

CIVIL WAR AND SORROW

The Marvelous María Beatriz and I spent Thanksgiving 2020 in North Carolina with a dear friend who would have otherwise spent the holiday by herself.

The 13-hour drive from New Jersey took us through a good swath of the former Confederacy (various Trump/Pence signs—“Truckers for Trump” and a DJT doll made out of two stacked rolls of hay, one upright painted with his blue suit/red tie ensemble and on top of that, one end facing out, his face and hair—an enormous Confederate battle flag waving from a 60-foot pole on a hilltop, scores of ads for the Crucifixion made out of three crosses also planted on hilltops, a poster in a store which showed a Confederate soldier pointing a gun at the viewer with the caption, “We kill every third Yankee, and the second one just left,” a supposedly historical study of Lincoln’s Marxists, Stonewall Jackson’s museum and so on).

Seeing all this put me in mind of the call-outs being voiced these days about the need for having another civil war or that we are already in a civil war and that there is little Biden/Harris can do to end it.

Let us say that after the election, segments of American society indeed seem in a civil-war mood, in civil-war prep: pre-actual conflict on the battlefield but past the possibility for a reconciliation.

How would a second American Civil War play out?

Before musing on that, let us all accept that this would not be the second American Civil War but just one more iteration of America’s history of its own citizens being at war with its own citizens, beginning with the revolution (Brits against Brits) and moving through constant waves of civil warring (slavery, eradication of aboriginal Americans, the abandonment of Reconstruction, capitalist depredations against the working class, civil rights movements, and so on).

There has never been a time, even during the supposed amity of the decade following the second world war, when some contingent of Americans was not actively trying to delete some other contingent of Americans. What we have today is just a juiced-up version of what Americans have been doing to themselves for the last quadramillennium.

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While it's not out of the realm of possibility that militias and others will take up arms to provoke a race war or white supremacist war or something of that ilk, I think this next civil war would continue to play out as it has always played in the American context: as a class war flavored by race and gender where democratic power is wielded to diminish the fortunes of the many in favor of increasing the wealth and power of the few.

The Republican Party has spent decades constructing itself along these lines just as the Democratic Party has not spent those decades forming a counterbalance. Because other political parties (e.g., the Greens) have no chance of breaking up the duopoly, the coming/continual civil war will be a continuation of Republican stratagems (they can't really be called policies) to retain power, promote whiteness and funnel more riches to the rich through division, voter suppression and governing (if it can be called that) through minority control.

I can appreciate that Biden/Harris had to send out a call for unity after the election—it is part of their job as the incomers to do so, and they made the appropriate gestures of believing what they were saying.

But what, precisely, is this unity they are calling for?

At some high abstract level there might be a unity around the principles of liberty and equity—the touchstones of the American project—but once the discussion becomes about the details of how those principles get put into play—in other words, politics—we are back to our present-day.

There are ways out of this dilemma, and many Americans are working at that through the hundreds of small and large nonprofit organizations chipping away at our common problems. But this work has little power against the institutions that supposedly enact our political will as “the people” but which really do as all institutions do: perpetuate the benefits of those on the inside.

Unless all the good-faith efforts of millions of people can be forged into a political movement with enduring political establishments, we will remain locked in this stasis of blathering on while the American experiment dissolves into what Lewis Lapham once called a “participatory fascism.”

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Of late, though, given the damage wrought by the pandemic, I have been thinking that there is another basis for unity that Americans should employ to at least blunt the demonizing of others if not bring brotherhood: sorrow.

I'm thinking specifically of a passage in George Saunder's *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Saunders based his 2017 book on a historical fact that when the Lincolns' 11-year-old son Willie died in 1862, Lincoln visited the crypt several times where Willie was temporarily interred to embrace the body, unable in his grief to literally let go.

Toward the end of the book, two spirits residing in the cemetery, whom Saunders named "hans vollman" and "roger bevins iii," find themselves inside Lincoln's body accessing Lincoln's thoughts and feelings as he realizes that "his boy was gone: his boy was no more" and that "his continued presence here was wrong; was wallowing."

Saunders' Lincoln then hymns about the human fate of sorrow, and here I find the source of a politics that might save the Union by unifying us not in strength and hubris but in a humility and loss that might lend itself to service.

His mind was freshly inclined toward *sorrow*, toward the fact that the world was full of sorrow; that everyone labored under some burden of sorrow; that all were suffering; that whatever way one took in this world, one must try to remember that all were suffering (none content; all wrong, neglected, overlooked, misunderstood), and therefore one must do what one could to lighten the load of those with whom one came into contact; that his current state of sorrow was not uniquely his, not at all, but, rather, its like had been felt, would yet be felt, by scores of others, in all times, in every time, and must not be prolonged or exaggerated, because, in this state, he could be of no help to anyone and, given that his position in the world situated him to be either of great help or great harm, it would not do to stay low, if he could help it.
hans vollman

All were in sorrow, or had been, or soon would be.
roger bevins iii

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It was the nature of things.

hans vollman

Though on the surface it seemed every person was different,
this was not true.

roger bevins iii

At the core of each lay suffering; our eventual end, the many
losses we must experience on the way to that end.

hans vollman

We must try to see one another in different ways.

roger bevins iii

As suffering, limited beings—

hans vollman

Perennially outmatched by circumstance, inadequately
endowed with compensatory graces.

roger bevins iii

His sympathy extended to all in this instant, blundering, in its
strict logic, across all divides.

hans vollman

He was leaving here broken, awed, humbled, diminished.

roger bevins iii

Ready to believe anything of this world.

hans vollman

Made less rigidly himself through his loss.

roger bevins iii

Therefore quite powerful.

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hans vollman

Reduced, ruined, remade.
roger bevins iii

Merciful, patient, dazzled.
hans vollman

Lincoln then goes on to conclude, because he is the president of a country at war with itself, that even though this shared sorrow is a truth, he must induce even more sorrow by inflicting more pain and suffering on the enemy: he must “kill them and deny them their livelihood and force them back into the fold. ... Must end suffering by causing more suffering.”

I will let Lincoln go his way at this point because that is not my way forward. I want to sit inside this idea of the democratizing power of shared human sorrow as a possible source of a politics. What would our institutions and practices be like if we built them with sorrow as their cornerstones? With a shared consciousness of each person’s frailty and hazard as the basis upon which we act toward one another? Build a society upon the power of being “merciful, patient, dazzled” with ourselves and others?

There have been politics built upon insights like these, so Americans don’t lack models, but the citizenry seems unable, at the moment, to find a way to loosen its deadlocks and deathgrips without resorting to violent and accusatory fever dreams that could easily trigger real destruction (and have already, in some quarters, wrought such destruction re: COVID-19 is not a real pandemic and masks are an insult to liberty).

But if Americans can carve out some space to think about this, then I would like them to ponder the words of Kate Cody, also known as KC, the star, so to speak, of the fifth chapter of a five-part series on homelessness in the Bay Area, *According to Need*, a project of *99% Invisible* and produced by Katie Mingle. (I cannot praise *99% Invisible* enough, but that is another post for another time.)

In the course of Mingle and KC’s conversations, KC describes how a politics of sorrow can work:

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Mingle: There was a guy at the landfill [a camping ground for the homeless] named Sparky, reclusive and KC thought likely dealing with schizophrenia. But there were a few people in the community that looked out for him, including KC. He would sometimes come into her house wet and cold, and she'd have a pair of pants for him and clean socks.

KC: You can't, you can't just discard people. Look, if you have a set of priceless dishes and one plate has a fine hairline crack in it. You don't just give that to anyone sitting at the table. You don't send it to the kid's table, you know. You always end up with that plate—you're the one who knows not to hit it too hard with your knife or to drop the fork on it because even though that plate is flawed, that plate is part of a set. Right, okay?

Mingle: And that was Sparky?

KC: That was Sparky.

Think upon Sparky. If Sparky can be cared for, then all can be cared for.