

# Unhinged

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (June 2023)



*Rainy Day, Fifth Avenue, Childe Hassam, 1916*

**In this time of greatest wealth**, peace and safety (is true, seems counter intuitive, may not last long) optimism has been replaced by collective ennui. Even if one is inclined to be optimistic, the dictates of the present woke world demand a tribal, Eeyore-like adherence to catastrophism of all problems towards ideological solutions. That to which we belong we are to belong absolutely, and equally so, we are assigned to belong to either the oppressed or oppressors. Why fight what has been determined, even if in a historical heartbeat, transcendence and belonging to something larger than self and tribe was a worthy and shared goal?

It seems every new woke outrage is greeted with a shrug and seemingly reasonable, 'just wait, until the pendulum swings back.' To which, I ponder, to what? Just how does a pendulum swing back to what it does not know? The trajectory of return swing can only be accomplished by a mechanism that remains hinged, and the cultural apocalypticism of our enlightened age has become unhinged.

I wish my faulty impression was unhinged instead. But alas, the ground beneath our feet has shifted, and once unassailable values are expendable. Consider highlights from the recent NORC (National Opinion Research Centre) poll described by the Wall Street Journal [article](#), "America Pulls Back From Values That Once Defined It."

1. In 1998, 70% considered patriotism very important, compared to 38% today.
2. In 1998, 62% considered religion very important, compared to 39% today.
3. In 1998, 59% said having children is very important, compared to 30% today.
4. Meanwhile, fully 91% say self-fulfillment is either somewhat or very important, and 90% say money is either somewhat or very important.

For those under 30, these figures drop to 23% for patriotism, 31% for religion, and 23% for having children. Canada tends towards synchronicity with these trendy American trends. And while the malaise meanders and plot thickens, progressives are achieving what they wished for as never before. Still, given today's obsession with sustainability, especially from among young people, it seems odd that human sustainability is slipping away without concern. Western birth rates are mostly below 2.1%, the figure needed to sustain a population. For example, Spain, nominally a Catholic country, holds the European low fertility rate at 1.2%, which is formula for rapid depopulation. Sadly, on a 2021 chart showing the birth rate of 37 European countries, France has the highest at only 1.84%. No country has ever come back from a decline to 1.9%. The 2022 American birth rate, traditionally higher than all of Europe, is now below the point of no return at 1.7%. Of course, the progressive answer is predictable: sustainability is for plants, animals and icebergs, but not for humans. No sustenance from that unsustainable thought.

If a young and declining population has never much thought, does not have the context to value country, religion, and the importance of children, just how does the pendulum swing back? If country is just pandering to the man, if the concept of God is too vague, and children merely add to climate change disaster, one cannot maturate static aggravation into pendulum swing recovery. It just ain't there. More than sad, it's tragic.

I come from a time when we wee babies were everywhere, with aspirations for money and self-fulfillment something people didn't admit to in polite company. One of my earliest and most vivid memories is watching the much-anticipated North American debut of the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show in 1964. I wasn't among the anticipators, did not know who or what the Beatles were, but I distinctly remember that anticipation was in the

air. My five-year older brother just had to see the Beatles on Ed's Sunday variety show, and in our shared everything world, that meant our entire brood were consigned to watch the same on our only TV. In the wake of the pre-woke world, tectonic plates began colliding with seismic results that we are still adjusting to.

Until that moment we had mostly lived in the world of family, community and religion—that is, the individual defined by context of others—and had not much thought about or envisioned a world tending towards me, myself and I. If we thought about it at all—and we didn't—the 'me' generation was simply an 'I' anomaly that we would get over. We were wrong.

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Long hair and psychedelic colours passed, but these were only interchangeable markers for what was to come. The Beatles did not just displace Bing Crosby, they represented an epoch of change in every aspect of western civilization. I'm sure many people at the time thought that Father O'Malley would return to the parish and the pendulum would swing back, negating whatever the Beatles were.

What I remember most about the Beatles debut was their effect on the audience, my brother included. Unlike all other Ed Sullivan shows, on this night the camera often turned and faced the audience as teenage girls out-performed the Fab Four with histrionics and contrived swooning. It was exciting, but I didn't share the excitement, didn't understand it. My parents grumbled as teenagers stumbled, and we collectively traded our outward sight of the stars for an inward gaze of the naval.

My simple contention is that the 1960's confused two seemingly similar ideas. The need for change based on altruistic imperative came up against the hubris and narcissism of those newly drunk on power. Not the Beatles fault but they, being

more popular than Christ, represented a memorable demarcation line. More dramatic examples might be the French and Russian revolutions, wherein the execution of noble ideas resulted in ignoble executions. And it isn't just that things don't always work out for the revolutionary minded. There is also the irony factor. The lost lesson of the French Revolution's aspirations—liberty, equality and fraternity—resulted in enslavement, post-Monarchy anarchy, and a complete reversal of class tyranny.

So why don't things work out? And more to the point, why can't the woke awakening that has taken over entertainment, the media, education and politics, work out? And by extension why do we continue on the hamster wheel of repeating history with repeated failure? We tend to see the left's political ascendancy in the political arena and our many losses in the cultural wars as solely political and cultural phenomena.

But the roots may run deeper. A few years back I read a book entitled, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. It is a powerful read, setting out the negative impact of technology on brain function, and especially on our impressionable children. It was impressive research, but I thought its claim that our brain is being rewired was a tad exaggerated. Little did I know, little do parents understand. This book anticipated a 2020 Netflix special—unlike any other—called *The Social Dilemma*. It too disparaged the overuse (raise a hand those who can honestly claim to not overuse) of technology and particularly social media. It exposed the social media's malevolent preying on our need for belonging, and the use of algorithms that unhinge the brain into lust for what it doesn't even want. I say *The Social Dilemma* was unlike any other because it featured the makers and shakers—creators, designers, CEO's—of the social media who uniformly cautioned the use of their own technologies. And here is why the term rewiring your brain is not over-stated: its addictive infusion of dopamine into the prefrontal cortex

is equivalent to cocaine use. Most prescient point: those interviewed either severely limited or did not allow their children access to their Frankenstein-like creations. Social media was created to be addictive, exceeded Dr. Frankenstein's expectations, and was unleashed into the world without knowing what the ultimate consequences might be. And those who made the machine without thought of consequence are rich beyond measure.

Just this week, I finished another paradigm destroying book called *The Master and the Emissary*, by Ian McGilchrist. It is a long, difficult and worthy read by a brainiac of gigantic proportions. The first half of the book discusses the astonishing processing coordination between left and right brain function, with the left brain, responsible for language and logic most often regarded as the master. The right brain, responsible for context and metaphor, generally gets second billing. But the contention of the book is that the right brain, of poor second cousin status, is actually the unrecognized master because its between-the-lines, implicit understanding, gives us much needed context and meaning.

The brain, of course, ultimately works as a whole, but it is interesting the extent to which it functions as a dichotomous whole, with left or right brain supremacy dependent upon or else determining whichever cultural epoch is examined. Generally throughout time, humanity has progressed in the non-modern, traditional sense— i.e. art, architecture, literature—when right brain function has had the upper hand. Michelangelo, the building of cathedrals, and Shakespeare illustrate the point. Conversely, dark periods (the dark ages, the Inquisition, and the winning trio of Hitler, Stalin and Mao of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) have occurred during periods when the mechanistic, utilitarian left brain has held sway. It turns out the mechanistic, process-oriented and very determined left brain master, can be master of inertia and ruin if not tempered by imprecise, intuitive right brain function.

This leads to the present time. The systems we have developed during this long left brain run have served us well in many ways. We have improved transportation, health, farming, communication and many technologies so that we can move faster, live longer and feed large populations with greater efficiency. Objectively, we are better off in the aforementioned categories of affluence and safety. But because of, or in spite of all that emphasis on the illusion of absolute individual independence, we are increasingly unable to relate to the seven billion selves outside of self to whom we belong. And that is troubling.

*The Master and the Emissary* concludes with a few simple bottom line concepts. An increase in material wealth has not created a commiserate increase in happiness. In fact, once minimum standards are met, left brain consumers are left with unfulfilled desire. As such, actual happiness is best predicted by the breath and depth of one's social connections. And, ironically true and intuitively known, it turns out that right brain propensity for altruism is a major contributor to health and longevity. This is because for all the left's brains emphasis on mechanical functioning, we humans are not a machine. A kitschy illustration might be the fact that in the age of instant access to pornography, young people have less sex, and are less successful at it than their repressed, square old grandparents (true fact). The rumour is, many a grandparent on the verge of mentioning this to the youngins' pauses, smiles and decides, better left unsaid.

But it is the concluding point of *The Master and the Emissary* that is most relevant to our times. Our left brain, drunk on technological mastery and deeply invested in process and logical thinking, believes that life's mysteries can be logically processed into certainty. (Which may account for why there is greater anticipation of AI today than the Ed Sullivan audience waiting for the Beatles in 1964). Though the 1921 Heisenberg Uncertainty Principal established uncertainty as an

ironic certainty behind the facade of order in the universe, the promise of certainty in scientific materialism is our modern religion.

But this was not always so. For the ancients, belief in certainty was synonymous with hubris. Today, biologist Richard Dawkins is an intellectual rock star, dispelling notions of God and uncertainty with his oft repeated claim that science will know all and solve all, in time. For Dawkins, and his many moderns, belief in uncertainty is for the faint of heart, and the rulers of tomorrow courageously place their faith in the god of certainty.

Our angst may be our saving grace. However certain our beliefs during the light of day, uncertainty will certainly creep in as we lie awake in the dark of night. Or worse, we will successfully bury deeply what matters most. And the disparity between proclaimed beliefs of the day and what we know writhing under sheets during the night is why we have generational anxiety. We know we didn't create our lonely selves, nor have we been gifted with certainty about how we got here or where we are going. Whatever we have convinced ourselves to believe, our only solace against despair exists in the company of others. Simply put, in relying on our individual selves, we are lost. Our lives literally have no meaning without the context of the crowd. The pendulum too needs context—for which our present, modern dilemma has no historical precedent—to know whence to return. We need an imprecise, between-the-lines right brain solution to the mechanical precision of the modern world. Let's start with an age old search for wisdom from those of old age. Who knows, maybe we'll discover both a formula for living, as well as the sexual secrets of our randy, repressed ancestors.

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**Larry McCloskey** has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes*, and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife.

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