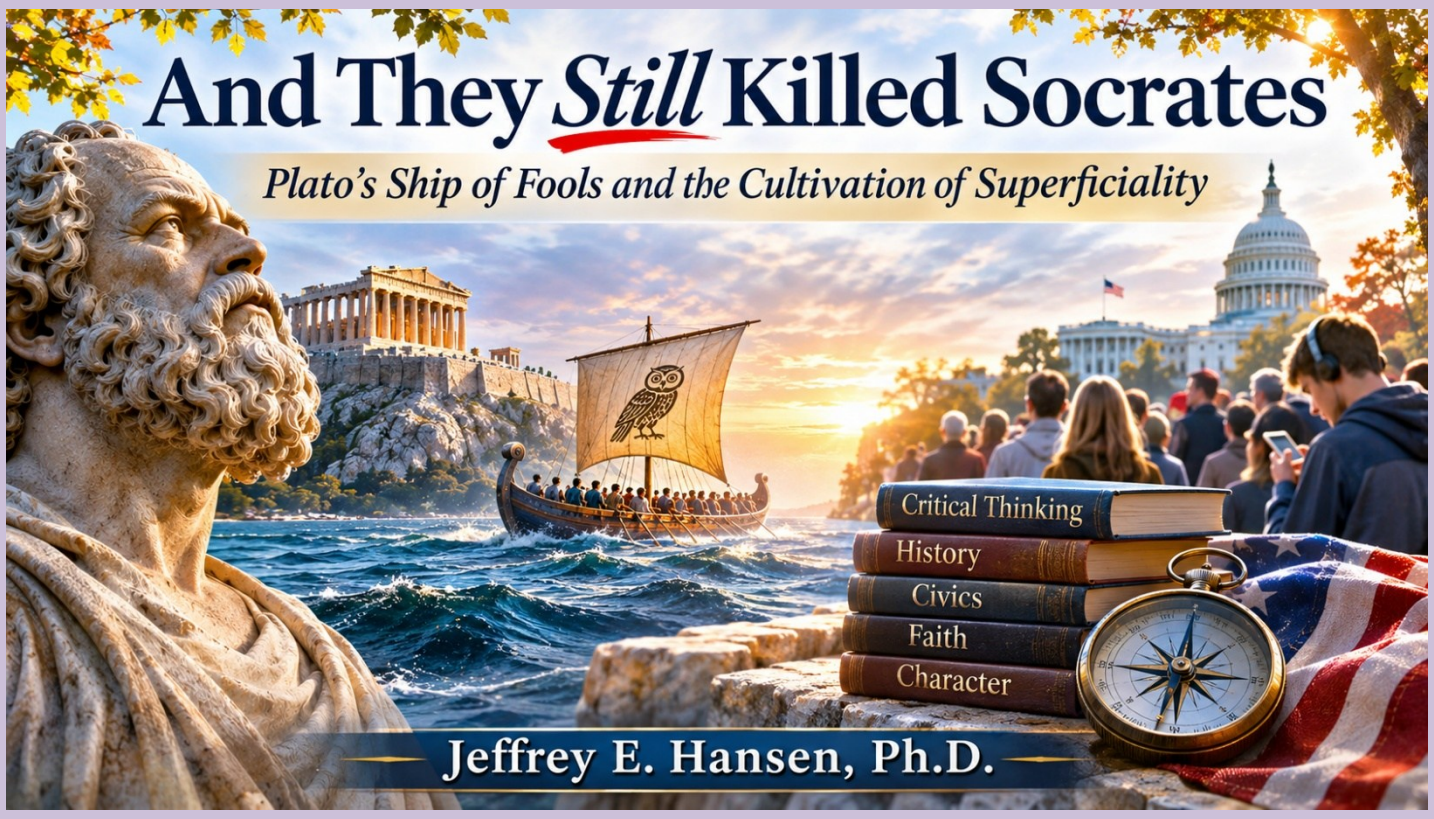

The Musings of a Restless Psychologist

There I go again. It is well before sunrise, at an hour when most rational human beings are still enjoying the benefits of restorative sleep, and this old psychologist is pondering the follies of humankind. One might reasonably question the wisdom of a man contemplating the intellectual shortcomings of civilization who has not yet mastered the simple art of sleeping until a civilized hour. The irony is not lost on me.

This morning I stumbled upon a particularly compelling YouTube presentation, *Why Democracy Rewards Idiots: Plato Saw It Coming 2,400 Years Ago*. I owe its creator a debt of gratitude for articulating so eloquently something that has been troubling me for some time. As I listened, I became increasingly fascinated by the observations of Plato and increasingly disturbed by their relevance to our world today.

Good grief, how little we seem to have learned. We have split the atom, put human beings on the moon, transplanted human organs, and developed artificial intelligence. We carry in our pockets devices that give us access to much of the accumulated knowledge of civilization. Yet how far have we progressed in intellectual humility, critical thinking, moral courage, and our susceptibility to manipulation?

My conjecture as a psychologist is that we may have actually made matters worse. By no means am I attempting to solve the woes of the world in one essay. I am examining one small but consequential slice of the human condition as I wrestle with a rather perplexing question: How in the world did we get here?

Are We Still Aboard Plato's Ship of Fools?

In *The Republic*, Plato describes a ship whose sailors quarrel over who should assume command despite possessing little understanding of navigation. Their energies are devoted to persuading the shipowner to give them control. Meanwhile, the genuine navigator, who has studied the stars, winds, seasons, and intricacies of seamanship, is dismissed as a useless stargazer. The very man equipped to navigate the ship is the man least appreciated by its crew (Plato, *Republic*, VI, 488a–489a).

Plato had good reason to be troubled. He lived through the devastating defeat of Athens in 404 BCE, the temporary overthrow of its democracy, and its restoration. In 399 BCE, that restored democracy condemned his mentor, Socrates, to death on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth. Socrates had made a rather uncomfortable habit of challenging assumptions, asking difficult questions, and exposing the limitations of people's understanding.

Consider the irony. Athens produced some of the greatest philosophical minds in recorded history. It had a remarkable tradition of public discourse and philosophical inquiry. It did not have smartphones interrupting its citizens' thoughts or algorithms competing for their attention throughout the day.

And they still killed Socrates.

The Seduction of the Confident Amateur

Plato was deeply concerned about the sophists, teachers of rhetoric whose persuasive abilities could be used to win arguments rather than pursue truth. His concern was not that they lacked intelligence. It was that the appearance of wisdom could be substituted for wisdom itself.

Some 2,400 years later, psychologists Justin Kruger and David Dunning (1999) demonstrated that people with limited competence in certain domains can have difficulty recognizing the extent of their own shortcomings. The confident amateur may not know enough to appreciate what he does not know. Conversely, expertise often brings an appreciation of complexity and the limitations of one's understanding. What a perverse situation when the humility of the knowledgeable navigator is interpreted as weakness and the certainty of the amateur as competence!

I see this in my own profession. After decades of study and clinical practice, I continue to find certain clinical questions extraordinarily complex. Yet I encounter colleagues who speak about those same matters with an almost breathtaking certainty. Good grief, where is your intellectual curiosity? Where is your willingness to entertain the possibility that you might be wrong?

The skills required to get elected are not necessarily those required to govern. Charisma, eloquence, good looks, and the ability to reduce complex matters to memorable slogans are useful campaign attributes. But they tell us little by themselves about whether the individual understands the intricacies of governing a nation.

Good Grief, We Are Choosing the Captain by His Face!

In 2005, Princeton psychologist Alexander Todorov and his colleagues published a remarkable study in *Science*. Participants made judgments of competence based solely on photographs of political candidates. Those judgments correctly predicted nearly 69% of the outcomes of the 2004 United States Senate races (Todorov et al., 2005).

It gets even better. In 2009, Swiss researchers presented children with photographs of unfamiliar French political candidates and asked whom they would choose to captain their imaginary boat. The children's choices predicted election outcomes about as accurately as those of adults, roughly seven times out of ten (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009). What would Plato make of that?

Consider also the famous 1960 Kennedy–Nixon debate. The familiar story that radio listeners favored Nixon while television viewers favored Kennedy has been challenged historically. Nevertheless, experimental research confirms that television images can influence our assessments of political candidates (Druckman, 2003).

Consider the contemporary progressive political figures Zohran Mamdani, Abdul El-Sayed, and James Talarico. Listen to them speak and examine their proposals, not simply the appeal of their delivery. How much of what you know about them comes from sustained, substantive inquiry and how much comes from electronically packaged impressions? I would ask precisely the same question of those enamored with Donald Trump or any other figure on the political right.

Charisma is not character. Eloquence is not wisdom. Confidence is not competence. And popularity is not proof of truth.

An Ancient Brain in an Increasingly Complex World

The human brain is remarkably equipped to recognize patterns, assess danger, form impressions of others, and respond rapidly to immediate threats. Throughout human history these capacities have served us well. But consider the demands we now place upon that same brain: international economics, geopolitical alliances, complex medical research, artificial intelligence, constitutional governance, and extraordinarily difficult ethical questions.

Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky pioneered research into the mental shortcuts, or heuristics, that help us make judgments but can also produce predictable errors (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Kahneman (2011) subsequently popularized a distinction between two modes of cognitive processing, commonly called System 1 and System 2. System 1 is fast, intuitive, automatic, and relatively effortless. System 2 is slower, analytical, and demanding of sustained attention. We need both. But when a decision demands a careful examination of evidence, our initial impressions are a particularly poor substitute for deliberation.

My concern is that our world increasingly demands System 2 thinking while our culture increasingly rewards System 1 thinking. Worse yet, we can employ considerable intellectual horsepower rationalizing conclusions we have already reached emotionally. Intelligence does not guarantee rationality, and rationality does not guarantee wisdom.

The Industrialization of Superficiality

Plato's sophists had the public square. Today's political communicators have an extraordinary technological apparatus capable of delivering emotionally compelling messages to millions of people in seconds. We are no longer necessarily evaluating the politician. We are evaluating carefully curated electronic fragments of the politician: a charming smile, a clever retort, an articulate response, a compassionate gesture. From those fragments we construct an impression of the entire individual. And then we convince ourselves that we know the person!

Daniel Hallin (1992) found that the average political sound bite on American network evening news declined from 43 seconds in 1968 to nine seconds in 1988. That was before the smartphone! More recent research has documented increasingly rapid turnover in collective attention (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2019), while a meta-analysis of reading research found a comprehension advantage for printed texts, particularly informational material read under time constraints (Delgado et al., 2018).

What cognitive habits are we cultivating through hours of scrolling, rapid attentional switching, and immediate emotional appraisal? Where are we developing the intellectual stamina to read a substantive article, contemplate competing arguments, and wrestle with ambiguity? We exercise our bodies to develop strength. Why do we imagine that intellectual endurance requires any less intentional effort?

My colleague Dr. Andrew Doan and I have addressed problematic digital media use in our professional work, and psychiatrist Dr. Victoria Dunckley (2015) has described a proposed clinical construct she calls Electronic Screen Syndrome. I sometimes wonder what genius decided to call that device a smartphone. Perhaps we ought to call it the dumbing-down phone.

Technology can be an extraordinary instrument of learning. But when its dominant use is feeding us electronic morsels and interrupting sustained thought, it can become an instrument

of superficiality. My conjecture is that we have created an environment that amplifies the very vulnerabilities Plato identified. We have industrialized superficiality.

Doxa, Epistēmē, and the Seductive Appeal of Simplicity

Plato distinguished between *doxa*, opinion or belief, and *epistēmē*, knowledge. How have we become so adept at acquiring the former while growing so impatient with the work required to acquire the latter?

How in the world did we get to a point where something as singular as the price of gasoline might become the defining consideration in a person's choice of national leadership? Yes, gasoline prices matter. The financial struggles of families are real. Yet even gasoline prices reflect an extraordinarily complex interplay of international markets, energy policy, geopolitical events, refining capacity, and supply and demand. How tempting to reduce all that to a slogan, identify a villain, and move on.

Psychologists have identified an illusion of explanatory depth: we frequently believe we understand things considerably better than we do. In a particularly relevant experiment, people asked to explain how political policies actually worked, rather than merely state why they supported them, often revised their assessments of their own understanding (Fernbach et al., 2013).

We crave simplicity. We crave coherence. We crave certainty. And when the facts do not fit our preferred narrative, motivated reasoning can lead us to scrutinize unwelcome evidence more harshly than evidence supporting our convictions (Kunda, 1990). Good grief, the world is complex. Wishing it were otherwise does not make it so.

Ideological Conviction Without Intellectual Inquiry

To my progressive friends who find socialism or communism particularly appealing, how many of you have actually read Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*? How many have studied Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, and Fidel Castro? Have you examined how their ideas were implemented and what happened to the people living under those regimes? Have you wrestled with the historical record of repression, imprisonment, mass killing, and the destruction of lives and careers?

Do you understand the distinctions between democratic socialism, communism, fascism, and totalitarianism, or are these little more than slogans you have absorbed from your preferred electronic sources? If you embrace an ideology, do the hard work of understanding its history, its promises, its limitations, and its consequences. My conservative friends, the same challenge applies to you. Can you articulate the strongest arguments against your own convictions, or do you simply retreat into the comforting embrace of your preferred commentators?

I am not telling anyone how to vote. Vote your conscience. But for God's sake, inform that conscience through a thoughtful appreciation of the complexity of the issues before us.

To My Colleagues: We Must Do Better

As a pediatric psychologist, I have been particularly troubled by the reduction of complex questions in pediatric gender medicine to emotionally charged slogans. To my colleagues, I ask: Have you critically examined the breadth of the outcome research? Have you studied developmental trajectories, desistance, persistence, psychiatric comorbidities, family dynamics, and the limitations of the evidence? Have you examined research that challenges your preferred approach? Do you distinguish among social transition, psychological support, puberty suppression, and other medical interventions?

How many of us have heard the question, "Would you rather have a living daughter or a dead son?" I find that false dichotomy appalling. Children experiencing gender-related distress deserve compassion and careful assessment, and families deserve an honest discussion of benefits, risks, uncertainties, and alternatives—not a terrifying ultimatum. Recent systematic reviews have identified major limitations in the evidence for social transition and puberty suppression (Hall et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2024). Limitations in the evidence do not establish that every intervention is ineffective or harmful, but they demand intellectual honesty.

We are psychologists and physicians, for God's sake. We must do the outcome research, read beyond the studies that reinforce our convictions, and remain willing to revise our conclusions. Expertise does not exempt us from intellectual humility. It should demand it.

When Silence Meets Cowardice

In my earlier essay, *When Silence Meets Cowardice*, I reflected upon painful experiences during my tenure at Madigan Army Medical Center. After I spoke publicly about the complexities of pediatric gender medicine, including the issues I sought to raise about pornography, my professional licensure was targeted and false allegations of defrauding the government were made against me. Those allegations have since been acknowledged as false.

There were colleagues who came to my defense, and for that I remain grateful. Yet some did so very tepidly, crafting statements in ways that minimized their own professional risk. I understand the human psychology underlying such behavior. Understanding it does not diminish the pain of experiencing it.

Organizational silence thrives when people perceive that speaking up is dangerous (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). What happens to science when professional security becomes more important than scientific inquiry? What happens to a profession when its members are reluctant to defend a colleague for fear of what it might cost them?

Jack Nicholson's character in *A Few Good Men* famously exclaimed, "You can't handle the truth!" I would go a step further. Sometimes we simply do not want to know the truth. It might inconvenience us, threaten our belonging, jeopardize our careers, or demand that we acknowledge our own ignorance.

It takes courage to articulate complexity when others demand simplicity. You might be hated. You might be vilified. You might be punished. I certainly have been. Yet there is something profoundly reassuring about knowing that you stepped into the wind rather than turning your back to it. I am no political genius, nor do I have this world figured out. But I am not afraid to dive into the deep end of the intellectual pool.

The pursuit of truth requires intellectual humility. The defense of truth requires moral courage. And, dare I suggest, the latter is in rather short supply these days.

Trading Freedom for the Illusion of Security

Plato warned that a democracy might descend into tyranny when people weary of disorder entrust their freedom to a leader promising security. The fall of the Roman Republic offers another illustration of the dangers of political instability, factionalism, and the concentration of power. Erich Fromm (1941), in *Escape from Freedom*, explored the psychological burdens of freedom and the temptation to relinquish autonomy in exchange for security and relief from responsibility.

How tragic that the very security we seek can come at the expense of the freedom we cherish. Freedom demands that we tolerate uncertainty, exercise judgment, and assume responsibility for our decisions. There is no simple way around that obligation.

The Athenians killed Socrates. Some 2,400 years later, an individual attempted to assassinate Donald Trump. The events are historically different, but they remind us that political violence has not disappeared with technological progress. This is not an endorsement of Trump. I have my own concerns about him. This is not about Trump. It is about us.

We face consequential decisions about artificial intelligence, national security, economic stability, education, religious freedom, and the future of our constitutional republic. As a grandfather, I am acutely aware that the consequences of those decisions will outlive me.

Plato's Diagnosis, but Not Plato's Prescription

Plato proposed that philosopher-kings, rigorously educated in the pursuit of wisdom, should govern. I understand his thinking. But that is not a world in which I want to live. Intellectual expertise does not guarantee moral character, and concentrating power among an intellectual elite presents enormous dangers of its own.

The answer is not to disenfranchise the masses. The answer is to educate them. Rather than abandoning democratic governance, let us cultivate the intellectual and moral capacities necessary to sustain it. And that means some of us need a rather substantial wake-up call.

Educators, Wake the Hell Up!

Extricate ideological indoctrination, from whichever political direction it comes, from our educational institutions and get back to teaching. Teach our children how to think rather than what to think. Teach history honestly, its achievements and its atrocities. Selectively rewriting history to accommodate an ideology is just intellectual dumbassery.

Restore substantive civic education. Teach how our constitutional republic functions, why checks and balances matter, how laws are made, how economic systems operate, and how policies can have unintended consequences. Have students defend competing positions using evidence. Teach them to identify fallacies, assess sources, and distinguish an argument from an assertion. Research demonstrates that critical thinking can be taught, particularly through dialogue, authentic problems, and mentoring (Abrami et al., 2015).

Get smartphones out of classrooms and remove unnecessary electronic distractions. Get back to substantive reading, writing, discussion, and reflection. The objective of education should not be ideological replication but intellectual independence. That requires educators who are secure enough to tolerate students arriving at conclusions different from their own.

Parents, Wake the Hell Up!

During my three decades as a pediatric psychologist, I frequently asked families a seemingly simple question: What are your family's core values? It was remarkable how often they struggled to answer. It was not that they necessarily lacked values. They had simply never taken the time to articulate them together.

One of my favorite therapeutic exercises was to have families create their own coat of arms, incorporating the values they identified as important. It was a beautiful thing to witness. It facilitated meaningful conversation, fostered a sense of pride in who they were, and gave them a shared vocabulary for navigating life. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) similarly emphasizes identifying meaningful values and translating those values into committed action (Hayes et al., 2006).

Put down your own damned smartphone. Sit down with your children. Eat together. Read together. Talk about faith, history, morality, and the difficult questions of life. Encourage your children to challenge your assumptions, and be sufficiently humble to listen when they do. Give them something no electronic device can adequately replicate: genuine human connection.

For God's sake, start being parents. Do not abdicate that sacred responsibility to an electronic device or an educational institution.

Journalists, Start Being Journalists!

What a radical concept it would be to restore fairness and objectivity to journalism. Report the facts. Distinguish news from opinion. Stop cropping interviews in ways that distort what was communicated. Make full interviews available rather than feeding viewers the fragments that best accommodate your preferred narrative. And I direct that criticism toward both the political left and the political right.

How about substantive presidential debates in which every candidate is expected to participate? Ask equally challenging questions, allow sufficient time to develop answers, and press candidates to explain the trade-offs and unintended consequences of their proposals. Make the entire debate readily available. I do not want another rehearsed thirty-second sound bite. I want to hear the complexity of the candidate's thinking. Does the person seeking to captain the ship understand anything about navigation?

Churches, You Are Not Getting a Pass Either!

To my beloved Christian churches, wake the hell up! Enough of the vanilla, milquetoast sermons that leave us comfortable but relatively unchallenged. Christianity was never intended to be an exercise in psychological comfort. Scripture should penetrate our defenses, expose our hypocrisy, and transform how we think and live.

This is one of the reasons I appreciate pastors like Jack Hibbs and my own pastor, Whitney Walters. Whitney challenges me to examine what the Bible actually says and to live differently as a consequence. His sermons are not spiritually sanitized. Hebrews 4:12 describes the Word of God as sharper than a double-edged sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and discerning the intentions of the heart. That is not a particularly comfortable image, nor should it be.

Proverbs 18:17 reminds us that the first person to present a case may appear correct until another comes forward to examine it. What a remarkably pertinent lesson in intellectual humility. Our churches should be places where we develop discernment and moral courage, not places where we retreat from difficult questions.

Navigate Around the Damned Storm

On November 1, 2026, a Learjet 60 plunged into the ground near Greenacres, Florida, killing all nine people aboard. Investigators recovered pieces of the left elevator miles from the crash site, evidence that critical components separated before impact. Severe weather is a major

focus of the investigation (National Transportation Safety Board [NTSB], 2026; ABC News, 2026). Nine precious souls. Nine lives extinguished in a catastrophic descent.

I do not know what decisions were made in that cockpit, and the investigators must determine what happened. But the tragedy brought me back to Plato's ship and a fundamental principle of navigation: when the direct route is dangerous, take the longer route. Go around the damned storm. It may cost you time, fuel, and inconvenience. The alternative may cost you your life.

Why should navigating the future of a nation be any different? We have become enamored with expediency, convenience, and intellectual shortcuts. But the storm does not care how confidently you deny its existence. Reality does not accommodate our desire for simplicity.

Epistēmē Over Doxa: Can We Make the Shift?

Can we favor knowledge over opinion, tolerate complexity, and summon the courage to confront uncomfortable truths? I believe we can. But unlike Plato, I would entrust that responsibility not merely to a better captain but to a better-educated, more discerning crew.

As a youngster, I hated homework. Good grief, how I hated homework! But I did it anyway. And after decades of professional practice, teaching, and study, this old psychologist is still doing his homework. The older I get, the more I realize how much I do not know.

My grandchildren and yours will inherit the ship we are navigating today. For their sake, I pray that we learn to navigate it wisely.

For God's sake, do your homework. There are precious lives aboard this vessel.

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