

Ancient Counsel Regarding the Grievous Human Condition

“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” “There is nothing new under the sun.”

These words come from one of my favorite First Testament books, Ecclesiastes. The author may sound like a nihilist but he’s more a realist, one no longer in thrall to the idols of the mind – those false myths and ideologies by which we human beings exploit others and are ourselves exploited in the struggle to impose ourselves and our agendas on the world.

Ecclesiastes’ message is not that the world is careening out of control, but that we are not really in control: “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but time and chance happen to them all.” God may ultimately hold the reins, but we cannot know the future.

Whether you find this comforting or discomfoting probably depends on how much you think you can determine your own destiny, or how much you think you deserve your particular lot in life.

It may also depend on how grieved you are by the current state of affairs.

I am very grieved. It’s some comfort to know that, as bad as things are, this is nothing new. More precisely, though it seems new and unprecedented in form, this is not the first time the human race has proven itself capable of enormous stupidity, perfidy, greed, ignorance, bigotry, cowardice, and self-destructive short-sightedness.

In my youth, the world stood on the brink of nuclear holocaust. Now we also stand on the brink of ecological suicide. Not to mention the unconscionable depravity of our country’s current administration and so many others, including some lauded by our sociopathic leader. Think Russia, North Korea, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia. Even if the human race survives, it’s not clear that meaningful democracy will.

In another time of national turmoil, James Russell Lowell authored the eloquent poem, “The Present Crisis” – a commentary on the conflict over slavery. Among its memorable lines is one that especially captures today’s predicament: “Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne.” Yet Lowell was hopeful enough to believe that justice would ultimately prevail. Alluding to the Crucifixion, and all martyrdoms for truth and right, Lowell wrote: “Yet that scaffold sways the future” – ah, but at such great cost in suffering and sacrifice.

Recall the words of another poet, one of my own generation, Bob Dylan, who asked, “How many deaths will it take 'til [one] knows that too many people have died?”

Which leads me to ask, How bad must it get before enough people awaken to the urgency of the moment? How much wider does the gulf between rich and poor have to become? How many more human rights and liberties must be curtailed and trampled into the dust? How much more carbon dioxide and methane gas needs to be released into the air? How much more do

temperatures and sea levels need to rise? How hard must it be to make a living; to raise a family without fear of guns, strangers, and unfunded medical needs; to enjoy the restorative peacefulness and beauty of nature? How many deaths will it take to get serious about pursuing peace, addressing climate change, embracing those who look different, welcoming the refugee and the stranger?

Of course, if it's all vanity, who cares? But even Ecclesiastes counsels us to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in life. It is the striving for some meaningless and unattainable greatness that Ecclesiastes counsels against. The world is not all about us. It's not about amassing fortunes or power. We're all going to die. Meanwhile, get real! Get a life!

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