

Just When I Thought I Was Done...

I thought this book was finished. Heck, I had already submitted the manuscript to my formatter, Will, and was rather pleased with myself for having brought this literary adventure to a close. Will and I connected through Fiverr, that marvelous platform that brings together editors, formatters, graphic designers, and other creative professionals from throughout the world. We have now collaborated on fourteen books. The poor guy probably knows better than to believe me when I tell him a manuscript is finished.

But permit me a little personal digression. Around the time I lost my beloved twin brother, Gregg, Will lost his beloved sister in a horrible automobile accident. Somewhere in the midst of our respective grief, a professional relationship evolved into a friendship characterized by a remarkable brotherly affection. We have never met in person, yet with every new book we check in with one another. Will, thank you for all you have done to make my books what they are, but more importantly, thank you for your kindness and compassion when Gregg died. Your friendship is one of those unexpected blessings God slips into our lives when we are busy doing something else entirely. I am grateful for you, brother.

Now, where was I? Oh, yes. The book was finished. But then came that ridiculously early hour of the morning when my ever-restless default mode network apparently decided I had enjoyed quite enough sleep. Something was missing. There was one more uncomfortable conversation I simply could not walk away from. Sorry, Will. Here we go again.

To my beloved left-leaning friends and colleagues, I suspect the title alone may have gotten your blood pressure up. Some of you may have already decided that I have lost my intellectual faculties. A few may decide they no longer like me. It wouldn't be the first time. But before you

decide you hate this essay, might I persuade you to read a few paragraphs? I will endeavor to be fair. I make absolutely no commitment to making you comfortable.

I am not a politician or a political strategist. I am a clinical psychologist who loves taking psychology beyond the consulting room and applying it to larger human systems. If individuals can become psychologically sick, why on earth would we assume societies cannot? And, quite frankly, I think something has become terribly sick within our political culture. I have never been particularly good at playing it safe. At seventy-two, I see little reason to cultivate that skill. I'm going to damn well say it anyway.

Of Course You Hate Trump... Don't You?

One of the more peculiar experiences within my professional circles is the automatic assumption that, of course, I hate Donald Trump. It is not even presented as a question. Apparently, being an educated and compassionate psychologist obligates me to participate in a particular collective emotional response. Well, no. I don't hate Trump. Nor do I worship him. I see him as a mixed human being, as I saw Biden, Obama, and Clinton. There are things Trump has said that make me wonder why someone hasn't confiscated his phone, and things he has accomplished that I consider remarkable. I have no difficulty holding those two thoughts simultaneously.

I have what I affectionately call my good-heart friends. Some of them hold political views that I think are absolutely nuts, and I suspect they think much the same of mine. But I love them. Unfortunately, I have not always been afforded that same courtesy. Colleagues with whom I once shared meaningful friendships and intellectual exchanges have effectively excommunicated me. Decades of clinical work, books, and presentations suddenly seemed irrelevant. None of those accomplishments makes me a genius, but neither does my refusal to subscribe to your politics make me a moron. Challenge my research, my reasoning, my conclusions. I rather enjoy a good intellectual wrestling match. Just don't demand that I hate the people you hate as the price of admission to your club.

Herbert Marcuse and the Moral Folly of Repressive Tolerance

Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) was a German-born Jewish philosopher associated with the Frankfurt School, an intellectual movement that drew upon philosophy, sociology, Marxism, and psychoanalysis to examine domination and conformity. Marcuse witnessed the collapse of German democracy and the rise of Nazism, fled Germany, and worked in American intelligence during World War II. In America, he encountered racial segregation, McCarthyism, and the conflict over Vietnam. I understand the Zeitgeist in which his thinking developed. I understand his fear of authoritarianism.

In his 1965 essay *Repressive Tolerance*, Marcuse argued that indiscriminate tolerance could perpetuate existing oppression. His proposed solution, however, was explicit: “Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 109). He contemplated withholding tolerance from

certain forms of speech and political assembly. Good heavens, Herbert! In attempting to confront repression, you have handed us a philosophical justification for it.

I consider that prescription morally reprehensible. Understanding the origins of a destructive idea does not exonerate the idea. Once we grant ourselves authority to determine whose political thinking deserves tolerance, who gets to decide? And, of course, everybody thinks it should be them. We cannot simply blame subsequent generations for taking Marcuse out of context. The seeds were already in his thinking. His argument provides a philosophical parallel to the selective intolerance I encounter today, whether or not the people practicing it have ever read him.

Erich Fromm and Gordon Allport: When the Fire Becomes Its Own Master

One of Marcuse's critics came from within his own intellectual tradition. Erich Fromm, a social psychologist, psychoanalyst, and humanistic socialist associated with the Frankfurt School, challenged Marcuse's radicalism in a 1955 exchange in *Dissent*, describing it in terms of human nihilism (Fromm, 1955a). Their dispute preceded *Repressive Tolerance*, but the philosophical divide is fascinating. Fromm understood the importance of love, responsibility, human dignity, and independence of thought. Well, Erich, I may not be particularly enamored with your politics, but you and I have more in common than I initially appreciated.

Liberation without love, responsibility, and human dignity is a hollow enterprise. What good is social justice if we become incapable of recognizing our own injustices? And if I reject Fromm's wisdom simply because he was a socialist, am I not practicing precisely the ideological rigidity I am criticizing?

In *The Sane Society*, Fromm (1955b) asked whether an entire society could become sick. Dysfunction can become so culturally normative that nobody recognizes it as dysfunction. Now add Gordon Allport's (1937) concept of functional autonomy: motives can become independent of the circumstances that originally gave rise to them. In less sophisticated language, what starts a fire is not necessarily what keeps it burning.

Every good clinician understands the distinction between precipitating and perpetuating factors. A depression may begin with a devastating loss but subsequently be sustained by rumination, withdrawal, disrupted sleep, and the erosion of meaningful relationships. The depression becomes a fire unto itself. Why would similar processes not operate within larger human systems? An ideology can acquire entirely new sources of fuel: belonging, moral certainty, institutional approval, power, and the identification of a common enemy. The genie is out of the bottle. The original philosopher need no longer be read. And the enemy may become psychologically useful to the very people who despise him.

When Hatred Becomes the Price of Admission

I happen to love Helen Reddy and her celebration of women's empowerment. I am pro-woman. I am not anti-man. Why should the advancement of one human being require the degradation of another? Similarly, why should belonging to a political or professional community require me to hate Donald Trump? There is something terribly unhealthy about a community organized around whom its members despise rather than what they collectively love.

Decades of research on conformity and obedience demonstrate how readily we surrender independent judgment under social pressure (Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1963). And sometimes it is not simply blind obedience. We identify with a cause so strongly that we willingly participate in destructive behavior, convinced that we are doing something noble (Reicher et al., 2012). Who needs a dictator when we have learned to police one another?

Political sectarianism brings together othering, aversion, and moralization (Finkel et al., 2020). The person who disagrees with me becomes morally suspect. Soon, the hostility extends from Trump to his voters, his associates, and anyone who dares acknowledge something positive about him. I no longer have to know my neighbor. Apparently, knowing how he voted will suffice. Bandura (1999) called attention to the mechanisms of moral disengagement through which we can injure others while retaining a favorable view of ourselves. Perhaps the most dangerous hatred is the hatred we have learned to call goodness.

Jonathan Alpert and Me: When the Therapist Becomes the Target

Jonathan Alpert, a practicing psychotherapist and author of *Therapy Nation* (Alpert, 2026b), has raised provocative questions about a therapeutic culture that can reinforce grievance rather than cultivate resilience. In his 2025 Wall Street Journal essay on Trump Derangement Syndrome, he described patients whose political preoccupation had become emotionally consuming and psychologically disruptive (Alpert, 2025). Alpert subsequently reported receiving death threats. A therapist raises a psychological question, and some people respond by threatening the therapist! Challenge his clinical observations, his terminology, his conclusions. But threatening his life? What the heck has happened to us?

I can relate. After publicly challenging prevailing assumptions about transgender medicine during my years in a federal healthcare institution, a colleague accused me of defrauding the government and threatened to report me to my licensing board. I did not defraud the government. Period. I experienced the institutional response as remarkably tepid. The accusation did not prevail, but the experience left me profoundly disturbed. Attempting to destroy my livelihood is not a scientific rebuttal.

And my professional colleagues might want to take a look at Inbar and Lammers (2012), who found that some surveyed social and personality psychologists were willing to discriminate against openly conservative colleagues in professional decisions. We are psychologists, for heaven's sake! We teach our patients to recognize cognitive distortions, resist unhealthy interpersonal pressures, and develop independent judgment. Can we not apply those same

principles to ourselves? I do not want a conservative psychology any more than I want a progressive psychology. I want good psychology.

This is why Marcuse concerns me. A culture that grants moral legitimacy to the silencing of opposing ideas can turn professional accountability into a weapon. I see a disturbing parallel between what Alpert reports experiencing and what happened to me. We are supposed to be students of human behavior, not guardians of ideological orthodoxy.

Are We Becoming a Borderline Culture?

What intrigues me clinically about the phenomenon popularly called Trump Derangement Syndrome is not the political preference but the psychological pattern: obsessive preoccupation, disproportionate emotional reactivity, selective acceptance of information, hostility by association, and the destruction of relationships. It is not a formal diagnosis. Yet the psychological processes are familiar. And they have a mirror image in the person who cannot acknowledge a single legitimate criticism of Trump.

In object relations theory, splitting refers to difficulty integrating positive and negative representations of oneself and others. A person may idealize someone one moment and devalue them the next. Contradictory early relational experiences can contribute to such difficulties; the therapeutic work involves helping the person tolerate and integrate complexity (Kernberg, 1975). My God, are we doing this on a national scale? Are we becoming a borderline culture, unable to integrate the good and the bad within the same human being? I am borrowing a clinical mechanism, not diagnosing a nation or disparaging those who struggle with this disorder.

Consider Bill Clinton. I found aspects of his personal conduct deeply troubling, yet I considered him a remarkably gifted politician. I thought the Republican obsession with his impeachment was politically counterproductive. Why can I not extend the same intellectual courtesy to Trump? I was no fan of Biden's presidency, but I did not hate him or wish him harm. I want consistent standards of evidence and accountability, whether the person under scrutiny is someone I admire or someone I would never vote for. Political violence, including the attempted assassination of Trump, should horrify every one of us.

The partisan brain is remarkably adept at processing information in ways that protect our social identity (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). We swallow a narrative that makes our opponent look terrible and scrutinize every detail of a narrative that might redeem him. We become skilled at seeing hypocrisy everywhere except in the mirror. And then we congratulate ourselves on our objectivity. What a terribly exhausting way to live!

How Do We Heal Our Hurting Nation?

In treating individuals who struggle with emotional dysregulation and polarized relationships, we help them regulate their emotions, tolerate distress, confront the pain beneath their anger, and integrate contradictory realities. Marsha Linehan's dialectical behavior therapy (1993) teaches

precisely the capacity to hold seemingly opposing truths, while Kernberg's approach emphasizes integration. Surely there is something here for our hurting nation. We need to learn to tolerate disagreement without experiencing it as a threat to our very existence. We need to stop confusing emotional intensity with factual accuracy and moral certainty with moral maturity.

We are a nation at war with itself, a nation that risks devouring its own people. I do not want to see my left-leaning friends become more conservative. I want to see them remain my friends. I want my conservative friends to resist the temptation to practice their own version of repressive tolerance. I want us to recover our capacity to acknowledge the goodness and brokenness within the same human being, including the one staring back at us in the mirror.

As a Christian, I find Christ's command to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) rather inconvenient at times. But He did not provide me with an ideological exemption. Nor did He require me to surrender my convictions in order to love another human being. Love is not intellectual capitulation. It is the refusal to reduce another person to the things about them that trouble us. Liberation without love is hollow. Justice without compassion can become vengeance. And tolerance that demands ideological conformity is not particularly deserving of the name.

Which brings me back to Will. Two men who have never met in person, connected through an ordinary business arrangement, discovering friendship in the midst of profound loss. There is something considerably more beautiful in that relationship than in all the political outrage I have examined here. Surely we can learn to disagree courageously, think independently, and love generously. Surely we can do better than this.

And now, Will, my beloved brother, I think the book is finally finished. Then again, there's always tomorrow morning.

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