flourishing of empathy and felt connection with other beings? Whatever it is, it's possible for our dialogue and our own personal sharing to include these spheres of experience.

It's all too convenient to write off illogical or objectionable views as wrong, without attempting to understand the worldview at the heart of what's being expressed. Until we invite a space of honest communication that honors the full humanity of all participants, destructive patterns are destined to repeat and fester. Granted, this is far easier said than done. For one thing, unskilled attempts at opening a genuine space of reflection and exchange can easily backfire as manipulative, condescending, or laughable. But we need to start to find ways to move beyond the superficial gridlock that keeps us stuck in an adolescent stage of human development—one in which we are too timid or skittish to dive deeper into our full experience and the many layers of identity and history informing our firmly held beliefs. A genuinely ecozoic culture will require us to stand authentically in our full humanity, and failing to bring such perspectives to the political domain will only impede progress. A healthy culture, like a healthy individual, requires that all elements are included and nurtured into their healthy expression as necessary parts of the whole. Shunning and condemning destructive elements is only a temporary fix, and a dangerous one at that; engaging apparently destructive voices with an understanding that some undeveloped part of the culture is coming into view is what enables a more integrated, healthy, and creative way forward.

Such an orientation is, of course, not going to magically set a culture on a preconceived idea of a "correct" course. The work of Steve McIntosh and Carter Phipps at the Institute for Cultural Evolution provides a useful framework here, advocating "evolving the left" and "evolving the right." Both conservative and liberal perspectives are understood as natural parts of the human psyche—or of the collective cultural psyche—with an inherent evolutionary tendency. Providing an environment conducive to the evolution of both trajectories is presented as a path beyond polarization. While the topic of this essay is not political polarization per se, the Institute's model provides a useful analog by attempting to understand and include diverse viewpoints, thus providing them the space to unfold and move into more integrated and healthy expressions. The way forward, in this sense, is not determined by a static set of beliefs or principles that would solve the culture's problems if only enough people would get on board. Rather, the way forward is an unknown that is the product of the dynamic interplay of diverse

views; the more we are able to wisely and safely support the evolution and healing of elements that may be in opposition to our own views, the more freely and consciously the culture will be able to progress.

When Donald Trump won the election, perhaps what surprised his detractors most was his supporters' capacious tolerance for apparent scandal, falsehood, and juvenile antics. Many were bewildered by how a man whose character was so at odds with many of his supporters' professed values, and whose transparent appeals to populist sentiment were dubious at best, could garner such loyal support. A year later, what has been confirmed is that there are aspects of the national psyche that will not be swayed by condemnation, argument, or a critical appraisal of results. The president can disregard the rule of law, oppose a free press and informed citizenry, and borrow heavily against future material wellbeing to fund measures that exacerbate the concentration of economic power, and as long as he pays lip service to standing for American values and helping American workers, many of his supporters enthusiastically stand by their president. Something deeper is driving support for some of the most troublesome actions in our country. Understanding and learning to respond to these deeper layers of identity and motivation, rather than ostracizing them, may be a necessary step in our cultural progression—one that may well have significant repercussions for our ability to relate and collectively live from a fuller experience of our humanity.