

Humanism's Temporary Eclipse: Pushing The Envelope When Moral Courage Has Elapsed

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One of the most forceful of 20th century American writers was Thomas Wolfe. He had the rare ability, unusual for one so young – born in 1900, he died barely 38 years later – to portray real scenes and believable people with compelling authenticity. His youthfulness, which never left him, manifested itself in his novels – *Of Time and the River*; *Look Homeward Angel*; *You Can't Go Home Again*. Wolfe could barely contain his creative energies, gripped as he was by an over-exuberant desire to help humanity in spite of itself; his enthusiasm for this nation – idealized as the American dream – was boundless and lyrically expressed, owing to a mastery of the English language.

You Can't Go Home Again, Thomas Wolfe's last novel (published posthumously in 1940) and personal testament of sorts, begins with George Webber peering out of his New York apartment window on a spring day in 1929. Back from a tumultuous year in Europe, he's brimming with happiness, for his book has been accepted for publication by one of the city's most outstanding firms. He also resumes an old love affair with Esther Jack who reciprocates with tenderness and passion. But there's a flaw, a fatal flaw, in George's otherwise great happiness: he and Esther have contrary value systems and are headed in opposite directions. A celebrated stage designer, Esther mingles with an artistic set of friends and professionals. George, in contrast, feels he can't be deeply in touch with himself unless he lives among and identifies with what used to be condescendingly called the "little people" – the world's ordinary folks whom few ever notice yet who constitute the bulk of human beings everywhere. The little people of the world, whatever their lineage, essentially share the universal experience of powerlessness.

Just before his book is published, George decides to go home again, to savor his roots: Libya Hill, a small city in the mountains, the immediate reason, to attend the funeral of his aunt who had reared him. Libya Hill, however, is no longer the place George knew as a boy. It was growing rapidly, crowded with money – driven speculators whose overriding concern was making huge paper fortunes in real estate (one might consider them as among the more important, and hence more influential, people on the planet. George quickly realizes he could never go home again; change, after all, is a permanent feature of human life and society, so he returns to New York, his most recent familiar and comfortable venue. After his book finally came out and was favorably reviewed, George began to be barraged with threatening and spiteful letters from the townspeople: his friends and relatives felt he had betrayed and unmasked them unfairly when all he had done – an entirely honest person often seems naive – was to record the truth of what he had seen and experienced as a child. (Wolfe's memory for details of his own life being prodigious). The question arises: how much truth can we take? My own answer is, far more than we usually think we can. The world's rulers, of course, want us to believe otherwise – "the little people" who are in the majority need to be shielded, protected, kept

from the full truth of what's happening around in their lives and in their name, the better to keep them in line.

Taken aback by his hometown's response to his first published book, George Webber says goodbye to Esther and moves to Brooklyn where he's naturally attracted to society's marginalized individuals: the homeless, derelicts, prostitutes, petty criminals, each of whom, George instinctively came to appreciate, were really not unlike the conventional good people in any society, the working and middle classes of the turbulent Depression years of the 1930s; every citizen whatever one's estate or background was equally representative of America. Only through the search for and telling of truth about America could the world – and the U.S.A. – be saved from destruction, George believed. His closest friend at the time, editor Foxhall Edwards, believed no less in the value of truth but was paternalistic, holding that truth can't suddenly be sprung on most people, meaning, the little people, as if the full truth were the special preserve of the world's self-designated elites. This naturally enraged George the egalitarian, who felt such an attitude was one of disdain and could only unbend the springs of moral action, leaving deplorable social and economic conditions unchanged. Why not develop the habit of telling the truth one sees at every turn, and see what happens? Must it always come as a surprise and in little bits?

George the idealist now became restless once more, traveled to England, then returned to N.Y. with the completed manuscript of his second book, sailed again to Europe, visiting Germany in 1936 only to be shocked at how the people had changed for the worse since his last visit 8 years earlier. Persecution and fear had come to that once proud and cultured country now in the throes of a ripened fascism. Could there be any place left in the world where freedom and truth were still alive and welcome, he wondered? He was hardly alone in asking that question. At the same time he was beginning to be feted as a successful author by “the better people”, let's say, and fell deeply in love with a German woman who, however, had no intention of leaving her country. Fame was quickly proving to be elusive, nor particularly lasting or nourishing. George knew he had to return home in order to regain his footing and somehow cry out to his fellow Americans that they must live the truth at all costs lest it be fatally infected by the world's political misery and eliminated altogether from human consciousness. Again did George realize that no one can ever really go home again, that we humans cannot thrive on nostalgia, all you can do is go back to where you're presently living before you can go anywhere else.

The best way to maintain one's balance in the present, therefore, is to have one foot in the real past and the other in a future of our own gradual making. Breaking personal ties with his editor, realizing that fame and love he had once cherished were not enough, George was rapidly acquiring a certain modesty that made him yearn to speak truth even more urgently to the downtrodden, to all humanity if possible. All men, women and children are morally equal to one another, all are worthy of dignity, respect, compassion. George the rescuer had to try somehow to awaken the slumbering conscience of his fellow Americans, to make them freshly aware of the constant need for truth so that they might keep and exercise their historically hard won freedoms. Occasionally George feared the

battle was already lost both here and abroad, yet he'd never stop fighting so long as hope persisted that democracy could be refreshed.

At last it dawned on him who America's real enemy was – itself: what regularly threatens to overcome a prospering people like us is selfishness, greed, fear, and hubris, all mixed together and disguised as the benign and desirable end of life. We despise poverty, we love wealth. Is freedom about making money or speaking one's mind? If he along with others of his ilk could only reach, elicit the extraordinary potentials of this nation's general run of people – since democracy's institutions cannot automatically liberate those who are not themselves inwardly free already – and remind the citizenry that they nonetheless have the power, however untapped at the moment, to distill truth from reality, they might once more defeat the enemy within themselves: the fear of truth, the fear of the freedom that precedes it, all based on the fear of losing what one has. Through people like George, then, America might recover its natural soul, come home to its shared democratic self and put materialism in proper perspective. There the novel ends, and the real world for us begins. For starters, let's consider that, from an ethical vantage point, there are no little people or big people – only people.

The problem is, we humans often do not stay true to ourselves for long. No sooner had WWII ended and the United Nations barely established than the dark cloud of McCarthyism descended upon us. The National Security Act was passed in 1947, the seedbed of what would become a parallel shadow government of Cold War warriors infused with anti-Communist passion if not paranoia, and given to the swashbuckling enterprise of covert actions which almost invariably allied us with dictatorial regimes headed by puppets largely of our own devising – like the Shah of Iran, Mobutu in Zaire, Suharto in Indonesia, Diem in Vietnam, Marcos in the Philippines, Pinochet in Chile, Noriega in Panama, Hussein in Iraq – what a crew! And that's only a sampling: is this any way to preserve and conduct a democracy? The right-wing elites appear to think so. Do freedom and fascism constitute some curiously acceptable democratic paradox?

If we started out in 1789 as an idealistic Republic in the guise of a nascent secular democracy, we certainly grafted onto it an imperialistic overlay by the late 1890s, and transformed ourselves, without informing the citizenry, into a national security state in the wake of WWII. Then during the sizzling dot-com 1990s we succumbed to an unprecedentedly widespread culturally sanctioned acquisitive materialism that President George W. Bush has boiled down to the imperative phrase, "It's your money", a prelude to a series of massive tax cuts that will cumulatively reduce the size of the federal government and create a persistent predicament of economic inequality: just what the Bushies want. What's become permanent is an irresponsibly expensive war economy with partisans of the corporate way of life regularly duking it out with the friends of democracy. The public square has been privatized, mostly abandoned, segmented into economic and political market shares by professional spinmeisters.

A half century ago historian Crane Brinton defined a cynical democracy as one "whose citizens profess in this world one set of beliefs and live another." He saw this as a "wholly impossible" arrangement in the long run. I suspect he's right. After all, even

though the American Constitution is principally a document of freedom that looks toward an indefinite future, it was nonetheless an artifact of its times as well: native Indians were untaxed and completely denied citizenship, women are not mentioned at all, and “three-fifths of all other Persons” – a non-racial but hardly flattering euphemistic reference to black slaves as only 60% human, were thus distinguished from white males who alone could vote. The seeds of dissension and violent conflict were thus implicit in Article I of the Constitution; the moral logic of the notion of a universal humanity would eventually clash with such untenable political compromises. An open society created by democratic practice would sooner or later detonate such contradictions, and it did, starting with the Civil War and extending well into our own time. The Constitution’s amendment mechanism is the nation’s safety valve. With a wink and a nod people can profess one set of beliefs and practice its exact opposite only until the situation becomes so widely experienced and viewed as unacceptable that something like the great mid-20th century civil rights revolution had to come into play, changing the entire political and cultural landscape of the country.

But as of 9-11 we’ve been jolted into a new and unfamiliar state of affairs. Isn’t it amazing how numbed many citizens have since allowed themselves to become, if not almost despairingly indifferent? For example, some members of Congress are outraged that the most frequently reiterated justification for going to war with Iraq pre-emptively was that it had weapons of mass destruction ready to be unleashed; so far they haven’t been found but their existence is assumed for political reasons by the Administration to be somewhere whether discovered or not, so we’ve dispatched Special Operations units to wander around looking for them in the desert sands. The public appears to care little whether anything is found and closes its eyes to the possibility of a shell game because it wants to believe their government is telling them the truth.

It wasn’t so long ago that presidential press secretary Ari Fleischer sent a rightist signal to an already quiescent White House press corps, warning them to watch what they were saying, whereupon they filed out with their tails between their legs. More recently Fleischer hinted that Congressional Democrats, in daring to question and filibuster the judicial Neanderthals the Republican right keeps thrusting before them for no-questions-asked nomination to the federal bench, may be behaving unconstitutionally, if not illegally! Meanwhile Tim Robbins, an eloquent and gifted Hollywood actor who delivered a barn-burner of an anti-war speech at the National Press Club in Washington in mid-April, ran out of luck when he expressed dissenting opinions in an interview I happened to catch on The Today Show one morning; Robbins was literally blanked out on the screen out for several minutes by presumably behind-the-scenes NBC executives, possibly prompted by an angry and urgent communication from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. When The Today Show came back on, it proceeded as if nothing had happened and Robbins had vanished.

We’ve become an increasingly surveilled society that too easily allows itself to be shocked, awed, and silenced. The ancient Greeks recognized from their own experience and observation of human nature that the power of fear is the power to induce passivity which severs life’s spiritual nerve and, therefore, one’s ethical responsibility to be

politically engaged. To free oneself from official cant is to achieve – in Virginia Woolf’s splendid rendition – “freedom from unreal loyalties” – like, say, waving the flag as proof positive of one’s patriotism. Thus, to face danger even when one is sensibly afraid is a truly courageous act. In the current environment, then, we need to practice putting our ethical humanist vision front and center and unapologetically challenge and neutralize, as much as we can, the evangelistic blather that daily threatens to drown out the nation’s reason and common sense.

But, first, some critical observations about our own ethical humanist stance, faith, position, is in order with a view toward our becoming more effectively active. Consider the difference between opinions and convictions. Opinions are beliefs, views, conclusions held confidently or weakly as the case may be but seldom substantiated by positive knowledge or proof. Convictions characteristically are strongly held, arrived at by means of argument, logic, evidence pointing to a clear but not necessarily closed conclusion leading to a specific course of action. Convictions drive decisions, decisions make history where opinions do not.

In my experience we humanists, no less than other people, don’t always think out the implications and consequences of what we profess and start disagreeing over minutiae because we lose track of the larger perspective. The same is true with those who more or less characterize themselves as liberals, who tend to substitute a laundry list of desired political goals for a coherent philosophy. Humanists are not necessarily liberals in every instance, nor are all liberals ipso facto humanists. A point of view held with tenacity and courage can often be mistakenly equated with dogmatism. An error we humanists sometimes make is to assume that strongly held beliefs are inherently offensive to the open mind. Tentativeness at every juncture, however, is not a virtue.

Ethical Culturists and religious and secular liberals in general may protest from time to time that they aren’t religious, usually on such unstated grounds that religions are too intense or too emotional, or too dominating or epistemologically off the mark. All that may be true, but misses the point, which is, that what distinguishes any authentic religiosity is a unique view of what is sacred, or holy. Ethical Culture holds that ethics in its force and depth is the heart of spiritual life, and the spark of democratic politics. When we recite our governing motto, that wherever people meet to seek the highest is holy ground, we are evoking ethical humanism for what it is – a religion, a rare and unusual one, to be sure. Ethics issues forth in the quality and depth of the whole range of human relationships; here I would add, in the spirit of Albert Schweitzer, the sanctity of all existence including the natural world and the expanding cosmos in which we are specks of consciousness and physical being.

Philosophically speaking, humanists lack a shared doctrine of power, a subject I talked about at length a few Sundays ago. It’s precisely that lack which inclines us to hold views tentatively rather than strongly as a matter of course; such a posture weakens one’s resolve at the get-go, not a smart way to start the day.

Consider, in light of these remarks, a dogmatic proclamation by Pat Robertson in his 1992 book, *The New World Order*: “There will never be world peace until God’s house and God’s people are given their rightful place of leadership at the top of the world.” A classic instance of Christian triumphalism thrust forth with self-righteous conviction, implying disdain – for the world’s little people.

What’s a humanist to do? Denounce it? Yes, but that’s hardly enough. You have to show why it’s unacceptable: humans are unsuited to dealing with absolute power – it will corrupt us absolutely every time and wreak havoc with whatever and whomever it touches. Pluralism of all kinds is a fact of life. Absolutist wannabees often know deep down they’re full of humbug, but when they see how easy it is to bamboozle and frighten and manipulate their fellow humans they feel inflated with a sense of false power, deceived by their own propaganda; God might be summoned up for extra help.

As a happy and unrepentant humanist I find that we mortals have great difficulty accepting our finitude, but when we do accept it, the infinite possibilities of our own humanity can give us the lift of a lifetime. That’s a modest and true proposition, but folks of the opposite, let’s say, theistic persuasion, believe otherwise and like the President equate arrogant theological claims with religious humility. A month or so ago the *Washington Post* reported a delightfully revealing incident in the cocky life and times of House Majority leader Tom DeLay who’s publicly into God and prayer. Upon ordering a scrumptious meal in a government-run restaurant in Washington reserved for our elected leaders, he lit up an expensive cigar. The restaurant manager promptly reminded him that smoking on federal property was prohibited by federal law. DeLay looked up at him and answered in no uncertain terms, “I am the federal government,” and went on smoking. When you have God so completely on your side, you don’t have to explain anything to anybody, you usually are not one of the little people.

In November 1992, right after Bill Clinton won the Presidency, an outcome that astonished and outraged the Republican right who then and there vowed to make Presidential life miserable for him, a controversy erupted at a gathering of The Republican Governors Association. When a reporter asked them how their party could appease Christian conservatives at the same aiming for an inclusive secular political coalition, Mississippi Governor Kirk Fordice famously responded by pronouncing America to be a “Christian nation,” not the first time in American history that such sentiment has been cavalierly expressed. Pat Robertson, let’s remember, has long held that the separation of church and state is “a lie of the left.” The thesis of George Orwell’s satirical *Animal Farm* again appropriately comes to mind: all religions are equal, we might admit in polite company, but some religions are more equal than others.

It’s one thing to hold such conviction, it’s quite another to initiate political steps to religionize democracy and thereby destroy it by ensconcing majoritarian tyranny in democracy’s name. This Bush Administration is without doubt the most dangerous in our history, convinced in its possession of ultimate truth both secular and supernatural that dissenting views are consequently irrelevant and unworthy of toleration and that a final solution to the problems of the postmodern world is at hand – namely, divinely guided

pre-emption, a one-size-fits-all theory. The illusion of unchallengeable power is an ultimate aphrodisiac: might make right. If the U.S.A. is the world's single superpower, then in good Calvinist theology it perforce must enjoy a superior right to dominate and direct it. To be sure, all countries are equal in their sovereignty, but one country is more equal than all other countries combined – ours – the only allowable Administration compromises being tactical and temporary, not strategic. Our national intention of world domination remains unsullied, therefore the sovereignty of other countries is at risk.

So it is that moral courage is presently in short supply, suggesting this is the time for us to push the envelope. That, by the way, is the driving premise behind the idea of an advocacy forum to be launched in the fall of this year: in light of the continuing national emergency. We don't have to hate, we don't have to cave in to pressure, we don't have to shuffle around being afraid of phantom nonsense. For the Democratic party, I submit, the Presidential election of 2004 may well be a holding action at best, which if it occurs should not be sneezed at. I take a slightly longer view: the election that counts will be that of 2008 signifying the conclusion to George II's presidency.

That's when the religious and political right will either establish a long-term lock on this country, and thus in the world at large, or those of us lastingly imbued with the democratic promise of the original American Republic will successfully expose and decisively break that lock or at least pry it open. In any event, during the interim a kind of ethically savvy guerilla politics will be called for, starting now in our quest for a distinctively progressive national social agenda. We can't afford to tire of this responsibility; instead we should be energized by its prospects. The cost? Less sleep and fewer vacations! George Webber leaves us with exactly that likelihood. George, however, is not a nuts-and-bolts thinker; we today have to be in addition to being visionary.

Sinclair Lewis tried his hand at imagining a fascist America in his half-prophetic ironically titled novels, made into a fair Hollywood movie – *It Can't Happen Here*. The novels of Lewis and Wolfe appeared nearly simultaneously during the darkest days of the 1930s. We can't complain we haven't been warned well beforehand, from the founders of the Republic to Emerson to the more politically perceptive literary lights of the last 100 years – Twain, Lewis, Wolfe, and others who've informed told us that a free and democratic society can never be taken for granted. Alarms have been going off periodically throughout our history, but so has hope. Wrote Wolfe to his mother in 1922: "I will know this country when I am through as I know the palm of my hand, and I will put it on paper and make it true and beautiful." "I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found", he wrote to Foxhall Edward in real life, concluding: "I think the true fulfillment of our spirit, of our people, of our mighty and immortal land, is yet to come." It would be well for all of us to believe that the future is not cancelled.

Has that time come finally? If so, we have noble, demanding and not altogether popular work to do. Will you join me, or one another, or other Americans all over this land in this endeavor? "The time calls for action," proclaimed Felix Adler in his founding address of

May 15, 1876. "Up, then," he exhorted, "and let us do our part faithfully and well."
Whatever "our part" turns out to be, may we indeed perform it "faithfully and well."