

Moving Beyond a Politics of Anger to a Politics of Hope

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“May you live in interesting times.”

I imagine that many of us have heard this sentence. It is often attributed to an anonymous “ancient Chinese curse.”

When someone says, “May you live in interesting times,” the meaning is clear: it’s better to live in a time of predictability and stability and not in a time of uncertainty or even chaos.

Well, the thought is true but the attribution is not. The statement “May you live in interesting times” is not in fact an ancient Chinese curse. It is instead a thought expressed by a British diplomat, Austen Chamberlain. He was the half-brother of the notorious Neville Chamberlain. Austen was Britain’s Foreign Secretary in 1925, responsible for negotiating the Locarno Treaties with Germany. Under those treaties Germany was obliged to honor the borders in Western Europe but the treaties gave Germany a free hand to revise the borders in Eastern Europe. Eleven years later, Germany violated the treaties by moving its troops into the Rhineland.

Commenting on this undoing of his own handiwork, and the threat that Hitler now posed to all of Europe, Austen Chamberlain gave a speech soon after Germany’s invasion. A newspaper reported his speech as follows:

Sir Austen Chamberlain, addressing the annual meeting of Birmingham Unionist Association last night, spoke of the “grave injury” to collective security by Germany’s violation of the Treaty of Locarno. He said, “It is not so long ago that a member of the Diplomatic Body in London, who had spent some years of his service in China, told me that there was a Chinese curse which took the form of saying, ‘May you live in interesting times.’ There is no doubt that the curse has fallen on us. We move from one crisis to another. We suffer one disturbance and shock after another.”

Investigators have searched in vain for the source of Sir Chamberlain’s claim. So probably this is not an ancient Chinese curse.

But the curse applies to our present times. They are indeed interesting, to say the least. On November 9 we woke up to a reality that virtually all the pollsters and

pundits and predictors had been certain would not happen. Now Donald J. Trump is our President-elect.

How shall we respond?

I found one thinker who helped me make a plan, but I'm not going to tell you about him here. Instead, he is the subject of my column in the Bulletin that Judy is putting together to come out next month. I hope you will read it there.

I did find another useful guide, the person upon whom I often rely: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. What I am going to recommend to us this morning relies heavily on his advice.

Rabbi Sacks says that what is happening both here and in England and the rest of Europe cannot be called politics as usual. The American Presidential election, the Brexit vote and the rise of extremism in the politics of the West are warnings of something larger. The sooner we realize it, the better. We are witnessing the birth of a new politics of anger. It is potentially a very dangerous development.

No civilization lasts forever. The first sign of breakdown is that people stop trusting the ruling elite. Those in power are seen as having failed to solve the major problems facing the nation. They are perceived as benefiting themselves, not the population as a whole.

The people at the top – the one percent, the government leaders – are seen as being out of touch with the population. They seem to be surrounded only by people like themselves. They have stopped listening to the grassroots. They underestimate the depth and breadth of popular anger.

That failure of trust in government appears to be a strong factor in the election of Donald Trump. It was also a major reason for the Brexit vote in England and may lead also to electoral gains by right-wing parties in France and Germany.

In all these instances, it seems that the governing class fails to see the blow coming. The party of the status quo is thus defeated by the candidate of the angry party. Supporters of the existing government think that policies matter, but the voters don't seem to agree.

Therein lies the danger. Anger is a mood, not a strategy. Anger can make things worse not better. Anger never solves problems; it merely inflames them.

The danger inherent in a politics of anger, as it has been throughout history, is the demand for authoritarian leadership. That can be the beginning of the end of the free society. We must not forget Plato's warning that democracy can end in tyranny. Plato worried about the risks in a pure democracy. One way to describe that risk is to

imagine a democracy consisting of two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for dinner.

As we saw in this election, our system in America is deliberately not a pure democracy. The electoral college is designed to temper the views of the majority in the whole country by holding in effect 51 elections for president, one in each state and the District of Columbia. When the electors convene on December 19 to choose the next president, they will represent the popular vote in each state, but not necessarily the overall popular vote. And this is a good thing, because it creates an incentive for candidates to appeal not only to large population centers but also to more rural areas and smaller communities. As we see in this election, that can result in election of a president who prevailed in those areas while losing the national popular vote.

Rabbi Sacks argues for finding an alternative to the politics of anger that led to Brexit and Trump and possibly will lead to similar results in the coming European elections. He advocates turning from the politics of anger to a new politics of hope.

Hope is not optimism. A politics of hope begins with a candid acknowledgment on all sides of how bad things actually are. Large numbers of people have not benefited from economic growth. They have seen their living standards fall, relatively and absolutely. They have watched while traditional jobs have been outsourced to low wage economies, leaving once-thriving industrial centers as demoralized wastelands.

We need a new economics of capitalism with a human face. We have seen bankers and corporate executives behaving outrageously. They have awarded themselves vast payments while the human cost has been borne by those who can afford it least. We have heard free-market economics invoked as a mantra, oblivious to the pain and loss that accompany the global economy. We have acted as if markets can function without morals, as if international corporations can disregard social responsibility with impunity, and as if economic systems are acceptable without regard to their effect on the people left stranded by the shifting tide. Grandparents know only too well that life is harder for our children than it was for us, and for our grandchildren it will be harder still.

We need to rebuild our social ecology. When a civilization is in good order it has institutions that provide support and hope in hard times. In the West these have traditionally been families and communities. Neither is in a good state throughout the West today. Their breakdown led two of the most important thinkers in America, Charles Murray on the right and Robert Putnam on the left, to argue that, for large sections of the population the American dream lies broken beyond repair. The sooner

we abandon the politically correct but socially disastrous view that marriage is outmoded, the better.

We need to recover a strong, inclusive sense of national identity if people are to feel that those in power care about the common good, not simply the interests of elites. The West is still suffering from the damage done by multiculturalism, living proof that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Unless we can restore what George Orwell called patriotism as opposed to nationalism, we will see the rise of the far right, as is happening already in Europe.

The religious voice is important also. I think so not just because I'm a rabbi. It's just the fact that the great faiths have given people a sense of dignity and worth that was not tied to what they earned or owned. When religion dies and consumerism takes its place, people are left with a culture that encourages them to buy things they don't need with money they don't have for a happiness that won't last. It is a bad exchange. It will end in tears.

All this is big and deep and serious. The results of the elections in England and now here must move us beyond the confrontational politics and divisive zero-sum thinking that have so brutalized public debate. Anger is always a hazard of politics in ages of rapid change. But anger has not always been as dangerous as it is now. The revolution in information technology has transformed the entire tone of global culture in the twenty-first century. Smartphones and the social media empower groups that might otherwise lack a collective voice. The Internet has a disinhibition effect that encourages indignation and spreads it like contagion.

A politics of hope is within our reach. To create it we will have to find ways of strengthening families and communities. We need to build a culture of collective responsibility. We must insist on an economics of the common good.

This is no longer a matter of party politics. It is not about Democrats and Republicans. The issue is not liberals versus conservatives. What is at stake today is the very viability of the freedom for which the West fought for so long and hard. We need to construct a compelling narrative of hope that speaks to all of us, not some of us. The time to begin is now.