

The Strength of Broken Dreams

As the COVID-19 ravishes the United States, a number of interesting articles are appearing. These articles consider the COVID-19 as the “pivot moment” of change that the United States sorely needs. Maybe so, or maybe not. We will see. In any event these articles are interesting, introspective, and poignant. Here is one such article.

This article is titled “The Strength of Broken Dreams” by Matthew J. Peterson and was written on 1APR20, when the COVID-19 just started to turn the United States upside down. It was edited to fit this venue and all credit to the authors.

The Strength of Broken Dreams

“The American Dream” is dead, but America remains.

In the 1960s the American Dream spread quickly through the American mind.

At its best it meant that Americans could fulfill the moderate, but deeply rooted, desire most people have to work, own a home, and raise a family on the income earned by one parent.

At its worst, it was not attached to much more than this—a generic promise of economic and social mobility. The phrase was always ridiculed by intellectuals and activists as much as it was used positively. This is America, after all.

It was always amorphous. But for some time now, the American Dream has been dead, both as concept and as reality. In the coming months, regardless of exactly how long it lasts, millions will be forced to further reevaluate their dreams as the virus takes its toll on our bodies, our economy, and our way of life.

American Dreams

Dreams slip into air outside the grasp of mind the more fully we try to hold onto them. Is their unraveling noble or unsavory? Is their letting go freedom—or slavery?

Today we hold that two parents must work for ideological as well as practical reasons. We're told the family itself is oppressive. Certainly it is harder for many people to start and raise one, as both lived experience and data show. The suburbs are castigated as evil. Certainly it is now harder in many regions to afford a home in one. The idea of working for the same employer for years and "settling down" was long unthinkable to Millennials, and the "gig economy" celebrated, up until recently.

It made sense to tell people looking for a decent way of life to move to southern California in the 1950s and '60s. They could buy a home, and their children could go to college and work to become doctors or lawyers. Would you advise an young, aspirational family to move to southern California now, in 2020?

But from the end of World War II to the present day, we have not stopped dreaming. We dreamed many dreams. The American Dream became an increasingly feverish kaleidoscope of dreams, manipulated by many mad masters, both within and without ourselves. Our own desires, as well as our ruling classes, increasingly untethered our dreams from reality. First whimsical and sentimental, Disney's childhood; then Dionysian, like 70s teenage rock; then hardening into habitual vices pretending to be respectable, responsible adulthood; culminating in denial, dysfunction, and vicious delusions.

These dreams did not ultimately better us or draw us out of ourselves. They did not call us to higher purpose or action. Nor did they finally cause us to go wild, become revolutionary or reactionary, violent, or unrestful.

Instead they acted like cultural ketamine, lulling us into dissociative sleep. In our near past, many have lived in a steady twilight of manicured dreams and illusions, a coma stabilized and maintained by the anaesthetic drip of electronic media, nourished only by the feeding tube of petty consumption. These dreams are coming to an end.

As my friend and colleague James Poulos has frequently suggested over the last few years, the rise of digital technology—combined with impoverished, if not dystopian, elite “ethics” and “politics”—have interrupted our dreams and left us disenchanted with the televisual era. We are now collectively waking up to the reality around us: our doddering leaders long past retirement age, our corrupted institutions, our paltry or absurdist political ideologies, our weakened bodies and souls, and, for many, a deep unhappiness and dissatisfaction with present circumstances.

This is the real reason for the rise in deaths of despair despite a historically high level of material prosperity—which is rendered meaningless in context. The first to wake up were those affected most by economic realities, haunted as they were by the dawning perception that no way out, no path forward, no respectable, honored, or fulfilling way of life was available to them. What, in our contested landscape, *is* the American way of life *now*?

Our dreams were already dissipating. The coming of the virus has perhaps hastened their demise, widening the demographic range of those waking up in the valley of the real. Trust in our political, cultural, and economic system and its leaders was already waning. Regardless of how long the virus lasts, how many people are now being forced to rethink their education, their status, their work, and the very course of their lives?

The experience of the changes that have only just begun will have deep and personal effects on each of us. Our dreams are unraveling, and we cannot hold onto them.

The Death of Celebrity

Dreams unmasked and untethered, threads unbound.

Celebrity killed people—but the crowd was entertained.

Celebrity routinely, ritualistically killed people, but the crowds that created and sustained them throughout their lives were also entertained by their deaths. For the crowd which they became obliged to serve, a “tragic” death was all part of the final act, drenched in maudlin sentimentality--catharsis on the cheap.

One could never interrupt the show to speak at length of the likely actual causes of their deaths, of their inner wretchedness and pain--whatever propelled them to seek refuge in addictive pleasures. Whatever really haunted them. Whoever managed and directed their lives. Whatever kept them from healing and strengthening themselves and living accountable lives.

“No. Money and fame are good and make you and us, your fans, happy. Let us keep our fantasies,” said the plaintive crowd. “You can’t take them from us. They are ours. They do not condemn us like the heroes of old. They are our living puppets. Our living symbols. And they must die so we can live these fantasies. They must die so we can live in dreams.”

More proximately, the celebrities were the puppets of those who controlled our dreams. When the mechanism of dream creation fails, in part because it has become readily observable, all involved are revealed for what they are. And we no longer care about them. Celebrities singing “Imagine” are no longer likeable, with or without their makeup. They no longer dazzle, and we’d rather see those to whom we have some real connection on our screens. We’d rather see our family and friends than watch these dull strangers off stage without their masks on.

The #metooed men behind the curtains that have lately lifted are uninteresting to us. They are going into retirement as quickly as they can. The galaxy of interwoven mythologies they created has lost its luster, no longer appealing to our inner feelings. Nostalgia, already made uncomfortable by the totalizing “woke” politicization of our media companies, now dwindles as the future becomes more pressing on the present than the mem-

ories of childish comforts past.

For the educated classes, the same logic applies to the “news” and what passes for analysis, punditry, and intellectual notoriety. The desire for fame in the 20th century, when the screen was “silver” and the carpets ran red, boiled over briefly onto social media before the reality of digital life devalued all punditry, talking heads, and even the glamour of entertainment itself.

It was always a strange and slavish notion: why would multiple generations of millions of children desire such a thing—to be an actor or musician strutting about the stage, often paid as a part-time employee, “project” by “project”, show by show, by producers and owners who are actually in charge? One need not be a Socrates nor a Plato to see this as nothing other than a sign of great sickness, of a society in the throes of worsening political disease.

Yet we thought it could go on forever, until it didn't.

Dissociative Slumber

Dreams deferred? Dreams opaque and vanishing in the nude, once covered in robes that now fall silently like snow to ground.

To live the unexamined life is to be lost to yourself: to be cut off from

outside light and air, cultivating an empty darkness within that eventually suffocates even the inner light by which you see yourself, snuffing out your very person. It is a long and difficult journey both to get to such a place, and to journey back—although jolting experiences can hasten the process in both directions. The streaming flood of borrowed dreams, which could not be countered by our broken families and decrepit educational system, made it possible for masses of people in our lifetimes to approach it.

We spent hours daily looking into screens pretending to substitute for reality. They gave us shared mass dreams and epistemologies by which we saw ourselves and the world at large. As time went on, the televisual medium became less *reflective* of us as a people and more *directive*, seeking to influence our way of life in an ever deeper, ever “woker” manner. At the same time, digital technology fractured the shared nature of those dreams and their corresponding epistemologies, allowing for multiple “channels,” voices, and ways of seeing the world that undercut mass control.

The temptation of all human beings in slipstreams of relative peace at home is to go to sleep—to pretend that the vivid drama of good and evil is not playing out within our hearts and minds and across the globe every day. To pretend that one can simply absolve oneself from the pursuit of justice. To pretend that one’s own society or social clan is incorrupt. To laugh off the deepest questions and airily dismiss earnest answers, as if “science” or some “expert” out there has dissected and explained it all. To lazily believe and indulge in distractive fictions and comforting technocratic myths about your world.

Such matters are extraordinarily difficult, after all. That’s what makes individual virtues and political life noble.

But this is also what makes giving up altogether so tempting. If all institutions are perfectly fine—or perfectly corrupted—why bother? This giving

up, or refusal to take responsibility, leads to lives cut off from actual politics and real virtues, in which either soft hedonism or asinine idealism of all sorts flourishes. Live Action Role Playing, or idealism, leads in turn to more dashed hopes and dreams, fostering more shallow cynicism. And here we are.

What incidents like the 1619 Project reveal is how deep the suicidal urges of the western world have seeped into the American psyche. People on the Left (and Right) want to denigrate, revile, and blame the founding—our origins and intrinsic system. It makes them feel good. It doesn't matter what some of the best historians (leaning Left with no bone to pick) say about the truth of the matter. We wanted to believe negative mythology about ourselves.

This is so because we knew something was amiss, but whatever that is we cannot easily discern. 1619 is but one example. It's not just that it pronounces we are flawed, like every human society (although not every human society is equally good about admitting it). It's that we *want* to believe we are *intrinsically* broken and *cannot* be fixed—at a time in which we are indisputably the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth. This is a spectacle worth meditating on.

We *want* to believe we cannot change ourselves or our system and that it must break down, or be broken down. It would be one thing if we did so because we wanted something better, but this is by no means clear. Insofar as anyone does seemingly want things to improve there is a deep divide over what would constitute "improvement." Regardless, this sort of fatalism is often a self-fulfilling prophecy in individual human lives.

We are indeed waking up now, but not in the manner the Social Justice Warriors or Right-wing culture warriors might wish. The virus is yet another quickening event that threatens our posturing. It makes a mockery of our preferred stance and subgroups. It reveals things as they are—and chal-

lenges us to confront reality.

The new reality is uncomfortable because it snaps us out of our stupor. The populace, waking up from a long distracted, T.V.-induced sleep, discovers that in real life it's now often functionally illiterate, increasingly unemployed or engaged in meaningless employment, obese, addicted, and grumpy, if not suicidal. People increasingly feel real fears and have no idea what to do with them.

Meanwhile, our various *officially approved* groups of rulers are exposed as vapid, apolitical, smoothly medicated drones who wish to live as comfortably as transhumanly possible and are uncomfortable dealing with anything that bursts their finely tuned bubbles. And in differing ways, in digital life everyone seems far more vulgar and vicious than what used to be shown to us "on" the major vehicles of social engineering.

Who will rescue us from them—and ourselves?

The Courage of the Real

You find yourself looking up from the bottom of a large and ancient lake. Disorientated and troubled, you eventually get your bearings. Reflexively longing to reach the sunlit surface, you begin to feel the weight of the deep bearing down on your body. Above the underwater motions of living creatures, your countrymen are engaged in fierce naval battle on the surface. The wreckage and bodies drift downwards, but you cannot rise. Held in place, you can do nothing.

The human soul is difficult to rescue and resuscitate when habitually distant from the real, entranced in a kind of living death. But the jolt of events increasingly allows us to see our caves for what they are. The inner pilot light needs to be lit again, but what will catch? This is the problem America now faces.

The worst lies are the ones we tell ourselves about ourselves and end up believing. When those lies are taken from us, we are disorientated and feel the pain of their removal. But as we begin to see past them, we see the distance we have created between ourselves and reality, and we despair.

We often don't tell ourselves outright lies so much as hide from ourselves, shoring fragments against our ruins to hide our ruinous parts from ourselves and others, attempting to cordon off or even willfully self-amputate what we consider undesirable.

We cling desperately to these fragments—these distractive or reflective fictions—as if camouflage, armor, or shelter could turn us into something we think we'd rather be, never mind heal the disease or wounds they might conceal.

Courage is needed first to seek out and confront the truth about yourself and reality, and then to conform and develop yourself accordingly. It takes courage to confront and develop one's inner life, and above all to conform that life to reality as it is.

We are most often cowards not because we make the effort to run away, but because we merely turn away. We turn our gaze from the truth about our inner and outer reality, and we act according to our willful ignorance.

Having so turned, we too easily recreate ourselves in our own preferred image by way of simplistic amputation, bifurcation, or cosmetic concealment. Over time, we each begin to live within a partial framework of habitual blindness or willful fantasy.

In this sense, certain forms of even physiological mental illnesses or debilitating conditions can often be seen as more extreme forms of what all humans suffer, often at their own hands along with those of others in the same troubled state.

What festering wounds are we hiding? The metastasizing soft hedonism of distraction. The painful brokenness of shattered families. The apolitical "politics" of "naturally" unsocial atomistic gods. Disembodied bodies, puritanically dedicated to amorphous, directionless, prophylactically un-gendered sex within themselves, social only for the sake of attaining a continuous, inner-directed masturbatory self-affirmation.

In a sense there is no "other" when we are all autonomously equal godlike beings. When we forgo seeking fulfillment out there, or simply use what is outside ourselves for our own ends, we discover a certain devilish equality. This the inverse of the natural equality yet buried deep at the heart of the American regime. It is an imposter, born *ex nihilo*, rather than the substance of human nature.

As in John Lennon's song, we imagined the impossible. We saw evils mixed up with being. Therefore being itself was evil. So we imagined we were nonbeing, or that we could become so.

We imagined we were pure potential, to be molded within ourselves without any form from the outside. We thought we could share the world because we had nothing to unify us other than our rejection of any religious or politi-

cal claim to its rightful use. We thought we could attain unity merely by each seeking to use the other for their own purposes. What is everyone's is no one's, we thought, and so we should realize we are each no one in the empty solipsism of our self, within which we could form our own being.

In sum, we imagined that our imagining alleviates the unpleasantness of the real by eliminating the central forms of human community. This practically defines everything that went wrong with the televisual era. This was the best we could wish for—the best we could imagine—preferring imagined nonbeing to engaging with the difficulties of the real, which we wanted to evade, or saw no way to resolve. It was to act as if in the here and now we could be either gods or beasts, with nothing possible in between.

This is also the path to power for those who would rule without the bother of deep consent. Get the populace to think they are all perfectly equal, self-sufficient, atomistic little gods who make their own, fully informed, rational choices and arrive at their views the same way: internally, by means of the majesty of their own will and the gloriousness of their own mind, without learning from others outside themselves, least of all leaders or any kind of order or hierarchy. Without taking cues from anyone or anything or any event. Without suspecting that entertainment and advertising no less than punditry and education affects them in anything more than a neutral way.

Flatter them. Get them to think they are independent, free thinkers without ever having to work to think.

Give them leaders they don't see or acknowledge and a shadow government of hierarchical order which gives them cues. Create and shape events and images that lead them to desire whatever you wish, from within, as if they'd thought of it themselves. Let them project their desires into the emptiness of the images and talking heads while you control the frame and focus, molding their desires. Let the millions of independent, free thinkers each buy

millions of the same product so they can show each other they are independent and free.

Enslave them to their own internal desires. Profit and rule.

It's an old story, forever new.

Reality-#Based Hope

*Looking down the trail ahead at dusk, before having to turn back.
Looking down the long roads as you pass. Looking up before turning in.
Looking up before heading down again.*

Tocqueville, in his introduction to *Democracy in America*, describes how the very people who could have helped shape democracy for the better rejected it for the wrong reasons while the worst people led its rise for all the wrong reasons. As democracy rose regardless, Tocqueville was keenly aware of the screeching, jumbled train wreck that is human existence, tried to describe it, and hoped someone paid attention. Which no one often does, really, until well after the fact.

And that's life, often enough. To glimpse the contours and predict the directions of the train wreck—which is to see the flaws on all the “sides”—and yet refrain from despair is achievement enough. This alone is so difficult that, to clean things up, people generally construct or retreat into another's ideological fantasy world. To fight to see the real is

hard enough, and then we find it hard to bear much of what we are given to see.

But some times in life the real is forced upon us. I suppose this is why Christianity treats hope as one of only three supernatural virtues, presuming that we understand enough to know why it is needed. In this life, as anyone who has ever undergone its tragedies knows, hope is a virtue.

In our technologically advanced, spiritually primitive paganism, hope is the forgotten of the three new preeminent virtues Christianity offered as gifts to the world. Charity is abused to death; talk of love now bores us and is near meaningless from over-use. Faith or belief we think we know, even if we reject it. We think it means a kind of reasonless act of our individual will. A planting of our willful flag wherever we choose.

But hope as a kind of core or supreme virtue is almost a mystery. What does *that* even mean?

We don't need hope if the arc of history bends our way and progress is inevitable.

Worse, we have hidden the very truths that reveal our need for it so as not to trouble ourselves. Death. Deep institutional corruption. Civilizational collapse. The underlying currents of pain in our particular lives like loneliness, guilt, and other anxieties. Unpleasant fictions, all. Eat, drink, and be merry. Take more pills. "Love." Have "faith" in what you will. And "hope"—well, there's no need for wishful thinking. Work hard and study, believe in the dreams our culture gives you, and you will be set free.

And the suicide rate rises.

The difference between hope and the shallow self-help that passes for it (often aping faith in one's own will rather than hope) is in many ways the difference between life and death—sadness and distraction versus happiness and fulfillment.

Hope is what Christianity gave the world, even if you think it bunk. The European primitives before conversion struggled with just this: a dark vision of a doomed world. The monsters would encircle them eventually, they thought. In the end, the dragon would come and slay them all.

The therapeutic and distractive uses of technology in our time are designed to keep such visions at bay. Some iterative mythos of ekpyrosis would inevitably return except for the fact that our masters today have isolated us, and told us a different lie: like Sisyphus in reverse we must keep entertaining and pleasuring ourselves, over and over, with small delights, alone. This is happiness.

And yet we are not happy.

But we think we should be. There must be something wrong with us! Why doesn't it work? Why am I not happy? We must climb the hill again!

Our ignorance of the human condition is vast. It is astounding that it is even possible to keep a population so ignorant. But we came to think that we had no need for hope. The problem must be in our procedure or its execution. There must be some external or internal constraint holding us back from happiness. We must further free ourselves. And thus we find ourselves

enslaved.

Hope is what truly frees the oppressed, which is why the deepest form of oppression obviates not only the perception of its reasonableness or its possibility but the understanding that we need either cultivate it deep within, or live as dead among the living.

All flesh is grass, says the prophet—meaning that it dies quickly and fades away. But unlike the leaves of grass, we each have a name.

Yet even a name comes from another, just as each of us do. A name is given and received.

Names remind us that identity is not and cannot be wholly self-determined. Even in a world that recklessly seeks total atomistic self-determination, and increasingly lauds even self-mutilation accordingly, the nature of naming remains difficult to thwart. This is why it is now a hate crime to “deadname” those who say they wish to change their sexual biology.

A name is blessed or cursed, loved or hated, and gathers reputation from others. This is why Aristotle says fame or status is not a secure good upon which to base one’s ultimate happiness. A name comes from another.

We do not create ourselves or anything else out of nothing, but remain mere temporary stewards of what we are given, and whatever we finally wrought from what we were given. A name comes from another who recognizes us as something determinate.

We both name and receive names. The first human, Adam, did not create but named the animals, the Old Testament tells us, even as God often changes the names of the prophets. We need space to form ourselves and build human communities, but this does not fully unmake what we are and naturally need to become. We need to discover and receive wisdom beyond ourselves and our own experiences to do so, but this does not mean slavishly repeating old mantras or stale formulas.

The Strength of Broken Dreams

Looking through the mirror, through the glass. Looking through the water, past your own reflection, at living things, darting fast.

This transitional slipstream, in which we see suddenly and much too clearly through the water instead of being lulled to sleep by the familiar, muddying currents of the rhetoric of pre-digital life, will eventually pass. At some point we will no longer behold our own reflection mirrored on the increasingly digital surface, as all the old policies and outdated ideologies dissolve.

And perhaps, if we are conquered by those who would further control us, we will all float on into false dreams and visions again, but of another, more terrifying kind. But in the present we need the courage to jettison the old and think anew. We need new humbler but more noble dreams, conformed to the real. The best hopes and dreams are more real than the reality of present experience, because they bring what already exists unseen into sight, and what could and should actually be into being.

But fitfully waiting for this to happen is not a strategy or a plan. We can't dream our way to better dreams.

A new frontier is the only way forward—and out of—what is and what is to come. But it is not clear where and what manner of frontier it could be. A trove of wisdom and achievement, retrieved and repurposed, is necessary for any needed renaissance. But it is not clear where in the past and what manner of wisdom might revitalize us.

As Peter Thiel wrote recently, “a renaissance will require motivational goals,” which means goals that are “both ambitious and achievable.” The goals of the televisual era were either hubristic and unachievable (“world peace”) or too small and hedonistic (“netflixing”). We are increasingly searching for something else now; like it or not, for the foreseeable future we will be compelled to grasp for it—or die trying.

There are certain summer nights when you can stride the earth and feel as if you could reach up and touch the full moon. But to actually get there, one needs to keep one's wonder at the skies while willfully submitting to the crushing realism of humility. Reach your hands in the sky as you dream and you will experience the futility of attaining the heavens.

To accomplish such a “dream,” like those who actually put the man on the moon, one needs to abandon dreams. One must observe, learn, and act. One must work hard to know—and then overcome—every physical obstacle that stands in one's way. One must see, in real life, what prevents the dream from being accomplished, and alter it accordingly.

Dreams in the best sense arise from wonder about what truly is, and concerted effort to discover it. This means that a clinical scientism that pretends to know more than it does, and lashes out at and seeks to cover up

the great mystery of existence, can be as much of an impediment as distractive dreams to human vitality. This is because scientism itself has become a dream, and separated itself from the totality of human experience accordingly.

We must experience genuine wonder about human life and nature again, not strain within ourselves to dictate like gods.

It may be necessary for those whose dreams are still borrowed from mass culture, to be disrupted and turned away from the streaming images so that they might have dreams of substance, based on who and what they truly are, and who and what truly is outside themselves and beyond the shadows on the walls of the cave. Many need to be rehabilitated and encouraged to dream natural dreams—to be given truer dreams.

But even for those who perhaps have truer dreams already, it may be necessary to periodically sacrifice them upon the altar of our hearts. What if one must routinely give up the callings of your dreams in order to discover your true calling, or even merely glimpse it, reaching for a goal that, like a shade in Homer, Virgil, and Dante, cannot be grasped by the hands of the living? Is this not the fate of all men? The way of all flesh?

We make idols of good things, as well as bad. We make idols of things worth idolizing, in their way. But to grow and develop, to avoid stuntedness and stagnation, one must sometimes break them and enter out into the unknown once more.

There is a season and a sense in which we ought not to encourage or nurture dreams, or urge others to follow them, but rather to give them up. To let them remain illusions only, patches of glimmering sunlight on the earth beneath the trees in summer.

When I am overburdened by clinging to these dreams too long, can I recognize it? Can I free myself of them? Can we each put aside the unfelt weight we carry and dive into the ocean free? Perhaps they will return. Perhaps not. But to put bread out on the waters is to expect it not to return, to expect only the unknown, and to have to search again to know.

This is why our dreams are so hard to give up: they give us something known—something to hang on to—regardless of their realism, regardless of our circumstances. We imagine we might someday carve them into the future—into the rock of reality itself. We enjoy these imaginings, and linger with them, and attempt to chisel them into stone. To put these plans and their corresponding tools down is to begin again, even if they have propelled us forward to wherever the place we actually stand.

We must sometimes let go of what we have been chiseling, and when we do so we discover where we truly are again, and eventually resume traveling, moving, seeking.

What if, then, to offer up our dreams is not weakness but strength? What if it was silly to think one could hold on absolutely, could conclusively determine and dictate one's dreams to the world?

To weather broken dreams is to pass through a portal into a vast reality beyond the constraints of your former world, which was likely a sort of constructed idol—an idolatrous landscape or constructed reality, meant to serve virtual goals. If, that is, one can survive the passing through—if your broken dreams don't break you.

If our dreams become leverage against us for fear of losing them, they may have become idols. You must smash your idols to be free of fear. You must mentally work through killing your Isaacs. Kill your darlings. Even the

most noble ones. Neither the world nor God owes any of us our dreams made real.

The American Dream is dead, but America still lives. If it is to live on, we must let the past die, look to our present, and habitually act to confront and determine it. We must not look to the past for dreams, but for the wisdom to perceive and act in the present. We must clear and build more humble paths towards higher ground. It is only then that we can begin to dream naturally again.

When reality has already broken your dreams, holding onto them will only accelerate your own self-destruction.

We are born naked, and we die so—with nothing that is ours except what we formed inside ourselves. But it may be that if we can sacrifice our dreams, what we are inside cannot be broken.