

Where Ignorant Armies Clash by Night

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (November 2022)



Time ... thou ceaseless lackey to eternity, Orit Hofshi, 2017

I'm sitting in a cafe on a perfect autumn day—which in Canada is the very definition of fleeting— and I really should be enjoying rather than mulling. My excuse is I don't worship on the alter of mindfulness as is the modern way. I can't help thinking that without knowing where we came from and without a reason to move forward in life, we don't have the context to know how to live. A poor excuse, maybe, but it seems life is less holding on to the moment than forever juggling the bits of our selves and our others—memory and future interactions—in continuous flow, not unlike ocean waves upon the shore. I am, admittedly, un-modern.

My dear old mom often said I was one for mulling things over, and all these decades later I admit the affliction continues.

And, I would add, has been exacerbated by political and cultural events of recent years.

Just how did we get to this place where decades-long friends who never had a word to say about politics or the raging cultural wars can no longer stand to be in the same room? Friends, neighbours, siblings, couples who didn't have a political stance five minutes ago cannot compromise their political views today? How is it that we have become polarized—with increasingly extreme pressure to adopt the correct political position—on the great political divide? Why is compromise synonymous with capitulation?

And as I mull over this very modern phenomenon, I am reminded of a poem that impressed in reading as a teenager, and in re-reading just now it astounds with relevance. Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* has a sense of timelessness, an archetypal connection from ancient Sophocles to 1867 Matthew Arnold, to this autumn day with its ceaseless "grating roar" of ocean waves that "bring the eternal note of sadness in." Hours ago—before uber cultural sensitivity and political awareness—we had poetry and art and beauty to remind us what, throughout the ages, we have in common. I think the word is Humanity. That would be the coming together and synthesis of human attributes into an indivisible one, as opposed to the parsing of identity parts that has become our modern, enlightened way. We have substituted being together for being against.

Back then has changed. Much of then has been deemed in need of correction. We know with precision and certainty a version of living of which our parents couldn't begin to dream. It never seems to occur to our enlightened selves that maybe our parents refused to dream the nightmare we refuse to wake from. Being woke will do that.

Whatever my parents believed politically is a profound mystery. They adhered to the golden rule that with friends and

family you don't talk religion or politics even though on the religious front they were all Catholic so unlikely to be much of a divide. My dad never asked my mom how she voted. My mom never asked my dad if he believed in God. Private views had meaning and were respected. If they were inclined towards poetry—they were not—they might comment on the universality of God's ways, the human condition, the eternal note of sadness from ocean waves. It wasn't just that these wayward discourses tended to cause conflict, but there were more important things to do—like surviving the depression, winning the 2nd world war, or raising seven kids. And perhaps—a surprise in our dour modern times—they stayed away from controversial subjects because those discussions weren't much fun. Under the weight of all of the above, they had fun in a way our technologically distracted world no longer seems capable of doing. Uncensored conversation around the kitchen table, whatever movie was on either of our two television channels, euchre, corny jokes competition at dinner, and just about any excuse to make things up, be creative, or find anything to do to keep from boredom. We didn't have Netflix and we were never bored.

So, with that world gone, my lifetime habit of mulling over is in overdrive. I look for objective ways to know—a formidable challenge both because sifting through conflicting facts and versions of the truth has always been challenging—and because in the polarized, subjective world in which we now reside, feelings rule with selective facts chosen to fit prescribed narrative. The primacy of 'lived experience,' 'my truth,' and 'google fact-checking' has reduced objectivity to historic relic. The bones of saints can be occasionally taken off the shelf and regarded for nostalgia's sake without disrupting the immutability of one's world view.

Dicing the supremacy of feelings may seem a dicey, but if we accept that our individual selves are not the centre of the universe (and what a relief it is to come to that epiphany), there may exist another way to negotiate knowing politics,

world issues, the meaning of life and our place in it. It is actually essential for good mental health to mostly park subjective feeling within the context of empirical evidence.

So how do we balance subjective feelings with objective reality? I have a test that can be summarized in one word: beer. My relationships—real and imagined—are not objective, are driven by feelings. There are far too many people I want to spend time with to spend any time with those I don't feel drawn to. In this regard, I don't question a wholly subjective methodology. For unknown public figures, I might fantasize about whether I'd like to sit down and have a beer and conversation. Some people are interesting, some not; same for those we are drawn to. That subjective, that simple. Still, who I'd like to have a beer with doesn't necessarily correlate to my assessment of that person's life work.

For example, Trump. Besides the fact that he doesn't drink beer, Trump isn't a likely choice for warm conversation in front of a peat fire in an Irish pub. (And no I haven't experienced an Irish pub actually heated by peat either, but it fits the fireside vibe. Besides in the subjective world, you get to make things up according to how you feel). For most people, Obama would probably trump Trump as choice of cozy conversationalist, and for more reasons than that he drinks beer. Still, that doesn't mitigate the fact that Obama was an ineffective and divisive president. True, Trump was also divisive, but Obama had a unique opportunity and made a promise to reconcile division, especially race relations on the basis of his own background and personal resolve. I remember exactly where I was when I heard a speech Obama made before he was elected in 2008. He spoke eloquently, a measured reconciliatory tone about bridging the gap between black and white. He spoke in a manner unique in American politics, and having one parent who was black and another who was white, his eloquence was eclipsed only by his apparent authenticity. But, as is now history, race relations deteriorated, with a wide

and increasingly irreconcilable gap between oppressors and the oppressed becoming the status quo. Still, for all the failings of his presidency, Obama remains one of the most charming human beings on the planet. That is, to the extent feelings are the currency of judgment.

And then there is Trump for whom there is always huge expectation to parrot variations of Trump Derangement Symptom (the diagnosis determined by a series of clinical tests indicating the prevalence of excessive, neurotic and deeply personal feelings of hatred that one believes to be wholly justified and completely objective). Astonishingly—even to Obama at the time—Trump's predecessor was given a Nobel Peace prize for a failed negotiation in the Middle East (surly the world's toughest place to make peace), whereas for Trump there were no meaningful prizes and the media hardly even acknowledged the unprecedented achievement of the 2020 Abraham Accords. (For those who have to look up what the Abraham Accords are, I rest my case. The thing about history is, it only exists as such if it is recorded).

Under Trump, the United States became energy independent, whereas Biden—with help from the likes of Trudeau in Canada—is begging thugs and despots of the world to sell him oil at inflated prices to cover his colossal mistakes, especially before the midterms. To the detriment of Americans, the thugs are unmoved and unwilling, enjoying their rarified Schadenfreude moment. The prospect of the United States on its knees does not present itself very often. And of course the hopelessly naive and aspirational assumption of Biden's and Europe's uber fast-tracking and wholly unrealistic green transition fuelled Putin's ambitions and has given the thugs of the world hope that the west's slow suicide may become imminent. The political coroner's assessment may determine death to have been caused by the excess of green, but not green initiatives so much as the green of hopelessly naive. Romances are forsaken, wars are lost, and civilizations fall

on the issue of timing. For all the potential good of green, it is a destructive force when forced to the starting line before its time.

As Victor Davis Hanson writes in *The Dying Citizen*, citizenship determines nationhood. As such, giving away citizenship is death to a nation. Trump campaigned on building the wall—and said some unpleasant things about Mexicans which excluded him receiving an invitation to join me for either a beer or Diet Coke at the pub. And yet, once in office he did what he said he was going to do and illegal immigration slowed to a trickle. Under Biden's anti-Trump progressive agenda, illegal immigration is out of control, the efficacy of the statement evidenced by the fact that we don't even know how many undocumented millions have passed across the porous border. There are many reasons why accepting large numbers of legal immigrants is good. But turning a blind eye to an unknown quantity and quality of people entering the United States based on the assumption they will express their gratitude by voting Democrat, is a very poor one. This sentiment is perhaps most strongly felt by people who have gained citizenship—with all its rights and obligations—legally, according to the existing rules of their adopted country.

Since 2020, Democrats have supported or given passive acceptance to de-fund the police movements (with the morale and effectiveness of the remaining police certainly affected). That phenomenon combined with a cadre of recently appointed progressive

Attorney Generals who refuse to prosecute criminals, has resulted in a shocking crime spike, particularly in blue states. One of Trump's achievements most ignored by the media was The First Step Act which has elements of both sentencing and prison reform. The Act was far from perfect, but was noteworthy for its commitment to measurable change beyond teleprompter aspirational utterances that ensure real change

never occurs. Basically, unlike the Democrat progressive way, Trump's act prosecuted criminals, but with shortened sentences and better prison conditions than had existed. Mostly noteworthy for something the media failed to note, The First Step Act was of disproportionate benefit to African-American and Hispanic prisoners. The Act was criticized for not going far enough, but it achieved something the previous progressive administration did not. It was a first step for an issue that needs many more steps in the same direction.

I know the many and varied objections, and I am not making a case for Trump. I am not assessing him as a human being but am solely focused on some of his achievements as President. And to that end, whether you or I like it, there were many, particularly compared to the present administration. Sure debatable points, subject to differing interpretation, but facts not easy to dismiss if we assess from the objective mind. In case I haven't been clear, I don't like Trump, and hope he doesn't run for the Republican nomination again. But my like or dislike is irrelevant, and my bottom-line plea is to the jury of rational thinking for a conscious and deliberate means of analysis that does not immediately revert to feelings and allegiance to prescribed causes. We can always choose feelings about an issue over what objective analysis concludes, but we need the self-awareness and context to know if we are making our own decision or simple reacting to the swirl of expectation upon us. We need to know, or least should be interested in knowing, who is driving the bus and if it is veering off a cliff.

All of which begs another question (and yes the mulling gene lends itself to asking many questions). If a loud-mouthed lout—who described himself as the least qualified candidate in the world to be president—has success as President, how do we assess a virtue-signaling President who is failing America and the world by any objective measure? Biden, his ideological lookers and hangers on, and the media parrot ridiculous

subjective claims that have no basis in reality ('the border is secure,' 'there will be no recession,' 'inflation will be temporary,' 'most Americans think this Administration is doing a fine job'), but the question remains, why does anyone living a real life not call such claims what they are—distortions and lies? Is it possible—unpleasant as it may be to discover—that my feelings, my lived experience, my truth, is not necessarily true?

Mulling on this question does not quash angst or lead to any satisfying answer. My unsatisfying conclusion is that we have devolved, morally declined, laid ourselves bare to the manipulation and hallow claims of—as Thomas Sowell says—the skewered vision of the anointed. As such, we have given away our ability to think critically, separate feelings from analysis, sort through ideological proclamations (borrowed thinking) and discover our own convictions (a moral compass based on examined life in progress).

Just why have we made the seismic shift towards regarding history, civilization and the present world as unsalvageable, barely worthy of our condemnation and blame? Why do we think that our newly minted progressive world is the epoch of greatness, while the past only exists to be corrected and re-written? Why is it that we of the proper causes, anoint ourselves to be so unquestionably right and smarmily smart? Hubris is too limited a word.

And as I mull over these many penetrating questions, I am stymied trying to find a singular, unifying answer? Then as mulling deepens, the answer unexpectedly seeps into mulling consciousness and smacks me square in the mulling-contorted face. While in coffee-shop writing form, I mostly ignore whoever parks beside me. For whatever reason, I like the noise and action swirling around me as I cocoon at a table, with little to intrude upon my thoughts.

But on this occasion, half an hour into a couple's arrival,

bits of their discussion began to intrude. The tables are close together and the twosome beside me talk and talk and I do not listen and listen, but something is percolating. It seems they have met before but don't really know each other, are in the process of feeling out where each stands or sits in relation to the other, and I—who have no experience with the technologically driven means of achieving relationship—suspect they are on a date/feeling out meeting/hooking-up possibility session. She is black and he is white which has no significance until he makes it so. He wants to impress her, is determined to impress her—either ideologically, or he is engaged in the keystone move of his much practiced shagging strategy—as he talks and talks, ratcheting up excitement as she listens and occasionally vocalises approval.

He latches onto the scourge of white supremacy, of its existence everywhere, and of his reputation for speaking up against white supremacy everywhere. She approves. He moves on to the recently celebrated holiday, once called Thanksgiving, now re-named— by him and a select number of progressive others—Anti-White Supremacy and De-Colonialization Day. Of this too she approves, but not with great enthusiasm which drives him into an apoplectic frenzy of disparaging, re-naming and regurgitating all things anti-white, anti-establishment (sorry but the establishment has rolled over into your anti anti world, so nothing subversive there) and anti-colonialism. Only Auntie Mable has not been included .

He has run out of steam, anti and otherwise, and she changes the subject with a searing question about the style and maintenance of his man-bun hairdo which he, in his flagging moment, reacts to with enthusiasm. Finally, an issue to be discussed that is not anti, but is full of important and positive tentacles of conversational possibility. He talks—seems an exaggeration, but is not—for twenty minutes on said care and maintenance of man-bun, and then they leave. Perhaps she has tired of his narcissistic diatribes or else

his shagging strategy has been successful and they go somewhere private so that he can unfurl his man-bun to further and heightened approval.

Either way, the singular answer to my mulling question has been made epiphany clear. For all the complexity and ambiguity of modern life, we have a choice. And we have to make it, cannot prevaricate, delay or avoid. Life and our response to it comes down to either gratitude or grievance. And my guy's man-bunned characterization of Anti-White Supremacy, Anti-Colonization Day formerly known as Thanksgiving, is the perfect metaphor for the seismic societal shift that has rocked our Norman Rockwellian world. What was once a ritual at every meal of giving thanks has been relegated to the past—that would be the past in need of severe correction. Still, we grieve without grievance.

In the absence of any achievements, relevancy to the lives of real people, or intellect, our Canadian Prime Minister is a professional apologist. While the grievance grind has shagging potential and the apology tour excites the senses—the all time low point in Canadian politics occurred at the exact moment our Prime Minister staged a photo-op by holding a teddy bear at a grave site in solidarity with the aboriginal babies murdered at residential schools. At least that was the headline two or so years ago. And yet, with a great deal of time to prove or disprove allegations, nothing has been resolved for an issue that burned with immediacy when the story broke worldwide. So, why has there not been concerted effort to confirm or correct the original accusation? Why not vigorously pursue truth wherever that leads? If pursuing truth is a personal value, we will always embrace the concept of wherever it leads however unpleasant. Still, incredible as the inertia seems, it has logic. Logic because why bother with pursuing truth when the imprinted, original narrative fits so perfectly? With at least 68 churches burned, untold damage, and continuing outrage into the unproven present, why

introduce facts that have the potential to alter the narrative? Never let truth deflect from an opportunity to clutch a teddy bear and score political points at the prospect of tragedy. Whether or not the worst claims prove accurate, who uses tragedy as the political opportunity of a lifetime?

The new and improved grievance world appropriates everyone to their respective role as either oppressor or among the oppressed. Given this dynamic, the rise of identity politics makes perfect sense. Best adorn oneself with kitschy anti-oppressor markings and stake one's place among the oppressed before being assigned—like Dante's *Inferno*—to the lowest level of oppressor hell. The irony of course is that no amount of self-flagellation of one's race or gender is enough to expunge original sin, but those of true oppressed exterior status might appreciate the futile effort. As for us poor saps who remember with nostalgia the imperfections of our shared heritage, anti-woke past, there is always Matthew Arnold.

*The Sea of Faith was, too, at the full,
But now I hear,
It's melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.*

Still, all is not hopeless. We have the thought, the comfort, the hope of a transcendent life and, most of all, we have the bitter sweet comfort of relationships. And if not mindfulness, we can be mindful of relationships, immediate and present, even if we cower in the face of what will come. For all the assaults upon common sense and decency, for all the vicissitudes and heartaches of modern life, we have each other to face the trifecta of pain and loss and death. Together.

Ah love let us be true

*To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain:
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

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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 Psychotherapist. He lives in the heart of woke Ottawa, Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife.

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