



Tyrants and Damsels and Associated Incisive Insights

An Earth Manifesto essay by Dr. Tiffany B. Twain
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Zen masters and ecological philosophers agree with alert observers who see that everything on Earth is hitched together in infinitely intricate ways, marvelously and inextricably interconnected and interdependent. The implications of this most fundamental of all understandings about the biotic underpinnings of our existence run so deep that they defy our full comprehension.

In the province of ideas, any one organism, idea or issue is ultimately linked to all the rest, so any place provides a legitimate point of entry into everything else. Therefore, HERE is as salubrious a place as any to begin an exploration of important ideas that consequentially affect the human race. Let us consider, for instance, the controversy surrounding the story of Tyrant fungi and Damsel algae.

I love this tale, which concerns "lichen symbiosis". Biologists once debated the nature of this phenomenon with heated passion, steeped as it is in evolutionary adaptation. To understand this clearly, it helps to know that there are, for all practical purposes, three Kingdoms in the classification of all forms of life on Earth -- Animals, Plants and Fungi. About 148,000 species of fungi have been described in the world; this narrative deals with the subset of fungi known as lichens. There are about 20,000 known species of these kinds of life. They can grow on almost any surface, and are commonly seen on rocks and tree bark. Many of them are classified as either crusty or leafy. Their structure consists of a tough drought-resistant outer fungal layer, called a cortex, and inner algal partner cells that are protected by the cortex. These algal cells provide sustenance for the whole lichen by producing nutrients through the miraculously providential biological process of photosynthesis.

Long ago, far back in evolutionary history, these fungi and algae were separate life forms. Algae are plant species that love moisture and are able to use energy from the sun to transform water and carbon dioxide and minerals into food energy. Fungi and algae have co-evolved together into distinct genetically united species in a symbiotic relationship that functions as a cooperative win/win adaptation of the formerly separate species. Lichens formed through this evolutionary marriage are a mutually beneficial combination of the descendants of the former fungi and algae species. In the natural world, it is instructive to note, there are no absolute moralities, and there are no laws, cultural taboos or strict constitutional amendments against such bonding relationships.

For many decades, scientists had a spirited debate about the nature of this intimate relationship. A prominent English naturalist called it a "sensational Romance of Lichenology", and an "unnatural union". As some aspiring aficionado of alliterations put it, "Freddie Fungus and Alice Algae took a lichen to each other." The debate was centered on an impressively anthropocentric theory: the tough protective fungus acts as a Tyrant master that is holding the Damsel algae captive. This theory held that the fungus was exploiting the vulnerable and productive propensities of the alluringly productive algae. I suppose scientists have not been able to not actually assign sexes to the fungi and algae, and the various processes by which lichens reproduce are no doubt significantly less interesting than those that pertain between a handsome male and some eager and comely young lass.

This, however, is neither here nor there. This story gives us insights into the human-centered nature of scientific debate and philosophical speculation. It also provides us with an enlightening perspective about one of many awe-inspiring 'survival strategies' that have been manifested throughout the long history of the evolution of life on

Earth. Books like Richard Dawkins' *Ancestor's Tale* flesh out this fascinating story, for those whose inquisitive minds drive them to learn and better understand. See Wikipedia for a good synopsis of this book.

Solipsism and Anthropocentrism

This story of Tyrants and Damsels reveals that human beings tend to see the world in ways that distort its true nature. This is natural for us because our frames of reference are a product of how our minds perceive and interpret sensations and experiences. Our self-referential perceptions and systems of belief create worldviews that are naturally human-centered. We project our feelings and beliefs, superstitions and moral conceptions onto the real world. The downside of this propensity is that we often fail to see fuller, more complex and more accurate perspectives.

Such projections powerfully affect how we live in the world, and the roles we play in it. People from time immemorial have projected anthropocentric archetypes and stereotypes onto deities they have imagined into existence. This is why gods and goddesses of every culture in history have exhibited human-like appearances, motivations, behaviors, emotions, activities and control drives. These projections all have a genesis in human nature, and are a creative reflection of the human imagination. Our species also tends to attribute human qualities and sensibilities and feelings to animals, and to forces of nature like lightning, and even to inanimate objects like towering mountain peaks. This process of attributing human characteristics to non-human entities is called anthropomorphizing.

A classic form of the anthropomorphization of animals is embodied in Aesop's Fables. In these stories, human traits and feelings are projected onto animals. The purpose of these fables is to illustrate simple moral lessons so that people are able to more easily understand and remember them. But is the lion really noble? Is the coyote wily? Are owls wise? Are asses intransigently stubborn, indeed? Our mental projections can cause us to perceive and interpret the world in ways that we actually believe our projections accurately represent reality. When a violent storm harms people, we may see it as vicious or malevolent. But is it really?

Ecological Introspection

Lichens are among the hardiest life forms on Earth, living in even the coldest and hottest and driest places and actually helping break rock down into life-sustaining soil. Yet they have a curious Achilles heel, so to speak. They are highly vulnerable to acid rain, a sensitivity that makes them useful for using their natural pigments to produce litmus paper to test for alkalinity or acidity.

Understanding that one million species of life will be driven to eternal extinction because of the direct and indirect impacts of human activities -- possibly within this century -- it is incumbent upon our leaders to take responsible action to prevent this Anthropocene epoch episode of mass extinction.

As if in mortal imitation of the voice of God thundering down at Mount Sinai, we can now begin to hear a new commandment -- that we must become responsibly willing to protect threatened species of life. This is an ultimate litmus test of propriety and integrity and the moral good.

Chief Seattle, an American Indian chief of the Suquamish tribe in the Pacific Northwest, once warned the U.S. government against the misuse of land, water, air, and animal life. In 1844 he reputedly said, "Whatever happens to the Earth, happens to the children of the Earth ... All things are connected, like the blood that unites one family. Mankind did not weave the web of life; we are but one strand within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves."

Try to imagine this idea from the perspective of another species, like polar bears. The intention of the Endangered Species Act was to protect biological diversity and safeguard the health of biotic habitats, and to ensure that human actions do not cause a risk-laden unraveling of the web of life. The Clean Air Act stipulated that the Environmental Protection Agency, when faced with uncertainty, must choose standards "requisite to protect the public health ... with an adequate margin of safety."

With an adequate margin of safety! Both the Bush and Trump administrations so politicized the EPA that the agency regularly sided with Big Business and strived to protect corporate profitability with a *negative* margin of

concern for the health of citizens or the environment -- or for other species of life on Earth, like polar bears. In the eight years of the Obama administration, Republicans showed adamant hostility to the EPA and the protection of endangered species. So once Trump Republicans seized control, they reprehensibly reversed many environment protections to allow polluting industries to spew more toxins into the biosphere and maximize short-term profits.

The Environmental Protection Agency is supposedly an independent watchdog agency, responsible for the health of people and the environment. But its administrator under George W. Bush was Stephen Johnson, a man who acted like a political operative at the behest of the White House with a different mission. He basically opposed all efforts to ensure protections of the environment from greenhouse gas emissions created as fossil fuels are burned. He did this despite an April 2007 Supreme Court decision that held that the EPA has the authority to regulate such emissions. Polar bears, threatened with extinction, would be cynical about this, if they were able to comprehend the big picture of human hubris, greed and political shenanigans. As cynical as a polar bear can be, anyway. They would probably think that human beings are obtuse, inimically self-centered and evil tyrants!

Then Mitch McConnell and scheming Republicans, pursuing their nefarious court capture scheme, managed to appoint three new far right Justices to the Supreme Court during Trump's chaotic time in office, and these Republicans judges are eviscerating the power of regulatory agencies like the EPA. Remedial action must be taken!

To me, far-sighted and realistic ideas are important. It is vital that we collectively begin to live our lives in ways that are consistent with the greater good over the long run. At the same time, it would be propitious for us to be true to the better parts of our authentic inner selves. The ideas in the Earth Manifesto have been set forth primarily to suggest ways that we can accomplish important goals in this context.

Consider this. Medical groups warned in the summer of 2019 that climate change is a "health emergency". This included 74 medical and public health groups that pushed for a series of consensus commitments to combat climate change. The climate change agenda released by the groups, including the American Medical Association and the American Heart Association, came amid early jostling among Democratic candidates over whose environmental platform was more progressive. "The health, safety and well-being of millions of people in the U.S. have already been harmed by human-caused climate change, and health risks in the future are dire without urgent action to fight climate change," the medical and public health groups wrote. The policy recommendations they made are a stark contrast to Trump Republicans' approach, and represent "back-to-basics" plans for an internal Democratic climate debate that has so far revolved around the liberal precepts of the Green New Deal.

Among other things, the groups pressed elected officials and presidential candidates to "meet and strengthen U.S. commitments" under the 2015 United Nations climate agreement in Paris, from which Trump withdrew the United States (and President Joe Biden rejoined). They also pushed for some form of carbon pricing, and "a plan and timeline for reduction of fossil fuel extraction in the U.S."

One informed observer said that, for voters who view climate change "primarily as a threat to things in the environment, like polar bears," talking about the issue as a health problem could reframe their thinking. "It's incredibly helpful when health professionals point out the actual reality of the situation, point out that this is also a threat to our health and well-being now ... and it's likely to get worse, much worse, if we don't take action to address it."

Consider another conundrum. People love to travel, as I do, and yet excessive tourism has been increasingly damaging the very qualities that attract tourists to popular destinations in the first place. This outcome is correlated to human traits like that of being driven to be compulsively busy. This desire is stimulated by advertising and promotion, and results in an odd paradox of prosperity. When people have more money, they tend to travel more, and can afford greater latitude to indulge their stimulated desires, as for instance by indulging in tourist travel that can wreak harms on natural ecosystems. This realization is dawning on many.

Take, for instance, people in Hawaii. In an article titled *After a year without tourists, Kauai's rugged coast reopens*, valuable light is shed on this phenomenon. A two-mile stretch of a highway in Kauai reopened in June 2019 after having been closed for more than a year because of landslides triggered by record-breaking rainfall. "Without tourists to disturb the wildlife, native plants and animals rebounded, and even the local community grew

stronger." The area had been "an ecological disaster with the suntan lotion and oil on the reefs." After the Kūhiō Highway reopened, "new regulations will aim to cut the park's number of visitors in half, a goal some locals say is not enough."

The primary themes of all Earth Manifesto writings are ecological sanity, principles of Golden Rule fairness, the well-being of our communities, strategies for peace, win/win solutions to problems, the advancement of personal freedoms, respect for human dignity, the vital importance of core values of democracy, and an overarching responsibility for the common good. Wide-ranging points of view have been assembled from an extensive array of sources to examine ideas aimed at helping achieve an epoch-defining transition to a fairer and more sustainable existence. My goal in articulating these ideas is to broaden understandings in general, with the hope that this will contribute to a more salubrious destiny for people alive today, and those to be born in the future.

Mother Earth Weighs In

The original Earth Manifesto was first published online in 2004. It can still be found linked to Part Seven on the Earth Manifesto Home Page (Book Nine, *The Original Earth Manifesto*, is also available from Lulu Press). It was scanned in online as a PDF file so that it could include some of the colorful and emphatic calligraphy that was typical of early versions of these ideas that arose before they were put online. This first version of this manifesto on the Internet consisted of 121 one-page Soliloquies. Soliloquy #5 had a long elliptical circle at the top with the title in it: *Letters from the Earth*. A rotund page-encircling dark blue circle appeared below it, containing a three-paragraph communiqué, signed at the lower right by "Mother Earth". Here is what Mother Earth communicated us in this Soliloquy:

"Lovely to have you human beings around! Life has finally achieved a self-reflective state of consciousness after so many eons, meaning great recognition for yours truly Mother Earth -- for my awesome beauty, and for the extraordinary context of existence in the Universe. As a part of physical Nature, I am naturally utterly indifferent to judging or favoring any particular circumstance or changes, but I must make one thing perfectly clear: My Gaia aspect -- the sum total of all my living systems -- loves itself. I love my beautifully balanced ecosystems, teeming with life in infinite niches, my topography of magnificent mountains and vibrant valleys and superb seas. Please don't ruin everything by hunting all the animals to extinction, by poisoning my life-supporting waterways and atmosphere, and by myopically modifying and destroying my habitats."

"My living systems are fabulous sources of materials for your prosperity and sustenance, like food, fish and timber -- but they are also vitally valuable in a healthy state for the services they provide to the human race. Forests help provide clean water and flood management, erosion control, water storage, regeneration of the atmosphere, and buffering against weather extremes. Likewise, wetlands, rain forests, wilderness areas, riparian habitats, coral reefs, symbiotic communities and other healthy ecosystems are critical for your survival, so I recommend that humanity whole-heartedly embraces the ideas expressed by Tiffany Twain, and begins to move boldly towards sustainable and restorative activities."

"Listen up, humanity, your home planet speaks! You would be wise to rediscover your native reverence for Planet Earth, the respect and appreciation that were once so germane to your awareness, your hearts, and your souls. You must, for your own good, begin a dramatic Ecological Revolution, and enact positive environmental, economic and social changes worldwide. Commit yourselves to a transformation of human activities consistent with both your own long-term well-being and that of the Earth; and also strive to develop more effective international institutions to help ensure peaceful coexistence amongst all your peoples and nations."

--- Mother Earth

Can Art Serve Society?

Passion and inspiration are valuable characteristics in getting things accomplished. Jack London, one of America's greatest writers, wrote compellingly of inspiration. In *Martin Eden*, a semi-autobiographical novel, London's protagonist Martin became infatuated with Ruth Morse, a young woman who inspired him with passionate intensity. Martin threw himself into trying to improve himself by reading books, educating himself and trying to make himself

worthy of Ruth. Intimidated by her alluring presence, Martin was "like a navigator adrift on a strange sea without chart or compass."

But then, "in splendor and glory, came the great idea. He would write. He would be one of the eyes through which the world saw, one of the ears through which it heard, one of the hearts through which it felt." Passionate inspiration like this can be the source of much hope in the world, partially because such influences can be the catalyst for positive changes. Everyone is a bit lost, in the widest of senses, and these words and ideas are issuing forth to help provide a compass by which we can better see and more wisely navigate.

"Ah, that gives me an idea!", as Jack London's father had a charming habit of saying, just before he proceeded "to elaborate a beautiful truth or what appeared to be a fact in nature heretofore overlooked." Far better societies are within our reach. It is high time people demanded them and helped to actualize them. It seems as though humanity, given a comprehensive and perceptive perspective of existence, might be able to use insights like those contained in this manifesto to transform our cultures and societies into fairer, saner and more sustainable ones. Such ideas are found throughout these writings and are summarized in detailed plans in *Common Sense Revival - Book One of the Earth Manifesto*, and in Part Four online; see *One Dozen Big Initiatives to Positively Transform Our Societies*, and the *Progressive Agenda for a More Sane Humanity*.

Let us have healthy and honest debates about these ideas, and seek a more unified consensus on how we should all strive to get along better and improve the prospects of well-being for everyone on Planet Earth, not forgetting all our heirs in future generations. There will be plenty of challenges for the human race in the years and decades and centuries ahead without us acting in ways that create and exacerbate conflicts. We must come together to seek common ground, and honor fair-minded Golden Rule principles. We can't afford to continue to misunderstand others and fight fervently and sometimes even violently over our differences. Even without adversarial goading, our explosive planetary population growth and the ways we are depleting resources, in conjunction with the worsen devils of our competitive natures, are sure to continue to contribute to the impetus for resource wars and desperate struggles for supremacy. Let's turn down the heat on this pressure cooker!

Caring for Real Life Damsels

The purpose of this exploration of ideas is to shed light on some vitally important issues that face humanity. As we launch into these issues, let's remember that the most effective way to solve our problems is to begin by developing clearer understandings of their real causes. We should avoid delusion and confusion about the true nature of problems or their significance, or else we may end up merely addressing symptoms instead of causes. When we fail to understand the actual nature of problems, our efforts to solve them can be misdirected, wrongly resolved and poorly prioritized, or woefully inadequate and even backwardly counterproductive.

Consider, for instance, the current generation of American damsels-to-be: the 12 million teenage girls between the ages of 14 and 19. A study done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that at least 1 in 4 teenage American girls had contracted some form of sexually transmitted disease. This startling statistic represents a serious public health problem. Protecting our children, especially our daughters, should be one of the highest priorities of our families, communities and country.

We should design social policies to ensure that the physical and psychological health of our children is given high priority. We should NOT force unmarried teenage girls to carry unwanted pregnancies to term, just as we should not make young people losers in our socioeconomic and political systems, or pawns in hot-button ideological conflicts, and we sure shouldn't allow misinformation to misdirect public policy. Our kids are, after all, vulnerable and impressionable young females and males!

To prevent the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, many of the people who control our government and churches say we should emphasize sexual abstinence. Social conservatives are often opposed on ideological grounds to teaching sex education in schools, or to sensibly encouraging the use of contraceptives by people who are sexually active. This is patently wrongheaded. These doctrinaire extremists apparently believe that sex -- one of the most powerful of all natural biological urges -- can be effectively discouraged by telling girls and boys, and women and men, to "just say no".

Yet our entire culture is obsessed with sex and sexiness. Images of slender nubile young females are so pervasively pimped by advertisers that it is impossible to open a magazine or turn on television or log onto the Internet without being presented with alluring, revealing and sexually suggestive messages. Ooh la la! Boys and men are subjected to these enticing stimuli, and this form of cultural conditioning stimulates already strong biological urges and peer pressures. These influences encourage males to "score", and to get girls to "put out", or give in, or even just "hook up" to satisfy sexual impulses. It is obscene to allow the radical right to control our social teachings and deny important education to young people when the consequences of ignorance can have far-reaching harmful effects and burdensome implications.

And with right-wing Republicans intent on forcing every female who becomes pregnant to carry the incipient zygote for 9 months and give birth, no matter what, the risks and obligations have become enormous.

More than 400,000 teenage girls under the age of 20 gave birth in the United States in 2009, and more than 80% of these teenage pregnancies were unplanned. A large proportion of the children born were unwanted, and about 90% were born to teenage girls who were not married, meaning that the babies were born into unstable and insecure situations. The total number of abortions has declined every year for more than a decade, due mainly to increased use of contraceptives, so this is a good thing -- fewer abortions! -- but now in 2022, most Republican politicians seem to be perversely driven to prevent women and men from even having a right to use contraceptives.

Curiously, there is a remarkably simple reason that social conservatives and religious fundamentalists advocate the abstinence-only method of birth control. It is an obvious yet astonishing reason: *it doesn't work*. This is not just opinion; it is a statistical fact. And why might these folks promote a policy that doesn't work well, given that failures to abstain from having sex are caused by one of the most powerful motivations in relationships between sex-obsessed males and fending-off females? Again, it's simple and obvious. One reason these folks cynically don't want the approach to work is because pregnancies produce more children that can be indoctrinated into religious faith, or into materialistic consumerism and future profits.

Globally, the World Health Organization reports that more than 12 million girls under the age of 20 give birth each year, and teenage pregnancies are most likely to occur in poorer segments of society than richer ones. These facts should motivate us to find ways to give teenagers more power to choose, and better lives.

The Struggle Within: Strict Father vs. Nurturant Parent

Consider for a moment the way we think about the basic nature of tyrants and damsels. Tyrants are ruthless rogues. Damsels are a bit dainty and need a hero to save them when they're in distress, which is frequently the case. Language experts can help us clarify our thinking and allow us to extrapolate our concepts into a valuable framework of human understanding. The famous linguist George Lakoff uses psychological underpinnings of family development philosophies to provide insights into the sometimes contradictory nature of human motivations. He concludes that there are two broad contrasting central metaphors about the relationship of parents to their children, and of the state to its citizens. He characterizes these two main paradigms of interrelationships as being consistent with either Strict Father values or Nurturant Parent values.

People who hew to Strict Father constellations of beliefs are known as conservatives. Conservatism is generally characterized by a moral conception that respects strength, toughness, self-reliance, tradition and male authority. It is associated with values that revolve around duty, orthodoxy, self-discipline, sacrifice and puritanism as being proper and right. Conservatives consequently advocate harsh punishment for wrong-doing and support the death penalty, and a powerful military; they believe in the rightness of laissez-faire sink-or-swim economic doctrines, and a minimum of regulations; they demand what are basically regressive changes in taxation that emphasize big tax cuts for the wealthy; they want to constrain social program spending; they prefer private education to social investments in public education; they push for increased gun ownership by private citizens with a minimum of restrictions; they are susceptible to dogmatism and obediently follow authorities, even when abusers of power egregiously use a barrage of falsehoods to keep them in line. They also oddly oppose dignity in dying; they are often sexually puritanical, so fundamentalists among them adamantly and intolerantly oppose pre-marital sex, sex education, contraception, freedom of choice, safe legal abortions, and civil rights for lesbian women and gay men;

and they effectively believe in a rigidity of roles for males and females in which men deserve more control, power, privileges and pay than women.

People who tend toward a Nurturant Mother constellation of beliefs are known as liberals. In general, liberalism is characterized by moral conceptions that respect empathetic understanding, nurturance and fair dealings. It is associated with values that revolve around social justice, basic human rights, helping others, being empathetic, having compassion, and demonstrating progressive attitudes. Liberals tend to champion strong protections for people and the environment against harm, exploitation and unscrupulous business activities; they advocate actions and policies that are consistent with the greater good, like fairness doctrines, progressive tax reform, tightly controlled military spending, peaceful conflict resolution, a reasonable safety net of affordable social programs, and intelligent environmental regulations; they support true justice rather than retributive punishment, and programs designed to reduce criminal recidivism; they oppose draconian punishments for drug use and harsh incarcerations and the death penalty; they believe in public investments in good education and affordable public schools; they advocate sensible regulation of businesses to mitigate the social ills associated with industrialization and poorly regulated capitalism; they want greater safety of firearms and a ban on ownership of mega-clip rapid-fire assault weapons; they are tolerant of the privacy rights of others and freedoms to choose how to lead their lives; and they effectively believe in equal rights in the relationship between females and males. They believe strongly that future generations should be protected from current day practices and policies that are wantonly wasteful, destructive and shortsighted.

The best course for society to follow would be to choose a healthy, smart and fair balance between conservatism and liberalism. This balance should be characterized by individual responsibility and empathetic Golden Rule consideration for others, and for the greater good. Moderate points of view are critical in public policy decision-making, and excessive extremism is generally contrary to the best interests of almost everyone.

Setting Goals and Improving Our Societies

There is, of course, a degree of tyrant and vulnerable damsel within each of us. To achieve a healthy balance in our societies, we need to moderate impulses toward either unjust domination or cowering acquiescence. We would be wise to mitigate extremes of Strict Father discipline or Nurturant Parent permissiveness. I strongly believe that our societies should encourage the freedom and capability of people to actualize the best within themselves, while also striving to create optimum outcomes for the greater good.

The devil is often in the details. There are many people on both the left and the right of the political spectrum who believe in "social engineering". So the question is, how can we best decide what directions are most desirable? What changes should we support, and which things should we actively discourage? How can we reach a fair consensus on which priorities are the most important? How can we unite people to focus on common goals, and restructure our societies accordingly, so that our national policies are more honorable, fair, farsighted and sustainable? And how can we get people to collectively agree on the best ways of accomplishing positive change?

The best first step to take would probably be to prevent moneyed interests from using blaring megaphones to persuade people to support misguided national priorities, and to *Move to Amend* the U.S. Constitution as soon as possible to reduce the misguiding influence of wealthy people and large corporations in determining our laws and national priorities. Also, we should take strong steps to reverse the trend toward extreme polarization of the populace that is intrinsic in partisan gerrymandering, because it is terribly damaging to desirable social cohesion. We should demand that Congress outlaw partisan gerrymandering, and the Supreme Court should stop allowing racially discriminatory gerrymanders.

We must find better ways of reaching consensus on the common good goals that we regard as most important. This should involve broad-minded debate, respectful listening, clear thinking, reasonable compromises, and a passionate commitment to finding win/win solutions. Once we have formulated a smarter master plan, then it might be easier to stay on track to reform our corrupt system and restructure our legislative priorities. This would help us prevent competing interest groups from selfishly subverting greater good goals. We can be most effective and fair in implementing a more promising master plan by creating both powerful incentives and motivating disincentives to affect the behaviors and activities of the entire populace.

We would be wise to integrate the best of libertarian principles and conservative principles and liberal principles into our societies, and streamline the government to work better. We should more reasonably balance competing interests, and do a better job of resisting the influence of entrenched interest groups that have so successfully distorted our national priorities and subverted fairness and exacerbated inequality and undermined fiscal responsibility and encouraged military aggression. We should minimize interference of federal and state governments in people's lives when it comes to privacy issues and civil liberties and freedoms of reproductive choice. And we should simultaneously ensure that all people are treated fairly in opportunities for education and jobs -- and workplace safety, legal justice and national security.

The Value of Humor and Satire

Ambrose Bierce provided a cleverly insightful definition in *The Devil's Dictionary* that is appropriate to the failures of conservatism: "Conservative, n. A statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others."

Ha --- Such satire! Let's act to honestly replace existing evils with other things, but let's replace them with productive, fair and farsighted national policies! While I have my *Devil's Dictionary* out, and am pondering tyranny, here is another definition to think about: "Dictator, n. The chief of a nation that prefers the pestilence of despotism to the plague of anarchy." Balance, I say.

Satire laughs at human foibles and absurdities, but the laughter is becoming more rueful in the world today as increasingly consequential woes are coming more to characterize some of our habits and shortcomings.

We can appreciate good satire, for it often has a constructive purpose: to criticize using humor and wit, with a goal of stimulating improvement in human institutions or undertakings or activities. Satire seeks not to tear down but "to inspire a remodeling". Few can deny that our nation and world are in critical need of a big measure of smart remodeling!

Mark Twain expressed this intriguing perspective: "Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever."

United We Stand, Divided We Fall

The Founders of our great experiment in democratic governance were united in their opposition to despotism and oppressive rule. In the great U.S. Constitution, these Founders honorably declared that a primary purpose of creating a new form of democratic republic was to "promote the general Welfare". Yes, to promote general well-being! Today, the fact of the matter is that the general welfare of the people of United States, considered in the Big Picture of most of the 332 million Americans, is in excessively poor and unnecessarily disreputable condition, especially during the pandemic when anti-vaxxers are causing the widespread affliction to be unnecessarily prolonged.

Politicians who engage in corrupt influence peddling and deviously self-serving betrayals of the common good are brazenly undermining the general welfare. The American people deserve more fair-minded public servants in Washington D.C. who are focused on making the lives of citizens better, and not merely on enriching themselves and clinging to power.

Now this is a simple thing. Many wise persons over the ages have declared that "United we stand, divided we fall."

To honestly promote the general welfare, we need to place a higher priority on improving conditions for the masses, not just the people at the top. To achieve vastly greater cause for peace, mutual security and hope in our world today, we indisputably need a greater measure of unity and honorable collaboration, and this should be centered around egalitarian justice and ecological sanity. What we really need are progressive policies that are more expansive and inclusive, and much more farsighted. Ones like those articulated by Dr. Tiffany B. Twain throughout the Twelve Books of the Earth Manifesto. A new dawn lies ahead, crystal clear.

The wrong thing, of course, is to let "conservatives" continue to divide us, and to let them give gigantic amoral corporate entities more power and prerogatives to deplete resources, pollute the commons and create excessively oppressive working conditions for tens of millions of working people. It is wrong from the standpoint of the

greater human good to fail to throw off the rashly rude and harsh hegemony of power-abusing politicians who favor expanded largess for the wealthy through tax cuts rigged to be amazingly generous to those at the top. This is wrong because such tax cuts come at the expense of taxpayers and citizens who face increased austerity and cuts in funding for public schools, affordable healthcare, social safety net programs, protections of the environment, and dozens of other hallmarks of a civilized society. It is fiscally wrong to let our duplicitous representatives facilitate the calamitously serious scam of allowing taxpayers to be ripped off through schemes that add to the already dangerously large \$30.5 trillion national debt.

Capitalists are pushing their luck in the age-old struggle against working people, in a risk-laden and treacherous case of brazen and dangerous overreach. Corporations are run by capitalist CEOs and top management that strive to maximize profits in many ways that are socially damaging. Their efforts to take excessively unfair advantage of working people are their most disastrous activities, along with their opposition to increases in the minimum wage and overtime pay, and their efforts to foist externalized costs onto the masses, who see firsthand how insidiously these corruption-enabled expediencies wreak tragedy-of-the-commons harms on them and their communities. Smart reforms, informed by foresight and long-term thinking, are required.

Making the Right Bets

We must remember that we are inextricably involved in a Bet Situation about the future, and it is incumbent upon us to begin leaving a fairer legacy to the young, and to all those countless numbers of human beings to come in future generations. We simply must give much higher priority to ecologically sane plans and policies. And it is wrong, from points of view of those who understand that investing in mutual security is wise, and that doing things like slashing budgets for State Department diplomatic solutions to global problems inevitably require more money to be spent on the Pentagon and military readiness and wars.

Donald Trump repeatedly tried to slash State Department budgets, hobbling diplomatic efforts, while at the same time increasing Pentagon spending. This was foolhardy, for peace, justice, mutual security and reasonable compromise are existentially important values. Even the hawkish Secretary of Defense James Mattis argued, "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately."

Three days before Dwight Eisenhower yielded the responsibilities of the Presidency in January 1961, he made a haunting speech warning the world in his farewell address about the unwarranted influence of the military-industrial complex, stating: "Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together."

Well put, Ike! We should always remember that a fair-minded balance between personal liberties and the most valid versions of our national security should be a cornerstone of our national purposes.

Adm. Michael Mullen, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said that excessive U.S. national debt has become one of the top national security threats. Acknowledging the kernel of truth in this perspective, we can definitively declare that out-of-control military spending poses big risks to future well-being.

Dwight Eisenhower had spoken at an annual Republican Women's National Conference five years earlier, and made the incisive remark that he felt "the most deep conviction that a political party can be called such only if its whole purposes are soundly based in some moral and spiritual values." He added, "The women of this nation are more concerned in their day by day work, I think, than are men with these values. They have the job of rearing our young, those youngsters who are so dear to all our hearts, and they want them to grow up with the right kind of values imbedded in them so that as they meet the problems of life they will always have a certain kind of principle, or doctrine, or belief to fall back on that will help guide them through the rough spots."

Eisenhower then concluded: "If a political party does not have its foundation in the determination to advance a cause that is right and that is moral, then it is not a political party; it is merely a conspiracy to seize power." We have had enough of partisans engaged in conspiratorial collusion to seize and abuse power, and must now DEMAND better representation of the common good!

Peaceful Coexistence, Anyone?

Choosing more intelligent and far-sighted priorities is vital. Almost no one would argue, in retrospect, that the best way to have improved the world and made it fairer and safer in the wake of 9/11, given a multi-trillion-dollar budget, would have been by attacking and occupying Middle Eastern countries and thus causing social, economic, and political turmoil and upheaval. George W. Bush had contended, when he was a candidate for president, that the U.S. should be a humble nation, not an arrogant one. In his campaign rhetoric, he appealed for voters to support him and said we should be judicious in the use of military force around the world. As it turned out, his administration was radically and recklessly injudicious, and did involve us in intrusive "nation building" abroad and costly unnecessary wars. This tragically paved the way to the awful litany of power abuses by Donald Trump and his cultishly obedient minions.

At half the price of our invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, we could have created a more vibrant and ecologically sane economy, reduced world tensions and instability, strengthened our moral standing in the world, made the U.S. more equitable and the world more just, avoided much hostility and recrimination, and mitigated serious blowback risks. We could have invested in independence from our addiction to fossil fuels, and reduced deficit spending, and helped strengthen Muslim nations against radicalism, and helped stabilize countries in places like Latin America and Africa against instability and surges of emigration. We could also have saved the lives of thousands of our troops and hundreds of thousands of people in the Middle East, and prevented an incalculable amount of suffering and an untold number of health harms and debilitating injuries.

It would have been much less expensive to implement a positive program like the Marshall Plan that helped Europe recover from World War II in the years between 1948 and 1952. Our goal in that plan was to use financial aid to rebuild war-devastated countries, and to forestall hunger, desperation, poverty and chaos. Our preemptive wars in the Middle East have contributed to outcomes that increase these undesirable states. They have made refugees of millions of people, increased instability and caused a horrifying number of people to feel less secure and more desperate, humiliated, angry and hateful, thus providing powerful impetuses for terrorist groups and their suicidal attacks, and a terrible interlude of heightened Islamic State barbarity.

When we followed our invasion of Afghanistan by a bait-and-switch tactic of attacking and occupying Iraq, this action proved to be a colossally costly miscalculation. One underlying reason for the launch of the Iraq war was to forcefully gain control of diminishing global oil reserves. This strategy was critically misguided and foolish from the perspective of opportunity costs and adverse unintended consequences associated with this decision. Have we really in any way meaningfully accomplished a noble or rational mission in the Middle East? In June 2019, the United States came within minutes of launching a war against Iran, after Iran's Revolutionary Guard shot down a drone spy plane. This would have drastically compounded the dangers of our aggressions in the area.

Let this outcome inform all future war debates. Become an early adopter of *opposition to the next war*, already!

Earthquakes and Their Philosophical Aftershocks

A destructive earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal on November 1, 1755. In an epic irony, the powerful quake took place at the height of religious masses during All Saints' Day, a Catholic holiday that is a commemoration of martyrs and righteous people. Tens of thousands of people died as a result of this quake, many of them while attending services in more than 30 churches that ironically tumbled down on the faithful. Divine trick or treat?!

This terrible tremor had its epicenter deep under the seafloor off the coast of Portugal, and it generated a destructive series of huge tsunami waves that killed many people in Lisbon and coastal areas in the region soon after the quaking had subsided. Fires also broke out that wreaked further devastation on people in the area.

Theologians of the time tried to take advantage of the Lisbon calamity. Various Christians claimed that God caused the deadly earthquake, wrathfully punishing evil and sin in Lisbon, which was one of largest, richest and most opulent cities in Europe at the time. Stupidly simplistic explanations like this were another form of manipulative propaganda designed to strengthen the Church's power over gullible followers.

Philosophers like Voltaire and Rousseau debated the dominant philosophy of their day -- that of 'philosophical optimism' and the conviction that 'all is good'. In 1759, Voltaire wrote *Candide*, one of the most famous short stories in history, in response to controversies spawned by the earthquake. The optimistic tutor Dr. Pangloss in

Candide repeatedly assures innocent Candide that this is "the best of all possible worlds", despite calamity after calamity after calamity that befell him. Voltaire lampooned extreme credulousness and simplicity of belief in this great short story.

Another influence on Voltaire's philosophical understanding was the lethally savage absurdity of the Seven Years' War that ravaged Europe from 1756 to 1763. Far-flung colonies of European nations were all affected, including those in America and India, and more than one million people died in this devastating war.

It is vitally important for us to consider the dangers of being credulous and having blind faith in shrewd and manipulative authorities and their conniving rhetoric. Every time natural disasters occur, religious opportunists rush to blame people they hate or can gain power by demonizing. When they claim God is wrathfully punishing the victims of such calamities for their supposed sins, we should snap to attention and reject these torturously twisted, biased, reactionary, ignorant and emotion-hijacking claims. I urge everyone to embrace more modern and realistic understandings of cause and effect in the natural world. We would be wise to transcend ignorance, superstition and prejudice. We surely should strive to make our world a fairer and safer place.

Mark my words: religious fundamentalists are already preparing explanations of how God will have struck "sinful" San Francisco after the next big earthquake in Northern California. The debate will rage on for a while, as if there is some suspicious probability that such an explanation could be true. Right-wing bigots will probably claim God is punishing San Francisco because it is an epicenter for regional tolerant attitudes toward gay people, or on account of a decision by the California Supreme Court in 2008 that said laws barring same-sex marriages were unconstitutional, or other such things. It will be similar to the hypocrisy and hot-button prejudices of certain Religious Right ideologues who blamed lesbians and gays for 9/11, and for damages done by Hurricane Katrina.

Earthquakes, like storms and volcanic eruptions, are natural phenomena. They are NOT an expression of the wrath of some angry Supreme Being who wreaks natural disasters to punish 'sinners'!

Some of the most powerful earthquakes ever to occur in the U.S. took place in Missouri, of all places, when a series of tremors struck the New Madrid Seismic Zone between December 1811 and March 1812. Let's harken back to these events. These earthquakes caused epic ruptures in the land, and the mighty Mississippi River even flowed backwards for a period of time. Superstitious people thought that the devil had come, and imagined that the end of the world was near. A geographer and geologist named Henry Schoolcraft was so moved by the calamitous nature of the New Madrid earthquakes that he expressed his emotions in poetry:

"The rivers they boiled like a pot of coals,
And mortals fell prostrate, and prayed for their souls."

Every person should feel free to pray for their souls, and the activity may even have good effects on one's health like some miraculous tonic or positive placebo, but no one should make the absurd mistake of thinking God is going to stop the eons-long movement of tectonic plates to accommodate their pleading personal concerns!

This New Madrid fault zone is still active, and strong earthquakes will eventually happen there again, sooner or later. Thus, preparedness is a bona fide good idea. And it will be preposterous to blame God for inadequate seismic protections in the building codes! Just ask the 5 million people in China's Sichuan province who became homeless in the immediate aftermath of a devastating earthquake that took place in May 2008. Many shoddily constructed homes, businesses and schools simply pancaked down onto their occupants.

When the next quake inevitably hits the Midwest, preachers will need to be creative and dig deep to come up with an adequate explanation for why God is punishing innocent, well-meaning and righteous Midwesterners. After all, in 2004, voters in Missouri approved an amendment to the State constitution that banned same-sex marriages, and many socially conservative Missourians are still righteous in opposition to allowing gay people to have fair civil rights or domestic partnership rights.

Albert Einstein, who was named Time Magazine's 'Person of the Century' at the end of 1999, once said: "I do not believe in the God of theology who rewards good and punishes evil. My God created physical laws that take care of that. His universe is not ruled by wishful thinking, but by immutable laws." Our thinking and our human laws should likewise not be driven by prejudices or discriminatory biases, or intellectual dishonesty that rationalizes extreme

inequities. Nor should our laws be formulated in ignorance, or in accordance with fatalistic beliefs in supernatural causes of natural disasters.

Projections of beliefs and doctrines and myth and fable provide a provocative context for us to question whether our anthropocentric deities are really the way we picture them. Does God really get jealous or angry? Does God crave recognition, adulation, worship and glory? Does "He" care about our diet? Is God really an all-knowing, all-powerful, and loving entity? Could God really exist in any way similar to what is imagined?

There are positive aspects of anthropocentric convictions that a divine being exists, just as there are positive aspects of stories told in Greek mythology. Jungian psychologist Jean Shinoda Bolen salubriously summarizes such perspectives in *Goddesses in Everywoman*, and in *Gods in Everyman*. There is also affective power in the symbolism contained in religious legends, morality tales and other kinds of metaphorical conceptions and beliefs.

Problems arise in the large subset of situations where such beliefs are used for harmful purposes, as they have so often been throughout history. It is revealing to examine the nature of the things we believe in, and the biases that are expressed in the narratives we create. Consider, again, the lichen. Some lichen species live on trees, but are not parasitic on them and do not harm their host trees. Mistletoe, on the other hand, is a parasitic life form that grows on trees, saps their essence, and can eventually kill them. An anthropocentric biologist might judge that lichens are nobler than mistletoe, because in human interactions we regard those who make their living off others without harming them as being better and more ethical than those who bring harm to those they exploit. Think about it! (This whole story, incidentally, may cast a curious new light on the tradition of a male deserving the privilege of kissing a female under sprigs of mistletoe during Christmas holidays!)

Here in the 21st century, in any case, we could use visionary and farsighted clarity of understanding to properly prioritize our collective efforts to cope well with arising challenges. We need to seek unity and consensus instead of focusing on divisive attitudes, supremacy gambits, rash exploitation, absolutist opposition, or other ways of achieving narrowly focused goals that are counterproductive.

Honorable Accolades, and a Furious Fusillade Against Tyranny

Hypatia of Alexandria has been referred to as the "Lady Philosopher" of Classical antiquity. She was one of the first renowned female experts on the subject of mathematics and scientific rationalism. When she was born around 370 CE, the city of Alexandria in Egypt was a cosmopolitan center where scholars from many civilized countries gathered to exchange ideas. Hypatia's father, Theon, was a distinguished mathematician and astronomer at the famed Alexandrian Museum, so Hypatia grew up in an atmosphere of learning and open-minded exploration. Her father was an unusually open-minded person at a time when men dominated the intellectual world, so he encouraged his gifted daughter to develop her mind and understanding, and thus helped her achieve academically what no woman previously had. Theon supervised Hypatia's education and tutored her, passing on to her his own love of the awe-inspiring beauty and logic of science. In addition to her training in mathematics and science, Hypatia also received a thorough education in the arts, literature and philosophy.

Hypatia's father instructed her not to let any rigid system of religion take possession of her life and exclude the discovery of more accurate scientific truths. Theon told her to "reserve your right to think, for even to think wrongly is better than not to think at all."

As a part of her extensive education, Hypatia had traveled to Athens and Italy, where she spent time as a student. When she returned to Alexandria, she became a highly respected teacher of mathematics, astronomy and philosophy. Scholars, students and admirers from around the world converged on Alexandria to attend public talks that she gave.

Hypatia gained a reputation of dignity and virtue, and was appreciated and popular because of her intellectual accomplishments, but she was still vulnerable to a religious and political struggle that was raging in Alexandria. Because she was a proponent of Greek scientific rationalism, she made enemies who hated things like open-mindedness, female empowerment and non-Christian ways of understanding the world. These qualities eventually become factors that led to her being assassinated in 415 CE.

Alexandria had been founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE, and within a century it had become the largest

city in the world, "and for some centuries more, was second only to Rome." In its early years, it became the main Greek city in Egypt, and was also home to the largest Jewish community in the world. The Roman Empire had gained control of Alexandria in the first century BCE, leading to intriguing episodes and escapades involving Julius Caesar and Cleopatra and Mark Antony. More than three centuries later, during Hypatia's lifetime, many Romans were converting to Christianity, but Hypatia refused to convert because Christians were hostile to what they condemned as pagan ideas, and they even alleged that expansive beliefs caused a gradual weakening of Roman character.

One reason many Christians disliked Hypatia is because she expressed convictions like this: "All formal dogmatic religions are fallacious and must never be accepted by self-respecting persons as final."

Alexandria in those days was beset by intense conflicts between religious authorities and those in the civil sphere. The religious bishop Cyril of Alexandria became the powerful Patriarch of the Church in the city in 412 CE, and began a program of oppression against anyone he believed to pose a challenge to Christian authority. After some escalating incidents, he expelled all Novatian Christians and Jews from the city, and confiscated their assets in an early example of extreme persecution of Jews and anti-Semitic prejudice. Thus Cyril came into conflict with the civil administration of Alexandria by championing Christian orthodoxy and rigid hegemony with zealous single-mindedness of purpose.

Cyril considered the widely admired Hypatia not only to be a dangerous pagan but also an enemy because she had considerable moral authority and extensive influence in Alexandria, and she had sided with Orestes, the Roman governor of the province of Egypt. She opposed everything associated with the tyrannical control of Egypt by the Church. Orestes struggled against Cyril's domineering influence, and he "steadfastly resisted Cyril's agenda of ecclesiastical encroachment onto secular prerogatives".

The conflict intensified, and in March, 415 CE, a mob of Christian zealots formed that was led by Peter the Reader, a minor cleric and major fanatic. The frenzied mob seized Hypatia, dragged her into the cathedral of Alexandria, then stripped her naked and proceeded to dismember her and burn parts of her corpse. Hypatia's violent death made her a martyr for her beliefs, and the vile murder came to be regarded as the end of Classical antiquity and the beginning of the downfall of intellectual life in Alexandria.

Shockingly, Cyril was later given the title *Pillar of Faith* and was anointed Saint Cyril. He was regarded as a saint because of his obstinate devotion to political intrigues that strengthened the early Christian faith. Hear this now: when most people think of the word "saint", usually they think of a person with much more admirable humanitarian virtues than the ruthless Cyril. Interestingly, not all people admired Cyril's harsh ways, and in fact, according to Wikipedia, the Nestorian bishops at the Council of Ephesus declared him a heretic and labeled him a "monster, born and educated for the destruction of the church." A monster was anointed as a saint!

"Reserve your right to think, for even to think wrongly is better than not to think at all."

--- Hypatia of Alexandria, echoing her father

The Relativity of Recompense

There are many ways of evaluating ideas, and none of them are absolutely right or wrong. Truth is elusive. When you think about it, simplicity is desirable, but overly simplistic ideas that ignore real and important facts are undesirable. "Everything is relative," to be sure. Albert Einstein proved this as a scientific fact in the physical world. One particularly evocative illustration of the relativity of perception is contained in *Zorba the Greek*, the great book by Nikos Kazantzakis:

"It all depends on the way you look at it ... Look, one day I had gone to a little village. An old grandfather of ninety was busy planting an almond tree. 'What, granddad!' I exclaimed. 'Planting an almond tree?' And he, bent as he was, turned round and said: 'My son, I carry on as if I should never die.' I replied: 'And I carry on as if I was going to die any minute.' Which of us was right, boss?

Zorba looked at me triumphantly and said: 'That's where I've got you!'

I kept silent. Two equally steep and bold paths may lead to the same peak. To act as if death did not exist, or to act thinking every minute of death, is perhaps the same thing."

During a recent day of lovely gentle rain, it seemed to me that there is something about falling rain and rushing water that accords happily with the soul. Drought is a threat that affects communities in many places, and this makes falling rain a boon and an almost sublime affirmation of life. Yet if one were a tourist visiting from abroad, the rain might be a bothersome inconvenience. And if one were homeless, then rain, wind and cold could be quite miserable. A fierce rainstorm with violent winds can lash out and seem to be malevolent in destructive potentiality. Too much rain can cause devastating flooding -- just ask Texans after another episode of torrential rains or others in Midwest states after one of the periodic rampages of the Mississippi River!

Consider the relativity of perspective in geology, the science that studies physical aspects of the Earth. Geologists tell us that earthquakes are sudden ruptures that occur when tension is released after years of building up as tectonic plates of the Earth's crust move past other plates, or subduct under them. Friction prevents movement between the rocks of the plates, and there are no sharp, well-lubricated boundaries between the plates, so they get 'stuck' -- until finally they snap. The tremors we call earthquakes are the result.

Californians wonder if there will be another "Big One" along the San Andreas Fault. This fault zone is the contact area between the Pacific Plate and the North American Plate as they move laterally against each other. Many people wonder this, even though extensive evidence shows that there have been thousands of periodic Big Ones over the eons as the San Andreas Fault opened up the Gulf of California, and tore the volcanic Pinnacles in half, moving the western part almost 200 miles north in the past 24 million years, and moved Point Reyes far up the coast from the position it occupied millions of years ago. It is basically a certainty that there will be many more Big Ones in the next million years, during which period the beautiful Point Reyes peninsula will become an island drifting northward on the Pacific Plate. And within the next 24 million years or so, the area where Los Angeles is now located, on the Pacific Plate, will move north of San Francisco, which sits on the western edge of the North American Plate. Unimaginable? Incomprehensible? Check the science!

These earth movements will occur independent of whether mankind survives during this eons-long interregnum. In other words, this natural process will continue to take place whether or not 'sinful' human beings survive to live in the lovely geophysical setting of San Francisco's Golden Gate.

Visualize the Pacific Ocean drained of water and seen from high above in an orbiting space capsule. A long line of more than 80 colossal conical volcanic mountains, each of them between 10,000-feet and 33,000-feet tall, stretch in a long line all the way across the Pacific from the formative hot spot beneath Hawaii's Big Island to the deep Aleutian Trench, where the seamounts subduct on the seafloor down beneath the North American plate. In 50 million years, the Hawaiian Islands will be underwater seamounts, themselves approaching this fate, far to the north. The oldest mountain in this chain is the Meiji Seamount, which is about 80 million years old and lies some 3,600 miles northwest of its formative place above the Hawaiian hot spot in Earth's mantle.

Geologic time provides us with a provocative and awe-inspiring perspective, telling us that time is practically eternal. In contrast, time seems to rush headlong past us in our daily lives, and we are driven collectively by busy activities, myopic perspectives and short-term planning. We are particularly shortsighted with regard to our undisciplined consumer activities and collective lack of willingness to make much of any "sacrifice" to invest in protecting the environment that sustains us. Wealth taxes are called for.

Our Great American Hero Mark Twain Weighs In

Mark Twain was fascinated by our race's place in the universe, and especially by the absurdities of religious myths and dogmas. He wrote much of his witty satire, *Letters from the Earth*, in the final years of his life, though it was not published until 1962, posthumously, more than 50 years after he died. This book gives readers entertaining insights and perspective into the absurd nature of orthodoxy and inflexible dogmas of established religions. It is an incisive book that ridicules absurd contentions contained in 'holy books'. After all, scriptures are, as Ambrose Bierce defines them in his *Devil's Dictionary*, "The sacred books of our holy religion, as distinguished from the false and profane writings on which all other faiths are based." A witty way of seeing!

Mark Twain wryly observed: "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

More than 100 years have passed since Mark Twain wrote *Letters from the Earth*. We can now see that ridicule has proved to be inadequate to mitigate the harm that religious fanaticism is causing in the world. Perhaps Mark Twain was wrong in his contention that "Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand."

Sectarian strife is intense today in many Islamic nations, and especially in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Egypt. While sectarian rhetoric that dehumanizes the "other" is centuries old, this cycle of demonization is getting worse throughout the Muslim world. The two most powerful Middle Eastern countries fall on opposite sides of this sectarian divide, with Iran being predominately Shia and Saudi Arabia being mostly a strict form of Sunni. Many experts are concerned that Islam's divide is leading to escalating violence and a growing threat to global peace and security. People in Western countries struggle to combat the rise of Islamic extremism and the brutality being committed in the name of religion.

Heightening dangers in June 2019, Donald Trump sent an aircraft carrier, troops and military drones to the Gulf region, amplifying tensions and leading the U.S. to the brink of war against Iran.

Islamic terrorism is partially a reactive response to economic, social and military injustices, and to underlying strife involved with supremacist gambits of established Western religions. This tactic is making the world increasingly dangerous by threatening attacks on Western nations and provoking a costly and violent military and security state apparatus reaction. The huge cost of our military interventions and global standing armed forces is threatening to bankrupt the U.S., an outcome that would create an even more unstable world and an incalculable amount of widespread hardship.

Mark Twain has been described as "North America's greatest Renaissance Man." He "traveled the planet, observed and assessed with insight and precision. Nothing he wrote is obscure and little of his work is outdated." Mark Twain also respectably took part in the first American peace movement, joining the anti-war Anti-Imperialist League that fought the U.S. annexation of the Philippines on moral principles as well as economic, legal and racial grounds. He courageously served as the League's Vice President.

I, Tiffany Twain, aspire to leave similarly significant writings and impacts, utilizing Mark Twain's genius and making use of many of his salient ideas, along with those of dozens of other eminent thinkers. The Earth Manifesto is creative in its organization and the thoroughness of its attempt to assemble productive ideas. Its interpretation of history uses extensive portions of the wide body of human thought and knowledge and philosophy to clarify issues, along with some of humanity's most visionary understandings.

Seeking a New Renaissance

The Renaissance was a cultural movement in Europe during the 14th to 17th centuries. It entailed a dynamic flourishing of artistic, social, intellectual, scientific and educational innovation. The Renaissance had followed the Dark Ages, a five-centuries-long period in which medieval Christianity and the Church dominated "thought" in the Western world through coercive dogmas, the suppression of "heresy", terrible Inquisitions, and a general inhibiting antagonism to free thinking.

The Renaissance achieved its greatness by embracing freedom of thought and rejecting the puritanical and tyrannical aspects of monotheistic religious establishments. Fluid concepts of divinity helped spark important scientific triumphs of reason, logic and science. This facilitated advances in medicine, technological innovation, artistic creativity, and even strong positive impetuses toward revolutionary measures of democratic governance.

Today we would be wise to be open to a new renaissance in thinking that would laudably help us cope more successfully with economic, social, cultural and environmental challenges that are unprecedented in global scope. Progress is an adaptive force, but it is staunchly resisted by dominion demanding elements of society that are opposed to progressive change and reasonable reforms. Those who obstinately stand in the way of progress are often backward looking, precisely at a time when we have a critical need to be more open-minded and forward-looking. Seeking common ground and the greater good will may be the key.

The need for adaptive flexibility grows with every year that passes. We cannot any longer afford to stubbornly stay the course. We cannot allow our leaders to cling to traditionalism, orthodoxy and strict conformity, nor to engage in extreme partisanship, opposition to needed reforms, and intransigent refusals by dominion-demanding conservatives to fairly compromise. All is relative, of course, and there are no absolute rights and wrongs, but surely there are ways of being that would be more socially intelligent and collectively advantageous. These better ways of being rarely coincide with reactionary opposition to sensible and fair-minded reform. Whatever circumstances come our way, we should strive to make the best of them for the whole of society.

Politics and the Curious Continuum of Differing Perspectives

Every nation's culture has its own competing worldviews and continuum of political propensities. Rather than our country being composed of clearly delineated "red states" and "blue states", there is within every community a broad spectrum of perspectives.

Think about people you know in the context of a political continuum that runs from the radical and freewheeling far left to the atavistic and reactionary far right. Don't people seem to arrive at their personal beliefs less by rational thinking and sensible reasoning than by their upbringing, cultural conditioning, peer influences, tribal identity affiliations, biased news sources, and a kind of knee-jerk emotionality? Doesn't there seem to be some sort of mysterious well-spring of belief systems and personality that appears to be practically inborn? Studies have found a "startle reflex" that curiously correlates people's political perspectives to complex genetically-inherited propensities of temperament. And the evidence of the impacts of echo chamber propaganda and social media microtargeting of fake news and conspiracy theories and negative attack ads gives proof through the fight that profoundly manipulative influences are afoot. Both nature and nurture are involved in the genesis of people's beliefs and convictions.

In one of his most famous essays, Mark Twain wrote in *Corn-pone Opinions* in the year 1900, "We all do no end of feeling and we mistake it for thinking. And out of it we get an aggregation which we consider a boon. Its name is public opinion. It is held in reverence. It settles everything. Some think it is the voice of God."

It is rare to see people shift their attitudes dramatically along the political continuum. When people do change, they traditionally tend to become more set in their ways. In general, the more money that people have, the more they are swayed to the right, where selfish and jealous motives are ensconced in the doctrines of protected privilege and stubborn defenses of the status quo. I heartily applaud those who are fair-minded and versatile enough to buck this trend and become more empathetic, philanthropic and civic-oriented as they get older, or as they become wealthier.

The Despicability of Despotism

Tyranny is about control and domination, and it can be severely unjust. Human civilizations have been ruled from time immemorial by real despots who exploit damsels, and men and children as well. These rulers are pathetic, in contrast to the real heroes who save damsels in distress like the chivalrous heroes that often appear as protagonists in novels, legends, myths, melodramas, comic books and movies.

In any case, fungi are not tyrants. There have, of course, been plenty of tyrannical human beings in the long span of human history, and in the course of countless human relationships. Our societies have many times been afflicted by despotism, arrogance and ruthlessness on the part of those in power. The abuse of privilege and authority is carried to such merciless extremes that it is easy to believe that capitalism and our oligarchic political system are fundamentally predicated upon this propensity to take unfair advantage of others. Capitalize! It is as if our business and political leaders believe in a divine right that entitles them to the prerogative of abusing power, externalizing costs, and enriching themselves and their "friends", often in a corrupt, harsh or pathetically paternalistic manner.

Consequentialist ethics would say that despotism is deplorable in degrees, depending on the number of people that a tyrant adversely affects, and the severity of the oppression, and the exact nature of the injustices perpetrated. The tyrannies wrought by Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, Pol Pot, Augusto Pinochet and Saddam Hussein are among the most notorious and lethal in history.

During the years of the Bush administration, some say that government officials were guilty of an especially cunning tyranny due to their clever marketing, deceptive motives, manipulative propaganda, dishonest spin, and Machiavellian exploitation of public fears, patriotic emotions and nationalistic impulses. These people point to the imperialistic initiatives of Republicans and their aggression in preemptive warfare, ethics violations, usurpation of executive power, pandering to the wrongheaded right wing, anti-environmentalism, and absurdly disingenuous claims of God's approval. It is difficult to reconcile the high-minded words of those in the Bush administration with the unfair quandaries their policies created. At the time, there seemed to be ironic truth in Albert Einstein's observation that "Force always attracts men of low morality". Years later, Trump, in spades, managed to grab power and take over the Republican Party, and dishonesty and low morality proliferated.

Another form of uncompromising fundamentalism that is adversely affecting the greater good in the world today is market fundamentalism. There are three primary planks in market fundamentalist ideologies that generally view any measure that imposes costs or limits on business activities as having the effect of "killing jobs", and as therefore being a bad thing. These three planks are part of a false dichotomy between the economy and the environment that has become a "new-right orthodoxy". The first plank holds that environmental protections are always bad for the economy, so they should be adamantly opposed. The second plank in anti-environmental orthodoxy is uncompromising antipathy to all regulation. The third plank is a misguided obsession with absolute private property rights that features relentless opposition to public land ownership, zoning rules and environmental regulations. Author Frederic Rich expansively explores these ideas in his thought-provoking book, *Getting to Green*, subtitled *Saving Nature: A Bipartisan Solution*.

Subversive Conspiracies

A daunting threat of despotic rule confronts the USA today, due to the Republican Party having embraced an unholy alliance of dominion-demanding conservative religious authorities and ruthless corporate task masters and scheming politicians functioning as puppets for the interests of wealthy people. The rest of *Tyrants and Damsels* explores a variety of rueful and shameful aspects of this dangerous and undesirable coalition.

One model of tyranny that the Republican Party has become enamored with is that of Viktor Orbán, the authority abusing leader of Hungary. Steve Bannon has called him "Trump before Trump". Wisconsin's right-wing Senator Ron Johnson has said Orbán's government is doing "so many positive things". One observer noted, "Among the things it has been doing: seizing control of the judiciary and media, banning the depiction of homosexuality, demonizing Jewish billionaire George Soros, expelling asylum seekers and erecting a wire fence on the border, forcing out the country's top university, and halving the size of parliament and redrawing districts to keep itself in power."

"At its core, Orbán's rule has been about sustaining, and being sustained by, white nationalism." He made a speech on July 23, 2022 that "was an extended articulation of the 'great replacement' conspiracy idea" that non-White people are plotting to take over from White people -- and presumably to treat them as shabbily as they have been treating minority groups for centuries. This culture war hot button theory has been promoted numerous times by Tucker Carlson on Fox News, among others, including Rep. Elise Stefanik, who replaced Rep. Liz Cheney as House Republican Conference Chair when Cheney patriotically stood up against Trump and his insurrectionary coup attempt. Liz Cheney is commendably taking a strong and principled stand for responsible measures to prevent any despots in the future from succeeding where Trump failed.

The way Dartagnan, a member of Daily Kos Community, saw it in his Apr 21, 2022 article, *Yes, Republicans really are moving us toward full-blown fascism*.

"As explained by Jonathan Chait writing for *New York Magazine*, what the Republican Party now apparently sanctions, with little or no debate, is the same type of intimidation autocracies commonly use to stifle dissent and control public opinion in countries such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary and Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Dartagnan referred to Ron DeSantis and the Florida legislature, which had just passed a bill cancelling Walt Disney World's special tax status in that state due to Disney having expressed public opposition to the Republican "Don't Say Gay" law, a bias-affirming piece of legislation that is an example of Republican laws designed to marginalize and demonize LGBTQ people as a way to provoke people in their political base to gain and cement political power. Then

he cited an explanation expressed by Greg Sargent, who writes for *The Washington Post* that "this represents a chilling 'expanded use of state power to fight the culture wars in a much broader and more pernicious sense.'"

"Corporations that publicly question the party's preferred policy, or withhold donations in protest, will be subject to discriminatory policy. If they enjoy favorable regulatory or tax treatment, they can continue to do so on the condition that they stay in the GOP's political good graces.' This is one way rulers like Orban and Putin hold power. It is a method that, until quite recently, would have been considered unthinkable in the United States. That bright line has been obliterated. Trump and Ron DeSantis have now made it almost unremarkable."

"Chait notes the lack of almost any conservative opposition to DeSantis' action, a silence that confirms its tacit approval among the right. As Sargent notes, some of the current crop of Trump-vetted candidates, (J.D. Vance, for example, currently running for Senate in Ohio) have already voiced their support and approval of such tactics, which they characterize as the philosophy of a rejuvenated, menacing 'New Right' repurposed to promote a theocratically based 'post-liberal moral order,' as Sargent describes it."

To me, a "theocratically based 'post-liberal moral order'" sounds assuredly like an undesirably despotic form of creeping authoritarian abuse of power!

Dartagnan continues:

"Sargent's piece in the *Post*, however, goes significantly further, explaining exactly how such tactics could -- and likely would -- play out on a national level assuming Republican control of Congress, or even worse, the executive branch that controls the function of our federal agencies."

"Sargent quotes professor Donald P. Moynihan of Georgetown University on the implications of this type of intimidation. Moynihan suggests that in an executive branch controlled by DeSantis, for example, administrative agencies could be staffed (much the way they were under the Trump administration) with 'right-thinking' officials, but specifically tasked with hunting down and persecuting corporations that refused to toe the administration's ideological lines. In effect, the government would 'harass or investigate companies perceived as 'culturally disloyal.' Changing the tax status of liberal-leaning foundations and targeting specific corporations with punitive measures (akin to what DeSantis is imposing on Disney) would also be possible through the administrative state."

"And if for some reason that type of state-controlled pressure didn't have its desired 'chilling effect' on the way such foundations approached certain issues, the added legislative threat from a GOP Congress working in tandem with such agencies certainly would."

"Sargent poses the question: 'What if such a president were backed in this project by congressional leadership?' Josh Chafetz, a Georgetown law professor who studies Congress, says you could see legislation targeted at offending companies, and even if it didn't survive the courts, it could still function in a punitive way."

"Those companies would sink large sums of money into litigating against such measures, even as Congress relied on taxpayer-funded lawyers on their side, Chafetz told me, meaning 'the onus of the expense would fall on the companies, which would have a chilling effect.'"

"All of this, of course, is in the service of maximizing political power through control of the population, be it publicly through their media propaganda outlets or now privately through coercion aimed at businesses and corporations that might threaten the conservative dogma that cements their control. And although conservatives love to pay fealty to the supposedly libertarian principles of 'free enterprise,' those sentiments, as we now see in Florida, will readily come to a screeching halt when private businesses act as an impediment to the right's theocratic cultural dogma."

"With their thoroughly corrupt majority on the Supreme Court, their gerrymandered legislative majorities seemingly pending to take control of the Congress, and now their increasing willingness to punish private corporations that decline to submit to their ideological malignancy, Republicans have shown every indication not only that they prefer to live in a country like Hungary or Russia, but that they intend to do whatever is necessary to make that happen as soon as possible. The rest of us -- and the incredible diversity of race,

religion, and gender that this country actually represents -- are simply obstacles to their vision, and thus undeserving of any thought or consideration."

"Our task is to prove them wrong."

An Evaluation of Political Performance

A valuable understanding of the foibles of politicians was provided by columnist Dan Milbank in *Homo Politicus*, a book published in 2007. Milbank describes status-conscious politicians and the influence of money and power and scandalous activities from the point of view of an anthropologist, analyzing characters in 'Potomac Land' (Washington D.C.), and he appropriately skewers members of both political parties for their ethical lapses, scandalous behaviors and corrupt political activities. Power abuse and hypocrisy and wrongdoing are definitely not strictly confined to one party or the other!

The real scandal in Washington D.C. is not what's illegal, it's what is LEGAL for politicians. Dark money influence and Super PAC funding that are basically forms of legalized institutional bribery, and insider trading by some members of Congress, travel and golf junkets, lavish travel expenses and personal costs foisted onto taxpayers, and a wide variety of ethics code violations are the stuff of legend -- and of entire books like Mark Leibovich's *This Town: Two Parties and a Funeral - Plus, Plenty of Valet Parking! - in America's Gilded Capital*. And Peter Schweizer's book, *Extortion: How Politicians Extract Your Money, Buy Votes, and Line Their Own Pockets*.

The wryly witty Sam Clemens, trenchant in his Twainian humorous perspective, observed: "It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native criminal class, except Congress."

Conservatives' were dominant in power for the first eight years of the twenty-first century, and then were a staunchly oppositional "Party of No" during the Obama years, and then under Trump wreaked havoc on norms of propriety and violated laws, decency and the Constitution. So investigative scrutiny of unprincipled conservative politicians deserves greater attention. Uncompromising stances zealously taken by misguided politicians and today's QAnon conspiracy theorists and Big Lie pushing insurrectionists make them complicit in undermining greater good goals. Honest conservatives have had their honorable principles and sensibilities exploited and betrayed by politicians who claim to be conservatives. What treachery this is! Sensibly honest conservatives should be outraged and embarrassed, and should take stands against anti-democratic activities.

Voters rejected a "third term" when John McCain lost the 2008 election, denying Republicans the ability to continue policies similar to those of the George W. Bush years. Recall again the nature of policies that were enacted then, under the rubric of 'conservatism': highly regressive changes were made in the system of taxation; the federal government was made bigger, more bureaucratic and much more intrusive in people's lives; ideological initiatives were implemented that exacerbated social status conflicts and increased inequalities; the U.S. acted with arrogance, unjust unilateralism and militaristic hubris on the international stage, harming our nation's moral standing; irresponsible economic and fiscal policies were pursued and many sensible regulations were gutted; shortsighted initiatives were enacted that seriously perverted our national priorities and made them into a pathetic phantasm of responsibility and propriety; and our leaders stuck their heads in the sand on environmental issues to perpetuate advantages for short-term-oriented profiteers. Instead of dealing with hard choices, leaders chose to exploit the debt-be-damned expediency of deficit spending every year since President Clinton ran a budget surplus, and they failed to establish fairer and more intelligent priorities. It is a pathetic record! And these things got worse under Trump.

Most of our leaders have been unwilling to tell people what they need to hear, or to be honest and courageous in acting in accordance with what would truly constitute the greater good. What the American people need to hear and know is this: that the government must become more fiscally responsible, less bureaucratic, more fair in its actions, less deceptive, more truthful, less secretive, more oriented toward the common good, less racist, less sexist, and more socially and fiscally and ecologically responsible. The Trump years proved to be sadly and harshly antithetic to this smarter direction.

Political leaders have given big business more power by failing to enact reasonable campaign finance reform, and by facilitating unethical efforts of pay-to-play lobbyists and no-need-to-pay-as-we-go budgetary policies. Both the

Bush and Trump administrations jumped wantonly into bed with Big Oil, Big Pharma, Big Brother, polluters, climate change deniers, the NRA, corporate Big Media and the enormous Military/Industrial complex. And Republican leaders in particular have pandered much too egregiously to fundamentalists of the 'Taliban wing' of established religions on divisive hot-button social issues. Do they not know that Nemesis, the Greek goddess of divine justice and vengeance, nips at the heels of hubris, and is likely to exact revenge on those who are heedless and hubristic?

The Ironic Influence of the Religious Right on the Republican Party

The fascinating book *What's the Matter with Kansas* provides a cogent understanding of politics in America's heartland. Kansas was once liberal, for good economic reasons, and fought valiantly for the interests of farmers and workers. But in recent decades the state of Kansas has rejected the economic self-interest of its people, and this radical about-face seems to have taken place in response to the triumphant tactics of scheming strategists who have seen how political opportunism can be found in cynically exploiting wedge issues and pandering to the religious right and billionaires like those in the Wichita-based Koch network.

The Republican Party has sided with socially reactionary extremists on the religious right for years. The Party was ironically almost taken over by fundamentalist religious candidates in the presidential primaries in 2008 when Mike Huckabee made a strong showing in his efforts to capture the Republican nomination. Then in 2012, the religious right showed even greater sway when the self-righteous triumvirate of Michelle Bachmann, Rick Perry and Rick Santorum briefly dominated those entertainingly confused and conflicted Republican primaries. And in 2016, Ted Cruz did ridiculously well in the internecine contest for the Republican nomination for the presidency. These developments have a ring of poetic justice to them. Imagine the headlines: "Republicans pandered promiscuously to evangelicals, but then their party was co-opted by true believers!" Many politicians supposedly representing the people in Congress today are stubbornly uncompromising religion-professing politicians and their excessively reactionary spawn, cultishly deluded diehard Trump supporters, no matter what.

In 2008, Republicans chose to pass the mantle of their presidential aspirations to the "maverick" John McCain, whose lobbyist-managed campaign championed the absurdity of endless war, continued unilateral war-for-oil aggression, discriminatory free-market economics in health insurance, and such things as expanded oil drilling off the nation's coasts and even a gimmicky and unwise "gas tax holiday". McCain basically professed stay-the-course policies and retrogressive proposals that would perpetuate war, and disingenuous influence-peddling corporatism and inequities in health care and the ascendancy of right-wing evangelical religious authority.

Pragmatists like former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger created shock waves in the Republican Party in 2007 when he warned the GOP that their Party was in danger of "dying at the box office" by failing to appeal to a wider spectrum of Americans. They have gotten worse since then, waging a war against women's rights and failing to work together with Democrats to enact comprehensive immigration legislation. Trump has brashly exacerbated these problems, and his rude brand of politics is reprehensibly taking advantage of the frustrations and anger of millions of Americans in a bizarre swindle to abuse power by sowing division, acrimony and hate in the world.

Efforts to merely re-brand or re-shape the image of Republicans are inadequate. We need Republicans to be more honest, fair-minded, fiscally responsible, peace embracing, and oriented toward sensible protections of the environmental commons. Substantive changes in our national priorities are required; cleverer marketing just will not suffice! Right-wind *Dark Money* is promoting narrow causes, and in distinctly unconstructive ways. Republican Rep. Tom Davis of Virginia said in 2008 that the GOP had become such damaged goods that "if we were a dog food, they would take us off the shelf". And from January 2017 through January 2021, things got much worse. Republicans should stop pandering so exclusively to anti-progressive attitudes and corporate prerogatives and inequality-exacerbating social policies and reactionary extremes of ideological partisanship!

I feel strongly that American citizens should not vote for any Republicans until they promote a fairer agenda that is more consistent with the greater good. We should demand that both our Democratic and Republican representatives institute Clean Election initiatives and serious reforms of our campaign financing system. The corrupting influence of Big Money in our politics is becoming more blatant every year as Super PACs contribute to more inequitable rigging of our political and judicial systems. Koch network billionaires continue to lead the way,

and this form of reprehensible institutional bribery is manifesting extremely negative effects on our national politics by eroding social cohesion and driving wedges between Americans.

Mere rhetoric, window dressing, and cowardly baby steps are not adequate to fix the Big-Money-rules system that dominates our politics and rigs the system against the people. Federal legislation is urgently needed to strengthen voting rights and prevent the negative impacts of polarization being made worse by gerrymandering.

Supreme Court Treachery

The Supreme Court has become a fundamentally political body that is undercutting American's rights. This became acutely obvious after the Republican majority on the high court overturned federal protections of women's rights to choose to terminate a pregnancy.

Three watershed Supreme Court rulings are contributing to our great country being torn apart. Conservative partisans on the Supreme Court claimed in 2011 to see no corrupting influence of Big Money in our elections, and opened the floodgates to an ever-increasing tsunami of corrupting contributions by special interests in our elections and in lobbying for special advantages and perks. Then in 2013, they eviscerated a provision in the Voting rights Act of 1965 that prohibited certain states with a history of discriminatory voting restrictions against minority groups from denying or abridging the right to vote on account of race, color or membership in a language minority group. This ruling has allowed aggressive schemers in many states to enact discriminatory changes to voting laws. And then in 2019, Supreme Court conservatives made the further corruption-enabling ruling that the legislative branches government must be the ones to fix discriminatory voting rules, not the Supreme Court. This ruling delivered a severe blow to fairness in elections and hopes for us to overcome divide-to-conquer tactics and the pernicious effects of gerrymandering -- and the highly undesirable polarization that results from it.

Republicans trail Democrats by only seven seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, so the GOP need only flip a net of four seats in the 2022 midterm elections to gain majority control. This would likely cripple President Biden's chances of fixing the system and passing need legislation in the last two years of his term. Because of population growth, Republicans gained seats in the House after the 2020 Census -- particularly in the Bible Belt -- and this has given some red states additional seats, and they have aggressively engaged in gerrymandering in redistricting in places they control like Texas, Ohio and Florida.

"First, Ohio Republicans *ignored* reforms passed by voters requiring fair districts, and they submitted rigged maps anyway. Then, when state courts struck down these unconstitutional maps, Republicans only made minor tweaks before resubmitting them -- even though they *knew* the courts would reject the maps again. *They did this six times*. Now, because Republicans have run out the clock by playing political games, courts have ruled that it's too close to the election to throw out the GOP maps. *That means this year's elections in Ohio will be held on unconstitutional maps.*" This is obscene politicking.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 required proof that any proposed voting changes do not deny or abridge the right to vote on account of race, color, or membership in a language minority group. It was wrong for partisan conservatives on the Supreme Court to have eviscerated this provision of the Voting Rights Act in a 2013 ruling.

Democrats in the Senate should eliminate the filibuster for voting rights legislation, so that it can be passed with a simple majority. Otherwise, Republicans will succeed in continuing to tyrannically cheat to win elections. This legislation must prohibit partisan gerrymanders. Obviously Republican politicians are unalterably opposed to broad legislation that would stop them from legalized cheating in elections, so not a single one in either chamber of Congress will vote for a measure that stops them from engaging in voter suppression and rigging the system so that they win no matter what the majority wants.

President Biden simply must urge the Senate to "fix or nix" the filibuster in order to pass the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

The only realistic way partisan gerrymandering can be stopped is if it is banned at the federal level. "The important thing is to require maps that are fair in partisan terms -- compact districts or other priorities are all well and good, but the main priority must be keeping parties from using map drawing to cheat their way to power. This proposal is actually part of the voting rights bill currently before Congress, but it remains to be seen whether

moderate Democratic senators will get rid of the filibuster and pass these election protections."

Efforts to create fairer elections should not be designed to punish for the past but to ensure a better future. We have to be clear about one important thing: The key victim here is not the Democratic Party, though its prospects will suffer. The majority of voters are the victims.

This is not ordinary partisan jockeying. It has been taken to an entirely new level, as a Republican campaign more than a decade in the making comes to fruition. Its goal is not merely to give Republicans an advantage in close elections. Its goal is to *make elections irrelevant*, so that no matter what the voters want, Republicans always stay in power.

A Digression on the Misdeeds of Donald Trump

Republicans impeached President Bill Clinton in 1998 for having lied by denying that he had consensual sexual relations with a White House intern. Fast forward to late June 2019, and Donald Trump was embroiled in another sexual assault scandal, this time for having allegedly raped a woman in the upscale Bergdorf Goodman department store in midtown Manhattan in the mid-1990s. Trump has been an inveterate liar about his many adulterous affairs, indiscretions, sexual assaults and rapes in the last 40 years, even though he candidly admitted to Billy Bush, recorded on a live microphone in the Access Hollywood tape, that he enjoyed taking advantage of women against their will, kissing them without permission and grabbing them "by the pussy".

The writer E. Jean Carroll was one of almost two dozen women to come forward to tell their #MeToo stories about Trump's misbehavior. Carroll had been a longtime columnist for Elle magazine and author of five books, and her disclosure that she had been raped by Donald Trump sent waves through the national discourse. Trump reacted aggressively, deviously declaring in an interview: "I'll say it with great respect. Number one, she's not my type. Number two, it never happened. It never happened, OK?" This was like a confession of guilt, for she was clearly attractive and a woman -- just his type. This cast light on his decades-long compulsions for sexual conquest as an entitled playboy narcissist and repeat offender sexual predator. He denied having ever met E. Jean Carroll, which was instantly revealed to be a preposterous distortion of the truth because a photo of them together in the department store was widely published with the story, OK?

Trump had reportedly once offered up advice to a friend who admitted that he had behaved badly with women: "Deny, Deny, Deny." He told another friend who had admitted bad behavior towards woman: "Deny everything that's said about you. Never admit", according to Bob Woodward in his book *Fear*. Deny all indiscretions, and attack back ferociously, and bully, intimidate and threaten lawsuits. This is his decades-long modus operandi.

But these sexual crimes are minor, in a sense, compared to the long litany of malfeasance that Trump has engaged in. Tax evasion. Election finance law violations. Telling big lies about consequential matters. Exploiting conflicts of interest for personal profit, including violating the Constitution's Emoluments Clause. Nepotism. Obstructing justice. Cover ups. Illegally giving banks false information, and shenanigans with Deutsche bank, and ripping off investors with shrewd tactics, fees and declarations of bankruptcy. Money laundering. Misusing the legal system to "win" victories over people and communities and the ecological commons. Scheming with authority-abusing leaders worldwide, including Vladimir Putin, Mohammed bin Salman, Recep Erdogan, Bibi Netanyahu, Kim Jung Un and Rodrigo Duterte. And lying lasciviously and unrelentingly about the 2020 election having been stolen, and pushing a "fake electors scheme", and fomenting an insurrection to try to stay in power.

An African proverb was quoted at the bottom of a full page ad in the New York Times in December 2009 that urged bold climate action, and was signed by four members of the Trump family. It read, "If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." Trump always apparently wants to go quickly, with "winning" as well as with conquests of women, and his cultish political base has supported him, even though he rudely leaves them behind. We Americans want to go together -- with honestly responsible leaders.

Sensationally, Trump joined 100 business leaders in this 2009 full page ad that urged President Obama and Congress to pass legislation, "and lead the world by example," to implement "meaningful and effective measures to control climate change." To fail to do this, the Open Letter declared, would cause "catastrophic and irreversible consequences for humanity and our planet"

But then con man Trump realized how much power he could gain for himself by corruptly pandering to the oil, natural gas and coal industries, so he changed his tune by 2016, harshly criticizing President Obama for remarks he had made that "global climate change is one of the greatest threats facing the United States and the world." Trump actually called this "one of the dumbest statements I've ever heard in politics — in the history of politics as I know it". This was a deceitful and racially tinged assessment that was truly deplorable.

There's not enough hyperbole in the world to express how grotesquely opportunistic Trump acted by his flip-flop on this issue. Consequential ethics would judge the depth of perfidious duplicity in this flip-flop as all but evil. This pandering to misguiding interests is wrongheaded because it promotes damaging tragedy-of-the-commons outcomes. It is shocking how egregiously self-serving, irresponsibly hypocritical and corrupt this demagogue can be, with his zealous efforts to grab power and influence, and to make money and allow the corruption of our national decision making by fossil fuel industries, and to satisfy his ego and thirst for power -- despite the fact he knows this is causing "catastrophic and irreversible consequences for humanity and our planet."

Another big concern, according to reporting in the Washington Post, was that experts worried about Trump's unpredictable actions while he was in office, believing they put our national security at risk. Specifically, his approach to ICE raids, tariffs on Mexico and confrontations with Iran were erratic and sent "mixed messages" -- and weakened our democracy. Trump's approach on these issues was risky, because he increasingly employed dangerous brinkmanship in an effort to achieve key policy goals. As a result, the risks of a Wag-the-Dog war against Iran were real, for Trump has often used distractions to get himself out of tight spots.

Trump has been a self-serving con man throughout his entire career. He ran roughshod over tenants and entire communities, stiffed contractors, double crossed investors, cheated American taxpayers, defrauded banks, discriminated against Blacks in buildings he owned, engaged in race-baiting against the Central Park Five, and acted as an arrogantly egomaniacal bully with a hair-trigger temperament.

In *Siege, Trump Under Fire*, author Michael Wolff painted a shocking portrait of an unconscionably impulsive, volatile and erratic man who is obsessed with winning and wantonly feeding his ego and seeking flattery and deviously gaming the system so that he can continue his lifelong career as "the guy who gets away with it."

Trump deserved to have been impeached and removed from office, and subpoenas should have been enforced to everyone who defied them and demonstrated loyalty to Trump in ways treacherous to the American people.

As president, he pretended to care about his country and the folks in his political base, but he deceived them by facilitating a murky culture of corruption and pushing an extremely short-term oriented agenda that was anti-environmental and ruthless, domineering, white supremacist, male chauvinist, sexist and racist. He gained power, celebrity and notoriety by acting as a slick populist demagogue, scapegoating Muslims and Mexicans and desperate immigrants from Central America, and being vindictive and intimidating anyone who gets in the way of his schemes, swindles, power grabs and self-aggrandizement.

After four years in power, his administration can be seen in retrospect as having been mired in scandal, controversy, deep dishonesty, crude corruption and conspiracies against our Constitutional system. He managed to distract millions of people from his scandals and cover-ups and illicit efforts to obstruct justice. He created a fake national emergency, to appropriate billions of dollars to build more of the wall on the border with Mexico, and he acted "loose and stupid", and engaged in the usual imperial American geostrategic tactic of imposing extreme hardships on millions of people abroad, using harsh economic sanctions against regimes that refused to kowtow to his corporate billionaires' agenda.

Trump took an oath of office to faithfully execute the laws of the United States. He frequently violated this oath, broke rules of law, exploited conflicts of interest, defied the Constitution, brazenly deceived the people, abused power, broke campaign finance laws with illegal payments to hide sexual affairs, obstructed justice, made numerous efforts to cover up his misdeeds, and continuously tampered with the jury of public opinion.

Every member of Congress also took an oath of office to faithfully execute the laws of the United States, and those who slavishly support Trump and obstruct efforts by Congress to satisfy their implied constitutional duty to exercise oversight over a power-abusing executive branch are culpable for abrogating their oaths of office.

"It turns out that treason is unpopular with voters. In July 2022, a Monmouth poll revealed that 66% of all Americans -- including 65% of Independents -- say that members of Congress who assisted the planners of January 6th should be removed from office." The Disqualification Clause of the 14th Amendment rightly should be invoked to disqualify all those who helped push the Big Lie election fraud plot, and the fake electors scheme, and the January 6 insurrection coup attempt.

The farmers of the Constitution hated despotism, so they gave Congress the duty to impeach the President and Vice President and remove them from office when convicted of treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors. There has never been a president who has more seriously violated democratic norms and deserved to have been impeached and removed from office -- twice.

Think about it this way. As David Von Drehle observed: "the "conservative party" has become a radical movement, from the White House to the statehouse. The latest evidence is found in the radical anti-abortion laws passed by legislatures in Georgia, Alabama and Missouri (and then even more egregious ones in Mississippi and Texas), with other states close behind. These laws are intentionally provocative, reckless and "extreme", as televangelist and abortion foe Pat Robertson put it. Here are David Von Drehle's words in May 2019:

The radicals behind such laws fall into two camps, neither one conservative. Some are zealots who genuinely believe in their extreme ideas. The rest are cynics who hope that the courts will strike down these laws and thereby drive the abortion wedge into the heart of the 2020 campaign. What unites them is their willingness, even eagerness, to strain the social fabric and discredit our institutions.

We now can see that the conservative hero Barry Goldwater was wrong philosophically, and not just as a matter of campaign strategy, when he declared in 1964 that "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice." With that battle cry, Goldwater breathed the germ that now puts America's conservative movement on its deathbed. Whatever its initial motivation, and regardless of what it sets out to defend, extremism winds up going too far. Extremists demand 100 percent in a world (in need of reasonable) compromises, and seek to paint the many-shaded human condition in stark black and white.

Extremism in the defense of liberty proves to be an oxymoron, for extremism comes at the expense of liberty. To achieve their goals, they must infringe on the liberty of others. Thus, a movement that began with skepticism of government power now enacts laws to direct government power toward coercing women to carry unwanted pregnancies and turning rape victims into unwilling incubators.

And a movement that once valued patriotism now sows division just to win reelection.

Trump is not patriotic, despite his zeal for appearing in front of big American flags. He has demonstrated anti-American proclivities by giving top priority to his own personal interests in money, power, ego, celebrity and notoriety at the same time that he harmed the best interests of the people and our country. He failed to seek sensible consensus solutions to critical problems, making them worse rather than trying to improve conditions. This is true on immigration, inequality, climate change, national security, the national debt, healthcare, domestic tranquility, the general welfare, and the providential blessings of liberty for the people and for our posterity.

A Bit of Trumpian History

Trump wages a constant campaign to twist reality to his personal advantage. In his incessant barrage to fool people into believing his malignantly narcissistic version of reality, he acted like a deviously deceitful misogynist and master manipulator by attacking members of the admirably successful U.S. Women's National Soccer team as they reached the quarter finals of the World Cup competition in France in June 2019. He launched a particularly rude tweet against Megan Rapinoe, a co-captain of the team, provoking Ali Krieger, her teammate, to issue a strong rebuke to Trump, tweeting, "I know women who you cannot control or grope anger you ... I don't support this administration nor their fight against LGBTQ+ citizens, immigrants & our most vulnerable."

This principled stand against the Narcissist-in-Chief was part of a back-and-forth volley about a potential visit to the White House by victorious athletes. It came as no surprise to anyone knowledgeable about the admirable principled character of the women involved. "This is a team suing its own federation for gender discrimination, so, yeah, it's probably not likely to hobnob with someone with such a long track record of bigotry and misogyny."

One observer expressed the informed opinion that "... there are few things Trump loves more than stoking a good culture war. Or causing a scene to try and distract from the news Robert Mueller is going to testify before Congress. Either way, there was no way he was going to resist a months-old video of Rapinoe saying she wouldn't go to 'the (expletive) White House' or recent clickbait about her long history of peaceful protest."

"Trump claimed that championship teams love visiting him at the White House. Apparently he's forgotten about the Philadelphia Eagles, half of the Boston Red Sox, the Virginia men's basketball team, North Carolina's men's basketball team, South Carolina's women's basketball team, Notre Dame's women's basketball team ..." The Golden State Warriors also chose not to go to the Trump White House after either their 2017 or 2018 national NBA championships.

Trump "went off on a tangent about NBA teams, which have made clear they want nothing to do with him, and bizarrely -- and wrongly -- quoted black unemployment rates and the poverty index. What relevance that has isn't clear, unless perhaps he thinks Rapinoe is black or he was dog whistling again. Trump wound up his tweet storm by saying Rapinoe should not disrespect the country, White House or flag -- none of which she's doing. When he himself will begin heeding that advice remains to be seen."

"While it's easy to poke fun at Trump, and dismiss his criticism for the inanity that it is, it obscures what is actually important. Rapinoe is smart, thoughtful and principled, and she had made the decision to kneel for the anthem in support of Colin Kaepernick because she was bothered by the very real problem of biased policing that has cost the lives of far too many people of color."

"Rapinoe is well aware her acts of protest can be a flashpoint, and she doesn't much care. That's the point. Our rules of law, our cherished traditions, our very democracy are being eroded by Trump and his sycophants, and drawing attention to that is far more important to Rapinoe than what people might think of her." "Even if it's the president. Especially when it's this president."

Authority, Tyranny and Blind Belief

We should not allow our leaders to be tyrants who treat *We the People* as damsels to be exploited. High up in the hierarchy of real tyrants among us are ruthless followers of control-freak demagogues and those who zealously promote unrestrained corporatism and take advantage of the darker expressions of human nature. Joining these tyrannical individuals are ideological supporters of the Radical Right and of Manichean fire-and-brimstone preachers who exploit people's fears. These tyrants manipulate people and hijack our societies for power and profit, as if satisfying an ego-driven lust for domination. They abuse positions of authority to advance narrow agendas that are often detrimental to the greater good.

When people blindly believe demagogues and follow authority figures, they become more vulnerable to negative outcomes. Some of the most manipulative leaders who have gained influence over others by playing on public prejudices, anxieties, ignorance and gullibility are:

(1) Adolf Hitler, who was responsible for killing millions of Jews and rationalizing this terrible genocide using a demagogic assertion that Aryan peoples are superior to all others;

(2) Wisconsin Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, who red-baited liberals, intimidated intellectuals and artists, and hyped people's fears of communism in the 1950s to gain power and notoriety;

(3) Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who in the wake of the 9/11 attacks blamed "the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians" and organizations like the ACLU for supposedly making God angry and thus making us vulnerable to the 9/11 attacks;

(4) George W. Bush and his right-wing supporters who took advantage of the anxieties and anger that were generated by the 9/11 attacks to wage a global 'war on terror' that has cost trillions of dollars worldwide and wreaked painful injustices on millions of people. These policies skewed our national priorities into a wrongheaded agenda of dominion-oriented hegemony, endless war, interventionist nation-building, record levels of deficit spending, and irresponsible anti-egalitarianism;

(5) David Miscavige, leader of the Church of Scientology, who is portrayed by former members of the cult-like

Church in the 2015 documentary film *Going Clear* as a hyper-manipulative authoritarian demagogue who abuses his power to indoctrinate believers, control adherents, and both shame and punish those who try to escape the psychologically and sometimes physically abusive practices of the Church. He has been named as a defendant in numerous lawsuits involving his role in the organization. "The most recent lawsuit, filed in April 2022, refers to repeated sexual assault of children by senior Scientology officials during his leadership, and also involves allegations of human trafficking, forced labor, and other forms of child abuse," according to Wikipedia. He also exploits the tax-exempt status of the Church of Scientology to amass wealth.

(6) Donald Trump. The January 6 House panel is investigating his role in trying to cling to power by planning and inciting an insurrection against Congress, and thereby prevent a peaceful transfer of power. Their findings have been damning. Check out *See Clearly - Sanity During Insane Times* in the online Earth Manifesto for a full expose of the stunningly serious long litany of his misdeeds, malfeasance and sins. And,

(7) John Hagee, the televangelist megachurch pastor in Texas who claimed that Hurricane Katrina was an act of divine retribution by God to punish New Orleans for its allegedly sinful ways. Hagee harangues people with his fire-and-brimstone preaching to bring attention to his Religious Right gospel. He has also promoted the "blood moon prophecies", a series of End Times prophecies related to a series of four full moons in 2014 and 2015. His goal is to get people to support his politically extreme ideas regarding social issues and Israel. Presidential candidate John McCain said in 2008 that he was "proud" and "pleased" to have Hagee's support. Real nice! And he has dangerously been a strong supporter of Trump. Hagee advocated that the U.S. or Israel should preemptively bomb Iran. He denounces abortion and speaks out against lesbians and gay men. He claims that Biblical scriptures, as interpreted by fundamentalists like him, are absolutely right and should have overriding authority in our society.

The tax-exempt status of religious organizations should be revoked when they are headed by bigots and demagogic leaders like Hagee who interfere in politics, especially when they use their pulpits to gain power and advance reactionary political goals. McCain and Trump should have been more honest, and refrained from pandering to zealots like Hagee for purposes so self-serving and contrary to fairer understandings of the greater good. The American people should recognize the risks and logical absurdities of allowing our nation to be ruled by those who pander to religious fanatics and extreme right-wing ideologies and authoritarians.

Thomas Paine sensibly stated, "It is of the utmost danger to society to make religion a party in political disputes."

The Continuum of Political Ideologies

There are no absolute rights and wrongs, so it is dicey to make objective judgments about whether one moral system is definitively "better" than another. However, conservatives are generally much more interested in achieving and perpetuating their own narrow ends, regardless of how unfair their means may be. Political and cultural conservatives are therefore much more willing to have people suffer harm in order for them to "win" and dominate and control public policy. In a dangerous world, hypocritical self-righteousness and arrogant white supremacy are risky attitudes, and can be highly antithetical to formulating fair far-sighted public policies.

The proportion of Americans who believed that our nation was headed in the right direction fell to an all-time low of 14% in 2009, according to a CBS poll, while 81% expressed the opinion that the country was on the wrong track. Not many people at the time were Pollyanna-ish about the wisdom of preemptive military interventions, or economic and social policies that perpetuate extreme inequalities and inequities, or the irresponsible use of huge amounts of deficit spending by the federal government. Most people were starting to suspect that deregulation of banks is seriously misguided, and that bubble economics and scheming fine-print provisions in international trade agreements are bad ideas, and that natural resources should not be wantonly squandered, or the environmental commons irreparably harmed. Only the ignorant, the gullible and those who are blind believers in spin, propaganda and orthodoxy still stuck to the opinion that everything was going quite well.

The severe economic crisis that began unfolding in the autumn of 2008 contributed to this historic gloomy outlook. Rasmussen Reports in May 2012 reported that the proportion of likely U.S. voters who said the country was heading in the right direction had recovered to 30%, and it has stagnated in that vicinity with 28% being similarly optimistic in May 2016, and 24% in October 2017. During the time President Obama was in office, this proportion

ranged from a low of 14% to a high of 42%. These numbers reflect the current pulse of perception in our nation. In the most recent Rasmussen survey for the week ended July 21, 2022, 23% of people polled felt good about our direction.

Liberals are still being blamed and mercilessly belittled by conservatives and people in right-wing think tanks, and these groups tend to have the biggest megaphones for trying to sway public opinion to their essentially anti-populist propaganda. As a consequence, most liberals shy away from the label of being liberal and instead prefer to say they are progressives. In any case, these people look forward, not backward; they welcome new ideas without rigid reactions; they care about the general welfare, and emphasize it instead of prerogatives of the privileged few; they are concerned about people's health, protected women's rights, good public schools, meaningful jobs, fair civil rights, citizen privacy, universal health care, fair housing policies, sane environmental policies, smart investments in needed infrastructure, and better balanced foreign policies.

The domination of our nation by Neoconservatives during the period from 2000 to 2008 was not good for our nation or the world. Neoconservatism is a reckless right-wing ideology that ironically had its roots in a kind of intellectual utopian idealism. It basically held a simplistic idea, that after the Cold War had come to an end, the best and safest situation was regarded as one in which the 'good guys' -- that's US! -- ruled the world. We would rule nobly, and make the world safe for free trade, laissez-faire capitalism, liberty and democracy.

We Americans tend to see ourselves as freedom-loving, honorable, God-approved, morally righteous people. This way of seeing things has unfortunately contributed to involving our nation in aggressive global police-action roles and overly unilateral foreign policies, and this has led to grave injustices and significantly exacerbated social inequalities. This outlook has served to perpetuate unjust, exploitive, and oppressive American hegemony over other nations in realms of military involvements, surveillance, intelligence gathering, and international trade.

Conservative policies have been extremely costly in money, blood, military overreach and stoked opposition and risks related to blowback retaliation. The outcome of these unfolding miscalculations is clear: we rely too much on "hard power", and pathetically falter in diplomacy and good faith. We are consequently faced with economic adversities, immoderate geopolitical risk and circumstances that are described as moral quagmire, along with environmental calamities and detrimentally wrongheaded priorities. Extreme conservatism, it turns out, is not really conservative, but a deceptive right-wing rationalization for corporatism, irresponsible profiteering, hubris-filled American economic and military supremacy, expanding inequalities and inequities, short-term-oriented public policies, armed interventions, drone bombings, repression and political corruption. Not so good!

On Competition and Cooperation

Competition is a curious thing. Free-market competition is a marvelous mechanism for creating wealth and jobs, and for compelling people to work harder. Economists and investors love productivity gains! But our economic and political systems are set up primarily to benefit wealthy people and the investor class, so they are unfairly rigged to give a small minority of people the preponderance of benefits generated as a result of workers' increased productivity. The buying power of the average worker's wages has been diminishing ever since the days Ronald Reagan embraced economic elitism and began to dismantle the New Deal initiatives that helped build a strong and vibrant middle class in America. At the same time, the costs of living have increased significantly, particularly for essentials like food, housing, heating, gasoline and healthcare.

Unintended consequences result from all policy actions. In our late-arriving efforts to become a little less dependent on fossil fuels, for instance, large subsidies were given to producers of corn and other grains that can be used in making biofuels like ethanol. This policy contributed to a spike in demand that drove up prices for grains, stimulating speculation and creating hardships and hunger for millions of people.

Inflation in the costs of many basic necessities dramatically diminishes the economic security of tens of millions of men, women and children. Personal economic insecurity is, on the other hand, of little practical concern for the wealthy. These trends of inequality should not only be bemoaned, they should be significantly reduced. Farsighted progressive policies are needed. We really should find better ways to prevent shortsighted and regressive policies from being entrenched at the nexus of stolen power.

In an even larger consideration, cutthroat competition can be seen to be one of the causes of the deterioration of the global environmental commons. Collaboration and cooperation are what is most needed to protect the commons. We must reconcile competing interests and start to better manage resources, farmlands, fisheries, and old growth forests. We must give greater protections to fresh water resources, lakes, rivers, wetlands, coral reefs, oceans and the atmosphere. We must do this to ensure future generations that they will have reasonable prospects for enjoying prosperous and healthy lives. We must, above all, leave a legacy likely to be propitious for the survival of our species.

To maintain sustainable fisheries, for instance, sensible quotas should be established and enforced. Likewise, to practice sustainable forestry, we should manage forests better and protect old growth stands and make sure that more trees are planted than are harvested. Also, as the production of greenhouse gases begins to have calamitous impacts through extreme weather events around the globe, we must take bold steps to reduce emissions and to mitigate the damages caused by an ominous build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. We must translate "hot air talk" into common sense action. After the Kyoto Protocol was adopted in 1997 to limit greenhouse gas emissions, it was ratified by 191 nations, but the U.S. was not one of them. We have refused to lead in precautionary environmental matters, until President Obama began serious climate change initiatives in his second term and the historic Paris Accords were signed by almost every country on Earth. Then Trump rudely withdrew the USA from the Paris Accords, so things got worse before we resumed trying to turn the corner on this epic challenge. Partially as a result of opposition to sensible climate action, emissions have continued to increase worldwide, and trends are not encouraging. Check out the online Sustainability Index!

We are very fortunate to be living at a time in history when there is still such a great cornucopia of resources on Planet Earth. There are so many marvelous resources to enjoy, so many delicious animals to eat, and so many yummy crops to consume -- or to feed to the animals we keep for meat or milk or companionship. But we cannot assume that this cornucopia is unlimited, because it is not, and the signs of this are increasingly clear.

The issue of Peak Oil is always near the heart of understandings about the urgent need for changes in our national policies and collective behaviors. There are less than 1.5 trillion barrels of identified crude oil reserves left on Earth. We are still producing oil in quantities that allow hundreds of millions of people to fly around the planet on airplanes in record numbers each year. It is rather preposterous, however, to presume that we can continue to stimulate our ravenous demands for this vital but exceedingly damaging resource without inevitably depleting it. We are after all burning up more than 35 billion barrels of oil each year around the world. A quick calculation reveals that 1.5 trillion barrels of oil will be used up, at a rate of 30 billion barrels per year, within 50 years. Even if we drill in wildlife refuges and national parks and in risky offshore sites and maybe find another 50 years' worth, it is a dirty fuel that is causing extremely negative and costly environmental impacts. Even if we frack the hell out of the rocks underground, it would be a precautionary better plan to wean ourselves from our addiction to fossil fuels by choice, rather than waiting until we are desperately forced to develop alternatives, and pay the piper for this failure to act more rationally.

Our entire global civilization is built on fossil fuels, and yet we are fiddling while we profligately use them up. Programs to wean ourselves from this dependency should be accelerated, and most of the recoverable reserves of fossil fuels should be left in the ground to prevent disastrous impacts of climate change. Bold conservation efforts, much greater efficiency of use, and wise investments in the development of renewable clean energy alternatives should be given urgent priority!

Let's embrace smart action by working together to hammer out plans for a real Green New Deal.

Historical perspective is valuable. We are living in an era that has curious parallels to the speculative and imprudent Roaring Twenties, just before the "Great Depression" of the 1930s. That decade-long event wasn't all that 'great' for people! President Franklin D. Roosevelt was the architect of many new economic and social policies that have served America well. He created the New Deal to save the capitalist economic system from itself by infusing it with sensible safeguards, and creating more fairness and a social safety net.

The New Deal involved reasonable regulations, economic recovery programs, and a social security program that made the capitalist system more responsible to the people. The safety net was fragile for many reasons, and many

influential conservatives have strived to dismantle it since 1980. This backlash against progressive programs began in earnest with Ronald Reagan, and it has accelerated as rich people, corporations, market fundamentalists, the religious right, and dangerous demagogues have gained more power.

The Social Security program itself has become increasingly unsustainable because it was based on a transfer-of-wealth plan rather than an honest savings retirement plan. Today, basic economics and demographics are catching up with the program, highlighting its flaws and vulnerabilities. It is an absurdly myopic expediency to have borrowed and spent the Social Security 'surpluses' year after year after year. Now that more and more people in the Baby Boom generation are retiring in large numbers and collecting benefits, this financial problem is becoming increasingly challenging.

Shortsighted myopia likewise afflicts entitlement programs like Medicare and Medicaid. A good solution would be to completely divorce health insurance from work by creating a new system in which ALL citizens would be covered by insurance. The cost of such a system could be paid for by reducing the red-tape bureaucracy that costs an estimated 25% of the more than \$3 trillion spent annually in the U.S. on medical care and insurance (before the pandemic). Another idea would be to enact a single-payer plan and alter the insurance industry with its focus on bigger profits every year and its denials of medical coverage. Some form of tax on business could replace the current employer-paid system, which pathetically leaves tens of millions of Americans without normal medical coverage. We need to somehow fix our unfair healthcare system, and provide universal coverage. The pandemic has made this need even more glaringly obvious.

Deficit spending is a form of accounting gimmickry that could make all social security programs inadequate as the years roll by. Check out the documentary film, *In Debt We Trust*, to learn about how sadly misplaced our trust in debt really is. Debt and hyped-up materialism are a form of bondage. The use of credit cards has been heavily promoted until it is a thriving industry, but it has become characterized by excessive fees and usurious interest rates. A bankruptcy law passed in 2005 was primarily beneficial to lenders, but was detrimental to thousands of people who suffer medical calamities and job losses.

Unsupportable debt is imprudent. Some 30% of Americans have a negligible or negative net worth. Every man, woman and child in the U.S. also basically owes a proportional allocation of the national debt, which comes to about \$92,000 per person (simply calculated: \$30.5 trillion in July 2022 divided by 332 million people). The tax and spending policies that have led to this state of affairs need to be balanced and intelligently reformed.

As a teenager, I greatly respected my grandaunt, who had the lovely name Aura. She had a dry and sharp sense of humor and a wonderfully indomitable character. She was wise and thoughtful, and she could articulate an idea so clearly that you nodded your head in recognition and agreement. She had traveled widely and led a colorful life in her youth and beyond, and was exceptionally open-minded for her age. The Depression of the 1930s had strongly affected her young adult years, so she was frugal and never extravagant or wasteful, even long after her financial circumstances had become comfortable. Everyone in more recent generations could learn valuable lessons from such a fiscally responsible attitude!

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

--- T.S. Eliot

Prudent fiscal precautionary principles would include planning ahead for "rainy days" and emergency needs. They would eschew wildly dishonest and short-term-oriented gimmicks. The former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger floated a proposal in 2008 to fix a big budget shortfall by borrowing from future lottery earnings, and by promoting the lottery to grow its revenues. Since most people who play lotteries are those without a lot of money, this shortsighted expediency was regressive. It was just one in a long string of short-term-oriented gimmicks that politicians use to appease the populace and avoid making hard choices required to balance budgets.

All state politicians, like our representatives in the federal government, should fairly compromise to raise tax revenues with more highly progressive graduated taxation plans, and sensibly cut spending to more nearly balance annual revenues and spending. Ouch! When such courses of action are taken, they should be formulated in smart ways, and fair ways that are reasonable from a long-term perspective. While we're at it, we could stop incarcerating so many marijuana users, and eliminate "three-strikes-you're-out" sentencing, and reform the extremely costly prison system, and reduce the racist underpinnings of the U.S. judicial system.

Citizens and their representatives need to prioritize fairly and intelligently. We can no longer afford to avoid making difficult decisions! Extrapolating California's lesson to the national scene, it appears obvious that an even worse plan would be to increase federal spending and budget deficits while cutting taxes in regressive ways. This tactic stimulates the economy in the short run, but increases the potentials for economic hard times. And it is SO irresponsible and unfair to all taxpayers in the future.

Moral Hazard

In human affairs, change is accelerating as our numbers continue to increase. We are depleting resources at an unprecedented rate, essentially blundering into the future. Our planning timeframe barely envisions next year or five years from now, and certainly not 100 years from now. It makes me think to myself: "Self, why do people choose to do so little objective good?"

There is so much we should and could be doing, but NO -- the same old strategies seem to remain dominant. The control-demanding Establishment consists of vested interest groups that set all-important aspects of our national agenda. They manifest a powerful resistance to changing the rules of the game. This prevents us from setting smarter priorities and goals. Because progress is impeded, risks mount. Conflict escalation is inevitable as long as we continue to cling desperately and half insanelly to the same old thinking and policies that our leaders have been stubbornly pretending are right and optimum for so many years. The fix is in; let's fix it!

A specter is haunting Planet Earth -- the specter not only of ideologies that promote narrow interests and an excessively inequality-promoting status quo, but a specter of obstacles that appear nearly insurmountable. Limits loom ever more ominously. We are in the desperate final throes of allowing old ways of acting and thinking to dominate. We still let the powers-that-be jealously protect and expand their great advantages and narrow prerogatives. We allow the international 'corporatocracy' to continue pumping the profit pipeline and amplifying short-term-oriented activities and resisting fair-minded reforms, and often hindering technological innovations like clean energy projects that could lead us toward a safer, healthier and more sustainable future.

Many people were concerned when the United States entered a recession in 2008. The Federal Reserve and the White House and Congress moved to forestall a slowdown in growth by using huge bailouts and hyper-stimulative spending and tax cuts -- and low interest rate policies. This all happened again after the pandemic recession suddenly began in March 2020.

As the pandemic spread around the world, with cataclysmic impacts on people's health and on commerce, equities markets suffered some of the most sudden falls in history, so once again the Fed used its playbook from the 2008 crisis, reducing interest rates to near zero to provide extraordinary economic stimulus, and printing up trillions of dollars in new money. Once again this has been a big benefit to banks and rich people. After the grave threats caused sudden stock market declines that reach lows in March 2020, once again the rich began reaping incredible rewards, and the 630 billionaires in the U.S. have made out like bandits.

Fed actions like this tend to disproportionately benefit the wrong people, drastically increasing inequality, because the main beneficiaries of increases in equity prices are wealthy investors. In conjunction with Congress borrowing trillions of dollars to give it to individuals and businesses in an effort to stabilize the economy, this has created "a golden age for Wall Street", but it is also creating a more fragile and unstable economy.

These actions have led to the largest disconnect ever between Wall Street and Main Street. In April of 2021, according to Forbes rankings, the 400 richest Americans had as much combined wealth as the poorest 64% of American households. While it has been terrible times for many since the beginning of the pandemic, the good times keep on rolling for America's richest. As reported in the 40th annual Forbes 400 list of the wealthiest

Americans in October 2021, the collective fortune of the richest 400 Americans rose a massive 40% over the last year -- up from \$3.2 trillion to \$4.5 trillion.

All of this constitutes a type of "moral hazard" in which the Fed incentivizes bad behavior of rash risk taking and then when speculative investments go bad, risk takers are rewarded by being bailed out. It is like creating a no-lose casino for gamblers, and makes the entire system more vulnerable.

As certain as it is that strong earthquakes will rock California again in the future, there will assuredly be economic recessions and depressions again, and they will be international in scope. And they will be exacerbated by scheming leaders that refuse to seek consensus solutions that are consistent with the true common good.

To forestall such eventualities, it would have been smartest in recent years to invest in America's human capital with an improved system of higher education, and to invest in the maintenance and improvement of our national infrastructure. We should have made bolder investments in innovations designed to achieve independence from our risky dependence on fossil fuels. Instead, we have indulged in huge amounts of deficit spending, created large trade imbalances, squandered trillions of dollars on wars, and clung stubbornly to extremely anti-egalitarian 'trickle-down' economic ideologies. And we have given more huge tax breaks to rich people, and unsustainably stimulated housing bubbles and stock market profiteering, and let financial markets be deregulated. And electioneering malfeasance and fraud and abuses of power have been allowed to take place.

Strict good governance measures are needed; who will step up to effectively champion them? Too many of our leaders are able to circumvent rules and regulations that would have made government more transparent and accountable. Our representatives have made inadequate efforts to properly interpret the Fourteenth Amendment, allowing some to say that corporations have rights of "personhood", even though many of the prerogatives associated with such tortured interpretations cause detrimental social and environmental impacts.

Here is one very good reason to fix the overly partisan Supreme Court with its excess of Justices who have "conservative" ideological biases. It is also a good argument to change the Constitution to limit tenures of Supreme Court Justices, rather than having them appointed for lifetime terms. We need to be able to get rid of anti-adaptive ideological conservatives ("bad apples as they over-ripen").

We are failing to formulate ways to ensure that good citizen goals are achieved. We are apparently incapable of instituting adequate discipline to check excessive impulses of consumers, investors, speculators, corporations and dogmatic conservatives. Check out the valuable perspectives of Robert Reich in his book *Supercapitalism* to better understand how our society has chosen to emphasize consumer and investor goals at the expense of more crucially important, sensible and sustainable good citizen goals. A summary of Reich's incisive understandings is contained in Earth Manifesto essays like *Optimizing Change Through Clarity of Awareness and Right Action*.

If even a reasonable fraction of the specific recommendations in *Common Sense Revival* (and Part Four of this manifesto online) were implemented, our nation and the world would be in much better shape.

In his novel *Sweet Thursday*, John Steinbeck wrote these words about his female character Fauna: "It was Fauna's conviction, born out of long experience, that most people, one, did not know what they wanted; two, did not know how to go about getting it; and three, didn't know when they had it."

Ah, sad but true! We humans often struggle to figure out who we are, and why we do what we do, and what we should really be doing to achieve greater happiness and to better connect with our authentic inner selves. In times of introspection, we wonder *What Really Matters?* Well, I believe that efforts to address larger concerns must gain traction, and that we can and should make a heroic Apollo-Program-like effort to solve the challenges we face. This, ultimately, is what really matters. It is my hope that the rambling thoughts expressed herein will contribute to the larger discourse, and make a positive difference in the world! Let's make this positive difference for damsels, and mothers and children, and everyone!

We strut and fret our hour upon the stage of life, as William Shakespeare so evocatively put it. Our lives pass, slowly but surely, no matter how well or poorly we do. We can only conclude that good or bad, right or wrong, worthwhile or useless, certain or uncertain, meaningful or meaningless, it is incumbent upon us to abide by the implicit conditions of our flourishing and survival, and to honorably leave the stage in decent enough shape to those

who will follow us that they will have a fairer opportunity for prospering and pursuing their own hopes of achieving happiness, well-being and security in their lives.

To paraphrase the *Common Sense* pamphleteer Thomas Paine from the revolutionary days of our nation's founding, "These are the times that try people's souls. ... The decisions we make today will be like words engraved with a penknife on the tender bark of a young oak tree; the wounds will enlarge as the tree grows, and posterity will read them writ large as definitive testaments to our forethought and intelligence, or alternatively as proof of our overly selfish and foolish shortsightedness." Let's choose to carve a more commendable history!

Yours Truly,

Dr. Tiffany B. Twain Thanks for reading!

July 2008 (modified occasionally in 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2022)