



The Enlightenment



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What the World Needs Now – Competent Leaders.

An article in the May 2-3 issue of the weekend *New York Times* entitled “Despotism and Democracy” by journalist Roger Cohen, inspired me to make leadership one of the themes of this *Enlightenment* along with democracy, capitalism, and the coronavirus pandemic.

Cohen notes: “The Great depression that began in 1929 produced two distinct results on either side of the Atlantic. In the United States, it led, beginning in 1933, to Roosevelt’s New Deal. In Europe it led to Hitler’s rise to power in the same year, the spread of fascism and eventually devastation on an unimaginable scale.” The devastation came to an end in 1945 thanks in no small extent to the courage, foresight, and competence of two great leaders, Churchill and Roosevelt, who were in the right place at the right time.

What followed World War II was a period of peace and prosperity in the western world, and the evolution of a thriving middle class. Never before in all of human history, had societies like this emerged. Societies based on democracy, rule of law, and equal opportunity for all. It turned out that most people were better off economically than their parents had ever been, and it was expected that their children would be even better off. By and large, governments governed with concern for the well-being of all citizens, not for just the privileged few. But like the so-called Golden Age of ancient Athens, this modern Golden Age did not last long. After thirty years, real incomes for the middle class began to level off and inequality began to creep in as regulations designed to keep businesses and financial institutions in check were gradually relaxed, culminating in the 2008 financial collapse. But the people who caused the financial collapse were never punished. Instead, governments bailed them out, and some of these people became even richer. Fortunately, Canada came through this period better off than some other countries because regulations had not been relaxed as much.

After the collapse, economies gradually began to recover, but by this time capitalism and democracy in the United States were both broken as big business and big finance had obtained undue influence in governments. It was not the well-being of the many that mattered, but the well-being of the few. For the past 50 years the wealth of the top 1% has been steadily increasing as a percentage of total wealth. In 1989 the top 1% held 30% of the world’s wealth. Today it is close to 50%. In 1950, executives made 20 times as much as workers. Today executives earn as much as 300 times what workers earn. Gross inequality was afoot. The middle class was declining.

While all this was going on, globalization and free trade was on the increase and jobs were being shifted to countries with cheap labour. This was good for shareholders but devastating for workers in so-called rust belts and coal mining areas. Then along comes populist Donald Trump promising to “make American great again,” by bringing back jobs from China and elsewhere. This helped to get him elected president. Populism was also on the upswing in Europe as well, with leaders like Boris Johnson in Great Britain.

Then the unexpected happened. A deadly virus emerged in Wuhan China. It is a new coronavirus that causes a disease called COVID-19. The Chinese authorities delayed letting the rest of the world know about the problem until it was too late, and this delay caused the virus to spread throughout the whole world. This is a time like no other in recent memory, and if ever there was a time for competent leadership, it is now! Instead, what do we have? Not another Roosevelt and Churchill: Donald Trump and Boris Johnson.

Instead of a statesman-like leader, the United States has, in Roger Cohen’s words, a “lunatic unbound.” Other adjectives that have been used include incompetent, bully, egomaniac and impulsive liar. He claims to be “a very stable genius.” He is certainly not stable but may seem to be a genius in being able to stay in power. It is not being a genius that keeps him in power, it is a corrupt Republican Senate.

Tragically, this “lunatic” has really screwed up in his handling of the COVID-19 crisis, by refusing to recognize that a disaster was underway until it was too late. With 5% of the world’s population, the U.S. has 33% of the world’s COVID-19 infections and 29% of deaths. And despite this huge screwup, Trump insists he has done a masterful job in handling this crisis. And populist Prime Minister Boris Johnston has performed no better. He also acted too late and Britain now has the most cases and the most deaths in Europe.

So, are there any government leaders who have stood out in a world where the global economy has been brought to a standstill by a totally unexpected pathogen invisible to the naked eye. Yes, there are some, and most are women. They include Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand. By acting quickly on the news of the coronavirus in China, infections in New Zealand totaled only 1,487, just .03% of the population. Deaths amounted to only 20, or .0004% of the population. Other women leaders who handled the COVID-19 pandemic effectively include German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Norway’s Erna Solberg, Denmark’s Mette Frederiksen, Taiwan’s Tsai Ing-wen, and South Korea’s Sanna Marin. Will more women come forward to help make the world a better place? There are those who would hope so. Maybe it is time for women to step forward and prevent humanity from becoming extinct, because there are those who predict that is exactly where we are headed.

I have recently read a book that predicts dire consequences ahead if steps are not taken to alleviate the problems. The book is: *Democracy of Suffering* by Todd Dufresne (2019). The problems highlighted are:

1. Climate change.
2. Unfettered capitalism based on fossil fuels.
3. The end of liberal democracies.

Climate change – Warnings about climate change are not new. As far back as 2006, Al Gore published *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What Can be Done About It*. This book contains graphs showing that carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels remained below 300 parts per million (ppm) for over 600,000 years. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution the level of CO₂ was only about 250 ppm. By the end of WWII, the level had risen to 300 ppm. When the book was written in 2006, the level was about 375 ppm, with the increase being primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels. Today CO₂ levels are at 400 ppm. In 2015, 196 nations signed the Paris Climate Accord agreeing that steps must be taken to achieve an

aim of a rise of no more than 1.5 degrees C above pre-industrial age average temperature levels by 2050. This equates to a CO2 level of an absolute maximum of 450 ppm. Very laudable objectives, but there is no means of enforcement and Donald Trump has withdrawn the U.S. from the accord, stating that global warming is a hoax.

Grave consequences are predicted if concrete steps are not taken to prevent rising temperatures in the future. The Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets will melt at increasing rates and sea levels will rise significantly, threatening to inundate coastal cities. Desertification will increase and food production will fall, causing famines, starvation, and deaths. And continuing rises in temperature could result in humanity becoming extinct.

Todd claims that the only way to prevent catastrophes down the road is to reduce – and preferably cease – the burning of fossil fuels as a source of energy in order to meet Paris Climate Accord objectives by 2050. This is a tall order because all the products and conveniences we enjoy today were made possible by the burning of fossil fuels since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, and most of us wish to continue enjoying these amenities. The solution seems quite simple. Just replace “dirty” sources of energy with “clean” sources of energy such as hydro power, wind, solar, and nuclear, although disposing of nuclear waste is a concern. The problem is storage. Wind and solar sources are intermittent and today’s battery technology is not advanced enough or economical enough for storing large quantities of “juice.” Will technology eventually save the day? It is too early to tell.

Capitalism – During WWII, capitalism proved its worth. Business owners rallied to meet the challenges presented and provided the tanks, ships, and aircraft needed to achieve victory. And business owners and the wealthy in general were willing to share the profits by paying top income tax rates as high as 90%. This was capitalism at its finest and it continued for about 30 years as a sizable middle class developed and prospered. For perhaps the first time ever, as previously mentioned above, equality was optimum in all respects. Then beginning in the 1970s, things gradually started to go downhill, as regulations designed to protect the welfare of all citizens began to be relaxed and marginal tax rates were reduced, all this to the benefit of the few, not the many, as inequality began to increase. Today capitalism is broken in some countries, particularly in the United States, where big business and big money and the NRA control the Republican Party. It is good for the few, not the rest.

Democracy – I believe WWII demonstrated the advantage of democracy over fascism, and democracy’s attributes were again lauded with the fall of communism in the USSR in 1991. And fortunately, democracy is still thriving in numerous countries including all of Scandinavia, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, France, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. But in some countries, democracy is being threatened by populist governments. These include the U.S., the U.K., Poland, and Hungary. Others including Russia, China, and Venezuela are ruled by dictators.

Why has populism crept into some countries? Most likely because of increasing inequality. Citizens are not as well off as they once were, and they are looking for a change. Populist leaders promise better days ahead, but they do not always deliver. Todd points out that increasing inequality brings about increasing poverty and increasing suffering and if the situation gets too dire revolt can result.

What is the Alternative? – Todd warns that if changes do not start to occur, and unbridled capitalism ignores the dangers of climate change, and if governments govern for the few, ignoring the well-being of

the masses, humanity could become extinct due to unbearable temperatures and extreme poverty. But he says there is an alternative. The alternative is to govern with concern for the well-being of all citizens, not just the few. Greed must be replaced with compassion. But can these conditions occur without some world-wide catastrophe that threatens the life and survival of rich and poor alike? Is COVID-19 that catastrophe? Time will tell, but I am not sure the pandemic will be catastrophic enough to get the wealthy to change their ways and share their wealth and for politicians to prioritize well-being for all.

The Pandemic

One thing the pandemic has taught us is to recognize just who it is that keeps a society functioning. Who is it that keeps us safe and alive? The list includes: those who keep our water supply systems running and safe (we cannot live long without potable water); those employed in the food chain, including farmers, farm labourers, transporters, food processors, and grocery stores; first responders, including police, fire fighters, and EMS personnel; medical professionals – doctors, nurses, and pharmacists; non-professional staff in hospitals and nursing homes; those who keep the internet and mail services operating; those who keep communication systems operating – phones, TV, radio, and newspapers; those who provide fuel for transportation and heating homes; those who keep the electricity grid operating; and we must not forget garbage collectors and other sanitation and cleaning workers; governments and government employees.

There are no doubt others, but these individuals, classified as essential, comprise a lower proportion of all workers. Those of greater numbers, deemed non-essential, are unfortunately unemployed and the businesses in which they work are shut down. They are asked to practise social distancing and stay home as much as possible. Their incomes have dried up and they must rely on government support in order to survive. Maybe it is time for universal basic income (UBI).

On looking over the above list, one thing immediately stands out. There are those deemed essential that are working at or close to minimum wage. These include foreign agricultural workers, grocery store clerks, and personal support workers at nursing homes. It is time these essential people are paid a decent wage. Some are being paid a higher wage now, but it took a crisis to bring it about.

What is not on this list are financial speculators – those who have made inordinate amounts of money through manipulation and in the end became wealthy while contributing little to the economy. As mentioned above, these people need to share, not hoard, their wealth.

Paying low-paid essential workers more will increase prices on some items, but it is time to show more compassion and less greed. This is exactly what Todd is saying in his book. Will the pandemic be enough to goad government and business leaders to put compassion ahead of greed and put the well-being of all citizens ahead of the almighty dollar and take concrete action on climate change? The challenges are enormous with the digital age and artificial intelligence (AI) in our midst. Work is changing and jobs are disappearing.

It sticks out like a sore thumb that only dedicated and competent leaders can put us on the right path for the future. Maybe it is time for women to take over the running of things! Todd uses the word Humanism now and again in his book. By this he means concern for the well-being of all humanity not just the well-to-do. Perhaps only women leaders can make Humanism, in this sense, a priority.

Christian Students Challenge *Enlightenment* Column, Columnist Challenges Students.

The April Enlightenment contained an article by Duncan Watterworth entitled *Living with a Lesser God*. This same article appeared in the December issue of *This Month in Elgin*, a publication circulated in St. Thomas and Elgin county, Ontario. A teacher at the Oxford Reformed Christian School in Mount Elgin, Ontario, noticed Duncan's article and asked her grade twelve Apologetics of the Christian Religion class to critique the article and send Duncan their rebuttals. He received a pile of neatly handwritten letters, and later prepared his rebuttal. Duncan's comments and replies to the students are printed below. I think readers will agree his answers are thoughtful but direct. (DAH).

Duncan's Comments

My December column prompted letters from sixteen students in the grade twelve Apologetics of the Christian Religion class at Oxford Reformed Christian School.

At first glance, I was pleased by the letters. The students were polite, friendly, enthusiastic. Also, they picked up on my humour. I had said, tongue-in-cheek, that since the only God I acknowledged was the sun, I might end up a sun worshipper in Hell, and looking for its library.

"Sunscreen can't save you in Hell," warned one. "There is no library," advised another.

And of course, they all presented philosophical arguments supporting the existence of God. They and the teacher invited me to reply. So here goes:

Reply to the Students

Dear Students:

Your letters, at first, had the feel of legit inquiry, of respect for reasoned arguments, of sincere engagement with The Big Questions of life. Cool. That's what youth is for.

But after a closer reading I felt disappointed. What was really going on here? You repeated dusty, off-the-shelf arguments for God that have been more deeply developed and debated long ago.

Some of you made the argument that the universe exists, so there must be a creator, and that's God. Okay, maybe, but where did that creator come from?

One of you said that an eye needed an "intelligent designer," while another summarily dismissed an alternate explanation – evolution – as being based on chance. But it's actually based on natural selection.

Several mentioned the "ontological argument" for God. "Confusing I know," admitted one. I'm with you there.

If you really want to investigate these arguments, read Dawkins' *The God Delusion*.

Only a few of you squarely addressed the primary question I posed: what is the most reliable source of truth? Possibilities include scientific inquiry and reason, or else religious revelation.

These are incompatible sets of rules for how the universe works. Two versions of reality. You can't have it both ways, so which one trumps?

You stated that the Bible trumps – it is infallible.

So, what is your Apologetics class really about? Wikipedia tells me that “apologetics” is the religious discipline of defending religious beliefs against critics. And one of your letters explained that the Bible’s being “God’s special revealed will” is “one of the axioms of pre-suppositional apologetics.”

So, you pick your religious belief first, and then pull philosophical arguments off the shelf to support it. And if the arguments don't fly, the Bible trumps anyway.

This, of course, is the opposite of a reasoned search for truth.

So, the purpose of your class is to add a façade of rationality for your theology. Not surprising for a religious school, in hindsight. But I was fooled for a while.

Okay, now what?

What I want to say to you is: you clearly are thoughtful, and you've been exposed to the Big Questions. The first answer you hear tends to stick, but it isn't always right.

And when I think of your religious education, I picture harness makers installing leather blinders over the sides of the eyes of buggy horses, so they can only look straight ahead.

Toss off the blinders and look around. Keep growing. Lots of books explain evolution. Check out some astronomy and geology. Learn critical thinking. Read for yourself.

Ever since the Dark Ages, the faithful have opposed scientific advances, only to eventually cave in. One classic smackdown involved Galileo, who was persecuted for stating that the earth circled the sun – a contradiction of the Bible. Read for yourself.

Faith and belief are not virtues. They are the off ramp on humanity's grand journey toward understanding our world and our selves.

Faith is easy; the truth takes effort.

The Enlightenment is an independent publication issued to a select group of readers. Editor and publisher is Don Hatch – dahatch@rogers.com. Past Enlightenment, along with Goldwin Emerson's *London Free Press* (LFP) articles and a list of topics of past HALA meetings, can be read at humanists-london.org.