

When Something Snaps

The Sudden Release of Uncoordinated and Uncontrollable Energy

How can you recognize much less adapt to a sea-change when a people or a culture have destroyed their capacity for intelligent, reasonable, and responsible thought? If your utopian visions reduce your horizon to a set of slogans and wish-fulfillments, then anything that happens that falls outside the “normal” will not exist—at least in your mind, your consciousness, your experienced reality of a world mediated by meaning. Pandemics, hot or cold wars, black swans, and other unexpected events place demands on the human mind that cannot be met by biased and blinkered minds. They may try to freeze time in its tracks, but inevitable they will fail to meet the challenges placed before them by a universe far greater than the one they can imagine.

A robust populace can withstand much; an emaciated one fails at the first real challenge. Perhaps we can encourage those small but critical productive and creative members of our culture while protecting them from the ravages of the mundane power-laden death-embracing mob that would have all descend into chaos. For this we need to grow subjects committed to freedom, reason, and human dignity.

Perhaps there is no better time than this to rise to the challenge.

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Redundant, Obsolete, Trivial¹

What better description do we have of the alphabet stew of departments and agencies (CDC, DOJ, FBI, and IRS, to name but a few) now exposed as credentialed, meritless, and incompetent organizations that operate through the mist and fog of inaction, misdirection, cover-ups, and protectionisms. This stands in sharp contrast with a 20th century model of people who live and work in an Age of Mobility, Big Data, Transparency, and Open Source and Shared Economy.² To live in such a world is to realize that there is no place to hide from the truth. As Sarah A. Hoyt notes: “Tell the truth or at least don’t lie. Remember to build in truth, because there is no hiding from it. We live in the times when the secret of every heart shall be revealed.”³

Martin Gurri draws out what is becoming obvious to many.

So this 20th-century Industrial Age model of democracy, where rulers are at a distant from the public, is gone. Now it's embarrassingly clear that the rulers, the elites, don't really know what's going [on] or what they're doing. And at the same time, the public has no shared organization, no common leaders, no ideology. Instead, we have a divided populace united only by its disdain for the status quo.⁴

Trump may have altered the latter.

The current U.S. elections have brought out the worse of the American ruling class, turning over rocks that once hide a multitude of sins. To those that follow the political arena, as I have since 9/11 redirected my attentions and interests, this credentialled yet somehow incompetent class is engaged in wide-spread censorship that approaches gaslighting in its extreme. But, as Richard Fernandez put it,

The biggest downside to censorship shadow banning and other methods of distortion and thought control is it destroys information. This is one of the fundamental reasons why the pros do so badly against Black Swans. They can't conceive them or think out of the box to solve them because they have destroyed the information that might have enable them.

But it's worse than this. They have a tendency to throw printed money at problems and since printed money is in a sense, nothing but misinformation, the real amount of reliable data falls even more. One reason why the election polls were so bad was because they were recording self-noise.⁵

Combine this with Col. Nathan R. Jessep's explosive reveal, in the movie *A Few Good Men*, "You can't handle the truth!"⁶ and you have the root cause of many of our problems: the lack of sound, reliable, information, i.e., of moments of truth. And this brings us to the importance of faith.

The real crunch comes with the loss of authority, of legitimacy, that comes with the fragmentation of a culture into numerous sub-cultures that have little if anything in common with each other. Each has its own unique appreciative system, its own world view⁷, its own accepted set of values and common-sense knowledge which, when taken to its limits, means the loss of any singular universal orientation that would allow for a common way of evaluating the world as well as diagnosing the source of what is a "problem." But what is a problem to one group may not be a problem to another. Conflict is inevitable, as well as gradual decline as the socio-political order devolves into every more chaotic and dysfunctional schemes of operation.

The problem is one of agency. The incoming administration, in their recent coup, believe they have gained the reins of power to do what they will to whomever they will. They will have the power but will lack the authority and influence to carry that power through into the public realm. These increasingly weaponized government agencies that include Pravda-based media and high tech as a single operative unit will be the only way the new (old) power-players can protect themselves against the shifts among key agents as these same agents come to their own conclusions and act accordingly. But weaponizing everything, including such once a-political sports, will only make matters worse. The

problem is that people need to be able to express themselves and when they are denied the right to gripe, they go underground. And when they go underground, the pressure builds until something breaks.⁸

And the first to go is trust. Without trust, everything devolves to essentials. The rule of law is the first to go by the board, soon followed by a lack of property rights and the loss of human dignity. The good of order shrinks down to its most basic elements, namely tribal identity and family trusts. The capacity for production and innovation drop off as few are willing to take on the risks of trying new approaches when all can be taken at the whim of the powerful who are not subject to their own rules and regulations. Industrial development will take a hit, along with the supply chains that keep things going.

But so too will the military, already tasked with the need for new recruits as senior NCOs retire yet faced with a populace that in many ways fails to meet the physical, emotional, and intellectual needs of a high-tech war machine. How will the rank and file react to an incoming Commander and Chief that does not have their back? How will the (Dis)United States fare when it comes to maintaining open sea lanes across the globe? The old global order based on the Bretton Woods agreement is already breaking down as new powerful agents emerge on the global stage. And all are not nice players in a global economic system where oriental despots such as Xi Jinping gain the fruits of modernization without changing their oppressive regimes, or the Islamic dar al-Islam (Ummah: the House of Islam) that cannot escape primitive tribal bonds and a permanent state of war with the dar al-Harb (all non-Muslims: the House of War) that leaves such a culture in dire poverty whose "citizens" are unable to use in any meaningful way the very technology they have acquired from the West.

Then we have the mass appeal of the Devil's Pleasure Palace⁹ that is the hard Left, a subversive ideology grounded in the death-embracing generative principle. They promise a glittering life of ease and luxury free of all strife, knowing full well such promises are nothing but lies. They promise full care and protection for all under the umbrella of the State while at the same time destroying the means of production that provide safety and security. It is a strange paradox.

All this becomes personal when the lack of trust foreshortens any plans or policies, any expectations of what can or cannot be achieved. Isolated from each other, blocked from any meaningful engagement, and increasingly vulnerable to an "elite" class, the loss of free associations combined with the downgrading of a middle class that provides common law and the production of wealth effectively disenfranchises those who create the wealth all others enjoy.

This means the loss of wealth not counted in money but in the capacity to produce and distribute goods and services. Fiat money is infinite, production and distribution finite. And when the capacity to make things happen, to be agents in the world, is degraded so

too we return to a pre-industrial life that is at best short and nasty, constrained by a lack of opportunity that will leave many lives devoid of meaning and purpose. The loss of modernity has already begun to affect the lives of people all around the world.¹⁰

Now we are not talking about religious beliefs nor cult dogmas, but about how we come to know what is or is not so. The fact is that extraordinarily little of what we know as being true cannot be verified through personal experience; most of what we believe comes to us by second-hand routes – we know something is true because someone else affirms it is true. In other words, the key variable is faith. Galen, from the TV series *Babylon V*, reduces this down to two questions: “Who do you serve, and who do you trust?”¹¹ These are the two most important questions that you will ever face, for your answer – your decision – will set the foundational horizon and intentions that will start your movement through life.

Note that fundamental changes in one’s horizon and intentions can and do occur as new experiences accrue, a better understanding emerges, the ability to exercise reasonable judgment expands, and the capacity for responsibility grows over time. There are two basic types of fundamental changes: horizontal, through the expansion of an existing horizon, or vertical, through a radical shift to a higher perspective. The latter involves intellectual, moral, and religious conversion accompanied by a well-differentiated mind capable not only of understanding different realms of meaning but of knowing when and how such realms can easily contaminate each other.¹²

This leads us into questions of authenticity, honor, and/or capability of the person to answer Galen’s questions. The brute fact is that all of us know what we know not through direct experience, which is fleeting and elusive, but by relying on the judgments and decisions of others. If you have never been to China, how do you know the country exist? A world Atlas may provide a detailed map, but how do you know if the geographer was correct? A mob may storm the capital building, but how do you know it happened? Or the meaning of such an event? We live in a complex world mediated by meaning. If that mental world is corrupt due to mistakes in deciding whom to trust and whom to give one’s allegiance, then we live in a make-believe world that may have little to do with reality.

People of good character whose lives are built around wisdom rather than intelligence may seem few and far between. Yet they are the ones upon which society rests. As C.S. Lewis writes:

We make men without chests and expect from them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst.¹³

To reiterate an earlier conversation, Lonergan writes about the existence of a radical shift¹⁴ in perspective that results in the subject leading a new life quite different from the

old. This is a radical shift toward value rather than personal interests, toward what is true rather than illusion, and toward a power greater than that of humanity. Without such a vertical shift in being, individuals—indeed whole societies—can fall into decline and eventual collapse as the plans and policies created by limited, truncated, and unconsciously biased minds fail to meet the demands of an ever-changing reality.

Note that such radical shifts cannot be willed, for it is a deliberate decision to be responsible that is a high achievement indeed often provoked by a free encounter with another human being whose capacity for freedom exceeds our own. Furthermore, although it is intensely personal, it is not private. Often, it means joining a different community. Or if the community is the same, one belongs to it in a different way.¹⁵

Take the question of what is or is not true. To most human beings, truth is what can be seen “out there” quite independent of the person doing the viewing. How often do you hear the comment, “You only have to look to see what is real”? Yet looking—or experiencing—is incomplete without not only understanding what it is that one is experiencing (an insight) but failing to ask the follow-up question of judgement: “Is it so?” This is what Lonergan calls a radical shift away from an epistemology of naïve realism to a far more accurate one of critical realism by following the compound cognitive operations of experiencing, understanding, and deciding. And there are transcendental precepts associated with each: be open to experience, be intelligent in understanding, reasonable when judging what is or is not true, and responsible when deciding what to do or not do.

Then we have the reality that, born as animals, we have an intense very selfish interest in our own well-being. Who among us would put our own well-being aside when threatened? Perhaps most of us would “play along to get along.” But there are those that will take a stand for what they believe, even if it may cost them their lives. Whistle-blowers, for example, or people who fight for the truth about repressive regimes, or those who decide to fight against evil and promote the good in the face of daunting odds. This willingness to place value over personal satisfactions is the second component (moral conversion) in this radical shift.

The third, which really drives the first two, involves a shift toward the transcendent in the human condition (religious conversion). There must be a morality grounded in something deeper than then of human interests if a person is to undertake intellectual and moral forms of radical change. Following a natural law grounded in the divine deprives humans of all the satisfactions that come from attaining godhood, from becoming the general managers of the universe—lords of all we survey. Without such an external compass, truth becomes relative (if not non-existent) and value ceases to constrain the naked drive for power over others. The societal good of order is itself downgraded to levels where trust grows absent, wealth is not created but seized,

economies degraded to the point where little can be built or sustained, and life reverts to the short and nasty lifespans of pre-industrial civilizations.

Let me put it this way. Would you trust any person or organization that lacks sound judgment when it comes to determining what is or is not real, that will defend its own interests and well-being over that of anyone else, or that refuses to acknowledge the existence of any power greater than their own?

More than such radical changes are needed if we are to achieve a satisfactory relationship with others—indeed the world at large. Over thousands of years, mankind has brought into being different realms of meaning that are quite distinct from each other, each with their own methodologies, intentions, and boundaries. The primary ones are common sense (a knowledge of how to get things done in one's own unique time-and-space-specific situation), theory (the hard sciences dedicated to understanding reality through reason and experimentation, revealing a world quite different from that of common sense), transcendental (the Divine in particular, but in general anything considered greater than human well-being, e.g., Marxist), interiority (the self-knowledge of our coming to know and be), and scholarship (recovering the common sense of other times, other places). There are others of course, notable the arts, but these form the bases of our complex world mediated by meaning.¹⁶

The thing is that any true understanding of ourselves and the world around us now requires a fully differentiated mind capable of not only clearly and distinctly recognizing each differentiated realm with the different modes of intelligence associated with them but exercise extreme caution to prevent cross-contamination. The most common area of confusion lies with undifferentiated minds who can only understand other realms through their own common-sense modes of thought, for example by bringing scientific models of quantum mechanics into the realm of common sense leading to the birth of New Age practices and beliefs. Or chaining the unrestricted desire to know of the practicing scientist to the interests and concerns of the bureaucracies that fund their research, thereby elevating anthropomorphic climate change to unchallengeable levels of doctrine more suited to political ideologies and Utopian thought (and religious fundamentalism) than the task of teasing out the basic structure of reality.

Keep in mind that it is only Western modernity, ground as it is in Christianity, that has undertaken the exploration of all that there is.¹⁷ Non-western civilizations such as those organized around oriental despots (Xi), Islamic tribalism, or pagan rituals, all of which consider the universe as cyclic, not created, and as a given, rather than something to come to know through the application of both reason and faith (faith being the belief that the universe can be understood through the application of reason, as well as the belief that the universe was created and is unfolding through time in a positive direction toward the good).

For our purposes, the most important realm of meaning is that of Interiority. It is in this realm of meaning that the subject begins to appropriate their own rationality, in the sense that he or she becomes aware of the various cognitive operations at play and the transcendental precepts that guide them. Here that we delve into Lonergan's transcendental method¹⁸ (individual operations) and functional specialties¹⁹ (communal operations) that enable us to create the highly symbolic worlds-mediated-by-meaning that we use to live in the sensate world. For if there is one primary ability of human beings, it is our capacity to create and manipulate extraordinarily complex and interactive symbols at all levels of being.

And this leads us to the central core of this work, one that promises a way of being in the world as productive citizens holding such citizenship dear—and it is one that is not restricted to mere political practices but a way of living that transcends individual concerns and lays bare a level of being that unites rather than divides, builds rather than destroys. And for this we turn to the words of Frederick E. Crowe:

At certain momentous points in history, the term “organon” has been used to designate an instrument of mind: not an instrument of the hand, like a hammer or nutmeg grater, or even so precious an instrument as a Stradivarius violin, but rather a developed talent of an incarnate subject, a way of structuring our conscious activities, that has been of immense importance for the human race.²⁰

It is in the hope that this little project may turn out to be a step in the right direction. In either case, we need to “Embrace the Suck.” For the coming days will certainly suck and only the search for truth, taken with a good dose of moral courage combined with a belief in the Divine Mystery, will get us through the progressively dysfunctional world that will define our immediate future.

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Postscript

All of the above rests on years of inquiry into professional practice, a true transdisciplinary framework, an invariant structure of the human good, the core development of a human being from conception to post-death, a general theory of history grounded in the world process of emergent probability, the importance of adhering to the transcendental precepts when it comes to the authenticity of the person, and the general processes of functional specialties that relies on a method to determine truth and justice rather than rely on normative cultures or scientific knowledge. The whole point of this journey is to be able to work out, in a confused and confusing world dominated by “narrative”, what is or not reliable. I may be wrong. But before you can

make that claim, you would have to understand the grounds upon which my own judgments and decisions rest. Otherwise, you are just spinning your own wheels.
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18. Lonergan, *Method*, pp. 17-22.
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Glossary

World mediated by meaning: Our lives play out in a sensate world of objects and processes, a world seemingly out there to be seen as something external to ourselves. Our contact with the sensate world is mediated through a complex highly symbolic world view of our own creation, a world that gives significance and meaning to our sensate experiences. Thus, a thin rectangular piece of colored paper becomes known as a dollar bill, a promissory note that has meaning only within a given economic system. Both the sensate and mediated worlds are real, in the sense that there are real world consequences to our actions: stub your toe on a rock and you will experience pain; fail to meet mortgage payments and you will lose your house. The difference is that the former exists independently of human interests while the latter is a creation of human minds. If such humanly created worlds mediated by meaning stray from the reality of the sensate world, then the mediating world will mislead its users: one might fall off a cliff because the cliff cannot be seen, or one might run headlong into a brick wall of one's own creation – a wall that does not exist. Creating sound and reliable symbolic worlds is the primary function of our human species, where success leads to progress while failure declines.

Transcendental Method: In a world full of competing agendas and conflicting world views, the study of metaphysics becomes an important component in discerning the difference between progress and decline. In a world of conflicting metaphysical positions, the only way to resolve such issues is to appeal to the epistemological positions that support them. But we run into the same problem. Naïve realism, conceptualization, empiricism, etc. are all epistemologies with different often conflicting visions of reality, different understandings of such common terms as history or myths. Lonergan's solution is to appeal to the underlying cognitive operations that lead to each epistemology, and in turn each metaphysical position such that a sound understanding of human cognitive operations opens the door to a sound epistemology that in turn grounds a proper metaphysics. The result is the formation of a transcendental method that has all the potential gains of the hard sciences without the truncation embedded in such sciences. No more do we have to rely on normative cultures or scientific beliefs to guide our collective plans and policies. Cf. Chapter 1 of Lonergan's *Method in Theology*.

Functional Specialization: Our civilization has reached the point where no one mind can encapsulate all that there is to be known. We need a strategy to cope with complex non-linear systems, one grounded in a firm understanding of human understanding. The latter is Lonergan's transcendental method; the former is his application of this method to theological investigations in particular but all human communities in general. These functional specialties break down into two primary groups, with the first four dealing with capturing past and present world views while the last four concentrate on building sound world views. Each specialty takes the conclusions of the prior set of investigations and works with this material to provide the data set for the next specialty in a cyclic process of progressive refinement and relaxation. Each specialty is isomorphic with its cognitive operations, e.g., Research (Experiencing), Interpretation (Understanding), History (Judging), and Dialectics (Deciding) that completes the recover stage, and Foundations (Deciding), Doctrines (Judging), Systematics (Understanding), and Communications (Experiencing), before the cycle starts all over again. Cf. Chapter 5, *Method in Theology*.

Dialectical Generative Principles: given the transcendental precepts and the authenticity of conversion, we can affirm that there can be only two fundamental generative principles at play in the dialectic between positions and counter-position at the foundational level. These two positions reflect the difference between those who seek intellectual, moral, and religious conversion and those that do not. It is a division between those who escape the bonds of a naïve realism epistemology and adopt a critical realism grounded in the cognitive operations of the human mind, those who prefer to give their allegiance to true values rather than personal satisfactions, and finally those who accept the reality of a transcendental power in the universe over those who prefer human agency alone. Both the life-affirming and death-embracing principles refer to two fundamentally different recurring schemes of operation, the former engaged with the Divine Mystery while the latter negates its reality in favor of becoming like their own ultimate authority, i.e., elevating themselves to godhood. Between these two poles lies a continuum, as no human person nor human community fully completes their journey to one or the other of the "strange attractors."