

## Book Notes:

### *Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*

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## Heroic Centrism: Rebuilding the Center

*"People talk about the middle of the road as though it were unacceptable. ... Things are not black or white. There have to be compromises. The middle of the road is all of the usable surface. The extremes, right and left, are in the gutters."*

Dwight D. Eisenhower [1]

*"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by their character. ... When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every tenement and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual, "Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last."*

Martin Luther King Jr. [2]

Writing this on a snowy Martin Luther King Jr. Day, I ask myself two questions. First, what would Dr. King say today, 57 years and counting after his famous "*I Have a Dream*" speech in August 1963 about the shape of the American *now*, and second, what is the shape of that *now* as President Biden accepts leadership of it at noon Wednesday, Jan. 20?

Well, I wouldn't presume to put words in Dr. King's mouth, but I suspect his comments would reflect a twinge of disappointment that, even after so much progress, there is still so much more to be done. But that disappointment would be tempered by his deep understanding of the enormity of the challenge and his deep optimism that it could be overcome.

As for the shape of the *now* confronting President Biden, it finds the center not holding, things threatening to fall apart and the best lacking all conviction while the worst, like the thugs marauding through the Capitol two weeks ago, "are full of passionate intensity." It was such intensity, in fact, that although the muddled attempt at a *coup*, like almost everything touched by Donald Trump, failed, serious analysts and thinkers free of the Web of *Foxian* obfuscation ponder whether the storming of the Capitol was a one-off or the opening gambit in a continuing saga of civil unrest and domestic terrorism aimed at undermining

American democracy.

Recognizing the parallels between the 20-teens and the 1850s, numerous pundits on both the right and the left, both famous and obscure, have begun to ask the unthinkable: “Is America on the brink of a civil war?” Talk of civil war is in the air, ranging from a December 2019 *The Atlantic* cover story, “How to Stop a Civil War,” [3] to a Jan. 11, 2021 *Shreveport Times*’ Letter to the Editor from Ken Epperton, Sr., who wrote the “Capitol riot, if not dealt with swiftly, is beginning of Civil War II.” [4]

Which, it needs to be said, is exceedingly dangerous. For to make the unthinkable possible, it first needs to be thought. Once thought, it needs to be talked about, and once discussed and chewed on, it is no longer neither unthinkable nor unmentionable but rather something to be considered. And, once considered, there will be those for whom it is an option.

And that, regardless of how probable or improbable one thinks a second civil war to be, is where we are *now*— at an inflection point for America. As Barton Gellman opined in *The Atlantic* on Jan. 16, 2021, “This is a moment of historic fragility in America. We are a long way yet from a second civil war, but there is no precedent for our fractured consensus about who holds legitimate power.” [5]

As President Biden confronts the shape of our *now*, “our fractured consensus” about “who holds legitimate power” is only a secondary issue, or what historians call a proximate cause. Current disagreements about who holds legitimate power are only symptomatic of the primary disagreement, the ultimate cause of our current discontents, which is the unraveling, the shredding of the cultural consensus about what constitutes the American story.

In short, the consensus that has fractured, the center that has not held, is Americans’ agreement about whose story is the American story. Separating into tribes, they no longer agree about what it means to be an American. You can find more about this in my *The American Tapestry Project* on WQLN NPR, which can be found [here](#).

Phrased another way, it is a disagreement about America’s core values and who gets to share in them.

At its heart, it is about who is “in” and who is “out.”

It reminds me of a comment an Italian tour guide made to a group I was with in fall 2018. Someone asked him why Italians still refer to themselves as Calabrian, Tuscan, if not Florentine, Venetian, Neapolitan, etc. He replied that Italy is a young country. It was only founded in the middle-late 19th century. He quoted Mazzini (or was it Cavour or Garibaldi?) who allegedly said after unifying the Italian city states, “We’ve made Italy, now we have to make Italians.”

So, too, is the case with America, but with a tremendous added complication. When the original 13 colonies united, they had to learn to think of themselves as Americans and not as Virginians or New Yorkers or New Englanders. Then, adding to the challenge, as the nation expanded westward it brought in new territories and new peoples while simultaneously adding wave after wave of immigrants. Some of whom were not Protestant; some of whom were not white; almost all of whom could not speak English. From the Irish and German Catholics

of the mid-19th century, to the Chinese in the West working the mines of the Gold Rush to the late 19th, early 20th century wave of immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe to the late 20th century influx of immigrants from South Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, America and Americans struggled to define what is an American, who gets in and who gets counted.

It is an old story – who and what is an American?

As long ago as 1782, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur asked, “What then is the American, this new man?” [6]

It is a story as fresh as Wednesday’s Inauguration when the first *Blindian* [7] will be sworn in as Vice President of the United States, in which the answer to Crevecoeur’s question now extends beyond “man” to include “woman,” extends beyond Crevecoeur’s implicit “white” to include a palette of hues.

But not everyone agrees Kamala Harris’ story is a good story.

Why is that important?

Why are stories important?

Who gets to tell them?

Stories are important because humans are storytellers. It might be what distinguishes us from all other creatures. Storytelling is a hot topic right now. Everywhere I turn I find someone talking about storytelling. Some even ask, “Is there a storytelling gene?” “Are we hardwired for storytelling?”

Why?

Why this interest in storytelling?

Two reasons: First, humans are meaning makers. It’s both our genius and our curse. Second, a leader’s primary obligation is to articulate a unifying vision.

How best to convey a vision?

Tell a story.

Humans are both meaning makers and storytellers. As we learned in the very first *Book Notes* almost a year ago discussing Joan Didion’s *The White Album*, humans make meaning by telling stories:

***We tell ourselves stories in order to live. (Emphasis added)***

The princess is caged in the consulate. The man with candy will lead the children into the sea. The naked woman on the ledge outside the window on the 16th floor is a victim of accedie, or the naked woman is an exhibitionist, and it would be “interesting” to know which. We tell ourselves that it makes some difference whether the naked woman is about to commit a mortal sin or is about to register a political protest or is about to be, the Aristophanic view, snatched back to the human condition by the fireman in priest’s clothing just visible in the window behind her,

the one smiling at the telephoto lens. We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. [8]

Humans are storytellers. It might be, in the final analysis, what makes us humans. We tell ourselves stories to make sense of our experience, but it is also our ability to tell stories that enables us to bond large numbers of people together into collaborative cultures.

As Yuval Harari noted in *Homo Deus* [9], it wasn't the invention of agriculture that separated humans from others in the animal kingdom. It was the ability to organize large numbers of people together into coherent cultures through the medium of shared stories that made possible “scaling” agricultural villages into large urban collaboratives.

In short, storytelling created civilization and not the other way around.

How? Because it is stories that create a culture – that shared space, those shared stories telling us who we are, where we came from, what we are and where we are going. Stories create cultures by sharing our origins, values, attitudes, customs, mores, and beliefs.

Stories and storytelling are the glue that unifies cultures. So, in our time, when we say the “center is not holding,” what we really mean is our stories are fracturing. When our stories fracture, the center fractures, and when the center fractures, things begin to fall apart. For it is the center that unifies any society.

Rebuilding, reasserting the center and America's core values are the great challenges of our time. Recently, in a Niskanen Center policy essay, *Heroic Centrism in a Time of Polarization*, William (Beau) Weston wrote: “The ‘center’ is where, in its central institutions, the most crucial values of modern societies are translated and made real. Institution is an abstract, vague sounding word – let's make it specific. Which institutions' primary responsibility is it to tell the story that unifies a people? Actually, it's many – schools and churches, civic organizations and community groups, but the heaviest responsibility falls to our leaders – whether of a school or church, town or county, state or the United States.

How to rebuild the center? An interesting place to begin is the Niskanen Center's *Open Society Project*. As it defines its mission:

With the rise of authoritarian populism on both sides of the Atlantic, it is no longer possible to assume complacently that liberal democracy is the end point of political evolution toward which all countries will eventually converge. The basic principles of what Karl Popper called the “open society” are neither self-explanatory nor self-executing: They must be constantly articulated, defended, and fought for if they are to remain vital. [10]

At the risk of oversimplifying, an “open society” is one based on liberal

democracy, which is to say it is a representative democracy based on the consent of the governed. As a representative government, it skews towards republicanism (small “r”) and not towards a pure democracy (small “d”); it believes in free markets, but not the Wild West and the absence of any regulation; it believes in humaneness and reasonableness; while reasonable, it values tradition as a check against hyperrationality; it believes in equality and freedom, while recognizing the inherent tension between those two concepts; it realizes civilization is still a work in progress and to that extent is melioristic, i.e. it believes the world can be made better by human effort but it is keenly aware that ‘humanity’s intellectual leaders have often betrayed that belief’. [11]

The Niskanen Center itself is an interesting entity. Most of its principals are former staffers and policy analysts at The Cato Institute – the high church of libertarianism.

I tend to think of the Niskanen Center and its members as recovering libertarians. They seem to have realized that the logical conclusion of a purely libertarian world is not everyone sitting around a campfire singing “Kumbaya,” but rather the reemergence of clans and rule by authoritarian thugs. As a result, they have moved back to the center or at least the center-right.

In their *Conceptus* [12] – a somewhat pretentious sounding title for an extended analysis of their organizational mission – they describe themselves as conservative-progressives and progressive-conservatives. Which is to say, while ideological, they are not doctrinaire. They might be that most valuable of American concepts – functioning pragmatists. They seem to have grasped the fundamental truth so many others have forgotten – *either/or* thinking is the most fallacious of logical fallacies. Very few things in life are *either/or*, most are *both/and*. You find *both/and* thinking at the heart of the heart of any flourishing group. You find *both/and* in the center.

And it is the center that William (Beau) Weston seeks to reassert. His essay *Heroic Centrism in a Time of Polarization* has three key takeaways, one brilliant metaphor, and several suggestions for how to proceed. If it has a flaw, it is its deep dive into the sociological theory underpinning his analysis. I’ll spare you the sociology and get to the practical values.

Weston’s key takeaways are, first, that a strong center is necessary for a functioning society because it embodies society’s core values while continuing to develop and incorporate various peripheries and embrace new ideas. Second, a strong “center is where the most crucial values of modern societies are translated and made real in its central institutions. Institutions embody the central values of society imperfectly and conflict with each other regularly, but the center of society is strong to the extent that the central institutions work with one another to embody the central values even as they clash.” And, lastly, although moderation and centrism are similar, moderation lacks a positive program, that is it has no overarching vision, whereas “centrism creates and maintains elite consensus around the central values of society and holds elites to the larger task of incorporating the periphery.” [13]

Weston’s brilliant – my word – metaphor is to conceive of society as a circle and the center as its locus. Most analyses of American politics place it on a horizontal plane of left versus right, which has at least two immediate difficulties.

First, it encourages – one might say requires – linear, binary thinking – *either/or* – and, second, it places the poles at extreme positions as if they had nothing in common save as mutually exclusive end points. The circle metaphor has the creative advantage of eliminating pole points and by eliminating pole points bringing all points closer together.

It is simple geometry. Any point on a circle's circumference is, in theory, closer to the locus and then two diametrically opposed points at opposite ends of a straight line.

OK, maybe the geometry is not that precise, but the metaphoric implications are – any point on the circle's edge is no farther from the center than any other point. Although we might have different ideas about different things – our different, to strain a point, points of view might conflict, but we share certain things in common, not the least of which is that we are all part of a common circle. We share certain common values.

So, going back to Weston's key takeaways, those institutions at the circle's center – its central institutions – embody our shared values. It is their job to embody those values by operating and behaving in a way consistent with those values while at the same time communicating those values to those on the periphery – the circle's circumference. As they do that, the central institutions need to be keenly aware of evolving thought on the periphery that enriches and extends society's core values. They need to bring those new ideas into the center as they expand and refine society's values, thereby increasing society's inclusiveness. As they do that, by incorporating those on the periphery – giving them a stake in society's success and permanence – society is strengthened.

It is a circle, not a straight line.

It is *both/and*, not *either/or*.

Which institutions occupy the center? Weston separates them into three sectors – the government, the market, and all the others. Usually, “all the others” are lumped into one group that comes lagging after the first two. Weston flips the order, for, as he points out, both government and markets require a strong supporting sector. So, he organizes society's sectors as 1) the Servant Sector, which includes everything that is not the government or the market. This includes the family, education, religion, the media, social services, and arts and culture; 2) the All-Service Sector, which is government existing to support and to regulate both the Servant Sector – heavy on support, light on regulation and 3) the Self-Service Sector, which is the market in which one is free – subject to certain societally agreed upon constraints – to seek one's fortune.

What are the values society's central institutions embody? To begin we must ask for what end is society organized? Society exists to enable its members to survive and, in surviving, seek their happiness. Aristotle called it *eudaimonia*. Maslow would have called it achieving self-actualization, self-fulfillment. “Happiness is the end that is not a means to another end.” [14]

In American culture – in the American circle – that value is foundational. It is the core American value to which all Americans – regardless of their position within the circle, regardless of their proximity to the center or the periphery – adhere. It is the *American Creed*. It is the second paragraph of the Declaration of

Independence.

It says, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” [15]

The story of America has been the story of three things: 1) to bring that glittering statement to life; 2) to ever expand the definition of “We” by expanding the definition of “men” to mean all people regardless of creed, gender, or ethnicity; and 3) to do that while doing two other things only rarely ever attempted in human history: a) build and sustain a government *of the people, by the people, for the people* all the while b) constantly redefining the people by expanding who is meant by the people from within – women and minorities – and without – wave after wave of immigrants.

It has been a bumpy ride.

But here we are. Two hundred and forty-four years in and still striving to make it work.

What must society’s central institutions do to embody these values? First, they must constantly recommit themselves to these values, operate in the spirit of these values, and, having recommitted themselves to these values, to evangelize for them by telling their story.

What is the story?

It is The American Tapestry – the weaving together of America’s many stories to create the story of America.

What stories, what threads woven together comprise The American Story – The Stories of America – The Stories of America’s central values – The Stories of The American Tapestry?

The heart of *The American Tapestry* are its *warp* and *weft* threads. The *warp* threads hold a tapestry together – they are invisible in the finished product. The *weft* threads are the visible threads telling the tapestry’s stories.

Taken together they form *The American Story*.

It is not linear. It does not start at one point and move directly to a conclusion. Sometimes it loops back upon itself. Sometimes it goes in circles repeating themes. Sometimes, like a labyrinth, it darts down a path leading seemingly to nowhere.

It is a mosaic; it is a collage; it is a tapestry telling many stories that when woven together are The American Story – The American Tapestry.

The warp threads are *The American Tapestry’s* foundational, its central values. The weft threads are the patterns, the themes of America’s many stories.

The *warp* threads, America’s central values, are:

Thread I: Liberty, Freedom, Equality and Opportunity

Thread II: The ongoing Experiment in Self-Government

Thread III: Blending Diverse People Into **one** People as in *We the People*.

The *wef* threads, the patterns America's stories reveal, are:

Thread I: *Freedom's Story at Home and Abroad*

Thread II: *Freedom's Fault Lines: Stories of Race and Gender*

Thread III: *The American Dream: "Success" Stories, Horatio Alger and A Nation of "Hustlers"*

Thread IV: *The Immigrant's Tale*

Thread VI: *The Fusion Thread: The ever expanding definition of "We the People."*

Why is any of this important?

If stories create cultures, then *The American Tapestry Project* is the heart of the heart of our American Experience – our American Story – our American Culture. And it is these stories that need to be told and retold. So, when I listen to civic leaders, when I listen to religious leaders, when I listen to educational leaders, when I listen to political leaders – all those occupying critical roles in society's central institutions – I listen to hear if they understand the American story as a commitment to all of us or only some of us. I listen to hear if they understand that the job – the primary job – of a leader is to tell the group the story that unifies them – unifies them around a common purpose, unifies them around a common understanding of America's creedal values.

As I write this before Wednesday's Inaugural, you will have the advantage, because you will have heard or read reports of President Biden's Inaugural Address, but on Wednesday, I will be listening for him to articulate a vision of America reminding Americans what they hold in common – reminding Americans of their central values – their belief in liberty – freedom – equality – and opportunity; reminding Americans of their belief in self-government; reminding Americans of their belief in the democratic process; reminding Americans of their belief in the rule of law and that those who betray it must be held accountable; and reminding Americans of their belief in the great task of ever expanding the American notion of "*We the People*."

The greatest leaders are uniters, not dividers. You will find few monuments to those who would conquer by dividing. Although they may have their moment, dividers, like Ozymandias, end up in the dustbin of history.

Just as in the quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with which we began, it is the uniters – those who suffer any and all to come unto them – who are exalted.

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### End Notes

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5. Gellman, Barton. "America's Second-Worst Scenario", in **The Atlantic** (January 16, 2021) available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/how-close-did-us-come-successful-coup/617709/> accessed January 19, 2021.
6. "What Is the American?" in U.S. History available at <https://www.ushistory.org/us/7f.asp> accessed January 19, 2021.
7. A "Blindian" is a person of both black (African American) and South Asian (Indian) ancestry. Kamala Harris' mother was South Asian Indian; her father Jamaican. She identifies as black, although she honors her South Asian Indian heritage.
8. Didion, Joan. *The White Album* in **We Tell Ourselves Stories In Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction** (New York: Everyman's Library Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), p. 185.
9. Harari, Yuval. *Homo Deus*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017). Cf. particularly Part II: Homo Sapiens Gives Meaning to the World, pp. 155-279.
10. "Open Society," at **Niskanen Center** available at <https://www.niskanencenter.org/policy/open-society/> accessed January 19, 2021.
11. McCrum, Robert. The 100 best non-fiction books: No. 35 – The Open Society and Its Enemies by Karl Popper (1945) in **The Guardian** available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/26/100-best-nonfiction-books-karl-popper-open-society-its-enemies> accessed January 19, 2021.
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13. Weston, William. "Heroic Centrism in a Time of Polarization" at **Niskanen Center** available at <https://www.niskanencenter.org/heroic-centrism-in-a-time-of-polarization/> accessed January 12, 2021, p.1.
14. Ibid., p. 6
15. "Declaration of Independence," at the **National Archives** available at <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript> accessed January 19, 2021.

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