

January, 2025

...After the American Presidential Election, 2024:

Justice, Truth, and Emmet from "The Lego Movie"

"What is just? What is truth?"

I don't live there anymore. I left in 1998, among other reasons, because the right was going to impeach Bill Clinton and was beginning to destroy public education in California.

"Is it just to be subject to a king? Is it just to enslave other people?"

Then came Bush/Gore, 9/11, the Iraq War, 2008 financial crisis ("solved", with money to the banks not to the people), Obama (Healthcare), Hillary .... Then 6 January, 2021.

"True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice;"

Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Is it just that the president is a convicted felon? That he insults people, speaking as a public servant?"

I don't know the American people anymore. Nor do I know deeply their context where the internet, the attention economy, is the source of all, determining the complete relativity of values.

"Who is this, demanding justice? What is your identity and how authentic are you?"

I could be the one yelling the loudest, commanding your attention: "My hate is authentic, I'm not bullshitting like the others ..."

Or

I could be the one who maintains my demand for justice even though you call me "woke" or "politically correct" or something else ... diverting our attention. It's my example that matters, it's my demonstration that counts - that's what makes me authentic. The means equal the ends.

"Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Gandhi

“The real meditation is how you live your life.”

Buddha

I know people are afraid and confused. I know with the internet, where things change all the time, with frustration all the time, together with lingering fear over economic precarity, over the health of the planet, over fear of another pandemic, people lack trust. They are fearful. No trust. Hannah Arendt showed how Hitler exploited conditions like these and, contrary to disruptor’s philosophy, history, in this case, authenticates. Could that history sound quite useful now?

With trust gone, away too are its social products and all that’s left is “I didn’t get what I wanted” - a consumer attitude applied to everything.

Trust’s social products: science, education, community all become suspect. But isn’t community, citizenship different than being a consumer in an attention economy that uses publicity and entertainment and deception to capture you? Doesn’t a community require having perspective, discernment, and compromise - words totally debased today?

I think of “Mr. Rogers Neighborhood”. You come into his home while he changes his sweater, sings “It’s a marvelous day in the neighborhood...” and interacts with the delivery man, the policeman, the teacher and others, showing the peace that can be part of a community while you remain vivid and special within it.

“But it’s all about power, Foucault and Nietzsche are right, it’s all about power (and Susan Neiman in her book “Left is Not Woke” makes this point while critiquing “Wokism”).”

Of course it is about power - but isn’t there a more fundamental point: about how it is used? Isn’t there another debased word here too - wisdom?

“The earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

Chief Seattle

“Is it just to own, for oneself, or for the community? To own, for advantage, then calling it “necessary innovation” in order to escape the earth we trashed? Does community, ownership extend to the planet? To nature? Why do the Native Americans, the original people of our land not have an idea of ownership? Does community extend to other animals, other forms of life? To good health?”

With these questions, are you strong enough to withstand someone cutting you off with “Your attitude takes away jobs.” or “We’ll get to Mars to remake our world.... You want to stop progress, you’re just old-fashioned ...” Isn’t that what Europeans said when their utopian dreams brought them to America? Haven’t we seen how that turned out?

.....

“What is a just wage? Is an Amazon driver getting it in a delivery economy? A farmworker getting it when people need to eat? A human being picking up your garbage? A stockbroker when issuing an initial public offering (IPO)?”

I left from the college where I taught philosophy because of the two-tiered wage system for people doing the same thing - and the fights for justice, of which I participated, were practically zero because most of the teachers then, were happy to have some kind of work in their field. But then: “They came for X and I did nothing. Then they came for Y and I did nothing. Then they came for Z and I did nothing. When they came for me, there was no one left.”

I don’t know what is true anymore ....The video just sent me, the music I just heard -real or AI? The communication from my bank - true or fraud? I “think” the bird in front of me is real.

“Who determines truth and justice? A judge? A jury? A voter? A good king? God? A tv show?”

“What can I trust? Science? Faith? The other?”

“Is it just to believe in something beyond yourself? Another person? Their experiences? That the planet is round? Just, to believe in a nation? Was it just to fight other nations in World War II? And to end that war, right after physics got mystical, is it just for an American to ignore that we dropped the bomb first? Was it just that Navalny was imprisoned? Where is justice in the Russia/Ukraine war? Hamas/Israel?”

Richard Rorty, in his book “Achieving Our Country” (the title coming from a quote by James Baldwin), from 1998, seemed to predict the rise of the current president, and claims the Left has felt satisfied winning intellectual arguments (in the diversionary culture wars), diminishing sadism, while ignoring economic justice, as if all can’t be done at the same time. To him, too often the Left has seemed content to be a spectator and not an agent.

I remember distinctly in California, teachers, citizens, who did not fight for the public schools, who did not defend taxes as an equitable way to finance them but instead kowtowed to Silicon Valley for funding and accepted charter schools and vouchers. Short of money? Keep only those university departments that bring cash in... and philosophers, with their annoying questions, are the first to go since they bring in nothing. And look who has gained control over the schools, not the people any longer, via taxes for all, but capitalist endowments and

donations. Knowing this, who can be surprised with the society becoming more and more unequal?

Rorty also speaks about a need to find a rhetoric of commonality. What has common value? What makes the social fabric? The need for food? The need for help when you are sick? The need to get your kids to school safely? The need for good work?

Unions must be part of the social fabric. I taught at an international Catholic school and together, with all of those diverse, reluctant, scared teachers, we finally got a wage raise with the help of a union. Only together did we succeed.

Wasn't the idea behind "American" finding something in common with a diverse other, bridging differences between different peoples? E Pluribus Unum.

"Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Lincoln

It seems like community, common values, have been hijacked by ownership. It seems like "Our Town" and "Mr. Rogers Neighborhood" have been taken over by mafioso bullies, as if a delivery man like Mr. McFeeley, has been assaulted by Elon Musk and now he is running the post office and is charging whatever he wants (and, incidentally, who paid for most of the public educated brains of his companies? Us, through taxes, before).

How do you reach the other, building trust between people (the opposite of Margaret Thatcher saying there's no such thing as society, community, there's only selves)? Of course there is always something more than just individuals.

Which leads us to Emmet.

In a time when "identity" seems to fragment people away from community, what we all have in common, Emmet, from "The Lego Movie", seems the perfect balance between identity and community. After all, he's an "every-person" construction worker from a Lego set. But he makes a weird couch that saves everybody and he takes to heart that he is special (and makes the point that we are all special). His identity is also strong.

But he also has a communal task - to fight President Business (Lord Business) who wants to keep all the Legos uniform and stuck. He says, "President Business doesn't expect us to follow the instructions (rules of society?) because we are so diverse ... You are all so talented, imaginative, different than me, but you can't work together as a team. I'm just a construction worker (American, average guy?). But when I had a plan and we are all working together ... we can build a skyscraper, anything we choose... We could save the universe." He is able to unite all the different Lego sets in order to perform a common task, as a Team. And, surprisingly, in the end, he even has compassion for President Business, saying even he too is special.

Trying to reach the other.

“The universe, as we know it, is a joint product of the observer and the observed.”

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

And trying to see the other must include psychology: to try to understand the other; to see how one was harmed, hated, rejected... how they could have had a mean father ... how past elements form people, determine their motives, create their world view, their behavior ....

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus

Is this compassion?

“Are you a man or a woman?” Or is it just, to keep it a private matter, like abortion? What happened to privacy of religion? Between right wing decisions and the internet, is it just to have no privacy?

It seems there has always been a basic paradox at the heart of the USA: It's all about equality and it's all about the pursuit of happiness. And if that pursuit is taken to the extreme: of owning others, controlling others, too many riches over others, can't you ask the question: With all that money, is it just? Then equality becomes a tool to be invoked.

How to transcend this paradox? Only with compassion and wisdom.

“I believe much trouble and blood would be saved if we opened our hearts more.”

Chief Joseph

Jung to Freud: “Psychology is a cure through love.”

“God is love.”

Jesus

Trust in happiness. Trust in equality. Understand both with compassion.

As a philosopher, I've witnessed 50 years of a lot of these questions being ignored, due to a mentality of selfishness (led by Thatcher and Reagan). Is this type of questioning going to be forbidden now? Would that be just?

“It's better to die having fought for justice than to live and stay on the sidelines and to watch injustice have its way without a challenge.”

William Barber II

If there is a point to this essay it is to ask questions, to try to understand ... and then to act. The answers are not blowing in the wind, they are here and now. It is time to act, to fight injustice.

“Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“With malice toward none, with charity towards all ...”

Lincoln

“Love is light, that enlightens those who give and receive it. Love is gravity because it makes some people feel attracted to others. Love is power because it multiplies the best we have and allows humanity not to be extinguished in their blind selfishness.”

Albert Einstein

“One world, one heart ... Let’s get together and feel alright.”

Bob Marley

Ronald Gerard Smith