

SLOUCHING TOWARD UTOPIA

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The second decade of the 20th century set the world on a vicious and bloody course that would dominate history for decades. What we now call the First World War — it was rightly called The Great War at the time — began in 1914 and lasted until 1918. It embroiled most of the nations of Europe, along with Russia, the US, and the Middle East. All told, more than 65 million soldiers were involved in the war. The dead soldiers and civilians numbered more than 20 million.

Partially as a result, two Russian revolutions in 1917 removed Czar Nicholas II from power and installed Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Bolsheviks. Lenin put in place a brutal and repressive regime that, in one form or another, lasted until 1991.

For the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, the maelstrom of violence generated by the First World War and its aftermath formed the backdrop of an atrocity he witnessed up close and personally. William of Orange had conquered Scotland, England, and Ireland in the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688. Ever since, the people of Ireland, mostly Catholic and poor, had been ruled by high-handed Protestant kings of England and their privileged minions. The quest for Irish independence eventually led to an insurrection in 1916 known as the Easter Rising, which the British tried to crush by swiftly executing the leading conspirators, four of them poets.

Yeats responded to the specter of a world in turmoil with his well-known poem written in 1919 titled “The Second Coming.” Yeats writes:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

While the blood-dimmed tide of violence may not be as pervasive today as it was a century ago, the world is still an awfully bloody place — and it could get even bloodier. You know the list of current and potential conflicts as well as I do. The world is armed to the teeth, which is also true of many private citizens in the US — another travesty.

During the recent negotiations to raise the US debt ceiling, however, the last two lines of this first stanza of Yeats' poem kept coming to mind: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." Almost all the negotiators did what they had previously said they wouldn't do. The animosity of the far right toward the middle right, and of the far left toward the middle left, seemed almost as great as the animosity of the right and the left toward each other — which is saying something. Speaking of those who wanted to raise the debt ceiling without requiring specific budget cuts, one Representative remarked that we don't negotiate with global terrorists abroad, so why should we negotiate with domestic terrorists here at home?

Set against other challenges that bedevil our nation and our world, the entire debt ceiling circus turned out to be a complicated and embarrassing mess — the very definition of an imbroglio. Besides, no nation in its right mind would even have a debt ceiling. Nonetheless, the deal got done, which illustrates one of the enduring truths about politics and human life generally: things often get done in messy and complicated ways.

William Butler Yeats, as he looked upon a world that seemed to have fallen apart, concludes his poem by revising somewhat his view of how the future gets born. He writes:

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The Second Coming, Yeats says, referring to the Christian view that Jesus will someday return as Christ the King to rescue the faithful — the Second Coming will not appear in the form of a princely conqueror on a noble steed. Rather, it comes as a rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem, site of the ancient stable — roughhewn and crude — where the supposed revelation of Jesus first appeared.

For my part, I read Yates as saying that even though things have fallen apart, and anarchy prevails, there is still hope. History is a rough beast emerging out of the desert — a troubling sight at times, even the stuff of nightmares. Though the rough beast of

history moves forward only by slouching, Yeats insists, it's headed in the right direction — toward Bethlehem, where a revelation of something new might yet get born.

His point in the poem, and mine in my sermon this morning, is that progress will almost always be messy, incomplete, and often unsatisfying. But despite the messiness, it's essential to keep the possibility of a better world in view.

My sermon title comes from a book published last year by the Berkeley economic historian J. Bradford DeLong titled *Slouching Towards Utopia: An Economic History of the Twentieth Century*. DeLong takes as one of his starting points the utopian view of Karl Marx, who believed that the free market economic system created by the bourgeoisie in the late 19th century would inevitably become the main obstacle to human happiness. It could, Marx thought, create wealth, but it could not distribute wealth evenly. The rich would become richer, and the poor would become poorer. The only solution was to destroy the power of the market system to boss people around.

DeLong says, “Marx spent his entire life trying to make his argument simple, comprehensible, and watertight. He failed. He failed because he was wrong. It is simply not the case that market economies necessarily produce ever-rising inequality and ever-increasing misery in the company of ever-increasing wealth. Sometimes they do. Sometimes they do not. And whether they do or do not is within the control of the government, which has sufficiently powerful tools to narrow and widen the income and wealth distribution to fit its purposes.”

For the most part, however, governments have not widened the distribution. Material prosperity today is unevenly distributed around the globe to what DeLong calls “a gross, even criminal, extent.” Besides, he adds, “material wealth does not make people happy in a world where politicians and others prosper mightily from finding new ways to make and keep people unhappy.”

Even though utopia has not arrived, we have made progress in that direction. DeLong points out that less than nine percent of humanity lives at or below the roughly \$2-a-day living standard we think of as extreme poverty, down from approximately 70 percent in Marx's day. DeLong adds that there are more than enough calories produced in the world to feed everyone, so it is not necessary for anybody to be hungry. There is more than enough shelter on the globe to house everyone, so it is not necessary for anybody to be homeless. There is more than enough clothing in our warehouses, so it is not necessary for anybody to be cold. Utopia has not arrived, but we are slouching in that direction.

Whatever the domain of human endeavor, progress is more likely to come in fits and starts than in a smooth climb onward and upward forever. The path from here to there is almost always circuitous, and sometimes it turns out to be tortuous. Whenever we get sidelined or turned around, we need to remember where we are headed and keep ourselves pointed that way. Whether we are trying to get fit, or get a degree, or get sober, or get published, or get a promotion, or get connected, we can often get there — even if we end up slouching along the way.

I know this from personal experience. After I finished my seminary training, I decided to enter a PhD program in classics. I had left the Mennonite faith of my upbringing and had not yet discovered Unitarian Universalism, so I had no immediate use for my seminary degree. For various reasons, including my lack of adequate preparation, the graduate study of classics turned out not to be for me. The following year, I entered a PhD program in theology, which also turned out not to be for me, though for theological reasons rather than practical ones.

The following year, I entered the PhD program at the University of Chicago — the third in three years. After I finished my comprehensive exams, I needed to find a job — and I had just discovered Unitarian Universalism. So, I began my preparation for the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Then came a marriage, then a baby, then the role of assistant minister and then associate minister at All Souls, then a divorce, and eventually another marriage. The came 9/11.

All of which is to explain why it took me nearly 20 years to complete a PhD. At times, I wondered whether I would ever finish the dissertation. I came to doubt myself and often felt discouraged, overwhelmed by more pressing responsibilities, unable to clear the time and make the commitment to write. Somehow, I stayed the course. Championed by the indefatigable faith of my wife Holly Atkinson and the patient guidance of my adviser Chris Gamwell, I managed to follow through on my intention.

After I graduated with my PhD in 2004, I mentioned to Chris Gamwell that it had taken me a very long time to complete the degree. He replied, “It’s true that your path to here took you through a lot of other places along the way. But you always stayed pointed in this direction.” In my own way, I was slouching toward Bethlehem.

I don’t know what you hope to accomplish in your life, or what you hope we can accomplish together in our world. Progress is almost always a rough beast — messy, complicated, and often unsatisfying.

No matter. Whatever comes, we need to keep heading toward Bethlehem — toward goals that inspire us and possibilities that lure us on. Even if we don’t ever get there, we’ll feel satisfied knowing that we’re headed in the right direction. We’re headed toward utopia, even if we’re sometimes slouching.