

There Is Much that We Really Cannot Bear to Know

One of my college applications way back when required me to write a timed impromptu essay on T. S. Eliot's statement in his poem, "Four Quartets": "human kind Cannot bear very much reality."

I'm unable to recall what I wrote over fifty years ago, but Eliot's statement has stayed with me. Whatever his meaning, the words have become to me expressive of something profoundly troublesome about the human condition.

I observe, especially, our human limits to bear reality in both our religious life, in regard to the ultimate nature of our circumstances, and our political, social, and economic existence, in regard to our lot and station in life.

Experience has taught me that much religion, as well as much that passes for social, political, and economic knowledge, is some form of delusion. The truth seems to be that we human beings, individually and together, inhabit worlds defined by beliefs, doctrines, theories, ideologies, and such that we have constructed to hide from ourselves the most painful features of being human.

In reality, life is unfair, and goodness often goes unrewarded while evil often prospers – but we imagine a final dispensation, perhaps in the form of heaven and hell, to administer the final justice that we so often fail to experience in this life. In reality, we suffer losses all along the way of life, until we lose ourselves in death – but we assure ourselves that there is a final restoration that is absent the pain of our losses and reunites us with our loved ones. It is true that we are guilty of many errors and omissions, and have often failed to be our own best selves – but we ascribe to various doctrines and practices that, though often bizarre, convince us not only that all will be forgiven but everything will ultimately be set right.

And what about our public life? What are we told, and what do we tell ourselves? All people are created equal? If you work hard, you can achieve whatever you put your mind to? Success is necessarily deserved? People "earn" what they make? In America, anyone can grow up to be President? Elections in our democracy are fair? However slowly the wheels of justice turn, they grind very fine? The truth will eventually come out? The "free market" provides the most just and efficient allocations of resources and rewards? The will of the people cannot be thwarted? Our nation is exceptional, founded on and still true to the highest ideals [not theft and genocide of the native peoples and enslavement and torture of captured Africans and their descendants]?

Some of these bromides are partially true part of the time – yet often they conceal rather than reveal the truth. They serve as lenses, or blinders, to limit our awareness of harsher realities. It seems crucial that most people believe them in order to preserve social order, minimize discontent, maintain the prevailing social, political, and economic hierarchies with their attendant benefits for those closer to the top.

There's no justice in people at the top being rewarded thousands of times more than those at the bottom, while rarely ending up in jail, when millions of the poor are incarcerated or

disadvantaged with tarnished records. But if everybody understood that, and was not in thrall to false notions about how society must work, there would be revolution.

Life is good! But - if we all fully fathomed the realities of our circumstances, and why things are the way they are, significant features would be utterly intolerable. It would be more than we as individuals, or as a society, could bear.

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