

PROPHETS OF POSSIBILITY

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The essayist Maria Popova, in a blog post on Thursday, recalls Nobel prize-winning writer Toni Morrison's response to the reelection of George W. Bush in 2004. In retrospect, Morrison's response seems even more relevant today than it was then.

Writing in 2004, Morrison says, "This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."

She continues, "I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge — even wisdom. Like art."

The 19th century English novelist Anthony Trollope is one of the artists who went to work in a time of malevolence and chaos. His insights seem purpose-built for times like these.

When Trollope returned to London in 1872 after being in Australia for a year and a half, he was indignant at what he saw. Commercial interests ruled the capital of the British Empire, fueled by reckless financial speculation and careless credit. People were obsessed with social standing. Relationships were only a means of climbing the ladder. In Trollope's view, this was an altogether unseemly specter.

In response, Trollope wrote a satirical novel titled *The Way We Live Now*. At more than 1,000 pages, it's the longest of his 40-plus novels and arguably the most derisive. In his autobiography, Trollope explains why he wrote the novel. He says:

A certain class of dishonesty, dishonesty magnificent in its proportions, and climbing into high places, has become at the same time so rampant and so splendid that there seems to be reason for fearing that men and women will be taught to feel that dishonesty, if it can become splendid, will cease to be abominable. If dishonesty can live in a gorgeous palace with pictures on all its walls, and gems in all its cupboards, with marble and ivory in all its corners, and can give [epicurean] dinners, and get into Parliament, and deal in millions, then dishonesty is not disgraceful, and the man dishonest after such a fashion is not a low scoundrel. Instigated, I say, by some such reflections as these, I sat down in my new house to write *The Way We Live Now*.

While some of the moneyed scoundrels in Trollope's tale eventually get their comeuppance, the story of London remained a tale of two cities, as Charles Dickens had described it a decade or so earlier. Of course, Trollope had his own shortcomings. His unseemly anti-Semitism undercuts the moral authority he wields against the duplicity of his day.

Even so, the travesties of his day remind us of the travesties of our own. Here in the US, we too have seen dishonesty of magnificent proportions climb into high places. As a result, we too have seen dishonesty cease to be abominable or disgraceful, at least to many Americans.

I was reminded of Trollope's novel by a column published in the Washington Post last January by Karen Tumulty, the associate editor of the newspaper. It's part of a series in which Washington Post opinion writers described the biggest issues on their beats for 2024. For her part, Tumulty focused on the widespread use of the statement, "This is not who we are."

She points out that we have heard these words countless times over the past decade. Most notably, we heard them from Joe Biden in response to Trump's harshest policies at the US-Mexican border and from Biden after the deadly 2017 white-supremacist march in Charlottesville. We heard them from Republicans who refused to stand up against the MAGA movement and then tried to distance themselves from it. We heard them from Kevin McCarthy in the wake of the attack by Trump supporters on the US capital on January 6, 2021, when McCarthy said, "This is not what our country should look like. This is not who we are."

Tumulty concludes her column by saying, "If Americans, knowing everything they now know about him, reelect Trump — or come close to doing so, it will be time for us all to quit lying to ourselves. This is who we are."

In the aftermath of Tuesday's election, we now know: this is who we are. In my sermon last Sunday, I described my hope that the great undoing project in the United States — in the apt description of Martin Wolf of the Financial Times — would itself become undone. This did not happen.

Even if the election had turned out differently, however, we would still have a deeply and bitterly divided nation. Seventy-five percent of the industrial working class jobs in the US have disappeared over the past half-century or so, and many of those who have been left behind economically are fearful that the influx of immigrants will marginalize them even further. They are anxious and angry, and they have been crying out for someone to take their plight seriously. Donald Trump said he would, and they believed him.

Whether or not a second Trump presidency will solve any of our nation's problems isn't my concern this morning. For my part, I'm not holding my breath. I fully expect many of our nation's problems to get significantly worse in the months and years ahead. My concern this morning has to do with All Souls — how we understand ourselves and our role in these challenging times.

All Souls was founded in 1819 in the wake of a widely-disseminated sermon by Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, who argued that the Bible had to be interpreted in light of reason and that Jesus was a great prophet and teacher, but not the son of God. The only document more widely circulated in the pre-Civil War era than Channing's sermon was a pamphlet published in January of 1776 by Thomas Paine, who also championed Enlightenment thinking. The pamphlet, titled "Common Sense," advocated independence from Great Britain for the 13 American Colonies. Opponents of independence immediately denounced Paine and his wildly-popular pamphlet, warning that without the monarchy, America would "degenerate into democracy."

In December of 1776, in an effort to bolster the courage of the fledgling revolution, Paine published the first in a series of pamphlets titled "The Crisis," which began: "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value."

Because of the outsized political power now wielded by opponents of equal freedom and equal dignity, these are indeed the times that try our souls. When Paine uses the word "try," he doesn't mean that this is a time to try out our souls, as though we are trying on a new pair of sneakers. He means trying our souls as in putting them on trial, as though a jury is watching to see how we will respond and what we will do. If our words and actions in coming days and weeks were put to the test in this way, would we be judged worthy? Or would we be summer soldiers and sunshine patriots, who shrink from service because the going has gotten painfully difficult?

Make no mistake: in terms of the values we cherish and the goals we pursue as a congregation, the going has gotten difficult. The going wasn't easy before last Tuesday, but it's gotten much more difficult now. We will need to double down on our strength and resilience as individuals and as an institution in order to face the challenges ahead.

The good news is that religious institutions were purpose built for times like these. Instead of obsessing about the day-to-day, week-to-week, and even year-to-year vicissitudes of life, religious communities focus on the long arc of the universe. We work, in the famous phrase of the 19th century Unitarian minister and social reformer Theodore Parker, to bend the long arc of the universe toward justice.

In the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' book *The Dignity of Difference*, which is subtitled, *How to Avoid the Collapse of Civilization*, he writes:

Economic superpowers, seemingly invincible in their time, have a relatively short life-span: Venice in the sixteenth century, the Netherlands in the seventeenth, France in the eighteenth, Britain in the nineteenth and the United States in the twentieth. The great religions, by contrast, survive.

Islam is 1,500 years old, Christianity 2,000 and Judaism 4,000... They remind us that civilizations survive not by strength but by how they respond to the weak; not by wealth but by the care they show for the poor; not by power but by their concern for the powerless. The ironic yet utterly humane lesson of history is that what renders a culture invulnerable is the compassion it shows to the vulnerable. The ultimate value we should be concerned to maximize is human dignity — the dignity of all human beings, equally, as children of the creative, redeeming God.

In these trying times, our role as a religious community is to be the conscience of our nation. We bear witness to our nation's moral aspirations and pass judgment upon our nation's moral failures. We protest against the world that is, in the name of the world that ought to be.

The early Christian writer St. Jerome once described conscience as an eagle. I imagine the eagle soaring high above the public square. From that vantage point, an eagle sees the big picture — ends more than means, overall purposes more than specific plans. The role of the religious community is to help guide our nation in the right direction and help ensure that we're all moving together.

From my perspective, as we celebrate today our 205th anniversary as a congregation, All Souls is well-equipped for this lofty purpose. We have demonstrated our ability to confront difficult challenges with courage and perseverance. We know what it takes to survive and even thrive as a congregation, and we know what it will take for our nation to survive and even thrive. On the long journey toward equal freedom and equal dignity for everyone, we are prophets of possibility.

Let me close by acknowledging that the days and weeks and years ahead will be a battle — a battle for the soul of our nation. This battle will take all the energy and focus and determination we can muster — especially those of us who realize we are not fighting for only half of our nation's citizens, but for everyone. I implore you to fight the good fight.

Along the way, stay hopeful. Remember that hope is not predicated on the probability of change but on the possibility of change. In this sense, hope is woven into the very nature of the universe. As the future unfolds, something is always possible beyond what is present.

Also, remember to embody the values we champion — freedom, equality, and justice. Above all, always seek to maximize human dignity. Our nation will only be great to the extent that its citizens exemplify the good. Our mission and our calling, as people of faith and as citizens of this great nation, is to serve as the vanguard of our nation at its best.