

The gift of honesty

Recently, a friend of mine with whom I disagree politically (and have for thirty years), gave me perhaps the greatest gift of all. He prepared a two-part personal 'manifesto' that laid out his beliefs about America and Americans. I should add that this friend currently resides in Germany and has, off and on, for four decades. He is bi-cultural in that he has had a foot in the U.S. and one in Europe and has viewed both countries from within and from without. In that, he brings a unique perspective with his views, and by digging deep into that bi-cultural experience he gave me the gift of himself, pure and unvarnished, absent of the usual animus that accompanies the haranguing of many that side with him on the Left.

He is also a contemporary, in his eighth decade of life, and has sampled the U.S. during its post-WWII heyday and into the prosperous fifties and sixties. He is an East-coaster, New York City to be precise, and on that geographical point, he and I are as different in our upbringing as two people from two different solar systems. That aside, we both lived in Germany at the same time, the period immediately following the 'fall of the wall' and the German East/West unification.

During my four years in Munich my friend and I had many spirited discussions, but those discussions were had during a more hopeful time. Europe and America were still celebrating the end of the Cold War, and we in the U.S. still held some common beliefs and were not as polarized as we are today. We Right-of-centers were still able to have actual conversations with those on the Left and vice-versa. That changed, markedly, sometime in 2000, after that year's contentious Presidential election. The tectonic plates of political division shifted and revealed themselves in the anger directed at George W. Bush for 'stealing the election' from Al Gore. Then came September 11, 2001 and we experienced a brief political rapprochement - a coming together for the good of the country. It didn't last long, however, and the seeds of discontent from the previous year (and probably for many years prior) began to burst through America's topsoil in the shape of organized opposition to everything Republican.

At the time I was living in Denmark and could see the Danish press (which had always leaned left of center) begin to reflect the 'anti-Bush/anti-cowboy' sentiment. They declared that "America had been pulled too far to the Right and was beginning to revive its 'imperial tendencies' by a war in the Mideast and nation-building." After returning to the States in 2004, I was anxious to take the pulse of the nation for myself, first-hand. What I found was a country frozen in a deep malaise and one that was locked in the midst of an identity crisis AND was in the early stages of a cultural civil war.

I was shocked and deeply saddened. How had this happened? When did the 'American experience' start to feel like the Hatfield and McCoy feud or the war between the states? My friends in Europe were elated when a few years later Barack Obama was elected, and they told me that now, surely, the U.S. will come together. The wounds of war will be healed as will the wounds of racial differences. America will finally shed its 'cowboy/wild west ambitions.' Normalcy will return and we will once again become the responsible global leader that led through words.

Surprisingly, that actually happened. Words were the Obama Administration's currency and they did replace deeds, but while the words sounded good they were not backed up by actions. Our political divisions became greater and our race relations worsened despite the fact that we had elected America's first half-Black President! The U.S.' return to the world stage was seen by its adversaries for what it was...a great script but a really bad play. A political ideology that looked great on paper couldn't make the transition to reality. Our economy and our military were faltering and so was our confidence in our own ability to reprise greatness. While our forward movement was impressive in light of that inability, the movement was alienating half the country that didn't share the Obama vision for a 'new America.'

After eight years, half of the country had had enough and spoke out. My friend in Germany (and many of my other friends spread around the globe) were appalled that a man like Donald Trump

could actually become President. We had gone from a cowboy to a statesman to a showman! What was America thinking? Weren't Americans concerned about what the rest of the world would think? I had to tell them, "no." Americans were more concerned for a change about what THEY thought about THEMSELVES.

During the four years of the Trump Administration, America became increasingly more tribal. People on the right moved farther to the Right and those on the Left moved farther to the Left AND they dug foxholes and fortified a philosophical Maginot Line around their own beliefs. Those of us who were willing to speak out about America's problems (and our solutions to those problems) began to lose friends. We Conservatives were treated like lepers, even by members of our own families. We were told that we were delusional, that we were racists, homophobes, misogynists, Islamophobes, and enemies of the state as well as 'domestic terrorists' and White supremacists. We were pariahs and not fit to polish the boots of 'real' patriots who believed that America was a systemically racist country and had been since 1619.

The friendship hemorrhage continued apace. I lost a friend of fifty years because he was so overwhelmed by hatred for the Republicans that he couldn't bear to even exchange an email with me. This is a man who is an educated clinical psychologist who has treated numerous drug addicts and dysfunctional families over the years around the world, but he just couldn't subordinate his own rage at a whole political party to engage in a civil discussion with an old friend. That is how far we had fallen.

I suspect that many of you have had similar experiences and have reluctantly jettisoned some friends over the years or been 'canceled' yourself. And while you may be pessimistic about the future for some of your other friendships, take heart. The manifesto that I got from my friend in Germany just today, the anniversary of D-Day, renewed my faith in the 'possible.' All may not be lost as long as a few of our friends are able to replace anger and resentment with the courage to go on record about their own beliefs like mine did. Hope springs eternal even in today's America.

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