



Gene Ziegler

Octogenarian Time Capsule

## The Great Divide

### *American Culture Wars*

The agony of the Trump era of American politics is the frustrating and near futile attempt to understand the true nature of the divide. The ostentatious presentation of a dysfunctional conservative ideology, bordering on cultish fantasy, is rife with bitterness and envy. It is more reactionary than conservative and seeks to destroy everything in its path, but with unclear goals beyond defeating those who are perceived to stand as obstacles to their wrath. With spectacular irony, they have turned to the architects of their plight, the affluent elite and their corrupted power brokers, to lead them out of their despair. As in classical revolutionary theory, the power brokers whisper to the disaffected that it is the educated middle class that is at the root of their problems. And in their ignorance, they believe with an irrational passion in an alternate reality and turn to their dementors for an authoritarian savior. *Why?*

An appealing theory appears in an article by Andrew Whalen in Newsweek (7/22/20) entitled variously “The Great Unmasked”, and “Narcissists and Psychopaths Are More Likely to Refuse to Wear Masks.” Whalen reports on research published in The Journal of Personality and Individual Differences into the Dark Triad Traits; Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy. Researchers report,

*Respondents demonstrating Dark Triad traits—so-called because their malevolent (or "dark") qualities correlate with more crime, less compassion and dangerous leadership qualities—were more likely to hoard and less likely to take preventive measures.*

*The results correspond well with previous research into individuals with Dark Triad personality traits, who tend to be more impulsive, short-sighted, competitive and risk-taking.*

It follows that in extreme cases of dark personality traits, people are less likely to comply with rules, laws, norms and restrictions on their behavior. They are given to bigotry and cruelty and drawn to authoritarian and often violent solutions to conflict, even to the repression of dissenting points of view. They eagerly embrace conspiracy theories that reinforce paranoid notions that justify their grievances of inequity. They are unlikely to take a stand against racial, social or economic injustice and express self-righteous indignation in the face of those who do. We have the most extreme example of those traits in the person of President Trump.

Such qualities are, of course, not absolute. Extreme narcissism is rare, but in its less benign form may be expressions of selfishness, an irrational but often insecure sense of self-worth and self-actualization. Such people see life in sum-zero terms and as such are willing to see others suffer hardship and depravation in order to feed their own needs or desires. Their anxieties hinge on fears that *others* are beating them out in the competition for life's bounty; material wealth, success, recognition, influence. "*Others*" are most easily identified by race, color, gender, language, and religion. *Others* may also be simply more successful or better educated, more articulate, or even better looking. Envy, jealousy, and resentment are prongs on the devil's pitchfork.

These qualities lead to political resistance to welfare, food-stamps, disability compensation, Medicaid, debt forgiveness, unemployment compensation, possibly even Social Security. When these programs are linked to their perceptions of "*Others*" they metastasize into hate, public belligerence, and even violent confrontation. Malevolent politicians, themselves in possession of Dark Traits, willfully capitalize on these misanthropic views in the quest for power. They present themselves as an authoritarian solution to thwarting the ubiquitous "Takers".

Where does this come from? Babies are born with dark traits as necessary tools of survival. They quickly become self-aware, demanding, and manipulative. As toddlers, they must be taught to share, don't scream for attention, don't hit, and to give love in order to get love. Good parents' guide them through these transitions and in doing so, mitigate dark traits into nearly complete remission. Indifferent parents, particularly those who are incapable of demonstrable love and given to harsh forms of discipline, may allow dark traits to fester and grow. Bad parents, themselves possessing strong dark traits, are likely to encourage those same traits in their offspring. Much of the world's ills are traceable to bad or inadequate parenting.

Our psychological makeup as a species rides on an ideological spectrum that is black-and-white on one end and infinite shades of gray on the other. We range all over the spectrum depending on our upbringing, our education and the culture in which we are immersed. Generalizations about individuals and groups of people are always precarious, but always tempting in evaluating competing ideologies. We skirt on the boundaries of ecological fallacy when do so, but it can also be useful to trying to understand people who do not think as we do.

We are all born near the black and white end of the spectrum. We migrate toward the center and possibly beyond through education. Vocational education, ever so essential to our civilization and survival, channels our natural curiosity towards the world of practical facts, useful skills, survival skills, and a special kind of creativity. But it can and often does narrow our purview to the more tangible aspects of life and away from loftier considerations of cultural, social, and political evolvments that invariably insert themselves into our lives whether we want them or not. We develop what we perceive as a practical belief system, much of which we absorb from our parents, our schools, and our chosen environment, that too often includes myths, legends and rumors that we accept as true and real because they reinforce our current beliefs and biases.

People who are avid readers, or go on to college, get graduate degrees, especially in the liberal arts, move farther along on the spectrum. *Enlightenment*, a politically loaded term these days, is discovering that very little in life, even in the sciences and especially religion, is

incontrovertible. Shades of gray are ever present. Critics from the right say that colleges and universities only function is to make students more liberal. The left would argue that ‘Yes’ that should be a goal since you need enlightened thinking to solve society-wide problems and resolve conflicts. People on the far-right tend to make hard intractable stands based whatever fictions they have embraced. Liberals are usually less certain and believe that all things are negotiable.

The locus of life is to love and to learn. Education has long been the preferred path to improved social status in American society. Training is applied education. Education is implied training, often for some unspecified future career. It’s what most parents want for their children. But here is another thought. It is quite possible to go through college and get a degree without getting a liberal education. Colleges and especially Universities offer a wide variety of programs in engineering, science, business, agriculture, pre-med, hotel management and more. The best schools have basic requirements for a sampling of liberal arts courses, but arts courses are so broadly defined that it’s easy to sidestep the deeper humanities. But even the students and faculty who live on the more or less vocational side of curriculum, still live and work under the bright lights on enlightenment and will emerge a little farther along our spectrum than where they started. And our success as a nation depends on this.

Unfortunately, our success as a materialistic culture has come at the cost of devaluing education. Easy money and unproductive distractions have trapped much of our populace in the darker regions of our triads. Many are disaffected, bitter, envious, unsympathetic and often irrational. They fantasize about a romanticized past and want to turn back the clock. They are drawn to the pied piper, the Elmer Gantry of politics who promises “He can fix it.” He can’t.

*Gene Ziegler, Chandler, Arizona August 2020*