

Realizing the Principles of American Democracy

The Hard Heroic Journey from Independence to Interdependence

“Democracy is the **worst** form of government”, said Winston Churchill, in a speech to the House of Commons in 1947, two years after the end of World War II. “Democracy is the **worst** form of government [Winston said] except for those other forms.” I think he is right. Democracies are messy, prone to internal strife and slow to act. Yet, despite a democracy’s flaws, George Marshall, the great American leader during World War II, believed that once a democracy gets going it can become an unrestrainable, unstoppable force for the Good.

For the billions of common, salt-of-the-earth people throughout the world, democracy holds a universal appeal. Why is this the case? Is it the ability to choose one’s leaders through elections that is so appealing? Is it the rule of law (Instead of the law of those who rule)? Is it the idea of being a citizen rather than a subject? Is it the protection of individual rights and liberties? It is all of these, and possibly much, much more.

America’s liberal democracy (combining majority rule with minority protection) initiated 250 years ago on this continent has had a powerful, magnetic drawing power for the world’s proletariat. From its founding America has been seen as a country of possibilities, a land of opportunity, a place of hope and dreams, where one could apply one’s skills and talents and get ahead. But I believe, there has always been something more at work behind the American Dream.

Many an immigrant arriving by boat in New York harbor wept at their first sighting of the Statue of Liberty with their hearts beating to the poetic words written by Emma Lazarus and chiseled into the granite pedestal of Lady Liberty:

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;*

*Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame...*

*Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand...*

*Glow's world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.*

*Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,*

*Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,*

*Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

This 'golden door', I argue, is what is referred to in the Second Aim of the Institute of World Culture as the "universal vision behind the American Dream"?

Fundamentally, I believe the American Dream is the desire, the yearning, the longing, to be guided and ruled from within rather than from without. To be self-governed, self-ruled, self-directed. This is the essence of freedom, it **is** the power of choice, it is to be a self-determining agent in the world. It is the path of self-transcendence as a person's idea of 'The Good' deepens and expands.

It is this idea of human self-evolution that the Institute of World Culture headlines in its website with a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay Circles:

*The life of man is a self-evolving circle,
which, from a ring imperceptibly small,
rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles,
and that without end.*

A self-evolving human being is one who is ever engaged in an inner revolution in consciousness of remaking themselves. Revolutions are typically thought of in a collective external sense, yet Emerson argues that fundamentally:

Every revolution was first a thought in one man's mind.

Professor Iyer in his wonderful book Parapolitics speaks of this fundamental revolution as being rooted in self-awareness. As he writes in the chapter 'The Fundamental Revolution: From Elitism to Equality':

This revolution alters man's inner response to external events and is grounded in his very conception of himself. It depends for its force and direction on the nature, range and depth of his self-consciousness. It is furthered whenever a man comes to see himself as a creator rather than a creature, as an agent not as a victim, as a being necessarily involved in the act of defining himself through self-determination, self-expression, self-fulfillment to any degree, and self-actualization in whatever form.

Professor Iyer goes on to point to three historical figures as embodiments of this fundamental revolution: The Buddha who challenged the caste structure of Hinduism with a revolution of self-enlightenment; Socrates who challenged the Sophists and Athenian Assembly with a revolution of self-correction; and Christ who challenged the Pharisees and Romans with a revolution of self-surrender.

Fundamental revolutions are not simply about exchanging one source of power for another. Fundamental revolutions begin as inner revolutions in self-consciousness around a new vision or ideal of how we human beings should live our lives.

Initially the ideational force behind the American Revolution was the longing for Liberty. As the colonists demanded a voice in their own affairs (with the cry of "No taxation without representation") the King bolstered by the Parliament of England responded with ever increasing oppression--- the Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend Act of 1767, the Tea Act of 1773.

Finally, when relations between Britain and the colonies were stretched to the absolute limit, Tom Paine (invited to the colonies from England by Benjamin Franklin) burst onto the American stage with his pamphlet Common Sense. Published in January 1776, Common Sense ignited America's outer Revolution which six months' later, on July the 4th, became irreversible. "A government of our own is our natural right", Paine demanded. "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind," he declared. And, in conclusion, Paine wrote:

On these grounds I rest the matter...Wherefore, instead of gazing at each other with suspicious or doubtful curiosity; let each of us, hold out to his neighbour the hearty hand of friendship, and unite in drawing a line, which, like an act of oblivion shall bury in forgetfulness every former dissension. Let the names of Whig and Tory be extinct; and let none other be heard among us, than those of a good citizen, an open and resolute friend, and a virtuous supporter of the rights of mankind and of the FREE AND INDEPENDANT STATES OF AMERICA.

Thomas Jefferson, one of Tom Paine's closest friends, said of his writing that "No writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style, in perspicuity [which means clarity] of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language."

Finally, with the issuance of the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson and strongly assisted by Tom Paine, AMERICA, ("conceived in Liberty" as Abraham Lincoln states in the Gettysburg Address) declared its complete separation from Britain, leading to the bloody Revolutionary War with its tremendous heroism and self-sacrifice.

At the beginning of the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence there are written thirteen pithy words which sounded the keynote and set the foundation stone for this country of ours. These resonating words are:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

It is Benjamin Franklin who lined out Jefferson's phrase "sacred and undeniable" and replaced it with the single word "self-evident" which shifts

the emphasis of this sentence from one of faith to one of reason. Human equality, like human brotherhood, is both an ideal to be striven for, but also, a fact in nature that can be realized by any human being's power of reasoning. To echo a statement of Claude de Saint Martin that Professor Iyer was fond of quoting,

The ideal is only Truth at a distance.

With this thirteen-word phrase embedded in the Declaration of Independence, America became the first democracy ever to be founded on an ideal, a universal principle, or as Abraham Lincoln put it in the Gettysburg Address:

dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

The founding of the United States of America was truly a New Order of the Ages—a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*.

All revolutions are an attempt to bring forth a new order of things--A new turning, a new revolving. If this turning is also an evolving, then it necessitates an upward spiraling. Fundamental revolutions involve a breaking down of an old order and a building up of a new order. There is a deconstructive phase, that is often violent and destructive, and a constructive phase where thought-forms, relationships and systems are reconceived, realigned and reestablished. This can easily be seen with the arc of the American Revolution which began gradually with more open rebellions, transitioning into full on war and finally with the destructive phase's cessation, the writing of our Constitution and the creation of the United States of America.

As an historical aside, as all the state delegates began to sign the Constitution into the law of the land, Benjamin Franklin commented that he had often wondered whether the painted sun on the back of the elevated chair that the mostly silent George Washington presided in was a rising or setting sun. As he confided to another delegate, "it is with great happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting sun". This expression of uncharacteristic optimism by the pragmatic Franklin came with a cautionary warning only moments later. As Franklin descended the steps of

Independence Hall, Elizabeth Willing Powel called up to him, "Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" Franklin's famous response was, "A republic, if you can keep it." To which, Ms. Powel asked, "And why not keep it?" To which Franklin replied (thinking of a democracy's vulnerability to manipulation by corrupt demagogues) "Because the people, on tasting the dish, are always disposed to eat more of it than does them good."

Unfortunately, America was not just founded on an aspirational ideal. It was founded also on a blatant contradiction to that ideal. **SLAVERY.**

As Thomas Jefferson once said, "We have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go".

Four score plus years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence the collective conscience of Americans could no longer keep a grip on this wolf of hypocrisy. Our country broke apart immediately after Abraham Lincoln was elected president when the southern states began seceding from the Union. This triggered the Civil War (America's Second Revolution) leading to America's Second Founding and the post-war period of Reconstruction with the inclusion of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution abolishing the institution of slavery.

While America's First Revolution was essentially about achieving Liberty, America's Second Revolution was ultimately a striving for Equality. As Abraham Lincoln put it in the Gettysburg Address, creating a nation that, in practice, **is** "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal".

So, if America's First Revolution rotated around an affirmation of Independence and Liberty, and America's Second Revolution revolved on an affirmation of human Equality, are we as Americans currently experiencing the deconstruction phase of a Third Revolution as we painfully awaken to the reality and necessity of human solidarity and interdependence?

America's Founders would be aghast at the state of our democracy today. They saw the greatest threat to American Democracy as never due to external forces. George Washington warned in his famous Farewell

Address that intense political factionalism and partisanship could lead to cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men seizing power and destroying the republic.

Likewise, Abraham Lincoln in his famous Lyceum speech (delivered 22 years before he became president) warned that Americans may very well one day become disillusioned with their government, and, out of desperation turn to "an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon." As he declared:

At what point is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reaches us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time or die by suicide.

As John Adams, our second president warned:

We have no Government armed with Power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality. Avarice, Ambition and Revenge would break the strongest Cords of our Constitution as a Whale goes through a net.

Perhaps it was Alexander Hamilton (of modern musical fame) who saw this danger to our democracy most clearly and vividly. As he prophesized:

When a man unprincipled in private life desperate in his fortune, bold in his temper...despotic in his ordinary demeanour, known to have scoffed in private at the principles of liberty, when such a man is seen to mount the hobby horse of popularity, to join in the cry of danger to liberty, to take every opportunity of embarrassing the General Government and bringing it under suspicion, to flatter and fall in with all the nonsense of the zealots of the day; It may justly be suspected that his object is to throw things into confusion that he may 'ride the storm and direct the whirlwind'.

A contemporary writer could not have more clearly described our current president and his rise to power. It is almost beyond comprehension that our federal government would unleash violent, masked paramilitary marauders on American cities with unrestrained license to murder in cold blood completely innocent citizens like Renee Good and Alex Pretti. And

then have the audacity to absolve these murderers while attempting to gaslight us into not believing what we have seen with our own eyes from multiple—overlapping--first-hand videos.

Are we now living in a dystopian, Orwellian America where bold-faced lies have become our government's official stated "truths". All of us here today, and most everyone in our country, knows we have traveled quite a way on a very dangerous road which could lead to the complete collapse of our democracy. Our constitutional structure of separation of powers is in shatters. A supine Congress supplicates to the President. The Supreme Court is in his back pocket. And for the most part the fourth branch of our democracy, "We the People" have remained docile, minding our own business. But preserving and protecting our democracy is every citizen's business. As Louis Brandeis once said,

The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of Citizen.

If we are indeed squarely in the deconstructive phase of America's Third Revolution, what do we as Citizens of this beautiful country do? How do we keep our heads, as Robert Frost wrote, when all about us are losing theirs?

First, I would say, as painful as it is we must bear witness to the attacks that are breaking away the foundation stones of our democracy. We need to face and penetrate with unflinching eyes the ugliness, the selfishness, the anti-democratic evils currently at work.

The most corrupting aspect of power is the absolute unwillingness to relinquish it. Our current president would like nothing more than to dispense with our democracy. Right now, this administration is doing everything it can to prevent free and fair elections this coming November. So, very first we can't, just out of sadness and disillusionment, turn our gaze or run away. We need to bear witness. The ache, the sorrow, the suffering we feel in our hearts for our struggling democracy is our conscience Awakening to Interdependence.

Second, we need to realize that we are not the resistance, as Michelle Alexander reminds us. We are the river Awakening to Interdependence. Those consumed with fear and hatred who want to pit us against each other, American against American, to divide and separate us with their racism, their misanthropy, their misogyny, their xenophobia, their homophobia, their so-called “Christian” nationalism—they are the resistance. The frostbit Minnesotans in their hand-knitted, pointy red hats blowing their plastic whistles while phone-videoing the viciousness of this federal government do not call themselves ‘protestors’ or ‘resistors’. They call themselves PROTECTORS. And they are not just protecting those that our federal government wants to disenfranchise. They are grass-roots heroes, attempting, with every fiber of their being, and in many cases putting their very lives on the line, to PRESERVE AND PROTECT our Democracy.

What Professor Iyer loved about America and Americans in general, is our enthusiastic, fearless ability to put our founding ideals, our longings for excellence, our inventive ideas into practice. In essence, isn’t this what it means to be ‘Woke’? To take high ideals out of the realm of the abstract and creatively embody and instantiate them in the arena of practice. More than anything on the physical plane, America’s greatest resource has always been our lofty ideals and fresh ideas. Our greatest treasure is not to be found in Fort Knox. It is our innovative multi-cultural people. Have Americans so easily forgotten that ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ are the silk threads woven into the tapestry of our democracy? As a blending melting pot of humanity shouldn’t we be celebrating our diversity? Are we to close the golden door to the American Dream and no longer be the land of equal opportunity? Is America no longer to embrace, with arms of welcoming inclusion, all the people who long to legally live here? Instead of D.E.I. (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) are we to become a country of U.I.E (Uniformity, Injustice and Exclusion)? Where’s the joy in that? Now is not a time to be treading water. Second, then, lest we succumb to the heat of all this hateful rhetoric, we need to plunge into that river which leads towards human interdependence--human fellowship--human brotherhood--human solidarity.

I don’t think any of you brave souls who chose to come to this meeting on democracy would deny that things look pretty grim for America.

Professor Iyer often warned that in the very near future there may not even be a USA. And yet he also said that things are never going so well as when they appear to be going so bad. If we are indeed in the early disruptive phases of America's Third Revolution, we may have reached that point in time where the internal enemies of American Democracy have fully exposed themselves and their despotic intentions to the gradually awakening, but still disoriented, eyes of the general population.

Yes, as Tom Paine wrote, "These are the times that try men's souls". And yet, over and over again, in times of great crisis, the heroes with thousands of faces in this epic story of America (those with ardent love, with Eros, for America's ideals)---the founders and early patriots in the 1770's--the abolitionists and unionists in 1860's--the American suffragettes in the early 1900's--the civil rights marchers in the 60's, courageously brought their vision of a better, fairer more interdependent America into life's arenas of strife, standing up to oppressive authority and challenging the constricting status quo.

From Nathan Hale whose last words 250 years ago before a firing squad were, "I regret that I have but one life to give to my country"; to John Brown whose last words on the gallows 167 years ago were, "What a beautiful country"; to Rosa Parks who was kicked off a bus and arrested, 71 years ago for simply saying, "No"; to Martin Luther King Jr. who said in his last sermon the night before he was assassinated, "I have been to the mountaintop...and I have seen the Promised Land", to Renee Good who one month ago forgave the brutality of an ICE agent with her final words, "I'm not mad at you dude"---we all need to find the courage to let the inner voice of our higher conscience speak through us.

So, third, we must see that the long, hard heroic path from Independence to Interdependence begins ever anew with small but deliberate steps taken by each of us. As Edmund Burke once said:

Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.

Awakening to Interdependence is not somebody else's project. It is up to each of us to set our eyes forward and renew the universal vision behind

the American Dream. For us members of the Institute of World Culture this work might begin by more deeply embodying the aims of the Institute. If you might notice every one of these 10 aims begins with an active infinitive verb—To explore, To renew, To honour, To enhance, To deepen, To promote, To investigate, To examine, and To assist. By striving to actively embody these potent aims we find ourselves increasingly becoming that Emersonian self-evolving circle with radiating lines of interconnectedness extending out to all. In other words, each of us their own moral community make. It's up to each of us to meld what Professor Iyer called 'A Community of Strangers' into 'The Society of the Future'?

In conclusion, let's take a few minutes and attempt to sketch a few outlines of America's future as a Republic of Conscience, or as Professor Iyer often spoke, a *Civitas Humana* or **City of Man**.

In his classes at UCSB, Professor Iyer often spoke of this mysterious thing he called 'the dialectic'. In reflecting on how Professor Iyer used the term, I think fundamental revolutions have a lot to do with inter-weaving two dialectical processes—an inner vertical dialectic of a person's relationship to themselves, and an outer horizontal dialectic of an individual's relationship to the whole. The inner dialectic is one of self-transformation and self-transcendence; the outer dialectic is one of self-identification and self-expansion.

If the United States weathers the destructive deconstruction phase of this Third Revolution, I believe it will be the interplay of these two dialectics, combining individual moral growth with regenerated social and political structures, that will be necessary for the building of a more perfect Union based on a shared universal vision rooted in the American Dream.

In Professor Tepfer's talk one month ago at the Institute of World Culture on 'Awakening to Interdependence' he emphasized the importance of TRUST. Trust, I believe, will be the alchemical elixir needed for this rebuilding to occur. Trust begins as self-trust. As Emerson said in his essay Self-Reliance:

Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to that iron-string.

It has been said that if human beings truly trusted that their neighbor meant them no harm, three-quarters of the world's violence would immediately come to an end. So, first and foremost, this fundamental revolution of Awakening to Interdependence has to do with forging relationships of unconditional trust.

Secondly, we need to find ways to switch from a psychology of scarcity to a psychology of abundance. The more we revel in the realms of potential and possibility--the more we begin to see that America's greatest resource is its driving ideals and its people with their multi-cultural blend of creative perspectives and ideas. Removing obstacles to every individual's pursuit of happiness is the best way for America to maintain itself as a dynamic thriving democracy. This could be assisted by what Professor Iyer recommends in the 'Unfinished Dream' chapter in Parapolitics which is the GAI (Guaranteed Annual Income) or as Andrew Yang calls it, the UBI or Universal Basic Income. Having this reliable foundation income will become increasingly necessary as large sectors of our economy get temporarily displaced or altogether replaced by Artificial Intelligence.

Third, school curriculums need to be revamped to emphasize moral education or character building, blending the heart and the hands with the head. As Thoreau said, "How can you expect a harvest of thought without a seedtime of character." For our democracy not to become a sham it depends on its participants sharing common basic moral values like the 'Golden Rule' or the virtues of tolerance and civility that Professor Iyer writes of in the fourth chapter of Parapolitics. America's Founders all believed that a well-educated citizenry, which encourages the development of the classic virtues, was vital to the healthy functioning of our democracy. George Washington emphasized the "common education" of the youth, Thomas Jefferson considered the universal "diffusion of knowledge" as essential to maintaining freedom, and James Madison predicted that without a well-informed and educated populus our democracy would end as a "Farce or a Tragedy".

At the conclusion of America's Second Revolution, Congress seized the opportunity to abolish slavery with the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. If indeed we are at the outset of America's Third

Revolution perhaps upon its conclusion, we will have a fresh opportunity to rewrite some of our Constitution, incorporating the Ideal of Interdependence.

Here are just a few ideas:

Our new Bill of Rights could eliminate homelessness with a right to housing and make all types of health care (including compassionate progressive mental health and drug addiction services) universal and easily accessible.

This new Bill of Rights could include, as Gandhi suggested, a Bill of Duties which for one could require every young adult to enlist for two years in a branch of their choosing (not of the military) but of an American Service Corps, protecting the environment, working on community projects, helping new immigrants settle, for example.

This Bill of Duties could also include a Duty Tax on an individual's or corporate business' excessive net worth to rein in wealth concentration that has aggregated in the hands of a small coterie of elites.

The Second Amendment could be modernized to eliminate all automatic weapons, which I'm sure the Founders would heartily approve.

The Constitution's Third Article regarding the Judiciary could put a two-decade term limit on federal judgeships, especially the Supreme Court.

The Constitution's First and Second Articles could put a wealth cap on all federally elected officials and include stronger enforcement requirements for the already established 'Code of Ethics for Government Service'.

The electoral college with all its gerrymandering nonsense could simply be eradicated with direct popular or rank choice voting.

Our judicial system could be reoriented towards restorative justice encouraging rehabilitation and reintegration, like Finland's, rather than simply meting out retributive punishment.

Living at a time of such political strife could certainly be seen as living in the worst of times. But if we recall how Charles Dickens begins his novel A Tale of Two Cities, from a certain detached higher perspective, it could also be seen as the best of times. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, who lived through the Civil War and America's Second Revolution, says In The American Scholar:

If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era?

So let me conclude these musings on the past formulations, our current state and some future possibilities for our country's version of democracy by quoting (with a few adaptations) these powerful and prescient words by John Ruskin:

Catastrophe will come to [America's democracy]; or worse than catastrophe, slow mouldering and withering into [Autocracy]. But if we can fix some conception of a true human state of life to be striven for—life, good, for all men, as for ourselves; if we can determine some honest and simple order of existence; following those trodden ways of wisdom, which are pleasantness, and seeking her quiet and withdrawn paths, which are peace;--then, and so sanctifying wealth into 'common-wealth', all your art, your literature, your daily labours, your domestic affection, and citizen's duty, will join and increase into one magnificent harmony. You will know then how to build, well enough; you will build with stone well, but with flesh better; temples not made with hands but riveted of hearts; and that kind of marble, crimson-veiled, is indeed eternal.

Yes Winston, "democracy is the worst form of government except for [all] those other forms"!